

Indians Down Under

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Indian Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna met his Australian counterpart, Stephen Smith, in London on January 27, 2010 to discuss the issue of safety and security of Indian students in Australia. Due to the pressure mounted by the Indian authorities, the Australian government has set up a high-level group to look into the matter. Mr. Smith assured his Indian counterpart that the attacks would be investigated and action taken. The Australian government also handed over a Police Dossier to India, prepared by the Victoria Police on attacks targeting Indians over the past one year. Initially, the Australian government had resisted providing any information to India.

Addressing the Australian Parliament on February 9, 2010, Australian Foreign Minister noted that some of the violence against Indians had been racially motivated. However, there are also some reverse patterns showing Indians involved in two of the three fatal attacks and reports suggest that internal disputes were the source.

The spate of attacks on Indians in Australia has strained Indo-Oz bilateral ties and has sparked off a debate on racism. Apart from the murder of Nitin Garg and the setting ablaze of another Indian a few days later, there have been reports of constant maltreatment and thrashing of Indian taxi drivers, bars refusing entry to Indians, vandalizing of a gurudwara and so on. The majority of these attacks have occurred in Melbourne. In most of the cases, the Australian police refused to lodge any complaints.

Australian authorities have refused to categorise these attacks as “racist”. Australia has argued that the Indian media is whipping up a storm because they were miffed by Australia’s refusal to sell uranium to India. However, at the Sunday morning prayer on

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January 24, 2010 at St. Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne, the Australian bishop Philip Huggins, urged parishioners to listen to the concerns of the Indian community, whom he described as "oppressed in this land". He pleaded for forgiveness for "prejudice and indifference" to people from different countries. Australia's former Chief of the Defence Force, General Peter Cosgrove has stated that the nature of attacks against Indians made it easy to conclude they were racially motivated. The Victorian Police Commissioner Simon Overland has also admitted that the police have known for two years that Indian students have been specifically targeted.

This is not the first time that race related violence has manifested in Australia. In December 2005, a series of racially motivated confrontations between Middle Easterners and Australians had led to mob violence. At that time, rioters draped in Australian flags and fortified with beer had assaulted anyone with Middle Eastern looks. As noted by Katharine Betts of Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, the opinion polls in Australia on multiculturalism and the immigration policy consistently show that approximately 70 per cent Australians are opposed to immigration. The polls also suggest that about a quarter of Australians hate Asians.

Despite the official claims, is Australia truly a multicultural country? In 1901, the Australian Government introduced the Immigration Restriction Act, later called as the "White Australia" policy, which deliberately restricted non-white immigration to Australia from 1901 to 1973. Over time, the Liberal Party Government under Robert Menzies further propagated the fear of Asian expansion and Communism. The act of separating Aboriginal children from their families and the denial of full citizenship rights to Aboriginal people and the Torres Strait Island people are the most telling examples of racism. After 1973, the "White Australia" policy for all practical purposes became defunct, and, in 1975, the Australian government passed the Racial Discrimination Act, which made racially-biased selection criteria illegal.

Multiculturalism as a policy has changed enormously since its formal introduction in Australia. Originally, it was seen by the mainstream population as recognition of the fact that Australians came from different cultures and ethnicities and continued to maintain ties with their roots. The election of John Howard's Liberal-National Coalition government in 1996 was a watershed in Australian race relations. Howard had long been a critic of multiculturalism, releasing his "One Australia Policy" in the late 1980s, which called for a reduction in Asian immigration. Shortly, after the Howard's government assumed office, the new independent

member Pauline Hanson made her maiden speech in which she declared that, “A multicultural society can never be strong”.

Opposition to multiculturalism in Australia is evident in the case of Islamic immigrants from Middle Eastern countries. Prior to the September 11 attacks, the main targets of anti-immigration campaigns were immigrants from southern Europe and later East Asia. In 2006, the Federal Government of Australia proposed to introduce a compulsory citizenship test, which would assess English skills and knowledge of Australian values. In January 2007, the Howard Government also removed the word ‘multicultural’ from the name of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, changing its name to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. This sparked renewed debate over the future of multiculturalism in Australia.

The example of Dr. Haneef Mohammed and controversies related to the Indian cricket team in Australia once again highlighted the prevailing racial orientation of Australian society. Dr. Haneef, an Indian physician, was wrongly picked up in Australia on July 2, 2007, for his “alleged” role in the UK terror plot, was maltreated and interrogated for belonging to a particular religion. In the case of Australian cricketer Andrew Symonds, the Australian media tried to depict him as Hanuman, thereby exhibiting their lack of respect towards other cultures and religious sentiments.

According to *The World Factbook* of Central Intelligence Agency, USA, the total population of Australia is 21,262,641 (July 2009 est.) constituting 92 percent Whites, 7 percent Asian, 1 percent Aborigines and others. Indians are the tenth most important source of immigrants to Australia. The first Indians who arrived in Australia were mainly Sikhs and Muslims from the Punjab region in north-western India. Between 1860 and 1901, more Indians arrived and worked as agricultural labourers, hawkers and domestic help. A number of Indians also worked in the gold fields. Migration from India was curtailed after the Australian Government introduced the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, but following India's independence from Britain in 1947, the number of Anglo-Indians and Indian-born British citizens immigrating to Australia increased. These British citizens decided to settle in Australia in large numbers but are still counted as 'Indian' Nationals in the census. The third wave of Indians entered the country in the 1980s, after the abolition of the White Australia Policy. After the policy was abolished many Indian teachers and doctors settled in Australia. Another big influx began with the IT revolution. Large numbers of Indian software professionals arrived in Australia from 1976 onwards. After the successive military coups in Fiji of 1987 and 2000 a significant number of Indo-Fijian migrated to Australia and as such

there is a large Indo-Fijian population in Australia. Indo-Fijian population has significantly impacted the character of the Indian community in Australia. While earlier Indian migration was comprised primarily with educated professionals, the Indo-Fijian community not only comprised largely of professionals but also brought many small business owners and entrepreneurs to Australia.

The current wave of Indian migration is that of engineers, tool-makers, Gujarati businessmen from East Africa, relatives of settled Indians and students. According to Indian Diaspora Report (2001), Indians are 1.2 percent of the total Australian population numbering about 190,000 which include forty thousand Indo-Fijian and more than ten thousand from Africa, UK and Malaysia.

Indians have done comparatively well in Australia especially in the field of IT and medicine. Indian students comprise the second largest ethnic group after the Chinese. International students are worth \$13bn (£8.1bn) to the Australian economy each year, after coal and iron ore. According to the Australia's Tourism Forecasting Committee (TFC), the drop in the number of Indian students is expected to cost Australia almost \$70m (£44m) this year. From 2004 to 2009 the number of Indians studying in Australia rose from 30,000 to 97,000 with 45,000 of these living in Melbourne, 32,000 in Adelaide and the remainder in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth but these repeated attacks on Indians have led to a fifty percent downfall of Indian students registering with Australian universities especially vocational colleges.

If Australia wishes to remain a multicultural nation, it needs to clamp down hard on racially motivated attacks and behaviour. The Indian Government should formulate a comprehensive policy to deal with the issues on security of the Indians worldwide. In the Australian case, India needs to sustain the diplomatic initiative with Australia and pressurise Canberra to take swift action to ensure the security of the Indian community. India should also mobilise the international community against the racial attacks on Indians in Australia without jeopardising bilateral relations. Australia, on the other hand, should also understand that in the present global scenario, empathetic multicultural policies are beneficial for development. It should not be overlooked that the strategic partnership between these two Indian Ocean democracies is essential for creating a coalition of democracies in the Indian Ocean Region.
