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# Caste-based organizations go global

Indians who moved abroad took along their caste affiliations, which are helping them to keep the social and cultural fabric of their caste alive

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Ram Aryawas the last qualified professional to leave his home in the Kalirawan village of Hissar in Haryana. That was 45 years ago.

"After me, no professional has found his way out of my village. It's very sad that almost half a century has gone by, the country has done so well, but people in my village still cannot get professional degrees," says Arya, a civil engineer.

So, when his company, Arya Properties Inc., a multi-million dollar real estate development and construction business in the US, began to do well, it was natural for him to think of his village. "Jats tend to be undereducated and those who want to educate their children do not have access to schools... I decided to do my bit to fix that problem," he says.

In 2001, Arya and his wife, Santosh, set up the million-dollar Sukhram Memorial Public School in his village in collaboration with the Association of Jats of America (Ajata). This co-ed school, spread over 28 acres of Arya's ancestral family land, teaches 720 students yoga, gardening and public speaking in addition to academics. Arya hopes that as a result of this effort, one day another qualified professional will emerge from his old village.

Like Arya, many immigrants believe—when you do well, give back.

And often, the place to begin is caste and kinsmen who may not be doing so well back home in India. Organizations abroad choose different ways to do that: some, such as Ajata, promote education in native villages; others, such as the Srignaud Brahmin Group of Toronto, focus on helping caste members who want to immigrate and settle abroad; others, such as the Leuva Patidar (Patels) Samaj (LPS) of USA, want to keep a shared culture and language alive for children who were born abroad. Still others simply want to remain a part of a community where (they hope) their children will find their spouses.

Whatever their reasons, the idea of caste affiliations did not vanish when Indians moved abroad.

They took their caste affiliations with them, where they have re-emerged as focused, and powerful social and cultural networks that play an important role in keeping the social and cultural fabric of caste alive outside of India.

Five years ago, Tejas Dave, a married medical salesman in Vadodara, decided he did not want to spend the rest of his life in a job that kept taking him away from his family. To him, immigration was the only way of giving them a comfortable life. So he moved to Toronto in Canada.

His caste relatives, members of the Srignaud Brahmin Group of Toronto (a community of brahmins hailing from the Godhra district of Gujarat) picked him up at the airport, took him home and gave him a place to live, served warm, home-cooked Gujarati meals that he was used to, showed him the sights and helped him learn the ropes—how to drive, how to get a driver's licence, how to get health insurance, how to get a green card, where to shop, and, of course, how to get a job and a house.

"I lived in their home for about four months. By then, I had got a job as a warehouse manager in Toronto. But I had not saved enough for rent and everything, so when my wife and son came over, we lived with another Srignaud Brahmin family for two months. They helped us for the first five months after our immigration here in a way that only a family can. They were there for us, every step of the way and it became so easy to adjust to life here," says Dave.

Twenty-five years ago, the Brahmins of Toronto (irrespective of sub-castes) began organizing themselves into a community when there were just six families in the area, recalls Subhash Pathak, who spearheaded the effort to create this community and had gone from door-to-door to convince families to join them.

"But as the number began to grow (there are 3,000 Brahmin families in Toronto now), the umbrella organization began to split. Each sub-caste formed its own community here," says Pathak, now chairman of the Srignaud Brahmin Group of Toronto. There are others, such as the Brahmin Society of Toronto, the Anavil Brahmin Samaj of Canada and the North Indian Brahmin Group.

Pathak says that his group was formed for three reasons: to conduct community festivals such as Diwali, Holi and *janoi* (the sacred thread changing done by Brahmins) ceremony; to integrate the community better and get young people from similar socio-cultural backgrounds to meet each other (maybe to find spouses); and also to help other Srignaud Brahmins who were immigrating to Canada.

For Dave, this caste-based organization paved the way for a life he had hoped to offer his family.

Every week, nine-year-old Arya Mohanty commutes to the Greater Boston area to learn Odissi, a dance form of her home state in India, and at home her father Arun Mohanty—a research scientist with a pharmaceutical company in Boston and a member of the Orissa Society of the Americas—teaches her Odiya, the language of her people.

"Language and art define a culture, I think," says Mohanty. "It is so important to teach our children these things."

Many feel the way he does. So, organizations such as LPS of USA, runs schools across America that teaches children Gujarati, their mother tongue. This community of Patels from south Gujarat, which runs successful hotel and motel chains across the US, wants to "focus on teaching kids about our ways of doing things, customs and living life. To do that, we organize

charities, sports events and conferences where young people get to intermingle and hopefully find a spouse. We also have a monthly magazine, a comprehensive database of the community”, says Mukesh Mowji, president of the 8,000-strong community of LPS of USA.

LPS has also set up a trust fund of around \$3.5 million (Rs16 crore) that endowed scholarships to deserving students in the US and in India. Like Arya, “our members run personally-endowed schools throughout south Gujarat. You will see a tremendous amount of philanthropy in that region, because every successful guy here wants to give back to his village and people. We are just very emotional about this”, says Mowji.

The impulse, across organizations, is the same: “Our children need to remember the shared story of the community—where we came from and how we got here. It is so easy to forget in a different country, especially if you lead an insulated life,” says Harish Dhayal, secretary of Ajata.

For others, such as the Srignaud Brahmin Group of Toronto, the community also offers a place where old traditions are kept alive. “It used to be difficult to do the *janoi* ceremony when we immigrated here,” says Pathak, referring to the sacred thread changing ceremony that is done by Brahmins every year on the day of Raksha Bandhan. “Now, we get together on that day, all the Brahmins of Toronto and change our thread as prescribed by the scriptures. That is the strength of a community like this. We can live as we were meant to.”

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