

## **Preamble**

# **The Indian Diaspora within the Context of the Modern Commonwealth – Acknowledging the Past, Constructing the Future**

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**ABSTRACT** The Commonwealth message to the GOPIO Convention presented by a member of the Social Transformation Programmes at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, England, will address the Convention theme by embracing the history of the Commonwealth, its evolution and present day character which would be incomplete without the history of diasporas. These movements of people from one continent or country to another - sometimes forced against their will, but often in search of a better life - is part of the fabric which goes to make up the tremendous diversity in cultures, races and religious beliefs that represents the modern Commonwealth in which the history of the Indian Diaspora is no exception.

It is an honour and pleasure for the Secretariat of the Commonwealth to have been invited to speak to this 10<sup>th</sup> International Convention of the Global Organization for People of Indian origin. I am pleased to bring the greetings of the Secretariat to this very significant convention which celebrates a critical moment in the history of South Africa. The Director of the Social Transformation Programme of the Secretariat, Dr Indrajit Coomaraswamy, had every intention of being here to present this short address, but at the last minute was unable to come. I am therefore honoured to be presenting this paper in his stead, whilst at the same time conveying apologies for his absence. As a Sri Lankan Tamil himself, he would have loved to have been here to celebrate with you this 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in South Africa.

### **INTRODUCING THE “MODERN” COMMONWEALTH**

The theme of this brief paper locates the Indian Diaspora within the embrace of the modern Commonwealth as it is today, no longer merely a group of former British colonies but with the addition of Mozambique – formerly a Portuguese colony and more recently Rwanda in 2009 - we have become a block of (54) countries comprising some 1.6 billion people who make up almost a third of the world’s population. The Commonwealth is a free association of independent states which share common values and principles among our member countries which are found in every region and on every continent. In encompassing great diversity amongst all of

these people, we also have principles which include adherence to democratic values; respect for diversity; protection of human rights; the rule of law; gender equality; elimination of poverty; people-centered development and empowerment of young people. The twin pillars of our mission statement are ‘Democracy and Development’, meaning that we work to strengthen democratic values with our member countries as well as to stimulate development. The framework which operationalises our mission statement draws heavily on a report by a Commonwealth Expert Group which was chaired by Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh. For example, at the Commonwealth Education Section where I work, we work in support of the EFA/MDG goals of achieving Universal Primary Education and Eliminating Gender Disparity in Schooling.

### **Commonalities in Commonwealth Diasporas**

Of course, the Commonwealth represents an exciting study from the standpoint of diasporas and diasporic movement. One might even propose that the very nature and fabric of the Commonwealth – and the common thread of the English language – has encouraged mobility, migration and the expansion of diasporas as there is a lingua franca or common denominator of language to confront or overcome the challenges which newcomers face in adjusting to a new country. We address in the Secretariat’s Health and Education programmes, at present the draw-off through recruitment and migration of health workers and teachers from developing countries which we do know is fuelled by the facility of the

English language being spoken in small Commonwealth states such as Swaziland and larger ones such as Canada. Other common interests, such as cricket and the Commonwealth Games, bind us in terms of commonalities of culture, interest and focus, despite our wide-ranging cultural diversity and variance in faith and ethnicity, for example.

The mobility of people of Commonwealth origin has been a major contributing factor in the emergence of people with multiple identities who are now an important part of many Commonwealth societies around the world. While those with multiple identities have added to the vibrance and richness of the cultures of these countries, there have also been challenges. Professor Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate who has made a seminal contribution to the discourse on multiple identities, personifies this phenomenon. He has been an outstanding Indian scholar, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and a Professor at Harvard.

In researching our theme it has been fascinating to consider the definitions of what constitutes a diaspora:

- Ø A description of any population that is considered transnational
- Ø The upholding of contacts in the land of origin in various forms, real or imaginary, material or cultural.<sup>1</sup>
- Ø An ethnic consciousness, an active associative life, contacts with the land of origin in various forms, relationships with other groups of the same ethnic origin<sup>2</sup>.

### **History of Diasporas within the Commonwealth**

The history of migration over the last 50 - 60 years of the Commonwealth's existence reflects only the more recent movements in countries which are now Commonwealth members. If we go back five to six hundred years we may include:

- Ø Merchants who went to East Africa or South east Asia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century
- Ø Slaves who were captured, forced and sold against their will to colonies in the New World such as the Caribbean and North America as well as the Pacific
- Ø Indentured labourers who went often as replacement labour to the New World at the end of the slave trade and of slavery. Sadly, forced migration through conflict

leading to the creation of diasporas' has also been a feature of the modern Commonwealth landscape. As long ago as the 1970s, we all recall the Asian Indian migration caused through the policies of President Idi Amin of Uganda which forced the choice of either being Ugandan or getting out on the Asian community in his country. We know that as a result of the ten-years of civil war in Sierra Leone many skilled persons fled that country. Today some 10,000 Zimbabwean teachers – this country sadly no longer a member of the Commonwealth community – can be found in South Africa and apparently unable to find employment as teachers.

Guyana – the Caribbean's largest county on the south American mainland - is one which has a population from two diasporas – the African diaspora brought about through slavery and the Indian diaspora through indentureship. It is a country which has lost much of its human capital and skilled labour through migration. In 2005, representatives of the leadership of the Guyana Teachers Union in an informal account to the Commonwealth Secretariat proposed the distinct possibility that the comparatively high levels of teachers of African descent, who were leaving Guyana, could be related to the perception that the terms and conditions of service for the African Guyanese teachers were proving to be less favourable than those of Asian Guyanese descent. Whether this was the case or not, this partiality towards one group of teachers on the basis of ethnicity, in the view of this official, caused teachers of the less favoured group to seek teacher's posts elsewhere through overseas recruitment.

More recently, whilst not unique to the Commonwealth, there have been diasporas created through:

- Ø Skilled workers who moved to developed countries after the Second World War
- Ø Contract workers who today serve the needs of the Gulf countries
- Ø Knowledge worker migration to the developed world (esp. USA).

It is interesting that the belief that Indians had first gone to South Africa as indentured labourers in 1860 was discounted by the information that Dutch merchants had brought Indians to the then Dutch Cape selling them as slaves to early Dutch settlers, who worked them as domestic servants or made them join African slave labour on farms. As you are aware many of

these Indian slaves were unable to preserve their distinct identity in the Cape as Indians, marrying slaves from East Asia, other parts of Africa or from the indigenous inhabitants, earning them the name of Malays or Cape Coloured. Many moved from the land to work in the railways, dockyards, coal mines, municipal services and domestic employment. In later years teachers, accountants, priests, lawyers and other professions would also join this Indian-South African Diaspora.

Sir Shridath Ramphal, a former Secretary General of the Commonwealth, himself the descendant of an Asian Indian woman, who undertook indentureship to Guyana twice, speaks of the systems of indentureship and slavery as being distinguished only by the issue of time: a slave was bound for life unless manumitted, and an indentured servant was bound for a period usually not exceeding 5 – 7 years. Like slaves the indentured were deprived of mobility and deployed at the whim of the planters. Coercion by whip was the norm and harsh laws determined where they walked, worked and slept, with one day's pay fined for every day absent and a day extra added to the indenture. Sir Shridath wrote and I quote:

“For three quarters of a century, in what amounted for the great majority to an “exile in bondage” the plantation imposed their servitude on Indian labourers, who were but mute pieces on the chequer-board of world-wide colonialism. Although nominally free, they were little more than slaves.”

Sir Shridath, well known as a passionate advocate for the end of Apartheid in South Africa also termed apartheid as another form of Slavery, indeed he terms it as having been:

*“indistinguishable from slavery at its worst”*

Diasporas in the Commonwealth have yielded interesting political leadership. As the British empire went into decline, the sons and daughters of slaves and indentured servants took the place of their former colonial masters. Outstanding among these was the advent – in the late 1800s of Gandhiji which coincided with the determination of the white South Africa population to put an end to what it termed “the Indian merchant menace” . This action directed by the whites against the former indentured labourers who started working in other sectors of the economy, was taken as the Indian merchants were rivalling the whites in trade and commerce. Mahatma

Gandhi was able to provide the Indian community with the leadership and inspiration that was needed to resist the racist policies of the Whites and guide them in their struggle for equality and fair play. Gandhiji's experience in South Africa served to raise his consciousness and develop his commitment to non-violent struggle which ultimately led to the end of colonialism and through his critical role in the emergence of the world's largest democracy in India.

### **Reflections on Political Leadership and Economics**

Like so many of our Commonwealth leaders, indentureship was in the background of the humble origins from which the second Secretary General of the Commonwealth Secretary was to emerge. Three generations after the advent of his ancestors from India to Guyana as indentures, he was proud to be standing on a Commonwealth platform and to report that India was the first country to launch international questioning and criticism of South African racism at the United Nations. India was also the first country, he noted, to impose sanctions on South Africa by terminating its trade and diplomatic relations with Pretoria in 1954. Speaking to the Commonwealth Society of India, in New Delhi, in 1986, he expressed his delight when at the 1985 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting he heard the grandson of Nehru, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, insisting that the Commonwealth had a responsibility to hasten the demise of the apartheid system.

It is important to reflect that world-wide – whether in the Pacific, Southern Africa or the Caribbean, the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom – the Indian diaspora is known for its business leadership, acumen and outstanding success as entrepreneurs from the smallest shops to the largest trans-national conglomerates. This success has led to Asian Indian communities being admired and indeed envied by other ethnic groups – indigenous or otherwise. Whilst acknowledging and honouring this outstanding financial and business acumen and ability, it is important to note that the flip-side of this success has led to antipathy and resentment, even, by other less successful groups in the diasporas. I stress that this is not unique to the Indian diaspora. It occurs wherever there is competitiveness and where the sources of the competition

are easily distinguishable. So for example, Chinese merchants in my own country in Jamaica in the Caribbean have met with similar resentment in an earlier era, and where I am based in London, the success of Nigerian businessmen is discussed widely and with concern. Despite much of this having been based on a time and moment in history, it is important to bear in mind that whilst success breeds success, it can also lead to resentment. This places a high premium on the need to explore the ways and means that we can reduce rather than construct such barriers to understanding and acceptance.

### **Conclusions/Recommendations – Constructing the Future**

Today, the modern Commonwealth is led by a distinguished diplomat of Indian origin, Secretary General Kamalesh Sharma. Last year on Commonwealth Day when we celebrated 60 years of the Commonwealth's existence, he reminded us of the role and contribution which India in 1949 had made in being the first developing country to join this Commonwealth of nations. At that time the other members were Canada, Australia, New Zealand and of course, the United Kingdom. We remain for some a strange agglomeration of countries – four highly developed and many of the others struggling to move up the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). My own view is that we encapsulate and represent in microform all that our globe represents at macro-level. If the values and principles of the modern Commonwealth can make a difference today – through conflict resolution and peace-building, through respect for all and celebration of diversity – then these values are good for our globe. Sir Shridath Ramphal to whom I referred earlier, said that:

*“The Commonwealth cannot negotiate for the world but it can help the world to negotiate”*

Today we are seeing the emergence of a multi-polar world with growing regional blocs. At the same time, we have a three-tier world facing the challenge of accommodating the rise of the second tier and the marginalization of the third tier. The Commonwealth with its inter-regional reach and

presence in all three tiers of the global economy is well placed to “ help the world to negotiate” in addressing the great challenges of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time this country South Africa presents the hopes and dreams of many who live beyond these shores. There is the perception that if you succeed the world succeeds and if you fail, so does our world. There is a strong sense among our Commonwealth brothers and sisters that what you have already achieved through social and political transformation in this country – despite the challenges – should be possible across the globe. So let us make it so through India and the Indian diaspora, through South Africa and through the instrumentality of our Commonwealth.

I close these brief remarks with that very “Commonwealth” statement from a great South African statesman. Nelson Mandela is reported to have once said that the Indians in South Africa should be:

“part of a solution and not the problem. The integrity of the Indian Diaspora in South Africa will be judged by its ability to subject its values to the test of whether they unite people on the basis of their ethnic identity or on the basis of their common humanity.”

My hope is that it will be the latter. Warmest congratulations on this significant anniversary of the arrival of Indian indentures in South Africa.

RDJ  
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### **NOTES**

- 1 Landy, Maharaj and Mainet-Valleix in “Are people of Indian origin (PIO) Indian? A Case Study of South Africa publ. Elsevier
- 2 Landy, Maharaj and Mainet-Valleix in “Are people of Indian origin (PIO) Indian? A Case Study of South Africa publ. Elsevier
- 3 “In Chap.7 South Africa - Report on the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora”
- 4 “Roots and Reminders: Reflections on Slavery Indenture, Apartheid and some personal conjectures” – Address by Shridath S. Ramphal, Commonwealth Secretary General, New Delhi, ( January 20, 1986)
- 5 “Some in Light and Some in Darkness: the long shadow of slavery” – Shridath Ramphal – public lecture on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of Abolition of Slavery Act (1833)