

Revisiting Diaspora Spaces in India

A Contemporary Overview

Edited by

Joydev Maity

Raiganj University, India

Series in Literary Studies



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Finally, to my parents, whose silent support, prayers and blessing have always done miracles in my life. This one is for them!

Foreword

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The phenomena of ‘diaspora’ and ‘diaspora spaces’ have been interrogated and addressed by scholars and practitioners from diverse social, cultural, and political viewpoints across the globe. To elaborate further, diaspora literatures have interpreted diasporas and diaspora spaces through various forms of linguistic, racial, gender, economic, political, physical, and emotional experiences. The experiences do not exist as individual entities but are intertwined with each other across time, space, and geographies. A lot has already been written about diaspora and diaspora spaces. However, a lot of perspectives need to be analyzed. In fact, most of the work that has been produced so far is more centered on the notion of ‘diaspora’ and less on ‘diaspora spaces.’ According to Avtar Brah, the concept of diaspora space can be understood as “a location where concepts of diaspora, border, and the politics of location are made immanent – that is, where they are played out along multiple axes of power.”¹ Unlike the notion of diaspora, the concept of diaspora space “constitutes a point of confluence and intersectionality,”² where the diaspora experiences are perceived in connection to various factors like refugee crises, political upheavals, border disputes, racial conflicts, and bio wars.

Joydev Maity’s edited volume is such an attempt to acknowledge the diverse and intersectional experiences of the diaspora spaces, which are personal, individual, and collective in nature. Based on different literary texts and personal experiences, the contributors in the volume engage with the question of diaspora spaces from multiple geographical, cultural, familial, linguistic, and gender standpoints. It is important to note that the

¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 630.

² *Ibid.*, 633.

interpretation of diaspora experiences and memories should not be restricted to the movements across lands and oceans but also the histories and memories that are stuck under the lands and oceans through warfare, spice trades, shipwrecks, and natural calamities. Historians like Ananya Jahanara Kabir ('archipelagoes of fragments'), Isabel Hofmeyr ('dockside reading' and 'hydro colonialism'), Dilip Menon ('changing theories from the global south' and 'ocean as method'), and many others have been consistently re-reading the diasporic histories and re-interpreting diaspora spaces through the perspectives of food, fashion, dance, music, indigenous terminologies, and underwater archives. In order to dismantle the Euro-North American-centric, heteronormative and hierarchical narratives on diasporas and diaspora spaces, it is crucial to engage with such re-readings and re-interpretations.

Altogether, this is a thought-provoking work, and hopefully, it will add much scholarly value to the existing archives on diaspora literatures.

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Introduction

The 'New World' presence – America, *terra Incognita* – is therefore itself the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference....The diaspora experience...is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.¹

(Stuart Hall)

Conceptualizing Diaspora: A Global Perspective

The term 'diaspora' which originally referred to the dispersion of the Jews, has now become a blanket term, referring to any nationality, ethnic, or religion-based "macro community" and numerous migrant communities (the immigrants, refugees, exiled, guest workers) who live dispersed worldwide, far away from their homeland or sometimes without a homeland, as in the case of nomadic Romani people.² The approach and process of assigning a broader spectrum to the word diaspora started in the 1960s-70s in the United States when communities like Armenian, Irish, Greek, and African were included within diaspora communities along with the Jews. In this context, it is imperative to discuss why and how the concept of diaspora shifted its meaning from religious to secular, specific to general, and narrow to a broader spectrum. Khachig Tölölyan writes about four significant events that led to the expansion of the word diaspora worldwide, especially in the United States in the 1970s.³ First, Tölölyan writes about the Black Power or the Afro-American civil rights movement, which gave a new identity to the people of color in the United States, and eventually led to the birth of 'The African diaspora,' replacing 'Black' or 'Afro-American' diaspora. Secondly, Tölölyan

¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora," in *Identity: community, culture, difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222-237.

² Dániel Gazsó, "An Endnote Definition for Diaspora Studies," accessed from ResearchGate on 2 Feb. 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338019637_An_Endnote_Definition_for_Diaspora_Studies

³ Khachig Tölölyan, "Diaspora Studies: Past, Present and Promise," *IMI Working Paper Series*, 55 April 2012, www.imi.ox.ac.uk

talks about the six-day war in the United States in 1967, during which the Jews supported their kin-state.⁴ The success of the Jews inspired other communities (Irish, Greeks, Armenians, Cubans) in the United States as they also aspired for such mutual bonds and assistance among their kin-state worldwide. Thirdly, Tölölyan discusses the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which wiped out the quota system grounded on nationality and ethnicity in the United States.⁵ Lastly, Tölölyan mentions that from the 1960s, scholars and critics worldwide started to focus more on the cultural diversity, ethnic differences, and diverse and dynamic aspects of the field of diaspora; such evolving approach expanded the meaning of the word diaspora to an extreme level. Although Tölölyan's observed events and approach took place mainly in the United States, a similar change was also perceptible worldwide.

At present, the term diaspora does not require any special definition; what it needs is clarification. Writing in 1986, Walker Connor's definition of diaspora includes every people living outside their home.⁶ Connor's definition is amorphous and assigns meaning to broad categories of people so liberally that it raises questions and creates problems. So Rogers Brubaker writes:

If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power – its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora.⁷

Later in 1991, William Safran based his standard definition of diaspora on Connor's definition and applied the term to those displaced communities whose

ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original center... they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland... they feel partly alienated and insulated from it (homeland)... they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as

⁴ The six-day war took place between Israel and four Arab states from 5-10 June 1967 and ended with Israel's victory.

⁵ With the introduction of Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, cultural assimilation was not necessary for the immigrants from various countries in the United States.

⁶ Walker Connor, "The impact of homelands upon diasporas," in *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, ed. Gabriel Sheffer (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 16.

⁷ Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (April 2005):1-19.

the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return when conditions are appropriate....⁸

Finally, Robin Cohen's widely-acknowledged definition in his *Global Diasporas* must be mentioned while clarifying the concept of diaspora. Cohen's definition bears many similarities with that of Safran's as he writes about the four basic features of a diaspora:

... members of a defined group have been dispersed to many destinations; they construct a shared identity; they still somewhat orient themselves to an original 'home'; and they demonstrate an affinity with other members of the group dispersed to other places.⁹

Over time, diaspora narratives have been evolving and presenting unique experiences, and so also the interpretation of such narratives by scholars and academicians worldwide. Thus, the "myth of return," one of the most inherent themes of classical diaspora literature, has been interpreted alternately by scholars and critics.¹⁰ Badr Dahya writes that among the members of the diaspora communities, the myth of return functions as a proportioned strength to make strong "kinship boundaries."¹¹ However, in his article, Mustafa Cakmak argues that immigrants' "episodic homeland visits" and "*mundane pilgrimages*" have debunked the myth of return as they no longer look for a permanent return to their homeland.¹² So Brubaker writes that the immigrants no more prefer a "sharp break" from their homelands.¹³ The tendency of such episodic visits is mainly noticeable among second and third-generation immigrants who do not have any memory of their ancestral homeland. Through such visits and with the help of "institutions of migration,"¹⁴ they form "multiple homes."¹⁵ These

⁸ William Safran, "Diasporas in modern Societies: Myths of homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 83-99.

⁹ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 2023), 1.

¹⁰ Muhammad Anwar, *The Myth of Return: Pakistanis in Britain* (London: Heinemann, 1979).

¹¹ Badr Dahya, "Pakistanis in Britain: Transients or settlers?," *Race* 14, no. 3 (January 1973): 244.

¹² Mustafa Cakmak, "Take Me Back to My Homeland Dead or Alive!": The Myth of Return Among London's Turkish-Speaking Community," *Frontiers in Sociology* 6 (March 2021): 1, 6. Cakmak terms the ritual-like visits of the immigrants as mundane pilgrimages.

¹³ Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," 4.

¹⁴ Verity Saifullah Khan, "The Pakistanis Mirpuri villagers at home and in Bradford," in *Between two cultures: migrants and minorities in Britain*, ed. J.L. Watson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 16.; By "institutions of migration," Khan here talks about travel agencies.

episodic visits function merely as a mirage of perpetual return. Such visits can also be interpreted by adopting Peeren's chronotopic approach, where the home is a medium for forming multidimensional identities.¹⁶

Considering the number of significant research works that have already been done, the inherent themes of diaspora writings like dislocation, re-location, memo-realization, hybridity, cosmopolitanism, de/re-territorialization, nostalgia, globalization, and identities need no further elaboration. However, the various types of diaspora – about which writers and scholars like Robin Cohen and John Armstrong have written a lot – deserve special attention. In one of his articles, Armstrong talked about two special types of diaspora: 'proletarian diaspora' and 'mobilized diasporas.'¹⁷ According to him, the 'proletarian diaspora' category includes those migratory communities who live as marginalized communities in the host countries, like the European peasants who crossed the seas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Interestingly, when 'proletarian diaspora' communities achieve a distinctive social status in the new country, they become 'mobilized diasporas.' Robin Cohen, in his *Global Diasporas*, discusses five types of diaspora: victim diaspora (forced migration, diaspora as a result of misery and famine); labor diaspora (resembles Armstrong's concept of the proletarian diaspora); imperial diaspora (diaspora during the time of territorial expansions and conquests); trade diaspora and deterritorialized diaspora (hybrid and post-modern diaspora).¹⁸ In this context, Michael Bruneau's four types of diaspora (entrepreneurial, religious, political and racial, and cultural)¹⁹ and Milton J. Esman's three types of diaspora (labor, settler, and entrepreneurial)²⁰ deserve special mention here.

Indian Diaspora Communities Worldwide: A Brief Overview

The 2022 United Nations report suggests that there are almost 32 million Indians presently living worldwide as diasporas, which is the largest. The

¹⁵ Khalid Koser and Nadje Sadig Al-Ali, *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home* (London: Routledge, 2001), 32.

¹⁶ Esther Peeren, "Through the lens of chronotope: suggestions for a spatiotemporal perspective on diaspora," *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race* 13 (2006): 70.

¹⁷ John Armstrong, "Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas," *American Political Science Review* 70, no. 2 (1976): 393-408.

¹⁸ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁹ Michael Bruneau, "Diasporas, transnational spaces and communities," in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. Rainer Baubock and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2010), 35-50.

²⁰ Milton Esman, "Definition and classes of diaspora," in *Diasporas in the Contemporary World*, ed. Idem (Cambridge- Malden: Polity, 2009), 13-21.

migration of Indians has an old history. In the 1550s, people from Indian states and cities like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, Allahabad, Delhi, and Bombay migrated to Russia and Asia. Scott C. Levi terms them “Banias,” “Shikarpuris,” and “Multanis” and describes the process as “Indian Merchant Diaspora.”²¹ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many business people and laborers migrated to the Caribbean, Africa, and Far eastern countries; this was the development period of the Indian diaspora. From the 1990s onwards, Indian diaspora people and their lives started to attract writers and scholars, and terms like “Muslim Diaspora,” “Hindu Diaspora,” “Sikh Diaspora,” and “Imagined Diaspora” developed.²² Today, the Indian Diaspora is viewed from a “transnational perspective”²³ (instead of International migration) in which, as Glick Schiller writes, people live across international borders and become a part of a transnational diaspora.²⁴

During the initial years, Indian migrants in the host countries created a kind of “clique” or “circle of friends” to solve common problems among themselves²⁵; such a “circle of friends” helped the new migrant to the fullest in the alien land. Those circles also provided the migrants with a feeling of being at home as they used to celebrate their festival, prepare communal Indian food, and wear traditional Indian dress together. In this context, Satya Bhan Yadav observes, “[T]hough they (Indian diasporas) are heterogenous, drawn from different historical and cultural contexts of migrations, they are identified and held together by their Indianness and a profound cultural and emotional attachment towards Mother India.”²⁶ Thus the Indians created what Hannerz describes as an “encapsulated world” both culturally and socially.²⁷ Later such a circle was termed the Indian Cultural Association, which sustained the unique identity of the Indian diaspora people. One of the remarkable features of the Indian diaspora is its globalization, which started

²¹ Scott Cameron Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and Its Trade, 1550-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1-31.

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Veco, 1983).

²³ Mohan Kant Gautam, “Indian Diaspora: Ethnicity and Diasporic Identity,” CARIM- India Research Report 2013, 10. <https://www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf/EthnicityandDiasporicIdentity.pdf>

²⁴ Nina Glick Schiller, *Identities V5.3* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 96.

²⁵ Rashmi Desai, *Indian Immigrants in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 23.

²⁶ Satya Bhan Yadav, “Understanding Indian Diaspora and Economic Development: Opportunities and Challenges,” in *Shifting Transnational Bonding in Indian Diaspora*, ed. Ruben Gowricharn (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 74-87.

²⁷ Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 37.

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