Indian Diaspora
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Socio-Religious and Cultural World of the Indian Diaspora

P. Pratap Kumar

In many countries, Indian community is in existence for over one and a half centuries (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, West Indian Islands, East Africa and South Africa) while in other places they are at least into the second generation (e.g., UK, Continental Europe, USA and Australia). This volume is dedicated to understanding how the social worlds of these immigrant groups have evolved and what issues have been and continue to be of significance to these communities in their countries. It is also to understand how their orientation to the land of their origins may have changed. For instance, questions such as, do they continue to think of the land of their origins as their homeland or, has their present location become their homeland? Is there a difference between the relatively newer immigrants and the 5th or 6th generation Indians in their association to their land of origins? How can the internal differentiations within the broader Indian community be understood without tending to homogenize the Indian as one ethnic or racial category?

On a comparative level, Indian communities that live in the former colonial locations seem to have undergone more substantive changes than the first and second generation Indians living in various western countries. They have also evolved their own cultural and religious orientations and become more deeply entrenched in local political and economic life as opposed to those who presently live in countries in North America and Continental Europe. It must, however, be admitted that even in the North American and the European context, Indian diaspora is beginning to take deeper roots by entrenching themselves in local economies and politics and creating their own unique identities. Broadly speaking two streams of immigration of Indians to various parts of the world beginning from the colonial period could be identified—those who were taken as labourers under various systems of colonial labour, as well as those who followed them as ‘passenger’ Indians or traders; and those who immigrated in recent decades as skilled, semi and unskilled workers. Although most of the recent immigrations have been to the western world or the first world countries due to better economic conditions, interestingly a significant number of immigrants have also gone to countries where Indian communities lived since colonial period—such as South Africa. Most of these new immigrants to places
where Indian community has already settled tend to be either business persons or professionals related to Information and Technology fields as well as various fields of education. The present volume covers both the earlier immigrations under colonial rule as well as the contemporary immigrations. It might be useful to present some historical overview of the Indian diaspora before going further.

Some General Background of Indian Diaspora

According to the government of India database of 2012, the total number of ‘People of Indian Origin’ outside of India is 11,872,114. The database makes a distinction between Non-Resident Indians and People of Indian Origin. The latter refers to those who are not Indian citizens and have migrated to various countries both during the colonial period as well as those who have settled outside India in more recent times. It also includes those who have twice emigrated such as those People of Indian Origin from East Africa to various countries in the West.\(^1\) It is important to underline the relationship between patterns of migration and the nature of the ethnic and linguistic communities of Indian origin that have come to exist today in various parts of the world. This is significant particularly in the case of the colonial migrations of Indians. Since the abolition of slavery in 1833 in the British colonies and subsequently in other European colonies such as French, Dutch and Portuguese the demand for cheaper labour became intensified. By 1834, the British began the transfer of Indian labour to Mauritius with other colonial governments following suit. By 1878 large populations of Indian labour had come to live in various colonial locations such as Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa, Surinam and Fiji (Naujoks 2009). Naujoks notes that plantation workers to Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji and Mauritius were mainly recruited from the present states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, while workers to Guyana and East Africa came from Punjab and Gujarat respectively. In the French colonies of Guadelupe, Martinique and La Reunion labourers mostly came from Tamil speaking regions (Naujoks 2009). However, labourers to South Africa came both from the northern states and southern states of India and largely belonged to four linguistic backgrounds—Tamil and Telugu from the South, Hindi and Gujarati from the North (Kumar 2013) Different systems of labour recruitments were used that would impact on the social structures in

\(^1\) See: http://moia.gov.in/services.aspx?ID1=300&id=m9&idp=59&mainid=23 (accessed on 26 December 2013).
these colonies where the Indian diaspora settled. The Kangani or Maistry systems that were used for Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Burma facilitated a much more homogenous ethnic group structure along familiar caste lines to survive in the colonies because both systems allowed for people from the same village and often from the same caste communities to migrate in groups of families. However, the indenture system that was first tried in Mauritius and later used more prolifically in South Africa allowed only individual labourers to migrate which affected the homogeneity associated with traditional social organisations such as caste. Even linguistic homogeneity was a difficult achievement among South African Indians as much cross fertilization had occurred both among the South Indian groups as well as among the North Indian groups. In other words, labourers from the South would have included not only the dominant Tamil and Telugu groups, but some Kannada and Malayalam speaking groups. However, the minority groups seem to have become integrated into the Tamil and Telugu speaking groups over time through marriage and assimilation of rituals of the dominant groups. Similarly, in the case of the North Indian groups, not only people from the Hindi speaking belt but also from the far flung states in the North as far as Bengal on the east coast had come to Natal. But they would have become homogenized as Hindi speaking group. The exception in South Africa would be the Gujarati speaking communities who managed to maintain some semblance of traditional caste affiliations because they mostly came as groups from the same village and often the same caste and religion (Kumar 2013). The type of migration also impacted on the nature of the mercantile activities that the merchant groups came to pursue. While merchants from Gujarat became shop owners in East Africa, smaller traders from Kerala and Tamilnadu mostly remained retail traders in Burma, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malaysia or became providers of small scale money lending (Naujoks 2009).

Colonial migration to North America and Britain did occur during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but was very small compared to the colonies. Indian migration to North America—United States and Canada—was mainly from the present state of Punjab and most of them were of Sikh religion. By 1930 there were about 8700 Punjabi Sikh labourers working in the Californian agricultural sector, while by 1907 there were about 5000 workers of Punjabi/Sikh background in British Columbia working in agricultural and timber industry. While the United States began to restrict the immigration of people of South Asia and East Asia between 1917 and 1924, the Canadian government imposed immigration restrictions around 1907 to avoid Indian immigration to Canada. By 1907 there were about 5000 Indians mainly from Punjab in Canada. In Britain the immigration of Indians was much less and those who settled in Britain between the First World War and the Second World War numbered
around 8000 and they were mostly educated Parsees and Bengalis. British raj restricted Indian immigration to Britain by not issuing them passports since 1930s to avoid less educated Indians entering Britain. Coupled with the introduction of the Passports Act of 1967 and the British Commonwealth Acts of 1962 and 1968 many Punjabi Sikhs immigrated to Britain (Naujoks 2009). Between 1995 and 2005 there were approximately 218,283 Indians settled in Britain. During the same period the total number of Indians settling in various countries in the West stands at about 1,373,492. This trend of Indian immigration to the West is generally attributed to the IT industry demands in the West. Many countries adjusted their immigration laws to allow for the IT professionals and other highly skilled workers to seek employment in the West including the US. As such, the total population of People of Indian Origin presently living abroad may be classified into two categories—those who left during the colonial period under different labour contracts; and those who immigrated after the independence of India. The latter includes both low skilled and highly skilled workers. In order to understand the newly emerging socio-religious and cultural worlds of Indians outside India we need to add the scenario of what has come to be known as the secondary migration. These migrations occurred mostly from East Africa, Fiji and the Caribbean countries. And they mostly went to Britain, Canada, the US, and Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands (Naujoks 2009). Although temporary immigration to countries in West Asia continues to happen, we shall not deal with that segment of Indian population for the purpose of this volume. Also, though the temporary migrants may constitute the Indian diaspora in some limited sense, they have not struck permanent roots to emerge as fully fledged citizens in those countries, notwithstanding the role they might play in adding to the diasporic experience of the Indians.

In order to understand the socio-religious and cultural world of the Indian diaspora of both the colonial period and the post-Independence era we shall now turn to highlighting the following aspects—Life in Indenture and Beyond, Life and Under Apartheid and Beyond, and Constructing Religious Institutions in the Diaspora.

Life in Indenture and Beyond

To mark this important landmark period in the history of the Indian diaspora this volume begins with the section on Life in Indenture and Beyond. The

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2 The total number of people of Indian Origin living in the UK by 2001 was around 470,000 (Naujoks 2009).
narratives about the life in indenture throughout the various colonies to which the Indian labourers were taken is unsurprisingly very similar notwithstanding the fact that different systems of labour contracts were used in different colonies.

Three of the chapters in this section have branched off from such conventional sources and relied on orally transmitted and ethnographically collected data. Using oral narratives they describe not only life in indenture but also how that has affected life in India.

In the first chapter, Archana Kumar and RN Tiwari deploy oral narrative as a valuable tool to recount life in India as affected by indenture. In justification of oral narrative as valid means of unpacking indenture story they argue:

Oral traditions do not merely refer to verbal lore—tales, songs, proverbs etc., but the term is used in a wider sense as is done by Jan Vansina. Oral traditions may include eyewitness accounts, hearsay, testimonies, reminiscences and commentaries too. Oral traditions, transmitted from one generation to another by word of mouth, and retained and relayed through individual and collective memory, embody truth of a different kind. Encompassing lived experiences of common people and “common voices,” oral traditions can be equally valuable source of reconstructing and reinterpreting past.

Collecting oral songs and narratives both in India and Mauritius, Kumar and Tiwari reconstruct indenture life on a more personal level. Such narratives often emphasise the suffering that the indentured labourers endured. However, Tetri Devi’s song recounts her own loss and misery while separated from her husband and continue to live in India. In a sense, these oral narratives offer an insight into what might have happened to the families that the indentured workers left behind. In a similar vein Ashutosh Kumar in the following chapter analyses the folk songs and poems that were popular in northern India. In his paper, he points out that the opposition to the indenture system did not only come from the colonies where the system was in operation. But it also came from the Indian religious and community organizations. Two stakeholders in this connection were the Arya Samaj and the Marwari Sahayak Samiti both of whom were located in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Both these organizations condemned the system of indenture to the extent that it alerted the attention of the British colonial office. It might be surprising that the Arya Samaj was actively opposing the system of indenture given the fact that they also saw it as an opportunity to deploy their ambassadors to the colonies where the indentured Hindus lived in an effort to transform the ritualistic Hinduism that they considered superstitious and backwards. However, the Marwari community had a certain commercial interest in opposing the indenture system. Their