SESSION 2: UNDERSTANDING INDIAN DIASPORA: DIVERSITY AND IDENTITY

Dr. Gadadhara Mohapatra
Assistant Professor of Sociology, IIPA
Formerly at Tripura Central University, Agartala
M.A., M.Phil, & Ph.D. (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)
Postdoc(Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany)
DTS & DoT, DoPT, GOI

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, NEW DELHI

Outline

- Debating Diaspora
- Core Elements
- Diversities in Indian Diaspora
- Classical Wave of Migration
- 1830s to World War II
- Post-Second World War Migrations
- Indian Student Migration
- Political Diaspora
- Women in the Diaspora
- Unity in Diversity
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Session 2: Understanding Indian Diaspora: Diversity and Identity

Objectives

1. To provide a framework for understanding Indian diasporas, diversity and identity.

2. To understand the major patterns of migration, the question of Indian identity among various diaspora groups, and the way they fare in the policy priorities of the Government of India.

Debating Diaspora

- The term diaspora, owing to its growing usage, has proliferated and dispersed so much from its core meaning that Roger Brubaker (2005) has gone to the extent of calling it a '"diaspora" diaspora': meaning a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space.

- It has become more or less a generic term, sharing meaning with words like "immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community".

- The inclusion of every act of migration or all kinds of ethnic minorities in the domain of diaspora can surely be contested.

The core elements

- Cross-border Migration/Dispersion and Settlement:

- It implies a dispersion in which the territorial boundaries of the state are crossed, followed by settlement in the "new land".

- This cross-border movement can be either voluntary or involuntary, but that leads to a permanent or, at least, long-term settlement in the host country or in a third country, if remigration takes place.

- In such a case, several categories like short-term migrants, all kinds of ethnic communities, and even segments of the remaining population of a partitioned country (for example, India and Pakistan) would fall outside the purview of diaspora.

Host Land Participation

- Settlement in the new land signifies not only residence, but participation in the economic and political processes of the host land.

- The immigrants create a niche for themselves and affect the host nation's social, economic and political domains.

- They also negotiate and compete with other communities through, what Stanley Tambiah (2006: 170) calls, "vertical networks" to secure their existence in the host countries.

- The more successful and well-integrated they are in the host land, 'in terms of attitudes, know-how, and financial capacity' the better capable they can be to participate in the development in their countries of origin" (De Haas 2005: 1276).

- Most of the Indian diaspora groups have achieved astounding success in their respective countries, which has also given a new aura to India and its people abroad.

- **Homeland Consciousness:**
- It implies a sense of awareness about the existence of a motherland (sometimes a non-existent one) beyond the borders of the country of settlement.
- The manifestation of homeland consciousness can be varied.
- For example, it can be retained in memory (like the Parsi community in India), can be recreated as a version of the homeland (similar to creation of "little India" by early south Asian migrants), or can exist in the form of social, political and economic involvement through networks (as in the present world).
- In case of re-migration from the host country to a third country, the homeland consciousness is entrenched in two locations rather than one. An interesting case in point is the Sri Lankan Tamils' diaspora, who have re-migrated to western countries and possess strong homeland (which is imaginary) consciousness, that manifests through their support for the separatist movement.

Construction of a Multi-locational 'Self':

- It involves recreation of an identity, drawing from both home and host lands and is not marked by strict boundaries.

- Such an identity is distinct, yet has points of merger at both ends, and undergoes changes as generations pass by.

- Both host land/homeland dynamics play a crucial role in the formation of such identities.

- It is clearly evident in intercountry variations in the diaspora groups arising out of the same home country.

- It is also the reason why "diasporic homecoming is often fraught with problems of reintegration...as (they) land up being strangers or minority groups in the home land which becomes like earlier host land" (Tsuda 2009: 329).

- Instead of regrouping, the returnees undergo, what has been termed as, the "Double Diasporisation" (Sinha-Kerkhoff 2005: 93).
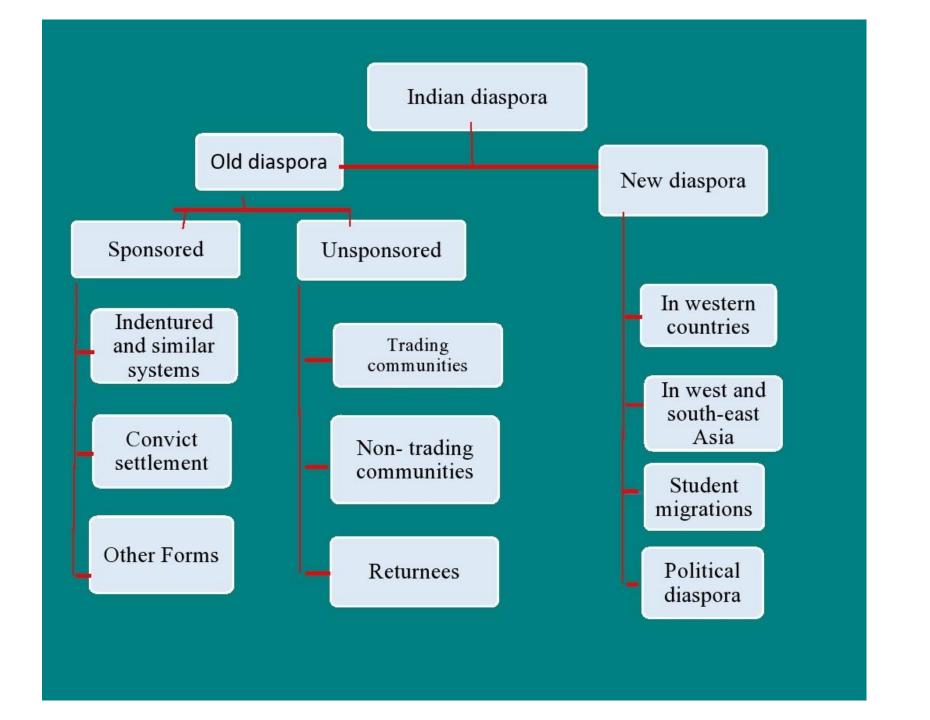
- As far as the Indian diaspora/overseas Indians (the two terms are interchangeably used) is concerned, it has taken the widest possible outline to include the wide variety of people living outside India.

- According to the High Level Committee on Indian diaspora, set up by the Government of India in 2001, "Indian Diaspora is a generic term used for addressing people who have migrated from the territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India" (High Level Committee 2001).

- On deconstruction, the term comes out with specific groupings, i e, persons of Indian origin (PIOs), who are no longer Indian citizens and the ones who continue to be full-fledged citizens of India holding Indian passport, non-resident Indians (NRIs).

- **Diversities in the Indian Diaspora**
- Indian diaspora has its roots in diverse sociocultural settings of India and includes all the major forms of human migration in its domain.

- Nonetheless, this diversity is not only a representation of the diverse Indian social set-up and heterogeneity in the phases, and patterns of migration, but also emerges out of the host country variations.

- The diverse set of people moving out of the Indian borders, go through a wide variety of experiences, depending on the dynamics of the host society and patterns of their involvement like artificial pluralism (as in Fiji); integration (as in Caribbeans); exclusion (as in Gulf countries); and multiculturalism (as in western countries).

- According to N. Jayaram(2011:3-4),

It is a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon subsuming under it many diverse phases, patterns and processes. There is a long way to go before we could confidently theorise the Indian Diaspora, what is important is that to unravel as many aspects of diversity as we can, from as many perspectives as we can, so that in due course we will have sufficient building blocks of data and conclusions to build a theory upon.

Classical Wave of Migration

- Ever since the civilisational growth of the Indian subcontinent began, Indians have been moving as preachers, traders, sailors, labourers, gypsies and in several other forms.
- Trade with other civilisations of the world provided a major incentive for Indian merchants who dared the high seas and the unknown lands, with no fewer escapades than the European sailors and adventurers.
- Although these largely unknown Indian sojourners are yet to find their due in the Indian historical works, they have always been a part of the Indian imaginary.

- Several Indian folklores and folksongs are replete with the "adventures of" and "longing for" the one who has gone beyond seven seas.

- Indian trading activities and settlements throughout west Asia, central Asia, Africa and south-east Asia are mentioned in foreign historical sources like the records of Alexander the Great, Periplus of Arithrian Sea, and that of the Greeks and Arabs.

- The merchants from Gujarat, Bengal and Tamil Nadu established important trading centres in several of these regions and influenced the eastern part of the world to the extent of Indianising it socially, culturally and religiously.

- However, most of these movements were rotational and, as it appears, "did not result into any significant permanent settlements" (Narayan 2008: 5).

- Consequently, the early phases of migrations from India could not result in the formation of the diaspora.

- 1830s to World War II

- The colonial economic patterns and growth of plantations resulted in various forms of state-sponsored mass labour migrations (indentured, kangani, maistry, convict, and so forth).

- This consequently led to permanent settlements and formation of a diaspora, also known as the "old diaspora".

- For several of these groups, 'Indian' is still a generic term, which includes other South Asians like Pakistani, Bangladeshis and even Sri Lankans.

Government-sponsored Migration

- Indentured and similar migration systems were the largest group among government-sponsored migration.

- The abolition of slavery and the growth of plantation economy steered the need for a cheap supply of labour, for which India became the prime source.

- The long British rule in India had already created strong "push factors" for the outflow of labour.

- Around 1.5 million labourers were exported to different colonies around the world like Mauritius, Uganda and Nigeria, Guyana, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, Natal, Surinam, Jamaica, Fiji, and Burma.

- The kangani and maistry systems developed in southern India along with indentured system.

- They were based on a network of headmen or middlemen, who recruited and supervised the labourers.

- These labourers were not bound by a contract, but were brought under a debt net through advance payment.

- Under this system, 1.7 million labourers were sent to Malaya, 1.6 million to Burma, and one million to Ceylon.

- One positive aspect in kangani and maistry was that it included family recruitments.

Free Migration or Passage Indians

- Apart from the government-sponsored migrations, there were also self-sponsored migrants called "free-passage Indians".

- Majority of them belonged to the trading communities from all over India.

- Though such migrations were already taking place from the Indian subcontinent, but the global economic transitions after the 18th century further propelled this process.

- Indian traders and entrepreneurs established highly successful businesses across Asian and African countries.

- Among the non-trading communities there were unskilled/semiskilled workers (cobblers, barbers, goldsmiths, etc) and skilled professionals (teachers, lawyers, and so on) who were "pulled" for migration by options of better livelihood.

- Caste and regional networks played extremely important roles in such migrations and kept them connected to the motherland.
- There was also a small number of "returnees", who having completed their indentured contracts returned to India.
- But unable to reintegrate into the traditional Indian society, they went back to resettle in the countries to which they had originally migrated.

- Such migrations were largely rotational but permanent settlements followed after second world war, especially in colonies where the indentured, kangani or maistry labourers were present.

- Although smaller in number than the labour diaspora and largely maintaining distance from them, the free migrants made a significant contribution towards providing stability to the social order of

- the indentured community by providing education, legal services and, at times, leadership to several of the indentured communities.

- They presented tough challenge to European businesses and were often subjected to various stereotypes and public criticism in India.

Post-Second World War Migrations

- By mid-20th century (largely after second world war), there emerged a new trend in the migration and settlement of the skilled and highly skilled professionals to the developed world.

- In the initial years such migrations were United Kingdom (UK)-centric.

- However, as the United States (US) immigration regime became more liberal during the mid-1960s, the wave got diverted towards the US.

- At present, Australia and other Asia-Pacific countries attract a large number of migrants, making South-South migration larger than South-North migration.

- Marked by what has been termed as the "brain drain", this process came under severe scrutiny and prejudiced the Indian public opinion against the highly affluent diaspora who mostly got their degrees from the publicly subsidised institutions in India.

- However, with the opening of India's economy in the early 1990s, the so-called brain drain started yielding unexpected positive results in terms of brain-regain, investments, remittances, philanthropy, and transfer of technology and skill.

- While the motherland connections always existed in this section of diaspora in some form or the other, but after the 1990s, it became more pronounced.

- Divergent views may exist about the pros and cons of their economic role but they have, to a large extent, become the part and parcel of Indian economy.

- One of the best examples of diaspora-induced growth models is India's information technology (IT) sector.

- The presence of large number of IT professionals in advanced countries became the turbine to kick-start the so-called "IT revolution" in Bangalore and Hyderabad, followed by the rest of

- India.

- The industry is fed with new ideas, new technologies and new markets by diaspora professionals/organisations.

- NASSCOM figures show that out of the top 20 Indian software businesses, 19 were founded by or are managed by professionals from the Indian diaspora

- Another group in the new diaspora is the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour migration to the Gulf and the south-east Asian countries.

- The oil boom in west Asia during the 1980s saw an upsurge in infrastructure building activities, which attracted a large number of migrant workers from India.

- It was followed by an influx of remittances hugely benefiting India's foreign exchange reserves and initiating a shift in India's policy perspective towards the diaspora.

- Although such migrations did not result in permanent settlements, they form a significant section under the category of NRIs. However, as the first phase of development was completed and industrialisation began, there has been a change in the nature of labour

- demand in these countries which are now attracting large number of skilled/highly skilled professionals.

- But the class divide appears to be prominent and two groups (i e, the labours and the skilled/highly skilled) largely keep away from each other.

Twice Migrants

- "Twice migrants", refer to those people of Indian descent who have re-migrated from their original host countries to developed countries.

- Such movements are also termed as secondary migrations.

- The Indo-Guyanese in North America, the Sarnami Hindustanis in the Netherlands, the Indo-Ugandans in UK, and the Indo-Fijians in New Zealand, Australia and Canada fall within this category.

- In most cases, they have been forced to leave due to government policies or socio-political discrimination.

- Despite retaining Indian religious and cultural practices, they develop a strong connectedness with the country of their first migration where they stayed for generations and maintain close familial ties.
- The twice migrants, further, problematise the homogeneous representation of the Indian diaspora by adding yet another facet of diversity to it.
- They also challenge the idea of "roots", often attached to homelands, and are a good representation of the "homeland consciousness".

Indian Students Migration

- Student migration is one of the major doorways for permanent or long-term settlement leading to the formation of diaspora.

- The concerns revolve not only around brain drain, but also the capital out-flow in the form of education fees and related expenditures.

- India is the second largest importer of overseas education and with a four fold increase in the numbers in the last 14 years.

- As per UNDP estimates, it is costing India a foreign exchange out-flow of $10 billion annually.

- Termed as the "Cash Cows", the Indian students make up for the revenue and the skilled labour force in the advanced countries.

- The benefits have led to several policy changes in the destination countries for attracting foreign students to their universities and further allowing them to stay on and work.

- Student migration from India also acts as the gateway for permanent residency for the Indian middle-class desiring to live overseas.

- Several factors at the domestic level in India are also responsible to push the out-flow of students.

- There appears to be a major demand and supply gap; shortage of quality educational institutions and faculty; availability of educational loans; and so forth.

- Private participation in the education sector has addressed these problems to some extent.
- But as India's gross enrolment ratio (GNR) in higher education is improving, India would require huge investments and an outward looking policy to handle the problem

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Political Diaspora

- Although migration from India has largely been economically induced, political diaspora emerging out of conflict is also not unknown to India.

- In India, the Sikhs and the Kashmiris are some of the commonly known examples of political diaspora.

- The Sikh diaspora emerged out of Punjab unrest and it is a well-known fact that they financed and participated in the separatist movement in Punjab.

- Although operation "Blue Star" is said to have created huge resentment and anger among the Sikhs around the world, according to Judge (2011: 45), "the racial and cultural differences and the difficulties of integration or assimilation in the host society pave the way for the longing or excessive concern for the mother land".

- However, as the Sikhs in the diaspora belong to all typologies and form a very diverse group, a considerable number of them did not support the separatist movement and were even "hostile towards the idea of Khalistan" (ibid: 41).

Women in the Diaspora

- Women have shared space with men in most of the migration streams and diasporic formations.

- However, for a very long time their presence and experiences largely remained subsumed in the homogenised perceptions.

- In reality, the experiences of women during the process of migration and settlement have always been different and very specific to them.

- As indentured labourers, women were not only facing with the tyranny of the plantation life, but were also oppressed by their own men(Lal 1985).

- As migrant wives, they recreate aspects of home and culture in a foreign setting, often ridden with politics of race and culture.

- As semi-skilled and skilled migrants, such as nurses and students, they risk the hostilities of a new environment single-handedly, aiming either to improve the life conditions of their families back home or to enhance their own career prospects.
- As highly skilled women professionals, they successfully balance the Indian home life and a global professional life, often becoming the face of iconised "global Indians"
- Women largely migrate within the framework of patriarchy and cultural considerations and preserve them as the "bearers of Indian tradition".
- While migration and economic independence has given them an opportunity to assert independence, redefine their roles and perceptions of self, it is still questionable whether it enables them to break away from the binding traditional patriarchal norms.
- No wonder, some of the most pertinent problems faced by the women in the Indian diaspora arises out of issues of gender discrimination and patriarchy.

Distribution

- In 2001, when the first database on Indian diaspora was created under the L M Singhvi Committee, the number of Indians living abroad was estimated at approximately 21 million.

- According to the latest figures of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, their number has increased up to 2,16,34,119, of which 1,00,37,761 are NRIs and 1,18,72,114 are POIs.

- They are spread in about 105 countries around the world, a fact which hugely adds to the diversity of the Indian diaspora.

- The largest number of Indian diaspora, i.e, 52.62%, resides in Asia.

Unity in Diversity

- Diversities in migration trends are further marked by differences in caste, religion, region, language and economic status, resulting in a plurality that has led to the idea of "many diasporas within the overarching Indian diaspora"
- As the common perception goes, the Indian migrants refer to themselves so much as Bengalis, Gujaratis, Telugus, or in terms of their specific sub-castes, that the idea of homeland creates a myth of a region, locality or community rather than of India as a whole.
- These diversities, at times, have also had divvying effects on the Indian diasporic communities in particular countries.
- One of the most prominent divides can be witnessed between the old and the new diasporas, considered by some scholars as a "caste like social distance" while others call it a "class and culture divide".
- But these differences relate more to the cultural heritage inherited by the two groups from India and the question of Indian identity.

- The segregation is so clearly evident in the countries where both these groups are present that there is very little, if any, interaction between them.

- In reality, the idea of "identity" marked by strict boundaries, often, pitch groups against each other by emphasising too much on the differences.

- However, if more emphasis is given on the points of merger and commonalities between the diverse groups, then the diversity can not only be less confrontational, but also emerge as a unified consciousness.

- This idea has remained at the core of the Indian civilisation for centuries and also gets reflected in the imaginary of India among the Indian diaspora.

- Starting from the colonial period to the present, the Indian diaspora can be roughly categorised into colonial/old and the postcolonial/new.

- Among the old diaspora, there are government-sponsored and self-sponsored groups, which further breaks into various other groups, such as indentured and similar migration systems, convict migrations, traders, small time professionals and returnees.

- The new diaspora can also be divided into highly skilled/skilled, semi-skilled/unskilled, student migrants and political migrants.

Conclusion

- Starting from the colonial period to the present, the Indian diaspora can be roughly categorised into colonial/old and the postcolonial/new.

- Among the old diaspora, there are government-sponsored and self-sponsored groups, which could be classified as indentured and similar migration systems, convict migrations, traders, small time professionals and returnees.

- The new diaspora can also be divided into highly skilled/skilled, semi-skilled/unskilled, student migrants and political migrants.

Quiz Question

1. **Free migration or Passage Indian Means**:
   a. Government- Sponsored Migration
   b. Self-sponsored Migration
   c. Private organization-sponsored migration
   d. Both Private and Government sponsored migration
   e. All of the above

2. **What is 'Balti' in Indian diasporic context in UK?**
   a. Religious festival
   b. Food
   c. Songs
   d. Dance
   e. Non of the above

3. **Which country has the largest diaspora?**
   a. Canada
   b. China
   c. India
   d. South Africa
   e. Australia

Reading

- Judge, Paramjit S (2011): "Diversity within the Panjabi Diaspora and the Construction of Nationhood" in N Jayaram (ed.), Diversities in the Indian Diaspora: Nature, Implications, Responses (New Delhi: Oxford University Press)

- Sharma, J C (2011): "The Indian Communities in Overseas Territories of France: Problems of Identity and Culture" in N Jayaram (ed.), Diversities in the Indian Diaspora: Nature, Implications, Responses (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), pp 125-38

- Tambiah, Stanley J (2006): "Transnational Move-ments, Diaspora and Multiple Modernity", Daedalus, 129(1), Winter: 163-93.

- With this I come to an end of the session on Understanding Diaspora: Ethnicity and Identity and leave you with few questions which you will find easy.

- Thanks for watching the video.

Thank you