



## ASPEN INSTITUTE INDIA

Session on “The Cultural Politics of the Indian Diaspora”

With Vinay Lal, Associate Professor of History, University of California, Los Angeles

4:00pm, Thursday, July 30 2009

“Diaspora Indians Suffer from the Anxiety of Invisibility”: Vinay Lal



In a session organized by Aspen Institute India, Professor Vinay Lal, Professor of History, University of California, Los Angeles suggested that while the Diaspora Indian suffer from the anxiety of invisibility—about not being taken seriously enough as Indians, and about Hinduism being an ‘invisible religion’.

In the interactive session, Prof. Lal said that while the Indian diaspora is an incontestable fact of contemporary history, the recent interest in the wider Indian community of NRIs, PIOs, OCIs etc generally refers only to the highly educated and affluent Indians in US, Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand etc. What is generally ignored is the older Indian Diaspora in Places like South East Asia, in the Caribbean and in Africa, who went as indentured labour, and to whom India paid scant attention. Thus, in some ways it can be said that India disowned its older diaspora between the 1940s and 1980s to early 1990s—perhaps in part because at the time India had no real capability to help Indians in other countries, and also because they Indian communities in these countries represented everything India wanted to forget. He drew upon the examples of Trinidad, Fiji,

Malaysia, South Africa and Guyana in this regard, and said that Indians had suffered considerable injustice and oppression in these countries in different ways.

Referring to the 'new' diaspora in the US in particular, Prof. Lal observed that until the ascent of Bobby Jindal as the Governor of Louisiana, Indians were barely represented in the political system. This, coupled with the fact that many diaspora Indians perceive that the world runs roughshod over them has created an 'anxiety of invisibility'. There is consternation over why China, a communist regime is given so much importance over India, the world's largest democracy—there is great insistence for parity. The corollary to this is the fact that Pakistan is seen as being given equal parity with India. There is thus an anxiety of influence.

There is also great anxiety over the "invisibility of Hinduism" and the fact that the religion, though has millions of adherents across the world, is not seen as a 'world religion' like Christianity, Islam, Judaism etc. This is in large part the reason why affluent Indians are investing so much money in building temples across America. Prof. Lal lamented that perhaps the money could have been better spent on development programmes in India.

In terms of diaspora politics, Prof. Lal pointed out that there are sustained efforts by some groups to forge closer relations between India, the US and Israel , under the rhetoric of each country being surrounded by fundamentalist Islamic forces.

He concluded by saying that diaspora Indians must display greater political awareness and need to make ethical, sensitive and democratic choices, such as forging linkages with other disenfranchised and disadvantaged groups. Trumpeting of family values, refusal to engage with the wider community, and over-investment in temples are some of the distressing aspects of diaspora Indians. Rather than looking at the rise of India as a great power, more attention needs to be paid to making ethical choices.