

Introduction

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From the earliest times human beings have been avid itinerants. Our ancestors, who lived a nomadic life, opted to migrate due to various reasons from mere climatic changes to tribal conflicts. However, even the very earlier forms of migration compelled them to assimilate with the host environments for their survival and sustainability. With the advancement of technology the term migration has assumed many forms and interpretations and the idea of migration has taken myriad shapes, presenting itself in many forms.

Migration included not only the movements of people but also the movement of their cultures and knowledge systems. For example, old literary texts such as *Jataka Tales* and the *Panchatantra* themselves are stories of migration or the earliest work of travel outside their original abodes. These stories were carried by the people from the land of their origin to other territories and societies. Legends, stories, fables circulated like the human beings, spices, ivory, or gems and took root in the land of their destinations, formed their own versions of the story, but maintained the essence of the original version. Thus, the traces of literary texts such as that of the *Panchatantra* can be traced in literary works such as *Arabian Nights*, *Canterbury Tales*, and in *The Fables of La Fontaine*, etc. In fact, migration has been a major factor in human development, and the 'history of the world includes remarkable stories of migration in every era' (Manning 2005: 1).

Historically, the South Asian region constitutes an extended cultural zone which has contributed tremendously in practically all fields of human endeavour. Its pluralistic, multi-layered and

often overlapping ethos is manifested in the region's dresses, cuisine, customs, religions, traditions, rituals, languages, scripts and many other socio-cultural spheres, all unfolding within a greater cultural space. The region has served both as a melting pot as well as a fulcrum for the circulation of men and goods, ideas and cultures, money and material across the globe and today it boasts of the largest share in the world's diasporic population. This itinerant populace of South Asia have also served as the unnamed and unsung cultural ambassadors, not only within the region but also across the globe.

Thus when we see this region in the historical context of migration, circulation and diaspora formation, the debate becomes very pronounced when it comes to three centuries of colonial rule – roughly from the beginning of the eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century. This was a period of great political turmoil in the region. It saw both the consolidation as well as collapse of a number of colonial powers and also the fructification of liberal and democratic aspirations of its people. This period also witnessed an unprecedented surge in the migration of South Asian workers to other colonial settlements across the globe. All these factors influenced and shaped the diasporic cultures of the region. During the colonial period a large populace of South Asians was traded as slaves by Portuguese, Dutch, French and English imperialists. They were taken to various countries as indentured labourers to develop plantation economies, construct railway networks and to serve as soldiers in the imperial military establishments. Large numbers of traders and professionals also accompanied these labourers and soldiers.

After their independence of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and later also of Bangladesh, the first set of scholars and academics

that came out from the universities of these South Asian countries migrated to the western countries for advanced studies and research and thus created a new form of diaspora in the modern period.

Thus, the problematics of diaspora and colonialism, together with the role of post-colonial forces in re-defining the dialectics of South Asian diaspora is what lies at the core of this volume which examines different aspects of diasporic cultures of South Asia in their historical perspective.

I

In the academic discourse the term ‘diaspora’ gained momentum with the introduction of the new phenomenon called globalisation induced neo-economic global agendas. Literally this term emanates from the root ‘to disperse.’ Etymologically, this word is of Greek origin. It is derived from two Greek words *dia* (through or over) and *speiro* (dispersal or sow) which means ‘scattering or sowing of seeds.’ However, it has meant different things to different people at different times. The ancient Greeks used this term to refer to citizens of a grand city who migrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonisation to assimilate the territory into the empire. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the word diaspora was used to refer specifically to the populations of Jews exiled from Judea in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, and Jerusalem in 136 ACE by the Roman Empire. This term is used interchangeably to refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel as well as culture of that population.

The term has been used in its modern sense since the mid-twentieth century. Since 1960s the word diaspora has come to represent various kinds of population forced or induced to leave

their traditional ethnic homelands; being dispersed throughout other parts of the world, and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture. From about this time it has also been established as a branch of academic studies cutting across 'several disciplines and knowledge systems such as sociology, political science, ethnography, literature, anthropology, geography, history, international relations, women's studies' and so forth. The study about diaspora is now recognised as a branch of study researching into various dimensions of human population living transnationally. Diaspora organisations and a large number of centres of Diaspora Studies affiliated to universities are now engaged in researching about various spheres of diaspora formation, migration pattern, their 'connect' with the home and the host countries/ cultures, the issues of identity, etc.

There is no precise definition of the term 'diaspora' as it is used, understood and interpreted in different ways, by different people, in different contexts and to suit different objectives. It is no wonder that this word has become highly politicised in certain countries and societies. According to Brij V. Lal:

Ordinary usage of the word [diaspora] today would include reference to a common ancestral homeland, voluntary or involuntary migration, and a sense of separateness and marginality in the country of residence.

But the question of homeland and territoriality, of exile and return, and of belonging and alienation, are much more complex and contested today than ever before. (Sahoo and Maharaj 2007: ix)

In the world of globalisation, migration and transnationalism, in which travel and technology have made national boundaries porous and latent, the dialectics of diaspora have become more

and more complex. What is the difference between migration and de-territorialisation, de-territorialisation and transnational movements and the transnational movements and diaspora formation? These and similar other questions have been debated extensively and repeatedly by social-scientists, historians, demographers and international bodies such as International Organization for Migration (IOM). Sahoo and Maharaj (2007: 5), for example, state that:

... a migration can be defined as a ‘diaspora’ if four conditions are met: firstly, an ethnic consciousness; secondly, an active associative life; thirdly, contacts with the land of origin in various forms, real or imaginary; fourthly, there should be relations with other groups of the same ethnic origin spread all over the world.

A crucial element in the above and many other definitions of ‘diaspora’ is the ‘connect’ with the homeland, which could be real or imaginary, sentimental or material. Another factor that differentiates diaspora migration with other forms of migrations is “that it is based on claims to a “natural right” to return to an historical homeland.” (Shuval 2007: 33). This claim to return to their historical homeland as a “natural right” may be more metaphoric and rhetorical than legal or real, but the ‘connect’ between the ‘home and host’ plays a defining role in identifying the diasporic groups. The Indian state, for example, recognises two categories of its diaspora – Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), and has a separate ministry – Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs – which “seeks to connect the Indian Diaspora community with its homeland.” (www.moia.gov.in).

II

Like the term diaspora, ‘culture’ too has defied a precise definition. There is perhaps no phenomenon as complex as ‘culture.’ In a manner of speaking, culture incorporates everything in a particular society. It is not only a matter of music, dance, art, and cinema, but also marriage customs, death rites, patterns of pilgrimage to holy cities, modes of raising children, treatment of elders, and innumerable other aspects of everyday life that are stitched into the meaning of culture. Moreover, it can be described/ understood with relation to geography (Western Culture, Eastern Culture, Asian Culture, African Culture etc.), religion (Hindu Culture, Muslim Culture, Buddhist Culture, Christian Culture, etc.), language and ethnicity (Sinhala Culture, Tamil Culture, Bangla Culture, Pakhtun Culture, etc.) – to name a few. The complexity of the issue does not end here. People even within the same culture carry several layers of mental programming within themselves. Different layers of culture exist at the following levels:

- The national level: Associated with the nation as a whole.
- The regional level: Associated with ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences that exist within a nation.
- The gender level: Associated with gender differences (female vs. male).
- The generation level: Associated with the differences between grandparents and parents, parents and children.
- The social class level: Associated with educational opportunities and differences in occupation.

- The corporate level: Associated with the particular culture of an organisation. Applicable to those who are employed.

(<http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/choudhury/culture.html>)

In short, culture is a system of building identities. Identities that are developed by beliefs, faiths, practices, customs, traditions, arts, crafts, language, food habits, dress etc. of a society or social group. Most often, when cultures of two different societies clash, it leads to a conflict in which the stronger one usually overpowers the other. The dominant (often foreign) power establishes its hegemony, local or indigenous cultures are made to appear inferior, ridiculous or otherwise not worth preserving. These are often forced to adopt the ways of the dominant society. An apparent example is the western culture which has, in the last two or three centuries, spread in most part of the world. It may also be argued that this process, in a way, broadens the cultures of both – the victor as well as the vanquished or the dominating as well as the dominated.

The diasporic cultures of South Asia, therefore, incorporate many layers of human life and there are various factors that have influenced and shaped the diasporic cultures of this region.

III

A few words about the title of this book – ‘Circulation of Cultures and Culture of Circulation’ – seem rather necessary. Circulation is not a simple change of geographical place; it involves social, economic, cultural, material and ideological changes which result from crossing of cultural and political boundaries. Circulation of ideas, theories, methods, practices, and cultural expressions, together with circulation of both material and cultural objects such as instruments, devices,

implements, machines, artefacts, seeds, plants, minerals, animals, textiles, pottery, spices etc. (the list goes on), and carriers of knowledge – manuscripts, records, books, inscriptions, drawings, maps, paintings etc. have, for a long time, enriched our culture and it continues to do so. Circulation of human beings – from hapless victims of catastrophes to merchants and traders, and from religious preachers, pilgrims and mendicants to intellectuals, scientists and philosophers, has likewise played a very important role in our cultural development and it continues to do so.

Similarly, monetary and trade networks which stemmed out of this circulation of humans, material, ideas and cultural expressions, especially the networks of coins and currency systems as well as credit instruments, both proto and post-colonisation and also after the fall of colonial regime also deserve much greater attention than it has received so far. Wider issues of intra-regional circulation and cross-fertilisation of the monetary and trade practices; the role of the imperial financial administration in the monetisation of colonial economies resulting in the emergence of some sort of monetary unions within these regions; the issue of international trade in precious metals and the effect of metal-price disparity between the ‘global north’ and the ‘global south’ and its effect on the monetary policies of the imperial governments, are some of the issues that need be addressed so as to build an informed base for future dialogue between different communities of the region and of the world.

Thus, some of the questions that the study of circulation of humans and their cultural ethos focuses on include:

- What causes and precipitates circulation of ideas and cultures, and diaspora formation?

- What restricts the circulation of cultures and what promotes it? What are the barriers and filters? What are the dynamics of the diaspora?
- How is this circulation driven by global as well as local, regional, and national cultural and intellectual currents?
- How does the circulation of cultures contribute to the strengthening (in some cases subsuming or metamorphosing) of local cultures and traditions as well as cross-fertilisation?

The study of the circulation of ideas and techniques in understanding their evolution and distinctive elements of their construction is also essential for understanding a transnational reflection on cultural globalisation.

IV

The papers included in this volume were presented at the SAARC Regional Conference on ‘Diasporic Cultures of South Asia during eighteenth to twentieth centuries’ organised by the SAARC Cultural Centre from 15-17 March 2012 in Galle, Sri Lanka. The Conference was a brainstorming session to discuss key issues, deliberate moot research questions and to identify themes and sub-themes of diasporic cultures of South Asia that merit independent and in-depth research.

The relevance of studying the cultural aspects of the South Asian diaspora emanates also from the fact of growing recognition of diaspora as soft power in statecraft. APSARA KARUNARATNE argues that in an age where public diplomacy and strategic interests are placed in the forefront of foreign policy agendas of the states, it is pertinent to inquire into how the South Asian Diaspora can be considered an apt vehicle of

the soft power. In his overview of the circulation of South Asian peoples and commodities, SHAH MUHAMMAD IKHTIAR JAHAN KABIR presents a survey as to how the Colonial interests and livelihood needs necessitated circulation of South Asian peoples and commodities in and outside the region during the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries and how at the end of the twentieth century the South Asian diaspora has forged collective initiatives to strengthen the circulation within and outside the region.

There are over 7.3 million people of Bangladeshi descent who have immigrated to or were born in another country. The world's largest Bangladeshi diaspora population is in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, where there are almost 3 million. Three papers included in this volume present the story of Bangladeshi diaspora and diffusion of Bengali culture. KARUNAMAYA GOSWAMI studies the tremendous impact that the Western culture had on 'the major dimensions of living [of the people of South Asia] from education to hospitalisation.' Citing examples from the music and dance traditions of Bengal, he concludes that the movement of people from beyond South Asia and within South Asia contributed very largely to strengthening and developing the existing cultural forms and leaving space for future developments. Another scholar from Bangladesh - SHARIF UDDIN AHMED – presents a historical review of the diasporic culture of the Bangladeshi people and suggests that recent surge in its diaspora 'owes to an unprecedented growth of population.' He discusses some unique cultural characteristics of this diaspora which have transformed the people as well as the places of their translocation. SHAMSUZZAMAN KHAN, also from Bangladesh, enters this discussion of the Diasporic Cultures of South Asia by presenting the Bangladesh perspective and

discusses the role of multi-layered and multi-dimensional meanings of context-specific diasporas.

The story of the diasporic communities living in the Himalayan state of Bhutan is narrated by HARKA B. GURUNG and TSHERING CHOKI. Dwelling upon the causes of diaspora formation in Bhutan they suggest that the country's diaspora that comprise mainly of the Tibetans and ethnic Nepalese communities, came into being mainly because of wars, political turmoil and labour migration. Their paper also analyses the impact of the cultural traditions of the Tibetan and Nepalese communities on the domestic populace of Bhutan within the larger framework of identity construction.

The Indian diaspora is unique as it surpasses all others in its extraordinary diversity and global spread. As per the UNDP's 2010 report, after China, India has the largest diaspora in the world. The population movement that took place in India during the colonial rule forms an integral part of the Indian diaspora, which is today estimated at about 30 million people, spread over 48 countries. In 11 countries there are more than half a million persons of Indian descent and they represent a significant population of those countries. WASEEM RAJA studies the undercurrents of the internal diaspora networks during the twentieth century in India. Focussing on the Bhojpuri speaking community from the Eastern Part of India, together with the Tamils, Sindhi, Parsis, Bengalis, Marwaris and the Punjabis he analyses the nature and functioning of such networks.

In Pakistan, the Pakhtuns constitute 11.5 per cent of the country's population, but share 33.5 per cent of the Pakistani diasporic population. Syed Minhaj ul Hassan discusses the changing cultural patterns of the Pakhtun society of the Khyber-Pakhtunwa province of Pakistan. He argues that in their search

for a better livelihood, the Pakhtun migration that started around 1970s, resulted in their economic prosperity but also affected their centuries' old traditions and life style. This impact was quite widespread as it changed their tangible as well as intangible culture.

Maldives has 1.5 million strong diaspora in its total population of 4.0 million. The traditional culture of Maldives has been shaped over the years by the diasporaic communities living in Maldives as well as by the returnee Maldivians from the foreign lands. ASIYATH MOHAMED and ALI WAHEED describe the impact of the diasporic communities on Maldivian food, attire, architecture and performing arts and conclude that the cultural practices of Maldives have undergone a transformation due to the diasporic contacts with the European, African and South Asian countries.

Sri Lanka has a sizable population of the ethnic Tamils, a majority of whom were brought by the British from India as labourers to work in tea and rubber plantations. Another group of the ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka comprise of the business community concentrated mainly in the capital city of Colombo and a few other urban and rural areas of the country. A.S. CHANDRABOSE discusses the forces that have impacted the cultural identity of this community in Sri Lanka and contours of their adaptation of the Sinhalese culture. RAMESHA JAYANETHTHI describes the uniqueness of the dress code of Indian Tamil plantation labourers. She studies their cultural background and traces the causes of the evolution and significance of their 'unwritten' dress code which depicted their social status and caste hierarchy.

The Buddhist art of Sri Lanka during the eighteenth to twentieth century reflects the influence of the European diaspora

present in the country. BINDU URUGODAWATTE discusses the distinctive features of the local paintings and architecture that reflect changes brought about due to centuries of European rule. She demonstrates that this influence was more pronounced in the Buddhist paintings of Sri Lanka from eighteenth to twentieth century which depict the contemporary society, culture and even political turbulence.

V

The ethos of diaspora has been very aptly reflected in the title of a book published by the Temple University Press in 1998. The book is called *A Part, Yet Apart* (Shankar and Srikanth 1998). It deals with the societal divergences and cultural differences of the South Asian American diaspora, which, though ‘a part’ of the new geo-spatial surroundings, remains ‘apart’ from it, being deeply rooted in the cultural soil of their country of origin. The cultural differences between the host country and the country of origin could be subtle or sublime and, most of the times, not very apparent or tangible. While certain aspects of a culture may be learned consciously (e.g. methods of greeting people), some other differences are learned subconsciously (e.g. methods of problem solving). As Salman Rushdie (1992) puts it, “Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools.” An understanding, therefore, of the historical background and cultural differences of the diasporic communities by the host country is as essential for a harmonious and mutually rewarding co-existence as it is for the members of the diasporic communities. The building of cultural awareness may not be an easy task, but it definitely helps in mitigation of cultural conflicts and cross-cultural tensions.

Though South Asians do not constitute a single or homogeneous diaspora, they are now recognised as ‘a

significant global phenomenon’ and the South Asian diaspora ‘reflects the dramatic modern history of South Asia and the diversity of the geographical region of origin’ (Jacobsen and Kumar 2004: x, xiii). The construction of the historical dynamics of the cultural identities of the South Asian diaspora – both as identity of ‘being’ (which offers a sense of unity and commonality), and identity of ‘becoming’ (of a process of identification, which shows the discontinuity in identity formation), is fundamental to establish an environment of respect, cooperation and peaceful co-existence, because “Cultural identities...Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall 1993: 394).

This book serves only as a prelude to many independent and in-depth studies such as: South Asian women in diaspora, intra-community relationship of the South Asian diaspora beyond the South Asian region, cultural implications of education overseas for the South Asian diaspora, sports (especially cricket) as carrier of diasporic culture in South Asia, to name a few, which may be taken up by competent researchers to foster a greater cultural cohesion between the diasporic communities of South Asia and their host countries as well as diasporic communities of other countries residing in South Asia.

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