First, let’s fix the education problems. Then let’s recognise the missing link in Australia–India relations, writes Robin Jeffrey

Right:

Above: Indian students protesting against violence outside Melbourne’s Flinders Street station in May last year. Photo: Will Ockenden/ Flickr

The arrival of 100,000 Indian students in the past five years is the biggest thing to happen to relations between the Australian land mass and the Indian subcontinent since the 1790s. That’s when the Campbell family started trading between Kolkata (Calcutta) and Sydney. Scottish-born Robert Campbell later migrated from India to Australia, where he built the first “bungalow,” became “a leading public figure” and earned a long entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Similar happy outcomes, I hope, lie in the future for many of the students from India who are putting substance into the puzzling 220-year relationship between their country and Australia. You have to look forward to good things, because some very bad things have happened in the past couple of years. When people are murdered, attacked and abused, and when individuals are picked on because they are obvious and alone, a nasty side of Australian society is revealing itself.

As a result, we are at a crucial turning point in the story of Australia and its ties with India. The harrowing tale of the past year can foreshadow the broader, deeper relationship whose absence has puzzled analysts for years. But thought, effort and imagination will be needed to bring a positive ending to an anguished chapter.

There’s been much agonising over what has caused “the outbreak of attacks on Indian students” and over whether these assaults are “racist.” The Indian media have been keen to get Australian officials to use the R word. Australians twisted like circus contortionists to avoid doing so until Simon Overland, chief commissioner of the Victorian police, said the sensible thing late last month: “I have
said from day one undoubtedly some of these attacks have a racist motive or there [are] racist elements to these attacks.”

The fascination with the word “racism” is understandable, and the fact that Australians have struggled so hard to avoid using it is a sign of better, not worse, times. From the Indian side, it was reasonable, once a number of assaults on Indian students were reported, to say: “Just as our grandparents told us: it is White Australia after all.” When I first lived in India in the late 1960s, there weren’t a lot of Australians – I worked with other Canadians, British and Americans – but if you mentioned Australia to Indian friends, their response was usually, “Oh yes, White Australia,” as if White Australia were the name of a country like North Korea or Papua New Guinea.

That’s not surprising, since Australians in the twentieth century had gloried in the fact that Australia was a White Man’s Country, and “White Australia” was a proud policy of Australian governments. As Gwenda Tavan writes, it was only in 1945 – Australians by that time having fought next to Indian soldiers in two world wars – that “government ministers adopted... the recommendation of External Affairs advisers that the White Australia slogan be dropped from public discourse.” It hung around, however, till well into the 1960s.

Australian immigration policy after 1945 searched initially for fair-skinned Europeans. Though colour and race declined in importance in the 1960s, I know people whose relatives crawled around Colombo cemeteries to find tombstones with dates that would help to establish “European ancestry” for Australian immigration purposes. It’s not surprising therefore that the people who run Mail Today, the cheekiest of India’s English dailies, should go straight for the “Australian racist” tag for the Indian-student story. They and I grew up on “White Australia.” It’s also worth pointing out that Mail Today is a clone of, and partly owned by, Britain’s Daily Mail. Its brief is to look like the Daily Mail and bring British tabloid journalism to India. Lucky India.

The other aspect to the “racism” squabble is positive. Today, “racism” in Australia is a dirty word that people don’t want hurled at them. That’s why everyone from the prime minister to cops on the beat and callers to talkback radio want to deny that Australians are racist. That’s a big change in two generations.

No one seems to have had time to define what “racism” or “being racist” entails. It seems to me, like any “ism,” “racism” needs a body of ideas behind it and groups that promote such ideas. There are mercifully few signs of either in Australia at the moment. The avowed racists who slithered out during the Hanson days of the mid 1990s have not made a noticeable comeback. Australia does not have a significant body of people promoting an “ism” about racial superiority.

But if racism means a kind of colour coding where brown people are known to be more vulnerable than white ones, you bet your boots that the louts of Melbourne and elsewhere are on the lookout for brown guys. The word has got around that brown guys – and that means mostly Indian students – are new to the place, on their own and unsure about how the system works. They have phones, computers and, often, ready money from having been paid in cash for long-hour jobs. They are less likely to go to the police because in India, police means hassles. They may also fear that they may be in breach of their visa conditions. No wonder Australia’s petty crims prefer coffee to vanilla when they colour-
code people to pick on. And now there is drunken, copycat brutality, the result of the publicity of the past year.

But we lack research. While we know that assaults in Australia have increased by about 5 per cent a year since 1995 (four times faster than the rate of population growth), we don’t have analysis of the social characteristics of the victims. And we are just beginning to discover that perpetrators of the recent violence are very often juveniles under the age of 18.

But is the change in Australia–India connections really so dramatic and vast? Census and other data show how the Indian presence in Australia has changed in the past six or seven years. In the 2006 Australian census, Indian-born people numbered 147,000 – 3.3 per cent of all overseas-born people. No more than 25,000 of those Indian-born people were students; but in the next three years another 70,000 students arrived. In short, the Indian-born population appears to have increased by something like 50 per cent in three or four years. That’s big.

This unprecedented increase in India’s presence in Australia suggests an answer to the question Meg Gurry posed years ago: “does Australia neglect India?” She highlighted the host of reports and statements over fifty years in which Australians rhapsodised about obvious links between the two countries – and yet, Gurry noted, nothing much seemed to come of it all. Why? Robert Campbell, remember, made a fortune from the India–Australia trade in the nineteenth century, and Alfred Deakin in the 1900s believed that “Australian developments would be directly influenced by... India.” What was missing in the twentieth century?

The answer – or a big part of it – is people. The relationship has up till now lacked the flesh-and-blood connections that made interaction broad-based and enduring. The Australian census in 2006 asked people how many generations their families had been in Australia. Of the 235,000 people who claimed Indian extraction, nearly 80 per cent were first-generation in Australia, and only 2 per cent traced their families back to three generations in Australia. The contrast with Chinese was striking. Six times as many people of Chinese extraction traced their origins in Australia back three generations or more (32,000 versus fewer than 5000 Indians, or more than double proportionally). The 1954 census had counted only 2600 Indians in the whole of Australia.

In spite of the fact that the British Empire and the English language brought India and Australia together, Australia’s deeper connections since the mid nineteenth century have been with China. Chinese Australians founded the real estate chain of L. J. Hooker, made up 40,000 men on the goldfields of the 1850s, owned a couple of Shanghai’s swankiest department stores and played a significant part in Chinese nationalist politics in the first half of the twentieth century. India had no comparable connections. Another indicator of the greater depth of the Chinese presence in Australia is that there is no book about Indians that comes close to the richness and wealth of stories that John Fitzgerald records so well in Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia.

As it has grown in Australia from the 1960s the Indian community has been heavily professional and remarkably small. Indians visiting family and friends in Australia reached 5000 a year only in 1995. By 2008, such visitors exceeded 25,000. Business visitors from India have similarly grown – from 5000 in 1996 to nearly 30,000 in 2008. That’s why the student story is such a major landmark: numbers quintupled between 2004 and 2009 – from about 20,000 to 100,000.
Regarding that story, we don’t know enough about the circumstances in which Australia’s permanent residency rules were changed and the way in which dubious “training colleges” grew up to exploit the opportunity. Did reputable training institutes expand too rapidly to try to cash in on the fee-payers, for example? And we don’t know much about how the recruiters have operated in India and how they have linked up with “providers” in Australia.

It appears that many Indian students have come on their own, financed by loans and by families keen to send their young people out to seek their fortunes. Permanent residency in Australia adds a useful card to the hand life has dealt you. The worst of the training institutes had no way to support these new students – and probably no interest in doing so. There are plenty of stories of students being left to find their own accommodation, even from the moment of arrival.

This lonely exposure contrasts with the experience of students from China who have been coming to Australia in larger numbers for more than twenty years. Chinese student numbers have built up over time; those who come are monitored more closely by their authoritarian government; and their longer experience and their government’s control mean that they often live in larger groups in established accommodation and are less exposed to the nasty side of Australian cities.

There’s been a tendency to deplore the fact that a large section of Indian students chose Australia not because of its outstanding education but because it was offering easy possibilities for permanent residence. Is that a bad thing? Young people who are prepared to take out loans to travel thousands of miles from home may be called a number of things; but you can’t say they lack initiative. That’s a quality that generations of Australian migrants, now well settled, have often had.

Talk to a young Indian (or Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepali or Sri Lankan – fewer in numbers but not to be forgotten in these discussions) driving a taxi in Melbourne and you will have an interesting conversation. My driver from the airport in September had finished a finance degree at Deakin University. Though he was from Haryana near Delhi, he had done his first Indian degree at Andhra University in south India. How had that happened? “Boxing scholarship,” he replied, and I noted the Kapil Dev-like build. He reported no trouble with his passengers. More important, he had met a fellow Indian student at Deakin, and they were going to marry. They planned to live in Australia but come and go frequently to India. That’s the kind of bone-and-sinew connection that the India–Australia relationship has so long lacked.

The cabbie back to the airport the next day was from Kollam (Quilon) in Kerala in the deep south. He had an engineering degree and a wife and baby back home. His aim was to find work in the Northern Territory and bring his family as soon as he could.

As well as initiative, the other quality Indian students bring is a readiness to take on authority. Melbournians will recall the cab drivers’ strike of May 2008 after attacks on drivers. Indian drivers led satyagraha – civil disobedience – at Flinders Street Station and made the front page of the Age.

Students from elsewhere in Asia come from cultures and political systems where you don’t mess with the government. In India, you have been told since primary school that Mahatma Gandhi was a great man, the father of the nation, and that he opposed the British government most of his adult life. It is a rare day in India when a demonstration or a protest does not happen somewhere.
Does Australia need more stirrers? The answer has to be yes if we mean people who take an intelligent part in public life. In Canada, where the Indian community is larger, more diverse and of longer standing, people of Indian extraction have been members of parliament, provincial premiers and members of federal cabinet for years.

THE RAPID GROWTH of an Indian student presence in Australia has been messy and tragic. But it heralds an important new chapter in Australia’s place in its region. A number of things now need to happen to turn the current distress into the substantial long-term relationship that benefits Australia, India and the people who live, work and trade in both places.

Changes to the permanent residency rules are probably less necessary than tighter regulation of non-government training institutions that offer courses with the potential to qualify a student for residency. Around 70 per cent of the almost 100,000 Indian students have been enrolled in such institutions. The Council of Australian Governments made a start with the decision in December 2009 to create a national regulating body for the “VET sector” (vocational education and training). What is crucial is that no student who came to Australia with a reasonable expectation of qualifying for permanent residency should be denied the chance to qualify under the new rules. Australia suffered no ill-effects from granting permanent residency to 30,000 Chinese students and their families at the time of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989.

We need substantial research on the new Indian presence in Australia – who the students are, how they finance themselves, what their aspirations are, how they relate to Australians and particularly to Indian-extracted Australians. We need, too, to teach and research more about India in our universities. The barrenness of Australian knowledge of Indian history and custom has been glaring in the media and official circles ever since the “Indian student question” hit the headlines. It’s not surprising: you’d be hard-pressed to find a course on India in the humanities or social sciences departments of an Australian university. No wonder public figures and officials often look so awkward discussing India or interacting with Indian students.

At a practical level, a little humility might be good. Why not ask the government of India for half a dozen “liaison advisers” – they could be police, administrators from India’s good colleges or education officials – to be seconded to Australia to work with our police and education authorities and with students. Let’s also host delegations of Indian educators – the people who run its best undergraduate colleges – to familiarise themselves with our system and to improve Australian understanding of what makes Indian education and students tick. Australia needs such knowledge, and the connections will have lasting benefits.

And symbolically, let’s be imaginative. Let’s create the “2009 Foundation” or the “Mahatma Gandhi Fund” – the name is not especially important – to commemorate a new chapter in Australia–India relations of which the events of 2009 made us all aware. The fund – say, A$10 million – would provide for the welfare of Indian students, reward outstanding achievements and encourage a flow of young Indians and Australians between each other’s countries. Let’s do something symbolic too. Make a garden, paint the Harbour Bridge in Indian national colours, establish an annual lecture, exchange the Taj Mahal in Agra for the Big Banana in Coffs Harbour, create an Outback-and-Bollywood film
festival, put up a statue of the Mahatma, start a substantial program of youth exchange... Ponder the possibilities. Better ideas welcome.

But let’s not allow this moment to pass unmarked. First, let’s fix the education problems. Then let’s recognise that the missing link in Australia–India relations is now present as it has never been before: people. People in substantial numbers. Coming and going. Marrying, trading, studying, building. These links, though recently made, will not be easily broken; the task is to ensure that the birth pangs of recent years lead to a fruitful future. •

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