

ROUNDTABLE ON BUILDING BRIDGES: PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONTACTS AND ENGAGING YOUTH

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Canada is a nation of immigrants and diasporas. A generation ago, the overwhelmingly percentage of immigrants to Canada were American or European. In 1967, Canada also adopted a “points system” for immigrants. Four years later, Canada was the first country to officially adopt a policy of multiculturalism. These two changes laid the basis for a radical change in who became Canadian citizens. Now, Asia predominates.

Of a population of 34 million Canadians, more than 1.3 million are of Chinese origin and 1.3 million are south Asian (mostly Indian), with the majority in Toronto and Vancouver, with the largest single group from the Punjab. Apart from English and French, the most widely spoken languages are Chinese, Italian and Punjabi, which is now even used for broadcasts of that most Canadian of games, hockey.

Despite these impressive numbers, the study of diasporas in this country is in its infancy. When I became president and CEO of the former Canadian Institute of International Affairs in 2004, only 7 years ago, I was told that diaspora studies were too politically sensitive to touch. Fortunately, that has changed.

However, Canada still has yet to figure out how exactly to leverage its large Indo-Canadian diaspora. Hence the great value of this important and historic conference.

Canada does have advantages in its relationship with India that goes beyond its large diaspora. The two countries share the use of the English language, both are open societies, and both are Parliamentary democracies. Canada and India share a common British heritage, with the advantage that Canada was never a colonizing power. Indo-Canadians are becoming more prominent, particularly in politics. And after decades of impaired relations because of disagreement over the nuclear issue, relations are finally on a firm footing. Canada and India have completed a Nuclear Cooperation Agreement and are negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement or CEPA. If truth be told, India has become a favoured partner to some politicians precisely because it is not China, and does not have China's baggage on issues such as human rights, the Dalai Lama, Taiwan and an aggressive policy in the South China Sea. And it seems easier to translate Indo-Canadians into votes than Canadians of Chinese ancestry.

Unfortunately, it is not going to be easy to get young people to function as bridges to India.

First, a major 2008 study by Kant Bhargava and JC Sharma entitled *Building Bridges: A Case Study on the Role of the Indian Diaspora in Canada* concludes that the diaspora's record in strengthening Canada-India relations has been poor.

Second, Canadian public opinion is a problem, as polling numbers clearly show. The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada released its [2011 National Opinion Poll: Canadian Views on Asia](#) in mid-April, and the results weren't pretty.

- Canadians' feelings towards Asia countries are decidedly cool. Only 9% viewed China warmly and only 12% viewed India positively. It's not clear why in the case of India. As for China, it is probably the result of the fact that most of the news we hear about China is negative, whether it is because of the issues mentioned above or stories about poisonous toys or dubious food products.
- Only 1 in 4 of those interviewed saw Canada as part of the Asia Pacific region, and that percentage has been in decline.

- Only 16% of Canadians see India as important to Canada's prosperity, and that number is also in decline.

There are a few rays of hope, however. The attitudes towards India were more favourable than those towards China; younger Canadians responded more positively to these questions; and India's growing economic power seen as more of an opportunity than a threat. In a separate Asia Pacific Foundation poll of Asia practitioners entitled [Points of View Asia-Pacific](#), including Indo-Canadians, 87% of respondents said India is an Asian country the Canadian government should give priority to, second only to China at 95%. Finally – and this is germane to bridge building between Canada and India -- when asked what priority Ottawa should give to specific actions in 2011, at the top of the list was: “Work with provincial governments to develop or strengthen education linkages.” Not far behind was “promote public education policy that puts greater emphasis on teaching about Asia and Asian languages,” and finally, “Strengthen human ties with Asia by facilitating mobility citizens/landed immigrants across the Pacific through, for example, visa requirements and expanded air services.”

So there is hope, and closer educational ties need to be a part of it. How should we proceed?

There has been a huge amount of attention paid to the economic benefits of getting Indian and other foreign students to study in Canada. The benefits to Canada are usually thought to run in the tens of thousands of dollars. And of course there is the unmeasurable benefit that students who study in another country almost always turn into goodwill ambassadors of that country and help to build bridges, then or later on in their careers.

Canada has not done well, here, however. The number of Indian students that study in the US, Britain or Australia is vastly higher than it is here, as University of Waterloo professor Ryan Touhey has shown.

Still, the numbers are improving. Thanks in large part to Canada's High Commissioner to India Stewart Beck, it has become much easier for Indian students to get visas. Last year, the numbers increased to 14,000 from a few thousand, and High Commissioner Beck is keen to get that number much, much higher. I would argue, however, that if we really want to build lasting bridges the flow has to be two-

way. That means Canadian students and faculty going to India, and more Canadian institutions either setting up shop in India or establishing partnerships with Indian institutions.

We have some distance to go. Lia Cosco, recently a postgraduate research fellow at the Asia Pacific Foundation, has just published a [study](#) on Canadian overseas and international schools. Cosco makes the point that: “The bond between foreign students and Canadian education will significantly impact the future of Canada’s people-to-people ties with Asia.” While Canada has 70 such schools, including 40 in China alone, there is only one Canadian international school in India.

Still, there has been progress. The Schulich School of Business at York University here in Toronto has just graduated its first MBAs in India and is building a campus in Hyderabad. On June 8, the University of Waterloo, the Canada India Foundation and the Asia Pacific Foundation launched the Chanchlani India Policy Centre at the University of Waterloo, leveraging a generous gift from Vasu Chanchlani, an Indo-Canadian entrepreneur and philanthropist. The goal of the Centre is to provide policy-relevant research in Canada and in India on the most timely issues in the Canada-India relationship. A “mapping session” of 40 experts from across the country on June 8 made clear that building bridges and engaging youth will be one of the major themes of our research.

Of course there is more to education than exchanges. What we really need across North America and the Caribbean is more emphasis on Asia-relevant material in our mainstream curricula. How can you attract foreign students in general and Indian students in particular when you don’t tell their stories? We need a global classroom.

A few decades ago when I went to school in Peterborough, Ontario, world history as presented was painfully and shamefully parochial. It was the history of Europe and North America, and in particular of every British King, Queen, Princess and war since the Magna Carta. China got a few paragraphs for the invention of gunpowder and the travels of Marco Polo, an Italian; India a few pages largely because it had the Taj Mahal and was an outpost of the Empire; and Japan because Admiral Perry, an American, opened the country to the outside. So most of what little we learned about Asia was thanks to the intervention of – and through the eyes of -- westerners.



From what I understand, the balance is improving but still has a long way to go.

That's why the APF has launched what we call the [National Conversation on Asia](#), a multi-year, civil society led initiative to help put Asia on the radar screens of Canadians and to prepare us for a century in which the BRIC countries, and particularly India and China, are increasingly going to dominate. The National Conversation has a number of programs specifically to engage youth, such as blogs written by young Canadians living here or in Asia; regional youth conferences; and networking events designed to help young graduates with interest in Asia move forward with their careers.

The world is changing quickly, and we had all better be ready for it. Building bridges and engaging youth are important steps towards coming to terms with the global realities of the 21st century.