Unit 1
Conceptual Understanding of Indian Diaspora and Transnational Studies

Contents

Learning Objectives

This unit will help you in:

- understanding the concepts in the study of the Indian diaspora;

- analyse the various perspectives; and

- relate the diasporic situation of Indians to these concepts and analyses.

1.1 Introduction

This unit will introduce you to the several concepts that you will come across in the course of reading the elective course on diaspora. We will introduce you to the topic of Indian diaspora by situating it in the context of the globalisation process. The phenomenon of transnationalism is an offshoot of the global process, which has made connections, real and virtual, more pertinent and speedy. All these have brought old diasporas who were previously somewhat disconnected from their homeland in constant touch with things back home. These connections are real and virtual, such as travelling back and forth, communications through the net, telephone, through interactions of media and other things.

We will start the unit with unravelling of concepts such as transnationalism, globalisation and diaspora. We will then proceed to the main context of this transnational situation by looking at the globalisation process, and then analyse how diaspora as a concept fits in to all these. Following this we will examine some of the theories and perspectives that scholars have used to study the Indian diaspora. Lastly, we will look at the diasporic situation of Indians who see-saw between belonging and longing, of being there and, not there and how this situation and the technological and media mediations add to the diasporic social space.

1.2 Transnationalism, Globalisation and Diaspora

Transnational migration is described as "a pattern of migration in which persons, although they move across international borders and settle and establish social relations in a new state, maintain social connections with the polity from which they originated. They live across international borders in transnational social fields." (Glick Schiller, 1999). As we mentioned earlier, though the communities move out of their homes or polity, the diasporas still maintain connections, and these ongoing connections make them truly

transnational for they cut across boundaries. The transnational character of the diasporas is an outcome of the globalisation process.

Globalization entails global markets, global communications and global networks (see Unit 21 in MSO-03). Globalization, as the term implies, covers societies at all phases of development in a way that the world is far more interconnected than ever, events happening in one part of the globe having repercussions in other parts of the world.

The process of globalization is driven by three major imperatives – the market, the new technology, and transnational networks-that are themselves interconnected. Market forces are in theory based on free and fair competition but protectionist policies in trade, volatility and negative effects of short-term capital flows and biases in international investment agreements permeate and vitiate the field to widen the difference between developed and developing countries.

Let us look at the technological revolution that constitutes the second major dimension of the socio-cultural impact of globalization in India and the diaspora. In both its real (locomotionary) and virtual (telecommunication) senses the diaspora is about travel (Clifford 1997). And it is travel in the various forms - the capacity to physically travel very fast and repeatedly and the capacity to travel virtually which has brought the diaspora as a compelling theme in our day and age. However, technology has played a catalytic role in all this. Especially, information technology (IT) which is leading to a new form of capital accumulation as is clearly evident in the IT industry. Regardless of its origin and amount, capital can be circulated and accumulated on a global scale at an unprecedented speed and therefore with extreme volatility. An urgent task of the study of globalization and migration is to understand the international labour system of the 'new economy.' In this context, unlike in the colonial past, it is capital chasing labour rather than the other way round.

Let us introduce the third major imperative of globalization, namely, transnational networks. According to Tambiah (2000:140) two broad sets of networks may be differentiated for purposes of analysis. 'Vertical' networks are formed within 'host' societies when 'communities' come together, either voluntarily or forcefully, in order to devise conscious strategies to fight discrimination as well as to succeed economically. The second set of networks, i.e., 'lateral' may be subdivided further: (a) between host society and society of origin/homeland, and (b) transnational global networks where diasporas across the world communicate with each other and maintain transnational links especially through media and travel. What is lacking in Tambiah's concept of networks, however, is the dimension of social stratification, which we may analyze in terms of class, culture and mobility in both the old and new diasporas (Jain 2004). To generalize, then, vertical networks are those which are seen across classes—these are inter-class asymmetrical networks— while horizontal and symmetrical networks rest on the intra-class solidarity. These networks happen not in any fixed place, which is geographical. The networks happen both across geographic spaces and in virtual space. In concrete terms a space that is unique to itself.

We have seen that in defining both these processes (transnationalism and globalization) 'diaspora', which has been conceptualized variously, plays a critical role.

Box 1.1: The Concept of Diaspora

Until its 1993 edition, the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defined the term 'diaspora' as "the dispersion of the Jews among the Gentile nations" and as "all those Jews who live outside the biblical land of Israel". Yet for the first time in its long history, in that edition the dictionary added that the term also refers to "the situation of people living outside their traditional homeland". The term has a Greek origin and refers, allegorically, to the scattering of seeds as they are sowed over a wide area; hence *speiro*= to sow, *dia*= over. It is widely believed that the term first appeared in the Greek translation of the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, with reference to the situation of the Jewish people—" Thou shalt be a diaspora in all the kingdoms of the earth."(Deut. 28, 25). Yet the term had also been used by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Sheffer (2003:9) is right in noting that, already at a very early period, the term had been applied to two of the oldest ethno-national diasporas—the Jewish and the Greek—that had been established outside of their homelands as a result of both voluntary and forced migrations.

There has been frequent criticism of the usages 'diaspora', 'diasporic', 'diasporism', etc., on the grounds that the generalization and universalization of culturally specific, viz., Jewish or Greek, processes is illegitimate. More particularly it has been argued that the persecution of diasporas either in the home or in host societies which is a recurrent feature of Jewish diaspora is absent or even reversed in cases of ruling Anglo-Saxon minority settler societies, viz., in Australia or South Africa. Safran's (Safran 1991:83-4) six-point model that lays down the features of the diaspora include:

- dispersal from the original homeland
- retention of collective memory,
- vision or myth of the original homeland;
- partial (never complete) assimilation in host society;
- idealized wish to return to original homeland;
- desireable commitment to restoration of homeland;
- and continuous renewal of linkages with homeland.

The debate on qualifying criterion for diaspora continues with some scholars offering wide, inclusivist definitions that contain "immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community and ethnic community in the semantic domain of diaspora" (Tololian 1991: 4-5)

Others have proposed a minimized working definition for diaspora that includes "dispersal from original homeland to two or more places; movement between the homeland and the new host; and social, cultural or economic exchange between or among the diaspora community" (Van Hear 1998:6).

This last definition covers the criterion of 'circulation' suggested by Markovits(2000), although he would further argue that 'diaspora' in the Indian instance is something of a misnomer, given the extensive, ongoing circulation and exchange that has historically characterized the trajectories of many overseas Indians. Interestingly enough, authors like Hansen (2002) claim the unsuitability of the notion 'diaspora' for South African Indians for precisely the opposite reason. According to him, the nostalgia for Indian roots and any

engagement for what is authentically Indian is belied by the experience of present-day third, fourth generation South African Indians amongst whom the propaganda of being patriotically 'Indian' is being drummed in (rather unsuccessfully) by the erstwhile, BJP-led Indian Government and organizations like the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and GOPIO (Global Organization of the People of Indian Origin). This may well be the experience of many other PIOs (People of Indian Origin) as contrasted with the commodified nostalgia of the kind that is visible among the first and second generation non-resident Indians (NRIs) in Europe or North America who belong to more recent waves of migration.

Reflection and Action 1.1

1. Do you have any members of your family living abroad or do you know people who have moved abroad? If you do know of such people, find out from them how the Internet and telecommunication technologies have brought them closer home?

2. How can one explain the popularity of Bollywood cinema among the Indian migrants? In what way is this connected with globalisation?

1.3 Perspectives on Studying Indian Diaspora

It is obvious from the foregoing account that the study of overseas Indian communities is a newly emergent field, which has so far yielded only a few detailed monographs and comparative essays. There has been a search for a theoretical framework to integrate this area of study. And in the following discussion we shall point out some of the important perspectives for the theoretical study of this topic.

The Retentionist Perspective: The first of these frameworks is the one which deals with cultural persistence. This is the *retentionist* view of Indian culture overseas and the studies falling under this category have recorded the ability of the Indians to retain, reconstitute and revitalize many aspects of their culture in an overseas setting. It is believed that the common bond of race, language and fellowship coupled with racial prejudice segregated the Indians first in barracks where they were lodged as indentured labourers and since the late nineteenth century in villages where they settled. Rural isolation, ethnic identity and the sheer tenacity of Indian institutions have been considered as major mechanisms for preserving Indian culture.

One of the best examples of this perspective is Morton Klass's study of East Indians in Trinidad published in 1961. Klass provides an extensive account of the social organization of the villages of Indians in Amity and reports that they were faithfully modeled after a kind of generalized north Indian culture. Villagers had rebuilt a community resembling the socio-cultural system of village India. In this perspective East Indians have successfully transplanted the institution of family in its basic form which they brought from their homeland. The East Indian family in Trinidad is still characterized by the inferior or unequal status of women, parental selection of mates, rarity of divorce, sharing of property and inter-relationships within the caste system.

Studies of cultural persistence fall under the general rubric of acculturation processes. In this view there is a bias which over-emphasizes the retention of cultural customs and traditions and only a superficial treatment of the disappearance of conventional patterns and the reasons for their demise.

There is also a problem about the approach to history and social change in this framework. Society and culture both in India and in the overseas setting have moved from one point to another during the period that the initial emigration of Indians took place. This dimension is not taken care of in the perspective on cultural persistence. In other words, it is a static rather than a dynamic perspective on the acculturation of overseas Indian communities.

The Adaptationist Perspective: The second perspective is purely and simply an *adaptationist* one. Studies falling under this category are chiefly concerned with the question of the adaptation of the social group or an immigrant society in the social environment of the host society. R.K. Jain's (1970) work on South Indian migrants, in a typical Malaysian setting, is a study of the process of adaptation of a people of Indian origin to conditions of life and work in a particular Malayan environment, namely, rubber plantations. The study highlights the interaction between norms of a traditional rural people from southern India and the ideology and procedures of an industrial bureaucracy. Burton Benedict (1961) also subscribes to the adaptationist perspective in his study of the Indians settled in Mauritius. His book begins with a general appreciation of the Mauritian situation, describing the physical, demographic, economic and political setting in which the Indians live. Then it narrows down to the Indian situation, examining the households, land tenure, domestic economy, kinship and marriage, Indian religious beliefs and the village political structure. Benedict tries to show that there is communication and mobility between sections of Mauritian society, tending to unify it and where there are bars to communication, tending to drive the sections apart. Adrian Mayer's (1973) study of the rural Indian society in Fiji is another example of the adaptationist model. He reports on the Indian pattern of settlement, their ritual activities, caste, culture and kinship keeping in view the aspect of adaptation. The adaptationist perspective has been criticized on account of its failure to incorporate the comparative aspect. It is also criticized for not being able to relate in a systematic fashion the microcosm to the macrocosm. As a result these studies tend to be self-contained.

Plural Society Perspective: The next perspective is that of the *plural society*, first advocated by Furnivall (1948) in the context of colonial society of South East Asia. According to him this kind of society possessed three characteristics — cultural, economic and political. Culturally, a plural society consists of incongruous and incompatible cultural sections between which communication is hampered. Economically, the relationships between the cultural sections are those of the market place. Politically, this kind of plural society is held together only by the fact of being dominated by an external colonial power. R.K. Jain has argued (1986) that the concept of plural society in the sense used by Furnivall is applicable only to "settlement societies" and not to civilizations. In fact, M.G. Smith (1965, 1969), who developed this theory in its application to the Caribbean society, restricted it to modern colonial situations and to the era of European industrial expansion and laissez-faire capitalism. Further, it was confined to the study of multi-racial communities. Pluralism was defined in terms of both structure and culture, as connoting simultaneously "a social structure characterized by fundamental discontinuities and cleavages and a cultural complex based on systematic institutional diversity" (Smith, 1969:27). The stability and unity in a society with structural pluralism and differential incorporation was maintained by the dominant group which was a cultural minority.

The theory of plural society generated a number of criticisms in the late fifties and sixties. R.T. Smith (1970) and Leo Kuper (1969) argued against plural societies, as defined in the Furnivall tradition and by M.G. Smith against their definition as societies at all. How does one determine whether one is dealing with a "society" and not simply a mechanical aggregate of social groups? Mere incorporation of individuals and sections of individuals into a single political unit had to be distinguished from the society because the former lacked social relationships. In its simplest form, as R.T. Smith (1970:44) puts it, "The problem can be stated by asking whether the members of the society share any common basis for social worth or whether the society is merely with each other for the power to dominate others." With regard to the Caribbean also, the plural society framework has its limitations. According to R.T. Smith (1970:71), "The Caribbean societies are among the worst examples of plural societies in spite of their diversities of race and consumption levels and of culture." This was mainly because the colonial rule created conditions which knit together the various sections of the society. Regional sub-cultural differences were not very clearly marked and each segment was separated only in the market place and in the sphere of economic competition. Fiji, on the other hand, is relatively closer to the plural society model.

The Ethnicity Approach: Jayawardena (1980:430-50) has tackled the question of diverse forms of culture in Guyana and Fiji through the parameters of ethnicity. This approach accords explanatory primacy to relations of class, status and power and ethnicity is seen as emerging from these factors. Ethnicity was bracketed as 'ethnicity' and its existence was incidental and depended upon a particular combination of political and historical forces. In Guyana the Indian population had lost or abandoned all but the basic principles of traditional Indian culture and were thus forced to fabricate a mythical identity. The Indo-Guyanese thus possessed both an ethnic identity and 'ethnicity'. However, the Indian population in Fiji possessed an ethnic identity but not an 'ethnicity' because its members maintained regular contact with their homeland and regarded their Indian identity as a routine feature of their lives. 'Ethnicity' had manifested itself in Guyana and not Fiji because of historically determined and crucial differences in the fields of class, status and power.

Drummond (1981:694) has criticized Jayawardena's approach mainly on the ground that 'ethnicity' has been accorded a secondary status in the domain of explanatory concepts. He argues that class and ethnicity are aspects of many social settings and therefore on what basis could the former assume priority over the latter? Besides, another limitation of this framework is that it tends to be descriptive rather than analytical.

Drummond (1980:352-74) offers another approach to the study of the transformation of cultures in the context of poly- ethnic emigrant societies. He applies the linguistic/cultural model in an ethnographic study of symbolic processes associated with ethnic categories in Guyana. He presents his case by arguing that just as the coexistence of several languages created Creole languages, so the coexistence of different cultures created Creole cultures. This resulted in a society based on inter-systems or a cultural continuum in which any element from a particular culture shaded into one from another. The continuum enabled actors to combine and recombine the elements into a coherent whole because they knew the entire continuum. They understood the elements and the significance of their variations and transformation.

However, Drummond's cultural continuum model has its own limitations. His suggestion that, "if variation and change are fundamental aspects of cultural systems, then we must consider the possibility that ethnographic studies of small, post-colonial ethnically fragmented societies such as Guyana illustrate the Creole process found in societies everywhere" (1980:370), was not tenable. For one, the Creole language/Creole culture metaphor did not hold in the case of Fiji. The Hindi spoken by the Fiji Indians was not creolised and there was no creole language resorted to by all ethnic groups. If culture was self-explanatory then how did one explain the aspect of creolization in the Caribbean and its virtual absence in Fiji? This could be explained in terms of the precedence of historical interpretations over cultural interpretations. That is, creolization of culture in the Caribbean was the result of a specific form of economic and political domination and not only an assortment of historically different cultures. This pattern of subjection of ethnic groups under the domination of one was absent in Fiji. It is Jayawardena's (1980:449) contention that if Fijian history was characterized by the domination of one group over all the other ethnic groups then a "Creole" language and a "Creole" culture would appear in its society.

The Political Economy Perspective: Approaches based on cultural pluralism and cultural intersystems such as the ones discussed above already alert us to the macro framework in which particular Indian communities overseas have to be seen in a theoretical perspective. We have already mentioned that there are a few among sociologists like John Rex (1982) who suggests that there is a continuity between the nineteenth century emigration of Indians and the twentieth century migrations to the industrially developed countries. Barriers of a racist kind control the movements of labour from underdeveloped countries to metropolitan countries at the present time. In other words, the migrants from underdeveloped countries are not given the same status—though they belong to the same economic class—as the labour force belonging to a different race into the metropolitan countries themselves. Normally, this is a process dictated by the worldwide phenomena of imperialism and colonialism going back in time to the seventeenth century, of which the repercussions are felt even to this day. Arguing along the same lines are the theorists of the development of underdevelopment thesis who take a global view of the phenomena of the migration, settlement, and formation of Indian communities abroad. Foremost among such theorists has been Beckford (1984) who pointed out the determining influence of the economic structure of plantations in the colonial territories of tropical areas in Asia and Latin America. Beckford's thesis of "persistent poverty" in the plantation areas of the world applies with special force to the Indian diaspora of the nineteenth century when indentured labourers were initially recruited to man the labour force on plantations. Hence, there is a continuity of socio-economic and cultural systems in plantations and other areas of Indian immigration in the nineteenth century.

On a still wider scale and arguing in global terms are the theories of Gunder Frank (1967), Wallerstein (1974) and Amin (1976) who argue in terms of a core-periphery model of the global development of capitalism. In these terms, it would seem that certain geo-political constraints of the nineteenth century and even earlier have shaped the unequal regional economic development all over the globe. In this perspective, the Indian dispora would seem to belong to an especially underdeveloped and deprived section of global population. There have been criticisms of this approach (for example Brenner, 1977) as regards the neo-Smithian Marxism which this framework represents. In fact,

with the globalization of ethnicity as the post-modernist phenomenon of our times, one feels that the opportunity to study overseas Indian communities in a framework which articulates macro - and micro -structures and further takes into account not only the past but the possible future of these communities would pay rich dividends to social science scholarship.

Reflection and Action 1.2

1. The fact that many Indian diaspora look to India when it comes to selecting a bride can be viewed from which perspective?
2. In what way is migration of Indian labour to colonial plantations similar to workers seeking work and migrating out in recent times, and in what way is it different?

1.4 Longing and Belonging: 'The In-between' Space of Diaspora

With increasing migration in this globalised world people everywhere belong to many places, they are everywhere and nowhere in some sense. They may be citizens of their host country but identify with their country of origin. They may live away from the roots and traditions of their home country but connect to it consciously as an ethnic community in the country to where they migrated. Thus they can easily be between belonging and longing and in an 'in between' state. Globalization and transnationalism alert us to issues of deterritorialization and reterritorialization which is related to international migration. The problematique of 'in between' identities of persons imbricated in these processes is crucial: hence people between nation states, between homelands and new societies, between longing and belonging, between 'non-modern' civilizations and post enlightenment 'settlement societies', between dual or multiple citizenship — people are caught in-between these heuristic binaries.

Discursive Dimension of Indian Diaspora

Diasporic Imaginary   Networks
(Longing)   (Belonging)
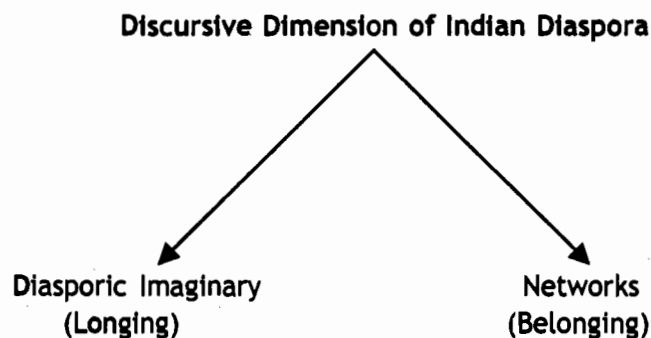
The distinction was first explicitly stated and explained by Vijay Mishra (1995). It is also implicit in Mckeown. (1999). It has been elaborated upon in relation to African, Chinese, Indian & Jewish diasporas. (Jain 2003)

As seen in the Indian case, there is a strong interactive relationship between the diasporic imaginary and global networks. Scholars have chosen to emphasize one or the other though they have all been fully cognizant of the interactive relationship. The question of identity as subjectification in the imaginings of the diasporics is prominent in works such as those of Axel (2001) on the Sikhs and of Sandhya Shukla (2003) and Pnina Werbner (2002) for the U.K. and the U.S.A. in the former and Manchester-based Pakistani Muslims in the latter. The question of identity in relation to the socio-legal aspects of citizenship has been implicit in the works of those interested in networks,

e.g., Tambs-Lyche (1980) on Gujaratis, Markovits (2000) on Sindhis, Xiang Biao (2001) and Voigt-Graf (2004) on Indian I.T. specialists in Australia and the various articles in the newly launched (2001) journal *Global Networks*. Writers of both persuasion have been interested in the transnational dimension of the diaspora, the former in their efforts to delineate a unique 'diaspora space', (see also Avtar Brah 1996) talking of 'deterritorialisation' but also of 'reterritorialisation' and the latter being more centrally concerned with the interface of nation-states with ethnicity. (see, for instance, Sheffer 2003, Baumann 1996, Munasinghe 2001, Vertovec 1992, et.al.)

Box 1.2: Deterritorialisation and Reterritorialisation

The concept of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation were terms that were used by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in a book called *Anti -Oedipus* (1972) but it got adopted by other disciplines, especially anthropology. Deterritorialization may mean to take the control and order away from a land or place (territory) that is already established. It is to undo what has been done. For example, when the Spanish conquered the Aztecs, they eliminated many symbols of Aztec beliefs and rituals. Reterritorialization usually follows, as in the example when the Spanish replaced the traditional structures with their own beliefs and rituals. When referring to culture, anthropologists use the term deterritorialized to refer to a weakening of ties between culture and place. This means the removal of cultural subjects and objects from a certain location in space and time. It implies that certain cultural aspects tend to transcend specific territorial boundaries in a world that consists of things fundamentally in motion. Although this refers to culture changing, it does not mean that culture is looked at as an evolving process with no anchors. Also, oftentimes when one culture is changing, it is because another is being reinserted into a different culture. This relates to the idea of a globalization of culture. In this process, culture is simultaneously deterritorialized and reterritorialized in different parts of the world as it moves. As cultures are uprooted from certain territories, they gain a special meaning in the new territory which they are taken into. (source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deterritorialization)

Scholars dealing with the latter set of questions either take a ground reality view of ethnic mobilization (the trend initiated by Barth 1969) or move frontally to the 'nationalism' and 'nation-state' framework to examine marginalization of ethnic minority (both numerical and political) in relation to the monopoly of power and 'patrimony' by the nation-state. The latter tendency is theorized in the works of Brackette Williams (1989) and Verdery (1994), for example, and analytically deployed by Baumann, for instance (but cf. Baumann's critique by Werbner 2002). Both these kind of studies are part of what has been designated variously as cultural politics, or simply politics of identity. When the analyst's perspective shows a mix of subjectification, transactionalism and the socio-legal status of diasporics (e.g. citizenship issues), the next logical step is to recast one's questions in the 'grand narratives' of multiculturalism and multiracialism with all the overtones of ideology and public policy.

1.5 Conclusions

In this unit, we have tried to unravel the many interpretations that are associated with some of the concepts such as diaspora and transnationalism. We tried to examine these concepts, situations and phenomena against the

backdrop of globalisation. Globalisation, as we explained in our unit, is not only about market forces being global, so much so that global markets are not located in one place. A production centre of any Transnational Corporation for instance can be located in one place and its service centers can be in a different place. You must have noticed the mushrooming of BPOs everywhere, which is nothing but part of global market operations. Apart from this, what characterises the globalization process is the connections and networks that are an outcome of technological revolutions such IT (information technologies) and speedy travel. These have propelled denser and speedier connections between home and abroad. Added to this is the simultaneity of media which makes it possible for people to consume and use their imaginations in space, which is not location specific. In a way these very characteristics of globalization are what inform the transnationalism of diasporas. They are now not just people who left home and who are disconnected with their roots but are constantly engaged with home both in an imaginative nostalgic sense but also in real terms, as in actual connections. This perhaps is the significant difference between erstwhile diasporas and the present day transnational communities.

We have tried to present a few perspectives that we think will help in analyzing the diasporic situation of Indians living abroad. As you can see not one of these perspectives can be easily applied to explain the Indian diaspora, for they all have differing contexts and histories. In our subsequent units we will try and look at the Indian diasporas in different parts of the globe, to get a sense of these differing situations by examining some of the studies and the approaches therein.

1.6 Further Reading

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