Attacks on Indian Students and the Harris Park Protests:

A Consul General Looks Back[1]

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I

From the end of May 2009, for about a year, academics and scholars, media, educationists, parents, students, diplomats on both sides, and the governments of India and of Australia were focused on a single issue: attacks on Indian students in Australia. It is no exaggeration to say that the frequency and number of attacks and, in some cases, the uncalled-for viciousness, was disturbing, confusing and totally unanticipated. Perhaps the single biggest failure was the collective inability of all stakeholders to anticipate the problem and to act in time. The system failure ought to have been recognised well before the keg burst. Once it exploded, it overwhelmed the system like a tsunami.

The intensity of the focus was largely media driven and so felt by many, including those who were not directly involved but read about it or heard it on the television news. There are accounts of Australians in India who, when they disclosed their identity, were asked why Indians were being beaten up in Australia. An article was published in a popular Indian magazine provocatively titled: Why the Aussies hate us. Several Australians I met during my tenure as the Consul General in Sydney said they were shamed and shocked at the events and that they went out of their way to not only say this kind of behaviour was totally un-Australian but also made special and genuine efforts to bond with Indian students and to make them feel at home, through barbeque lunches and family get-togethers. I attended many

[1] This is a non-refereed contribution. At the time of writing, Amit Dasgupta was Indian Consul General in Sydney.

ISSN: 1837-5391; https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/mcs
CCS Journal is published under the auspices of UTSePress, Sydney, Australia

Citation: Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal 2015, 7(3): 4659, - http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v7i3.4659

of these and all the relationships that were built during that turbulent period continue to exist. This, perhaps, is the positive fallout of tragedy: not everyone subscribes to the wrong thing.

The system had, however, been badly shaken. Debates swirled as to whether Australians were still racist, whether immigrants were undesirable or worse, whether Australia was better off closing its doors. I received literally hundreds of emails every day during this period, some of which were abusive and highly racist, while others were deeply heart-warming. A part of my morning duty would be to respond to each and every email, as I felt it was the right thing to do. The racist emails were on predictable lines: why didn't we get out of Australia and, if we wished to stay, could we smell differently, dress differently, stop talking loudly, etc.

The principal reason I responded personally to every email is because I believed it was important to create a dialogue, especially with the anonymous many, and to say that Indians simply did not believe that Australians, as a community, reject Indians or any other immigrants for that matter, that this was deeply hurting the concept of multiculturalism that Australia was being built upon, and that what was currently happening was rejected by the majority. I also said that I had every confidence that we would sort it out with the full support of the Australian federal and state authorities. Many responded to my emails and I am glad that a dialogue box was created, which permitted people to interact directly with me.

One email, in particular, deeply touched me. It was brief and said that the news on the television and the conversations his parents were having about the attacks on Indian students had not only deeply hurt them but that he, himself, was also very upset. He said that he wanted me to personally know that, as a young Australian, he was not 'like that'. He added that he had many Indian friends and that he loved the time he spent with them and that one day he would like to visit India. The person who wrote the email was ten years old. To my mind, it was the strongest rejection of the shrill coverage, at least on one prominent TV channel in India, proposing that Australians were, as a nation, racist and hated Indians.

Having said this, there were challenges, and this paper attempts to look back on the successful handling of the situation by the government, especially in the states of New South Wales and South Australia, where I had the privilege of being the Consul General of India. This paper approaches the problem [attacks on Indian students] essentially from a management perspective [how should the situation be managed?]. How do you co-opt

subscribers [win friends]? How do you counteract others? What should be the communication strategy? Whom do you talk to? How do you create confidence when it is waning rapidly? At what point in time do you start negotiating?

II

To understand the problem, it would be useful to briefly consider the background and the context. The Indian education system was proving to be increasingly inadequate to cater to the huge demand from a rapidly growing young population, hungry for the education and skills that would be necessary for finding employment. The failure to obtain admission to educational institutions became a major push factor for young Indians to seek education abroad, both in the higher education space and in vocational training. Indeed, by 2009, barely three years after a concerted programme was initiated to attract Indian students, Australia had emerged as their number one choice. The bulk of the Indian students were in Victoria, with the second largest concentration in New South Wales. While a small number were enrolled in university courses, the majority were pursuing education in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Estimates suggest that the Indian students alone contributed a little under A$5 billion, out of a total revenue of approximately A$19 billion earned from overseas students by the Australian education sector. This was, indeed, good business.

One principal reason behind the escalated interest in Australia was the genuine belief among international students that studying in Australia would result in Permanent Residency (PR). This made Australia an attractive destination. As a result, a number of dodgy schools sprouted like mushrooms to take advantage of the influx of Indian and other international students. The majority of these schools had inadequate facilities and were clearly established only as business ventures. They cut corners, compromised on quality of teachers and of teaching facilities, took advantage of gaps in the education system, exploited the students, and prospered. Another ogre joined in the exploitation: illegal migration agents. They had a field day making false promises of Permanent Residency to the international student community on payment of large sums of money for which no receipts were ever issued. Caught in a bind, the students found themselves helplessly trapped. They were all in too much financial debt to return to their home country and so most opted for staying on and trying their luck. There was also a cultural issue involved. At the time they left their villages in India to come to study in Australia and, more importantly, to migrate, they had been proudly seen off by their families, their peer groups and their friends. They were showcased

as the ones who had made it. Their parents had sold whatever they could and taken huge loans to fund their future. It was now a matter of *izzat* or prestige. It was simply not possible for them to return home with nothing to show. That would have been a huge loss of face, not only for them personally but also for their families. They had to give their all to survive. As a result, the majority of the students lived and worked within the trap they found themselves in. They worked longer hours than were permitted under the law and at wages far below what was stipulated by the government; their refusal to do so would have resulted in their starving and in not being able to pay the rent. With a sudden influx of hungry hard-working youngsters into the job market, the market value of wages fell. Wages were paid only in cash. It is a matter of record that several of the attacks against Indians were carried out late at night when they were returning home with cash in their pockets. Some restaurants and small shops depended on the availability of cheap, hard-working labour. This was the third ogre that was born. Very often, there was a nexus between all three.

Meanwhile, the existing Australian system itself came under a severe stress across multiple sectors, including transport and housing. Indeed, the housing shortage was so critical that often several students shared the same apartment, against all housing laws, and lived in pathetic squalor. Some even had to go through what came to be known as 'hot beds', where a person was allowed to use a bed (ie sleep) for only a certain number of hours after which it was vacated for the next occupant. Recognising this, several institutions of higher learning embarked on massive projects to increase student accommodation and thereby ensure not only decent accommodation but also security and safety.

But, apart from these very basic requirements, the system was also confronted by a severe cultural or multicultural challenge that it was simply not prepared for. I recall an incident at Harris Park, which I would frequent during the problem period, and which had a concentration of Indian nationals. An elderly Lebanese with whom I had struck up a friendship told me that when the Lebanese came they ousted the Greeks, who were long-term residents in the area. Greek newspapers and restaurants disappeared and the Lebanese took over. Now, he says, it is impossible to find a Lebanese newspaper, as the people who run all the stores are either from India or from Bangladesh. Simon had a sense of humour. He told me that these days he is a fan of Bollywood films and hopes to be able to meet the Indian film actress Madhuri Dixit someday.

The seriousness of the cultural shock merits emphasis. There have been complaints, for instance, that Indians talk constantly on the train, that they talk loudly, and worse, when they meet fellow Indians, they talk only in their native language. All of this was quite alien to the native Australian. A kindly and elderly Australian lady once recounted to me, with a sense of nostalgia, how the area she had lived in since she was a child once had only Aussie butchers, fresh fish shops, grocery stores, restaurants and bookstores and how, today, they have all given way to Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese restaurants, and Bangladeshi corner stores. She didn't say so with a sense of sadness but with a sort of acceptance of how things have changed so much.

When the government opened the gates of Australia to attract international students, they simply failed to anticipate all of the above. Even government departments, such as those of Immigration and Education, failed to talk to one another. As a result, dodgy colleges were able to accommodate far more students than they were officially licenced to. Education departments did not have enough inspectors to visit the colleges to see if they were operating in accordance with the norms. And the rot took root and thrived. However, within a year of the spate of attacks that reached its zenith in May-June of 2009, with the horrific attack on Shravan Kumar Theerthale in Melbourne, where he was stabbed in the head with a screwdriver, and the petrol-bombing case in Harris Park, Indian students coming to Australia for studies fell by forty-eight per cent. The bubble had burst.

Intense discussions took place at a government-to-government level between India and Australia. The Australian government itself recognised that unless system corrections were urgently introduced, Australia's image, both among its own people and abroad, could be severely damaged. Sadly, on occasion you need a problem to recognise that there is a problem. Several measures have since been introduced and there is recognition now that such corrections are not a static process but need to be regular and constantly monitored. There is also increasing recognition that multiculturalism holds huge advantages for Australia but, for it to truly succeed, immigration policies should not only be seen as the regulation of the entry of non-Australians but their integration into the cultural landscape. Institutions like the Community Relations Commission, for instance, would accordingly need to be strengthened.

It is now widely acknowledged that while the government and the police in New South Wales and South Australia were proactive and swift, this sense of urgency was simply not apparent

in Victoria. There were clear examples of Victorian police trying to underplay attacks. The remark by the then Victorian Police Commissioner that Indians could avoid getting attacked if they looked and behaved poor was publicly condemned in Australia and elsewhere as being inappropriate and in extremely poor taste. The Commissioner glibly responded that he meant it as a joke.

New South Wales, on the other hand, stood apart from Victoria on all counts. Nathan Rees, as the then Premier, convened an emergency meeting as early as June 2009 to put together a mechanism by which safety, security and the welfare of the international student community, in particular Indian students, would be ensured. The police were tasked with working in close consultation with the Indian Consulate and a mechanism of regular briefings was put in place. When Kristina Keneally took over as Premier of New South Wales, she endorsed the measures of her predecessor and agreed to strengthen mechanisms further, wherever and whenever necessary. The New South Wales Opposition, under Barry O'Farrell, played a hugely positive role, liaising with the police, the Indian Consulate and the student community, and offering full support. In South Australia, in an extraordinary gesture, the then Premier Mike Rann personally wrote to the parents of each and every Indian student studying in his state, assuring them of his personal commitment to the safety, security and welfare of their children. The success achieved in New South Wales and South Australia in ensuring that the problem was contained is owed entirely to the role played by politicians of both parties. Without political support, there would have been no success story.

This then, was the overall, albeit over-simplified, context in which the attacks on Indian students need to be viewed.

III

Many consider the handling of the Harris Park demonstrations as a turning point and a success story in New South Wales. It was, indeed, a turning point for multiple reasons: first, it established a clear and collaborative relationship between the Consulate and all other New South Wales stakeholders; second, it gave the resident community in the Harris Park area a sense of confidence in the Consulate's ability to deliver; third, it helped establish a more open and dialogue-based relationship between the community and the local police; and fourth, it demonstrated that problems could be resolved through trust and dialogue. On the

recommendation of the New South Wales government, the Harris Park story became an Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) Case Study in leadership.

Briefly, on 8 June, members of the Indian community in Harris Park gathered and staged a demonstration to express their angst at what they perceived as police inefficiency. A resident in Harris Park had been a victim of a petrol-bombing incident on 23 May. Early June saw several instances of verbal abuse and taunting of Indians, particularly women, by other ethnic community members living in the area. There were also instances of rotten eggs being thrown at Indians. Complaints to the local police, they believed, were not being taken seriously. By then, a huge demonstration had taken place in Melbourne by Indian students protesting the violent attacks on Indian students and complaining of police apathy. The Harris Park demonstration in Sydney was an attempt at repeating the Melbourne demonstration. On June 8th, around 150 demonstrators gathered in Harris Park and shouted slogans. The police stood by and watched and did not try to stop the demonstration. By and large, the demonstration was noisy but peaceful; slogans were shouted but there was no violence. The following day numbers had swelled to almost 400 and events soon got out of control, with some demonstrators throwing garbage bins on the streets, while others spoke of providing vigilante-type security to community members, since the local police were unable to do so. The local police informed them that if there were a third night of demonstrations they would take action by making arrests. The ANZSOG study details how all stakeholders successfully managed the situation thereafter.

It is important to know why the demonstrations occurred in the first instance. You can address a problem only after you have fully understood it. Partial knowledge or an incorrect appreciation will not help in finding a solution. While inspiration was indeed derived from the demonstrations in Melbourne, the Sydney demonstrations were not entirely motivated by the tauntings or the perceptions of physical insecurity but rather were an expression of utter frustration and helplessness over a cluster of issues: poor housing, false promises, inadequate finances, a dodgy education system, massive exploitation, and a sense of hopelessness with regard to the future. Indeed, the demonstrations were a strong symbolic representation of the deep loneliness and angst that the Indian student community was going through.

When I and my colleague, Gautam Roy, who headed the consular wing in the Consulate, met with large numbers of the demonstrators on the morning of 10 June, their story was agonising.

The taunts and the jibes and the rotten egg attacks they were subjected to on a daily basis only reflected, in their mind, how unwanted they were in Australia. They took it as a total rejection by the Australian community. Overtly, while they protested police apathy, it was a complaint and angst against a system which seemed to have disowned and abandoned them. They believed they were trapped and had nowhere left to turn. I realised that, unless Gautam and I understood and communicated this emphatically, we would not succeed in voicing their concerns and thereby seeking a pathway to a solution. At this critical moment, they needed a lifeline and the resurrection of hope. This was Lesson One.

Thereafter we met with a large number of the other stakeholders, in particular the police, elected representatives, restaurants and business establishments in the area, and, more importantly, the Lebanese community, who were the long-term residents. We needed to know what their views were. Lesson Two was to co-opt everyone in the dialogue and consultation process. Lesson Three was to prioritise the stakeholders. Some are less important than others. The restaurants and shopkeepers, for instance, many of whom were Indian, were only interested in the revenue they were losing as a result of the demonstrations and also worried that, if the situation got out of hand, the students, who were being exploited and paid less than minimum wages by them, would file formal complaints with the police and other government agencies. This could trigger serious problems for them. I realised that while it was important to know their point of view, there was no need to make it a pressing concern in finding out how the demonstration issue could be addressed over the next few hours. And time was, indeed, of the essence.

On the third lesson, let me also say that the Lebanese community was seriously concerned, now that the Consulate was involved, as to whether the compromise solution arrived at would disadvantage them or project them in a negative light. We realised that without their support, any solution would be fragile. As a result, Gautam and I decided to make our temporary office in a Lebanese restaurant at Harris Park. All meetings were held there, at the tables and chairs, outdoors and in full view of spectators. I gave my word to the Lebanese elders that under no circumstances would I endorse any criticism against their community, and I gave my commitment to work with them solidly through the entire process. The elders were as taken aback as were the Indians that our camp office was in a Lebanese restaurant and not in the Indian restaurant across the road. I believe it won many friends among the Lebanese community and thus their support. So, Lesson Three, further amplified, would be: never

ignore an important stakeholder or make them feel they would be used as a bargaining chip. Win them to your side.

The print and visual media were already swarming in Harris Park, hungry to report on what might happen that night and if the police were likely to resort to making arrests, as was widely expected. In situations where the media are around, it is fascinating to watch the number of people who are happy to line up to give interviews and share their analysis of the situation. Very often, these people have little contribution to make towards finding a solution and their minute in the sun is all they are interested in. Like scavengers, they revel in situations like this. Both Gautam and I took a conscious decision not to interact with the media and, in any case, we had nothing to say at that stage. But it also taught us another lesson: too many people, with nothing to do directly with the issues at hand, were keen to become spokespersons. So, Lesson Four: learn whom you need to keep out. Gautam and I decided that everyone outside of Harris Park would be kept out. This aggrieved many. I recall how many unhappy and disgruntled persons criticised us severely for having kept them out of 'the success story'. I believed then and I believe now that our decision was the right one. We needed to find a solution, not to politicise the situation. Interestingly, our decision to exclude outsiders was fully endorsed by the student community in Harris Park.

The meeting with Local Area Police Commander, Robert Redfern, was critical. We needed to be on the same page. We had never met before and, if the attempt at rapport failed, police action would ensue that evening. The situation could have turned extremely messy and serious violence was not to be ruled out. There were reports that some of the Indian demonstrators had hockey sticks and cricket bats with them. Gautam and I had a general idea of what we could negotiate on because of the several rounds of discussion we had already had with various stakeholders. We knew that Robert was an outstanding police officer with an impeccable record, but neither Gautam nor I knew him personally. We were confident that the police, in any eventuality, would prefer to avoid a violent clash and that they too would hope for an amicable resolution. Furthermore, Robert had already had exposure to a similar situation in the Cronulla riots, which were a serious and extremely violent clash between a community and the police. He would obviously prefer to avoid a repeat scenario and, more importantly, he had learnt many lessons from the Cronulla incidents which could prove to be useful. As I walked into Robert's office that 10 June morning I believed that we would be on the same page. I was not wrong.

Robert was firm. I expected nothing else. He told me that if there were another night of demonstrations and if, like the previous night, it started getting out of hand, he would have no option but to ask his force to act. We requested his support for time to be able to negotiate and to try and stop the demonstrations. I said 'stop' and not 'defer' because it had to be non-negotiable: the demonstrations could not continue and the grievances had to be addressed. So we tabled a series of grievances that the community had and asked if these could be addressed. Robert was most forthcoming. He assured us that if there were lapses in police efficiency, he was committed to correcting them. He also said that the police were not enemies and that it was important for the community members to feel confident to walk up to the police station with their grievances. When we left Robert's office that afternoon, I knew I had a friend and an ally. He walked out with us to our parked car. This was a powerful public diplomacy gesture, as members of the Indian and other communities could see us shaking hands and reported back to others. Lesson Five: co-opt the most important stakeholder in your game plan. Without his support, the plan will fail. More importantly, make sure everyone knows he is on your side.

So, what was the plan? The end objective was to not only stop the demonstrations but to also address the concerns of the community. This meant that we needed to break the ice with the community (we had done so), to make the other major community in the region feel they were not going to become the target as a result of our negotiations (we had conveyed this) and to get the police to respond to the grievances of the community (we had conveyed this and obtained the police commander's assurances on this). Was this enough to stop the demonstrations? Gautam and I talked about it and our view was that the solution lay in a face-to-face meeting between the community and the police and, possibly, the local and state government representatives. It was important that all sides met and heard each other directly and not through intermediaries. This was Lesson Six: parties to a conflict must negotiate face to face and directly. We proposed the convening of such a meeting at the Town Hall (the symbol of democratic power), to openly enter into a mutually acceptable 'agreement'. This was not going to be easy. To arrange it we met with the Lord Mayor, Toni Issa.

Toni is a Lebanese but with very strong Indian family connections. He was deeply distressed at the demonstrations and the bad press the Parramatta area and Harris Park, which was his jurisdiction, were receiving. I believe he was among the most outstanding persons I met at

that very dark hour. I shared with Toni details with regard to all the various meetings we had had since the morning, including the list of demands from the police and the community. Toni was not entirely convinced that he was going to be able to deliver on the demands made by the community, such as improved lighting near the rail track, CCTV cameras, enhanced police patrolling and so on, as most of it was going to require considerable budgetary allocations. But, like Robert, he too wanted the demonstrations to end. So he agreed to the Town Hall meeting and, more importantly, to chair it. It was scheduled for 5 o'clock that afternoon but there was still worry about the kind of media coverage that would follow if the discussions collapsed.

It is important to mention at this stage the role that was played by another outstanding person, Stepan Kerkasharian. As the Chair of the Community Relations Commission in New South Wales, he had also been tasked with the issue of the attacks on Indian students. Stepan is himself an immigrant and has close links with India; he proved to be a huge asset and the role he played would be difficult to quantify.

At the time the meeting was to take place, word was received that Robert Redfern was averse to participating. I realised that without Robert, the talks would have no value. Stepan spoke with Robert and we realised that Robert's principal concern was the presence of media. This was easy to solve: we decided to keep the media out. And so, Lesson Seven: know when to get the media in and when to keep them out. We didn't want publicity. All we needed was to get the job done. Efforts at seeking interviews with me were politely declined on the grounds that I had, at present, nothing to say. With that hurdle out of the way, the meeting took place. Suffice it to say that it was successful. Both parties met, they talked, they pulled down barriers, they built bridges of confidence. The demonstrations were called off and the police delivered on all their promises, as indeed did the local government. One of the big lessons this taught all of us is that, more often than not, the real problem lies in our inability to sit across the table with one another and talk. This helps us to share our misgivings and our concerns. We have fixed perceptions and refuse to budge from positions we take. On the other hand, once we are able to talk, several problems can actually be resolved. Lesson Eight: listen to the other person's point of view; never refuse to talk.

The successful handling of the Harris Park incident created a special relationship between the Consulate, Stepan, Robert and myself. With Toni Issa, I developed a warm friendship. The

management of the Harris Park demonstrations created trust, which is the basis of teamwork. Much of what was achieved in New South Wales derived from the Harris Park success story.

IV

There were several other lessons I learnt during this period. Briefly, these are as follows:

1. Perceptions matter. This can be a real problem because all of us have a view about everything and we protect our view. We refuse to see any other point of view which contradicts our perceptions. Our blinkered view becomes the lens through which we see everything: Indians talk too loudly, the police are unfriendly, Australians love to hate us, the Lebanese don't want Indians in their neighbourhood. Perceptions need to be addressed and should not be ignored.
2. Create trust. Never make promises that you are unable to deliver upon. Once you let a person down, it is an uphill task to win back trust. Work as a team and learn to see all points of view and not just push your own.
3. Stay focussed on what you are negotiating and ensure that successful negotiation means that both sides must have takeaways. Success can never be for one party alone. If you leave the other party empty handed, the battle is not over and you will need to revisit the issue again and again. Mutual benefit is the way to go. Loss of face is a no-brainer.
4. Never lose focus after the success. It is important to follow through and to visibly demonstrate continued interest. Always stay in touch because it reflects that you are genuinely interested in seeing things through.
5. Communication channels should always remain open. Speak to everyone, listen to everyone. You will never know what you missed until it is too late.
6. Not everything you hear is true. Be mindful of rumours. In the Harris Park incident, rumours were constantly floated about persons having been kidnapped or having been killed. Don't believe everything you hear.
7. Never underestimate the power of the mobile phone. In today's day and age, everyone has a mobile phone and all mobile phones come with a camera. Before you know it, news spreads. The SMS can be misused to spread rumours.
8. Be selective about whom you involve in finding the solution. Everyone will want to be on the bandwagon of success and to suggest solutions. Be selective because not everyone is likely to be a constructive ally or partner.