Globalisation and the Indian Diaspora

Alexandra Boyle, The University of Auckland

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The term diaspora is prevalent in current academic discourses. It is a historically contingent term originating from the “Greek word (διασπορα), which meant to ‘disperse’ or literally to ‘sow over’…originally a neutral word merely indicating geographical dispersion” (Brown, 2006, p.3). Once translated to English the word took on different connotations. It became associated with what is considered to be the archetypical diaspora, the Jewish diaspora. The Jewish were displaced from Babylon the term consequently adopted “overtones of forced expulsion of an ethnic and religious minority from its homeland, of persecution and exile” (Brown, 2006, p.3-4; Kokot et al., 2004; Brah, 1996). The term continues to be heavily contested, with scholars unable to develop a cohesive, concise definition (Gopinath 1995). This is in part due to the fluidity of the processes that the term diaspora attempts to encapsulate and the intangibility of the social networks and cultural phenomenon that make “a diaspora community settled in a particular country ‘diasporic’ rather than simply ‘ethnic’” (Werbner, 2002, p.122). Therefore, this essay sets out to explore how the term diaspora has evolved in a globalising world by examining the case study of the Indian diaspora.

The term diaspora is currently experiencing a renaissance. It is now frequently employed in academic discourses to the point that the meaning of the word is being eroded away through its’ over use. As reinforced by Kokot et al. (2004, p.1) “the concept of ‘diaspora’ has acquired a new and theoretically challenging position…once associated with traumatic dispersal and incomplete attempts at coping with collective deficits, [it is] now hailed as the ‘paradigmatic other’”. However, it is important for the purpose of this essay to offer a definition. Essentially, the concept of diaspora is concerned with spatial imaginaries and memory of, and nostalgia for, a homeland (Bandyopadhyay, 2008;
Singh, 2003; Blunt, 2007). In other words, it is “the contested interplay of place, home, culture and identity through migration and resettlement” (Blunt, 2003, p.282). However, this definition does not go far enough. Diaspora is also a socio-cultural construction of an identity based on nationalistic sentiments, political affiliations, religion, a “sense of distinctiveness…and the belief in a common fate” (Singh, 2003, p.3), mediated by processes of migration, mobility, globalisation, historical contingency, the media and governments (Punathambekar, 2005; Brah, 1996; Werbner, 2002). These are processes which transcend national borders and de-territorialise place “both ideologically and materially” (Werbner, 2002, p.120), to transform ethnic communities into diasporic “communities with complex, distinctly hybridized national identifications” (Walton-Roberts, 2004, p.55). It is a transnational phenomenon, yet diaspora is distinct from transnationalism (Voigt-Graf, 2005).

The distinction between diaspora and transnationalism is subtle, yet a crucial one to make. “The concepts of diaspora and transnationalism differ to the extent that they emphasise different aspects of movement and identity formation [and] have tended to merge in recent academic discourses” (Olwig, 2004, p.55) proving to be problematic. Where diaspora is concerned with intangible socio-cultural identity construction through processes of migration, transnationalism predominantly relates to socio-economic relationships grounded in recurring cross-border movements (Kokot et al., 2004). The convergence of the terms diaspora and transnationalism has come about because of globalising processes. Globalisation precipitates “intensified and deepened cultural, economic, political and institutional interconnectedness and interdependency that has developed between corporations, communities and states, particularly since the 1970s” (Walton-Roberts, 2004, p.54). Thus what constitutes a diasporic community as opposed to a transnational community has become increasingly hard to discern. As a result, to accommodate for the various and continually evolving conceptions of diaspora, there are numerous sub-categories of diaspora. These include, ‘trade diaspora’, ‘cultural diaspora’, ‘labour diaspora’, ‘political diaspora’, and ‘victim diaspora’ (Kokot et al., 2004).
So, why study the Indian diaspora? The Indian diaspora is a particularly compelling area of inquiry as it is the second largest diaspora to China; with over 20 million people worldwide (Walton-Roberts, 2004). This makes immediately evident the significant nature of the Indian diaspora based on sheer size alone. Furthermore, the Indian diaspora can be considered one of the most diverse diaspora. It is a microcosm of India, encompassing disparate religions, for instance Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains and Muslims as well as regionally distinct cultures and ethnicities such as Punjabis, Gujaratis, Kannadigas, and Bengalis just to name a few (Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Voight-Graf, 2005). Moreover, India has “16 official languages and around 1000 dialects” (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, p.95). Indian’s have a long history of migration, with three observable phases. The first of which was trade related migration between colonies and monarchies facilitated by colonisation and imperialism, then the 19th century saw forced or involuntary migration in the form of indentured labour to other colonies such as Fiji and the final phase has been 20th century voluntary migration of Indians to industrialised nations forming “organic linkage[s] with the colonial diaspora” (Jain, 1998, p.339). As stated by Chaturvedi, (2007, p.67) “diasporas and their practices produce and inhibit a postcolonial frontier” a statement particularly true of the Indian diaspora as it enters “contemporary currents of post-coloniality, globalisation and transnationality” (Jain, 1998, p.340). Therefore, the numerous rationales offered here makes apparent the way in which examining the Indian diaspora is a relevant area of inquiry and will lead to a better conceptualisation of how diaspora operate in a globalising world more generally.

The extent to which the Indian diaspora and globalisation are intertwined is exposed by the relationship the Indian government has developed with the Indian diaspora. Since the early 1990s the Indian government has become increasingly aware of and involved with its diaspora, formalising its commitment and connection through a series of policies (Voigt-Graf, 2005; Sahoo, 2006). This can be attributed to the influence globalising processes have had on communication technologies and time-space compression which has resulted greater interconnection between the Indian diaspora and the ‘mother country’ reflected subsequently in the institutional relationships between the Indian government and the diaspora (Dissanayake, 2006). Members of the Indian
diaspora have become known as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) or People of Indian Origin (PIO) denoting “a transition from years of neglect to officially and formally recognizing the role of NRIs and PIOs in India’s development and global engagement” (Walton-Roberts, 2004, p.56). In September 2000, the Indian government founded a High Level Committee (HLC) on the Indian diaspora in addition to creating a ministerial position relating solely to NRI affairs (Walton-Roberts, 2004; Sahoo, 2006; Chattarji, 2007). The Indian government has been motivated by the perception of its diaspora “as a source of foreign exchange, investment and entrepreneurial activities, and as a market..put[ing] various policies in place aimed at forging formal economic links with Non-Resident Indians” (Voigt-Graf, 2005, p.375). State governments have followed suit also implementing diaspora specific investment policies (Voigt-Graf, 2005).

Investment policies have been met with mixed success. “In 1999, India was the largest global receiver of remittances, receiving some US$ 9 billion out of an estimated world-wide total of more than US$ 61 billion” (Voigt-Graf, 2005, p.378). However, remittances and investment have since dwindled (Chaturvedi, 2007). The Indian government had hoped that their diaspora would prove as lucrative to the national economy as the Chinese diaspora is to China (Singh, 2003). Moreover, the Indian government has caused considerable frustrations for NRIs and PIOs who wish to obtain dual citizenship. A system of dual citizenship was devised but never put into practice and as an alternative, “a partial citizenship for expatriate Indians, known as OCI (Overseas Citizenship of India), was established in 2006” (Friesen, 2008, p.56). In essence, the Indian government is preoccupied “on financial remittances. Yet equally important are the social remittances, namely the flow of ideas, technologies, theories, beliefs, world views, new ways of doing things, etc.” (Chaturvedi, 2007, p.77) which to date have been overlooked much to the detriment of Indian nationals and NRIs alike. Below expected economic investment from the diaspora can also be accounted for by the way in which “when constructing transnational spaces, Indians follow their normative cultural and social systems while rarely having a specific economic gain in mind” (Voigt-Graf, 2005, p.380). Conversely, the government initiatives have inadvertently influenced “an increasingly global form of ‘Indianness’ not ontologically rooted in the country’s
sovereign territory” (Walton-Roberts, 2004, p.64). This is a useful demonstration of how diaspora are a social construction mediated by discourses with one of the dominant discourses in the Indian diaspora being those circulated by the ‘homeland’ government. In other words, the unintentional way in which government policy and debate has constructed a notion of ‘Indianness’ is symbolic of “how different meanings are being written into and read out of the term “Indian” diaspora” (Chaturvedi, 2007, p.92).

However, the actions of the Indian government have not affected the diaspora uniformly. As aforementioned, the Indian diaspora is highly heterogeneous. There is a tendency among scholars to refer to a ‘global’ Indian diaspora but as Friesen (2008, p.46) highlights, the “problem with the concept of the ‘global Indian diaspora’ is that the term itself suggests a greater degree of homogeneity than is actually the case”. Singh (2003, p.4-5) goes as far to say “what possibly distinguishes the Indian diaspora from its counterparts is its extreme heterogeneity, diversity and in some cases, a persistent localism – a plurality”. Werbner (2002) attributes this to the fact that diaspora are widely assumed to be unified, homogenised and high organised social networks. In reality, “chaorder ['chaotic order'] is the principle of organisation: diasporic groups are characterised by multiple discourses, internal dissent, and competition for members between numerous sectarian, gendered or political groups, all identifying themselves with the same diaspora” (Werbner, 2002, p.123). Werbner’s (2002) ‘charorder’ conceptualisation shows how diaspora operate on a series of binaries, with the main binary among members of the Indian diaspora, religion. In other words, whether a diasporic is a Hindu or non-Hindu or, a Muslim or non-Muslim, is a strong point of contention. The majority of the Indian diaspora is Hindu, in fact “85 percent of all people of Indian origin overseas are Hindus” (Singh, 2003, p.3), and the other 15 percent identify with other religions. Resultantly, a decisive “ethno-religious polarisation between India’s Hindu majority and its Muslim minority” (Ballard, 2003. p.206) has emerged, a fracture that has translated to the diaspora. This makes evident how upon closer inspection, seemingly homogenous groups are actually highly heterogeneous. In this instance, “the conflation of nationalism and Hinduism is obviously a problem for those of Sikh, Muslim and other religious backgrounds as well” (Friesen, 2008, p.57) as it
creates a hegemonic discourse based on an exclusionary narrative. In a globalising world, such fractures are magnified by media portrayals and intensified cultural linkages proving to perpetuate negative effects.

Media and communication technologies are an integral aspect of globalisation. Technological communication innovations and the advent of mass media have greatly influenced modern diaspora. Such technology allows for real time communication in addition to time-space compression allowing for more frequent communication with the ‘homeland’. Therefore, the “significance of (relatively) new technologies in facilitating transnationalism” (Friesen, 2008, p.51) should not be underestimated. However, the influence of both multi-media and mass media is deceptive and far reaching. Media is the most significant means of socio-cultural construction within the Indian diaspora, as emphasised by Gillespie and Cheesman (2002, p.128) who state that “media cultures are helping to sustain the triadic relationships that migrants forge between their countries of birth or ancestry, countries of settlement, and the wider South Asian Diaspora”. In the case of the Indian diaspora, the media is purported to have had a unifying and positive effect, however, the outcomes of a media presence are varied. Post-structuralism espouses that discourses are often revealed to be subjective truths, taken to be ‘universal’ truths, but in reality embedded within complex social, cultural, political and economic power relations (Panelli, 2004). This opens discourses up to contestation and subordination by the majority or elites. Equally, the media has provided previously disempowered and less visible members of the diaspora, such as Muslims, with a voice. This is a sentiment shared by Friesen (2008, p.52) who states that “the roles of the media in the transnational activities of diasporic communities are diverse. Representation of migrant characteristics and outcomes may have been the dominant role of host society media, but of more interest here is representation by diasporic groups of their own situations and connections”. In other words, the media is an active agent in the construction of a diasporic identity and concomitantly provides diasporic communities with the opportunity to construct alternative and empowering discourses, an opportunity previously unavailable to them (Panelli, 2004; Friesen, 2008).
The most prominent form of media in the Indian diaspora is the Bollywood film industry, as “Bollywood constitutes the most prolific film industry in the world” (Aftab, 2002, p.88). Like the diaspora, Bollywood is a “complex symbiosis between globalism and nationalism” (Dissanayake, 2006, p.26) and is increasingly ubiquitous (Aftab, 2002). Bollywood is receiving heightened international attention primarily due to the over 20 million strong diaspora which enthusiastically supports the industry; “in fact, Britain represents the second biggest market in the world for Hindi films, with ticket sales of approximately £30 million in the last year alone (Aftab, 2002, p.88). This suggests to us two things. Firstly that Indian diaspora has a strong presence in Britain and secondly, that there are significant cultural and social implications for the host countries and “the notable trajectory is towards increasing ambiguity in the relationships between countries of settlement and countries of origin, and between the migrants who circulate between these” (Friesen, 2008, p.59). There are known to be strong kinship ties between India and Britain sustained by their post-colonial relationship which provides a strong incentive to migrate to Britain as “Indians naturally seek to build and maintain ties with their prosperous migrant co-ethnics in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere” (Wirsing & Azizian, 2007, p.iiv). A sense of ethnic ‘consciousness’ and ‘distinctness’ among migrants in their new homeland precipitates the formation of diasporic social networks within, in this case Britain, and transnationally (Singh, 2003). In Britain, the “Indian ethnic community has made a major impact upon British society through the creation of cultural spaces within it” (Wirsing & Azizian, 2007, p.6). However, owing to the “permeability of culture” (Jain, 1998, p.338) Western culture also penetrates the diaspora. The fusion of the two cultures can be seen by the development of a British television show called ‘Bollywood Star’, “‘the western world’s very first search for a Hindi film star from within the 22-million strong diaspora’” (Chattarji, 2007, p.173). Despite this, “there is no doubt that migrant receiving countries largely retain control over the nature of transborder movements and the characteristics of migrants” (Friesen, 2008, p.56). Conversely, there is an element whereby the choice of the diaspora “to lead transnational lives is inextricably linked to the changing conditions of global capitalism” (Voight-Graf, 2005 p.367) and technologies which enable day-to-day engagement with kin elsewhere in the world.
As aforementioned, the film industry is an active agent in identity creation and Bandyopadhyay (2008, p.79) is adamant that “the Indian diaspora’s imagination of India is strongly informed by Bollywood movies” and is therefore, strongly informed by Hinduism. Bollywood is “a mode of production, a way of producing culture within a national and global context that is inextricably linked to the Indian nation-state and the post-colonial economy of liberalization” (Desai & Dudrah, 2008, p.2). This statement symbolizes how all aspects common to the diaspora intersect. In other words, Bollywood encapsulates cultural, social, economic, nationalistic, post-colonial and globalising processes. Pervading the academic literatures on Bollywood is the word ‘Indianness’ which appears to be synonymous with Bollywood. Scholars cite that Bollywood fulfils the “desire to see ‘Indianness’ and Indian achievement in the works of expatriate filmmakers” (Chattarji, 2007, p.173). This has the effect of creating cultural understanding between Indian nationals and the diaspora important to the maintenance of the transnational tie between the two. Furthermore, “the importance of Bollywood as an element in the fostering of linkages between India and the global Indian diaspora is increasingly being recognised and promoted by the Indian government” (Friesen, 2008, p.58) for a variety of motivations connected to the Indian government’s wider exploitation of its diaspora.

As previously mentioned, the Indian government intends on capitalising on its diaspora through attracting investment in the ‘homeland’. In addition to this, the government has chosen to pursue other, non-policy initiatives including the promotion of Bollywood films, as it may generate diasporic tourism or ‘roots’ tourism which would further the economic gain for India (Bandyopadhya, 2008). Concomitantly, the government believes the ‘valorisation’ of its diaspora would result in enhanced bilateral relationships with other nations (Chattarji, 2007). On a religious level, the Indian government has strong affiliations with Bollywood because of the presence of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) in the Indian government. The BJP “is a party dedicated to the replacement of a secular Indian nation with one based on Hindu nationalism” (Mukta, 1995, p.2) therefore endorses heavily the hegemony of Hinduism in Bollywood films and the diaspora generally. Werbner (2002, p.121) notes that “the ability of diasporas to
actively participate and intervene in the politics of the homeland has been greatly enhanced and facilitated by the spectacular development of global media and communication technologies”; media such as Bollywood films. Clifford (1994, p.307) believes “some of the most violent articulations of purity and racial exclusivism come from diaspora populations”. Therefore the politicised nature of diaspora needs to be acknowledged. In other words, critics of the religious and politically motivated Bollywood industry accuse it of having been capitalising on the diasporic yearnings for homeland. It is also simultaneously and intentionally engages in ‘othering’ Muslim Indians since the Hindu binaries and nationalists operating within the diaspora do not permit Islam (Gillespie & Cheesman, 2002).

The process of migration and transnational mobility is an inherently political process with migrants frequently encountering politicisation. As previously discussed, the government policies of both the host and the homeland countries are hugely influential as they essentially permit or prevent certain mobilities through immigration policies (Schwalgin, 2004). However, Chaturvedi (2007, p.69) argues that “critical geopolitics of diaspora is much more than human flows defying man-made borders”. Political channels are a means to selectively include or exclude migrants from assimilating into society. Thus it is frequently found that “the aspirations of migrants and natives do come into direct political antagonism (Clifford, 1994, p.309) as many migrants are perceived ‘threats’ and subsequently experience ‘othering’ (Chaturvedi, 2007). Conversely, “new roles and demands, new political spaces, are opened by diaspora interactions (Clifford, 1994, p.314) with diasporas proving to be a useful political pawn in bilateral relations. Rubinoff (2007, p.100) contends that “the role of Indians in the United States to be decisive in altering perceptions of decision-makers”. Politics of identity is a relevant concept here (Brah, 1996). The political agency of migrants is a contextual and relational aspect of ones identity whereby in some instances migrants are empowered such as “lobbying for the removal of authoritarian regimes in their respective countries” (Werbner, 2002, p.120), and in others, migrants are disenfranchised and marginalised. Clifford (1994, p.308) puts forward that the “term diaspora is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles”, struggle over citizenship and
franchisement and the struggle of the politics of identity. However Gamlen (2008, p.842) would argue that “they [diasporics] are a normal form of political organization, which has been overlooked by modern geopolitical thinking”. Friesen (2008, p.57) expands further suggesting that as globalisation takes hold of political processes “the apparent ease with which many Indians in New Zealand have changed their citizenship appears to support the contention of postnational theorists that migrants’ identities and allegiances are becoming deterritorialised”.

In terms of the methodological treatment of diaspora within academic literatures, as cited earlier, it is has been heralded as the ‘paradigmatic other’ (Kokot et al., 2004). Therefore it seems that in the face of dynamic globalising processes, diaspora as a concept receives little critical interrogation. Consequently the term is being ‘overextended in current academic discourses as “the label has been stretched to cover almost any ethnic or religious minority that has dispersed physically from its original homeland, regardless of the conditions leading to the dispersion, and regardless of whether, and to what extent, physical, cultural, or emotional links exist between the community and the home country” (Safran, 2004, p.4).

Moreover, the problem remains that they academy is unable to further define the term diaspora to give more clarity to researchers, Kokot et al. (2004, p.2) agree espousing that “still, ‘diaspora’ remains widely contested, as both a term of reference and as a concept for research”. Some authors contend that there is a need for more “ethnographic close-up studies of such experiences…to provide a testing ground for theoretical concepts and generalisations” (Kokot et al., 2004, p.1). Furthermore, it is evident that authors grapple with the concept in part because of their inability to “terms with their own experiences of hybridity and multiple belonging” (Kokot et al., 2004, p.2). Therefore, it may be that it is difficult for authors to bring clarity to diasporic research and ignore their own positionality.
In summation in a globalising world, social networks and cultural phenomena have become increasingly fluid, less tangible and more interconnected. For population geographers this has become problematic to their inquiries into the concept of diaspora. It means that to date, academics have been unable to develop a cohesive, concise definition of the term diaspora (Gopinath 1995). However, the term is liberally employed none the less and therefore is becoming confused with other closely related processes such as transnationalism or mobility. Examination of the Indian diaspora, the second largest diaspora globally, has revealed that the historically contingent term continues to be contested and to an extent open to subjective interpretation. The Indian diaspora was proven to be both a mental and physical state. That it has been written into the Indian government’s policies, is a form of economic investment, heavily associated with the Bollywood film industry as well as being a means of social and political organisation. Conversely to some, the Indian diaspora is no more than a mental state, a feeling of ‘Indianness’ and of being conscious of their ethnic distinctiveness. This essay also revealed that diasporas are in some senses microcosms of countries therefore despite overarching perceptions of homogeneity, diasporas are highly heterogeneous. Diasporas are socio-cultural constructions formed by discourses and constitute an aspect of a person identity. Therefore whilst this essay has focused on a particular case study, inferences can be made about the nature of diaspora generally, as they operate in a globalising world.
References


