

# DEBUNKING THE INDIAN DIASPORAS

Empirical explorations and theoretical assumptions.

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The Indian Diasporas. A disputed empirical and historical framework.

## Introduction

Currently, around 20,000,000 people of Indian origin live outside the borders of India, with the majority located in Africa, the Caribbean and Oceania.<sup>1</sup> Although there are regional variations in their adaptations, in many ways they display a common 'Indian' identity.<sup>2</sup> They may want their children to prosper in their adopted countries, but at the same time they would prefer them to adopt Indian family values, marry other Indians and share their common culture. In other words, many South Asian overseas tend to reproduce Indian culture, values, language and religion as much as possible.<sup>3</sup> In addition, nowadays many South Asian migrants try to re-connect with their homeland. Either through the modern mass media, internet or through personal visits. These re-connections are often seen as a romantic 'rendez-vous' with the historical past and the 'original roots'.<sup>4</sup>

Within, the 'Indian diaspora' academic literature, the reproduction of culture in often hostile environment as well as the relation with the homeland are key-features of the diaspora concept. Nevertheless, in this volume we emphasize a rather different approach. The authors in this volume realised during their fieldwork and archival research that in quite a few cases overseas Indians were not interested in re-connecting with the homeland. They felt that they were excluded from their historical

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<sup>1</sup> Figures vary in the range from 12,000,000 to 26,000,000 depending whether or not they include Non-resident Indians (NRIs), 'mixed' parentage and their offspring. In general, these figures do not include the People of Indian Origin who now reside in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Many statistics also exclude the number of 'Indians' settled in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Nepal.

<sup>2</sup> The limits of the use of the word 'Indian' and the fact that this process of adaptation is not a 'natural' process will be discussed further in this introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Recent examples include, G. Oonk, The changing culture of the Hindu Lohana community in East Africa, *Contemporary South Asia* (13) 1, 2004, 7-23. In this article the process of cultural adaptation of migrants towards a new environment is described in terms of a process of stretching and closing preferences of identity from the migrants' perspective. See also, K.E. Nayar, *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver. Three Generations amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism*. University of Toronto Press, 2004. M. Gosine and D. Narine (eds) *Sojourners to Settlers: Indian Migrants in the Caribbean and the Americas*, Windsor Press 1999.

<sup>4</sup> G. Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics. At Home Abroad*, Cambridge 2003; W. Safran, Diasporas in Modern Societies, *Diaspora* 1 (1) 1991, 83-99; W. Safran, Comparing Diasporas: A Review Essay, *Diaspora* 8 (3), 255-92.

roots by the Government of India as is the case with many Muslim Indians after partition and Indian Africans after the expulsion by Idi Amin of Uganda. In the case of 'twice migrants' like the Hindustanis in the Netherlands we find that they may identify with India as well as Surinam. In addition, it is shown that in case where Indians reconnect with the villages of the ancestor's birthplace, the relation with family members back home has become ambivalent and is sometimes experienced with unease. In other words, re-connection with the homeland is self-evident. It may or may not happen. Though some of these findings are not new, they shed some fresh light on the diaspora concept as a whole.

The main aim of this volume is to bring together sociological, anthropological and historical perspectives on the 'Indian Diaspora'. The papers published in this volume present new empirical research on South Asian migrants worldwide. The authors share a strong ambivalent feeling towards the mainstream issues highlighted in the 'South Asians in diaspora' discourse, like the emphasis on the migrants' relation with the homeland and the reproduction of Indian culture abroad. In this sense, this book may be read as a first attempt to focus on the limits of the diaspora concept, rather than its possibilities and range. From a comparative perspective, with examples from South Asian migrants in Suriname, Mauritius, East Africa, the UK and the Netherlands, this volume shows that in each of these regions there are South Asian migrants whose histories raise questions related to the Indian diaspora concept. Therefore we try to stretch the concept from its current use by highlighting empirical cases, which raise questions about the effectiveness of the diaspora concept.

This introduction starts with a short outline of four different migration patterns from the South Asian continent. The causes of migration differ, as well as the length of migrants staying abroad. This will be followed by a short historiography of studies on the 'overseas Indian communities'. Here, the transition from labelling South Asian migrants from 'overseas Indian communities' to 'South Asian diasporas' is highlighted. In the third section I propose three different perspectives on the diaspora concept and how it is to be used. The first perspective focuses on the analytical framework of the concept; the second perspective is that of the Government of India and, the third perspective focuses on the way the diaspora concept is used or received by the overseas migrants themselves. In the final section, I introduce the various papers and highlight where they may fit in the proposed perspectives.

## Various migrations, one diaphora?

The South Asian migrants, or their ancestors, left the subcontinent as a part of various migration patterns. These migration patterns include the Indian trading communities who have for centuries travelled from Hong Kong and Central Asia to East Africa and Panama. In this literature, the emergence of long-distance trading connections – including the circulation of capital –, the changing role of women, and the notions of ‘trust’ are important issues.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the migration of the so-called ‘Indentured Labourers’ in the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries is well documented, with the main focus on the travel and working conditions of the labourers, the nature of the contracts, and the number of returnees.<sup>6</sup> In the same period, some Indians migrated as clerks and teachers to serve colonial Government overseas. They are mostly described as being a part of the colonial expansion scheme, where Indians contributed by collaborating with the British.<sup>7</sup> After the Partition in 1947, many Muslims migrated from India to East and West Pakistan. More recently many, often highly educated –often skilled software engineers-, Indians found their way into the US, Canada and the UK, whereas many unskilled Indians migrated to the various Gulf States. All these groups enjoyed various degrees of attention from historians, anthropologists, sociologists, the Indian Government, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and other interested parties. Bringing these various migration patterns together under the unifying label ‘Indian Diaspora’ is not an easy task.<sup>8</sup> These patterns vary in causes and consequences of migration, numbers of migrants, periods of migration, the numbers of returnees, the way in which they were received by their host countries, whether or not circular

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<sup>5</sup> S. Dale, *Indian Merchants and the Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750*, Cambridge 1994; C. Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants 1750-1947. Traders of Sindh from Bukhara to Panama*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; S. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade 1550-1900*, Koninklijke Brill, Leiden 2002; D.W. Rudner, *Caste and Imperialism in Colonial India: The Nattukotai Chetiars*, Berkeley CA 1994. B. Sue-White, *Turbans and Traders: Hong Kong's Indian Communities*, Hong Kong 1994.

<sup>6</sup> M. Carter, *Coolitude. An Anthology of the Indian Diaspora*, London Athens Press 2002. K.O. Laurence, *A Question of Labour. Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana, 1875-1917*, London, James Currey 1994.; D. Northop, *Indentured Labor in the age of Imperialism 1843-1924*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1995. H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, Oxford University Press 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Bosma, U./Oonk G. ‘Bombay-Batavia. Parsi and Indo-European variations in mediating 1800-1947’, in Randerad, N. (ed.), *Mediators between State and Society in Comparative Perspective*, Hilversum 1998, 17-40. H. Tinker, ‘Indians in South East Asia: Imperial auxiliaries,’ in C. Clarke, C. Peach, S. Vertovec, *South Asians overseas: Migration and Ethnicity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1990.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Varma, Sushma J., and Radhika Seshan (eds.). *Fractured Identity: The Indian Diaspora in Canada*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication

migration was transformed into permanent settlement and family reunion, and the questions of whether there was a locally emerging as 2nd-, 3rd- and higher-generation 'Indian migrants' instead of assimilating within the local society. In addition, there is a vast difference between the religious, regional and ethnical backgrounds of the migrants. They are labelled as 'Hindus' with a great variety of castes, sub-castes and 'jatis'. There is a great diversity in sects and beliefs present among South Asian Muslims (Sunnis, Ismailis) as well as a number of religious/ethnic groups such as Sikhs, Jains, Goans and others. Additionally, there is the wide variety in regional and language backgrounds: the Gujaratis (Hindus and Muslims) from North-West India, Telugu migrants from the South, Bhojpuri-speaking peoples from the North-East and Central India, and so on.

In general, this mosaic of Indian identities abroad is presented as the mirror of India itself. India is diverse, and so too are its migrants. It is acknowledged that Indian migrants abroad tend to reproduce their religion, family patterns, and culture as much as possible. At the same time, however, they adjust to local circumstances. Barriers of caste and language have to be negotiated in new environments. This is not a natural process, but one in which great efforts need to be made – sometimes in the direction of maintaining one's culture, but also in the direction of the host society. In other words, these migrants differ in their cultural and religious backgrounds, in the causes and duration of their migration, and the extent to which they adapt to local societies.

This volume discusses two basic problems concerning the Indian diaspora. One is the prefix 'Indian'. And the other is the word 'diaspora'. The implication of the first is that there is a single India with its people, who are somehow united under the same flag. This is far from obvious. India has been described as a 'nation and its fragments' or an 'invented nation'.<sup>9</sup> In this literature the unity of India is a construction or, at best, referred to as 'unity in variety'. This is even more so for South Asians abroad, who had experienced various processes of integration and assimilation in very different host countries. Moreover, Indians abroad do not so much identify with India as a nation but with the 'homeland', that is the specific region where the migrants – or their descendents – come from. They often refer to themselves as Bengalis, Gujaratis,

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<sup>9</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nations and its fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial histories*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1993. G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a nation in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press 1997.

Telugus, or to their specific sub-castes, like Patels, Lohanas, Cutchis. Inasmuch as they have created a 'myth' about their 'homeland', it appears that region and locality is much more important in structuring migrants' identities than 'religion' or 'nationality'. Claude Markovits rightly asserts that migrants from Gujarat, whether they were Hindu Muslims or Jains, had more in common with each other in their experience of migration than Gujarati Hindus had with Bhojupuri Hindus, or Gujarati Muslims with Bojpuri Muslims.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, this is not the case for many South Asian migrants in the Caribbean, or the 'twice migrants' in the UK and the Netherlands. These are descendants of Indian indentured labourers who migrated from India to the Caribbean, and from there to the UK or the Netherlands. Most of today's descendants from these migrants are hardly aware of their regions of origin, whether it is Bihar, Bengal or Uttar Pradesh. For them, a vague notion of 'India' remains. However, in their host countries, South Asians in the Caribbean, UK, East Africa and elsewhere are referred to as 'Indians' with the region of origin not playing a role. This suggests that the prefix 'Indian' has a local meaning, but not so much in terms of 'self-identification', but more as a labelling by outsiders. For many outsiders, India is not fragmented, and the geographical masses of the continent pre-suppose a cultural unity.

This idea of 'unity' of the South Asian subcontinent is nowadays reproduced in the vast and growing literature on the 'Indian diaspora', emphasizing how and to what extent 'Indian' culture was reproduced in the various host countries. In addition, the often-ambivalent relation of migrants abroad with their homeland is highlighted. In this literature, the word 'India' is often rightly substituted for 'South Asian' especially to refer to pre-independence migrants whose origins lie in contemporary Pakistan or Bangladesh. Despite this, the Government of India has recently made a strong effort to reconnect its migrants of the '*Indian* diaspora'. Here, the word 'Indian' is – again – clearly intended to unify the migrants whose origins lie within the current borders of the Republic of India. This means that the prefix 'Indian' has been defined – though not without problems as we will see in this volume – by the Indian State. At the same time, we realize that these problems beg the question: how far can the construct of a comparative Indian diaspora take us?

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<sup>10</sup> C. Markovits, *The Global World*, 6.

The second problem is the word 'diaspora'. Despite the growing acceptance of the word for migrant groups outside the Jewish diaspora, social scientists do not agree on two basic questions regarding diaspora studies. One is: *what* is a diaspora? What are we studying? And the second; *who* is a diaspora? In other words, do all international migrant groups belong to a diaspora? Moreover, should we consider a diaspora as a static and unchanging phenomena, or is it constantly changing? And if so, how and in what direction, and why? In addition, from an academic point of view, the question is: what do we gain by using the 'diaspora concept', however it may be defined? Are there any new insights to be expected or is it just another buzzword? Obviously, the popularity of the term itself is related to the increasing relevance of representations of 'identity' and 'culture' in international politics.<sup>11</sup> The diaspora debate during the past decade has been passing through two extreme positions. One is that the term and concept refers to the specific migration of the Jews, which occurred under very unique historical circumstances. The other is that of universal applicability to all cases of immigration and settlement beyond the borders of nation-states where they originally belonged, irrespective of the circumstances of migration.

A diaspora refers to a particular kind of migration. Most scientists agree that at least a few of the following characteristics are crucial to describing a diaspora. (1) Dispersal from an original homeland to two or more countries. The causes for the dispersal may vary from traumatic experiences, as was the case with the Jews, or the African slaves, or in search of work, in pursuit of trade or other ambitions. (2) There must be a collective – often idealized – memory/myth of the homeland. In some cases there is a commitment to create and/or maintain this homeland, like some Sikhs and their efforts to create an independent Kalisthan, or the Jews and their relation with Israel. (3) A myth of return to the homeland (either now or in the future, temporary or permanent). This myth is grounded in a strong ethnic group consciousness of migrants abroad, and therefore may have prevented them from assimilating in the local society. (4) There is a sense of empathy and solidarity with similar groups elsewhere in the world and/or with events and groups in the homeland.<sup>12</sup> Diaspora is a term used today to describe practically any population

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<sup>11</sup> Kim D. Butler, 'Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse', *Diaspora* 10 (2) 2001, 189-219. R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas : An introduction*, Seattle WA, University of Washington Press 1997; W. Safran, 'Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return', *Diasporas* (1) 1 1991, 83-99. S. Vertovec, *The Hindu Diaspora. Comparative Patterns*, Routledge London 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, Safran, Kylotti

which is considered 'deterritorialized' or 'transnational', whose cultural origins are said to have arisen in land other than that in which they currently reside, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or indeed, span globe. According to Vertovec, intellectuals and activists from within these populations are increasingly using this term and emphasise that the 'Diasporic language' appears to be replacing, or at least supplementing, minority discourse".<sup>13</sup> In this volume we show that some overseas Indians may not fit in the diaspora model. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves, what are we studying and why?

### **From 'Overseas Indian Communities' to the 'South Asian Diasporas'.**

The study of South Asian migrants overseas is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the British Colonial Government itself was among the first to systematically observe, count, and describe the number of Indian migrants, their religious backgrounds, working conditions, and so on in the British Colonial Empire. These reports, correspondence and diaries are still the main sources of the history of South Asian migration. This means that the migration is often seen by outsiders and not by the migrants themselves. In addition, the themes studied were related to the 'outsider ruler' knowledge and desired information. They included themes such as: numbers of migrants, questions related to travel permits, settlement conditions, tax payments, trading licenses but also typical colonial obsessions like *sati*, Indian sexuality, child marriage, arranged marriages and religion.

In the 19th- and early 20th centuries, the word 'diaspora' was not used in these reports. The general nominator was 'overseas Indians' and this was also the phrase used by academics after the Independence of India [1947]. The first two comprehensive academic overviews on the history of South Asians overseas were published in the early 1950s by Kondapi (1951) and Cumpston (1953).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the interest in the overseas Indians changed once the colonial empire had collapsed. The most popular theme now became cultural persistence, the ability of Indians to retain, reconstitute and revitalise many aspects of their culture in an overseas setting. These studies dealt with the processes of acculturation, adaptation and, in the end, the perspective of plural society, first advocated by Furnivall

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<sup>13</sup> James Clifford 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, (9) 3 1994, 311.

<sup>14</sup> I. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories*, London Oxford University Press 1953. C. Kondapi, *Indians Overseas 1838-1949*, Bombay Oxford University Press 1951.

(1948).<sup>15</sup> Early examples include regional studies like that of Palmer, Gillion and Griffit.<sup>16</sup> On the macro level, neo-Marxists developed a centre-periphery model of the global development of capitalism. Here the focus is on the changing push and pull factors which determined the causes of South Asian migration. The emergence of an imbalanced regional economic development may have hampered, hindered or promoted migration.<sup>17</sup>

It is especially from the mid-1970s that historians, geographers and anthropologists started to produce research in the field of what we now call the 'South Asian Diaspora'. F.N Ginwala, for example, introduced the notion of the 'Indian South Africans'. The notion of local space and embedding of Indian culture was studied by S.Shah and Winchester.<sup>18</sup> It was, however, not an 'Asianist' but a world historian who proposed an important shift towards the construction of the South Asian Diaspora: Phillip D. Curtin. In his book *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Cambridge 1984, he introduces the term 'trade diaspora,' including that of the South Asian 'trade diaspora'. Moreover, he emphasizes the relation of cross-cultural traders with their hosts, with each other and the way they organised the cross-cultural trade.<sup>19</sup>

This growing interest eventually culminated in a unique international conference on 'South Asian Communities overseas'. The conference and the proceedings transformed the rhetoric of South Asians' migration and the history of 'Indians overseas'. Note that the word 'diaspora' was not yet in use at Oxford University in 1987. The published proceedings (1991), however, do use the term

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<sup>15</sup> J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, New York 1948. This literature – related to India – is well summarised in R.K. Jain, *Indian communities abroad. Themes and Literature*. Delhi 1993.

<sup>16</sup> K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Immigrants*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1962. J.A.G. Griffith, *Coloured Immigrants in Britain*, London, Oxford University Press 1960; M. Palmer, *The History of Indians in Natal*, Cape Town Oxford University Press 1957.

<sup>17</sup> G. Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, New York 1967. I. Wallerstein, 'The Rise and Future Demise of World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analyses.' In *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, 1974: 387-415; S. Amin, *Unequal development*, London 1976.

<sup>18</sup> F.N. Ginwala, 'Class. Consciousness and Control: Indian South Africans, 1960-1946. D.Phil Oxford University 1974. S. Shah, 'Aspects of the Geographic Analysis of Asian Immigrants in London,' a D.Phil thesis, Oxford University 1980. S.W.C, 'Social Activity and Spatial Structure,' D.Phil Thesis Oxford University.

<sup>19</sup> Phillip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Cambridge 1984. His most important predecessor may be Abner Cohen, *Customs and Politics in Urban Africa. A study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns*, University of California Press, Los Angeles 1969. He expanded on this in his 'Cultural strategies in the organization of trading diasporas', in Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *The development of indigenous trade and markets in West Africa*, pp. 266–81. London: Oxford University Press. See also the article of Scott Levi in this volume.

'diaspora'.<sup>20</sup> The book is edited by Steven Vertovec, who also used the term 'diaspora' in his introduction of the volume. The introduction, however, highlights the British interest in the history of South Asia in general. It especially emphasized the contribution of academics at the Oxford University Press. There is no reference to the concept of diaspora as it is used now [see page 5-6]. None of the other papers use the word 'diaspora', either in the titles or in the articles themselves.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the term 'diaspora' became fashionable. Its connotations were no longer monopolised by the Jewish diaspora. The question was raised as to whether other groups of migrants could be labelled as a diaspora. Politicians and representatives of overseas communities started using the term 'diaspora'. Africans, Armenians and indeed Indians and Chinese migrants began to refer to themselves as being part of a 'diaspora'. Moreover, the academic field began to question the way in which the word 'diaspora' would be useful in understanding migration, migrants and the relation between the motherland and host societies. This was especially highlighted in the establishment of the *Journal of Diaspora Studies* in 1991.

The *Journal of Diaspora Studies* point of departure is well formulated by its general editor Khachig Tölölyan. In his view, the concept has been related to a growing field of meanings, including processes of transnationalism, de-territorialization and cultural hybridity. These meanings are opposed to more 'rooted forms' of identifications such as 'regions' and 'nations'. This implies a growing interest in the discourse of 'rootedness', changing identities and the relation between the local and the global.

A few years later (1995), Peter van de Veer edited his highly-praised volume *Nation and Migration. The Politics of Space in the South Asian diaspora*. van de Veer and other contributors question the radical modernity of the experience of displacement, disjuncture, and diaspora. Migration has ambiguities of its own, based on what van de Veer calls the dialectics of 'belonging and longing'. Here, the theme of belonging juxtaposes rootedness with uprootedness, establishment with marginality. Longing, then, was related to the desire for change and movement. The yearning for 'arrival' and doing new things, as well as 'returning' to the known. In this volume, these topics were articulated in two interrelated areas of importance: nation

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<sup>20</sup> The proceedings have been published: S. Vertovec, Oxford University Papers on India. Aspects of the South Asian Diaspora, Oxford University Press 1991.

and migration, and nation and religion. The volume presents the diverse forms and dynamics of the 'politics of space'. Interestingly, however, none of the contributors – at that time – questioned whether all South Asians abroad form part of a diaspora or not. South Asian migrants abroad are presumably part of a diaspora by definition. The question is: by which definition? The definition according to the researchers, in their desire to be precise, or according to the subject themselves?

As the diaspora concept has grown mature, alternative definitions, different approaches and new suggestions for more research are emerging. Steven Vertovec (2000) proposes three meanings of Diaspora: diaspora as a *social form*; diaspora as a *type of consciousness*, and diaspora as a *mode of cultural production*.

The diaspora as a '*social form*' refers to the process of becoming scattered; the community living in foreign parts, and the place or geographic space. It draws on the Jewish model, and looks at the way social ties were cemented, the process of maintaining a collective identity, institutionalising networks, and social and economic strategies as a transnational group. In addition, it focuses on their political orientations, their inability – or unwillingness – to be accepted by the 'host society'. Especially in the contemporary period, where communication and transportation are relatively easy and inexpensive, the diaspora as a social form may be characterized as a 'triangular relationship' between (a) the 'globally dispersed, yet strongly transnational organised group (b) the territorial states where groups reside and (c) the Indian State or imagined homeland.

The diaspora as a *type of consciousness* emphasizes the variety of experiences, a state of mind and a sense of identity. This is described as *dual or paradoxical nature*. This nature has various connotations. First, it refers to the experience of discrimination and exclusion, and at the same time the positive identification with the highly-praised historical heritage of the Indian civilisation. Second, the awareness of multi-locality, the notion of belonging 'here and there' as well as sharing the same 'roots' and 'routes'.<sup>21</sup> The awareness of the ability to make a connection here and there, making the bridge between the local and the global. Third, the double consciousness creates a 'triple consciousness', that is the awareness of the double consciousness and being able to use that instrumentally. In addition to the identification with the host society, and the homeland, there is the identification with

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<sup>21</sup> (Gilroy).

the locality. Especially in the discourse of multi-culturality. Indians in Southall, London include the awareness of being 'Southallian', emphasizing their multi-racial character, within the discourse of the multi-cultural character of their local environment.<sup>22</sup>

The diaspora as a *mode of cultural production* emphasizes the flows of cultural objects, images and meanings back and forth. And the way these transcend, creolize and change according to the wishes of the customers and artists. It refers to the production and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena. Here the position of the Youth in diaspora is highlighted. Being socialized in cross-currents of different cultural fields, they form an interesting market for 'diasporic cultural goods'. In addition, they are the ones who receive and transform these new ideas and developments. Furthermore, it is clear that modern media, like radio, television, the VCR, DVD, and computer and internet are used to reformulate and translate the cultural traditions of the Indian diaspora. The popularity of the episodes of the Ramayanan or the Mahabharata in the diaspora has created new ideas about the 'Indian' culture'. In addition, the Indian diaspora has found its way into the virtual existence of the internet, with its numerous discussion sites, transnational 'find each other through school pictures' and marriage advertisements.

### **Three perspectives on 'diaspora'.**

Underlying the diaspora fad is an important quest for understanding the interconnectedness that overseas migrants have with India. This includes mechanisms that shape the movement of capital, people and culture. What is often missing within this discourse is the historical depth of interconnectedness, including the question of what structures the interconnectedness and what its limits are. During the conference in Rotterdam, it appeared that there were three different interrelated perspectives on the concept of diaspora. The first perspective is that of the diaspora as an analytical framework for scholars, students and researchers. The second perspective focuses on how the term diaspora is used by 'Indians' in India and the Government of India to re-link its overseas migrants with the so-called 'motherland'. The third perspective is that of the migrants themselves. Do they themselves highlight their diasporic consciousness, or do we, a priori, assume that all South Asian overseas migrants are part of a diaspora? These perspectives were

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<sup>22</sup> William Safran also emphasises that 'Diaspora consciousness is a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among contemporary transnational communities.' (Safran 1991).

occasionally an important part of a Tower of Babel-like confusion in the debates, often related to fundamental questions like, *what* is a diaspóra and *who* is a diaspora? At the same time, having clarified the confusion, it turns out to be very fruitful and raises new wide-ranging questions having theoretical and empirical consequences.

**The first perspective** focuses on the usefulness of the analytical framework of 'diaspora studies' as it is being used by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians in their empirical research. The general literature on diasporas uses broad 'checklists' of factors that define the groups in diaspora, like: dispersal to two or more locations; collective mythology of homeland; alienation from the host land and others.<sup>23</sup> These checklists facilitated a debate that started in the early 1990s on the question of whether the Jewish diaspora was unique or whether it could be complemented with an 'African', 'Chinese', Indian, Armenian, Greek or indeed any other transnational migrant group. This question obviously could only be answered by comparing *between* different ethnic diasporas. One of the outcomes was that it might be fruitful not to compare these diasporas by their ethnic origin but by their *causes* of migration, being victimized (Jews, slaves); looking for work and employment (indentured labour and migration of semi-skilled workers) or trade and business: victim diaspora, labour diaspora and trading diaspora.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, by broadening the field of diaspora studies beyond the Jewish diaspora, the question, ultimately, is: what is the usefulness of a concept that can hardly exclude transnational migrants? In other words: who in today's USA cannot be defined as being a part of a diaspora according to the checklists and definitions available? Indeed, contemporary studies appear with titles related to the Irish diaspora, the Caribbean diaspora, and so on. In other words, the question here is: what do we as social scientists gain from the concept of diaspora? How – if at all – does it help us to better understand particular aspects of migration?

**The second perspective** is that of the Government of India and its people. It defined the 'Indian Diaspora' in 2002 as 'a generic term to describe the people who migrated from territories that are *currently* (my emphasis) within the borders of the Republic of India. It also refers to their descendants'. What is more, the GoI adds that all these people, 'residing in distant lands', 'have retained their emotional, cultural and spiritual

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<sup>23</sup> [Butler 2001; Cohen 1997; Clifford 1994; Vertovec 2002].

<sup>24</sup> (Cohen 1997).

links with the country of their origin'.<sup>25</sup> This is not true. There are many examples where Indians are integrated in local societies, and are no longer recognizable as Indians. The Ithnasheries on the East Coast of Africa have freely mixed with the Swahili and Arabs. Many of them do not consider themselves Indians anymore. Besides that, this process of retaining links is far from a natural process, as we have shown through empirical research in this volume. People in diaspora choose to re-connect; they choose what to re-connect with and what not. And in some cases they may choose not to re-connect at all, still being 'Indian' or not.

In general, the Indian government also tends to overestimate the importance of Indian 'diasporic feelings'. In its recently published Report of the High Level Commission, it states that 'Since India achieved Independence, overseas Indians have been returning to seek for their roots and explore new avenues and sectors for mutual beneficial interaction from investment to transfer of economic skills and technology, to outright philanthropy and charitable work. This trend has become more marked in the last decade, as the Indian economy has opened up, giving rise to a new range of opportunities for emerging generations'.<sup>26</sup> This is, in fact, far from true and rather the consequence of wishful thinking. The main aim of the commission is to explore the possibilities of improving the relationship between India and 'Persons of Indian Origin' [PIO] and 'Non Resident Indians overseas [NRI]'. This is, of course, the result of the disappointment felt by the Indian Government in the role played by PIOs and NRIs up till now. But it is not only the Gol that wishes to re-connect with the overseas Indian. The Indian commerce of Bollywood fashion designers use the newly available cheap media techniques, one way or the other, to re-connect the Indian diasporas with India. Bollywood videos and music are sold throughout the world. And there are numerous internet sites where the Indian peoples in diaspora can share their views, discuss politics and reunite with the 'homeland', virtually. Indian fashions are sold in India, the UK, Canada, and anywhere where there is a sizable 'Indian' community.

The re-connection with the Indian Diaspora of the Gol as well as that of Indian commerce has to be seen from an instrumental perspective. That is, they choose what and who to re-connect and they have their own reasons for doing so. Thus, for

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.indiandiaspora.nic.in/welcome.html>

<sup>26</sup> The Indian High Level Commission, *Report on the Indian Diaspora*. See also: Lal, *India's Missed Opportunity*, Ashgate London 2001.

political reasons, the Gol does not focus on 'Indian' Hindu and Muslims who now reside in Bangladesh and Pakistan. They do not invite them to invest in India or share a dual citizenship. In addition, some PIO suggest that the Gol focuses especially on the well-off PIOs, rather than the poor ones. Though, the Gol denies this. Indian commerce, however, explores the markets of the neighbouring countries as well as elsewhere in the world. In other words, the question here is, what do they gain from re-connecting South Asians overseas and how do they do it? It is interesting to note that the very existence of a Gol creates an actor in the notion of 'diaspora' that hardly exists in the cases of the African diaspora. An active state, like that of the Jewish State, contributes significantly to the overseas migrants. Often even when they ignore it, as in the case of Asians in East Africa in this volume.

**The third perspective** is a perspective from 'below', i.e. the perspective from the sources and informants themselves. In daily life, migrants work, go to school, raise their families and celebrate their religious holidays. During all these activities they might not be aware that they are seen [by the Gol or scholars] as a part of a diaspora. Often, its only because of 'outsiders', like researchers, asking about their relation with their motherland, that they remember it or become re-aware of it. This is not to say, that they deny their Indian background, but just to point out that it may not be that important in daily life. At the same time we see that there is a growing number of religious, ethnic or caste based institutions which aim is to connect the migrants in diasporas. Therefore, we acknowledge that today the concept of 'diaspora' has become an element of self-reference and political identification. More and more groups are organising themselves for various reasons under the 'diaspora' umbrella. This not only includes the 'virtual diaspora meetings' via internet, but physical political, religious and economic organisations as well. They may include members who organise themselves according to class and social interest issues, and now become part of the diaspora. They send out messages, raise questions and organise transnational meetings in which groups may re-connect.

The question is: who is responding to these messages and who is not and why? The responses may vary from enlightenment, happiness too indifference or being

offended. Especially, the more negative and ambivalent responses have been underestimated in the diaspora discourse. They will be highlighted, more often than not in this volume.

The issue of whether to include or exclude members in the diaspora is even more complex from a historical point of view. Historical sources are mostly related to particular geographical areas. In general, they are focused on the local migrants' issues and hardly with their social or cultural ties with their homeland. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to deduce the social, economic or cultural relations with the homeland. In short, the question here is why and when do South Asian migrants overseas consider themselves as being part of a 'South Asian diaspora' and what do they (economically, sociologically or culturally) gain from it? What do we do as they themselves do not feel comfortable with the terms and definitions of the diaspora framework?

### **The papers**

All the papers in this volume deal with at least one of these perspectives above. In addition, they cover general issues related to the local identity of the 'Indian' diaspora as well as its ambivalence towards India as their home. They emphasize that the identity of 'South Asians' is neither an unchanging, primordial identity, nor an infinitely flexible one that one may paint, fill in or use, depending on the circumstances. This identity is constantly being negotiated in changing contexts. This assumption holds true as much in South Asia as it does in the South Asian diasporas. In the presented articles, the authors highlight and determine *how* this identity is negotiated in various parts of the world. Therefore, we like to emphasize the regions where South Asians live; their relation with the host land and the homeland, and the length of time of being abroad. Peoples in diaspora are part of a global history as well as a local history. Historians should emphasize the dynamic processes of changing attitudes towards the homeland, host land, and diasporic community. A historical and comparative approach may help us to understand some of these dynamics.

One way or the other, the articles presented emphasize that India may be a mirror for local identity creation, it is not a yardstick anymore.

The first section of the book is devoted to the historical perspectives of the Indian Diaspora. Here we deal with problem of using a concept that was not in use at period under research. Scott Levi takes up the first perspective as he uses the diaspora concept as an analytical tool. He explores the emergence of a Indian trading diaspora over the course of the seventeenth century. He focuses on the Indian merchant communities of the 'Multanis' and the 'Shikarpuris' who dispersed across Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia, the Caucasus and much of Russia. This paper shows that the definition of diaspora as used by Abner Cohen and others helped him to understand the emergence as well as the social organisation of the diaspora. In his paper, the term 'diaspora' implies that the Multani and Shikapuri communities maintained an identification with their homeland. Nevertheless, this homeland was not India. Nor did the traders themselves identify themselves as a part of the Indian diaspora. Therefore, this paper has to be seen within the framework of the first perspective on the concept of diaspora. Here, the author uses the concept in order to emphasize particular aspects of migration; in this case, the identification with the geographical origin of the traders and its ambivalent relation with the host society. He concludes that the ability of both Hindu and Muslim traders to maintain thriving communities in Central Asia may be attributed to the fact that they were widely respected as large-scale transregional traders, whose fortitude and commercial connections were valuable resources for the local states. At the same time, he cites some exceptional cases that prove that this relation was not always a harmonious one. In the final part of the paper it enables him to connect this century old trading diaspora with the modern world and the Indian diaposra of the nineteenth and twentieth century, including its association with the socio-economic trauma which was provoked with the Partition.

In the second paper, Oonk uses 'the perspective from below'. He argues that the Hindu Lohana in East Africa re-connected with their home villages in the first generation. However, in the process of settling not only the number of visits diminished, but also their economic and cultural orientation changed from India to the UK. During three generations they lost their ability to read, write and speak Gujurati despite the efforts made by Hindu organisations and the wishes of the elderly members of the community. In addition, they learned English –in stead of Swahili-

and this has become a part of the Indian education in East Africa. Oonk shows, that Lohanas in East Africa promoted Gujarati in times that the Colonial Governments in East Africa wished them to learn English and they opted for English when the Independent East African nations wished them to be educated in Swahili. In other words, they choose not to re-connect with India and become part of an Indian African identity. In other words, Oonk argues that 'the diaspora concept with its emphasize on 'rootedness, homeland, reproduction of Indian culture abroad,' can't help us to understand the history of the Lohana community in East Africa.' This shows that the process of identifying with the homeland is not one without its struggles, and that it has both a local and a global meaning. Where, because of the nature of the sources, Levi could not stress the process of 'self-identification', Oonk shows that the Hindu Lohanas in East Africa do not see themselves as part of the Indian diaspora, but prefer to focus on a local Asian-African culture. By taking the perspective of the migrants themselves, this article shows that the re-linking assumed by the concept of diaspora and the GoI has a strong instrumental flavour.

The third paper by Chandrashekar Bhat discusses some theoretical implications of the diaspora concept. He takes up the idea of an 'old' and a 'new' diaspora and how this affects the degree of interaction with the motherland. In his paper the language is seen as one of the most important carriers of culture and identity. He shows that for Telugu migrants it has become much easier to replicate caste and regional identities with the 'original' Andhra Pradesh, because of the emergence of modern mass media and internet. In his view, those who migrated earlier may have identified more with their respective host countries. In addition, it shows a fruitful example of how identity formation can be compared within the same group. In this case that of the Telugu migrants in the US, Mauritius and the Fiji. The differences between the 'old' and the 'new' Indian diasporas become clear in the papers by Oonk and Levi Scott as well. The most critical papers related to the diaspora concepts are yet to come. The paper by Ellen Bal and Kathinka Kerkhoff forcefully integrates the three perspectives of diaspora as formulated above. They use the diaspora concept as an analytical tool as used by academics and the GoI. In addition, they highlight the importance of a perspective 'from below', that is from the migrants themselves. Moreover, they emphasize a comparative perspective by focussing on cases from Mauritius as well as Surinam. They stress the fact that Muslims are often excluded from the Indian diaspora category. Muslims themselves identify differently over time and

geographical location. South Asian Muslims in Surinam long for an undivided homeland called Hindustan, whereas in Mauritius, Muslims of British Indian descent prefer local inclusion in Mauritius as a separate ethnic community. From this outcome of empirical research, they criticize academics (first perspective) as well as the Indian State (second perspective) in the way they incorporate, or exclude, Muslims in the Indian diaspora. This, again, shows the importance of localised empirical research (third perspective).

In the second section of this volume we focus on sociological and anthropological research on the Indian diaspora. This research shares its 'perspective from below'. Mario Rutten and Pravin J. Patel introduce 'two sided' approach where they intergrate their research in the UK as well in the villages of origin in Gujarat. They highlight the importance of the social environment of the locality of origin of the migrants and the social environment of the locality to which they have migrated. These transnational family relations are neither to be seen as homogenous, nor as separate communities. They show that the first generation Patel community in London show little interest in productive investments in India, but they do show some interest in religious funding. In addition, they highlight a certain level of ambivalence in London as well as in their mother country, their home village, which the elderly people visit three months a year. In the end, they feel at home in neither London nor India. This shows that the migration experience, the extent of local integration, affects the migrant's identity to the extent that the notion of home becomes ambivalent. It is interesting to see that these authors focus more on transnational contacts than on the concept of diaspora. The strength of this type of research is that it shows two sides of the same coin. The researchers followed their informants in the UK as well as in London. This contrasts strongly with the bulk of empirical research, which is mainly based on only the host country, due to the financial and social constraints of anthropological fieldwork.

Bhachu's paper emphasizes the local role of 'twice migrants', i.e. Indians who came to the UK via East Africa. Moreover, she focuses on women entrepreneurs, whereas the bulk of literature on the South Asian trading diaspora stresses the male perspectives. She shows that these female migrants, who are part of the old diaspora, are more successful than those who came directly from India (and are part of the new diaspora). Focussing on examples of the fashion and design industries, she highlights the fact that the local embeddedness of these migrants gives them an

important advantage in terms of knowing the local market, which is highly important in the fashion industry. Moreover, her article illustrates nicely how the Punjabi suit or Salwaar-Kameezes was awarded a mainstream fashion status, worn, amongst others, by Princess Diana of England. In addition, these Indian women entrepreneurs used their cultural background to re-connect with India, where some of their cloth is produced. Again, this is an 'instrumental way' of re-connection. They re-connect with Delhi and Bombay and not with their villages of origin. Nevertheless, they go back to India and even invest their money there, something the GoI tries to promote with their scheme.

The article of Anjoom Mukadam and Sharmira Mawani explicitly compare the 'self definition' [label chosen by an individual to express their identity] of second generation Nizari Ismailis in Toronto and London. They argue strongly against the migrant discourse as they feel that second generation migrants did not migrate and have become more part of a larger local Canadian/British identity than of a 'diasporic identity'. They make a strong argument to replace dominant essentialist conceptions like 'between two cultures' and the 'half way generation' for a more structuralist view. By emphasizing the hybrid character of the Ismaili identity, they show at the same time a tendency to define themselves not as a part of a diaspora, but as being part of Canada or Britain. This article does not deny the meaning of a diasporic identity, but highlights the self-emphasized 'national' identity. This raises questions about what we leave out of the identities of migrants, by focussing on the 'diaspora' as organizing method of research.

Sanderien Verstappen and Mario Rutten take a different angle. They show that while media are discussed in the diaspora literature, this is usually under the assumption that transnational media reconnect diasporic communities to their home countries. However, the assumed link between media *from* the home country and viewers' identification *with* that home country is problematic and must not be taken for granted. Indian movies are highly popular among Surinamese Hindustani's in The Netherlands, an audience that seems at the same time strikingly disinterested in the actual realities of the South Asian subcontinent itself. This article describes the reception of commercial Bombay cinema among Hindustani youngsters.

In the last article Brit Lynnebakke shows that in the case of Hindustanis in the Netherlands the diasporic images of the homeland do not fit the general positive connotations as suggested in the literature. These 'twice migrants' [as coming via

Surinam] do not freely interact with the 'direct migrants' from India in the Netherlands. As the latter migrants have developed a notion about the traditional 'Suriname Hindus', because they have preserved the Indian tradition even better than in India. The Suriname Hindus feel offended by the fact that they are not seen as reliable marriage partners, because of their Surinam/ and or Bihari background. Lynnebakke focuses why on the causes why a 'all India' identity does not emerge in the Netherlands. Migrations trajectories, educational and class differences seem to be at the front.

In short, the more two historical articles in this volume do underline the potentials of the concept of a 'Indian Diaspora'. Levi as well as Bhat focus on the more unifying character of the Indian diaspora. In contrast, Oonk and Bal/Sinha-Kerkhoff emphasize the limits of such an approach. The Hindu Lohanas in East Africa exclude themselves as being part of the Indian diaspora, whereas the India Muslims are excluded by the GoI. These articles also show the importance of which perspective is chosen in research, i.e. the perspective of the researcher, the perspective of the GoI or the perspective of the agents themselves. This last perspective is –not surprisingly- chosen by the researchers in the 'sociology/anthropology section'. In contrast with the mainstream diaspora literature these papers emphasise the ambivalent relations of the migrants with their homeland, with each other and with modern mass media from India. In our view, these ambivalences deserve more attention than they have had so far.