

Review article

Dharma in America: A Short History of Hindu-Jain Diaspora **by Pankaj Jain**

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As a scholar of diaspora studies and having read a fair share of literature on diaspora, there is one question that I always ask before starting to read a book on diaspora: why is it important to know about diaspora? A related question is, important to whom? Why do we need to tell stories of those who have left? I determine the eminence of the book based on how far the author has been able to answer the above questions and *Dharma in America* doesn't disappoint me.

Although every immigrant story is amazing, the Journey of Indians in America is distinctive on many fronts including education, income and entrepreneurship. Once "lost actors" are now "national assets" for both the host country and the homeland. Immigration to the United States from India started in the early 19th century when Indian immigrants began settling in communities along the West Coast. Although they originally arrived in small numbers, new opportunities arose in the middle of the 20th century, and the population grew larger in the following decades. As of 2019, about 2.7 million Indian immigrants resided in the United States (Hanna & Batlova, 2020). Today, Indian immigrants account for approximately 6 per cent of the U.S. foreign-born population, making them the second-largest immigrant group in the country, after Mexicans (Ibid).

The book by Prof Pankaj Jain, *Dharma in America: A Short History Hindu-Jain Diaspora* is an attempt to explore the role of Hindu and Jain Americans in education and civic engagements, medicine and healthcare and music with insights into role and challenges faced by the community. The book is arranged into seven chapters, including the Introduction and the Conclusion. The preface of the book starts with an interesting journey of Prof Jain of realising his 'American dream' and his experience of growing up in a Jain family. The preface instantly connects the reader with the journey of the author.

This short history of Hindu –Jain Diaspora in America starts its expedition not from the arrival of the first Indian in America but interestingly first delves into account of Indian indentured labourers in the Caribbean Island. Chapter 2 of the book, aptly titled "Before 'coolies', beyond 'cyber coolies'", gives an extensive historical account of Indians arrival in America. Jain has cited innumerable works on the depiction of the first Indians in America under the sub-section *Indians*

in the early American historical references. He points out how regardless of their religion all Indians were called "Hindoos" not only by old historians but by contemporary historians such as Prem Kurien and Vasudha Narayanan. Also, how this labalisation is refused by scholars like Michel Altman and Andrea Jain. Another sub-section of this Chapter that may intrigue the reader is *Indian American connections during the British Raj.* Jain interestingly notes that though Columbus could not find the wealth of India some of the Indian wealth did reach American soil (p. 9). He gives the example of the Yale University that received its name from its donor, Elihu Yale, who "made his fortune as the President of the East India Company settlement in Fort St. George at Madras" (Ibid). Jain further discusses works of some of the early scholars who introduced Hinduism to America in the sub-section *Early literary portrayals of India in America* followed by *Indic ideas in America through Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Transcendentalists.* Jain, in this chapter, also discusses the role of Indian-American in the Indian struggle for independence in America. He indicates that though the American people were supporting India's freedom struggle, the American government seemed to be supporting British Raj in India. He quotes President Theodore S. Roosevelt "The successful administration of India has been one of the most notable achievements of the white race during the past two centuries. If the English control were now withdrawn from India, the whole peninsula would become chaos of bloodshed and violence (p. 19)." The quintessential contribution of the book is to bring out aspects of Indian culture that "are not sufficiently described when books are written about Hindu Americans or even Indian Americans (p. 2)." The book, therefore, dedicates one chapter each to Ayurveda in the American Health Care system and Indian Classical Music.

Though Indians have been recognised in American societies for making their mark in the health care industry, their journey was not without hurdles. Jain says Indian doctors have come a long way in their struggle for equal recognition overcoming the barriers of racism and successfully voicing their demands through organisations such as AAPI (the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin). In his extensive research on the subject, Jain interviews Navin Shah (founder of AAPI) bringing out problems Indian doctors faced and how he was able to lobby for the laws to safeguard doctors of "foreign origin" from discrimination. Yoga and Ayurveda have made significant inroads into American healthcare practices in the category of alternative medicine. Jain, however, points out that "Ayurveda did not flourish in the Indian American communities, unlike Chinese medicine that continues to thrive in the Chinese communities (p. 36). In this section, the interview of Dr Lad is very interesting who is a pioneer of Ayurveda in America. Dr Lad raises many issues and hurdles an Ayurveda practitioner faces. This chapter also has a section on the impact of Indian cuisine and culinary ideas in America. According to the author, food is a means for the sustenance of Indian identity and culture as well as nostalgia for the homeland.

Indian Classical Music has seen rapid growth in reception and development around the globe, particularly in North America, where immigrant communities have preserved and passed on classical music traditions to subsequent generations through the establishment of local festivals and music schools. When other works of literature on the Indian diaspora in America makes a passing reference to musical icons such as Zubin Mehta and Pundit Ravi Shankar, *Dharma in America* in Chapter 4 focuses on the influence of Indian classical music on America and its current status. Jain starts this chapter with a short introduction on Indian classical music and goes

on to trace the pioneers of Indian classical musicians in America such as Sufi *Veena* player Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927) who brought Indian classical music to the USA, Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar who brought not only Indian culture but also spirituality to the west (p. 45). The author went on to describe how Indian classical Music of maestros such as Ali Akbar Khan and Amjad Ali Khan (*Sarod*), Ram Narayan (*Sarang*), Bismillah Khan (*Shehnaï*), Nikhil Banerjee and Imrat Khan (*Sitar*), Zakir Hussain (*Tabla*) influence jazz music too.

During his research, Jain has turned up countless new nuggets of information on the Jain community in America who are becoming increasingly visible and influential in American public life. In this chapter, he presents a detailed and commendable chronological development of American Jainism and other Jain initiatives from the 1900s till 2009, their arrival and establishing as diamond traders. However, the reader may miss a section on the philosophy of Jainism and two major sects – *Digambara* and *Svetambara*. The book thus remains narrow in scope and limited to those who are familiar with the Jain philosophy. The most interesting chapter of the book, however, is Chapter 6 entitled, *Indian American and Civic Engagements*. This chapter is the author's first-hand experience of contesting a local body election as a School Board Trustee providing remarkable insights into challenges members of a migrant community face in participating in the socio-political processes of the host country. Jain points out that despite their numbers and achievements, Indian Americans remain "forever foreigners" which becomes "a significant hurdle against acceptance and participation of Indian Americans in getting elected for government bodies" (p. 92). He brings out how subtly Christianity dominates American culture not giving room to other religions.

Dharma in America is a comprehensive study of the Indian immigrant experience that adopts multiple approaches to understanding the fascinating rise of the Indian community in the United States. The book is methodologically sophisticated with a deep historical insight and sociological realities to produce a deeply engrossing work. It opens up large research agendas and research questions that can be further developed such as: how do the bonds of kinship and citizenship shape Indian American's connections to India? When religion is the main marker of south Asian identity on a global scale, what implications does the rise of Hindu identity amongst Indian American has on India-America relations? How far the Indian government has been able to cater to the religious aspirations of Indian Americans? The book is an important contribution that bridges the gap in the existing literature on the Indian diaspora in America in general and the Jain diaspora in particular. A chapter or subsections, however, on the tenants and philosophy of Hinduism and Jainism would have made it a more enriching experience. It is, nonetheless, a must-read for scholars of the diaspora who are interested in socio-economic and-cultural achievements and contributions of the Hindu and Jain diaspora.

Reference

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