

THE INDIAN COMMUNITY IN THE PHILIPPINES: A PROFILE

AJIT SINGH RYE

The Indian community in the Philippines is rather small—only about five thousand—in comparison to the “Overseas” Indians in other Southeast Asian countries. Unlike the sepoys who came from Madras in 1762-1764, the later waves of migrants originated from Sindh and Punjab. The British annexation of Sindh (1843) and Punjab (1849) brought the lure of overseas adventure to the north-western part of India. Unlike the landlocked Punjabis, the Sindhis had been traders and had developed a long tradition of looking outward beyond the seas. However, it is the adventures of farm hands from the districts of Jullundur, Ludhiana and Ferozpur in eastern Punjab, their accidental coming to the Philippines and settling here as traders, that make a fascinating tale.

The study of the Indian migration to the Philippines becomes more meaningful if it is set in the context of Philippine-Indian cultural contacts prior to the coming of Islam and Western colonialism. A brief reference to the British venture into Manila also serves as a contextual link to the Filipino perception of the Indian people and their migration to the Philippines.

Early Indic Influence in the Philippines

Philippine-Indian cultural links developed, over a long period of time, prior to the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. Brahmanical and Buddhist influence spread through the intervening culture areas to the islands of Borneo, as well as Mindanao and the Visayas in the Philippines. It gradually penetrated even the northernmost island of Luzon. There are remarkable traces of Indic influence in languages, literature as well as social customs in the Philippines. Some of the pre-Islamic influences are more pronounced in the cultures of the Tausugs, the Maguindanaos and the Maranaos.

Islam and Isolation

In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan claimed for Spain the islands which were later to be named in honor of the Infant King Philip. Spanish control of the islands expanded with each succeeding expedition and the archipelago was gradually cut off from the Asian mainstream. Portuguese naval power, growing in the Indian Ocean and

the South China Sea, ruthlessly smashed the existing trade pattern in the area. Thus the island world of Southeast Asia was cut off from the South Asian mainland. The Spanish authorities in Manila were always apprehensive of Portuguese designs in East Asia. To keep both Portuguese and Chinese away, the Spaniards decided to close the islands to any unrestricted foreign trade and commerce.

The conquistadores and the clergy found the presence of Islam in the islands a serious threat to their long-range interest. They had been mandated, by the Pope no less, to annihilate Islam and subdue its adherents wherever they resisted. To subdue native Muslim sultans and datus, the Spaniards, persistently but often unsuccessfully, attempted to isolate the country from the rest of the Muslims in Borneo and other parts of the Indonesian archipelago.

The Spanish policy of isolating the Philippines, born of their imaginary fear of Portuguese and Chinese aggressive designs, failed in its objective. Firstly, the Muslims in the South successfully maintained trade and cultural relations with their Southern neighbors. Second, the British occupation of Manila in 1762 exposed the vulnerability of Spanish rule. The first serious challenge to Spanish power in the Philippines ironically came, not from the feared Portuguese or Chinese, but from the British.

The Seven Years War and Philippine-India Contract

The spilling over into the East of the Seven Years War brought the Philippines and India into direct contact with each other for the first time. Although it was only a brief and rather unhappy encounter, it left a durable mark on the history of the Philippines.

The British expedition against Spanish forces in the Philippines was mounted from Fort St. George in Madras, sailing under the command of General Draper. Manila was occupied in 1762 with little effort or bloodshed. The expeditionary force included a contingent of over 600 Indian sepoys and nearly 1400 laborers. They were mostly recruited from among the subjects of the Nawab of Arcot. Thus, all in all, the "Madras" contingent constituted nearly half the total expeditionary force. (This contingent became the forerunner of the famous Madras Regiment in the Indian Army.)

The "Madrasis" who sailed with the British fleet to capture Manila were a curious mixture of "mercenaries" and "indentured" labor. The sepoys were called the "Nawab's irregulars" but in fact they were treated as menial workers by their British superiors. Both the sepoys and the laborers were recruited or "hired" from the Nawab of Arcot. Nawab Mohammad Ali, an incorrigibly corrupt and inept ruler, was deeply indebted to the East India Company

and many of its officials at Madras, and was thus inclined to oblige the East India Company with a part of his own irregular forces to fight for the British flag. These people were ill-paid, ill-clad and ill-treated. Many of them were paid less than five pagodas (a coin current in Southern India corresponding at the normal rate of exchange to three and a half rupees). Payment they received in Madras was left with their families and while in Manila they were often reduced to living on the charity of their British superiors.

The Seven Years War came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. However, it was not until June 1764 that the British occupation of Manila was lifted and the British Fleet sailed back for India.

Considerable number of sepoy and laborers did not return when the British pulled out of Manila. Those who "chose" to stay behind were either prisoners of war in the hands of Don Simon de Anda's men or those who had drifted into the bush to escape miserable living conditions at the garrison camp. Later, they settled down in different parts of Luzon. A large group converged in the small town of Cainta, a large part of whose population are the descendants of the Madrasi sepoy. Their Dravidian physical features and dark complexion have earned them the nickname of "Bombays," but they retain no memory of their Indian past.

The Second Coming

There is no record of any significant migration from India to the Philippines for over a century after the British withdrawal in 1764. But in the wake of the British occupation of Sindh and Punjab, a fresh wave of immigrants began to trickle into the Philippines. These immigrants were mostly people from the newly annexed territories in India looking for opportunity for work overseas. Finding the people in the islands hospitable, kind and friendly, they decided to stay.

The Sindhis

The first to come to the Philippine shores in the closing years of the nineteenth century were traders from Sindh, who pioneered in the establishment of business houses in various British colonies. For instance, by the turn of the century a firm by the name of Puhumals had put up a chain of retail stores in the Philippines, Hongkong and elsewhere. These establishments recruited, from among their close kin and caste groups, promising young men to work as their salesmen and managers in Manila. Thus the pattern of growth and expansion of the Indian community in the Philippines has been like

an extended family. An intricate pattern of kinship and family ties exists among most of the ifmigrants.

The Punjabis

The first Punjabi appeared in Manila rather accidentally sometime in 1902. On reaching Hongkong he learnt that the Philippines had been acquired by America as a colony and that there were job opportunities there. Belonging to the Ghummar caste (of brick layers or potters), he hailed from Sangatpur, a small village in Jullundur district in Eastern Punjab. Ever since his arrival, people from Jullundur, Ferozpur and Ludhiana districts of Punjab have maintained a slow but steady stream of migration into the Philippines.

The Punjabis, with their rural background, still distinguish themselves by their village, district or caste origin. For instance, those from Ferozpur and Ludhiana, mainly Jats, are called the "Malvais"; the people from Jullundur and Hoshiarpur, mainly Sainis and Ghummars, are called the "Duabias". Interestingly, despite long years of stay in the Philippines—mainly in and around Metropolitan Manila—the Punjabis have managed to retain the peculiarly rural traits which characterize their communal and social life in the Philippines. They are generally conservative, cautious and hardworking.

Settlement Pattern

Except for a few wealthy Sindhis, most of the Indian immigrants are of middle and lower middle class origin. The Punjabis, for instance, mostly come from the landed families in rural areas while many Sindhis are of urban origin. However, most of those who immigrated before World War II started from humble beginnings, working at secure jobs such as watchmen at American and Spanish establishments, and gradually shifting to retail trading, often moving from one market to the other in different localities.

Manila being the primate city and business center of the country, nearly 85% of the Indians live in the Metropolitan area and the surrounding towns and cities. Unlike the Manila Chinese, they do not tend to crowd into exclusive ghettos. However, there are localities, such as Paco district, where some of the Indian families have traditionally been living close to each other.

Most of the Punjabis and the Sindhis employed in Indian business firms usually live in middle and lower middle class neighborhoods; and generally closer to the areas where they do their business. The economically better-off Sindhis generally live in upper and upper-middle class subdivisions and exclusive villages in Makati.

Business and Livelihood Pattern

The Indians, unlike the economically well established Chinese, constitute a marginal community, because of their small number and the marginal nature of their economic activities. However, as an alien community they enjoy a reputation far out of proportion to their number and economic strength.

The Punjabis specialize in retail trade of dry goods, textiles, garments, household appliances, and jewelry. In recent years some of them have also branched out into money-lending. A Punjabi businessman is an individualist in his enterprise. Hard work and thrift (rather than a complex business organization) are his guiding mottos. Typically, he forms a husband and wife team with the children pitching in. He thrives on small-scale operations which he can personally manage and control. His educational and cultural background has a lot to do with his individualistic self-reliance in business ventures.

The Sindhis, slightly larger in number than the Punjabis, are much more advanced in business. Most of the Sindhis also started with small stores and as individual retailers in Sunday markets. But, unlike the Punjabis, they persistently expanded their business operations and followed steadfastly where the opportunity and profit led them.

The Sindhi businessman, always forward-looking, is pragmatic in his business ventures. He is moved by opportunity and is never slow to grab it. Manila Sindhis have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adjust to changing conditions and respond dynamically to new circumstances and situations in the business world. For instance, when the Philippine retail trade was nationalized in the mid-fifties, the Sindhi businessmen gradually phased out their stores and shifted to wholesale business, manufacturing and imports. Lately, seeing more challenge and sensing better returns, many of them have entered the export trade. Some of them have entered into joint ventures with Indian industrial houses to set up industrial plants in the country.

Religious and Cultural Organizations

By the mid-twenties many immigrants had brought their families to Manila. The Punjabis, particularly the Sikhs, felt the need to set up a gurdwara (Sikh temple) where the entire community could gather together for religious and social purposes. Thus the *Khalsa Diwan* (the Sikh association) was organized and a gurdwara was built in 1924, under the name of "Indian Sikh Temple", in the Paco district of Manila. It became a community center for religious services and social functions for the entire community, including the Sindhis

and Punjabis. In addition to religious and social activities, the *Khalsa Diwan* gradually assumed the role of mediator in the settling of disputes and differences among the Indians. The gurdwara also became a focal point of community "politics" which has often been characterized by caste and regionalism. For the Punjabis, be they Sikhs or Hindus, despite petty disputes and differences, the gurdwara has a central place in their social, cultural and religious lives. Marriages, betrothals, baptismals and Akhand Paths (readings of the Holy Book of the Sikh), all take place in the gurdwara. Sikh religious festivals, such as the birthdays and martyrdoms of the gurus (Sikh teachers) are all celebrated with enthusiasm. For such annual gatherings, Indians living outside of Manila converge at the temple to join the congregational prayers and partake of the Langar (communal kitchen or eating together). A permanent feature of the Gurdwara, this is served every week after the Sunday services.

The gurdwara in Paco is managed by a board of trustees, elected by the members of the *Khalsa Diwan*. Religious services are conducted by a *garanthis* (the priest who recites the *Garanthi*—the holy book of the Sikh faith—and leads the congregational prayers and singing in the Temple) usually brought in from India under contract.

Two in one—the Hindu Temple plus the Gurdwara

The Sindhis and the Punjabis used to be a united congregation and religious services were held only in the gurdwara. But a difference over the performance of Arati (Vedic prayer for the Gods) during a Sunday service led to a split in the mid-fifties. The Sindhi community decided to set up a separate Hindu temple-cum-gurdwara under one roof.

The decision to set up a mixed, non-denominational place of worship, combining under one roof Gurugranth Sahib (Holy Book of the Sikh) and the statues of Hindu gods, typifies Sindhi eclecticism on the one hand, on the other a difference in lifestyle and the belief patterns of the two major linguistic groups. To an orthodox Sikh or a Hindu, the Hindu temple in Manila may seem an archaic mixing up of the irreconcilable elements of the two faiths. The Sikh faith is nonatheistic and worship of idols is prohibited. The Sikhs place no idols of their gurus in the gurdwara. But the Sinhi community feels that it has found a happy solution to their spiritual and social needs. In the Mandir (Temple) the *Gurugranth Sahib* is placed in the middle and it is flanked on the side by the statues of Lord Krishna, Radha, Vishnu and his consort and on the other side by the statues of Lord Shiva, his bull, the Lingam and the statue of "Jhulelai" — a legendary Awatara (incarnation) that according to popular Sindhi

belief rose from the sea. It is a popular object of worship among Sindhis every where.

Like the Khalsa Kiwan, the Hindu temple also serves as a center of social activities and a forum for communal programs. Early in 1980, the temple was transferred to a newly constructed edifice situated on a spacious site in Paco district of Manila.

In the Hindu Temple, the regular services on Sundays are mixed. The Kirtan of Gurubani (recitations from the Sikh holy scriptures) is followed by the recitation of Vedic hymns and the offerings of Aratis. The tolling of temple bells is followed by the recitation of Vedic hymns and the offerings of Aratis. The tolling of temple bells is followed by the cry of Wah Guruji Ka Khalsa Wah Guruji ki Fateh (a common Sikh chant: The Sikh belong to the God, God be great). The chief priest of the Hindu Temple is a Sikh Garanthi. The establishment of such an ecumenical set up, temple-cum-gurdwara, reflects the spirit of accommodation and tolerance within the local Sindhi community. It is an attempt to accommodate and provide for the satisfaction of diverse religious feelings and sentiments for Hindu faith within the Sindhi fold, and at the same time retain the strong attachment that most Sindhis feel for the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. This is reflected in placing the Garanth Sahib in the middle of the status of Gods.

The Ladies Clubs

Sindhi women, especially those who grew up in the Philippines, are active in social and cultural affairs of the Indian community. They also take part in the affairs of the larger Filipino national community. The elder ladies have organized themselves into the Indian Ladies Club with an active membership of nearly 200. Interestingly enough, its incumbent president is a Filipina lady married to a Sindhi businessman. She is remarkably integrated culturally into the Sindhi fold, and speaks fluent and flawless Sindhi.

The Indian Ladies Club's activities are supplemented by those of the Merry Maidens Club, composed mostly of a younger age group.

Business Organizations

The business association to be established first was the Bombay Merchants Association. Its membership was confined largely to Sindhi business establishments. The Association established the Indian Club for social and cultural activities. The Bombay Merchants Association was later followed by a broad-based organization of the business sector and was named the Indian Chamber of Commerce. The Cham-

ber included in its membership both Sindhi and Punjabi business establishments. Since a number of its members have taken up Philippine citizenship, the Chamber has been renamed as the Filipino-Indian Chamber of Commerce to accommodate the naturalized members.

Over two hundred Indian nationals have so far applied for naturalization. Nearly 150 have already granted citizenship, a majority of them Sindhi businessmen. The applications of the rest are still being processed.

The Non-immigrants

The image of the Indian community went through a transformation for the better, with the entry of significant number of transient-non-immigrant Indians into its ranks. The establishment of the Asian Development Bank in Manila brought to the Philippines a number of Indian civil servants, economists and specialists in banking. There are about forty Indian families of the officials of the Bank, with an estimated population of nearly 200 (including wives, mothers and children). This small group has added variety to the societal dimensions and to the regional composition of the local community. Added to the traditional composition of the community are now a sprinkling of Bengalis, Beharis, Madrasis, Rajathanis and of course more Sindhis and Punjabis. In addition to the ADB staff and their families, there are a few more families of Indian scientists and specialists working with various regional offices of the UN specialized agencies — WHO, ILO, UNESCO, etc., the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), and Indian businessmen working with joint industrial ventures in the country.

The Indios and the Bombays

The Indians in the Philippines are popularly known as *Bombays* meaning the people from Bombay, even though none of the early arrivals were from Bombay. A majority of them, in fact, sailed out of Calcutta. With the opening of Manila to foreign trade in the later half of the 19th century, European ships sailing through Bombay began to frequent Manila on their way to China. The Indian sailors on these ships were probably the first to be called the *Bombays*. Even though sailing from Calcutta, the immigrants too, perhaps, found it convenient to identify themselves as people coming from the city of Bombay. Thus the nickname "Bombays" resolved the problem of identity for the people coming from India. It was a bit better than to be called British subjects.

The Filipino National Community and the Indians

The Indians in the Philippines have been well regarded by the Filipinos and the cultural and business relations between the two communities have so far been agreeable. Government officials feel that the Indians in general have been law-abiding residents. One reason for such agreeable relations is that, because of their small number and moderate economic position in the national economy, the Indians do not seem to pose any serious threat to Filipino business interests. Further, although the Indians have managed to maintain, so far, a distinct cultural identity, they have learned to adjust and interact meaningfully with the Filipino community. For instance, the Sindhi businessmen are active members of many middle-class organizations such as the Lions, Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs. The community as a whole has always actively supported social, cultural and relief projects where their participation has been called for.