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The many meanings of being Indian

6 authors grapple with a changing subcontinent

April 21, 2002 | By Vanessa Gezari. Vanessa Gezari is a journalist based in New Delhi.

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In David Davidar's family saga, "The House of Blue Mangoes," an English pastor agonizes over the task of preaching Christianity to his rural south Indian congregation. "Will I ever come to terms with this country that is now my home?" the priest wonders as he paces the seashore one evening in 1899. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

The pastor's question, lifted from the Psalms, is also the colonist's, and it perfectly fits the period in which Davidar's expansive novel is set, the last 50 years of British rule in India. Yet even as Davidar reminisces about the final days of the Raj, a handful of young writers of Indian descent is turning the colonist's question upside down. Instead of singing a Western song in a strange land, they are trying to sing the songs of their strange land--India--in the West.

In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, an idea of India found its way to Britain and beyond. The mysteries of the subcontinent were reduced to a string of images: India was steamy and malarial, rich in spices, peopled with savages and conjurers. Indians themselves rarely made the journey.

But that has changed. In the last 50 years, Indian emigration has created an expatriate class so vast that its members are known in India simply as NRIs: non-resident Indians. They left the subcontinent for the Middle East, Africa, Europe and the U.S., which is now home to 2 million people of Indian descent, and they took their culture with them.

Their children and their children's children share experiences with first-time novelists Sameer Parekh and Imraan Coovadia. Born in immigrant homes far from India, these writers are free from the imperial shadow, but they are not free from the demands of India. What, they ask, does it mean to be Indian outside India? Is it possible?

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For many contemporary Indian writers and writers with Indian roots, the question of what it means to be Indian is complicated by the speed with which India is changing. While old ideas about India are still alluring--as books like "The House of Blue Mangoes" and Indu Sundaresan's "The Twentieth Wife" make clear--sepia-toned snapshots and crumbling ruins are becoming less and less apt to describe this teeming nation of more than 1 billion.

Sundaresan's novel is good-old-fashioned historical fiction. Set in the Mongol era, it tells the story of the bright, beautiful and canny Mehrunnisa, who falls in love with an emperor and wins a powerful position in the imperial harem. Full of jeweled beauties and court intrigues, it satisfies every craving for the pomp and mystery of India's past.

But India today is neither so satisfying nor so simple. It is a contradictory place, where businessmen with cell phones glued to their ears share the sidewalk with cows and goats.

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Indian writers Meera Nair and Amit Chaudhuri revel in these contradictions, in the stunning collisions between ancient ritual and contemporary reality that are everyday occurrences in India. In their short stories, the West seeps into India and India into the West, and the old colors the new. An Indian man watches a Western porn movie, and his obsession with what he sees almost leads to the ruin of his marriage. A woman from a good family leaves her husband and leaps to her death from a third-floor balcony. On the way to her funeral, one of the guests finds himself wondering whether the manner of her death will affect the traditional rituals--whether the family will still feed a crow that represents the dead woman's returning soul.

Parekh's absorbing first novel, "Stealing the Ambassador," is a study of the anxieties, and impossibilities, of being Indian outside India. It tells the story of Vasant, who leaves India to study electrical engineering in New Jersey, and his son Rajiv, an American-born medical student who returns to India in search of his family's roots.

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