THE INDIAN DIASPORA: IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

Ayesha Afsana
ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology, Assam University, Silchar – 788011
Revised and Accepted: 14 Feb 2020

ABSTRACT

Diaspora includes the ethnic population who are induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands, being dispersed throughout different parts of the world and ensuing developments in dispersal and culture. The origin of the Indian diaspora was due to the subjugation of the country by the British and its annexation into the British Empire. Significantly, the migration of people from India started during the nineteenth century as a result of the economic compulsions generated by colonialism due to the potential demand for cheap labour. The number of the Indian diaspora stands over twenty five million reflecting the full multiplicity and variety of rich social, ethnic, religious and cultural tapestry of their motherland. Studies on diaspora started in the late twentieth century in academics. On the basis of secondary data, the paper focuses on the social realities of the Indian diaspora. The paper draws on empirical studies which point out the major issues concerning the Indian diaspora which include their cultural identity, education, economic development, healthcare services, ill-treatment, harassment and dual citizenship.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Indian diaspora, migration, colonialism, cheap labour

INTRODUCTION

The existing social realities of India depict its image as a country stricken with poverty, unemployment and diversity of caste, class, ethnicity and language. There exists an inherent exilic state among both voluntary and involuntary migrants commencing from the old Indian diaspora of indentured labourers to the modern Indian diaspora of IT technocrats. However, the ‘Indianness’ of Indians acquires a particular poignancy overseas because Indians living abroad are presumed to shed their regional, linguistic and ethnic identities in deference to the general identity of being the Indian. There is also much diversity among the heterogeneous Indian diaspora in numbers, economic levels, relations with other coexisting ethnic and social groups, cosmopolitaness, religious perceptions and political participation. However, uniformities are found among the Indian diaspora in contexts of the Indian majority as the largest group, dominant Indian presence, countries with recognisable Indian population and countries like Middle-East with small Indian population. The Indian diaspora is a unique force in the world economy. Literally, the term ‘diaspora’ denotes dispersion. It is derived from the Greek composite verb ‘dia-’ and ‘sparein’ which etymologically means to scatter. Originally, it referred to the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C. as well as the aggregate of Jews or Jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine. But the term ‘diaspora’ refers to any ethnic population who resides in countries except their historical homelands since the late twentieth century. Broadly, it describes displaced people who maintain or revive the connection with their country of origin and includes different groups; namely, political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities, and overseas communications (Shuval 2000: 41). The term ‘diaspora’ indicate three meanings. These meanings include social form, type of consciousness and mode of cultural production (Vertovec 1997: 228). In the Indian context, the Indian
Government established a High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora in 2000 to analyse the status of the Indian diaspora in the world and their potential for the development of India. The report of the Committee was released in 2001 with recommendations for new policy to create conducive environment for the Indian diaspora in India. Under the Chairmanship of L. M. Singhvi, the Committee defines diaspora as “communities of migrants living or settled permanently in other countries, aware of its origins and identity and maintaining varying degrees of linkages with mother country”. Further, the Indian diaspora is defined to refer to “the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India. It also refers to their descendants”. There are five types of diaspora in its typology; namely, victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas. Victim diaspora includes Jewish, Africans and Armenians; the Indians are included in labour diaspora; Chinese and Lebanese come under trading diaspora; imperial diaspora includes the British and cultural diaspora includes Caribbean abroad (Cohen 1997). According to the report of the Committee, there were 20 million Indian diaspora consisting of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) scattered in over 110 countries all over the world (Singhvi et al. 2001). India has the second largest population of the diaspora in the world. There are more than 25 million Indian diaspora scattered across the major regions of the world, constituting a diverse, heterogeneous and eclectic global community, and representing different regions, languages, cultures and faiths. The common thread that binds them together is the idea of India and its intrinsic values. According to the estimate of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, the people of Indian origin include 1,00,37,761 NRIs, 1,18,72,114 PIOs and 2,19,09,875 Overseas Indians as on May 2012. They are settled in 205 countries across the globe; namely, Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa, Australia, Sri Lanka, Uganda, the United Kingdom (U.K.), the United States of America (U.S.A.), Canada, etc. Thus, the paper attempts to analyse social realities and concerns of the Indian diaspora, using basically the secondary data and the findings of researches conducted in India and abroad.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the analysis is to find out the persisting social realities and concerns of the Indian diaspora dispersed across the world.

METHODOLOGY

The secondary sources covering different aspects of the Indian diaspora such as historical and sociological were used to locate their concerns.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA

The root of the Indian diaspora goes back to the annexation of India by the British Empire in the nineteenth century. Indians were taken away as indentured labour to the British colonies of British Guiana, Fiji, Trinidad and Jamaica; the French colonies of Guadeloupe and Martinique and the Dutch colony of Surinam (Tinker 1993). The first wave of Indian emigration was labour flow from rural areas in India to developed countries of Europe. Indian emigrants started living in the U.K., U.S.A., Australia and Canada during the middle of the twentieth century where well educated and professionally trained Indians from urban middle class families approached. These exemplify early ‘migration of talent’ or ‘brain drain’. Recently, a new wave of Indian emigration has started which includes the migration of software engineers to western countries like the
U.S.A. This group of Indians is called the ‘cream of India’, people who trained in her premiere educational institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and Universities, and are highly mobile and maintain close contact with India in terms of socio-economic interests (Bhat, Narayan & Sahoo 2007). Thus, the emigration of Indians as labourers, traders and professionals to different parts of the world is a continuing saga of Indian emigration which has a longer history. The overseas emigration of Indians is examined in terms of following three phases:

1. **Pre-colonial Phase** – Trade and religious contacts with the Greek and the Mesopotamian civilisations led to the earliest emigration of Indians. The Buddhist monks spread Buddhism and religious gospels across the South and South-East Asia. There were instances of spreading of Indians and Indian Kingdoms across the seas. For instance, the Palas of Bengal had contact with the Sailendra kings of Indonesia. The expeditions of the Cholas, Tamil Princes, vanquished the great Indonesian Empire of Sri Vijaya in the eleventh century. The migration of people did not lead to the formation of permanent Indian settlements abroad during the pre-colonial phase. Besides, there were trade links between Indians and the Ismailis, the Hhoras, the Ranyas and the Chettiyars of the East Africa under the banner of Nattukottai Chettiyar Association (Tinker 1977).

2. **Colonial Phase** – Most of the studies on the Indian diaspora are concerned with the Indians emigrated during the colonial phase from 1830s to 1930s. There were mass unemployment due to the impact of the British rule on the Indian peasantry, famines and the consequent economic backwardness. The institution of slavery was banned by the British in 1830s leading to the acute labour shortage in sugar plantations of the British and the European colonies. Thus, it led to the origin of the indenture form of labour from India and other parts of Asia in which labourers were recruited from Western Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Orissa. Initially, the system of indenture labour was created to overcome the labour shortage following the ban on slavery. The indenture was a form of contract labour. The contract was fixed for five years of work in a particular plantation and the owner of the plantation paid the labourer as per the contract both in cash and kind. After five years of contract, the labourer was free to work in any place in the colony. The processes of emigration from India and immigration to work as plantation labour was governed by an Immigration Ordinance enacted in the country of destination. The prospective emigrants testified before a Magistrate in India and understood terms of the contract as required under the British administration. The initial emigration under indentured system had three destinations which included the Indian Ocean (Mauritius-1834, Uganda, South Africa, Malaysia and Sri Lanka), the Pacific Ocean (Fiji- 1878) and the Caribbean Sea (Trinidad-1845, Guyana-1838 and Surinam-1873). The years signify the year of indenture labour initiation in the respective colony. The indentured system was followed by ‘kangani’ or ‘maistry’ form of labour during 1890s to Burma, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Malaya. This kind of labour was mainly recruited from South India. The ‘kangani’ is a man with capital who lent his followers the expense of travelling to and settling down on a plantation. He was like a mediator between the labourers and the manager of the plantation in the colony. The Indian diaspora in Malaysia mostly consists of the descendents of the ‘kangani’ form of labour, overwhelmingly Tamilians from South India (Jain 1993).
3. **Post-colonial Phase** – This migration was mainly to the developed nations of the West such as the U.S.A., the U.K., and in the Europe and Australia. The educational system in the post-Independent India was patterned after the British and the American educational systems which produced professionals who outnumbered the availability of jobs that could absorb them. Indians migrated for the available opportunities abroad due to the dominance of underemployment and unemployment in India which led to a kind of professional migration; namely, ‘brain drain’ facilitated with the rapid transformation in the transportation and communication. There was also migration to the West Asia such as the Gulf region and the case of twice-migrants such as Fiji Indians to Australia, Surinam Indians to Netherlands and Ugandan Indians to the U.K. There was also the case of thrice-migrants, e.g., the Indians who initially migrated to Surinam migrated later to the Netherlands after Surinam’s Independence in 1975 and later, again to the U.S.A.

**SOCIOLGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE INDIAN DIASPORA**

The literature available on the Indian diaspora is distinguished into three types; namely, historical, diplomatic and anthropological. The historical works provide an account of phases of emigration of Indians and their early life situations in foreign lands. The diplomatic works give country reports on the status and problems of Indians beyond seas. The anthropological works provide the nature of ethnographic accounts with their accent on cultural continuity and change. There are three notable common features of the literature on the Indian diaspora such as much of it is based on the country-specific profiles and a few on cross-country comparisons, descriptive with analytical ideas and projection of the problem in colonial perspective. The functionalist orientation predominates the study of Indian diaspora. The existing literature gives emphasis on the cultural identity and integration neglecting class and power. Thus, it is necessary to view the problem of the Indian diaspora in sociological perspectives by focusing on the following two major perspectives:

1. **Socio-cultural Perspective** – This is the functional perspective in studying the problem of the Indian diaspora which addresses issues like place of origin, destination, the resultant identity, cultural continuity and change, cultural identity and integration. There are three recurrent themes in the existing literature on the Indian diaspora which indicate the predominance of socio-cultural perspective – recreating of the Indian social structure by the Indian diaspora wherever they go, holding fast to the native culture in the lands of adoption and marking the mode of adaptation by a preference for economic integration rather than cultural integration. There are three modes of adaptation in the host nation; namely, assimilation, cultural preservation with economic integration and ethnic polarisation for power cultivation.

2. **Political Economy Perspective** – This perspective focuses on the political and economic aspects of the Indian diaspora. Its versions include Marxist, non-Marxist and neo-Marxist. It is based on the classical
Marxian version. The basic elements of the Marxian economy are historical context, mode of production, class relations and nature of state. At the philosophical level, it tends to postulate a determinate relationship between objective conditions and subjective consciousness. Accordingly, it takes history, economy, class and power as its central explanatory categories. This perspective can be used in understanding differences in the phases of Indian migration.

Legally, immigration connotes entry of a non-resident into a country to take up permanent resident there. But sociologically, it signifies a situation of interaction between two cultural systems such as traditional and modern. It also signifies a change in the existential conditions of immigrants with all its implications for the change in their consciousness (Sharma 2004: 44-65).

SOCIAL REALITIES OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA

The existing literature on the Indian diaspora is related to the Indian migration, their socio-economic and cultural experiences, adaptation and assimilation in the host countries. The review of the literature on the Indian diaspora is country specific and there are a few comparative studies and theoretical paradigms. It focuses on historical approaches to the Indian diaspora, structures of diasporic communities and the agency of immigrants. It also emphasises on the social adjustment of immigrants, cultural persistence and dynamics of change in the family, religion, language, ethnicity and culture, ethnic identity of immigrants, generational difference, level of prosperity and education in their communities, background and relations with authorities in countries of origin, and level of integration to the home culture. The concerns of the Indian diaspora can be analysed from the following review of the studies:

The Overseas Indians can be looked at in two different approaches, such as recreating India in the land of adoption and seeing Indians as always victims of circumstance in the lands where they settle (Tinker 1977). A comparative study was conducted on the adaptive and adjustment patterns of the Indian immigrants which showed their rise and varying degrees with places of destination and in adjustment patterns, lifestyles and attitudes (Kurian & Srivastava 1983). Another work analysed the formation of immigrant workers in the receiving countries and their resultant marginalisation by capitalism. It concluded that the immigrants were entangled between the two cultures and suffered from double consciousness who finally found detached away from their own culture, language and roots (Chandan 1986). An ethnographic study on the ‘Melaka Chitties’, Indian immigrants in Melaka, Malaysia focused on the link between identity developed out of various socio-cultural processes and macro social processes in a plural society like Malaysia (Mearns 1995: 14). A study explored the issue of ethnic identity among the second generation Indo-Canadian students in relation to religion, gender, marriage, multiculturalism and educational experience. It examined perceptions of the students to the Canadian culture and found that the level of integration of parents of the students into the Canadian culture played a significant role in the integration of the students; and female students had higher levels of integration than male students (Spink 1999).

Examining the role of diaspora in the reduction of poverty in home countries, a study addressed courting diasporic investment by China, India, the Philippines, Mexico, Eritrea and Taiwan. Findings showed that China, India and Taiwan wanted business-oriented interest in diaspora and needed diaspora contributions to national development more than their assistance in poverty reduction; Taiwan had pursued a brain trust model that focused on attracting human capital from the diaspora; China had worked to attract direct investment and
open trade opportunities through overseas Chinese communities and India’s diaspora policy was multi-pronged, pursuing direct investment, portfolio investment, technology transfer, market opening and outsourcing opportunities (Newland & Patrick 2004).

A comparative study on roles of the Indian and the Chinese diaspora living in the U.S.A. in the political economy of their respective homelands explored the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland development, and the contribution of this dynamic relationship to economic growth and foreign relations of homelands. It revealed that similarities in Indian and Chinese diaspora activities included the economic law of supply and demand, and motivations whereas differences in Indian and Chinese diaspora activities included several perspectives such as historical, cultural, institutional, economic development models and geopolitical differences. Roles of Indian and Chinese diaspora in the development of their homelands were heavily influenced by economic development strategies of their homelands and political history and culture. The impact of diaspora on the foreign relations of their homelands was conditional upon the bilateral relations between their homelands and the country of residence (Zhu 2007: 281-296).

Based on both quantitative and qualitative methods, statistical data on immigration taken from the U.S.A. like U.S. Census Bureau, National Statistical Agencies of U.S., Central Bank of U.S., U.S. Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services; and case studies of returnees, diaspora members, International Monetary Fund and World Bank, a case study examined the brain gain strategies for the sending countries with reference to Indian migration to the U.S.A. It revealed that brain gain to India is the result of brain drain of skilled workers to the U.S.A. whereas majority of the Indian diaspora settled in the U.S.A. were economically and educationally strong and used their power and position to lobby issues of both political and economic concerns for their country of origin. Thus, the Indian diaspora are effectively utilised as soft power for their country of origin in which there is asymmetrical interdependence between the U.S.A. and India (Sahay 2009).

Using questionnaire and survey research techniques, an explorative study was conducted on the socio-economic and political aspects of migration of Telugus (Andhrs) to the U.S.A. in the post 1965 period. The primary data were collected from 22 Telugus residing in the U.S.A. temporarily or permanently. The study found that near about three fifths of the Telugus (59.09%) were from the coastal region, followed by Telangana (31.81%) and Rayalaseema (4.54%); over two fifths (45.45%) were in the age group of 20-30 years; over three fifths (63.63%) were married; over two fifths (45.45%) received help from people already settled in the U.S.A.; over a half (54.54%) came to know about opportunities in the U.S.A. through educational institutions and friends; near about three fifths (59.09%) were Masters in M.S., M. Tech., M.C.A., M. Pharm. & M.B.A.; over one third (36.36%) were having annual income of $40-$50,000 dollars; and their residential status showed that 36.35% held Green Card (permanent residents), 22.72% would get their Green Card status and 40.90% were in the U.S.A. under various kinds of Visas like the H-1B Work Permit and the Student Visa (Bhaskar 2011).

Addressing diasporic mutual benefit another study examined the emergence of transnational networks among the two important East Indian diasporic communities; namely, Punjabis and Gujaratis. They argued that the Punjabis and the Gujaratis in Canada formed transnational communities through their socio-economic, political and religious networks. Language, regional culture and religion offered the ideological base for identities and bondage of these diasporic communities at the global level. The networks formed by the dispersed
members of Punjabis and Gujaratis transcended the boundaries of national states wherein they were currently situated but fell within the legislated norms of international relations (Bhat & Sahoo 2003: 141-167).

Using the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with experts and Returned Non-Resident Indians (RNRIs), an exploratory study was conducted on the factors that pushed RNRIs to return to their homeland and the contributions of RNRIs to the hiring firms through the knowledge and competences acquired by studying and working abroad. Three types of sources were used: three Professors, five RNRIs and newspaper articles. The Professors included Binod Khadria, Professor of Economics and Education, and Chairperson at the Zakir Hussain Centre for Educational Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Tarun Khanna, the Jorge Paulo Lemann Professor and Director of South Asia Initiative at Harvard Business School and Devesh Kapur, Director of the Centre for the Advanced Study of India and Associate Professor of Political Science at Penn, University of Pennsylvania. The five RNRIs were from the IT industry and the banking sector. The study revealed that the economic decline in the West, family, quality of life, increased opportunities in India and migration policies were the drivers that pushed RNRIs to return to their homeland (Agnetti & Tonial 2012).

An online survey was conducted on 218 Indians and foreign Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) in November 2004 using both the questions and the web-interface to examine the importance of cross-border social networks for entrepreneurs in developing countries and ties between the Indian expatriate community and local entrepreneurs in the Indian software industry; namely, the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM). The study found that 60% of the respondents were co-founders; a half were CEOs of firms under the age of 5 and 70% were CEOs of firms under the age of 10 which reflected the relatively young and entrepreneurial nature of the NASSCOM; and local entrepreneurs who previously lived outside India relied more on diaspora networks for business and financing. It was concluded that cross-border social networks played an important role in helping entrepreneurs circumvent the barriers arising from imperfect domestic institutions in developing countries (Nanda & Khanna 2009).

Based on the anthropological research on women’s agency in Malaysia (1961, 1998 and 2010), India (1976-78, 1983), Trinidad and Tobago (1984-86), U.K. (1966-74, 1998 and 2005), U.S.A. (2003), Canada (2006 and 2008) and South Africa (1994, 2003 and 2010), the empirical data in the field of diaspora studies and focusing on the response and the challenge of a transmigrant woman; namely, Yageswari in Natal, South Africa, described by Anusuya Singh in her novel, “Behold the Earth Mourns”, another study looked into the social reproduction processes among transnational families in terms of family and household. It was found that social reproduction processes interwove with economic enterprises, fluctuating global markets and state policies. Transmigrant Indian women who lived in racially discriminatory social worlds become aware of the presence of social tension and conflict. They deploy different strategies based on their experiences to cope with the adverse situations (Jain 2010: 51-57).

In sum, the Indian diaspora is the result of different phases of emigration from India throughout the history. More specifically, it is the result of indenture and ‘kangani’ forms of labour migration, free or ‘passage migrants’, refugees, students and migration of professionals to several countries across the globe.

**MEASURES OF THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT TOWARDS THE INDIAN DIASPORA**
The Indian government has been trying to bring the potential influence of the diaspora in bringing to the development of the Indian economy in the last few decades. India celebrated the ‘Pravasi Bharatiya Divas’ or Overseas Indians’ Day for the first time on 9 January, 2002 in honour of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi), the father of the Nation and the most important NRI who came back on 9 January, 1915. The government wanted to bring the expertise and knowledge of the Overseas Indians on a common platform through this initiative and integrate it with the development process of the country. The Indian government also established the Ministry of Overseas Indians’ Affairs (MOIA) in 2004 with the mission of promoting, nurturing and sustaining a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between India and Overseas Indians. Thus, it instituted the overseas citizenship of India for those who held foreign citizenship but had been citizens of India after its independence from the British Empire. According to the Indian law, one cannot hold double citizenship, but this helps NRIs and PIOs gain similar rights as those with a real citizenship except for the right to vote, to stand for public office and to purchase agricultural land. All these measures were taken due to the growing size of the Indian diaspora and the policymakers’ realisation of the importance of the diaspora to the development of the country. At present, the annual income of the Indian diaspora is about $160 billion, a third of India’s GDP. Thus, the future of the Indian diaspora depends upon two modalities of thought and action (Khanna 2011: 167-168, Khadria 2009b: 4 & Chacko 2007: 134).

CONCLUSION

The migration of human beings has been continuing since their evolution for better livelihood and resources. The study of diaspora communities emerged in the academic world with the studies on racial and ethnic minorities in the receiving societies dealing with issues like cultural diversities, difficulties in patterns of assimilation, adjustment and other adaptive processes. The Indian diaspora dispersed in different parts of the globe not because of political, social and ethnic factors but because of economic factors such as better employment opportunities. The Indian diaspora maintains their commitment to ‘Bhartiyata’ or ‘Indianness’. The Indian origin, the consciousness of the cultural heritage and the attachment to India give all the Indian diaspora communities a common identity. In spite of the incentives in terms of socio-cultural elements given to the NRI investors by the Indian government, they hesitate to invest and save in India due to the political instability. Bureaucratic procedures and both administrative and economic reforms are required to remove obstacles standing in the path of optimal utilisation of contributions of the Indian diaspora. The implementation of deep administrative and structural reforms should be made at the Central and the State government levels to raise the status of the Indian diaspora.

REFERENCES


