

**Abstract: Interplay of Culture and Language in the Economic Relationship between India and Latin America**

For India, Latin America is the last frontier that remains for this Asian giant to justify its claim to global prominence. India's colonial experience, which shared much with Asia and Africa, had little to do with Latin America. The only significant connection lies in the Eastern Caribbean corner comprising former Dutch Surinam, and former British Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, which received migration of Indian labour during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consciousness of that region, and economic interaction consequently, have been scant. Geographical distance was compounded by the linguistic and cultural hiatus – India's consciousness of Western civilization was focussed on the Anglo-Saxon reality, whereas Latin America, and most of the Caribbean, had strong cultural and civilizational roots in the Latin world.

This paper attempts to outline the factors that have maintained the distance between India and Latin America, and suggests how the new economic paradigm that has taken hold of the global economy, is shaping this relationship and impacting cultural perceptions.

**Key Words:** Latin, Caribbean, India, Spanish, Portuguese, colonies, language, culture, trade, investment, translation

## Interplay of Culture and Language in the Economic Relationship between India and Latin America

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Latin America is the last frontier that remains for India to justify its claim to global prominence. India's colonial experience, which shared much with Asia and Africa, had little to do with Latin America. A significant connection lay in the eastern Caribbean corner of former Dutch colony Suriname, and former British colonies, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. These colonies hosted, and eventually became the homelands of, tens of thousands of 'indentured' Indian labourers, brought there after the abolition of slavery during the 19th century by the colonial powers, to work on plantations. Portuguese Admiral Pedro Alvarez Cabral's fleet, sailing to India, deviated from its route and accidentally discovered Brazil in 1500, which established a tenuous link with Portuguese India.

Consciousness of that region, and economic interaction consequently, had been scant till the commencement of this century. The problem of geographical distance was compounded by the linguistic and cultural hiatus. India's consciousness of Western civilization was focussed on the Anglo-Saxon, whereas Latin America, and most of the Caribbean, had strong cultural and civilizational roots in the Latin world.

The very appellation - Latin America - has a linguistic connotation. It refers to the region that comprises around thirty nation-States in Central and South America and the Caribbean, where the principal, usually the national language, a legacy of the colonial era, is Spanish, or Portuguese, in Brazil (1).

In parts of the Caribbean, particularly the former British colonies, and also in British and US ruled or controlled territories, English is the official and the popular language. Dutch is the language of Suriname, a former colony of Holland, and in the Caribbean islands of the Netherlands Antilles. French is the language of French Guiana in South America, and the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean, all overseas territories of France.

Migration of African slave labour to this part of the world, and the intermingling of European tongues, resulted in the evolution of hybrid languages, used by native and working communities. Their importance has come to be acknowledged in an increasingly humane and democratic region. *Papiamentu* (2) is used extensively in the Netherlands Antilles. Similarly most Jamaicans speak, or understand, a form of *Patois* (3), while in the the former French colony of Haiti, a variation of the colonial language, referred to as *Creole* (4) French is widely used. Indigenous languages such as Quechua (recognised as a national language in Peru), Guarani, Kekchi, Nahua and others, are also in use, mainly by the indigenous communities in Latin America

(5). European, African and indigenous races have contributed to create a rainbow mix all over the region.

The coining of the term 'Latin America' is widely attributed to the Colombian poet José María Torres Caicedo (6), who wrote in 1856:

Esos pueblos nacidos para aliarse:

La unión es su deber, su ley amarse:

Igual origen tienen y misión;

La raza de la América Latina

(These races born to be allied:

Their duty is to unite, their law to love each other:

A common origin and mission do they have;

The race of Latin America)

Though the region reveals cultural disparities, its political ethos has been defined by its history. An important, and fundamental element, which explains to a great extent the cultural hiatus between India and Latin America, is the nature and composition of the communities that populate the respective geographical areas. The historical context has much to do with this.

Most parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America were colonised by European powers around the same period, between the 16th and 17th centuries. Latin American nations, however, obtained their independence well over a century before those in India and Africa (7). India achieved its independence from Great

Britain through a negotiated settlement, the result of a largely peaceful freedom movement. The hispanic Latin American nations had to fight long and brutal wars to obtain their freedom from Spain. Brazil in 1822, and some Caribbean nations (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), obtained independence more peacefully, and retained institutional links with the former imperial powers. Like India, the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean adopted the languages planted in their territories by the colonisers, with an important difference.

In India, as in the rest of Asia, independence saw the assumption of political power by the indigenous peoples, who had been subjugated but could not be suppressed. In independent Latin America, on the other hand, the new ruling class came from communities bred by the colonising race and class, referred to as Creoles (8). Despite the racial miscegenation, or *mestizaje*, to use a Latin American term, the fact remains that most of those who assumed power were not native to the region, but descendants of the colonisers. The political and cultural orientation of Latin America therefore, was inextricably woven with that of its European progenitors. This determined not just the linguistic, educational, cultural and social proclivities, but also ensured that Latin America remained economically connected to Europe, only gradually including in its focus the North American continent, which imposed itself in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

India and most Asian countries had well developed, even classical languages, with their own literature and history. There was therefore no question of the colonial language being predominant. In the case of India, the Constitution recognizes the importance of English as a language for communication for official purposes. The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, however, recognises 22 principal Indian languages, along with Hindi, the official language, which is given prominence as the most widely spoken. India therefore emerged from the colonial experience with its civilizational base intact. Indeed it gained the advantage of a widespread knowledge and use of English, which has helped it to deal with an increasingly globalised world, and to access technologies perfected by countries using English.

We must also bear in mind that Latin American independence came about in a period when the world was not as interconnected as it was when India gained independence. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's earliest encounter with Latin American leaders came about in 1927 at the International Congress of Oppressed Peoples in Brussels. He then became aware of the commonality of interests that region shared with India (9). India established political relations soon after independence with several Latin American countries. The first Embassies were opened in Brazil and Argentina in 1948, and in other major Latin American countries in succeeding years. Argentina had shipped to famine-hit India 140,000 tons of wheat

in 1946, on its own ships. The first high Latin American dignitary to visit India was Argentine President Arturo Frondizi, in December 1961. Panditji himself visited Mexico in 1961. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi extensively toured Latin America in 1968, covering Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana (10).

Despite these early ventures, bilateral political and economic contacts were slow in developing. This was not for want of political will. India was immersed in efforts to unite and guide the former colonies of Asia and Africa, which shared a common colonial experience. The colonial experience of Latin America, on the other hand, was more distant in time and space. Latin America's political orientation was also slanted, in the first half of the 20th century, towards Europe and the United States. This was evident in the sluggish response – as also reticence on the part of some countries – of Latin America to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Indian establishment has always been aware of the importance of **Soft Power** in projecting India's image and promoting its interests abroad. The United States of America represents an archetype of soft power, projecting its talents and technologies through Hollywood, Disneyland, the internet, MTV, etc. In China, the projection of soft power is now state policy, an instrumentality to augment its standing in the international arena. China's growing economy constitutes a

major source of its increasing appeal. India, on the other hand, with its social, economic and geographical diversity and the rich cultural heritage of its people, represents an archetype of an ancient civilization, which is still in touch with its past. Over and above the exotic and esoteric qualities that it possesses, its resonance with the concept of soft power has stirred the Western imagination (11).

It is important to recognise and give credit to the role of culture in the awakening of Latin American consciousness, its recognition and embrace of Indian civilization. Experiences and writings of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, immortalised in the work of his Argentinian host, Victoria Ocampo; the works of Latin American poets Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz; and other cultural and literary exchanges, created a lasting fascination for India in that region. Indian spirituality, yoga, mythology, classical dance and music, among other manifestations of its rich culture, created a strong foundation for the relationship. The superstructure is being strengthened in this century by official agencies of India and Latin America, and increasingly through private and academic initiatives and institutions.

Given the absence of historic and political baggage or conflict between India and Latin America, cultural contacts provide an excellent vehicle to lay a strong and durable foundation for the political and economic superstructure. Several steps have been taken in this direction.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) the principal agency of the Ministry of External Affairs for propagation of Indian culture abroad, has Cultural Centres in Brazil, Guyana, Mexico, Suriname and Trinidad & Tobago (T&T). These Centres are staffed by experts in Indian music, dance, yoga and other aspects of Indian culture (12). In some cases, such as in T&T, there is a Hindi language teacher, for the Indian diaspora community. In Sao Paulo, Brazil, there are local artistes giving classes in Indian classical dance. This is evidence of the expansion of Indian culture in that region, but also reveals of the lack of sufficient Indian language expertise, which often obliges us to recruit local talent to be able to communicate. Such is also the case of our Embassies in the region, which frequently do not have sufficient language-proficient personnel, and have to rely on local staff to perform some very key functions.

The Government of India has signed Cultural Agreements and Cultural Exchange Programs with Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and T&T. These provide the legal and regulatory framework for formal cooperation, including the financing of such interaction (13). Another important aspect of India's cultural diplomacy has been the establishment of Chairs in universities and academic institutions for the study of India in Brazil, Mexico, Suriname, Jamaica and

T&T. MoUs have also been signed by semi-official Indian institutions such as the Indian Council of World Affairs with think tanks in Latin America. Several Indian universities offer Spanish and Portuguese language courses and have bilateral MoUs with counterparts in that region.

Language, however continues to be a barrier. Though institutions of higher learning in Latin America have faculty members well-versed in English, this is not true of the majority of the student population. Latin Americans, by and large, have not taken to English, though there is increasing consciousness of its importance in that region. On our side, there is even less expertise in Spanish and Portuguese. The language medium plays an essential and vital role in the projection of our soft power. Efforts at cultural promotion are diluted, even distorted, because we have frequently abdicated this campaign to those who are not necessarily adept, but can carry the message merely because they speak and express themselves in the local language. We do sometimes find inappropriate expressions of Indian culture depicted in Latin American media. There have been attempts to overcome this handicap.

Official agencies, such as ICCR and the External Publicity and Public Diplomacy Divisions of the Ministry of External Affairs turn out publications in Spanish such as ‘India Eterna’, and other well written and readable books on India; ‘India Perspectivas’, a fortnightly magazine on Indian affairs; and

‘Papeles de la India’, a periodical of essays in Spanish; Spanish and Portuguese language documentary films. Indian Embassies in Latin America have sponsored translations of Indian literary and other works into Spanish and Portuguese, notably the Autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi, the complete works of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, and several others. All our fourteen Embassies in the region have websites in the local languages, conveying useful information and serving as gateways for those interested in visiting or knowing about India.

An important feature of India’s projection of soft power has been the award of hundreds of fully paid scholarships annually in Latin America and the Caribbean. This has taken place principally through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Program of the Ministry of External Affairs (14), but also through the ICCR and other public and private institutions. Initially designed for technical education, the ITEC Program has steadily expanded the number of courses which impart English training, either as a separate, or part of a course for young students and professionals. These experiences provide Latin American participants an opportunity to know India and acquire the much-needed capacity to deal with it.

Latin American embassies, universities and governments have also sponsored and collaborated in the publication of Indian translations of their works. An important initiative was the publication by the Los Andes University in Merida,

Venezuela, of a Comparative Study of Gandhi and Simon Bolivar in 2008. The Chilean Embassy in Delhi recently sponsored the Hindi translation of the works of the famous Chilean poet, Gabriella Mistral.

The importance of Spanish language expertise has been recognized not just by the government, but also by the private sector in India. The burgeoning economic and commercial relationship with Latin America has created the need for translators, interpreters, and even public functionaries and executives who can live and work in Latin America, or service the requirements of public and private enterprise. The Cervantes Institute in Delhi, set up a few years ago by the Spanish government, and the growing number of private and academic courses offered, have created a large pool of Spanish and Portuguese language-proficient individuals, many of whom get absorbed by the business community even before completing their courses. The demand still exceeds supply. Let us consider the magnitude of the economic and commercial relationship.

Whereas in 1990-91, India's trade with the Latin American and Caribbean region was around US\$500 million, by 2011-12 this had shot up sixty-fold to cross US\$32 billion. On the Indian side, the export basket is diverse, including engineering goods such as automobiles; pharmaceutical products; chemicals; textiles; etc. Imports from Latin America are largely bulk commodities such as crude oil, edible oil, copper, coal, etc.

Despite a compound annual rate of growth in trade of over thirty per cent over the past decade, there is considerable potential yet to be exploited. The potential has been acknowledged by Indian and Latin American business interests. Evidence of this can be seen in the continuous flow of business delegations between both regions; participation in trade fairs; and involvement of governments on both sides in finalising agreements to facilitate trade and economic engagement. Successful development of business presupposes the capacity to negotiate and interpret contracts, which are normally bilingual. The same applies to crucial government agreements on reduction of tariffs; investment protection; taxation; and other areas. The demand for Indian professionals who speak Spanish and Portuguese has inevitably risen as a result.

The physical presence of business and investment has also grown on both sides. While Latin American investment in India is not very significant so far, there is increasing recognition of the potential India's market holds. Business houses, mainly from Brazil, but also from Mexico and Argentina, have established important joint ventures in India. Indian investment in Latin America has crossed US\$15 billion, mainly in hydrocarbons, mining, engineering, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, consumer and other products. A very important aspect of India's economic penetration of Latin America is the information technology (IT) sector. Tata Consultancy Services recognised the advantages of

nearshoring in Latin America (setting up ventures geographically and linguistically closer to important markets such as the US). It has had a network of service and development centres all over the region for several years, employing currently over 8000 Latin Americans. Other Indian software companies are present in the region and the success of this model is increasingly evident. This surge in investment has taken place over the past decade, and was possible because of a higher level of linguistic and cultural complementarity. This has come about as a result of conscious efforts by the official establishments, as well as the private sector on both sides. For its part, the Government of India has financed and set up Centres of Excellence in IT in several smaller countries in Central America and the Caribbean. These Centres project India's software expertise and experience, providing an opportunity for Indian enterprises running these Centres to know and operate better in the region, and help in building the much needed local capacity for Indian companies to function. In the process, a growing number of Indian professionals are learning the language and other important aspects of Latin American culture, so vital for them to live and function there.

India's collaboration with Latin America also covers technical areas such as defence, agriculture and science and technology. In all these areas, there is an increasing number of scientists and technicians visiting from both sides. While

technical terminology may be common, a proper functioning of such collaborative ventures will necessitate a higher level of linguistic orientation on both sides, if we are to take full advantage of the expertise we can offer each other.

The economic implications for Indian tourism and other service sectors are immense. As Latin Americans have got more exposed to Incredible India, tourist arrivals have increased steadily. Latin America holds tremendous appeal for India's film industry, with its natural beauty, cost advantage, and facility for operations. Some shooting has been done in recent years for films such as Dhoom II (Rio de Janeiro), Ek Tha Tiger (Havana). The most popular Brazilian TV Channel, O Globo produced 'Caminho das Indias' (Passage to India: Two Worlds, One Destiny) several years ago. A soap opera in Portuguese on Brazilian and Indian families, this runaway hit was translated in Spanish and seen all over the continent. It is now being telecast in the US, where the massive Latin American community has created its own demand. Latin Americans are also enjoying Indian films in increasing numbers. This has created the need for expertise in dubbing and sub-titling of our films, from Hindi to Spanish and Portuguese.

## **CONCLUSION**

In August 2012, a visit by the Troika of Ministers heading the newly formed Community of Latin American and Caribbean

States (CELAC) to Delhi, marked a significant milestone in India's relations with that region. CELAC brings all thirty-three independent States of that region under one umbrella. It was launched in 2010 and held its first Summit in Venezuela in December 2011. The current Presidency is held by Chile, whose Foreign Minister, accompanied by the Foreign Minister of Venezuela (immediate past President), and the Vice Foreign Minister of Cuba (next President – 2013) held extensive discussions with the External Affairs Minister of India and issued the most comprehensive Joint Statement on India-Latin American relations ever. Both sides agreed to hold annual high level meetings and set up forums for discussions on all aspects of the relationship. The paragraph on culture is reproduced below:

‘Both sides reiterated the importance attached by them to encourage people-to-people contacts and reaffirmed their determination to cooperate closely in this field. They agreed to strengthen cultural and academic linkages ... in order to promote tourism and business.’ (15)

It is evident that the benign distance that has separated India from Latin America is shrinking. If this process is to be seen as a virtuous cycle, a higher level of communication and understanding is vital. For this an appreciation of each other's culture, and the capacity to communicate is essential. Language capability should therefore be a priority for India.

## References:

1. The term Latin America came into common usage in the 19th century, distinguishing it from other parts of the Americas based on cultural heritage, since much of Central and South America was colonized by the Spanish and the Portuguese, both of them Romance nations with a strong connection in language and culture to ancient Rome.
2. A mixture of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and it also has some Arawak Indian and African influences. ([www.omniglot.com](http://www.omniglot.com))
3. Macmillan dictionary defines Patois as a type of spoken language used by people in a particular area, that is different from the main language in a country. Jamaican Patois exists mostly as a spoken language. Although standard British English is used for most writing in Jamaica, Jamaican Patois has been gaining ground as a literary language for almost a hundred years.
4. Creole dialects can be found in a variety of areas, most notably on the island of Haiti. While the Haitian form of Creole is French-based and generally recognized as the most prominent Creole languages, other types of Creole do exist.

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