

The Tug of Roots



Increasingly young Indian Americans are signing up for social projects in India, hoping not only to give back, but also to get to know the land of their heritage

BY CHARU GUPTA

Among second generation Indian Americans, Neelima Reddy is among the more hip. With a cigarette in her left hand, her cotton kurta blowing the wind and a blue scarf wrapped around gold earrings and hair that sticks out in black, angular jabs, Reddy makes her way across a crowded New York City intersection and towards a small pizzeria in Central Harlem.

Reddy, a 25-year-old advertising agent turned North Bronx public school teacher, wants to go back to India to teach again, this time for at least one year. She is a member of a new corps of second-generation Indian Americans

who are going beyond the traditional summer vacation and spending extended periods of time in the homeland to volunteer for social justice and teaching work.

Reddy has more counterparts than she realizes. Miles away, in an upper west side diner, Ambika Samarthya, 23, is also planning a trip to India. Samarthya will go for at least six months to complete her M.F.A. thesis, a short film. Samarthya described the growing initiative to return for longer periods of time. Like everyone, she said, you're supposed to go to high school and then college. Many go to India

only for summer vacations, maybe staying a little longer when they get older. These days, said Samarthya, the younger generation is going and staying for at least six months. Why? To 'give back' to the land of their ancestors. "It's now a rite of passage," Samarthya said.

Reddy and Samarthya have several things in common: they are both in their twenties; they were brought up in the United States, went to American colleges and plan to settle down here. But before they do, they also plan to spend a significant chunk of their post-graduate life in India getting to know the country their parents

left behind, getting to know themselves and, most importantly, giving back some of what they've gained in the U.S.

"After being here [in the US] and hating being Indian for so long," said Samarthya, who has spent weeks exploring India in the past, "you finally get to the point where you say, 'This is who I am and it's really cool and I want to know more about it.'"

For Reddy, the identity issues just kept piling up. "There was a build-up of not knowing what I wanted to do with myself. And also a build up of wanting to be with my cultural roots," Reddy said. "I was really struggling to find how I could be as Indian as I could possibly be."

After graduating college in 1998, Reddy realized a combination of few Indian friends and long hours working at an advertising firm had left her fumbling for her "Indian ness." She decided the answer was to go back for the long-term. She quit her job, applied to graduate school, deferred enrollment and packed her bags to go work for an NGO in India to teach under-privileged kids while living alone for four months.

Three years later, Reddy is again talking about going back, this time for a much longer time commitment. "I'm not sure how much I'd enjoy it," said Reddy, but said she was still determined to return.

"A lot of it has to do with the identity thing," she said, "But I think a lot of people feel guilty about the way they live here. I was feeling guilty about the way I was living my life here. I thought if I had just given myself, forsaken all these things I've lived with, then somehow it would all make sense. So even if I were living this lifestyle here, and not necessarily doing 'good things,' I would be redeemed for every-

thing I did wrong. And everything I did in the future would be fine because of what I had done in India."

For Samarthya, though her ends are different, her means follow a very similar path. Samarthya's first immersion into India happened for a period of five weeks. Through an HIV/AIDS education program led by college-students, Samarthya not only got to eye-witness the social ills of the red light district in Bombay and orphaned children, she also got to live without the help of nearby family and friends, doing her laundry, shopping and cooking.

"I thought the work they [the HIV/AIDS program coordinators] were doing was great," said Samarthya. "I thought the idea of going back to India to live without your family, without hotels, was great and it changed my life forever." The experience, though complete with diarrhea among other things, invigorated Samarthya in new directions. She returned to the U.S. more socially and politically motivated. "I wanted to come back and do more work like that here," she said. She enrolled in a graduate foreign studies program and went to study in London, where she took courses in Indian history, anthropology, law, cinema and Hindi - which sparked a professional interest in Indian film.

When Samarthya returns to India this fall, she will stay for six to nine months, put her personal life on hold (she is in a serious two and a half year relationship) and will try to get a handle on the Indian film industry in Bombay while she films her thesis, a "Bollywood-short" using Indian-American themes and starring Indian and Indian-American actors.

Paths like Reddy and Samarthya's seem less and less unusual. In fact, several organizations have arisen within the last

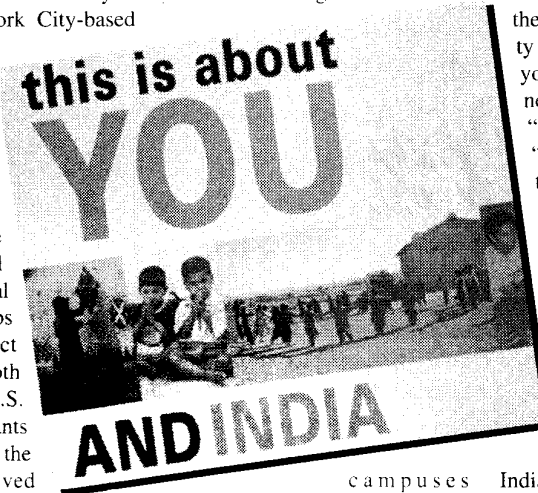
five years to capture the growing interest among second-generation Indians to do social work in India. Youth Solidarity Summer, an effort started in 1995 by a group of New York City-based Indian-immigrant leftists, every year brings together second-generation Indians from around the country between the ages of 17 and 21 interested in social change. YSS helps facilitate contact with NGO's in both India and the U.S. From 18 participants in 1995, last year the program received applications far beyond the 35 available openings.

Another indicator of interest in long-term social work in India is the new IndiCorps. The program was founded last fall by Anand Shah, who spent a year studying philosophy in Bombay, India and whose two sisters also spent a year each doing development work in the country. IndiCorps plans to sponsor approximately 10 one-year fellowships this September, placing fellows with pre-selected NGO's in India. Partly modeled after the U.S. Peace Corps (which was expelled from India in 1976 after a 15 year run because of diplomatic differences), IndiCorps requires applicants to be at least half Indian. The program has already received 50 to 80 applications its first round of placements.

Part of the reason for this trend is a changing collegiate landscape, said Sangeeta Kamat, an Indian immigrant and scholar who works with second-generation Indian-American issues and also runs YSS. "In some ways," said Kamat, "they [second-generation] are becoming more politicized with courses on campus

about post-colonial issues and South Asian history."

Asian American studies proliferated across college



campuses during the 1990's. Pawan Dhingra, a sociologist at Bucknell University who studies race and ethnicity, pointed to a clear connection between these courses and the more racially aware attitude among the second generation Indian Americans who take them. "They're more likely to get involved," said Dhingra.

Another reason, according to Dhingra, is that there are simply more Asian-Americans in America choosing to do different things with their lives. In the Asian-American community nationwide, said Dhingra, there are simply a larger number of people reaching adulthood. "Once there are more people in the community," he said, "the need to become a doctor or a lawyer or a scientist - professions coveted by the first wave of immigrants - is less. There's more room for variation in the community."

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Asian Indians have doubled in number since 1990 and the new generations of Indian Americans are the fastest growing minority group. Indian Americans now make up the third

largest minority group in the country, after the Chinese and Filipinos.

As communities of color grow in the United States, more diversity - and adversity - is keeping young people working in their neighborhoods, said Dhingra. "There's an increase," he said, "because people are seeing themselves and their communities as having internal problems and being marginalized as immigrants."

Besides, traveling to a country as far away as India poses a formidable expense for many. Financial burdens like student loans keep many Indian-Americans from leaving for an extended period of time. Some like Samarthya have relationships to consider and others want to invest in careers at an early age. A better option that still seems close to home, said Dhingra, is working at community-based organizations that serve communities of color. "They're not sacrificing a long-term career by doing this," said Dhingra.

For Reddy and Samarthya, the goal is to create more meaningful ties with their native country - ties that will perhaps make them less complacent about America. "None of us see living there as a reality," said Reddy, who said she feels guilty about her lifestyle here compared to that of the poor in India. "I thought if I had just forsaken all these things I've lived with, then somehow it would all make sense," she said. "I would be redeemed for everything I did wrong because of what I had done in the future."

Samarthya, whose parents speak English at home and go back to India only after long lengths of time, also wants a more personal, long-lasting communion with India. "In order for us to retain our cultural grasp," she said, "we have to do this on our own." □