



Research Paper

Back to the Roots: Indian Labour Diaspora

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The present paper is an attempt to chart the origin of Indian diasporic groups abroad. Diasporas are dynamic entities but within the confines of academia, they turn into what scholars, diasporic interlocutors and other commentators make of them. However, there is elasticity in the term ‘diaspora’ and this makes it open to examination from various perspectives.

When it comes to examining Indian diasporic groups, one significant fact that comes to the forefront is that the first Indians to migrate to other countries were workers. Their emigration was not necessarily a traumatic good bye to their motherland. It was either in search of work or as a part of the larger scheme of their colonial masters to further colonial ambitions. People who went out of the country in search of work are usually referred to as labour diaspora and those who went out in furtherance of colonial ambitions are described as imperial diaspora. However the migration process is marked by complexity and not subject to clearly marked definitions. Many of the migrants were content to go on a one-way ticket while others kept moving to and from the country of their domicile to their native land.

The labour diaspora can be traced back to the 1830s when many indentured Indian workers set out to work in British, Dutch and French tropical plantations. This is not to say that there was no Indian diaspora earlier. The Parsi diaspora for instance, is of a notable antiquity. However, every group that migrates internationally in search of work does not always evolve into a diaspora. If the immigrants are fully open to assimilating the culture of the host country and are readily accepted by the latter, a diasporic consciousness may not develop at all. It develops when the migrants are on the one hand, subjected to social exclusion and on the other hand continue to retain ties with their own culture, religion language and social norms. Weiner describes a labour diaspora as those “who move across international borders to work in one country while remaining citizens in another” (Weiner, “Labour Migrations and Incipient Diasporas” 48). Indian diasporas have shown great mobility and equally great gains in terms of their social and political paradigms over a period of time in most countries. But in some countries dispossession and poverty have continued.

The history of intercontinental migration exhibits large-scale movement of labourers both free as well as un-free. Many independent labourers, entrepreneurs and professionals move of their own free will in search of greener pastures. Others are indentured labourers in various countries

Un-free labour, employees not free to choose their employer, constituted an important part of the modern world system. The colonial masters and key European mercantile powers consolidated their trading empires by producing tropical commodities and extracting precious metals, and they did this by making use of coerced labour. At first, the Western world imported forced labour from Africa. After the abolition of slavery, indentured labour became the norm and the source was switched from Africa to Asia.

Most indentured labourers were recruited from India. The movement of Indian labourers to faraway tropical plantations shows how far the wealthy planters were prepared to go in return for cheap labour and abundant land. The indenture was usually for a period of five or seven years during which the workers were treated little better than slaves. However, they could not be bought or sold like slaves and for many poverty stricken Indians intercontinental migration provided an opportunity for social mobility that the rigid caste system within India made impossible.

Indenture included a free or partially paid for return passage to India but this option was taken up by only one-fourth or one third of the indentured Indians abroad. Many of them chose to be re-indentured with the promise of free land or saved their meagre wages to buy land at the end of their indentures. And, thus was laid the foundation of the Indian labour diaspora.

The three major Indian groups settled abroad are Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Sikhs have always claimed a separate identity as they went abroad as free farmers or as soldiers in the colonial army. Their distinguishing history of settlement abroad leads them to desire to be known as Sikh diaspora or Punjabi diaspora. The Hindu-Muslim distinction was not so pronounced in the early diaspora as both were in a similar condition. Also the indentured workers comprised of about eighty five percent Hindus and only about fifteen percent Muslims (Ceri Peach, "The Phases of South Asian Emigration").

The Hindu indentured workers then gradually evolved a distinctive diasporic consciousness. This was possible because of three factors that were common to them, viz. the reconstitution of family life, their religious beliefs and the adoption of the Ramayana as "the essential text of the Hindu diaspora" (Parekh, "Some Reflections").

In the beginning, official policy of limiting the number of women indentured workers led to a breakdown of the family system. But, slowly the Indian family was reconstituted, in an orthodox patriarchal form, leading to social cohesion and community life. Hinduism became the dominant religion of the labour diaspora community. The Brahmins tried their best to impose old ritualistic practices on them. They succeeded in most part but faced a little opposition and competition from Christian missionaries in Fiji. There, the Christian missionaries used temptations like free education and social work like establishment of orphanages in addition to religious authority in their attempt to wean away the indentured workers from Brahmanical Hinduism. However, in most cases, the indentured labour diaspora conformed to the Brahmanical canons and their links with their motherland, India, were in a way re-forged. The third feature that fostered the Indian indentured labour's diasporic consciousness was the adoption of the Ramayana as *the* holy book by all of them. A variety of reasons are usually put forward for this development. First, the central theme of the Ramayana is exile, suffering, struggle and eventual return. The indentured labourers, away from home, unconsciously read a parallel in it to their own lives. Second, the text is simple and gives the universal message of the victory of good over evil, a theme that touched the hearts of several in the harsh world of the plantations. Third, the Ramayana drove home a message that all – and not simply the Brahmins – wanted to hear: the son should be dutiful, the wife should be obedient and faithful and family interactions should be based on clearly defined mores of conduct. Finally in the caste-ridden society of India, the Ramayana is relatively casteless. It also appreciates the virtues of the so-called lower caste. So it appeals to all sections of society and became a binding factor in the diasporic consciousness of Indian indentured labour leading a life of exile and struggle, longing for familial ties and waiting for their hard work to be adequately fruitful.

This was how the Hindu diaspora made a world for itself outside India. But on a wider level, the Indian diaspora, Hindu and Muslim, Brahmin and Sudra, had to undergo many afflictions in their relationship with the host country and other ethnic groups. They were housed in former slaves barracks and had to conform to a harsh regimen. Frequently the indentured labourers and their offspring developed an antagonistic relationship with people of the country in which they found themselves. Many inter ethnic conflicts have taken place in countries like Guyana, Fiji, Uganda and South Africa. The conflicts were usually caused by issues like access to owning property but the outcome of the conflicts varied from place to place. In Mauritius, for instance, Indians were able to claim ownership of land to quite a sizeable degree. They ultimately became well educated, urbanised professionals and ultimately inherited state-power when Mauritius became independent. On the other hand, in Fiji Indians were regarded as intruders when indenture came to an end. In 1916, the Fijian elite owned eighty three percent of the land. Indians were not permitted to buy land and suffered a lot of discrimination at the hands of Fijian political leaders. A somewhat similar situation prevailed among other Indian overseas communities of the Indian Ocean area. Those who happened to be in Natal tried to buy urban property in Durban and Pietermaritzburg but the white authorities did not allow them to do so. In South Africa, the Indians were able to improve their economic condition, but the white rulers did not allow them to share political power. Their relationship with the native South Africans also deteriorated. If they supported the White rulers, they were doing injustice to the natives. If they supported the natives, they were in danger of losing what little status they had acquired. So, it was an uneasy Indian diaspora in South Africa but that uneasiness was nothing as compared to the positively negative situation that faced them in post-independence Uganda. The environment became so hostile that most of them chose to leave the country. Some came back to India. Some shifted to North America. Others decided to take refuge in the imperial power, Britain. Only a very few chose the option of taking Ugandan citizenship and staying back there. In a rather unexpected development, those who had migrated to Britain, prospered the most.

In a world where terms like globalization, transnationalism and multiculturalism are becoming integral to life, diaspora communities have acquired significance of their own. All people, diasporas as well as indigenous natives, need to realise that they have to learn to live together, rub along and to shake down and fit into the paradigm of a contemporary seamless society.

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