

Impact of Diaspora on South Asian Cultures from 18th to 20th Centuries

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Abstract

We may, in our context of discussion, take the word 'Diaspora' to mean what the dictionary says i.e. 'the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country.' To serve our present purpose, it could be taken as the movement of people from one place to the other and the impact it has on cultures with regard to shaping and reshaping their forms.

The Diasporic impact on South Asian cultures has always been immense since antiquity. During the eighteenth to twentieth centuries it was very much felt since the East India Company started consolidating their power in the Indian Subcontinent from the second half of the eighteenth century. During this period, South Asia came under tremendous Diasporic influence of the Western culture and it affected in length and breadth the major dimensions of living from education to hospitalisation. There was also the impact of movement of people from one region to the other within South Asia itself. For instance, music and dance forms travelled to Bengal from far outside the Bengal region and cultural ideas from Bengal travelled to some other regions in South Asia to create an impact there. Tagore travelled to Sri Lanka and with him travelled the culture of Bengal which left a far reaching impact on the Sri Lankan culture. Camel drivers from Punjab came to Lucknow and with their songs they contributed to the shaping up of a new form of Hindustani songs known as Tappa which very soon travelled to Bengal and created a very great impact on the musical developments there.

So this is how 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. This paper discusses such developments.

The word 'Diaspora' originally refers to the movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries. A saying in the Bible i.e. 'thou shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth' is supportive of such dispersion. The meaning of the word is made liberal to widen its content when by Diaspora we mean the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country. It is this movement-factor that we emphasise when we try to speak of the impact of Diaspora on South Asian Cultures during the last three hundred years.

The Diasporic impact on south Asian cultures or cultures in any other region has always been immense. Civilisation grows through interaction and the interaction inevitably takes place due to the movement of people from their place of origin to others. Aryans, for instance, came to the Indian sub-continent from a faraway land and changed, in course of time, the major tone of the local cultures. Such Diasporic impact continued over centuries with groups of people, big or small, coming to the sub-continent on different pursuits, mostly for conquest or business. The Muslim conquest of India created a Diasporic impact on the Indian culture of very far reaching consequence. If we talk about the Diasporic impact on South Asian cultures during the last three hundred years, we must recognise that it was never felt so keenly and so widely as during this period.

Diasporic impact due to inter-regional movement of people i.e. movement of people from beyond the South Asian region

took place very frequently as the East India Company came to India initially for business, but ultimately created their regime. They raised fighting forces and fought battles one after another and defeated local kings and rulers and brought the entire sub-continent under the company's rule which was formally taken over by the British crown in 1858. Battle of Plassey in Bengal in 1757 was a great turning point. The East India Company captured Bengal and shifted the capital of Bengal from Murshidabad to Kolkata in 1773. In the course of time when entire India came under the British rule Kolkata remained the capital of British India until it was shifted to Delhi on 12 December 1911. As the East India Company felt it consolidated its Kolkata-centric power, it paid some attention to bring western cultural expressions to India, initially through Kolkata-based programmes. Warren Hastings (1772-85) was the person who brought about a multi-dimensional interaction between the urban cultural expressions of Bengal and those of the west. The Kolkata-based Bengali theatre was the first to come into interaction with the western theatre culture. The first westernised theatre was founded in Kolkata in 1775. Performers were brought from England to stage plays. Ladies acted on the westernised Kolkata stage in 1783. Gerasim Lebedoff, a Russian band master-musician came to Kolkata and staged two English plays which were translated into Bengali during 1795-96. Bengali actors and actresses took part in stage presentations. In the British Indian capital and in some places around it, some dramatic clubs were formed to entertain the European communities. The English, Italian, German, French and other European communities took part in the club-performances. All these performances brought about changes in Bengali play writing and stage performances. The idea of orchestration caught the imagination of Bengali stage-music directors. When

Italian opera troupes started travelling to Kolkata and living there for years on contract for stage performances, they created an impact of a different kind on Bengali drama. Bengali song dramas in particular were written and performed following Italian opera models. Drama, prose or be it song, western influence affected and transformed Bengali urban literature in all its forms. Presence of the people from England and other countries of West in South Asia and that of people from South Asia in England in particular, and in Europe at large accentuated the speed of transformation not only of art and literature but of all the important areas of living - from education to hospitalisation.

But Western music initially did not have much of an influence other than bringing some temperamental changes in Bengal's urban musical compositional styles. Only the essence of some performing ideas was adopted later on. For instance, Rabindranath Tagore adapted the western idea of composed music in matter of rendition of his songs and emphasised the concept and practice of writing down music in notation for the sake of correct singing and preservation. This is, in brief, what Diasporic impact created by the movement of people from West to South Asia during the second half of the 18th century. But the intra-regional movement of people i.e. within South Asia itself had also done a lot in shaping and reshaping the cultural expressions. Camel drivers from Punjab used to come to Lucknow on business missions. For instance they loaded the camels with goods in Lahore and delivered them to Lucknow and again loaded the camels with goods in Lucknow to carry them back to Lahore. The camel drivers used to sing some Punjabi folk songs of very light classical tone. Golan Nabi (1742-92), a noted *Kheyal* (a form of Northern Indian Hindustani classical music) singer of Lucknow, took interest in

the Punjabi folk songs sung by the camel drivers and felt that he could create a new form of songs by accommodating the Punjabi folk nuances into the *Kheyal* space. He did it and successfully created a musical compound which he called *Tappa* (a form of light classical Northern Indian Hindustani music). Ramnidhi Gupta, popularly known as Nidhu Babu (1741-1839) went to Chhapra in Bihar in 1776 to work as a clerk in the newly founded collectorate there. Chhapra in those days was a music centre of repute and a good number of Hindustani classical music trainers and performers used to live there. Nidhu Babu was trained at an elderly age, in singing Hindustani classical song-forms, particularly *kheyal*. He took immense interest in learning the newly initiated *Tappa* style and learned it quite profoundly. On retirement he came back to Kolkata in 1794. But earlier to it he decided to move away from the line of the Hindustani *Tappa* and create a version of his own. He wrote some *Tappa* texts in Bengali and set them to music as he loved to create it. He took the Kolkata audience by storm when he started singing them in *mehfils* (music session) after *mehfils*. That inspired Nidhu Babu to compose hundreds of *Tappa* songs and lay the great foundation of Bengali *Tappa* tradition. With Bengaliised Lucknow *Tappa* Nidhu Babu revolutionised the age-old trend of Bengali urban songs. Till the end of the eighteenth century the mainstream Bengali songs was devotional in tone. But by tone Nidhu Babu's *Tappas* were secular and by theme they were love songs, love in pure human sense, emphasising the pangs of ladies for not possessing liberty of being able to choose for the men of their love. So, as we see, *Tappa* travelled to Bengal via Chhapra through Nidhu Babu and formed the basis of modern age of Bengali songs and in larger sense, the modern age of Bengali literature on the basis of secularism and democratic spirit. Raga songs like *Dhrupada* (a

form of North Indian Hindustani classical music), *Kheyal* and *Thumri* (a form of North Indian Hindustani light classical music) had also travelled to Bengal from places like Agra, Gwalior, Rampur, Kirana, Banaras, Delhi, Lucknow, Patiala, Muradabad and so on. As the East India Company started taking the entire Indian sub-continent in its grip, the Mughal empire and local kingdoms declined and all the Hindustani musicians of vocal and instrumental genres started pouring to Kolkata, the capital city where they were offered patronage by the growing affluent families. And from Kolkata they dispersed to different *zamindar* houses in remote village areas throughout Bengal. *Baijis* or the professional dancing damsels too got liberal patronage in Kolkata from where they occasionally travelled to the rural *zamindar* houses on contract. The most significant event in this regard was the shifting of entire Lucknow family of court musicians by Wazid Ali Shah, Nawab of Awadh in the Matiaburj suburb of Kolkata where he was banished on a yearly allowance in 1858. Earlier in 1857 he was arrested and kept captive for one year on charge of his complicity with the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. The shifting of entire Lucknow court was something very great and it acted very sharply in matter of ‘Hindustaniising’ the mainstream music of Bengal and the taste of the Bengali music loving people.

Rabindranath Tagore and his university Visva Bharati always had a warm relation with the people of Sri Lanka. Tagore had gone to Colombo on three occasions and was always full of admiration for the beautiful island. I quote from my own book, *The Art of Tagore Songs*, what I have written about Tagore’s last Sri Lankan tour in 1934:

In the month of May 1934 Tagore went to Colombo, Sri Lanka with a performing troupe. Tagore was full of praise for the island where he had gone in 1922 and 1928 when

there was no performing troupe with him. This time besides speeches delivered by Tagore, exhibition of Tagore paintings and performance of the dance drama Shapmochan took place. The people of Colombo came across a new experience about Indian music and dance. Colonial subjugation for many years had alienated Sri Lanka from the culture of the sub-continent. But the 1934 visit by Tagore had gone a long way in inspiring the Sri Lankan people about their cultural heritage and taking interest in Indian music and dance. Earlier to it three or four students from Sri Lanka came to Visva-Bharati for higher education. But as a consequence of this visit by Tagore students from Sri Lanka started to come in groups to read in the arts and the music faculties of Visva-Bharati. (Goswami 2011: 133)

Tagore's biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay calls it a very great event. Sinhalese newspapers commented on Tagore's visit in glowing terms. The 1934 Tagore travel played a very big role in enthusing Sri Lankan scholars and performers to take interest in the mainstream Indian culture. This is an example of how South Asian cultures came closer through movements of groups of people.

There is a Bengali folk song form known as *Ghatu*. *Ghatu* is a young boy good at singing and dancing who sings on boats. Although *Ghatu*s also sing on land, in *mehfils* and the *Ghatu mehfil* songs are of light classical trends. We also find a kind of song in Nepal which is known as *Ghatu*. It may have so happened that *Ghatu* songs have either travelled from Bengal to Nepal or from Nepal to Bengal. The kingly court of Nepal and the wealthy Nepalese families had always patronised Hindustani classical music and eminent *Gharanadar* musicians stayed in Nepal for years or decades.

Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign land through the glorious War of Liberation in 1971. During the last forty years Bangladesh has been a great centre of Diasporic activities. Bengalis from Bangladesh are today found living in large numbers in all the major cities of the world. They are taking the elements of Bengali culture with them and also accepting in some way or other the elements of culture of the places they are now living. This creates a chemistry of change in their mindset which they send back home in various cultural expressions and thus create a bridge of connection between Bangladesh and places they live in. Today Bangladesh plays a significant role in building up the global spirit by being a big partner in the global Diaspora. Bangladesh is also playing a role in creating an impact on South Asian cultures through organising or taking part in cultural programmes all across the region.

As matters go, people of South Asia should come closer to ensure peace in the region which is an essential prerequisite of development. We must together fight out our common enemy which is poverty. As for this, a strong environment of unity must be created between the SAARC member states. Be it in Bangladesh or in Sri Lanka, we will discover through investigation that at the root we are not very different at all. South Asia is like a huge tree and the member states are like fruits of different shapes and colours. This sense of regional belonging must be built on the grassroots level. Once this is done, political differences could be minimised. And this has got to be done for the sake of the countless South Asian people who are yet to enjoy the fruits of education, health, food and home.

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