In Retrospect: Some Theoretical Observations on the Socio-Cultural and Religious World of the Indian Diaspora

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The discourse on South Asian diaspora in particular and more generally on the diaspora communities is replete with victim narratives that emphasised the unfavourable immigration laws, degrading conditions at work place and dehumanizing conditions in which the South Asians were generally kept. Surprisingly, the victim narratives dominate even the more contemporary immigrations to various western countries—disadvantages in job markets, remuneration disparities, cultural and racial biases and so on. This trend in scholarship is not surprising as it is continuous with the post-colonial critique of western domination in the rest of the world. By and large the dominant data for this discourse came from more conventional sources such as government documents, bureaucratic reports, media reports and in general third party sources. Recent scholarship has begun to tap into hither to neglected sources such as orally transmitted narratives as we notice in the case of some papers in this volume. Be that as it may, in general it is without a doubt that a narrative of the Indian diaspora today has to begin with the colonial context in which thousands of Indians were transported in the nineteenth century across the seas to distant lands where they languished in hard labour and survived to have their succeeding generations to tell their stories. In other words, scholars generally are in agreement that a formal discussion on the history of the Indian diaspora really begins in the colonial period although Indian migration to West and East Asia and to Africa as well as to Europe\(^1\) predates the nineteenth century. But this going back in time that far could land us in mythic times!

Both the indenture diasporic experiences as well as the contemporary Indian migration experiences not only offer victim narratives, but also there are innumerable cases of stories of success and optimism as is evident in the Chapters 1–4. Perhaps what one needs to pay attention to is how in the context of colonial labour system, Indian migrant labourers eventually found new

\(^1\) Romani people popularly known as Gypsies are known to have migrated from Central India to Europe around 11th century. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-resident_Indian_and_person_of_Indian_origin), accessed on 26 December 2013.
homelands and built new sacred spaces and transformed their newfound lands into multicultural spaces. The stories of the indenture as well as contemporary immigration experiences, notwithstanding the many negative experiences suffered by the first generation, need to be seen as narratives of extraordinary adventure and optimism and survival. They exemplify what the US president Obama called ‘audacity of hope’. In the midst of their struggle for existence the indenture folk used the opportunities to expand their social relations beyond their erstwhile villages to become ‘jahajibhaïs’ and ‘girmityas’ thereby establishing new bonds with folks that they had never known before. As we notice in the paper of Lal (Chapter 4), it is not only in the case of Fiji, but in every single indenture location, Indians looked for opportunities to “overcome obstacles and find ways to achieve socio-economic progress in the indenture locations.”

From indenture life to the contemporary society, the Indian diaspora has evolved in many ways often claiming their own space in the societies where they chose to strike their roots permanently. This evolution of their existence in places outside South Asia reflects in the nature of the issues they had to deal with over a long period. Using individual accounts from various parts of the world, this volume offers a diachronic profile of how the Indian diaspora has evolved. While the indenture life was riddled with a significant amount of distress and disquiet in the lives of the immigrants, it would be incompatible with the data to assume that such victim discourse is peculiar only to the indenture life in the colonial period. The post-colonial accounts of immigration to the west reveals also such victim narratives. As such, it would be fair to assume that whether in the colonial period of indenture or in the post-colonial immigrant life in North America or Europe, often the first two generations go through a similar experiences of being out of place as it were and being subjected to various forms of discrimination. It is not as if the discriminatory practices no longer affect the succeeding generations. They are, however, better equipped to deal with the new issues not only through their own internal discourses within their ethnic enclaves, but also by engaging the broader society in which they live. The strategies and modes of discourses that would be deployed to engage with the others to lobby their own rights and privileges as well as in claiming their own space will depend on the country and the laws and the general social framework in which they live. For instance, in Malaysia and Trinidad temples were used to deploy their ethnic identity, in Singapore and Britain the Sikh community often deployed their ethnicity and race identity to claim greater political leverage while in Canada they deployed their religious identity as more significantly to be part of a Canadian multiculturalism.

It is in the crucible of their immigration experiences the Indian diaspora also found ways to redefine their identities. As Prea Persaud expressed in her