

STORIES OF SPICES AND INCENSE



If you drive by the shopping arcade around Oak Tree Road in Edison, New Jersey, a familiar smell greets you, a mix of red chilli, fried onion, cinnamon and cardamom. If you park in front of Dana Bazaar and walk towards the cluster of shops, for a moment you wonder if you have landed in Karol Bagh! The shop signs are like an invitation from another world: for groceries step into Panch Vatee, dine at Bombay Sizzler or Sher E-Punjab, for a trendy kurta or silk sari check out the collection at Sahil Sari Place. If you have a sweet tooth try sandesh at Bengal Sweet House, and if there is a wedding around, take a look at the gem-studded necklace at Maharani or Alankar. On a Sunday morning, Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis shop together exchanging notes on the quality of mangoes or the CDs of the latest Bollywood movies that have arrived at Poonam Video. Escorted by a friend, on a visit many years ago, we had kulfi there, watching the desi beauties, their black eyes and dusky skin, flitting in and out of the veritable eastern bazaar.

The old stories of Indian expats struggling, saving money by skipping meals, walking from one end of the street to another to cut down on bus fares – they are now taking a backseat. The Indians you come across in Manhattan and Birmingham, Melbourne and Toronto now are an upwardly mobile, assertive lot with a confident mien. Be in New York around Diwali, the sheer exuberance of Indian life will amaze you. Diwali is no longer an event on the community calendar celebrated with dinners you drive 100 kilometres to attend; it has the look of a local festival. Indian Americans, according to the 2010 US Census, have the highest household income of all ethnic groups at \$ 88, 538. And 71 per cent of all Indians in the US have a bachelor's or higher degree. At any given time there will be a handful of Governors and elected representatives of Indian origin discharging important responsibilities. In every administration quite a few of them will be holding key positions. It was important for Barack Obama that two writers of Indian origin, with their acknowledged celebrity status, Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri, gathered at a fundraiser for him in New York during his first presidential outing.

Almost twenty years ago when books for me meant either the ones bought at half price from the Sunday-morning book bazaar on the Golcha pavement in Old Delhi, or those borrowed from the British Council Library, one night I came home with a not-so-thick paperback – an unknown writer’s short-story collection. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* is about the women facing adverse situations and also their gutsy fightback, their love and longing for home across the oceans and the reality of their life in America. To me, the sad slow stories were deep evocation of the past of their characters. Chitra’s own story graphically captures the Indian journey overseas along the rough road to success. A student pursuing her masters, she took up odd jobs, working as a babysitter, a store clerk, a bread slicer in a bakery, and a dining hall attendant. Author of a number of critically acclaimed novels, she now teaches creative writing at University of Houston. Her hugely successful novel, *Mistress of Spices*, was made into a film of the same name. “I cannot write about a place unless I have lived there,” she says (*see interview*). If the crop of successful fiction harvested by the Indian writers on either side of the Atlantic is anything to go by, no doubt they are *living* in all those places.

The Diaspora, a biblical term, etymologically is more Greek than Hebrew. “Thou shalt be a diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth,” the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, said about the flight of the Jews from Palestine in different directions after they lost the war with the Romans. In Greek *dia* means across, and *speirein* – scatter. Though people have *scattered* all across history, large-scale migration in the wake of adverse situations reminiscent of the Jewish dispersal from Palestine, began around the Second World War. The two big waves of scattering were triggered, first by Hitler’s pogrom of the Jews, and second, the communist takeover of Eastern Europe. The traumatic events assailed the world’s consciousness and inspired a large number of outstanding films and a rich literary crop. Over the decades, émigré fiction has turned into an important genre. Irish writer John Boyne’s epochal novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, is a gripping account of Hitler’s diabolic campaign of extermination. Almost the entire oeuvre of Czech writer Milan Kundera, who fled to France after the Soviet invasion of his homeland, is a deep cry against his small country falling prey to the soviet expansionist policy towards Europe.

The war-ravaged Europe looking for able-bodied men to fuel the reconstruction programme opened its doors to thousands of Indians. Six decades into the life of their adopted lands, the second or third generation of the Indians are well settled in Germany, France and England occupying important positions in their universities, research labs, banks, news organizations and businesses. The uncertainties of arrival long over, they look back on their past, their Indian roots. Many of them travel back to Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Calcutta with the noble intention of paying back to the land of their ancestors in terms of technical knowhow, expertise and investment. Alex Haley, the celebrated author of *The Roots*, traced the origin of his family to Gambia from where his forefather Kunta Kinte had been captured and sent to America on a slave ship. Sometimes such homecoming meets with a rude jolt – our slow, insensitive system wipes out their enthusiasm in no time. But

there are some shining examples of the Indian expats from Europe and North America setting up institutions, doing philanthropy and launching business ventures with aplomb. In the fields of scientific, historical or social research, Indian academics on campuses around North America and Europe, often lead, setting the trends for their Indian counterparts to follow. They have the advantage of detachment, resources and most importantly, the unencumbered rational framework to look dispassionately at a situation.

But there is the other side of the Diaspora – those from elsewhere having made India their home – who often get overlooked. Down the ages they have made the difficult trek knowing very well that at the end of the road what awaits them is suffering, a lot of it. Madeleine Slade, daughter of the British Rear-Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, joined Mahatma Gandhi's ashram and at times was asked by her guru to do the most menial of work. In coarse khadi with a tough regimen to follow, she became Miraben of the Indian fable. Edith Ellen Gray, brought up in Cambridge where her father worked at a club, fell in love with an Indian student at Downing College, J. M. Sengupta. At the end of his term, she followed him to Calcutta, and then to Chittagong, the Sengupta ancestral home. Reborn in sari, now christened Nellie, she plunged into the nationalist movement along with her husband. She served a four-month prison term in Delhi for addressing an assembly declared unlawful by the British government. She was elected Congress president for a term. And when Independence came along with Partition, she, unlike others, decided to stay back in East Pakistan, perhaps thinking she would be a voice of sanity in a nation which had plunged into turmoil right from the beginning.

On the evening of Vijaya Dashami in a Haridwar ashram one year, I met a group of people from France. They were mostly in ochre clothes, waiting for a reclusive yogi, a Frenchman, who had spent his years in meditation in one corner of the ashram. "He neither comes out of his room nor does he meet anybody," one of them said. "This is the only day when he meets his followers for a brief while." The disciple's face was lit up in expectation of meeting the yogi.

A while later the man walked into the courtyard, frail, emaciated, his scraggy brown beard flapping in the wind from a nearby Ganga channel, his skin toned down after many years in the tropics. "He is 86; his food is only boiled, neither salt nor spices in it," proffered the disciple, her hands clasped, head bowed, eyes wet with emotion. The group had already broken into French, speaking in hushed voices. The man nodded a couple of times, and smiled in response.

The contribution of such men and women to India's spiritual, political and cultural process has been more permanent and significant than anywhere else in the world. India accommodates them wiping out all the

lines, visible and invisible, to make them part of its life. Asked if he had come under the spell of India, its magic, Mark Tully laughs. The journalist whose name had been synonymous with the BBC for almost half a century in the subcontinent, said for him the diversity of the country and warmth of its people are more important (*see interview*). This is the other Diaspora which now needs to be written about.

Bhaskar Roy