



Ajaya Kumar Sahoo and Gabriel Sheffer, eds., *Diaspora and Identity: Perspectives on South Asian Diaspora*

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A workable definition of diaspora (a Greek term meaning “scattering”), originally standing for the “dispersion” of the Jews following their Babylonian captivity, designates “a group that recognizes its separatedness based on common ethnicity/nationality, lives in a host country and maintains some kind of attachment to its home country or homeland” (Lahneman 2005, 7). As Pascale Herzog has it, the concept of diaspora “offers an alternative way of thinking about transnational migration and ethnic relations in contrast to those that rely on ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’” (2006, 96–97). The origin of Indian (South Asian) diaspora, a burgeoning influential phenomenon in world culture, harks back to the subcontinent’s incorporation into the British Empire, and the dispersal in the nineteenth century of many of its inhabitants from mostly the northern part of the country as indentured laborers to the Empire’s possessions in the Indian Ocean, South Sea islands, the Caribbean Sea, Southeast Asia, and South Africa. Following World War II and subsequently decolonization, the dispersal (voluntary emigration) of Indian labor and professionals has been a nearly global phenomenon. Indians and other South Asians provided labor in the reconstruction of war-torn Europe, particularly, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands; in more recent years unskilled labor from South Asia has been the main force in the transformation of the physical landscape of much of the Middle East.

Ajaya K. Sahoo and Gabriel Sheffer’s edited volume *Diaspora and Identity* contains ten chapters that are reprints of the articles published in the *Journal of South Asian Diaspora* (2009–2012), also edited by Dr. Sahoo. All the chapters are well researched and expertly written, and their different perspectives notwithstanding, deal with the complex nodal conundrum of the diasporic South Asians holding on to their homeland traditions, which they are prompted to readjust, recreate, and negotiate with a view to coping with their hostland’s cultural dominance. Yet this conflicting exchange does not degenerate into culture war, but a working, albeit occasionally precarious, compromise.

Over 30 million people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives constitute the South Asian diaspora inhabiting the globe outside of their homelands. They are diverse in terms of language, religion, and social structure, but by assiduously using collective mobilization and communication technology they have created transnational communities, thereby contributing significantly to the politics, economy, and culture of their hostlands.

Dibyesh Anand shows the ways in which diasporas can achieve subjectivity as an ethical position in order to challenge the bounded community of nation-states. Modern day diasporas, a large collective of people with shared ethnic markers of identity, may harbor political allegiance to their homeland while continuing to reside in their hostland. Thus, their individual subjectivity is marked by an ambiguity in that they

practice “a politics of identification” instead of their ethnicity and identity (13).

Bandana Purkayastha discusses how new global forces such as companies with global reach market cultural products like clothing, art, music, films, books, and cosmetics among South Asian target groups by appealing to their fundamental identities (27).

Pinna Werbner demonstrates how the diasporic Muslims of Britain, formerly considered non-threatening and relatively benign—their anti-Western and celebratory cultural rhetoric notwithstanding—have come recently under suspicion and accusations following suicide bombings on the London underground, and revelations of aborted conspiracies that they have been responsible for the failure of multiculturalism practiced in the country. The author believes that multiculturalism discourse is not “really about ‘culture,’” (36) but about, in her neologism, “multiculturalism-in-history” (46–47). Thus, multiculturalism, imbricated in religion, began with the Rushdie affair, following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (46). She concludes her essay by positing how the so-called “failure of multiculturalism” led the Muslim leaders of Britain toward “utilising the national platform of their own ethnic press, [and how this] has carved out a space of civility in which the responses of these leaders to expositions of their alleged extremism are expressed passionately and yet rationally” (58).

Rusi Jaspal and Adrian Coyle interview twelve second-generation Asians (SGA), focusing on the role of language in their identity formation. The authors subject their data to qualitative thematic analysis and formulate four superordinate themes: “Mother tongue and self,” “A sense of ownership and affiliation,” “Negotiating linguistic identities in social space,” and “The quest for a positive linguistic identity.” Participants expressed a desire for self-definition as Asian, but also a cautious concern about SGA monolingual in English as a possible loss of status among the diaspora Asians as whitewashed browns (77). The authors suggest careful intervention for sensitizing the SGA toward the pros and cons of monolingualism and bi-/multilingualism.

Laura Hirvi’s case study of “The Sikh Gurdwaras in Finland” focuses on the role of the *gurudvārā* (“gate of the guru”), a Sikh religious institution, functioning as an agent negotiating, maintaining, and transmitting immigrants’ identities. Her fieldwork conducted in metropolitan Helsinki leads her to comment on the question of identity among the Sikhs of Finland, who prefer to identify themselves as Indians (83). The author concludes that her fieldwork conducted during summer 2009 revealed that some of the Sikhs in Finland have formed a group with the intention of setting up their own separate worship gatherings (92).

In Herzig’s study on the placement of identity among South Asians in Kenya, we note how intra-ethnic relations (in 1989 approximately 90,000 Asians, the majority of them Gujaratis and Punjabis from India, including some of the latter ethnic group from Pakistan), more specifically networking, form a key to successful social mobility. The Asians in Kenya are mainly concentrated in the urban centers, including Nairobi, where community associations and services have been developed, each with its own place of worship and its own schools. It should be understood, Herzig observes, that “South Asians in Kenya are not a monolithic ethnic group, but they are differentiated by religion and region of origin—the so-called communities” (102). However, the post–World War II and post-independence decades witnessed the gradual replacement of the communal networks by social networks. However, the established Asians have developed a specific East African identity. As one of Herzig’s interviewees, an aging Hindu woman in Nairobi, averred: “I don’t know to which community I belong. My

father was a Brahmin, my mother a Kshatriya, both from Gujarat. Their families disowned them, that's the reason why they came to Kenya. I married a Punjabi Hindu, an Arya Samajist. I do not identify myself with any Community. If you asked my sons, they would say I'm a Kenyan—full stop!" (101).

In her "Trajectory of Social Mobility: Asian Indian Children Coming of Age in New York City," Rupam Saran investigates the intergenerational (upward or downward social mobility of individuals in relation to their parents) and intragenerational (changes in social position in one's lifetime). This task calls for dealing with four major issues: first, to determine the extent the current challenges in the US economy (economic depression since 2007) hinder their upward social mobility; second, how parental cultural, social, and human capitals contribute to their children's social mobility; third, what is the relationship between intragenerational and intergenerational mobility within the Asian Indian context; and fourth, how the second generation (and 1.5 generation) youth take advantage of parental cultural capital, and their counsels of benefiting from their two worlds: the traditional culture of their community, and the Western culture and education of their hostland. As Saran reports, "[s]econd-generation youths in this study expressed that 'the best of both worlds' was a normal thing for them and 'it was their way of life'" (131). Although the job situation has deteriorated due to the recession, and the consequent anti-immigration attitude has been gaining ground, the select young participants in Saran's study are, reportedly, "trying to do their best by reworking two worlds. Their success comes from their location between two cultures and their profound creativity to bridge the differences of two cultures" (133).

The ability of the Asian Indian youth of New York to tread successfully between the two cultures at home and in the outer world works to their advantage in the same way as for their Canadian counterparts in the Greater Toronto Area, in balancing between cultural moral constraints at home and pursuing their social and intimate cross-gender relationships in social space free from parental control and constraints. Their successful strategy owes to their expert use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), as we learn from an interesting study by three Canadian scholars, Arshia U. Zaidi, Amanda Couture, and Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale in "The Power of Technology: A Qualitative Analysis of How South Asian Youth Use Technology to Maintain Cross-Gender Relationships." The three researchers acknowledge their use of a psychological theory of uses and gratification (U&G) to explicate the goal-oriented motives of the CMC users. They clearly articulate these motives: "building relationships, keeping connected with partners, discreet communication, initiating relationships, easing potentially uncomfortable discussions and...communicating when face-to-face interaction is not possible" (143).

P. Pratap Kumar examines the role of caste identity in the Tamil- and Telegu-speaking South Asian diaspora in the West Indies and the UK. The Indians arrived in South Africa as indentured laborers from Madras and Calcutta during 1860 and 1870. By the end of the first generation, the practice and proliferation of using caste names as last names became widespread, by way of demonstrating one's social status through one's name, either for ritual purposes (priesthood) or for marriage purposes. As Kumar observes, "South Asian Hindu society is basically hierarchical in nature structured around caste and its institutions. So, it is obvious that the first-generation Indians in South Africa naturally tried to display the social behavior that they were used to" (162) by staying within their respective subcaste or *jāti* system. But the South African

situation, where there was a shortage of requisite numbers of the same *jāti* group to exchange marriage partners and perform priestly functions, led to frequent violations of the *jāti* regulations. Hence, by the middle of the twentieth century, the *jāti* became obsolescent, yielding the pride of place to more universal affiliations such as language-based groupings, such as “Tamil,” “Telegu,” or “Gujarati.” Yet the memory and mystique of the *jāti* persist to this day. As Kumar concludes, even the present generation of South African Hindus continue to “display their caste name as part of their last name or discreetly acquire caste names if they came from lower order caste groups” (167–68).

While acknowledging the undoubted excellence of this anthology, I am disappointed with the editors’ exclusion of studies on the rising popularity of Indian religion (Hinduism), cuisine, and couture (for example, Desai 2003 and Chowdhury 2000). The exertions of the Ramakrishna Mission, the Hare Krishna movement, and the Hindu gurus (since the advent of the handsome and ebullient Swami Vivekananda) have made remarkable inroads into the Judeo-Christian West. Thanks to the diasporic South Asians, especially in the UK and US, Hindu festivals such as *Diwali* (*dīpāvalī*) and *Holi* have become widely popular, drawing enthusiastic participation by the native populace of the hostlands. The influential academic scholarly web post RISA (Religion in South Asia) has been a wonderful, creative, and critical global forum of discussions, debates, deliberations, and dialogue on mainline Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, as well as the esoteric cults and tribal religions. Inclusion of these topics in the book under review would have vastly enhanced its scope and enriched the quality of its contents.

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