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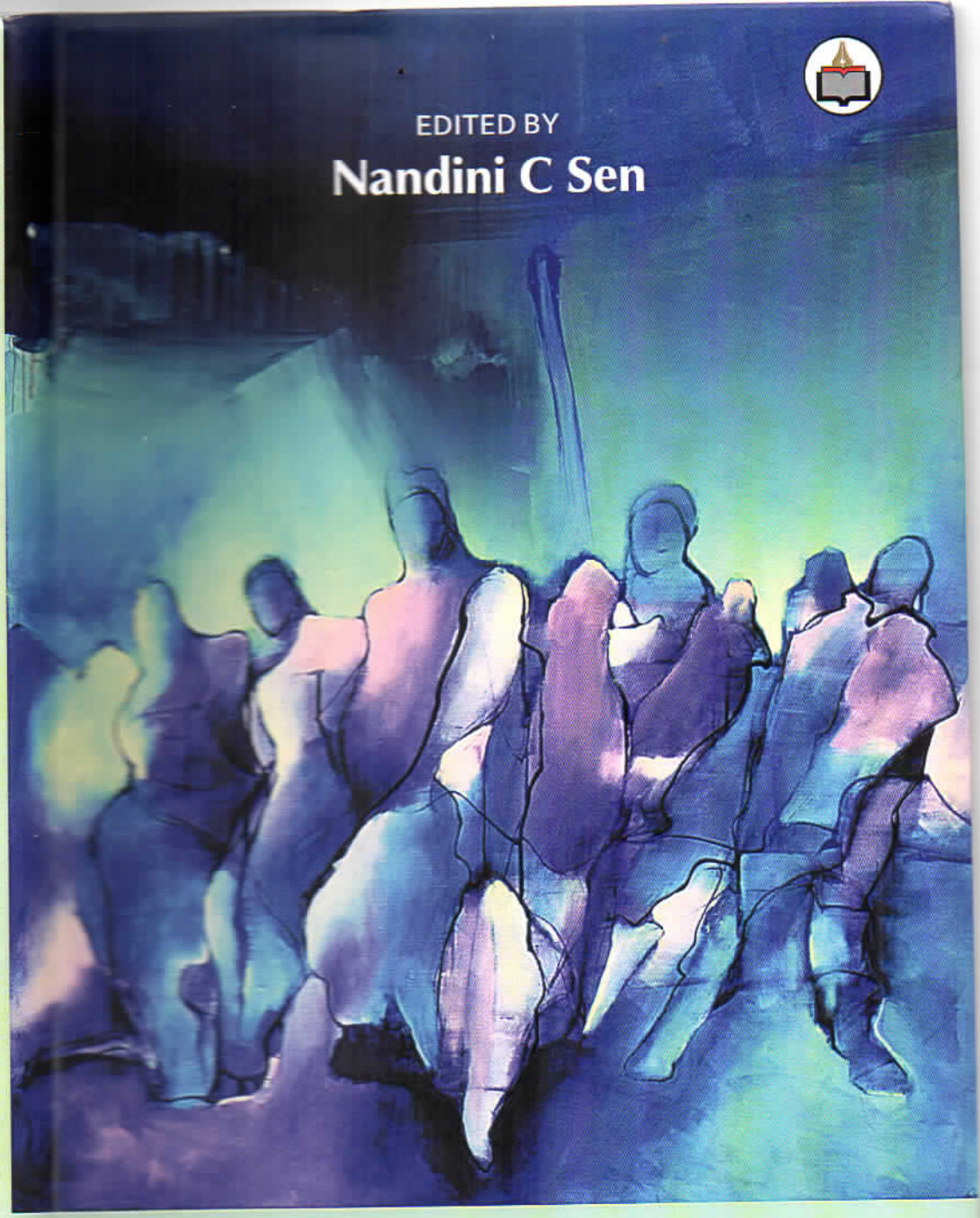

Through the Diasporic Lens

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Diaspora: Identities, Spaces and Practices

Amba Pande

Migration has been an integral part of human society since the time immemorial. In the modern world however it has grown exponentially and is a much more marked, analysed and theorised phenomenon that has received attention from numerous disciplines and multi and cross disciplinary studies. Closely related to the process of migration is the term diaspora which is in a sense more specific (because it concerns only with International migration and permanent or long term settlements) but in another sense it is more inclusive (because it also includes second and third generation migrants) (Tigau, Pande, Yuan 2016, 183). There has been a significant shift in the understanding of the term diaspora over the years as Jewish and Armenian paradigms marked by exile, loss and victimhood have given way to vibrant communities who maintain multiple ties with their homelands while at the same time also getting incorporated into the countries that receive them. This is not to say that these shifting nuances can be applied to all modern diasporas. Distress and undocumented migrations are still taking place leading to the formation of diasporas, that are 'victims' both in the context of home country and the host country.

Nevertheless, as Stanley Tambiah (2006: 129) points out, 'the term, nowadays, is in high fashion'. It has become a kind of 'All purpose' term in the academic and public discourse with different forms of expressions like diasporic, diasporan, diasporisation etc. According to Stephane Dufoix (2015, 8) "The instance of 'diaspora' demonstrates the many lives a word can live: as a religious term, as an academic notion, as a category of practice, as a scientific concept and as part of the international bureaucratic lexicon." Scholars like Brubaker (2005) have argued that the term should not be regarded as an innocuous analytical concept but the vast catalogue of theoretical and empirical model of the term and its derivatives, approached through various disciplines, presents a complex picture and has left the scholars baffled. An overview suggests that for one set of scholars (Safran 1991: 83-84; Cohen 1996:515; Anderson, 1998) the homeland dynamics remain at the centre and countries of settlement as peripheral. In such cases the diasporas are treated as a unitary category that originate and remain oriented towards the homeland. For example as Indian diaspora is understood to be a homogeneous set of people who have emigrated out of India. Another set of scholars (Brubaker 2005: 6; Armstrong, 1976:394-7; Khachig 1996) look at diasporas from the point of view of the host country where the diasporas are treated in terms of the 'other' or boundary maintenance. In such cases the homeland dynamics remain peripheral and hence immigrants are clubbed together as homogenised groups irrespective of the countries they belong to such as 'South Asian,' or 'Asians' in the US. The third category is the one that treats the diasporic spaces as somewhere 'in between', simultaneously embedded in more than one society or country. Rather than being wedged up in either host or the homeland the diasporas are embedded in both the cultures negotiating and creating new hybridised identities

that intersect nations, races, class and gender (See Sheffer 1986; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995; Clifford 1994).

Initially, this third perspective, indicated a kind of 'nowhereness' expressed as 'Trishanku's curse' by some scholars (based on the story from Indian mythology where a mortal king, in an attempt to visit heaven, got stuck in between). It was a state of 'homelessness'/'rootlessness' often seen as a 'crisis'; or a 'disjuncture' (Appadurai 2003). However, as the importance of diasporas grew and the transnational connectivity increased, the 'nowhereness', started to take root as 'dual belongingness' which is virtuous and something to be celebrated about. The entrenchment with the 'state of the in-between' is the strength and adulation the diasporic spaces, and source of an identity, that is very so often, more powerful than home or the host country identities. For modern theories and researches, diaspora is more of a constructive rather than a disruptive process. Streams like International relations and economics are increasingly recognising this dual belongingness that entails migrants' 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1973 [1959]) and gets concretised by efforts like dual citizenship.

However, such understandings are still evolving, and are visible only in economic and, to some extent, socio-cultural domains. Politically, despite the fact that they are used to fulfill various intellectual and political agendas, the diasporic 'other' is still in contestation with the idea of nation state. Whether it is the question of expatriate voting rights in the home countries or equal political status in the host country, diasporas are viewed as the 'Trojan horse' (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003) possibly with their own agendas, loyal to some other country or people. Culturally too they are largely still the 'other' who are a 'threat' and might 'take over' if their numbers increase. In this regard diasporic spaces are problematic spaces. On the one hand diasporic

identities are stamped with the mark of 'otherness' but on the other links them with the motherland and the co-ethnics around the world. Similarly, on the one hand hybridity and diasporic subjectivities offers opportunities wherein identities can be negotiated but on the other, creates 'unsettled conditions'. Such understandings offer us critical spaces to capture both the perils and rewards of multiple belonging and see the diasporas not only in terms of difference but also in terms of similarity. Sura P. Rath (2000) expresses this turmoil-rich hybrid space beautifully in the following words.

> "Physically and spiritually Indian, but politically and perhaps intellectually an American, I stand at the crossroads where two nationalities/localities intersect. Both merge in me, yet each remains sovereign. In me the two engage in conflicts and tensions that are sometimes subsumed under my 'internationalism' or globalism."

Hence the diasporic spaces bring profound diversities and hybridities that cannot be confined into the binaries of homeland and the host land or the native and the outsider. It is an on-going negotiation of demographics, cultures, politics and epistemologies that produces complex mutations and combinations. In that sense it is a process and not a product. As Avtar Brah (1996) suggests that the sense of belongingness in diasporic contexts is forever in the making, and emerges in constant interplay with 'host' cultures. What we understand under the generalised rubrics of diaspora is about diversities and diversities within diversities and the cross-sectionality of various factors that are at inter play.

Indian Diaspora: Conceptually Speaking

With all its heterogeneities Indian Diaspora can be considered as a representative case of diasporic formations. Indians settled in different countries around the world are regarded as one of the

most diverse communities, almost like a microcosm of the diverse Indian social set-up. In my conceptualisation of Indian diasporas (EPW 2013: 59-65) I have tried to draw four basic characteristics or the core elements that can be treated as the starting point for the understanding of the diasporas,

1) *Cross-border Migration/Dispersion and settlement:* It implies a dispersion in which the territorial boundaries of the state are crossed followed by a settlement in the 'new land.' This cross border movement can be of any type – voluntary/involuntary – but one, which leads to a permanent or at least long term settlement in the host country. In such a case, several of the categories like short term migrants, ethnic minorities, overlapping populations of neighbouring countries, and all kinds of minority groups would fall outside the purview of the term Diaspora. Also unless and until we factor long term settlement we will not be able to celebrate the duel belongingness. In India's case the migrant communities in immediate neighbourhood or what we call the 'Doorstep Diasporas' are not included in the term Indian Diaspora.

2) *Host Land Participation:* The settlement in the new land signifies not only residence but participation in the socio-economic and political processes of that country. The immigrants create a niche for themselves by competing with other communities and impacting the host nation in socio-economic and political domains. Most of the Indian Diaspora groups have achieved astounding success contributing significantly in their respective adopted countries and also giving an aura to India and its people. They were subjected to different

situations and wide variety of experiences, for example, in the British colonies like Malaysia they were subjected to 'Artificial pluralism', in Caribbean to 'Integration', in Gulf to 'Exclusion', and in Western countries to 'Assimilation and Multiculturism' and so on. At numerous occasions they faced racial discrimination, stereotypes and violation of their basic human rights. All these factors play a crucial role in the identity formation of the Diasporas. The varied experiences, and encounter with local conditions, also create ruptures and breakdown in the Indian socio-cultural patterns, ways of life, rituals, food habits etc., giving a distinct uniqueness to these groups.

3) *Home Land Consciousness:* It implies a sense of awareness about the existence of a homeland (sometimes a non-existent one) beyond the borders of the country of settlement. The manifestation of the homeland consciousness, can be varied; it can be retained in memory (as the case of Parsis in India); or can be recreated as a version of the homeland (similar to creation of 'little India' by early South Asian migrants); or can exist in the form of social, political and economic involvement through networks (as in the present world). In case of a remigration from the host country to the third country (twice migrants) the homeland consciousness is entrenched in two locations rather than one. Homeland consciousness, which can also be termed as 'continuity' or 'manifestation of 'roots', is an important component of Diaspora identity and in the case of Indians is very well pronounced and marked. The increased connectivity in

the modern times and India's growing stature, has further, strengthened and revived the 'Indianness' and along with that has also significantly enhanced the importance of Indian Diaspora around the world.

4) *Construction or Recreation of a Multi-locational 'Self' or Identity:* It involves recreation of an identity that draws from both home and host lands, is hybrid, but not marked by strict boundaries. Such identities are distinct yet have points of merger at both ends and also undergo changes as generations pass by. Both host-land/homeland dynamics play a critical role in the formation of such identities that gets manifested through economic and political participation. This duality is clearly evident in inter-country variations in the Diaspora groups arising out of the same home country. It is also the reason why 'diasporic homecoming and regrouping is often fraught with problems of reintegration (Tsuda 2009: 329) and the returnees undergo what has been termed as the 'Double Diasporisation' (Kerkhoff 2005:93). The Indian Diaspora manifests a duel belonging or a consciousness that originates from the diverse Indian roots but has developed its own unique features fed with wide variety of conditions and locations. These hyphenated, hybrid identities are stronger than the Indian identity and are endowed with exciting dialogic spaces for creativity. Modern day technology and the cyberspace have made the diasporic spaces even more real and effective.

In a nutshell, diasporas are specific type of transnational communities marked by migrations, continuity, rupture,

hybridity and duel or multiple belongingness which, gets manifested through economic, political and social interaction with home and the host land simultaneously. As far as the classification of Indian Diaspora is concerned, as mentioned earlier it is a diverse group. This diversity is not only a representation of the plurality of Indian society (in terms of region, religion, language, caste, creed etc.) and heterogeneity in the phases and patterns of migration over a long period of time, but also emerges out of the variations of the more than hundred countries where Indians are now settled (Pande EPW, 2013). While the government definition puts them into three categories – Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)[1], People of Indian Origin (PIOs)[2] and Overseas Indian Citizens (OICs)[3] – scholars have come up with different classifications on the basis of history and nature and pattern of migration. These categories can be further divided into class, caste, religion, region or gender and host country variations. Thus the various groups within Indian diaspora too, are not monolithic units, a fact that gives rise to complex overlapping, mixed, merged or blended identities and has led to the idea of "many diasporas within the overarching Indian diaspora" (Singh 2003: 5).

Such diversities among the diaspora often result into differences and contesting interests. A range of scholars have pointed out the 'fragile sense of national identity' among Indian communities around the world as 'the idea of homeland creates a myth of a region, locality or community rather than India as a whole' as 'the Indian migrants refer to themselves so much as

1. NRIs are Indian citizens and hold Indian passport. MOIA records their number as 10037761.
2. PIOs are no longer Indian citizens and number around 11872114.
3. OIC is a partial citizenship given to PIOs. Till 2014 around 1203613 OCI cards were issued by Government of India.

Bengalis, Gujaratis, Telugus, or in terms of their specific sub-castes' (Oonk 2013: 4). Marred by various differences and cleavages, Indians in the diaspora have often failed to emerge as a united force in the countries of settlement where the political have also often used such divisions against the Indians. Such divisions have also often been exploited by the political class in various countries against the Indians.

However, regardless of this diverse framework, the Indians in the diaspora derive a commonality from their Indian origin, as Sahoo (2008: ix) explains, "above this diverse framework what has given Indians in the diaspora their common identity is their Indian origin, the consciousness of their cultural heritage and their profound attachment with India". The growing connectivity with India and New Delhi's efforts to engage the diaspora with the idea of united yet diverse India has further boosted the process. It has led to a kind "cultural renaissance" (Jayaram 2004) or reinvention and reassertion of Indian identity among the diasporic Indians.

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