REVIEW: GLOBAL INDIAN DIASPORAS

Transforming Cultures eJournal,
Vol. 3 No 2, November 2008
http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC

Lola Sharon Davidson[1]

Gijsbert Oonk (ed.) ***Global Indian Diasporas: Exploring Trajectories of Migration and Theory*****,** IIAS Publications Series 1, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2007. ISBN 978 90 5356 035 8, paperback, pp. 298.

This collection of articles is the outcome of a conference, "The South Asian Diasporas: The Creation of Unfinished Identities in the Modern World", held at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, in June 2005, although not all the articles were written for the conference. As the editor's introduction makes clear, the intent of the volume is to question the notion of diaspora as applied to the approximately 20 million people of South Asian origin living outside of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In its own way the Indian Government has already done this with its "Person of Indian Origin" scheme which excludes people in Pakistan and Bangladesh, underlining the fact that India itself is a modern construction. Until now academic discourse on the South Asian diaspora has focussed on the maintenance of identity and links with the homeland. Here the focus is on the diversity of migration and hence the diversity of identity and relationship with the place of origin. Oonk identifies four major migrations: 1) traders from earliest times; 2) indentured labourers in the nineteenth century; 3) the post Second World War exodus caused by Partition and the movement of professionals to developed countries; and 4) the migration to former colonial powers of Indians from ex-colonies such as Suriname and Uganda. The book is divided into two sections, the first providing a historical perspective from a period when the concept of diaspora was unknown, and the second an anthropological and sociological perspective.

Scott Levi opens the historical section with an examination of the long-distance trading networks linking northwest India with Central Asia. He makes a valiant attempt to identify the disparate caste and religious identities concealed behind the names Multani

[1] Lola Sharon Davidson researches the cultural and commercial networks of the Indian Ocean on an ARC-funded project at the University of Technology Sydney.

(from Multan in the southern Punjab of Pakistan) and Shikarpuri (a nearby town in Sind to which many firms relocated in the early nineteenth century). This merchant diaspora, at its height from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, consisted almost exclusively of males who resided for a period of several years in caravanserais to trade textiles and engage in rural money lending before returning home to their families. Political change in Afghanistan and Russia brought about the collapse of this network, precipitating a relocation of the firms to Bombay and a redirection of financial connections throughout the world.

Gisjbert Oonk tests the diasporic framework in relation to another merchant community, namely Hindu Lohanas who moved from Gujarat to East Africa in the late nineteenth century. He charts the community's linguistic fortunes through three generations, from the first migrants, who were literate in Gujarati, to the second, who could speak and read but not write it, to the third, who speak some Gujarati in the home but are only literate in English. This linguistic shift, negotiated through changing educational practices and a preference for English over Swahili, marks a gradual abandonment of the Gujarati homeland in favour of an Asian-African culture with an internationalist orientation mediated through English.

Chandrashekhar Bhat and T.L.S. Bhaskar chart the zealous pursuit of a distinctive ethnic identity by Telugu migrants from Andhra Pradesh to the U.S. and Mauritius. The U.S. Telugus are recently migrated IT professionals from the upper castes while the Mauritian Telugus are the descendants of lower caste, nineteenth-century indentured labourers who no longer speak Telugu. Nevertheless modern means of mass communication have enabled both groups to join in asserting a transnational ethnic identity which is encouraged by the government of Andhra Pradesh for economic reasons. This revitalised Telugu identity resists both assimilation by the host nation and the nationalist agendas of the Indian government and the Indian diaspora. Unfortunately this article is poorly written and would have benefited from careful editing.

The impact of Partition and the consequent problem of placing Muslims within the Indian diaspora are addressed by Ellen Bal and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff in an article emphasising the importance of examining local contexts. In the nineteenth century, Mauritius and Suriname both received large numbers of indentured labourers from

around Calcutta, many of whom spoke Bhojpuri and a significant minority of whom were Muslim. In Mauritius, indigenous political rivalry combined with pressure from international Hindu and Muslim religious groups to split the Indo-Mauritian community along religious lines, leading the Muslims to distance themselves from India in favour of identification with the local multi-ethnic community or the international Islamic one. In Suriname, isolated by distance from the religious conflicts of the homeland, low-key communal conflict in the 1920s and 1930s was followed by a renewed identification as Suriname Hindustanis, united by a common historical origin in an undivided Hindustan homeland.

John Mattausch concludes the historical section with a critique of established notions relating the economic success of migrant communities to structural factors such as the extended family. Looking at the Gujarati community in the U.K., he emphasises that its economic prominence is a recent phenomenon quite unrelated to its traditionalist Hindu values. Rather both its capitalist expertise and its religious conservatism are effects of the trajectory through East Africa and the many accidental factors which impinged on this. He argues provocatively that chance is an important factor systematically ignored in the academic discourse.

The same community is the subject of the study which opens the second section of the book, on sociological and anthropological perspectives. Mario Rutten and Pravin J. Patel examine the relationship between Patels in the U.K. and in their home villages in Gujarat. These relationships are close and scrupulously maintained but fraught with ambivalence and resentment due to conflicting notions of social obligation. The expatriate Patels feel particularly bitter towards the Indian government which they see as having replaced a policy of total indifference with a cynical attempt at economic exploitation. The Nizari Ismaili Muslims studied by Anjoom Amir Mukadam and Sharmina Mawani also emigrated from Gujarat to East Africa and thence to Toronto and London, but in contrast to the Hindu Patels they have no ties to their twice-removed homeland. Rather they are united by their religion, as followers of the Aga Khan, who now lives in France. Consequently they fail a major test of diasporic identity, at the same time as they both maintain an ethnic identity and integrate into an increasingly pluralist host society. Mukadam and Mawani ask at what point do the descendants of migrants cease to be migrants. They argue it is time to replace essentialist conceptions,

such as 'between two cultures', with a more structuralist view and take account of the self-identification of second-generation migrants with their host country.

Sanderien Verstappen and Mario Rutten return to the question of globalised media and the construction of diasporic identity by questioning the assumption that Bollywood movies necessarily reconnect diasporic communities with their homeland. Bollywood movies enjoy great popularity world-wide, far beyond the boundaries of transnational Indian communities, so it is perhaps not surprising to find that Surinamese Indians in the Netherlands also enjoy Bollywood movies primarily for their escapism and spectacle, rather than turning to their essentially fantasy landscapes for a sense of identity or information about the twice removed homeland which is in any case often perceived as poor, backward and oppressive. Insofar as these movies do respond to a particular Hindustani identity, it is because their depiction of the extended family, with its tension between family demands and individual desires, mirrors its audience's experiences in situating themselves within their adopted Dutch environment. Next, Brit Lynnebakke examines the continuing division in the Indian migrant community of the Netherlands based on trajectories and points of origin. Surinamese Indians are seen by both groups as more traditional than those who have migrated directly from India to the Netherlands. The two groups do not socialise and intermarriage is discouraged. The recent migrants are of higher socio-economic status than the Surinamese whom they tend to look down on as descendants of indentured labourers from Bihar, one of the poorest parts of India, an attitude naturally resented by the Surinamese who regard the more recent migrants as untrustworthy and arrogant.

The book concludes with an afterword by Claude Markovits which returns to a historical perspective on the problems posed by the terms Indian and South Asian used in association with the now problematised concept of diaspora. While reluctant to jettison a concept that he concedes has become dear to the hearts of both the grant-seeking community and those they study, Markovits' historical meditations serve once again to underline the complexity and variety of the phenomena grouped under the vast generalisation of Indian diaspora. Were South Asians living as citizens throughout the British Empire a diaspora before the creation of the state of India? What relevance does a concept based on the Jewish response to the Roman Empire have to subsequent movements of peoples? Are all migrants part of a diaspora and at what point, if any, do

they cease to be so? Is a generalised point of origin really the best way of approaching transnational communities? This stimulating book is to be commended for challenging the concept of diaspora and opening up the complexity of human movements to wider and deeper discussion.