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Indians in Russia: A New Page in the History of South Asian Diaspora.

At present, Indian diaspora receives significant attention of Indian and international media and academics due to its size (total of 20 million, See Report, 2001) and importance in such countries as the United Kingdom, The United States, Canada, Trinidad, Mauritius, Guyana, Surinam, Fiji. At the same time there is a significant expansion of Indian diaspora into South America, Central Africa and continental Europe. Mediterranean countries are becoming particularly vulnerable to illegal Indian immigration via Turkey, Ukraine and Russia. Russian Federation is the country, which witnesses both the establishment of the South Asian diaspora and the re-invention of old signs of Indian presence on the Russian soil.

The 2002 census of Russian population counts 2,000 Indians in Russia. The Report of the High Level Committee on Indian diaspora gives a figure of 16,000 Non-Resident Indians in the country. The figure given by Mr. Jha, President of the Association of Indians in Russia, is 40,000. This figure seems to be reasonable. At least, 10,000 Indian students study in Moscow. Half of this number is resident in St. Petersburg. Comparable numbers of Indian students and businessmen are residents of Nizhniy Novgorod, Kazan, Kursk. At least 10,000 illegal migrants from South Asia also live in Moscow. Thus a figure of 40,000 of Indians seems to be correct. In comparison with 2 million Indo-Americans in the USA and 1.5 million of Indians in the United Kingdom, and with 1.5 million of Indian citizens currently resident in Saudi Arabia, 40,000 of Indians in Russian Federation is not a big figure. Yet, for continental Europe this figure is not miniscule. It is comparable with the number of Indians in Germany (25,000 of Indian citizens and 10,000 of persons of Indian origin) and in Spain (16,000 of persons of Indian origin and 13,000 Indian citizens). The number of Indians in Russian Federation is bigger than that in Eastern Europe in total.

The significance of Indian presence in Russian Federation is, however, not in their numbers. Russia is the country rich in oil, gas, electric power and other resources. It has significant potential for economic growth. It is not, however, the most safe country for living and investing.

This fact frightens western businessmen, but gives competing edge to those from Asia. Indians are particularly welcome due to the warm relations between Russia and India for the whole period of over fifty years of Indian independence. Russian society was in love with Indian movies and music for a long time, thus, it is more likely to accept Indians as a part of its emergent multi-cultural mosaic replacing Soviet uniformity. Porous borders of the Russian Federation with both Asian countries of the former Soviet Union and with new member states of the European Community make Russian Federation the ideal stepping stone for Indian transit migrants moving westwards. Thus, Russian Federation is emerging as an important transit territory as well as the final destination of Indian immigrants.

The emergence and rise in importance of Indian community in the Russian Federation encourages a scholar of Indian diaspora to look back into the past, particularly in the 17th century, when Russian-Indian trade was established and even a thriving Indian community existed in the southern Russian city of Astrakhan.

Some insight on the Indian community in Russia and in Central Asia and the development of trade relations with the north-western borders of India has been made by P.M.Kemp in her book 'Bharat-Rus' and a recent analysis was done by Gopal (1989) and Kaushik (Kaushik, 2003). Russian study of Central Asian Indians includes unpublished thesis by Dmitriev and several his papers (See Dmitiriev, 1965, 1972). The history of the Indians in the 17th century Astrakhan was traced through the records in archives by N.N. Palmov (1934), N.M.Goldberg (1949, 1958) and Yukht (1957).

The first record of Indian presence in Russia dates back to the 17th century when Astrakhan, trading-port at the delta of the Volga river was incorporated into the Moscow state. By then, Indian enterprise went as far as Isphahan in Persia, in Kizlyar in the North Caucasus and Astrakhan in Russia. The Archives in Astrakhan, Moscow and St. Petersburg contain significant information on the activity of Indian merchants and artisans in this Russian city in the mouth of the Volga river by the Caspian Sea. From the archives we know, that first Indians from Multan arrived to Russian Astrakhan in 1615-1616. In 1624 a special trading court (Gostiniy Dvor) for Indian merchants along with separate courts for Armenian and Persian merchants had been erected in Astrakhan (Palmov, 1934:137). More than one hundred Indian merchants with their servants lived there. They sold in Astrakhan textiles, jewellery and medicines. In 1645 an Indian merchant dared to go as far as Kazan and Moscow and bought there his goods with great success. As the result, 25 more Indian traders came to Astrakhan from Persia. In 1650 Indian

merchants sold their goods in Yaroslavl not far from Moscow. Russian Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich invited Indian artisans to Moscow to introduce textile industry there. English traveller Forster describes Indians who traveled from India to Astrakhan to teach their religion, definitely Hinduism or Jainism. Reports of Russian merchants, comments by Russian officers and references of an Armenian merchant to these Indians as cow-worshippers, suggest that these Indians were Hindus, and not Muslims. Russian archives suggest information that Indians had their living quarter and a temple along with a trading center in Astrakhan.

The international trade of local Indian colony was interrupted with the worsening of political relations between Moghul India and the Persian Empire. Indian traders survived political turmoil of the establishment of new political power in what is now known as the Southern Russia. They kept control of the East-West trade, but their links with India itself became irregular. This resulted in marriages of Astrakhan Indians with Tatar women. Although Moscow state allowed Indian traders to follow their religious rites, including that of cremation of dead bodies, and the Hindu temple existed in the city, a number of professing Hindus diminished and some of them had been converted to Islam. Others, however, retained Hindus. They had poured a water from the Ganges to the Volga, and considered the Volga as their local Ganges since that ceremony. They freely prayed to their gods and made cremation of their dead despite gossips and hostility among Muslims and Christians who considered them as pagans. Local administrative head (*voevoda*) was given instructions from Moscow to allow Hindus follow their rites of passage.

In early 18th century Indian merchants lived not only in Astrakhan, but also in Moscow. It is reported by Russian chronicles that in 1723 a group of Hindu traders left Moscow in protest of the local administration objection to the Sati (sacrifice of the widow) of a rich Hindu merchant. This record indicates the presence of Hindu traders in Moscow in 18th century. Thus, we see that in Moscow locals less aware of Hindu traditions. It is also the custom of sati which often alienated locals from Hindus, as this custom did not look much dignified.

With the expansion of their trade to central Russia and to a capital city of St. Petersburg many Hindu traders converted to the Orthodox Christianity. As usual, they got Russian Christian names and surnames. In 1740s we have several records of 'Russian Indians' with surnames Ivanov, Feodorov. Later on they had been assimilated to the Russian population. We may guess that some Russians from Astrakhan with typical Russian surnames but somewhat Oriental look can have Indian ancestors. Yet, in 19th century few locals there could claim Indian heritage. Indian diamond trade was known then in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Later on, Moscow and St.

Petersburg saw several visiting Indian adventurers including the Sikh hero Dalip Singh (1838-1893). In 1887 disguised as an Irishman (sic!) Dalip Singh visited Moscow where he met a popular Russian publisher and politician Katkov. Indians from Central Asia, where their numbers by early 20th century were estimated to be 6-8,000 (Dmitriev, 1972: 234), visited Moscow and participated at the famous Nizhniy Novgorod Fair (market) there. Yet, it is impossible to speak of continuity of Indian presence from the previous time. Astrakhan Indians dispersed to Kazan, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Astrakhan and their descendents became assimilated, although, it seems possible to assume that some families of 'Russian Indians' still keep memories of their South Asian ancestors.

The Soviet era witnessed the emergence of Indian Communist community in Moscow and Leningrad in 1920s-1930s. Famous Indian revolutionaries like V. Chatopadhyaya and A. Mukherjee started their life as the Comintern (Communist International) functionaries, continued as academics at Leningrad (St. Petersburg) Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography and ended up in prisons as many other politicians in 1930s. Surviving Indians found job as teachers of Indian vernaculars and experts on Indian affairs. Their numbers, though, were negligible.

In mid-1950s and onwards significant numbers of Indian students came to major educational institutions of Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk, Kursk etc. Yet, their presence was not expected to be long. Few managed to remain in Russia after completing their education. They did not form a diaspora, and the temporary presence of Indians in major Russian cities was not questioned because of strict immigration and residence rules.

The situation changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although economic hardships for a while made post-Soviet space unattractive for foreign students depending on stipend, better offs and adventurers found Russian conditions suitable, while Russian immigration and residence rules had been neglected for a decade by Russian authorities themselves. As the result, new wave of Indians coming to Russia consisted mostly from students, but of them only half (mostly medical students) made study abroad their main aim. The rest found it a good opportunity to combine a study abroad with a small business, often in retailing which they continue after graduating or dropping off as failed students. As the result, Indians in Russian Federation are now nearly as numerous as students. Some of them are successful and rich, others are just petty traders. Rich Indian businessmen are involved in tea and garments trade, construction industry, and most recently they invested in St. Petersburg and Moscow breweries. New projects involve

Indian investment in Russian oil fields, particularly in Sakhalin Island in the Russian Far East and in steel production where as competitor or a partner appears a steel empire of Mr. Mittal, an East African Indian, based in London.

Although, due to their phenotypic differences from the main population Indians can not be dubbed an 'invisible minority' in Russian Federation, their small number make them remain in the shadow of such minorities as the Azeris (Transcaucasian Shia Muslims) and the Chechens. Yet they remain to be mentioned in the media, particularly in connection with three problems.

The first theme of present day Russian life, which often has Indian connection, is that of transit migration. Nearly one thousand Indians is stopped at the Russian-Ukrainian border only. Indians, who try to enter Ukraine from Russia try to move further to Europe. They also try Belorussian border and that of Estonia and Latvia. It is estimated that at least half of them manage to cross these border safely. The total number of such transit migrants is estimated by Ukrainian border service to be nearly 10,000 annually. According to Russian FSB (Federal Bureau of Investigation), about 40 Indians enter Russia every week in the hope of sneaking to the West (Radyuhin, 31.05.2004). After a decade of negligence Russia is taking steps to curb the multi-million business of human trafficking from India. Russian FSB started screening for potential illegal migrants from India, A few years ago, the entire staff of the Russian Embassy consular section in Delhi was replaced to stem the smuggling tide (Radyukhin). The measure helped to reduce the flow of illegal immigrants, but did not stop it. A human-trafficking mafia has its men in the embassies, at customs and in police. Even ministerial staff, educational institutions and travel companies are involved in this business. As it can be seen from advertisements in Indian newspapers, like the Hindu, or the Times of India, placement of students to Russian educational institutions is openly sold by representatives (may be bogus ones) of the Russian Ministry of Education.

The situation for legal incomers from India to Russia, particularly for students, is worsened by the fact that educational institutions often do not have their direct representatives and bank accounts in India. Most recent case of Indian student sorrows is that reported by St. Petersburg Times on June 11, 2004. A Dubai-based Sailan International firm, which used to be a partner of St. Petersburg Mechnikov Medical Academy, suddenly disappeared. As Mechnikov Academy did not have its representative abroad, students paid their fees to the Sailan Int, and this firm processed money to the Academy. The disappearance of the firm troubled 300 Indian students of the Academy who's future is now uncertain.

Another danger for concern of Indian nationals in Russia is rising level of crime there. Illegal immigrants of Indian origin often fall victims of abuse and violence, they are forced to drug trafficking and even selling their organs for transplantation by members of international gangs, among whom are Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Chechens, Russians. In May 2004, a Moscow court sentenced Pakistani traffickers to long-term prison terms for kidnapping nine Indians.

The second theme of importance is the rise of racism in Russia. Although it is Azeris and Chechens who are main victims of racists, the mentioning of several Indians, one of whom was killed in St. Petersburg, shows the threat for South Asian students as well. Among victims of racist attacks students of South Asian origin from Surinam, Guyana are also mentioned. Thus we may suggest that the Indian numbers in Russia can be even bigger if we include PIO there. Racists, however, do not make any difference. They treat Indians like a racial group, the Asians or even 'Blacks'. Most recent case which got national attention is the murder of an Indian from Mauritius 23-year-old medical student Atish Kumar Ramgoolam. St. Petersburg Times reported on the accident on February 4, 2003. Readers' comments on the case prove an assumption that Indians are often targeted as easy victims unlike Azeris or Arabs. A medical student of the same institution who signed his letter Jatt Punjabi, suggests that foreigners in general are victims of offence. Another respondent, a victim's brother in law, Mr. Rajesh Jeewon, a resident of Portsmouth in the United Kingdom, suggested introduction of police patrol in areas of Asian concentration in the city, thus inviting us to to discussion of the Indian segregation in the city. We speak, however, about temporary residents of university hostel. The residential distribution of permanent residents of Asian origin is not known, although the trend for Indians is to settle in the rented accommodation in areas of moderate housing.

The third important theme is that of the Indian cultural institutions, and particularly, of Hindu temple which is announced to be constructed on Hodinskoye Pole in Moscow. The announcement of the perspectives of this construction gave a rise to heated discussion in Russian society. On October 17, 2003 Mr. Jha, a leader of the Association of Indians in Russia, announced of the foundation of the Center of Vedic Culture. The Foundation was supposed to be a sort of continuation of the success which got Indian culture with the establishment of the Swami Narayan Temple in Neasden in London. The driving force behind the project, however, was different. While rich Gujarati community in London and Swaminarayani Sect leaders both in India and in diaspora were among main sponsors and organizers of the temple construction in

London, in Moscow the task was laid to local Indian businessmen and Hare Krishna activists. Famous Alfred Ford of the Ford automobile empire also promised to support the project. Thus, although it was welcomed by Indians as a part of their culture, the project was viewed by the Russian Orthodox clerics as another attack on Russia from the West. A pressure was put on Moscow city head Mr. Luzhkov not to allow the planned construction. What is more, an old Hare Krishna temple in Moscow also is under a danger of demolition. By accepting the Hare Krishna movement in Russia as the representative of the Vedic culture Indians in Moscow found themselves in extremely hostile environment in present-day city of 'forty of forties' of churches, as the Russian capital once used to be known.

It should be added that the establishment of a Sikh temple and cultural center in Moscow not only did not alienate the Interconfessional Council of Russia, that on November 28, 2003 approved this step as allowing a normal religious life to nearly 300 Sikhs in Moscow (Interfax Agency, Moscow, 28 November 2003). Although it was dubbed as a branch of 'traditional Hinduism', Sikhism was considered a 'traditional' religion and supported by clerics of the Russian Orthodox, Muslim, Buddhist and Judaist Churches. In this context the opposition to the construction of a Hare Krishna temple in Moscow rose not due to the Indian origin of the religion, but because of its western interpretation.

In conclusion it should be said that there is much uncertainty both about real figures and the dynamics of rise of Indian population in Russian Federation. We may conclude that this population is rising, and that themes, related to Indian presence in Russian Federation are not unique, but fit very well to problems of Indians in other countries of the Indian diaspora. These are the problems of racism and cultural alienation from the host society, the problem of illegal immigration, transit movement of population, education, business and settlement, religion and culture.

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