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Actors and Models of Indian Diaspora in International Relations: From Social Parasites to Economic Boon?

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Actors and Models of Indian Diaspora in International Relations: From Social Parasites to Economic Boon?¹

Binod Khadria

Talking of the actors and models of the Indian diaspora, I have not so far come across any definite existing discourse that has dealt with a clearly-defined category called ‘models’ of Indian diaspora. On the other hand, ‘actors’ would perhaps be a more obvious category in the Indian diaspora as a holistic entity. The two alternative sets of descriptors in the sub-title that I have chosen for this article reflect my impression that the models could be based on how the actors in the Indian diaspora are going to be viewed in the arena of international relations in the twenty-first century – with suspicion, or with awe. Secondly, they also reflect a transition from the first to the second that might have taken place over time or is in process. For obvious reasons, I have left it an open question.

I have begun by constructing a framework of an underlying matrix, which comprises a limited number of typologies of models and a few typologies of actors. The former I have called Model I, Model II, etc., - represented by the rows, and the latter I have called Actors A, B, etc. – represented by the columns. This type of underlying matrix, I hope, will pave the way for addressing each of the binaries of models and actors that one could allocate to the cells created in the sub-matrixes, while still keeping the issues together under a holistic umbrella. The next step will be to name the models and actors in each typology of the matrix in order to place the issues in one cell or the other.

¹ This is a revised version of the keynote address delivered at the International Seminar on Actors and Models of the Indian Diaspora in International Relations, jointly organized by the Centre de Science Humaines and the India International Centre at New Delhi on September 26-27, 2005.

TYOLOGIES OF ACTORS AND MODELS IN THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Typology of Models		Typology of Actors								
		A						B	C	D
		i	ii	iii	iv	v	vi			
I	PIO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	?			
	NRI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
II										
III										
IV										

In the prototype matrix, I have divided the Typology I of models into PIOs and NRIs; and the Typology A of actors into (i) unskilled labourers, (ii) semi-skilled workers, (iii) traders, (iv) entrepreneurs, (v) professionals, and (vi) students.

In an extension of these typologies, in Model II, the ‘twice banished’, and the returnees form another group; in Model III, the temporary migrants, the circulatory migrants, and the sojourners appear as a third typology; in Model IV, the indentured workers and their earlier variants – the slaves, soldiers, policemen, the lascars, the maids etc., the present-day refugees/asylees, and the voluntary migrants could make still another typology where the degree of coercion could be the index. One could also have a typology of models (Model V) based on plain geographical location, or complex geo-political occupation of space. There could also be a further typology (Model VI) comprising the ‘brawn drain’, brain drain, brain bank, brain gain, etc. as categories of models.

Similarly, in the extended typology of actors we could have Typology B, with the principal ‘seed migrants’, the dependant spouses, the pre-generation parents, the second-generation progeny, other relatives, and even sponsored friends as a second typology. Typology C could be the diasporic associations based on provincial, linguistic, art and culture, religious, and professional groupings. Another important one, Typology D, could comprise men, and women as separate actors. And then we could also have *occupational actors* like doctors, nurses, engineers, information technologists, architects, lawyers, masons, drivers and so on, or *generic actors* like writers, teachers, scientists, inventors, innovators, managers, white-collar workers, blue-collar workers and so on in various fields, as two separate actor typologies – Typology E and Typology F.

Irrespective of how one finds slots in the matrix - whether *implicitly* in a fuzzy manner, or *explicitly* by creating well-defined typologies - as a next step, we would still need to probe further in terms of *contextualizing* a myriad of models and actors with international relations *per se*. International relation in itself is a mystical category as it covers a huge scope, involving distinctly different, although not disjointed, aspects of civil society: the political, the economic, the cultural (which includes the religious), and the security-related, to name just some of the most important aspects.

One way or the other, implicit or explicit, it seems that we are poised to face the challenge of addressing a new perspective in diaspora studies. Its novelty would lie in the *deconstruction* of the interface between the Indian diaspora and international relations, and playing with the interpretation of that interface - in terms of identifying each of them as a dependent variable under one construct and as independent variables under a different construct. In other words, we have a choice to say that the ID (Indian Diaspora) is the dependent (or determined) variable, and IR (International Relations) the independent (or determining) variable; or *vice versa*. For example:

We may wish to know how international relations - through immigration policies - have been instrumental in determining *the actors* as, for example, by the quantitative and qualitative immigration quotas for 'seed migrants' in the labour market, the family-reunification clauses in the family preferences, and so on; and in determining *the models* through, for instance, temporary entry and stay rights of Indians as exchange visitors or as intra-company transferees, transition categories like the H-1B visa holders, or as permanent residents with green cards and the like, and as citizens by naturalization or birth of the Indian diaspora. We may thus tend to know how these have defined the roles they had assumed or been assigned to play in the host societies so far.

Alternatively, we may say that we want to learn how the actors and models of the Indian diaspora, as pressure groups in host societies, and now increasingly in India too as their country of origin, affect international relations: (a) bilaterally between India and the destination countries, and (b) multilaterally with and amongst nations globally. This might be examined historically

through the past, contemporarily through the current state of affairs, or futuristically in the times to come.

One may choose to address the issue either way, although it is my impression that, if we were to assess it in a general sense, the policy concerns in the host countries are more intimately linked with the first perspective, as they must look at questions of assimilation of Indians as well as all other foreigners into the local society and community. The policy concerns in India have, however, more recently been trending toward the second perspective, looking for how the Indian diaspora could influence, to the advantage of India, bilateral and multilateral relations from abroad. While both perspectives on the interface between the Indian diaspora and international relations – that of the receiving country and the other of the sending country - are important, a novel approach would be to fuse the two approaches, with attention focused on the actors either as ‘traitors’ and ‘spies’, or ‘prodigal children’ and ‘a silver-lining of hope’.

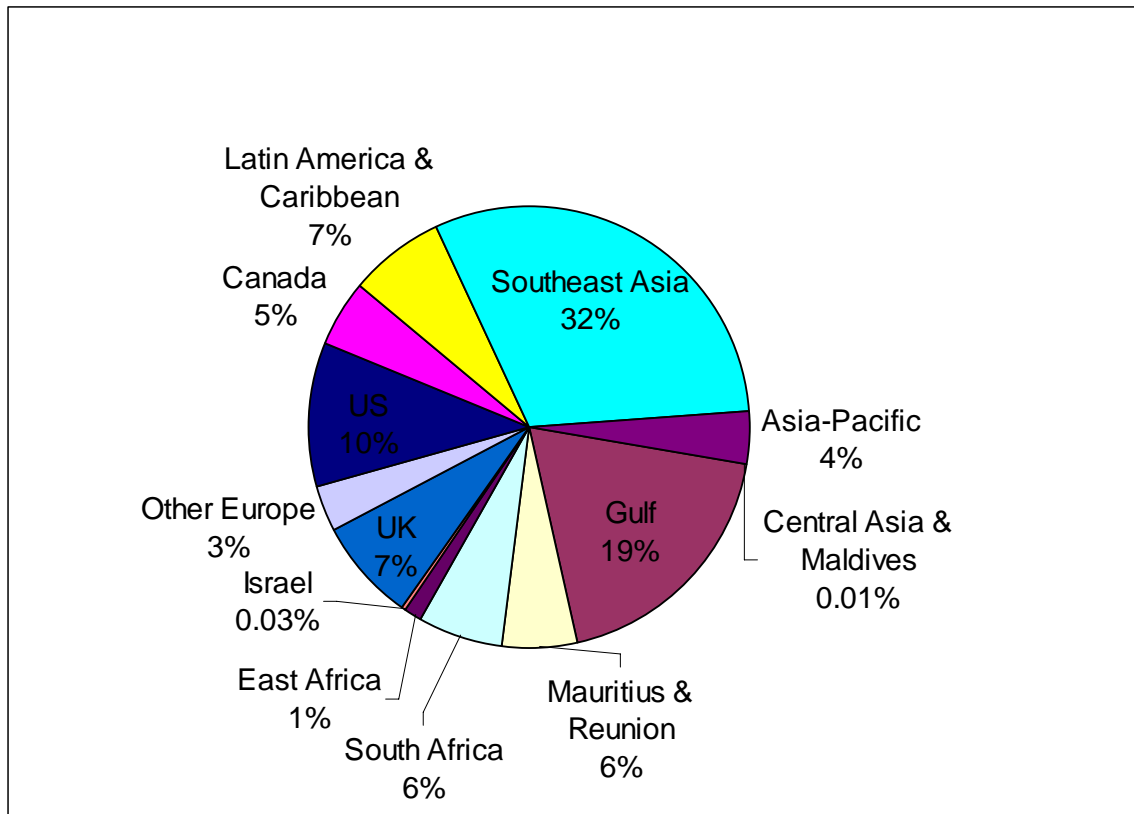
There is perhaps already enough literature on how international relations have shaped the actors and the models, or vice-versa, in the past. What I have attempted in this paper is to contemplate the links between the actors and models of Indian diaspora with international relations in a contemporary as well as a futuristic way.

The boundaries between disciplinary approaches in diaspora studies are becoming blurred, and the diaspora experts are increasingly adopting a multidisciplinary outlook, which I think is a welcome sign for the field. Keeping this in mind, I have tried to address some of the issues with a holistic perspective of international development in mind, whether local or global. In doing so, however, I have mainly used the limited example of the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) diaspora in the United States.

Figure 1 presents the regional distribution of an approximately 20 million-strong *stock* of the Indian diaspora at the close of the twentieth century (ICWA 2001). It is common knowledge that the earlier migrants who formed the basis of an Indian diaspora were mainly ‘cheap’ manual workers who left India in large numbers to meet the enormous demand for indentured labour that arose in the plantations, mainly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, immediately after the British abolished slavery in 1834 – leading to what is sometimes also called the ‘brawn drain’. The ‘brain drain’ - a quality exodus of the cream of India’s highly-skilled

professionals - comprising doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers, architects, entrepreneurs, and more recently the IT workers, as well as nurses, appeared a century-and-a-quarter later. From the post-mid-1960s, this brain drain has continued into the twenty-first century, flowing westward and contributing *inter alia* to the 10 percent concentration of the Indian diaspora now in the USA.

Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of NRIs and PIOs by Region



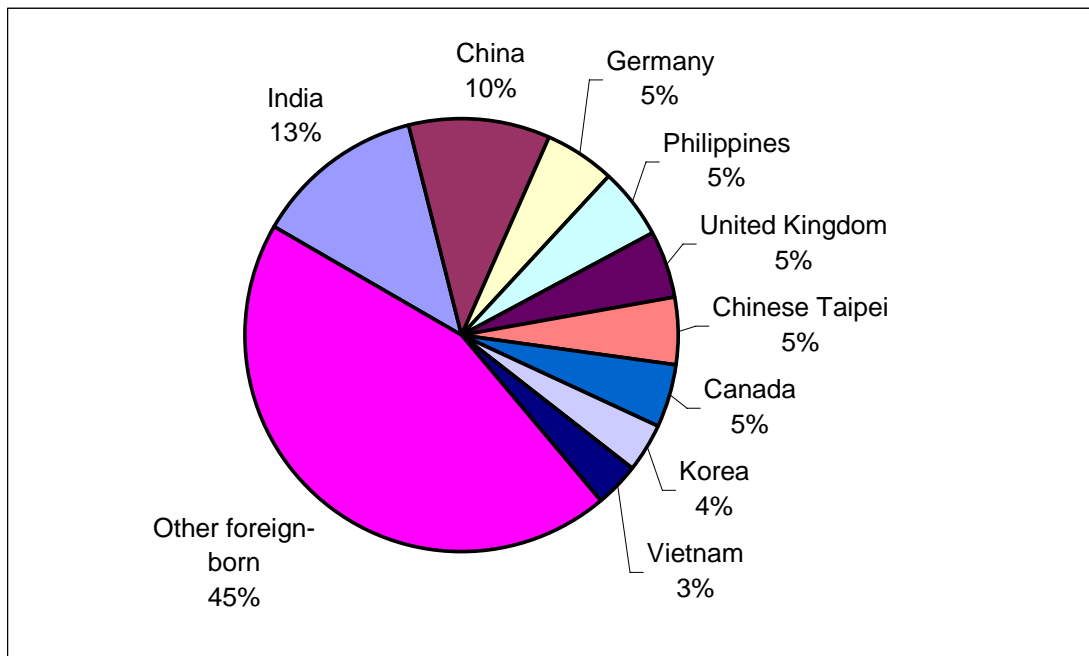
Source: ICWA, *Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora*, New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs, 2001.

Within the short span of the last decade of the 20th century, there has been a shift in the perception about the highly-educated or skilled professional Indian immigrants, from persons supposedly 'draining' India of its knowledge wealth and human resources, to now being seen as 'angels' -- perfect transnational "global citizens". This shift in the perception of professional migrants leaving India, has taken place in phases though - from the 'brain drain' of the 1960s and 1970s to the 'brain bank' of the 1980s and 1990s, and subsequently to the idea of 'brain gain' in the twenty-first century. This complete turnaround of perception --

moving from one model of the Indian diaspora to the other -- gets reflected in the current official and public euphoria in India over the rising immigration quotas of the developed host countries, mainly the US and the UK, the EU, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and so on.

Figure 2 provides a glimpse of the transition period into the twenty-first century in terms of the composition of the Indian diaspora in the US. In 1999, India-born residents in the US with a science, engineering or social science (SES) degree numbered 165,000. Indians thus accounted for 13 per cent of the total number of all foreign-born US residents with science, engineering, and social science (SES) degrees, which was more than the proportion for any other foreign-born diasporic residents including the Chinese.

Figure 2: Size of Foreign-born Diasporic Residents in the U.S. with SES Degrees, By Country of birth, 1999

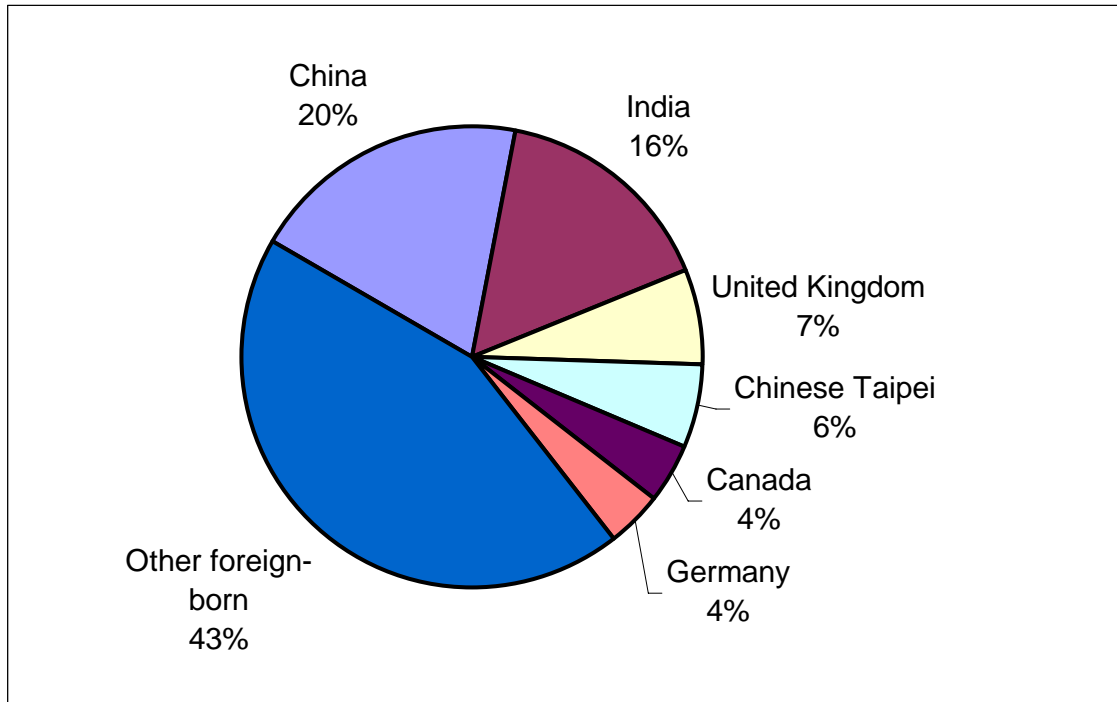


Source: Author, using National Science Foundation, Division of Science Resources Statistics (NSF/SRS), Scientists and Engineers Statistical Data System (SESTAT), 1999.

Figure 3 is a subset of Figure 2, showing the country origin of all foreign-born residents with a doctorate degree in science, engineering or social science, residing in the United States in

1999, with India accounting for a high share of 16 per cent or 30 000 people, second only to the Chinese.

Figure 3: Size of Foreign-born Diasporic Residents in the U.S. with SES Doctorate Degrees, by Country of Birth, 1999



Source: Author, using National Science Foundation, Division of Science Resources Statistics (NSF/SRS), Scientists and Engineers Statistical Data System (SESTAT), 1999.

Table 1 presents another picture of the transition period – the *flow* profile of the occupational shift of the NRIs entering the United States between 1999 and 2001. It shows a substantial increase in the proportion of those holding the highest-rung ‘professional and technical’ occupations over the three transition years into the new century (from 12 per cent to 21 per cent to 28 per cent respectively), showing that the position of the highly-skilled and knowledgeable amongst the Indian diaspora workforce in the US labour market has undergone significant enhancement. In addition, their share amongst immigrants of all foreign nationalities entering and settling in the US has also been increasing over this period (from 9 per cent to 15 per cent to 24 per cent). This is true for the second tier of occupations too, viz., the ‘executive, administrative and managerial’ occupations, on both counts, though at a smaller scale.

**Table 1: The Millennium Shift: Occupational Profile of NRIs
Entering the United States, 1999-2001**

	1999			2000			2001		
	Number	Share of all Indian immigrants (%)	Share of all Immigrants (%)	Number	Share of all Indian immigrants (%)	Share of all Immigrants (%)	Number	Share of all Indian immigrants (%)	Share of all Immigrants (%)
Professional and technical	3,492	11.6	9.4	8 632	20.6	14.7	19 935	28.4	23.8
Executive, admnstr. and managerial	1,112	3.7	7.1	1 644	3.9	7.9	3 062	4.3	11.1
Clerical & administrative support	576	1.9	4.2	573	1.4	3.9	643	0.9	3.9
Sales	648	2.1	6.1	689	1.6	5.3	842	1.2	5.4
Service	559	1.9	3.2	798	1.9	2.6	1 041	1.4	2.7
Farming, forestry & fishing	1,328	4.4	11.7	1 080	2.6	9.5	1 161	1.7	12.8
Skilled workers	301	0.9	0.9	308	0.7	0.8	389	0.6	0.8
Total with occupation	8,016	26.5	5.7	13 724	32.7	7.2	27 073	38.5	11.3
Occupation not specified	22,221	73.5	4.4	28 322	67.3	4.3	43 217	61.5	5.2
Total immigrants	30,237	100	4.7	42 046	100	4.9	70 290	100	6.6

Source: Author, using data from the US Immigration and Naturalization Service Yearbooks, the latest being from the Yearbook 2001, published in 2003.

As to the Indian presence in the knowledge sector, Table 2 presents a very comprehensive overview of the Indian diaspora in the science, engineering and social science (SES) faculties of the US higher education system. It is divided by teaching field and gender and provides a comparative perspective with the total faculty, and other Asian diasporas. It shows that amongst the American SES faculties in 1997, almost 7,000 teaching staff were of Indian origin, constituting 3 percent of the total faculty strength, 15 per cent of all foreigners, and 23 per cent of all Asians, with the share of Indian women being more than a quarter of all female faculty, and over one-eighth of total Asian female diaspora. The picture leaves enough scope for one to think about the potential for bilateral as well as multilateral advocacy and linkages the Indian academic diaspora can command in the U.S. and the rest of the world.

Table 2: Indian Diaspora Amongst US Faculties, by Teaching Field and Gender, 1997

	Total SES faculties	Indian Diaspora (ID) as SES faculties	ID as % of Total SES faculties	ID as % of All diasporas	ID as % of All Asian diasporas	Female % in Indian Diaspora	Indian Female Diaspora (IFD) as % of Total female	IFD as % of Asian female diaspora
Total SES	224 707	6 876	3.1	15.3	23.2	12.1	26.8	12.9
Physical sciences	37 020	688	1.9	9.3	19.4	16.7	18.8	9.9
Life sciences	53 055	1 014	1.9	13.4	31.2	31.6	38.7	15.7
Math. & computer	44 375	2 086	4.7	18.3	33.0	13.9	39.6	24.5
Social sciences	65 509	1 491	2.3	15.5	32.2	6.3	10.7	5.1
Engineering	24 748	1 597	6.5	17.8	27.4	0.9	23.3	6.3

Note: Data include first jobs of post-secondary teaching at four-year colleges and universities in the United States, but exclude faculties in two-year or community colleges, or those who teach as a secondary job.

Source: Author. Computed and compiled from National Science Foundation, United States, *Science and Engineering Indicators 2000*.

Initially, beginning in the early 1960s, the brain drain from India was associated with the public recognition that the Nobel Prize had brought to the gifted PIO scientists like Har Gobind Khorana (Medicine 1968) who had become a naturalized American citizen at that time, or Subramanyan Chandrasekhar (Physics 1983), who had naturalized in 1953, and had made the United States his home. Gradually, following the landmark 1965 amendments to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, the migration of professionals became a mass phenomenon through the 1970s and onwards, with Indian professionals enjoying the distinction of being one of the best-educated, most employable, and highest-income earning ethnic groups. And yet, they were disdained as ‘deserters’ from the ‘motherland India’, either openly or subtly.² It was only towards the end of 1990s that the success and achievements of the Indian diaspora in the US drew real attention of the developed countries in the West and the East alike, followed by a change of attitude in India too towards its diaspora.³

² Even socially, crossing the seas was at one time considered a taboo in high-caste communities, e.g. as depicted in Munshi Premchand’s novels and stories. Perhaps it was the cumulative effect of the nexus between the diaspora and the aspiring migrants that led to the crumbling of such taboos over time, resulting in swelling streams of migrants joining the Indian diaspora wherever it grew.

³ There is enough evidence of diaspora-India interaction that has been documented in the media lately.

Within the European Union (EU) - the largest economic entity in the world today - two-thirds of the entire Indian diasporic community still resides in the UK. Here too, the Indian community is one of the highest-earning and best-educated groups, achieving eminence in business, information technology, the health sector, the media, and entertainment industries. In Canada, with just 3 percent share in a population of 30 million, Indo-Canadians have recorded high achievements in the fields of medicine, academia, management, and engineering. The Indian immigrants' average annual income in Canada is nearly 20 percent higher than the national average, and their educational levels too are higher. Elsewhere, there are 30,000 Indian citizens in Australia; and New Zealand has also witnessed a rise in the entry of Indian professional immigrants, those engaged in domestic retail trade, and the medical, hospitality, engineering, and information technology sectors. Countries like Japan, Korea, and Singapore are also trying to attract Indian talent.

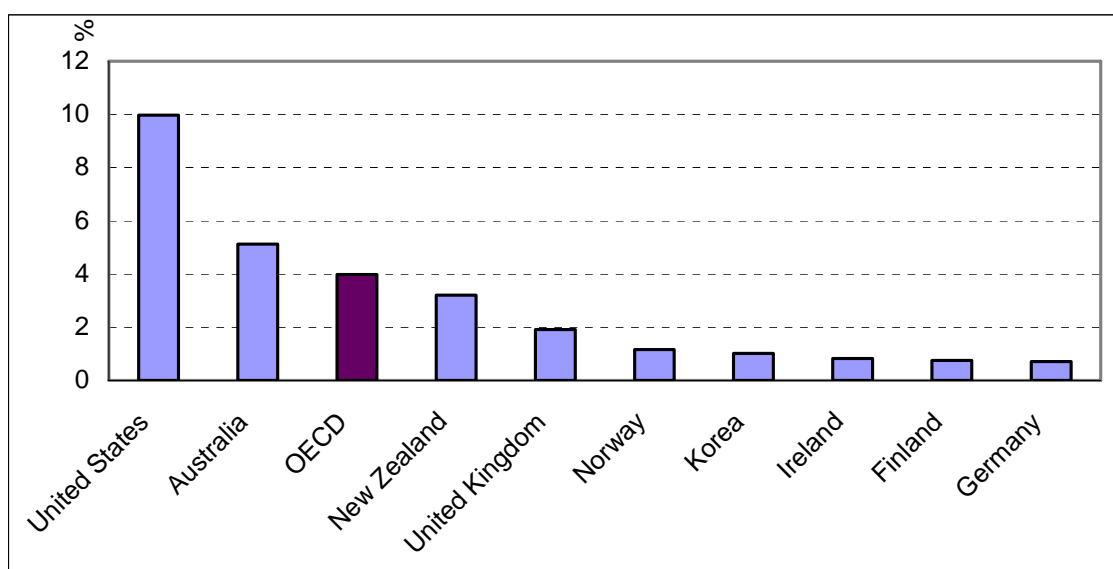
The highly-skilled Indians have joined the diaspora not only through the 'employment gate' but also through the 'academic gate' as a revolving diaspora of students that forms a distinct set of actor in the Indian diaspora - the 'semi-finished human capital' of India abroad.⁴ Data collated by the US Institute of International Education's *Open Doors 2004* survey reveal that in 2003-04 India retained its No. 1 position in US university foreign enrolments (followed by China, Korea, Japan, Canada, and Taiwan) for the third year in a row. Indians now account for 14 percent of all foreign student stock in the US. To serve the dual purpose of sustaining an expensive higher education system, and meeting *short-term* labour shortages, both the UK and the US, with other countries following suit, have adopted a policy of allowing foreign students in their universities, to stay on and work, rather than return to their countries of origin on completion of their degrees. (*The Hindustan Times*, March 2005) In addition, the destination countries gain political mileage in the form of a bonus: The foreign students become their long-term ambassadors in the international political arena.⁵ India has thus become a 'must destination for internationally renowned educational institutions shopping for "knowledge capital" - i.e., to woo the Indian student' (*The Hindu*, Nov 26, 2000). In October 2000, four countries mounted education 'fairs' in Delhi and other Indian cities, and since then it has become a regular feature of international relations in India. Most diplomatic missions

⁴ The term 'semi-finished human capital' for tertiary level students was first used by Tapas Majumdar (1994).

⁵ They also play an important role in world politics like they did in the past as, for example, the Indian celebrity students in the US did during India's independence struggle! (Jensen 1988, as cited in Khadria 1999).

project these as ways 'to facilitate the search of a foreign education to Indian citizens,' but the countries also compete against each other for the generic Indian 'semi-finished human capital' - the student. Figure 4 shows that Indian students accounted for 4 percent of all foreign students enrolled in tertiary education in OECD countries in 2001. A far larger share was registered for the United States, where 10 percent of enrolled foreign students were Indian. In 2004, the share of Indian students amongst all foreign students in the US went up to 14 percent.

**Figure 4: Indian Student Diaspora amongst all Student Diasporas
in Receiving countries, 2001 (%)**



Note: Excluding data for Canada, Greece, Luxembourg, and Portugal.

Source: OECD Education database.

The growing competition among countries like the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland, and also non-English speaking countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands, is bringing even the Ivy League institutions to India, and to other South Asian countries too, to look for the cream of students (*The Economic Times*, Nov 24, 2004).

CONCLUSION

The perceptions of the destination countries, in which the Indian professional migrants have settled and formed a diaspora, have thus undergone a significant reversal. Britain has come a long way since the days of Enoch Powell and his prophecy of 'rivers of blood' if economic immigrants were allowed to settle. The change in values since 1971 could be primarily attributed to the diaspora itself that has defied the anticipated doom by rising to unforeseen economic success.⁶ The reason the paradigm shift in the societies and regions where Indians have settled is important for the hosts lies in their realization that, given the appropriate help, resources, and local support, one type of diasporic actors - the suspect 'tinker, tailor, soldier, spy', if not outright 'social parasite' - can become the other, the economic boon, or as someone has phrased it, the white West's 'great *off-white* hope'!⁷

India has thus emerged as the most sought-after source country for the supply of professionals to the developed host countries. This has led to a major paradigm shift in India too - away from 'brain drain' being looked at as an outright loss, and therefore *painful* for the country, to 'diaspora' as a potential option for turning the phenomenon of migration into an opportunity, and therefore *gainful*. What remains for India as well as these host countries in the emerging international relations paradigm is to judge where the loyalty of the presumed tinker, tailor, soldier, spy that comprise the Indian diaspora will lie? Will they prove to be a real great 'off-white hope' - of not only Europe or Australia or America, but also of the world as whole. Or, will this depend on the direction in which the wind of international relations will blow in the new century, rather than being blown by the diaspora?

⁶ Today, Britain is an endless repository of success stories of the Indian professional diaspora, ranging from Lord Swraj Paul, to steel magnate Laxmi Mittal, to icons like Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen.

⁷ The first reference is an allegory of doubtful loyalties adapted from the title of Le Carre's best-seller of the 1970s - itself borrowed from a well-known nursery rhyme; the second is an expression used by Alibinia (2001) for the brown-skinned Asian Indians.

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