

Diasporic Cultures of South Asia: Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract

This paper looks at the concept, 'diaspora' as has been conceived by the academic circle in recent times. With a view to understanding the role of multilayered and multidimensional meanings of context-specific diasporas, it also discusses the form or types of diaspora identified by the academics in the contemporary literature.

Next, the paper explores the historical roots of the South Asian migration or movement of people from their respective home countries to the host countries or regions and the cultural assimilation process of diaspora formation in their resident countries will also be investigated.

Finally this paper discusses the Bangladeshi diaspora around the world a little extensively keeping in mind the historical depth and geographical spread of the subject.

The term, 'diaspora' has multiple meanings and various usages. In recent years, over-use and under-theorisation of the concept has made it a loose reference category such as, immigrants, ethnic minorities, expatriate, contactual workers, refugees, exiles and so on. Considering many conceptual and analytical descriptions one finds Gabriel Sheffer's formulation quite useful. According to Sheffer (1994: 60) "a fundamental characteristic of diasporas is that they maintain their ethno-national identities, which are strongly and directly derived from their homelands and related to them." One important fact is that, though the members of a diaspora do not know each other back-

home they regroup themselves as an active and cohesive identity group in their host-lands.

Ours is a globalised world. People are moving faster than ever before. In this fast moving world the role of diaspora is very significant in many ways. According to Adelman (2003: Online), diaspora remittances are the “major flow of economic resources from the developed to the developing world dwarfing aid moneys and potentially being much targeted and effective.”

Migration is an essential part of human existence. This world is not static but dynamic in nature. This dynamism works better when a society opens its door for others. In many cases these ‘Others’ come with new skills and innovative ideas and experiences. They perform hard labour and their capacity to do odd jobs is commendable. The arrival of migrants has benefitted many developed and economically well-off societies immensely. On the other hand, countries of origin are also benefitted from the remittances of their migrant workers or expatriates. Recent studies suggest that migration is a two-way beneficial affair. Both the sending and receiving countries are benefitted economically, socially and culturally from the migration of people. This is, in fact, the most positive side of globalisation and integration of world economy.

Following is a discussion of the benefits of both the receiving affluent societies and sending developing or less developed ones. Several studies show that the economic, human and infrastructural and even technological and scientific advancement of many highly developed countries have been closely linked with the migration of people over the centuries. Industrial growth of Europe had been possible due to forced or natural migration or colonisation. The United States and Australia are heavily indebted to migration for the founding of

their nation-states. Recent massive infrastructural growth and development of oil-rich Middle Eastern countries have been possible due to the migration of a skilled and un-skilled labour force from South Asian countries, Philippines, Indonesia, etc.

When evaluating the gains and losses of migration in relation to developing countries, some analysts view it positively, while others negatively. Those who see it positively say that, migration of a considerable number of people from the over-populated country is a great relief. It reduces the burden on the economy and helps solve the unemployment problem quite significantly. It also reduces health, sanitation and housing problems and at the same time the regular flow of their remittances boosts the national economy of their respective countries. On the other hand, the critics of migration say that migration of skilled professionals is a great loss to the country of origin because they have been raised and nurtured with valuable national wealth. So their migration is a national loss and a clear case of brain-drain.

South Asian Diaspora

Following is a brief discussion on the South Asian diaspora. South Asia consists of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Regionally they are working under the umbrella banner of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The concept of South Asian diaspora emanates from the historical roots of movement of people from our regions to other areas for fortune building, preaching, exchanging knowledge or ideas and for education or business. So South Asian diaspora was formed very early to circulate knowledge, cultural values and ideas and to preach religions. This is how similar values, pluralistic world views,

behavioural patterns and taste have developed in South Asia. For this reason scholars and historians of South Asian and beyond have called this region an extended cultural zone.

The South Asian diaspora around the globe has been formed by movement and migration of people, ideas, technical skills, exotic experiences and goods and commodities that flowed from South Asian countries. Incidentally, the South Asian region comprising Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Maldives and Bhutan is now widely known as the place of origin of the world's largest diaspora. This diaspora has raised a great hope for migrants who have moved outside their regions over the centuries because they have already created a space for favourable livelihoods in their host countries and in most cases have been sending remittances to their home countries to uplift the conditions of their near and dear ones. Thus they have been contributing immensely towards the economic development of their respective countries.

It is estimated that the South Asian diaspora consists of nearly 30 million people worldwide and currently they are perhaps the largest diaspora in the globe. Their number has immensely increased during the last fifty years and today they are playing a very significant role in building their host countries and home countries as well. This new era of migration during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is remarkable.

Bangladesh Diaspora

Historically Bangalese are a very dominant ethnic community in South Asia. They speak Bangla – a language of Indo-European language group. Bangla language has evolved from the Magdhi Prakrit language of Eastern-Indian subcontinent. The people of

Bengal are known in their language as 'Bangalee.' They belong to Indo-Aryan and Mongolo-Dravidian stock, and are closely related to Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Assamese, Munda, Tibeto-Burman linguistic and ethnic stocks. Bangla is considered now as the fifth largest language group in the world. Besides, the Austric, Dravidian, Munda and Tibeto Burman languages, Bangla has, over the centuries, assimilated words, phrases and grammatical terms from Latin, English, Turkish, Portuguese, Arabic, Parthian and even Japanese languages to enrich itself. This shows the interplay of cultural circulation and circulation of culture in South Asian regions and beyond.

Bangladesh is a recently independent country, but its history is many centuries old. The history of its peoples' migration dates back to several hundred years ago. It is said that, the ancestors of the Sinhala population of Sri Lanka are believed to have migrated there from the geographical area of present day Bangladesh. Atish Dipankar Srigan the great Buddhist scholar of the then Bengal (present Bangladesh) visited Nepal, Tibet and China to teach and participate in philosophical, religious and academic discourses. It is said that, he also carried the knowledge of earth dam-construction to the Chinese Emperor in the tenth century CE. During the British period many Bangalees worked in Burma and formed a distinctive Bangalese diaspora there. Many of the Bangalees, particularly from adjacent Sylhet district, moved to Assam during eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and occupied a very powerful position in the Assamese art, culture, society and politics. This is the reason for the spread of Bangla language and literature in Assam. Incidentally, like the Bangalees of Bangladesh the Bangalese of Assam also shed their blood for the right of their mother-tongue. During the British period the colonial rulers imported migratory labourers from different parts of India to develop their tea-industry in

Sylhet. Bangalese sailors of Chittagong and Noakhali districts had also migrated to different port areas of England to work as sailors under the patronage of British merchant navy and business houses. After destroying the Cotton and Textile Industries of Bengal the British colonial rurals imported their own goods to the Indian subcontinent. They carried goods from different ports of England to Calcutta, Diamond harbour and Bombay ports.

A section of the population of Sylhet migrated to England during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They have formed a very vibrant diaspora in London and other cities of the UK. The Towerhamlet area of London city has been dominated by the expatriate community from Sylhet District of Bangladesh. They have kept their home dialect intact and interact in that dialect. They are famous for catering businesses and own over 15000 Bangla or Indian restaurants all over the UK. They have in fact, introduced Biriani, Chicken Tikka Kabab and Masala Curry in their restaurants in Great Britain. It is now very popular in UK. They have, in fact, transformed the culinary system there introducing subcontinental dishes. This Bangladeshi Diaspora has contributed significantly to popularise Bangladesh's independence movement in the UK in 1971. Bangladesh officials and the media now refer to these workers as the nation's unofficial ambassadors and unsung heroes.

One also finds Bangalese diaspora in New York, USA, Canada, Australia, Japan and some other developed countries. Most of them are immigrants and expatriate Bangladeshis. They work in different professions and conduct businesses in New York, Canada and some other cities. Middle-East, East Asia and Asia Pacific regions too have massive Bangalee communities. Most of them are seasonal workers or contractual service

holders. Some of them are engaged in businesses. They send substantial amounts of remittances to Bangladesh which contributes significantly to uplift Bangladesh's economy.

The Bangalese living in the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan and Australia regularly celebrate cultural events and national days of their home country. They have even constructed monuments in memory of the Bangalee martyrs in their host countries. They regularly organise literary and cultural festivals to preserve and expose their cultural traditions and have introduced their cultural and daily essential goods in the host countries.

References

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