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EDITORIAL: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL WORLD OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA

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In many countries, Indian community is in existence for over one and a half centuries (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, West Indian Islands, East Africa and South Africa) while in other places they are at least into the second generation (e.g., UK, Continental Europe, USA and Australia). This Issue of the journal, *Man in India* is dedicated to understanding how the social worlds of these immigrant groups have evolved and what issues are of significance to these communities in their countries. It is also to understand how their orientation to the land of their origins may have changed. For instance, questions such as, do they continue to think of the land of their origins as their homeland or, has their present location become their homeland? Is there a difference between the relatively newer immigrants and the 5th or 6thgeneration Indians in their association to their land of origins?

On a comparative level, the communities that live in the former colonial locations seem to have under gone more substantive changes than the first and second generation Indians living in various western countries. They have also evolved their own cultural and religious orientations and became more deeply entrenched in local political and economic life as opposed to those who presently live in countries in North America and Continental Europe.

The discourse on South Asian diaspora in particular and more generally on 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. Four of the papers in this collection have branched off from such conventional sources and relied on the orally transmitted and ethnographically collected data.

Emphasising the significance of oral traditions, Archana Kumar and RN Tiwari in their paper offers a clarification on this point—

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> Oral traditions do not merely refer to verbal lore – tales, songs, proverbs etc., but the term is used in a wider sense as is done by Jan Vansina. Oral traditions may include eyewitness accounts, hearsay, testimonies, reminiscences and commentaries too. Oral traditions, transmitted from one generation to another by word of mouth, and retained and relayed through individual and collective memory, embody truth of a different kind. Encompassing lived experiences of common people and "common voices", oral traditions can be equally valuable source of reconstructing and reinterpreting past.

Collecting oral songs and narratives both in India and Mauritius, Kumar and Tiwari reconstruct indenture life on a more personal level. Such narratives often emphasise the suffering that the indentured labourers endured. However, Tetri Devi's song recounts her own loss and misery in the absence of her husband who left on the indenture contract to a distant land. In a sense, these oral narratives offer an insight into what might have happened to the families that the indentured workers left behind. In a similar vein Ashutosh Kumar analyses the folk songs and poems that were popular in northern India. In his paper, he points out that the opposition to the indenture system did not only come from the colonies where the system was in operation. But it also came from the Indian religious and community organizations. Two stakeholders in this connection were the Arya Samaj and the Marwari Sahayak Samiti both were located in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Both these organizations condemned the system of indenture to the extent that it alerted the attention of the British colonial office. It might be surprising that the Arya Samaj was actively opposing the system of indenture given the fact that they also saw it as an opportunity to deploy their ambassadors to the colonies where the indentured Hindus lived in an effort to transform the ritualistic Hinduism that they considered superstitious and backwards. However, the Marwari community had a certain commercial interest in opposing the indenture system. Their opposition to the indenture was so great that they even went on to forcefully retrieve some of the labourers on route to the hiring stations. As Ashutosh Kumar notes—

> [I]n Calcutta the wealthy Marwaris ascertained the relatives of indentured coolies and brought them to Calcutta in order to claim the release of indentured coolies. They sometimes raided the bogies of trains carrying indentured labourers to Calcutta.

In the discourse against the indenture system, what became significant was the co-option of caste and gender as key issues. While indenture system was perceived to be detrimental to the practice of caste, even the so called untouchable caste women became elevated to a position of emulation. The letter that was sent by Kunti, an indentured worker of Chamar caste detailing with the rape ordeal that she had to endure suddenly became a powerful tool in the hands of the nationalists who were campaigning against the British. In a convoluted way Kunti's case also provided the opportunity for the nationalists to affirm caste. Kunti was projected as someone who emulated the upper caste women. Ashutosh Kumar points out in his paper—

> But, what was implicit in the nationalists' construction of the lower caste working women through the Kunti case that 'despite' being lower caste, these women emulated the upper caste value of wifely devotion that was the ideal of Indian womanhood. In other words nationalists gave primacy to the high caste value even in the selection of the victimised Indian woman.

In northern India the experiences of women like Kunti gave rise to songs and poems that bemoaned the experience of indenture. It is these songs that Ashutosh Kumar offers in his analysis of indenture system.In continuation of the victim discourse, Banerjee analyses the context of South Asian migration to the US. She points out that in the pre-1965 period most immigrants from India were the agricultural labourers and some politically active Indians from Punjab towards the end of the 19th century. Since most of these workers during this period were single males, Banerjee argues that they were more vulnerable to frequent relocations at the behest of the employers. The full effect of the absence of women among the Indian immigrants is underlined by Banerjee—

> The socially-constructed absence of Indian women had multiple effects: it greatly subsidized the labour of Indians for employers, prevented generational renewal and transmission of cultural values, and shaped Indian males' social isolation, transience, and labour flexibility. Exploitation was rampant and Indians were paid lower wages compared to white labourers, despite being considered more reliable and hard-working as workers. Indians, like other Asian immigrants, were also subjected to violence and widespread discrimination.

In the post-1965 period tens of thousands of Indians immigrated to the US under the category of skilled workers. Although mostly Indian immigrants were praised as being most successful minority groups in the US, Banerjee argues that such general perception

> obfuscates certain key aspects of Indian communities in the U.S. It prevents an evaluation of the range of institutional inequalities and marginalization that tens of thousands of working class and self-employed Indian immigrants face.

Using ethnographic data Banerjee interrogates the general perceptions of Indian immigrants in the US vis à vis some personal narratives.

Notwithstanding the victim experiences that early Indian immigrants to foreign lands endured over many decades, in the evolution of these communities wherever they had settled there emerged a new sense of identity that not only distanced them from their places of origin, but connected them closely to places where they had found a 'home'. This is surprisingly true not only of Indian immigrants to the former colonies under indenture system, but also of the more recent Indian immigrants to the west as skilled workers. For most of them India as a land origin is nothing more than a distant memory or at best an exotic destination which they might wish to visit sometime in their lifetime. Even among the new immigrants in places like North America and Europe, the second generation is rarely interested in seeing India as their most favoured travel destination. For them the issues range

from—they can't relate to their cousins in India, can't understand the caste system, poverty, absence of western comforts, and so on and so forth. It is this mental distance in their minds seems to give rise to greater attachment to the land where they had settled becoming involved in local politics and economies. But there is another twist to this immigration narrative. Those who had migrated to former colonies outside India in some cases either forced to migrate again as happened in the case of East African countries, or due to personal circumstances to seek better opportunities as it happened to many Indians in the Caribbean Islands.

In recent years, many Indo-Caribbeans moved to the US. In the process they have acquired double identities. In her paper, Prea Presaud interrogates the subtle nuances of the terms 'Indian', 'East Indian', 'West Indian', 'Indo-Caribbean', 'Indo-Trinidadian', and 'Indo-Guyanese'. The complexity of these terms is expressed by her in the following statement—

> Although the use of these similar terms may cause confusion at first, the use of all of these terms is necessary because it is not only the way that Indo-Caribbeans talk about themselves and those from India, but it is also representative of their complicated identity which stands both inside and outside of these individual groups.

She notes that the Indo-Caribbean identity inherently flags the otherness that forces them to adopt a 'hyphenated identity'. She explains—

> The Indo-Caribbean identity exists not in the joining of "Indo" and "Caribbean," but rather in the hyphen itself – Indo-Caribbeans reject and claim each affiliation thereby standing in the tension created by opposing the two.

She further elaborates—

> The existence of a separate Indo-Caribbean identity, however, proves that while these two worlds may seem to be incompatible, they both can be represented in a singular identity. At the same time, the existence of the hyphen demonstrates the inability of these two worlds to merge completely.

In her analysis, she makes a case for the existence of a 'hyphenated identity' among Indians settled outside India. She argues that such an identity is an important characteristic of the diaspora—

> A hyphenated identity is a characteristic of the diaspora which forces migrants to choose their loyalties. It is not a state, but a process in which the migrant continually tries to bring together his or her history with his or her present.

Presaud illustrates this through the case study of Indo-Caribbeans and the largely first generation Indians in the US. She sees a significant difference in the way the two groups interact with each other. They distinguish themselves from both the West-Indians and from the East Indians in the US. And in the process of doing so, it is their authenticity that is upheld. Their struggle to maintain their authenticity as a community on their own is practical, and therefore they have to deal with their

identity in practical terms. Presaud offers an insight into their logic when she suggests—

> Thus Indo-Caribbeans find themselves engaging in two types of argument. The first is addressed to East Indians who doubt their "Indianess" (sic) and the second is proving to outsiders that they are not the same as Indians who migrate from India to America.

This desire to be wanting to be part of being Indian and at the same time not the same Indian is indeed a key element that needs to be noted as important in understanding the Indian diaspora.

It is this experience of duality that Govender and Sookrajh describe in their paper as rhizomatic experiences. Examining the lived experiences of Indian diaspora women in South Africa, the authors deploy the metaphors of rhizome and arborescent as structural terms that explain different root systems in botany. While rhizomatic root system expands horizontally and produces multiple shoots, the arborescent root system is unidirectional. Using these metaphors as theoretical ideas Govender and Sookrajh examine the life narratives of some Indian academic women. One of the cases she refers to makes the point that having lived in South Africa under the white dominant culture but within sheltered Indian township, Devina was forced to affirm her identity as an Indian South African. It is the ambivalences and contradictions in the lived experiences of the Indian diaspora women that the authors explored. While in the case of Devina she asserted her Indian cultural identity at times and her South African identity at other times, in the case of Ruby her higher education path opened up pathways to question her identity as part of an idealized Indian woman. By examining the lived experiences of these and other women, the authors suggest—

> The principle of rupture in relation to the lived experiences of the participants signifies defining or critical moments when these women 'broke' or 'shattered' images of being typically Indian which can be related to the heritage of patriarchy, contextual realities of apartheid or its abolishment or any other individual matter.

They therefore conclude that the Indian diaspora women

> have undergone a metamorphosis as individual Indian diasporic women in different and complex ways from saris to running shorts; breaking the shackles of patriarchy; challenging western conceptions of knowledge; decaffeinating the pragmatic patriarchal husband and being decaffeinated as well.

Pushing the complexities of Indian identity in the diaspora, Moodley's paper examines the art works of two South African Indian artists in order to explore the 'Africanisation of Indian selfhood and an Indianisation of South Africa'. She argues,

> While nation-building is currently seen as an imperative in South Africa, Indians are still concerned about their position and identity. A perusal of any Indian newspaper or media representation of Indians will foreground the stereotypical understanding of a homogenised Indian identity in South Africa. This sometimes takes the form of accents, dress, cars, food-

> ways or traditional family values as presently evidenced in the soap opera "Isidingo." In South Africa Indianness is in these ways exoticised and perpetuated thereby insisting on the "otherness" of this minority group.

First examining the art works of Galdhari, an Indian South African Muslim, Moodley suggests—

> All four works consider the complexities of being Muslim in South Africa and reflect on Indian/Muslim history and culture through the use of various symbols like the map, the sweetmeats (see C and D) and the overwhelming use of the colour black.

In a similar vein commenting on Selvan Naidoo's art work, Moodley underlines the efforts of Naidoo in his work to break out of being "pigeon-holed into creating works that explore only mysticism" and "explores his South African identity as one profoundly different from that of India". And this difference is expressed in his constant attempt to focus"on the shift away from past exclusions of a colonial and Apartheid legacy to a present legitimising identity". Nevertheless, she points out that a certain sense of Indianness distinguishes the artworks of Indian artists and in collecting them as "cultural and creative manifestations" they also inadvertently "suggest cultural and racial stereotyping". She therefore argues that

> [T]hese works clearly focus on the Indian collective but as we look forward this racialised sense of identity which is attached to the Indian community needs to be reviewed not only by external forces like the media and national institutions like galleries but also by the Indian community itself.

One of the key social units of Indian society has long been recognised as caste. However, in the context of Indian diaspora there has been greater evidence to suggest the gradual dissolution of caste as a meaningful unit of social organization. The extent to which caste was maintained by some groups in the diaspora depended on the nature of immigration, labour contracts and local political and social conditions. However, in the case of some groups such as the Gujarati merchants because of their ability to establish and use caste organizations for emigration to new lands they managed to sustain caste at least in their first few generations. Hiralal has studied in her paper the case of Rajputs of Gujarati background in Durban and examined the role of Natal Rajput Association in sustaining certain level of broad caste affinity in the early period. However, such organizations gradually reconstituted themselves to work towards a broader ethnic identity than closely knit caste identity. As such, Hiralal shows that an organization that was originally established to preserve the Dhobi Rajput identity gradually became a place for a larger Rajput identity by offering space for cultural and linguistic programmes. However, in the changing social landscape the Natal Rajput Association had to forge alliances with other Gujarati organizations in post-Apartheid South Africa as it "has lost its vibrancy in terms of community support for notions of caste consciousness", notes Hiralal.

Another important social structure of Indian diaspora is the institution of marriage. Notwithstanding the fact that in many cases mixed marriages have occurred throughout the history of the Indian diaspora, a certain tendency to entrench social taboos exists in exchange of marital relations. In most cases these exhibit themselves in religious terms as caste for most practical purposes became defunct as a social unit in the diaspora. This is evident in many parts of the world. When caste laws fail to enforce homogeneity, often they are extended to the religious rules. Religion becomes the basis for exchange in marriage. When religious boundaries are crossed, such marriages are often seen with certain level of doubt about the longevity of those marriages. Khan and Singh in their paper have explored interfaith marriages in the Indian diaspora and argued that although interfaith marriages are seen as a threat to marital stability, there is evidence that couples in interfaith marital relationships often downplay their religious differences to work on their marital bond and particularly in the case of women such efforts are seen to be stronger. It is often women who are willing to change their religions to sustain their marital bond. Khan and Singh argue—

> The findings therefore suggest that changing ones religion offers greater likelihood of marital stability as compared to making adaptation, adjustment, tolerance and negotiating differences within interfaith marriages.

Attempting to preserve one's Indian identity in the diaspora on the one hand and trying to become part of the new countries in some cases had a long period in between perhaps characterised by a limbo status. This meant anywhere across the Indian ocean—best expressed by Waetjen in her paper—"Men like Hassim Bismillah, pursuing migrant mercantile strategies for livelihood and capital growth, considered home and domicile as located across the Indian Ocean." Waetjen in her paper examines the writings of Zuleikha Mayat, a housewife from the Muslim community in Durban to offer an insight into women holding on to traditional roles prescribed for Indian women and yet demonstrating optimism for change. Waetjen therefore describes Mayat as a 'housewife', 'modern enthusiast' and a 'progressivist'. She suggests that Mayat in writing under the fictional name of Fahmida constructed a world that

> signifies several tensions: the tension between the communal (transnational) spaces of diasporic identity and those of the local pluralist and national context; the tension between Muslim woman's seclusion in domestic spaces and the secular, liberalizing spaces of modernity.

This is perhaps best noticed when, as Waetjen notes, Mayat turns a burning political issue into an issue of gender transgression. The poignant narrative of Sabira that Mayat recounts is yet another example of how traditional role of an Indian woman to be by her husband's side is affirmed on one hand and yet on the other the narrative itself turns into a political comment, suggests Waetjen in her paper. Waetjen argues that

> Mayat's championing of the new modern housewife enables her to place gender at the centre of a progressive historical narrative, one which firmly locates 'home' on African soil through its domestic discourses and which legitimates women's civic identities. As the reproducers of culture, women had long been positioned through their labour in the home as key both to the survival of Indian identity and to its anchorage to local social realities.

Although Gujarat remained the home of businessmen that came from there, Waetjen notes that the Group Areas Act and the forced relocation of Indians brought home to people where their true home really is—

> Now, her own generation, fully settled and rooted in their South African home, are to be forcibly removed from long-standing properties, their very success becoming a reason for their desired 'disappearance'.

In the narrative of Zainub, Mayat recounts how the subsequent generations broke off ties with the old country (India) and

> till at last they and their children could no longer be called Indians but were by any standard South Africans as pure and worthy as the Whites of Voortrekker descent, or the Africans who claimed that they were the original inhabitants of this fair country.

By unpacking Mayat's 'Fahmida's World' Waetjen demonstrates the complexities faced by the diaspora Indian women in affirming their identities, cultural loyalties and nationalities.

Using temples and buildings as narrative, Carolyn Prorok in her paper reconstructs "social, political and religious meanings that reflect generations of tension and negotiation within the community in counterpoint to the dominant social and political milieu in which they live." In her view temples reveal the identities of the communities that build them. Using data from Trinidad and Malaysia, Prorok develops an argument that temples like archival materials reflect the past and the choices that the communities had made. She suggests that by and large the type of labour recruitment, socio-political conditions during and after the colonial period informed the type of temple constructions in both Trinidad and Malaysia. Her narrative recounts not only conflicts between the Indians and the colonial administrators, but also conflicts between them and the other ethnic groups as well as within the Indian (Hindu) community itself as reflected for instance in the case of deciding to rebuild a temple in Trinidad. She therefore argues that the dominant culture provides the context within which Hindus had to build their temples and in doing so they juggle their identities of being Indian/Hindu, Trinidadian, Malaysian and so on.

As we have noted already, immigration is often not only an individual matter. Certain level of institutional involvement is often made use of by some communities in order to facilitate an organised structure for their emigration to other parts of the world. Such organizational structures to be in place, it requires a relative prosperity of the community in question. Mawani and Mukadam in their paper examine of

the role of *jamatkhanas* in facilitating emigration to the UK often via East Africa by Nizari Ismaili Muslim community of Gujarati ancestry. Negative political conditions in East Africa necessitated many Indians in East Africa to migrate to other countries such as US and UK. Muslims of Ismaili background have established themselves in East Africa for a long time during the colonial period. Not only the Ismailis from East Africa, but also from India began to emigrate to the UK in the 1960s and 1970s. Distinguishing the architectural differences between a mosque and the *jamatkhana* the authors offer insight into the unique communal role that the *jamatkhanas* played in the process of emigration and settlement of Ismaili Muslim community in the UK. Surviving their many ordeals, the Ismailis have created a niche in the British society and through their relative prosperity they have made inroads into the local politics and economy. Theirs is a narrative of both struggle and success to the extent of feeling at home in the British society. The authors argue that the *jamatkhanas* serve multiple roles in the lives of the Ismaili community—

> The Ismaili Centre, London acts as a reminder to the Nizari Ismaili Muslims of Gujarati ancestry of their multiple and fluid identities: they are at once British, Muslim and Gujarati. It allows them a space where these identities are not in conflict with one another but where they co-exist in harmony.

As diasporic communities strike roots in a place of their settlement even within the first generation often conflicts of interest arise and leading to racial prejudices. But interestingly such experiences of conflict with the host society by the diasporic communities are often clear signs that the diaspora is there to stay. Often these conflicts express themselves in the context of religious buildings and cultural centres as they are seen by the host society as invasions into their natural space. But in countries where virtually everyone is an immigrant at some point (as in the case of Australia or Canada), the unwritten law of first come first served seems to dominate and the so called host society which really is only a few generations ahead of the new comers feels theirs is the dominant culture and the new comers must conform to it. They go to great lengths to put in place racially prejudiced laws to prevent the new comers from even emigrating to the country, let alone allowing the new community to build their own cultural spaces. Goolam Vahed explores this tension in the lives of the Indian Muslim community who in recent years relocated from South Africa and other Southern African countries to Australia. Like most religious communities, Muslim society builds its life around religious centres such as mosques. However, in the case of the mosques the most contested part of it is the minaret from where the call to prayer is announced to the community five times a day. Although Islam is not new to Australia and has been present in some form since the late 18th century as Muslim sailors who worked on British ships often were left on the land. But in more recent decades that a visible Muslim community presence became a feature of Australian social landscape is seen as a threat to the

Australian society. Vahed suggests that such hostility needs to be seen as a fear of Australian mainstream society that Australia would become 'Asianised'. Especially since 9/11 attacks in the US this fear became real and is often expressed in relation to mosque constructions. Vahed therefore argues—

> Opposition to mosque building projects by Muslims is an indication of increasing abhorrence of the Muslim presence in Australia and the most obvious manifestation of Islamophobia. Like the opposition to the headscarves worn by Muslim women, mosques are seen as a visible political statement of Muslim claims to space and opposed as such.

Notwithstanding such conflicts that religious communities often endure in their new worlds, they continue to make an impact on the societies in which they make their home through their volunteer work and by helping the poor in society. Muslim organizations are not new to this work. Khan and Ebrahim in their paper examine the role of 'Faith Based Organizations' and especially the 'Gift of the Givers' in South Africa in relief efforts on an international scale. These religious organisations are often led by strong leaders who have made their impact on society through their work and achieve these goals almost singlehandedly. To the extent that they offer aid to not just Muslim communities but to the rest of society both nationally and internationally makes these organizations a welcome phenomenon notwithstanding their ethos being Islamic. In a sense, religious organizations use such social work to their advantage in reinforcing their presence as part of the larger society and nation allows it to brand itself as authentic representative of the country abroad—as is the case with the Gift of the Givers which brands itself with the 'Proudly South African' label. The discussion of Khan and Ebrahim illustrates the mutual benefit between the diaspora community and the country in which it lives. It is this perceived mutual benefit that allows a close collaboration between the government of the country and the religious organization.

The various papers presented in this collection reflect the ways in which the Indian diaspora in various parts of the world have struggled to sustain their social and cultural world. I have identified some of the salient points made by the authors in their papers. To appreciate the full extent of their views on the discourse on Indian diaspora the readers are invited to delve deeper into these papers and explore the nuances that I could not summarize in this editorial piece.