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Breaking the Links? A Case study of the Indian Diaspora in Thailand

By Ruchi Agarwal

Abstract

Thailand has long been a destination for South Asian migrants as well as a second home for Indian Diaspora. Recent migrations such as the post-partition period have been relatively understudied, however. In this paper, I focus upon the migration of Indian community to Thailand in the late 1940s to understand how recent arrivals influenced and integrated into existing transnational communities. I am specifically interested in the trajectories of individual migrants and the public representation and organization of Thailand's evolving Indian diasporic community. A historical linkage lies between South and Southeast Asia and as a result, the Indians moving to Southeast Asia are not entirely 'foreigners'. This paper explores the trajectories of the more recent Indian diasporic community in an attempt to analyze the aspirations of the newer migrants and their social life outside of the homeland. The findings in this paper are based on past literature, personal observations, and interviews with Indians residing in Bangkok.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Migration, Migrants, Temples, Thailand*

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Introduction

The Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009)¹ estimated that the total overseas Indian community constitutes over 25 million spread across different parts of the world. Such large numbers are a result of the different waves of migration beginning in 1830s in the form of indentured labour followed by the voluntary migrations of professionals and information technology specialists in the last three decades of the 20th century. The first wave of indentured labour in the nineteenth century was to the plantation economies in the Pacific, Africa, Caribbean, and Australia. Although there was a free migration of traders, craftsmen, ex-soldiers and businessmen, they did not bring any significant changes to the overall structure of the Indian settlements. The second wave marked the beginning of a change and the emergence of a 'new Diaspora' led by high skilled professionals moving to the Western world and semi-skilled contract workers to the Gulf, West and South East Asian countries. The new diaspora was made possible with the relaxation of immigration controls in 1960s in the US, Canada and Australia. This proved a turning point in Indian emigration to the US, which quadrupled between 1970 and 1996. India was then seen as one of the leading exporters of professional migrants who also became the highest earning ethnic groups in the US. These Indian emigrants came from different regions, religions, castes, and occupations. Later the oil boom of the 1970s attracted Indian labourers to the Middle East; those labourers became the principal remitters of foreign exchange to India (Singh 2003: 6-7).

The Indian diaspora is the second largest diaspora in the world and contributes, economically and culturally, a considerable amount to both the host and the home country. According to the World Bank, in 2012 India topped in the amount of remittances received from Indians living and working abroad. In 2012, a total of US \$70 billion were received as remittances in India compared to US\$ 66 billion in the most populous country of China. Therefore the Indian diaspora becomes an increasing important group among the other migrant groups. This paper aims to bring the Indian diaspora into light with an exploration of their aspirations and their social life outside of their homeland. The first part of this paper will attempt to get an understanding of diaspora in general followed by a brief history of the Indian diaspora in specific countries in the Southeast Asian region and later the focus will shift to a detailed account of the Indian diaspora in Thailand. This paper is based on primary and secondary data collected through past literature on Indian diaspora, personal observations, and interviews with Indian diasporic community members residing in Bangkok.

Explaining Indian community as a Diaspora

Vertovec (1999) explains Diaspora as

...a term used to describe any population considered transnational, which originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, span the globe (1999: 277).

Cohen argues that a diaspora emerges from a growing sense of group ethnic consciousness in different countries. This consciousness may be sustained through a sense of distinctiveness, common history, and the belief in a common fortune (1997: 26). He places diasporas into five main categories: *victim diasporas* (Jews, Armenians), *labour diasporas* (Indian indentured labour, Italians, Filipinos), *colonial diasporas* (Ancient Greeks, British, Portuguese), *trade diasporas* (Lebanese, Chinese), and *cultural diasporas* (Caribbean). The long established diasporas of the Armenian, Chinese, Indian, Jews and Irish are seen as more of a mature diaspora with a long history of migration and integration.

Indian diaspora in Malaysia

One such example of mature diaspora is the Indian diaspora in Malaysia with their presence in the country for 130 years. The number of foreign migrant workers grew from around 84,000 in 1880 to over 3 million in 2010. These migrant workers mainly came from China and India and were mostly on a semi-permanent employment contracts. The more recent foreign workers come from South and Southeast Asian countries, and are dominated by the Indonesians. These workers migrate to Malaysia in search for economic opportunities. After 1870s, Britain's 'Forward Movement'² in Malaya resulted in the country's greater integration into the global economy and thus enabled the production of mineral and agricultural commodities. By the late 1870s, British controlled Malaya was the world's largest producer of tin ore (White 2015:169). Labour migration thus became an important component of Malaya's economic growth model and related social structures. The country's main commodities of exports included tin, coffee and sugar. Between 1870s and 1890s, there was a growing Chinese and British interest in the economy of Malays. The Chinese already had investments in Malays but over time they were overshadowed by the Europeans (Nasr 2001: 32-33). While the Chinese entrepreneurs monopolized tin production, recruiting workers from China to work in the mines, European planters were largely involved in coffee and sugar cultivation and relied on indentured labour from India. In early 20th century, the planters switched to rubber, which eventually became the main agricultural commodity. The rubber cultivation required employment of a large, cheap and "disciplined" workforce and British India with the poverty-stricken population and caste-ridden society was the ideal provider of this labour. The state and

planters saw the Indian labourer moved for Malaya as another tradable commodity in the production cycle. The recruitment was done through two systems - the indenture system and its alternative, the Kangani system. Under the indenture system the workers were employed with written labour contracts through either labour recruitment firms in Madras (Southern India) or employers sending their own agents to south India to recruit workers directly. These agents would provide a certain amount of money as advance to individuals willing to migrate on the condition of signing the contract to work for a fixed period (ranging from three to five years) upon their arrival in Malaya. Between 1845 and 1910, there were about 250,000 indentured labourers in Malaya. After 1860s, an informal system of recruitment called the kangani was used to recruit labour from southern India. The system proved effective with a total of around 1,153,770 people recruited between 1898 and 1938, to work in Malaya through kangani (Sandhu 1969: 96). Kangani was a system of personal recruitment and became popular when the coffee and rubber planters needed to recruit more labour. Under this system whenever the Malayan estate needed more labour they would send their most trusted workers as labour brokers (kangani) to recruit people from the kangani's own locality or caste. This led to chain migration since labour was recruited only from specific caste and specific places in south India. The labours recruited through kangani system were seen as superior compared to the indentured labour since they were recruited by people with personal knowledge of resource pool. The contractual obligations were also less harsh. For example, the contracts were often verbal contacts and gave workers the rights to abandon the contract at a month's notice. Additionally, under the kangani, more women were recruited as labour. However, the system was abolished in 1938 as it gave a lot of power to kangani who abused it for personal benefits.

This mature Indian diaspora of plantation workers became the orphans of empire and marginalized in Malaysia. Indians were the most marginalized workers in Malaysia residing in closed plantation societies in frontier zones and the plantation implied the margin of their existence. Moreover the isolation of the plantations and colonial vagrancy laws prohibited them from leaving the plantation. Also the Indian workers' low caste backgrounds and failure to speak either Malay or English deepened their isolation and vulnerability. They were kept in a cycle of dependency and poverty within the plantation.

Indian diaspora in Thailand

Unlike Indian diasporic community in Malaysia, the migration of people from India to Thailand was more on a voluntary basis. The migration and settlement of Indians here varied between different linguistic groups like the Punjabis, Sindhis³, Parsis⁴, Gujarati Sunnis, Dawoodi Bohras⁵, Tamils, Pathans⁶ and the Bengalis. The first traders who came to Thailand were the Bohra Muslims from Gujarat and the Muslim and Hindus from Tamil

Nadu. The Gujaratis were mainly involved in precious stones and rice exports to India. The other groups were involved mainly in textiles. The little India (Pahurat) was and currently is a centre of the Indian commercial community of mostly Sikhs. Additionally, the Dawoodi Bohra Muslims and the Tamil Hindus with interethnic marriages among the earlier migrants have led to indigenization of their institutions.

The number of people of Indian origin in Thailand range between 100,000 to 150,000 with many living here for generations. Although the Indian community in Thailand is relatively small but does hold great significance to the study of Indian diasporic communities outside of their homeland. The Majority members of this community hold Thai nationality and engage in various business fields as mentioned earlier. Additionally, there are a large number of Indian professionals working in Thai private companies and other professional fields. Several community organizations are run by different Indian groups like Thai Bharat Cultural Lodge established in 1930 to promote cultural interaction between India and Thailand. The Lodge also runs two schools in northern Thailand for the Thai students. Another organization is the India-Thai Chamber of Commerce, the oldest foreign trade chamber in Thailand formally registered as India Chamber of Trade in 1969 and had its name changed to the India-Thai Chamber of Commerce in 1974.

Patterns of Indian Migration in Thailand

Mani (1993) notes a number of factors have contributed to the decision of Indians leaving their homeland and moving to Thailand. During the 20th century, the most important factor behind the Indian migration to Thailand was economic. The poverty-ridden life in the villages, due to droughts, crop failures and unemployment, prompted Indians to move to Thailand to seek for better opportunities. In addition, political problems like the partition of India and Pakistan also constituted an important factor. In addition, the economic success of the earlier immigrants attracted more Indians to test their fortunes in Thailand. Generally, the immigrants followed the migration of their earlier relatives. Brusie & Varrel (2012) note that diasporic communities are formed in places and these places later become markers on the migrations routes for the later diasporic communities to follow. Migration and migrants change space and create places reflecting *where* people come from, *how* they migrated and *what* relation they have to the host society. Women on the other hand mostly arrived in Thailand due to their marriage with men already living in Thailand. These factors were also the contributing factors for the internal migration in Thailand. The Indians that landed in provinces found Bangkok more attractive for capital gains and thus moved to Bangkok, the capital city, after sometime. Since Bangkok already had a number of Indian settlements, it was easier for the newcomers to settle in the areas with earlier established Indian concentration (Sandhu & Mani 1993: 957-959). Additionally, overtime as men settled in provinces married Indian

women living in Bangkok, they settle down in the capital city to make better fortunes.

For the Indian communities, religion provides an important element of Indian diaspora (Vertovec 2000; Parekh 1993). The strong roots of belonging come from Hinduism that is an ethnic religion of India (Parekh 1993: 140). Over 85 percent of overseas Indians are Hindus who refer to their homeland as 'Mother India' with deep spiritual and emotional admirations fulfilled through routine visits and pilgrimages. However not every overseas Indian is a Hindu rather several religious minorities exist within the Indian diaspora such as the Muslims and Sikhs. What really bind the Indian diaspora together are the emotions, acquaintances, customs, feelings and attachments that appeal to generations of emigrants for their motherland. Singh sees the heterogeneity and diversity as the factors distinguishing the Indian diaspora from their counterparts (Singh 2003: 4-5). The long history of migration has made the Indian diaspora experience great social, religious, economic, political, cultural, and other changes. This may involve abandoning some traditional practices, adapting new one and evolving a distinct way of life overtime. Thus I agree with Ben-Rafael (2010) who claims that diasporic conditions are important to be understood. The conditions under which diasporas live may vary both within and between diasporas. A diasporic community may want to assimilate into the new environment, but the loyalty to a certain attribute of being a diasporic community, may restrict them from assimilating and thus keep themselves distinct from the others. This is made possible with the establishment of institutions and networks that help them to adopt the common patterns of their ethnic group grounded in them. Thus diasporic community tends to maintain their original identity by being less absorbent to assimilation when compared to the non-diasporic groups (Ben-Rafael 2010: 1-2). Waghorne (2004) sees religion, history or a language bringing in the sense of belongingness and thus being the major components of community formation. Just like any other religious communities, contemporary Indians focus on the construction and preservation of their religious institutions wherever their work and life take them (2004: 14). Building a religious place of worship is a commitment to the tradition tangibly. An increase in the concern for old values happens as some migrants in the diaspora try to distinguish their way of life from the surrounding cultural environment (ibid 2004: 19). Religion is thus a social phenomenon providing a group identity and a source of personal inspiration at the same time, thereby allowing the diasporic community to create a space for themselves.. Tim Creswell (2008) sees space as incorporating a network of places that are a blend of a location, a locale, and a consciousness of place, thus explaining where, how and what of migration. Places are often created and recreated in order for the migrants to feel at home away from home. These places include houses, religious structures, restaurants, and community centres among others.

The overseas Indian community represents different regions, languages, cultures and faiths. In Thailand, the Punjabi migrants centred their activities on the Gurdwara originally established in 1909 and was later moved to Phaurat in 1932. The Hindu from Uttar Pradesh founded the Vishnu Mandir in 1920 acting as the cultural and literary centre for the community. Later in 1924, the Arya Samaj was founded and the Punjabi Hindus formed the Hindu Sabha in the same year, which later was changed to Hindu Samaj in 1945. These were formal religious organizations established to serve the religious needs of the Indian community in Thailand. As Sinha puts it in the case of Singapore, “efforts to reproduce elements of Hinduism outside India reveal a continuous orientation to India, which is approached as an authentic, legitimate religious-cultural reservoir for nourishing the religion beyond Indian shores” (Vineeta Sinha 2011: 25).

For Hinduism in particular, there exists (and still does) an informal network of Brahmins providing the ritual services to the laity. Under this informal network, Brahmins perform their religious activities in a religious market of demand and supply. With the establishment of Hindu communities, a loose network of relationships started with the Brahmins in Hinduism (Gyanis in Sikhism), acting as the key-figures. When an individual approaches God, the Brahmins or Gyanis became important mediators between an individual and God, thereby acquiring an explicitly strong position. Especially for the Hindu community, the Brahmins are the required commodity to conduct rituals like marriages and other religious works such as celebrating festivals and delivering religious teachings. For example, it is impossible to conduct any religious ceremony without a Brahmin’s assistance, as they have authority over religious services and the necessary knowledge to perform rituals. Thus temples (or places of worship) and the mediators (Brahmins and Gyanis) become a significant part of the social life of Indian diaspora. Furthermore to fulfil the religious requirements of the diaspora, these mediators were imported from India on short-term renewable contracts. However the institutions can employ only a limited number of individuals due to the visa and work permit requirements by the Thai law. Thus the number of Brahmins is never enough to serve the religious needs of the Hindu community in Thailand. As more Indians migrated to Thailand, the demand for Brahmins to perform religious activities accelerated. Additionally more cultural communities were established to serve the cultural needs of the Indian population, which again required an increasing number of Brahmins. This prompted the already employed Brahmins to invite their friends and relatives from their villages to migrate legally and sometimes illegally on tourist visas to fulfil the growing demand of their religious services. Therefore the Brahmins living and working in Thailand originate mainly from the same or surrounding village in India and maintain their religious network.

As Baumann argues the preservation of religious specificity is different from dominant religious affiliation of the host country but does not hinder the social integration of the group. He further argues that keeping the heritage of difference and merging with the host society's socio-economic patterns in fact goes well together (Bauman 2004: 77). The Indian communities in Thailand do maintain their native religions and cultures in addition to taking part in the religious activities of the host country. For example, Indians in Thailand observe Buddhist holidays and Royal ceremonies along with the local Thais. Representatives from the Indian communities (such as Hindu, Sikhs, and Muslims) are also present on the Royal birthdays and ceremonies to be part of the rituals. One such example is in fig 1 where the presence of the diasporic Brahmin is seen as presenting garland to HRH Princess Soamsawali during a royal ceremony in Bangkok.

However some traditional values might change over time as the confrontation with the Western values may provoke a reaction to reflect on the personal traditions and reformulation of the element of the religious heritage (Van Der Burg 2004:110).

Ben-Rafael also sees diasporas as maintaining 'dual homeness' whereby securing of a collective in its local environment deepened with an external reference of belongingness. This is relevant to especially the newcomers in more affluent western societies attracting a large number of immigrants from the rest of the world. In these societies, welfare rights are offered to newcomers easing the necessity of the migrants to conform to the dominant cultural models by reducing the risk of non-compliance. Diasporas are therefore motivated to settle in areas already



Figure 1. A Diasporic Brahmin offering a garland to HRH Princess Soamsawali at a Royal ceremony in Bangkok

inhabited by other diasporic communities. In Thailand, the long existence of the different communities like the Chinese among others (representing acceptance of different communities among the locals) and the historical presence of the earlier settled Indians have prompted more Indians to migrate in more recent centuries. Several generations of Indians have now settled in Thailand but maintain links with their homeland. Transport and communication facilities have also eased these links with the motherland and with other similar diasporic ethnic communities in different countries. In addition, securing jobs and their futures insert pressure on diasporic communities to acculturate into the new host environment. With effective acculturation, they learn the host language and acquire new symbols. Both new and earlier settled Indians have acquired written and spoken Thai language proficiency and have a picture or a poster of HRM the King in their homes to show their respect and the inclination to be part of the Thai society. On the King's birthday, the Hindu temples also organize the observation of the special day, which sometimes may include a procession like in the picture below where priests along with members of the Indian community carry the King's photo and the Thai flag.

As the diasporic community settles over generations, a new national identity is acquired and it becomes the primary identity leaving the original identity to subsides to a secondary level (Ben-Rafael 2010: 4). This certainly holds true for the younger generation of Indians, who are either born or bought up in Thailand. The younger generation more often identify themselves with Thailand rather than India. This sometimes leads to an identity crisis especially for the young Indians. The ethnic Indian looks enable the outsiders (non-Indians) to classify and recognize them as Indians while the fellow Indians from India do not see the diasporic Thai Indians as Indians anymore. In my interview with Indians visiting Thailand for tourism, the majority of them did not relate themselves to the diasporic Thai Indians. As Mr. Singh says, 'they (Thai Indians) are different. They dress differently, speak different language, and their body language is different too. They only look like us'. The younger generation thus fall in a dilemma- 'who are we?' The Indians do not see them as Indians anymore and they do not look like a Thai.

Aman, 20 year old, a third generation Sikh whose grandparents originally came from Pakistan and migrated to Thailand during the India-Pakistan partition in 1947, sees himself as more Thai because he was born in Thailand and went through the Thai education system. His parents are comparatively more Indian and patriotic even when they cannot speak Hindi or Punjabi (their native language) fluently. Aman and his parents visit Thai temples more often than the Gurudwaras. "We like the Buddhist teachings and carry our Sikh identity at the same time by wearing the turban." However the grandparents, who live together as a joint family, carry the Sikh identity forward. Aman is maintaining the Sikh identity only for his grandparents' sake. He says, "I will wait till my grandparents are

alive and will cut my hair short. He explains that wearing a turban does not help him with anything and that he does not see any reason for wearing a turban that sets him apart from others.. I will choose what is good and carry on with it and if it's not good I will not carry it".

Keeping long uncut hair tied in the turban, is part of the khalsa identity in Sikhism and it is a must for every Sikh to maintain this identity. Aman's statement that he will cut his hair short in the future is reflecting his desire to give away an important physical component of his Sikh identity, the long hair tied in the turban. The turban differentiates him from others on the outside and puts him into the identity crisis. However on the inside every Indian family as well as that of Aman's, maintain Indian traditions. For example the kids are sent to International schools run by Indians so that they can learn the home language (Hindi or Punjabi) while being in a foreign land. In addition the food culture is also maintained where Indian food is served during weekdays while weekends are generally left for eating outside depending on the family's likings. Every Sunday people from the Indian community will gather at their religious places of worship to perform their religious duties and these gatherings thus become social gathering of particular communities. For example, the Sikhs gather in Gurudwaras and Hindus gather in their temples on Sundays. These places of worship will organize special religious activities like sermons, rituals, or community eating to bring the members of the community together. One such example is the Gau-dan (donating a cow),



Figure 2. Diasporic Brahmins and community members from Hindu Samaj temple carry HRM the King Rama 9s' picture in a procession to mark his birthday (5 December 2012)

which is organized by a Hindu temple in Bangkok annually. The members of the Hindu community through donations support the event. Cow is of a great importance to the Hindu religion. Even during the ancient times, kings and others donated cows to Brahmins and others. According to the Hindu beliefs, donating a cow during a lifetime brings great merits to the individual. The temple generally organizes such merit accumulating events on a regular basis. The people joining these events are mainly the Hindus living in Bangkok. The purpose is to create a feeling of being at home even though they are away from home. Events like cow donation and others are commonly organized events in various parts of India.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was to explore the phenomena of diaspora and the importance of the study of the Indian diaspora in parts of Southeast Asia. There exist several diasporic communities in the region and the study of these communities is essential in understanding how the ethnic, cultural and social lives are maintained while being away from the homeland. The overseas Indian community constitutes a diverse, heterogeneous and wide-ranging global community representing different regions, languages, cultures and faiths. The common thread that binds them together is the idea of India and its intrinsic values. Overseas Indians comprise of the People of Indian Origin and Non Resident Indians and are amongst the communities that have successfully integrated with the local community of the host country. The Indian diasporic communities however do share a strong bond with their country of origin reflected in their language, cultures and traditions that have been maintained through families over the centuries, and continue to be vibrant and unique. The growing popularity of Indian films, dance, music, arts and culture in foreign countries is an evidence of that. The relationship between India and its diasporic community has also grown overtime with the help of new transportation and communication facilities.

The purpose of this research was to focus specifically on the Indian diaspora residing in Thailand. The members of the Indian diasporic community in Thailand migrated here for different reasons, some had voluntarily moved for economic opportunities while others were forced by circumstances like the India-Pakistan partition. The Indian diasporic community reproduced traits of their culture, like language, food, dress, and religion in Thailand. However these traits did not remain fixed but elements from the host culture were also adopted and combined to create more of a new hybrid form. Such hybrid forms have been a product of the creation more or less by mainly the third generation (sometimes also the second generation of the migrants) who may not retain strong connections to their homeland when compared to the earlier generations. The first and second generations however continue to maintain strong links with their motherland especially with the relatives back home. In comparison some of the second generation and most of the third



Figure 3. Gau Dan organized by the Hindu Samaj temple and attended by members of the Indian community in Bangkok.

generations of Indians have reconstructed their identity and rather self-identify themselves as Thai-Indians thereby taking the pride of their nationality as a Thai and integrating more into the host society. Religion however does play a very important role in binding the diasporic community, regardless of the different generations, with their motherland. Several religious and cultural communities have been established overtime in Thailand to serve the social and religious needs of the Indians diaspora by providing a community building space for belongingness.

To conclude the Indian communities in Thailand do preserve their Indian ethnic and cultural heritage, evident in their religion, language, customs, and food, thereby maintaining links with their homeland, India. An acculturation with the local Thai culture has also ensued with local language proficiency and action participation in the local cultural and religious practices. This is due to the need imposed by the host environment, for example with the necessity to learn local language and customs, and also with individual choices as they relate more to the host society while being brought up in Thailand.

Notes:

1. Data from the Ministry of Indian Overseas Affairs website: <http://moia.gov.in/accessories.aspx?aid=10>

2. The Malay Peninsula was a region of several sultanates with different boundaries ruled by separate dynasties. The political chaos in 1871-74 threatened the British commercial interests and compelled them to take more active interest in domestic politics. The result was the Forward Movement in 1871 with the British's consolidation of authority over Malays (Nasr 2001: 31-32).
3. Since 1860 Sindhis have been involved in large-scale migration either for trade, or due to political situations, or as post-war migrants from Indian subcontinent. They originate from the province of Sind, the north-western province of British India and now part of Pakistan. Before the Muslim conquest, majority of the population was Hindu with a strong Buddhist presence as well.
4. The Iranian Zoroastrians in India are called the Parsis
5. Bohras belong to the Shia sect of Islam and after the schism in 1591, the Bohra Ismailites split into two: the Dawoodi Bohra and the Sulaymani Bohra. The Dawoodi Bohra is the main branch of the Bohra and their centre in India. Another popular explanation is that Bohra derives from the Gujarati word which means 'trade'. Bohras' are a rich, well organized and commonly found group of Gujarati Muslims.
6. Pathan is a Hindi-Urdu pronunciation of the word Pashtun. Pashtuns are the original inhabitants of Afghanistan. A large number of Pashtuns in India are Urdu-speaking who trace their ancestry to the Pashtun-invaders and settlers.

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