

The Construction of Diaspora: South Asians Living in Japan

by Imtiaz Ahmed
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Movement of population has historically been among factors of lasting influence upon the process of evolution of human civilisation, economic development and social change. Many nations and countries – some of which are among the richest in the world today - have experienced population movement as a vital element in one or other phase of their history. Others actively promoted such movement and/or benefited from it. The impact of migration and other forms of population movement are pervasive and multidimensional at both source and destination, and include such important aspects as history, society, economy, politics, education, culture, religion, language and so on.

Like most other regions of the world, South Asia has always been at both receiving and producing ends of population movement. In more recent times, however, movement out of this region to various destinations far and near has become the more common practice than the other way round.

South Asians are migrating in ever increasing numbers adding regularly to the South Asian diaspora in various parts of the world, and the commonplace wisdom is that they migrate mainly in search of economic opportunities, sometimes also to escape political oppression. However, no systematic study exists to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences of the migrants in the destination states. In particular, hardly any literature is available revealing the process through which cases of migration transform into diaspora. Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed of the Department of International Relations of University of Dhaka has produced a book on *The Construction of Diaspora: South Asians Living in Japan* that attempts to understand the life and living of the South Asian migrants in Japan, particularly the manner in which they gradually transform into a diaspora, a persona that remains distinct from the local Japanese.

The study is about the “actual migrant life”. Accordingly the author sets out arguing that the simple fact of migration does not itself create diasporas. One can, he suggests, migrate but remain non-diasporic. The crucial factor is the failure, particularly lack of creativity of the civil and political societies of the host nation. In this respect the choice of location of the South Asian diaspora for the study is interesting because Japan is a nation of distinctive ethnic and socio-cultural identity, known for a striking social and structural resistance to permit *gaijins* or foreigners to influence the values, traditions and life-styles of the *nihonjin*, or Japanese.

The study takes into view four main variables to analyse the process that cement the relationship between the South Asians living in Japan, who in most cases never knew each other, and who represent widely varied backgrounds back home. These variables – work, food, gender and leisure - are discussed in four separate chapters on the basis of a sample survey that the author conducted among South Asians living in Japan.

Each chapter is an enlightening account of construction process of the diaspora. The chapter on work shows how the kinds of work the South Asians are engaged in are contributing to their diasporic identity. Similarly, by analysing what the South Asians eat and drink, the author explains how they remain distanced from the Japanese society. In the next chapter on gender and sexuality, the author shows that nuances in man-woman relationship are also critical in the organisation and reproduction of diaspora. Nature and evolution of gender relationships are bound to be influenced by cultural background and identity of people. Accordingly, when it comes to migrant communities, such relationships may become interesting areas of tensions and uncertainties, contributing to the way in which the diasporic persona is created. Examining the similarities and dissimilarities in man-woman relations in Japan with that in South Asia, Prof. Ahmed unveils the process of organisation and reconstruction of South Asian diaspora.

The fourth factor that the author examines is leisure. For most South Asian migrants living in Japan leisure is a luxury they can hardly afford. Even when they have possibilities of enjoying some kind of leisure, the options available in the

host country and in given cultural context would be quite different from what they would have liked to. In this context chapter 5 of the book is an interesting analysis of the way the South Asian diaspora seeks to spend leisure, and thereby construct an identity of its own.

Among some interesting and instructive findings and conclusions of the book is the proposition that diasporas can be creative as well as uncreative. They may contribute to all spheres of life in the host country while they can also be a source of conflict. Depending on the context and content of interaction with the host community the same diasporic community can be both creative and uncreative. As the author suggests, “creative or uncreative element is as much the result of the construction of diaspora as it is (quite logically) the result of the host community’s interaction with the diaspora”.

Obviously enough, both creative and uncreative elements begin to influence the host community. The degree and speed of such influence would perhaps vary depending on the extent of cultural resistance capacity of the host country. The author suggests that there is a good reason for the host community to try to change structures that contribute to the uncreative state of living for the migrant community living in Japan. “Any shortcoming or delays could simply turn alienation to bitterness and bitterness to violence. As is the case now, if Japan does not change and co-opt the diaspora, the diaspora will one day co-opt and change Japan”!

Prof. Ahmed’s book is well-researched, specially with respect to the identified four factors affecting life and living of the South Asian diaspora. The book doesn’t address many other issues that may come to mind when one considers South Asian or Bangladeshi diaspora in a place like Japan or other destinations. The book does not, for instance, deal with population movement as a factor in international relations – in terms of political, diplomatic and economic linkages of South Asian countries with the host country. It doesn’t cover social, economic and cultural impact of such migration back home. It does not bring out much about the diaspora’s possible role in shaping or influencing the host authorities’ perspectives and policies vis-à-vis South Asia, or particular countries thereof. It doesn’t also examine if and to what extent the growing inflow of South Asians into Japan may

affect Japanese policy with respect to diaspora itself, particularly their legal status and related matters.

Considering that the author recommends change on the part of Japan, it would be interesting to look more closely into the Japanese mindset, their social and institutional traditions, values and structures that determine the current level of resistance to *gaijin* influence, and from there on to examine the possibilities of such change. It can be expected that further work on this subject will take into view such vital issues. Be that as it may, the book remains a very important addition to the literature, and fulfils a long-felt gap. The University Press Ltd deserves to be commended for publishing it.

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