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Indo-U.S. Relations: Historical Perspectives

Strategic Insights, Volume VIII, Issue 3 (August 2009)

by Dheeraj Kumar

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Introduction

The historical links between the United States and India can be traced to the year 1492, the year when Christopher Columbus discovered America in the course of his search for a new route to India. But formal and official relations began after India gained independence.

Prior to this, "American contacts with India had started before the American Revolution through soldiers and seamen who had lived both in the American colonies and in India."^[1] During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, several American ships visited Indian ports in connection with trade. In 1784, the *United States* of Philadelphia reached Pondicherry; in the following year, the *Hydra* and the *Grand Trunk* were sent to India. Legal authority to Indo-U.S. trade was given by Jay's Treaty of 1794 between England and America. Benjamin Joy of Boston was appointed the first American Consul at Calcutta in 1792. The American businessmen who came out to India, being interested only in their trade, could hardly present a true picture of India to America.

Later, both countries had mutual contacts through various agencies such as missionaries, tourists, intellectuals and Indian freedom fighters. In 1815, the American Mahratta Mission was established. Missionary activities gave first hand information about India to the Americans. Their main interest was to establish schools and distribute religious literature. They worked among the poor. They did a lot of humanitarian work during the famines of 1897 and 1899. On their return home, the missionaries condemned India for lack of education, poverty and superstition. "The number of missionaries in India rose from 139 in 1885 to 2478 in 1922."^[2]

In the mid-nineteenth century, some American writers started appreciating India's cultural heritage. To quote Stephen N. Hay: "The writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and of the Sanskritists Hopkins, Lanman and Whitney, helped instill in 19th century Americans a respect for India's cultural heritage."^[3] Gandhi and Nehru were deeply influenced by Emerson and Thoreau. "In 1883 the Brahmo Samaj leader P.C. Majumdar lectured in many American cities, and in 1893 both he and famous Swami Vivekanand earned the applause of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and were eagerly heard by many smaller groups interested in Indian religious thought."^[4] Vivekanand's opening words, "Sisters and Brothers of America," brought him loud applause. Harvard University offered him the chair of Oriental Philosophy, and the University of Columbia the chair of Sanskrit.

Of India's political leaders, Lala Lajpat Rai was the first to visit the United States. In 1905 he went there in order to tell the American people about the need for Indian Independence. *The United*

States of America: A Hindu's Impression book written by him was published in America in 1916. He was much influenced by American life and American democratic institutions. He felt that the Indian student could learn a lot from the United States: "American conditions of life, physical, social and political, are such as to afford him more practical lessons for their application to life in India."^[5]

Katherine Mayo, an American lady, visited India during 1925-26. She wrote the book *Mother India*. She highlighted the social evils and religious superstitions of India in her book. Rabindranath Tagore visited the United States in 1912-13, 1916-17, 1920-21 and in 1930. During his stay in the United States, he left everlasting images of Indian life, literature and culture in that country. Stephen N. Hay observes, "On his part, Tagore carried back with him to India many ideas and impressions from the United States, and consistently advocated closer relationships between the Eastern most and Western most branches of the Indo-European family."^[6] However, on the whole, the "role played by the U.S. in helping India's struggle for freedom is not generally known in this country. Yet it is true that since the early part of the 20th century, the Indian independence movement received the active moral and material support of the American people."^[7]

In 1906, some Indian political exiles landed in the United States. In 1913, a group of Indian patriots, in the leadership of Lala Hardayal, formed the Hindustan Ghadar Party at California to gain the United States' support. They started a weekly called *Ghadar*. As M.C. Chagla observed: "The people of the United States always sympathized with the aspirations of the Indian People for freedom. Indian political leaders always found a platform in this country to propagate their views."^[8] Several societies and organizations were set up in America by the Indians and Americans to further the Indian cause such as India Home Rule League of America, National Committee for India's Freedom, India League of America, Society for the Advancement of India, Friends of Freedom for India, etc.

Among the important figures of America who sympathized with the Indian cause were William Jennings Bryan, subsequently Secretary of State in President Wilson's Cabinet; Rev. John Haynes Holmes, American evangelist and friend of Mahatma Gandhi. Outstanding among India's friends in the U.S. House of Representatives was Henry H. Mason. Some other eminent Americans were Mr. Checker (founder president of the India League of America), Justice William O. Douglas, Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, Senator Mundt Philip Randolph, Albert Einstein, Congressman Celler of New York, Congressman James Fulton of Pennsylvania, Pearl Buck and her husband Richard Walsh, and others.

The best-known Indian after Lajpat Rai to promote the cause of Indian freedom was Taraknath Das. He was the second man to become a U.S. citizen (1914), the first being Akshay Kr. Majumdar.^[9] The United States was a sanctuary for Indian freedom fighters. These included scholars, journalists, scientists and thinkers. Important among them were Silendra Nath Ghosh, Dhangopal Mookerji, Syed Hussain, Haridas Majumdar, M.N. Roy, B.K. Sarkar, R.L. Bajpai, Judge Saund, Krishanlal Shridharani and others.

The war message of President Wilson delivered in the Congress was a source of great inspiration to the Indian freedom fighters. It reads: "America is prepared to fight for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its people; for the rights of nations great and small and for the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience; for the rights of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments; for the right and liberties of small nations; for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free."^[10] In spite of the contribution of the American people towards India's struggle for freedom, the attitude of the U.S. Government was discouraging. The U.S. Government did not want to displease the British Government.

But Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence and his unique method of fighting British rule through Satyagraha attracted attention of the American people. The American press also showed a sympathetic attitude towards India's freedom struggle. Among them were the *New York Times*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *One World*, *Christian Science Monitor*. During the Civil Disobedience movement, the *New York Times* reported the speech of Professor L.P. Rushbrook Williams: "An English audience was told today that anti-British and pro-Indian feeling was far more prevalent in the United States today than pro-British opinion in connection with the present upheaval in India."^[11] Louis Fischer, a prominent journalist, did great service to India by his journalistic writings. He carried the message of Gandhiji to Roosevelt.

The Second World War marks the beginning of Indo-U.S. official relations. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Americans realized the need for India's co-operation in the war effort. The strategic importance of India as a base of operations against Japan was one of the chief factors which forced the Roosevelt Administration to take interest in the Indian political problem. In the summer of 1941, the U.S. Government agreed with India and Britain for the exchange of diplomatic personnel. In October 1941, Thomas H. Wilson was appointed the first U.S. Commissioner in New Delhi. Sir Girja Shanker Bajpai was appointed India's Agent General in Washington. He was to act under the overall supervision of the British Embassy.

The United States thought that the political turmoil in India could endanger the American forces which were to be sent to India. In April 1942, the Government of the United States established the Office of War Information (OWI) in New Delhi. Henry, F. Grady came as the head of a technical mission to make a survey of India's industrial potentialities and to suggest improvements with a view to increasing production. In due course, the United States supplied huge quantities of American goods to India under the Lend-Lease program. India also supplied goods to America in pursuance of its reciprocal aid program. American technicians took part in constructing roads, airports, factories, etc. American troops were also stationed in India in substantial numbers.

President Roosevelt wanted some sort of a solution of the Indian problem but hesitated to involve himself directly in the efforts to evolve such a solution. "He sent a cable to Churchill on 10 March 1942, suggesting the formation of a Government in India representing the various religious, geographical, and occupational groups, as well as the British Provinces and native princes. He thought that such a Government could be treated as a "temporary Indian Dominion Government."^[12] Roosevelt also sent Colonel Louis Johnson to India as his personal representative with the rank of Ambassador in April 1942. During the stay of the Cripps Mission in India, Colonel Johnson held unofficial talks with many important Indian political leaders. It was believed in many quarters that Johnson held those discussions under express instructions from President Roosevelt. Johnson's participation in the Cripps negotiations impressed many nationalists in India because the United States was, for the first time, showing an active interest in the solution of the Indian problem.

Nehru wrote to Roosevelt: "Dear Mr. President, I am venturing to write to you as I know that you are deeply interested in the Indian situation today and its reactions on the war. The failure of the Cripps Mission to bring about a settlement between the British Government and the Indian People must have distressed you as it distressed us."^[13] Gandhiji wrote to him: "The Allied troops will remain in India during the war under treaty with Free India Government that may be formed by the people of India without any outside interference, direct or indirect. It is on behalf of this proposal that I write this to enlist your active sympathy."^[14] To this, President Roosevelt replied on August 1, 1942: "I am sure that you will agree that the United States has consistently striven for and supported policies of fair dealing, of fair play, and of all related principles looking towards the creation of harmonious relations between nations... I shall hope that our common interest in democracy and righteousness will enable your countrymen and mine to make common cause against a common enemy."^[15]

The Cripps Mission failed to produce the desired result. President Roosevelt was disappointed at the failure of the Mission. In his letter to the British Prime Minister dated April 11, 1942, he conveyed his feelings. Though the Cripps Mission failed to achieve any result, it heralded the beginning of Indo-American political relations. India became free from British rule on August 15, 1947. A new era began with the message that President Henry S. Truman Sent to Lord Mountbatten, Governor General of India, extending his good wishes on the occasion. The message said: "I earnestly hope that our friendship will in future, as in the past, continue to be expressed in close and fruitful cooperation in international undertakings and in cordiality in our relations one with the other."^[16] Prime Minister Nehru in an address to an American audience remarked: "May I also say that all of us in India know very well, although it might not be so known in public, what great interest President Roosevelt had in our country's freedom and how he exercised his great influence to that end."^[17]

India and the United States, being separated from each other by thousands of miles, had few opportunities in the past to come close to each other. The British Government also did not want the two countries to establish direct contact, for it feared that India might get inspiration from the United States for intensifying its political struggle. Richard L. Strout, staff correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor*, observed: "Until the sudden emergence of the U.S. as a leader of democracies and the unexpected assumption of a world role, few Americans knew very much or cared about India. Now India suddenly has sailed into their ken. Similarly, far off India, with teeming millions, is discovering the United States."^[18]

The two countries, though quite different from each other in their geographical setting, race, culture and habits, cherish common ideals. They have both lived under subjection to a common power for a long time. Both have fought vigorously for their independence, though with different methods. While the American people have on their freedom through violence and bloodshed, India has preferred the path of non-violence. Soon after independence, India tried to develop very friendly relations with the United States. The Indian leaders acknowledged with gratitude the positive role played by the American President. The democratic ideals of America also greatly fascinated the Indian leaders, specially Nehru, and they tried to develop intimate relations with the United States. However, after the second world war, the U.S. policy of containment of Communism and India's policy of non-alignment did not match together and became their major source of difference. The refusal of India to join the military alliances sponsored by the United States and different stands taken by it on various international issues like recognition of the Communist regime of China, the Korean Crisis, the American-Vietnam war, and the Afghan Crisis, were quite annoying to the American leaders. On the other hand the American support to Pakistan on the Kashmir issue in Security Council and grant of military aid to Pakistan with a view to meet the Communist threats, support to Portugal on Goa Crisis and Support to Pakistan on Bangladesh issue were quite irritating to the Indian leaders.

Before the accession of the Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian Union, Pakistan invaded and captured large part of it. Nehru brought the matter to the notice of the Security Council at the UN, on January 1, 1948. At the United Nations, Britain and the United States managed to convert Pakistan's aggression on India into an Indo-Pakistani question. The United States maintained a cryptic silence about India's complaint. Instead of declaring Pakistan as the aggressor, the American delegate laid emphasis on the need to settle the issue by means of a plebiscite in Kashmir. The role of the United States in the Security Council all through the discussion of the Kashmir question was that of supporting the case of Pakistan and was naturally not appreciated in India.^[19] The United States, through direct negotiations (1953-56) was taking a very keen interest in the affairs of Kashmir. It realized the strategic importance of Pakistan to its plans for establishing military bases all around the Communist world. It was interested in solving the Kashmir question because this was the best way to oblige Pakistan.^[20]

Nehru and Prime Minister Mohammad Ali of Pakistan met in Karachi in July 1953 and later in New Delhi in August 1953 to solve the Kashmir problem. In the mean time, the U.S. proposal for

military aid to Pakistan came up and queered the pitch. Grant of U.S. military aid to Pakistan at a time when India and Pakistan were carrying on direct negotiations made it clear that the United States was not interested in finding a solution for the Kashmir question.^[21] The proposal for arbitration and a plebiscite by the United States was opposed by India. For such a proposal, a resolution was introduced on June 22, 1962 in the Security Council which was not passed and adopted due to the veto used by the Soviet Union.

The U.S. press vehemently criticized India. It held India responsible for the stalemate over Kashmir. *The New York Tribune* issued an editorial entitled "India Hides behind Russia's Veto." On the matter of Goa Crisis, and its accession to India, the United States supported Portugal since it is the member of NATO. A resolution was moved in the Security Council against India but could not be passed due to the veto used by Soviet Union in favor of India.

In the wake of the Chinese invasion of its northern territories in October 1962, India asked the UK and the United States for military assistance. To quote Bhagat Vats: "When the Chinese attacked India in October 1962, America and Britain give nominal aid but with the sinister condition that India should settle the Kashmir question with Pakistan. They talked less of China but more of Kashmir."^[22] Here the United States helped India in accordance with her policy of containment of Communist China.

During the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, Pakistan was flooded with American Arms. This led eventually a large-scale war between the two countries. The U.S.-made weapons, including Patton tanks and Sabre Jets, were freely used by Pakistan. Pakistan thought to get the help of the SEATO and CENTO in its design against India. Though Pakistan was the aggressor in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, the U.S. Government never seriously condemned it. On the other hand, it equated India and Pakistan while deploring the misuse of the arms it had supplied.

In the War of 1971 between India and Pakistan which resulted in the birth of Bangladesh, once again the United States adopted a partisan stand, and supported Pakistan. First of all, the United States sought to protect the interests of Pakistan by trying to secure a cease-fire through the Security Council. But after this move was stalled on account of use of a veto by Soviet Union, the United States moved her Seventh Fleet towards the Bay of Bengal on the premise of evacuating U.S. citizens from East Pakistan. The dispatch of the nuclear powered aircraft carrier Enterprise for the evacuation of American citizens was clearly a move for the military blackmail of India. The U.S. move was stopped by the counter-threat given by the Soviet Union on the side of India. Thereafter, the relations between the two countries continued to operate at a very low key. On 18 May 1974, India tested its first nuclear device at Pokhran. This alarmed the United States. India now stood in the line of those five powerful nuclear countries.

In 1975, Indo-U.S. relations suffered a setback following the decision by the U.S. Government to lift the ten-year old embargo against sale of lethal arms to South Asia. This provoked a strong reaction from India and it cancelled the scheduled visit of its External Affairs Minister to the United States. The criticism of the declaration of emergency in India in June 1975 by the United States was also disliked by India. But relations between the two countries showed an improvement after the formation of Janta Government in India in 1977 and the assumption of power by Jimmy Carter in the United States. In 1978, Carter paid a visit to India which was followed by return visit by the Indian Prime Minister, Morarji Desai. But before much progress could be made, Mrs. Gandhi staged a come-back to power in India. The Congress Government refused to rally on the side of the United States in its anti Soviet crusade over Afghanistan and advocated the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan at the appropriate time. The election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States, and his tough stand towards Soviet Union, also hampered closer relations with India, which had shown leanings towards the Soviet Union.

Because of their divergence of security and strategic interests, both India and the United States have manifested serious differences on several international issues. The Communist Revolution

of 1949 in China was seen as a threat to the U.S. policy of containing Communism. India promptly recognized the new Communist regime of China on December 30, 1949. India always supported the move to admit Communist China as a member of the United Nations. This difference over China embittered the Indo-U.S. Relations. Although the United States could not maintain its distance from China after 1971. Diego Garcia has been another irritant between the two countries. It is an island in the Indian Ocean, about one thousand miles from the Indian coast. The United States has established a naval base there. India felt that the base in the Indian Ocean might turn the ocean into a cockpit of super power rivalry.^[23] Though a strong advocate of nuclear disarmament, India refused to sign the NPT (1968) on the ground that it is highly unequal and discriminatory. The United States did not look kindly to India's first nuclear test in 1974. Later on, she stopped supplying enriched Uranium for the Tarapore Plant, as provided under the bilateral agreement of 1963.

However, the above mentioned differences should not lead to the impression that Indo-U.S. relations have been one of unrelieved tension; at times, it has been punctuated by brief intervals of warmth and friendly gestures well. To illustrate, both India and the United States were on the same side on the Suez Canal issue in 1956, Again in 1959, when President Eisenhower visited India, he was given a tumultuous welcome and the President on his part observed: "The strength of India is our interest." Similarly, in October 1962, when China invaded India, America along with Britain came to support India and thereby saved her from a military disaster.

Indo-U.S. relations became very cordial during the Kennedy period. His successor, President Johnson also kept the cordiality intact by establishing the Tarapur Atomic Plant and by supplying a large quantity of food grains to enable India to fight over the acute shortage caused by the severe drought in 1966-67. Again in 1973, as a friendly gesture, the United States wrote off the largest amount of foreign debt ever cancelled in history by liquidating two-thirds of its accumulated rupee holdings (\$2 billion) in India acquired in return for wheat shipments under PL-480. It was a case of rare magnanimity on the part of Washington. Again, in 1978, President Carter paid a goodwill visit to India to register and restore American sympathy and amity for India. Its economic aid, suspended since the Bangladesh crisis, was resumed and the U.S. government agreed to supply the fuel for the Tarapur Plant. Clearly, Carter was predisposed to look to India as the leader of South Asia, but unfortunately these brief intervals of warmth were soon followed by bouts of bitterness and disillusionment for one reason or another.

However, since the early eighties, India has been pursuing a well-planned policy of improving and strengthening relations with the United States. The visit of Indira Gandhi to America in 1982 worked as "operation defrost" between the two countries. The improved process continued after Rajiv Gandhi took over in 1985. His visit to America in June 1985 was a smash hit. The Memorandum of Understanding regarding technology transfer was a definite landmark. The dramatic improvement in the superpower relationship since 1986 removed the Cold War constraints on the upgrading of Indo-U.S. relations. This process acquired a new momentum after the end of the Cold War in 1989.^[24]

Several major changes took place in the world in the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century. The Soviet Union disintegrated. The Cold War came to its end. The world became unipolar. The United States became a supreme power and the leader of this unipolar world. The Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations were concluded and the WTO came into effect since January 1, 1995. This marked a beginning of liberalization and globalization in the world. Narsimha Rao became the Prime Minister of India in 1991, and in 1992 Bill Clinton was elected as the President of the United States. All these changes, having a global character, affected one-another and marked a new beginning in the Indo-U.S. relations.

The Finance Minister of India, Manmohan Singh initiated the liberalization of Indian economy in 1991, which attracted towards India the major world economic powers including the United States. For the economic necessities and strategic importance of India in South Asia after the

Cold War, the United States looked towards India with a new approach. In 1994 Narsimha Rao visited the United States. In March 2000, Bill Clinton came to India and in September 2000, Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited the United States. In January 2001, George W. Bush succeeded Clinton as the next President of the United States, who looked for a good relationship with India. From July 1998 to September 2000, ten rounds of talks were concluded between Jaswant and Talbott, top foreign policy leaders in both countries, to lay the new and intensified grounds of Indo-U.S. relations.

The nuclear tests conducted in May 1998 drew a sharp reaction from the United States, leading to a temporary disruption in the thawing Indo-U.S. relations, and the imposition of a broad range of U.S. restrictions on India. However, the generous offer of help from India to the United States following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, as appreciated by Christina B. Rocca, U.S. Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs, was a splendid act of solidarity with the American people at a time of urgent need.

President Clinton visited India on March 21-25, 2000, the first U.S. Presidential visit to India after a gap of 22 years. The five-day tour covering five cities was one of the most extensive visits undertaken by him to any country. The two sides agreed to cast aside the doubts of the past and to chart a new purposeful direction in bilateral relations in order to build a closer and qualitatively new relationship between the two largest democracies in the world, on the basis of equality and mutual respect. President Clinton described the objective of his visit as "strengthening a friendship that indeed is critical to the future of the entire planet." Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Clinton issued a Joint Statement outlining their vision of the new relationship. The Vision Statement outlines the contours and defines the agenda of the partnership between India and the United States in the 21st century. It expresses the shared belief that the relationship between the two countries could be a vital factor in shaping international peace, prosperity and democratic freedom and for ensuring strategic stability in Asia and the world in the era of globalization.

On March 2, 2006 in New Delhi, George W. Bush and Manmohan Singh signed a Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, following an initiation during the July 2005 summit in Washington between the two leaders over civilian nuclear cooperation. The successful passage through the United States Congress of the Henry J. Hyde United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act of 2006 was a landmark event in bilateral relations to enable the United States to extend full civil nuclear cooperation to India.

The 2.5 million strong Indian-American community in the United States has been growing in affluence and political strength and has developed into a force for closer and stronger ties between their adopted country and their nation of origin. Their active cooperation and interaction at different levels with the Government of India as well as with the U.S. Administration provides a bridge between the two countries. The passage of the Henry J. Hyde Act by the U.S. Congress saw the Indian-American community coming of age in the United States. Their efforts in support of this Act were magnificent. Students from India continue to flock to the United States, especially for university level education. India is now the number-one country sending students to the United States, with approximately 80,000 students each year, far surpassing China. U.S. Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes visited India in April 2007 with a delegation of five U.S. university presidents and pledged that Indian students would find it easier to obtain visas to study in the United States.

Two Indian Americans—Har Gobind Khorana of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the late Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar of the University of Chicago—have been awarded the Nobel Prize, in medicine and physics respectively. Indeed, NASA's premier X-ray observatory was named the Chandra X-ray Observatory in honor of the late Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar. Known to the world as Chandra, he was widely regarded as one of the foremost astrophysicists of the twentieth century. The observatory was launched into space in July 1999. Dr. Kalpana

Chawla added a new chapter to the history of the Indian American community. In 1997, she became the first Indian or Indian American to fly in the U.S. space shuttle. She was part of the Space Shuttle Columbia Flight STS-87. And more recently is added one more Indian American astronaut, Sunita Williams, who served on STS-116 and 117, and on International Space Station (ISS) Expedition 14 and 15, achieving the world record for the longest space flight by a female astronaut, 195 days.

Cultural ties between the two countries are largely driven by the private sector. Indian music, dance, art, and literature are widely appreciated in the United States. Indian cuisine is a favorite with many Americans, and Indian films are reaching out to wider audiences here. Efforts are currently underway to spread Indian culture to a more popular level as well as ensuring that Indian artists are able to perform at mainstream theatres and halls.

Increasing economic and trade relations are the real reflection of the bond between the two countries. India-U.S. bilateral trade grew from USD\$13.49 billion in 2001 to USD\$31.917 billion in 2006. India's major export products include gems and jewelry, textiles, organic chemicals and engineering goods. Our main imports from the United States are machinery, precious stones and metals, organic chemicals, optical and medical instruments, aircraft and aviation machinery. U.S. exports to India grew by 26.31 percent in 2006 to reach USD\$10.091 billion, while Indian exports to the United States increased by 16.07 percent to hit USD\$21.826 billion.^[25] The United States is one of the largest foreign direct investors in India. The stock of actual FDI increased from USD\$11.3 million in 1991 to USD\$5.71 billion as of January 2007. FDI inflows from the United States constitute about 11 percent of total actual FDI inflows into India. The United States is the leading portfolio investor in India. As of December 2006, U.S.-based Foreign Institutional Investors have made a net investment of USD\$17.8 billion of a total of USD\$51.02 billion in Indian capital markets accounting for 33 percent of the total. The United States is also the most important destination of Indian investment abroad: Between 1996 and July 2006, Indian companies invested USD\$2.62 billion in the United States, largely in manufacturing and non-financial services.

About the Author

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