

THE STORY OF INDIAN STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES¹

The first student from India seems to have come to the Pacific Coast in 1901. Since then altogether about five thousand Indians have received their higher education in U S institutions. They include well-known figures in Indian public life such as Dr. B. Ambedkar (Law Minister), Mr. Jai Prakash Narayan (leader of the Socialist Party), and the Kumarappas (sociologists).

The first Indian students came in the wake of the large-scale immigration of Sikhs on the West Coast. Many of them had gone to Japan for technical studies, and hearing about the United States from America-returned Japanese youth, came over to the United States. Indian educational societies also began to take interest in education in the U.S. and to send some students here.

The largest group of Indian students were enrolled at the University of California. In the year 1907-08, it had 17 Indian students, while 5 others were studying at San Louis Obispo and 3 at Mount Tamalpais military academy. ("The Hindu in America" by Girindra Mukerji, *Overland Monthly*, April 1908, pp. 304-05).

Har Dayal, the revolutionary, writing from the University of California in the *Modern Review* (Calcutta) of July 1911, said:

"The Hindu students in America come from the middle-class, which possesses energy and brains, but little money. They are engaged in technical study and generally work for their living... Some of our students find themselves stranded here at the end of the university course, when they find that a degree from a western university does not buy a \$200 ticket to Bombay or Calcutta."

Lala Lajpat Rai, the well-known political leader, who was here during the first World War, wrote that only a few of the Indian students here were partly or wholly financed from home or from some public organization. Most of them depended on their own work. Many of these students had left their homes without permission or against the will of their parents. Some had no money in their pockets when they left home or just enough to go to a seaport from where they earned enough to go to the next seaport and so on. He knew a student who walked from New York to Chicago without a penny in his pocket, sleeping on the roadsides and earning his food by whatever work he could pick up on the way. Some of those who came here to study left their studies altogether and began working on farms and ranches. A few "blacksheep" tried to earn their living by trading under the name of spiritualists, mind readers, astrologists and palmists.

¹ From *New India* (annual number, 1951), published by India Students Association of America, New York.

(Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America*, 1916, pp. 403-6).

In those days, however, the "market value" of the U. S. degrees in India was much less than those of European degrees. Those who could afford to go abroad generally went to Britain. The U. S. mainly attracted energetic youth who were prepared to work their way through school or a few others who had been under the influence of American missionaries in India. They were interested in subjects like agriculture and engineering which could be useful outside the Civil Service.

By 1911-12, there were 148 students from India and Ceylon in the U S. (U.S. Commerce Reports, Aug. 28. 1912, *Foreign Students in America*). By 1920-21, the number of Indian students alone rose to 235. (George F. Zook, *The Residence of Students in Higher Institutions*, 1922).

A commission set up under the auspices of the Friendly Relations Committees of the YMCA and YWCA noted in its report, *The Foreign Student in America* (1925):

"A majority of those [Indian students] coming to America are supported in the main by their parents. Some who are more ambitious and less judicious feel that if they can only put foot 'in the land of the free' everything will be all right, jobs will open up, the money will flow in, and 'somehow' they will be able to get an education. In some cases Indian Associations or Provincial Governments send men abroad for special equipment and of course stand ready to pay all expenses. But they are most careful whom they select and the results are usually gratifying." (p. 20).

Professor R. E. Hume of the Union Theological Seminary, in a contribution to the same study, added:

"Certainly there has been spread abroad in India the idea that somehow it is easier for a young man without money or without a 'pull' to get ahead in the United States than in Great Britain. There exist very few fellowships or appointments of any kind, like the few maintained by the Gaikwar of Baroda, whereby Indian students come financed.

"General 'opportunity' is unquestionably the great attraction, and undoubtedly there are more opportunities for a poor young man, even for a 'failed B. A.' to mount socially, intellectually, and every other wise than he could in India..." (p. 60).

The depression and the Second World War reduced the number of Indian students to less than half the average for the twenties. After the war, however, the increased prestige of the U. S., and the fellowship programs of the Government of India, the state governments and private groups, have increased the number of

Indian students in the U. S. to nearly 1,400 in 1949-50, surpassed only by the number of Canadian students. Since then, the number has fallen and is likely to fall further as a result of the dollar shortage in India, the devaluation and the reduction of government fellowships.

The Indian students are spread over all the regions of the U. S. In 1950-51. for instance, Indian and Pakistani students were distributed in 42 states and the District of Columbia. The main centers, however, were California (214), New York (205), Michigan (115), Massachusetts (95), Illinois (87) and Pennsylvania (49).

Attitudes of Indian Students

These Indian students have come into close contact with American students and professors and others. How do they react?

Rev. E. Stanley Jones wrote a quarter of a century ago:

"I have found many foreign students in America who were getting all their education and training here, but I have not seen a single one who while being self-conscious as an Indian could find anything good in America or her civilization. Only at times when they, for the moment, forgot they were Indians could they acknowledge any good." (*The Christ of the Indian Road*, 1925 pp. 101-2).

More recently, in the summer of 1947, Normal Kiell, an ex-G.I. who had seen service in the India-Burma Theatre, circulated a questionnaire among 50 Indian students to find out their attitudes. A summary of the results was published in the *Survey Graphic* (February 1948) and a detailed report was given in his dissertation to the Teachers' College of Columbia University in 1949 on "A Study of Attitudes of Indian and Pakistani Students Studying in the United States Toward America and American Democracy and the Responsibility of American Universities to Foreign Students."

He found that, of the fifty students, only two wanted to stay in the U. S. permanently; that only one expressed an opinion favorable to American democracy in action, while 6 expressed no opinion and 43 had grave doubts: that, except for 4 who had no opinion, all thought that American newspapers cater too much to sensational news, stressing murders, robberies, suicide and so on; that practically all of them were disappointed with the coverage of news of India in American newspapers; and that not one chose the Republican Party to run the American government.

He concluded:

"...before the students came here they had a very positive regard for this

country. However, after they have been in the United States for some time, their favorable attitude lessened considerably. While the Indian students were unstinting in their praise of America's achievement in agriculture and industry, they expressed doubt as to the capacity of the political and social institutions to meet the responsibilities of the country. Their reaction to the American scene was unfavorable largely because of (a) discriminatory practices against minorities; (b) predominant materialism; (c) the disintegration of the American family; (d) the insularity of Americans; and (e) public apathy and inability to participate in public affairs. Many of the students experienced unhappy personal situations in the United States or witnessed incidents which distorted their former picture of the American scene. As a result, because these students found that democracy had failed in one respect, they felt it had failed in all, and was thus worthless." (Norman Kiell, *Indian-American Cultural Relations*, 1949, pp. 3-4).

And he explained:

"It takes real learning first to understand and then to use democracy; the Indian students have not been conditioned to, nor have their experiences been canalized by, the democratic ethic." (*Ibid*, p. 4).

Statistics, however, can be deceptive. And it is possible that Rev. Jones and Mr. Kiell, both being Americans, could not fully understand the true feelings of the Indian students. These students have, of course, found that many things that they were led to believe about the U. S. were not quite true. They had some sad personal experiences such as discrimination or the attitudes of some Americans towards India. They probably reacted seriously to hasty and reckless conclusions such as those of Norman Kiell. Or they had difficulties in obtaining practical training which was one of the main reasons for many of them to come to the U. S.

But they have also experienced the hospitality of numerous American families. They have learnt to admire many things about American characteristics. They have seen the American achievements in practice and were impressed by them.

Kiell's study also reveals that four of the students questioned wanted to take back to India the American concept of "dignity of labor"; that six others wanted to take back the industrious quality of the American people"; ten the American "attitude of equality of man"; and others liked the freer mixing of sexes. Most of them wanted to learn the lessons of American industry (One said: "I'd like to take back everything except the atom bomb!")

Associations of Indian Students

Soon after they arrived in any numbers in this country, the Indian students began to form associations. The first probably was an organization launched by Swami

Ram, a lecturer, to better the conditions of the students and to aid in a united effort at higher education. Shortly after, an American organization was formed in Portland (Oregon) to welcome Indian youths to take up work as students of agriculture.

In 1909, an Indo-American organization was organized at the University of Washington at Seattle "to promote better understanding and friendly relations between India and the United States." Later this was transformed into the Hindustan Students' Association of America with branches at various universities. The Association published a journal, created a Loan and Scholarship Fund, made slides on India and presented several of Tagore's plays to American audiences for their premiere performance.

During the second World War, because of the greatly reduced number of Indian students, the association ceased its existence, but was revived again in 1946. Now this association, renamed the India Students' Association of America, has local chapters at most universities where there are a considerable number of Indian students.

NUMBER OF INDIAN STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

| | A | B | | A | B | |
|---------|-----|-----|----------|-----|-------|------------------|
| 1921-22 | 180 | # | 1936-37 | 68 | 83 | |
| 1922-23 | 218 | # | 1937-38 | 66 | 81 | |
| 1923-24 | 231 | # | 1938-39 | 61 | 76 | |
| 1924-25 | 202 | # | 1939-40 | 62 | 70 | |
| 1925-26 | 170 | # | 1940-41 | 56 | 62 | |
| 1926-27 | 193 | # | 1941-42 | # | # | |
| 1927-28 | # | # | 1942-43 | 54 | 54 | |
| 1928-29 | 213 | 208 | 1943-44 | 56 | 56 | |
| 1929-30 | 205 | 205 | 1944-45 | 73 | 73 | |
| 1930-31 | 195 | 201 | 1945-46 | 197 | 197 | |
| 1931-32 | 178 | 195 | 1946-47 | # | 766 | |
| 1932-33 | 135 | 152 | 1947-48 | # | 1,214 | (incl. Pakistan) |
| 1933-34 | 86 | 101 | 1948-49 | # | 1,281 | " |
| 1934-35 | 118 | 143 | 1949-50 | # | 1,396 | " |
| 1935-36 | 68 | 87 | 1950--51 | # | 1,229 | " |

not available.

(Note: The figures in column A" are from the annual reports of the Director of the Institute of International Education; those in column "B" are from *Unofficial Ambassadors*, the annual publication of the Committee on Friendly Relations with Foreign Students organized by the YMCA and the YWCA. The discrepancies may be explained by the difference in number of institutions covered and also by the fact that the Institute classifies students according to the country of origin while the Committee takes into account the ethnic, cultural and geographic

considerations. Thus, Indians from outside India are included in the Committee's figures.)