Joya Chatterji and David Washbrook


The self-declared aim of this handbook is ambitious: It is to redefine the field of South Asian diaspora studies. The strategy deployed is to draw together a collection of articles that offer interesting insights on a wide range of specialised thematic topics pertaining to South Asian migration and engage with conceptual debates within the broader field of diaspora studies. I cannot comment on the volume’s ability to redefine the field of South Asian diaspora studies, as I am not from this field of study myself; however, as a scholar of diaspora more generally, I argue that this collection enriches the debates on how to define and interpret the concept of diaspora with well fleshed-out examples.

Chief amongst the arguments advanced by the editorial voice in the handbook is the significance of a historicised interpretation of diaspora. The assumption that migration is a recent phenomenon is challenged in the first two parts of the volume that address the mobility of South Asians in the Early Modern world and during the time of the British Empire. The first five chapters broach pre-modern migratory circuits of labour and artisans (Kolff, O’Hanlon, Roy and Haynes), and the movement of value through the financial instruments of Hawala and Hundu (Ballard). As a unit, the Early Modern world section emphasises the fluidity and multiplicity of identities associated with what Washbrook characterises as the “highly mobile, pulsating and variable Indian Ocean world” before it was to exist as “India”, when “being an ‘immigrant’ was wholly unexceptional and where there were no self-evaluating ‘indigenes’” (p. 15).

The second section dedicated to diaspora and Empire consists of six chapters exploring the movement of South Asian businesses (Markovits), indentured labour (Lal, Sen), seafarers (Ahuja), and also includes a chapter surveying the South Asian presence in Britain prior to the mid-19th Century (Fisher) and the Nepali/Gorkhali diaspora since the 19th century (Gellner). Exemplifying the way in which various articles contribute to debates on diasporic identities, Gellner argues that in the case of Nepali migration history, it is only in the modern period that the term “diaspora” begins to be appropriate. It is at this point that national boundaries emerged and nationalist intellectuals began to promote the idea of a Nepali diasporic consciousness.

The third part of the volume continues to explore the conditions of emergence of diaspora and is entitled “Nation and Diaspora”. It contains two articles: Hofmeyr’s exploration of the emergence of a sense of “Indianness” amongst migrants in South Africa at the time of the British Empire through an interest-
ing exploration of Gandhi’s shifting emphasis from identifying as a subject of the British Empire towards that of a national subject of India. This is followed by a chapter on South Asian diasporic cultures in the United States (Shukla). The fourth section focuses on diaspora, nation-states and neighbourhoods. Here, we find Chatterji’s account of the shift from imperial to national identities, a critical discussion of human smuggling (Ahmad), the movement of Islam (Marsden), and explorations of two diasporas: Tibetans (McConnell) and Sri Lankans (Van Hear).

The fifth, final and largest section features the themes of globalisation and culture in diaspora, containing 15 articles. There is an impressive range of topics covered in these final chapters, including contemporary “hi-skill” migration (Washbrook), transnationalism (Gardner), hybrid identities (Leonard), Bengalis (Eade), Pakistanis (Samad), religious identities (Zavos, Werbner, Devji), urban diasporic life (Gould), youth cultures (Alexander and Kim), dress (Tarlo), marriage (Mody), literature (Kabir), food (Sengupta) and film (Dwyer).

Overall, while the volume is slightly weighted towards scholarship on South Asians in the UK, there are ample chapters addressing migration to North America and elsewhere. I found both the scope of themes addressed and the emphasis on debates and arguments rather than on general surveys of topics made for stimulating reading. Chapters develop arguments that provide insights into lively and current debates. For example, Ahmad’s chapter on state policies in relation to human smuggling from Pakistan addresses the framing of irregular border-crossing in response to a rise in criminality in the context of globalisation. Ahmad argues: “the facilitation of ‘legal’ migration in sending and receiving contexts is in many ways no less subject to corruption, fraud and profiteering than the illegal overland routes that grab news headlines, problematising the very notion of smuggling as a distinct form of travel” (p. 198).

The contributions also shed light on the multiplicity of diasporic identities that might simultaneously fall under the banner of “the South Asian diaspora” across time and place. In doing so, they highlight the contested nature of the boundaries of imagined and lived diasporic communities and also keep in view the power relations through which diasporic cultures are forged and reworked. Highlighting the complexity of the politics of diasporic cultural production, Alexander and Kim’s chapter offers a nuanced account of the mobilities of what they describe as the contemporary “desi” music scene. They discuss the way in which music such as bhangra and Asian Underground is ascribed variable meanings as it crosses national borders and they also consider the way the diasporic cultural sphere produces insiders and outsiders in different contexts.

I would agree with the editors that part of what makes their handbook stand out is the way in which various contributions are interesting in their own right,