

THE INDIAN DIASPORA & AN INDIAN IN COWBOY COUNTRY

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When the South Asian organizers at Harvard University told me that the audience was interested in discussing how authors depict the Indian Diaspora, I was confronted with a topic that I had not thought about, ever. I had not set out to create a work of fiction about the Diaspora and I had never seen my book, *An Indian in Cowboy Country*, through those lenses before.

When forced to think about this topic, my knee-jerk reaction was to be conventional and think about the global Indian Diaspora – from India to Fiji, to West Indies, to Yuba City, to British Columbia, to the countries of the Indian Ocean, to Great Britain, Canada, and the United States.

My mind immediately went to the big, macro historical picture, with all these turbid rivers of brown-skinned workforce flowing out of the country, migrating to unknown destinations. I saw these huge torrents flowing out of India and I was a particle in it.

And then something made me look at my own family history. At first blush, it seemed like I was one of the seeds of the global Indian Diaspora for just one generation. But then I recognized a reality.

My family uprooted itself three generations ago, when my grandfather moved to Bangalore. That's where my father grew up and then, he, in his turn, moved to Bombay. I grew up in Bombay and then I moved from Bombay to Texas.

To put this in perspective, my family moved from a Tamil-speaking region to a Kannada-speaking one, then to a Marathi/Gujarati-speaking one, and finally to an English speaking one (at least for now).

India is a land of millions of such migrations, and Bombay was and is a favorite destination. And as a child, I lived, experienced and thrived in this melting pot, in the arrival and merging of these different linguistic Diasporas from different parts of India.

At my school (run by the Salesians of Don Bosco, an Italian Catholic order) I had classmates and friends who were children of refugees from India's partition (Sindhis, Punjabis, some Bengalis, from East Bengal), Zoroastrians from Persia.

My neighborhood playmates spoke a variety of languages in their homes (Marathi, Malayalam, Telegu, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Kannada) but when we came out to play, we spoke Marathi, the local language, a brand of Bombay Hindi, and some English.

Bombay was the melting pot of India. In this city, no single culture, language, or religion dominated as they did in other cities in India and I grew up assimilating and absorbing a variety of indigenous cultures and thrived in it.

Indians may appear to be a homogeneous mass of people, but in reality India is the world's oldest melting pot where the population can be classified and broken down by language, religion, caste, class, and sex.

Just imagine the permutations and combinations: fourteen major languages, thousands of dialects, all major religions of the world, four major castes and a substantial number of sub-sects, multiple economic classes, and of course, two sexes.

Because of these divisions, ironically, every Indian belongs to a minority group. From the day an Indian is born, she has to learn to assimilate, thrive, and succeed in this environment.

When I came to United States and onto the global stage, it was just another extension of being able to assimilate and succeed in a different world. I immersed myself into the local society, learned to live in it and contribute to it.

So, after having lived through two Diasporas (the Indian Diaspora and the Global Diaspora), when I consider *depicting* or creating a portrait of a Diaspora, several interesting aspects begin to appear but I'll highlight a few. Those four aspects are:

1. *Diasporas have waves*
2. *All depictions are almost always subjective*
3. *All depictions are part of a bigger, macro picture and are relevant*
4. *History is kinder to romantic depictions and popular fiction than fact-based non-fiction.*

1. *Diasporas have three waves:*
 - a. The *primary wave* of immigrants has a huge motivation to uproot itself and move to another place. This wave is similar to a seismic shift of a tectonic plate. It faces the immense resistance and overcomes them in the most ingenious ways. These immigrants are

motivated to do so – they have burned their ships and there's no going back.

They build good lives and create foundations for their children and future generations. The first wave immigrant has an identity crisis of simultaneously belonging to the country of her birth and the country where she lives.

A majority (about 70%) of *An Indian in Cowboy Country* is a depiction of the first wave where the protagonist straddles two countries and continents, faces professional challenges, besides personal and cultural ones. It represents your parents' stories rather than yours'. And could be quite valuable to those who want to understand their parents' journeys.

(Examples of South Asian writers who also address *first wave* issues are Chitra Divakaruni, Anita Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa, Vikram Seth, Hanif Kureshi, and Salman Rushdie.)

- b. The *secondary wave* consists of children of the first wave who then begin to build on these foundations. They still have memories of their origins, but their identity crisis is acute and its resolution has dilemmas and drama. The first 3 stories or 30% of *An Indian in Cowboy Country* are about the secondary wave.

(Jhumpa Lahiri, Meera Syal, and Aubrey Mennen fall into this second category.)

- c. The *tertiary waves* assimilate and merge into the mainstream, and over time cannot be discerned from the local population. All that remains are romantic notions of their origins.

(Parsi writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry are great examples of this third wave, as are V.S. Naipaul, and Shiv Naipaul.)

2. *All depictions are subjective.* When an artist creates a representation of anything, the act brings together a combination of many dimensions:

- a. The age/time/conditions that the artist lives in,
- b. The artist's personal experiences,
- c. The artist's observation/insights,
- d. Her imagination,
- e. The medium used,
- f. The quality/deftness of expression.

An Indian in Cowboy Country is about a primary wave immigrant from Bombay, an IIT Engineer, who comes to Texas and joins the oil & gas industry, only to face professional, person, and cultural challenges. Of course, he overcomes them.

When I set out to write *An Indian in Cowboy Country*, I decided that I was going to write about something I know, intimately, so that my writing could have a texture, invoke memories, and induce sensations of taste, smell, and sounds.

I don't know how successful I was but many readers tell me that, when they read the book, it brought back memories. It also made them hunger and crave for Indian food!

(Some South Asian Examples: *My Beautiful Launderette* (Kureishi), *Bhaji in the Beach*, *Bend It Like Beckham* (Syal) *A Fine Balance* (Mistry), *Cracking India* (Sidhwa), *Mistress of Spices* (Divakaruni)).

3. *All depictions are relevant because they are part of a larger global tapestry.* By definition, a diaspora is spreading of the seed and this seed, when planted in different parts of the world, absorbs unique characteristics from the local soil.

Every story about the diaspora thus becomes a unique context, a coordinate in space, time, and experience, which someday will collectively tell the whole story of a Diaspora. There are thousands of such contexts, each a weave and a knot in the overall tapestry of a Diaspora.

An Indian in Cowboy Country is relevant in understanding a microcosm of that diaspora that moved to America and to Texas.

4. *History is kinder to romantic depictions and popular fiction than fact-based non-fiction.* People love stories, and the intermingling and the interplay of fact and fiction creates a taut and tense reading experience that cannot be matched by boring tomes by scholarly historians. Good fiction survives for a long time because it embellishes facts and adds interesting layers to hold readers' attention.

An Indian in Cowboy Country is semi-autobiographical and has been fictionalized to make it more interesting to the reader. The protagonist's background, timeline, and places parallel mine, but the people and incidents are a figment of my imagination. I wish my life were as interesting as that of the book's hero!

How did you become interested in writing?

Intrinsically, I am a right brained person, who was twisted and molded throughout my childhood into a left brained engineer. And somehow before it could create an explosive imbalance, I discovered an avenue of creative expression – writing.

It was perfect vehicle for an introvert. It did not need a huge canvas, it did not need instruments, and nobody could hear me practicing it – no screeching violins or singing! Whenever a creative urge poured forth, I would shut myself in a quiet corner and write.

It was very personal, intimate relationship between the blank sheet of paper in front of me, my pen, and me. I showed my writings to nobody. For almost ten years, I wrote for the sheer satisfaction of the action.

Then one day, my friend Kirat Patel, came to my dorm room at IIT. He was the editor of the campus magazine and he complained bitterly about how he was having a hard time finding people to write articles and fiction for the publication.

Kirat was and is a good friend, yet I hesitated showing him my work. When I did, he grabbed the entire folder/file and came back two days later to tell me that I had saved his reputation as an editor.

One of my short stories in that magazine went on to receive a state award for the best short story of the year. That was the first time I received confirmation that others liked what I wrote.

And then, when I came to United States I stopped writing fiction. My muse disappeared for more than 25 years but I kept my pen sharp by writing and publishing business articles, until one day in 2003, I read an interesting book *Forest for the Trees* by Betsy Lerner. It sparked that inert, latent urge in me and I wrote this book in 20 months.

How do you view the diaspora experience and how has that impacted the way you write about it?

Let me suggest a framework. There are three waves of the Diaspora experience:

The first wave has this tremendous motivation to uproot itself and move out. This generation burns its ships, and cannot and will not return to the land of their birth. This generation is the continental tectonic plate that moves and overcomes great resistance in ingenious, inspired ways.

The second wave consists of children of the first wave who then begin to build on these foundations. They still have memories of their origins, but their identity crisis is acute and its resolution has dilemmas and drama.

The tertiary waves assimilate and merge into the mainstream, and over time cannot be discerned from the local population. All that remains are romantic notions of their origins.

First, many South Asians are part of two diasporas – one local in India and the second is on the global stage. For example, my grandfather moved from a Tamil speaking area in North Arcot or Vellore, to Bangalore, where people spoke Kannada. Then, my father moved to Bombay, where the locals spoke Marathi. And, I, in my turn, moved to, as they say, the great state of Texas.

I am part of the first wave in the global diaspora and I was the second wave in India's local diaspora. An Indian in Cowboy Country is not simply the story of a Tam Bram in Texas but more about anyone who is different from those around.

The first three chapters are about dilemmas of a second immigrant wave. It is set in Bombay and India. However, I discovered that its *second wave* experience was universal when Aruna Vishwanathan, a Houstonian (born in the US; went University of Texas and Rice University) told me that she was moved by the second story, set in IIT Bombay!

The rest of the chapters are about resistances that the first generation faces and overcomes. You could empathize with some aspects of the first three chapters but the rest are about your parents. Overall, An Indian in Cowboy Country sheds some light on your parents' journey in America. It helped my daughter understand mine.

In what way is the Indian-American experience different from those of other first generations? In what way is it similar?

I believe that at a microscopic level each one's experience is unique; when you reduce magnification, similarities begin to show.

Similarities – Every immigrant generation faces resistance but overcomes them. It is amazing how many first-wave immigrants tell me how much my book tells their stories. By the way, this included a Polish woman!

Difference – In Mumbai, I still possess the ability to disappear into the masses of the city because I do not look different from those around me. However, in North America's white Anglo Saxon environment, I lose that capability and have to prove my worth constantly, especially in places where Indians are a rare commodity.

Why doesn't the Indian community rally behind Indian writers as they do in the Jewish and African American communities?

Two reasons.

First reason. Great writers write about experiences in their own cultures, and great Indian writers write about their experiences in their own subculture, which may preclude a larger Indian audience from appreciating the literature.

For example, Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize for literature and he is widely read in Bengal. However, his penetration of the Indian literary psyche is quite limited. Local authors overpower potential national authors in India and that trend is exported to America.

India has its own eddy currents of Diasporas moving around and till we have some kind of a uniform Indian culture, with common experiences across the country, literature that is wholeheartedly supported will be lacking.

Second reason. Indians don't have a common history (especially of "suffering") that binds them in the first place. Indians have loyalties to a place and its cultural environs, which is not adequate to create that cohesion behind a work of literary art.

It is different for other art forms with great aesthetic content. Indian art (M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza, Tyeb Mehta, S.H. Raza, V.S. Gaitonde, and others) has transcended these geographic boundaries in India and created a national Indian art form that is a beautiful amalgam and has great following.

To some it may sound vulgar but the Bollywood film industry has actually succeeded in creating a national Indian art form that also transcends these local boundaries in India.

On an international scale, films, such as *Bend It Like Beckham*, and *Namesake* have done a better job of creating a mass attraction in India and getting support among the global Indian Diaspora.

My lesson from this is that if I want to create an *Indian* bestseller, I have to make people laugh and celebrate (*Bend It Like Beckham*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), or make them weep in the recollection of a common tragedy or misery or struggle.