

Three meanings of ‘diaspora’, exemplified among South Asian religions

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‘DIASPORA’ is the term often used today to describe practically any population which is considered ‘deterritorialised’ or ‘transnational’ -- that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe. To be sure, such populations are growing in prevalence, number, and self-awareness. Several are emerging as (or have historically long been) significant players in the construction of national narratives, regional alliances or global political economies.

In recent years, intellectuals and activists from within these populations have increasingly begun to utilise the term ‘diaspora’ to describe themselves: we have witnessed the emergence, James Clifford notes, of ‘Diasporic language [which] appears to be replacing, or at least supplementing, minority discourse’ (311). However, the current over-use and under-theorisation of the notion of ‘diaspora’ among academics, transnational intellectuals and ‘community leaders’ alike,-- which sees the term become a loose reference conflating categories such as immigrants, guest-workers, ethnic and ‘racial’ minorities, refugees, expatriates and travellers -- threatens the term’s descriptive usefulness (cf. Safran, Tatla, Cohen ‘Rethinking’).

The following essay outlines three general meanings of ‘diaspora’ which have emerged in recent literature. It is proposed that these meanings have particular

resonance for describing developments among members of South Asian religions outside the subcontinent, and examples (drawing largely upon recent literature) are provided. The article concludes by way of calling for a recognition of the combined workings of structural, conscious and non-conscious factors in the reconstruction and reproduction of identities and socio-cultural institutions among groups outside of some place of origin.

Current meanings of ‘diaspora’

Within a variety of academic disciplines, recent writing on the subject conveys at least three discernible meanings of the concept ‘diaspora’. These meanings refer to what we might call ‘diaspora’ *as social form*, ‘diaspora’ *as type of consciousness*, and ‘diaspora’ *as mode of cultural production*. By way of but a few respective examples, it is further suggested that these rather different meanings each have certain utility for conceptualising, interpreting and theorising processes and developments affecting South Asian religions outside of South Asia.

I. ‘Diaspora’ as Social Form

The first meaning which can be derived from contemporary literature is the most common; hence this section rehearses many well known connotations. ‘The Diaspora’ was of course, at one time, a concept referring almost exclusively to the experiences of Jews, invoking their traumatic exile from an historical homeland and dispersal throughout many lands. With this experience as reference, connotations of a ‘diaspora’ situation were usually rather negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimisation, alienation, loss. Along with this archetype went a dream of

return. These traits eventually led by association to the term's application toward populations such as Armenians and Africans.

Martin Baumann indicates three quite different referential points with respect to the historical Jewish experience 'in the diaspora': these are (a) the *process* of becoming scattered, (b) the *community* living in foreign parts, and (c) the *place* or geographic *space* in which the dispersed groups live. Useful as it is to realise, at any time, to which of these reference points a discourse refers, for the purposes of this essay I nevertheless suggest that these distinctions nevertheless all ultimately concern 'diaspora' as a social form in that the emphasis remains upon an identified group characterised by their relationship-despite-dispersal.

Other common points attributed to a general social category of diaspora, drawing upon yet going beyond the classic Jewish model, can be compiled from a range of descriptive and theoretical works.¹ These traits include:

1. specific kinds of *social relationships* cemented by special ties to history and geography. These see diasporas broadly as:
 - a. created as a result of voluntary or forced migration from one home location to at least two other countries;
 - b. consciously maintaining collective identity, which is often importantly sustained by reference to an 'ethnic myth' of common origin, historical experience, and some kind of tie to a geographic place;
 - c. institutionalising networks of exchange and communication which transcend territorial states and creating new communal organisations in places of settlement;
 - d. maintaining a variety of explicit and implicit ties with their homelands;

- e. developing solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement;
 - f. inability or unwillingness to be fully accepted by 'host society' -- thereby fostering feelings of alienation, or exclusion, or superiority, or other kind of 'difference';
2. a tension of *political orientations* given that diasporic peoples are often confronted with divided loyalties to homelands and host countries. Individual immigrants may be significant actors, or collective associations may be powerful pressure groups, in the domestic politics of their host countries as well as in the international political arena, usually prompted by their interest in the political plight of a country of origin (the Jewish and Irish lobbies in the USA are obvious examples). Sheffer ('Emergence') underscores the growing role of 'new nongovernmental trans-state political organizations' in the global political arena. For example, groups such as Armenian organisations linked together in the USA, France and the Middle East demonstrate how transnational communities 'are among the world's most sophisticated political lobbyists, according to western political analysts and diplomats' (*Financial Times* 16 Sept. 1994); and
3. the *economic strategies* of transnational groups represent an important new source and force in international finance and commerce. This domain comprises the focus of Joel Kotkin's portrayal of how, among specific groups, a sense of collectivism on a world-wide scale provides a key to their success in the new global economy. The economic achievements of certain diasporic groups are seen to result from the mutual pooling of resources, transfer of credit, investment of capital and provision of services among family, extended kin, or co-ethnic members.

Finally, in all of these domains -- particularly in the contemporary period characterised by relative ease of transportation and communication -- 'diaspora' as social form is characterised by a 'triadic relationship' (Sheffer 'New field', Safran) between (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came.

Practically all of the general works concerning South Asian communities (including specifically religious groups) outside of South Asia concentrate, in one way or another, on 'diaspora' as social form, particularly by way of the kinds of *social relationships* noted above.² Therefore it is neither possible nor necessary to recapitulate this large body of information here.

The homeland *political orientations* of South Asian religious groups are ever rapidly evolving and, in some quarters, intensifying. Arjun Appadurai suggests that the process of deterritorialization among diasporic groups sometimes creates 'exaggerated and intensified senses of criticism or attachment to politics in the home-state' ('Disjuncture', 301). Further, he writes,

Deterritorialization, whether of Hindus, Sikhs, Palestinians or Ukrainians, is now at the core of a variety of global fundamentalisms, including Islamic and Hindu fundamentalism. In the Hindu case for example... it is clear that the overseas movement of Indians has been exploited by a variety of interests both within and outside India to create a complicated network of finances and religious identifications, in which the problems of cultural reproduction for Hindus abroad have become tied to the politics of Hindu fundamentalism at home. (301-2)

One of the most notable cases which Appadurai cites is that of the movement for the establishment of Khalistan as ‘an invented homeland of the deterritorialized Sikh population of England, Canada and the United States’ (302). This has particularly been the case among overseas Sikhs since the storming of the Golden Temple in 1984 (see especially Tatla). Right-wing religious organisations in the homeland are known to gain much support from overseas populations: most notably, Hindus through the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (and, by extension, the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) in India and Muslims through Jamaat-i-Islami, a prominent Islamicist political party in Pakistan.

In the sphere of *economic strategies* involving diaspora populations, the government of India enacted measures to attract the intellectual and financial resources of ‘NRIs’ (non-resident Indians), especially by way of salary incentives for return migrants and favourable rates for non-resident Indian investors (see Lessinger, *Financial Times* 27 June 1996). Indeed, the BJP recently has used such policies to bolster their support among Indians abroad (*The Economist* 6 June 1998). With regard specifically to the economic strength of parts overseas religious groups, Kotkin (201-32) details examples of intra-group business connections respectively between Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, Ismailis, and Gujarati Hindus; these are incidental, however, to the promotion of any kind of religious ‘cause.’ Religious considerations are evident, by way of example, in purported financial links of considerable size co-ordinated by the World Hindu Congress, while the Hindu Heritage Endowment (which supports the diaspora-oriented newspaper *Hinduism Today*) manages an annual budget of over \$1 million devoted to the propagation of Hinduism.

The above-mentioned examples of political and economic links support the notions of ‘triadic relationships’ (‘homeland’ – place of settlement – elsewhere in diaspora) among South Asian religions. Two specific events demonstrate further

modalities of triadic relationship. One surrounded the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 (Kundu, Burlet & Reid, Rai). Prior to this act, there had been much campaigning throughout the UK by Hindu organisations (especially those associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad) for the removal of the mosque and for the creation of a temple devoted to Rama. Following the mosque's destruction, there were: several incidents of damage to Hindu temples and cultural centres (plus a few mosques and curiously one gurdwara), numerous local state-organised forums for inter-community dialogue, much leafleting of the South Asian population by Hindu and Muslim organisations (particularly by the more extremist ones in both camps). In the wake of these activities, there was established the Alliance against Communalism and for Democracy in South Asia (which holds various kinds of public events and distributes information with the aim of combating among South Asians in Britain all forms of religious communalism). The explosion of violence in Ayodha had sent a shock wave through Britain.

Another example of emergent forms of relationship between India and the diaspora was the 'milk miracle' of September 1995, when *murtis* (images of deities) in Hindu temples around Britain (London, Leicester, Birmingham and Leeds) and around the world (including New York, Delhi, Hong Kong and Bangkok) were observed to 'drink' substantial quantities of milk. News of one such 'miracle' in one location was rapidly heard at another, where milk was subsequently offered and, if 'drunk', the news was immediately relayed elsewhere. Practically in the course of a day, news of similar incidents spread around the world through a variety of media. A South Asian religious diaspora, now connected through advanced global telecommunications, had wrought 'the age of the instant miracle' (*The Guardian* 23 September 1995).

II. 'Diaspora' as Type of Consciousness

Another, and relatively recent, approach to 'diaspora' puts greater emphasis on describing a variety of experience, a state of mind and a sense of identity. 'Diaspora consciousness' is a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among contemporary transnational communities (Safran, Clifford). Its particularity is variously described as being marked by a *dual or paradoxical nature*. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion, and positively by identification with an historical heritage (such as 'Indian civilization') or contemporary world cultural or political forces (such as 'Islam'). In a related way, James Clifford suggests that 'Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension' (312). Paul Gilroy ('There ain't', 'Black Atlantic', 'Small Acts'), too, describes a kind of duality of consciousness -- with direct allusion to W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of 'double consciousness' -- with regard to diasporic individuals' awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously 'home away from home' or 'here and there', or British and something else. Similarly, Clifford proposes that 'The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there. ...[It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here)' (322).

The *awareness of multi-locality* also stimulates the need to conceptually connect oneself with others, both 'here' and 'there', who share the same 'routes' and 'roots'. Hence, for Stuart Hall ('Cultural identity') diaspora is comprised of ever-changing representations which provide an 'imaginary coherence' for a set of malleable identities. Robin Cohen develops Hall's point with the observation that 'transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created

through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination’ (‘Diasporas’, 516). In this way, Cohen points out, ‘An identification with a diaspora serves to bridge the gap between the local and the global.’

In addition to awareness of multi-locality and links of the imagination, some writers have described diaspora consciousness by way of other functions of the mind. Arjun Appadurai & Carol Breckenridge, for example, state that whatever their form or trajectory, ‘diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment’ (‘Moving targets’, i). Yet these *collective memories and ‘new maps’ do not always serve to consolidate identities*; rather, they note:

More and more diasporic groups have memories whose archaeology is fractured. These collective recollections, often built on the harsh play of memory and desire over time, have many trajectories and fissures which sometimes correspond to generational politics. Even for apparently well-settled diasporic groups, the macro-politics of reproduction translates into the micro-politics of memory, among friends, relatives and generations.

Compounded by the awareness of multi-locality, the ‘fractured memories’ of diaspora consciousness produce a multiplicity of histories, ‘communities’ and selves. Yet instead of being represented as a kind of schizophrenic deficit, such *multiplicity* is being redefined by diasporic individuals as a source of adaptive strength. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch & Cristina Blanc-Szanton explain:

Within their complex web of social relations, transmigrants draw upon and create fluid and multiple identities grounded both in their society of origin and in the host societies. While some migrants identify more with one society than

the other, the majority seem to maintain several identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation. By maintaining many different racial, national, and ethnic identities, transmigrants are able to express their resistance to the global political and economic situations that engulf them, even as they accommodate themselves to living conditions marked by vulnerability and insecurity. ('Transnationalism', 11)

Diaspora consciousness is further considered to be the source of resistance through *engagement with*, and consequent *visibility in, public space*. Here, Cohen comments that 'Awareness of their precarious situation may also propel members of diasporas to advance legal and civic causes and to be active in human rights and social justice issues' ('Rethinking', 13). This is especially witnessed today in the ever more effective and organised expressions of group concerns (often described as ethnic mobilisation, identity or community politics, or the politics of recognition or difference).

A further kind of diaspora consciousness we can point to is specific to religious groups. This occurs through a particular kind of *self-questioning* stimulated by conditions of 'diaspora' coupled with religious pluralism. Under such conditions, believers are often compelled to realize that the routine habitual practice, rote learning and 'blind faith' underpinning previous contexts (where their faith may have been homogeneous or hegemonic) are no longer operational. Emblematic of such a shift in religious self-consciousness, Clifford Geertz's description of the ways in which, in Morocco and Indonesia (representing two margins of the Islamic world) 'the primary question has shifted from "What shall I believe" to "How shall I believe it?"' (61). This shift has entailed, further, 'a distinction between "religiousness" and "religious-

mindedness,” between being held by religious convictions and holding them.’ Further, the believer may now be in a position of having to rationalize and justify elements of belief and practice to members of other faiths. In these ways, we must even speak of ‘religious diaspora consciousness’.

Despite his proposition that the diaspora has produced no important features of transformation in Hinduism, Bhikhu Parekh has alluded to a kind of change in consciousness afforded by the overseas context. Through these, he reflects, ‘The diasporic Hindu was no longer a Hindu happening to live abroad, but one deeply transformed by his diasporic experiences’ (617).

Evidence of the *multi-locality* affecting members of South Asian religions are perhaps indicated most readily by the high degree of pilgrimage which still takes place among diasporic persons travelling back to the subcontinent to visit shrines and other holy places. Another, related yet somewhat obverse, example of this is provided in an anecdote by Arjun Appadurai (‘Global ethnoscapess’), who describes a trip (with his American-raised son) from his current home in the United States back to his childhood home of Madurai. There, Appadurai was surprised to learn that a particular priest, who had long served in the temple devoted to the goddess Meenaksi, was now a priest in Houston, Texas. This unexpected development stimulated Appadurai to reflect upon ‘the globalization of Hinduism, the transformation of “natives” into cosmopolites of their own sort, and the fact that the temple is now not only a magnet for persons from all over the world but also itself reaches out. The goddess Meenaksi has a living presence in Houston’ (202).

Both *duality* and the modifications of mind which Appadurai & Breckenridge have described as *fractures of memory* and attachment are perhaps evident in the statement by the President of Bradford’s Hindu Cultural Society who, following the

bloody aftermath of events in Ayodhya in December 1992, claimed that 'What has happened in India has nothing to do with us' (in Kundu, 28). Either this was a case of denial in order to deflect the media to serve some local political purpose: in either case, it seemed the 'triadic relationship' had been broken.

There is ample evidence of members of South Asian religions seeking to establish a legitimate place in *public space*, largely through engagement in political mobilisation around specific causes or civic domains (Vertovec 'Hindus', 'Muslims', Vertovec & Peach). These have included calls for public resources for 'community' associations, acceptance of group-specific values and practices -- including safeguarding these in law, and a range of accommodations in the education and social service systems. As Pnina Werbner ('Fiction', 'Shattered') demonstrates, the 'multiple realities' of life among various groups (in the case of her research, Pakistani Muslims in Manchester) are importantly contested, negotiated and revised in the course of engaging public space -- processes which sharpen, in an evolutionary way, the agendas and identities with which ethnic minorities engage the state. Iris Kalka similarly shows how processes and institutions for consultation established by the municipal authority effected the ways Hindus (particularly their 'ethnic brokers') in one part of London developed and concretised notions of 'difference' and 'community.'

In a superb ethnography of Southall, West London, Gerd Baumann describes how the dominant discourse of 'culture' and 'community' -- both reified as notions connoting homogeneity, fixity and boundedness -- are reproduced in the everyday classification of residents. The combined context of ethnic pluralism and conditions of diaspora, impacted upon by the dominant discourse, instils a 'culture consciousness' which Baumann (98, 107) describes as:

heightened awareness that one's own life, as well as the lives of all others, are decisively shaped by *culture* as a reified heritage. ... an awareness that whatever one, or anyone, does and thinks is intrinsically and distinctively *culture-bound*, and defined both in relation to one's own culture and the *cultures* of others.

Moreover, while everyone in the social field that is Southall is readily identified in terms of culture-community, 'religion continues to function as the local *community* marker *par excellence*' (181, emphasis in original).

However -- and here lies the crux of Baumann's argument -- despite an exacerbated 'culture consciousness' and the construction of reified 'communities' (namely 'Sikhs', 'Hindus', 'Muslims', 'Afro-Caribbeans' and 'Whites') in Southall by way of the dominant discourse, at the same time Southallians maintain a contrasting 'demotic discourse' surrounding *multiplicity*. This latter type (differentially patterned among different groups) also makes use of notions of 'culture' and 'community', but in open-ended ways which recognise the complex ties, overlapping affiliations, sub-differentiations and multiple identities sustained in everyday practice.

Yet this process is not one of simple segmentary fission, of a 'majority *community*' falling apart. Rather, it increases the institutional repertoire while leaving intact the multiplicity of cross-cutting cleavages. One may picture, for instance, an East African Punjabi Sikh of the Tharkan caste. He or she can speak to certain Muslim and Hindu Southallians as a fellow East African; they may do likewise with former East Africans who are Gujarati, rather than Punjabi; they may similarly speak to fellow Sikhs of the Raj or Lohar caste as fellow Ramgarhia, whether they hail from the subcontinent or from East

Africa. Which of these mutually independent identifications they draw upon or stress will depend on the perceived context, the strategies of everyday life, and the classificatory choices deemed appropriate between the various parties. (115)

Just as such identifications shift contextually, a 'dual discursive competence' allows Southallians to engage in dominant or demotic discourses of 'culture' and 'community' depending upon their judgements of situation and purpose (189)

The heightening of awareness with regard to 'culture' is paralleled by new kinds of *self-awareness* with regard to religious belief and practice. Among Muslims, for instance, Jørgen Nielsen writes:

The circumstances of migration, the situation into which Muslims have settled in European cities, and the adaptations which are being made, especially as the young grow up to be the first European Muslim generation, all impose the need to analyse. The old way has to be analysed into discrete parts so that Islam can be identified. The emphasis of the identification of Islam can be on the Qur'an and Qur'anic principles or it can be on aspects of the Shari'a tradition. In either case, one proceeds to 'reassemble' these Islamic components together with the components arising out of the migration and settlement experience into a new complex whole which functions more successfully in European urban, industrial life. As a universal religion with a long historical experience of successfully integrating into new cultures, it would be extremely surprising if Islam were not to follow exactly this kind of path also in Europe. (114-15)

Research by Kim Knott & Sadjia Khokher among young South Asian Muslim women in Britain underscores the emergence of complex, shifting strategies which provide a 'perceptual map' allowing for the situational assertion, rejection, or synthesis of values deemed either 'religious' or 'ethnic'. Many young South Asian Muslim women, they found, are conceptually establishing a firm distinction between 'religion' and 'culture', which were largely indistinguishable realms for their parents. Further, they are rejecting their parents' conformity to ethnic traditions which are considered as emblematic of religiosity (such as manner of dress) while wholly embracing a Muslim identity in and of itself. Among these young women, Knott & Khokher explain, there is a 'self-conscious exploration of the religion which was not relevant to the first generation' (596).

With a further view on to the emergent distinctions between 'religion' and 'culture' among diaspora groups, David Pocock noted that the goal of 'emulating the Jews' was long advocated for immigrants in Britain -- a goal understood to entail preserving distinct religious ideas and customs while achieving a highly successful level of socio-cultural and economic integration with the encompassing society. Pocock observed that in one branch (the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha) of the Swaminarayan movement, whose members long resided in East Africa before settling in Britain, there emerged a tendency to consider certain aspects of Gujarati culture (including family structure, language, diet, marriage networks, and the position of women) as quasi-religious phenomena -- that is, as behavioural and ideological facets contributing to the fulfilment of *dharma*. However, by co-equating religion and culture, Pocock observed,

The Sanstha is faced with a dilemma: to the extent that Gujarati culture becomes *the* culture of religion and succeeds in establishing this conception in the minds of its youngest adherents, it can ensure its own continuity and emerge not unsimilar to the Jewish orthodox and conservative congregations in Great Britain. But the parallel with the Jews would break down to the extent that such an assimilation of 'culture' to 'religion' could heighten the isolation of the Sanstha member, and thus frustrate the second part of the advice, 'Emulate the Jews' which urges not only the preservation of religion but also the maximum degree of integration compatible with that. (emphasis in original) (362)

The problem which Pocock discerned for the Sanstha -- that of 'dis-embedding a set of beliefs and practices - a "religion," from a "culture" which would then be defined as "secular"' -- is a critical one for South Asian religious groups around the world. It entails moves toward a self-conscious 'rationalization of the distinction religion/culture' (357) -- despite the everywhere-asserted dictum that 'Hinduism is a way of life.'

With regard to this conundrum amongst South Asians world-wide, Raymond B. Williams comments,

The critical assumption here is that there are some aspects associated with past religious practice that are fundamental and essential to the continuation of the religion and others that are cultural accoutrements that are not so fundamental. Thus, the process of searching for an adaptive strategy becomes the attempt to distinguish what is essential in the religion and what is not. ('New face', 191)

Processes of self-consciously distinguishing elements of religion/culture are bound to have differing results in various domains (in temples, in religious or cultural associations, in homes, in the workplace). As described by Pocock, Knott & Khokher, myself ('Hindus', 'Reproduction') and others, the process of disjoining religion/culture among certain groups of South Asians in Britain is only now underway. By way of the example of Hinduism in Leeds, Kim Knott points to another important dimension within the trend toward separating religion/culture -- one akin to what sociologists of religion usually deem 'secularization':

For some people [Hinduism] has the status of a 'compartment', or one of a number of aspects of life. ...Many Hindus in Leeds are only too aware that their religion is one amongst others. Not only are there indigenous faiths, generally grouped together by Hindus as 'Christian', but there are also other South Asian faiths. ...In this country Hinduism is just one minority faith amongst others. An awareness of religious pluralism has affected the way Hindus think about themselves and their faith. Some are beginning to think of Hinduism as many people do Christianity, something to be remembered during large festivals and at births, marriages and deaths. ('Hinduism', 46)

Such modes of 'sharpening awareness' seem to be a prominent development, in one form or another, throughout many South Asian religious communities overseas. It is a trend common to diasporas, fostered by self-reflection stimulated amongst minorities in contexts of ethnic and religious pluralism. Hence Ninian Smart writes that

diaspora reinforces contact with major world cultural forces. This factor underlines the need for the faith to express itself in the face of universal religions and secular values. ...Each such religion needs to give a universal

account of itself, and to articulate its teachings, perhaps under some general principle.... (295)

Such a universalising or ecumenical trend parallels that underway in America, which Raymond B. Williams describes as ‘the redefinition of boundaries through the manipulation of symbols and the expansion of their cultural contextualization so as to include as many Asian Indians as possible under a single religious identity’ (‘Religions’, 54). Gerd Baumann observed a similar phenomenon in Southall which he calls processes of perceived encompassment and convergence of religious traditions. Ashis Nandy, however, provides a somewhat different twist to the notion that self-consciousness is a catalyst for transformation.

I suspect that the diaspora has created identities which do not open up the older Indian identities but narrow them. Hinduism in the diaspora, for example, is much more exclusive and homogenic. Out of feelings of inferiority, many Hindus have tried to re-define Hinduism according to the dominant Western concept of religion. The result has been a more globalized, more Brahmanic -- even a more semiticised -- version of Hinduism which endorses some of the most atavistic elements in Indian politics (104).

With regard to such developments, Smart wryly comments, ‘Maybe over much of its history there was no such clearly demarcated “-ism” as Hinduism; there is now’ (294). The foremost questions to arise, then, will likely revolve around the status and ‘legitimacy’ of the emergent and evolving diaspora religious traditions which claim global recognition, or indeed, ‘authority’.

III. ‘Diaspora’ as Mode of Cultural Production

This final set of meanings which various writers have attributed to the notion of 'diaspora' is usually conveyed in discussions of globalisation. In this sense -- usually although not exclusively the approach of anthropologists -- globalisation is examined in its guise as the world-wide flow of cultural objects, images and meanings resulting in variegated process of creolisation, back-and-forth transferences, mutual influences, new contestations, negotiations and constant transformations (see for instance Appadurai & Breckenridge 'Why', Appadurai 'Disjuncture', Hannerz 'Cultural'). In this way 'diaspora' is described as involving the *production and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena*.³ Glick Schiller *et al.* point to the logic of associating transnational activity involving both material items and persons:

[T]he constant and various flow of such goods and activities have embedded within them relationships between people. These social relations take on meaning within the flow and fabric of daily life, as linkages between different societies are maintained, renewed, and reconstituted in the context of families, of institutions, of economic investments, business, and finance and of political organisations and structures including nation-states.

('Transnationalism', 11)

Also with reference to questions of globalisation, an interest in 'diaspora' has been equated with anthropology's now commonplace anti-essentialist, constructivist, and processual approach to *ethnicity* (see, for instance, Baumann & Sunier, Vertovec 'Multiculturalism'). In this approach, the fluidity of constructed styles and identities among diasporic people is emphasised. These are evident in the production and reproduction of forms (increasingly the focus of interests in Cultural Studies) which are sometimes called syncretic, creolised, 'translated', 'crossover', 'cut 'n' mix', hybrid

or 'alternate'. In this area as well, Stuart Hall offers important insights regarding diaspora, ethnicity and identity:

[D]iaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other peoples into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing form of 'ethnicity.' ... The diaspora experience as I intend it here 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. ('Cultural', 235)

The production of such hybrid cultural phenomena and 'new ethnicities' (Hall 'Old and new') is especially to be found among diasporic *youth* whose primary socialisation has taken place with the cross-currents of differing cultural fields. Among such young people, facets of culture and identity are often self-consciously selected, syncretised and elaborated from more than one heritage.

An increasingly key avenue for the flow of cultural phenomena and the transformation of diasporic identity is *global media and communications*. Appadurai & Breckenridge ('Moving targets', iii) comment that 'Complex transnational flows of media images and messages perhaps create the greatest disjunctures for diasporic populations, since in the electronic media in particular, the politics of desire and imagination are always in contest with the politics of heritage and nostalgia.' Gayatri Spivak also highlights 'the discourse of cultural specificity and difference, packaged for transnational consumption' through global technologies, particularly through the

medium of ‘microelectronic transnationalism’ represented by electronic bulletin boards and the Internet (276).

Most anthropological studies regarding South Asian religions outside South Asia have broadly concerned issues of *cultural production and reproduction* (particularly surrounding religious aspects of family and kinship, caste, and ritual practice⁴). A summary of insights from a large relevant body of literature is beyond the scope of this paper. Some significant reported trends specifically regarding religious ritual include ‘homogenisation’ (a distilling of several localized ‘little traditions’ into ‘common denominator forms’; Vertovec ‘Hinduism’, ‘Hindu Trinidad’), ‘retraditionalisation’ (a so-called return to fundamental forms set out in key sacred texts; Knott ‘Hinduism’), and complexification and conspicuous consumption (in which material accoutrements are multiplied and more expensive than usual, reflecting the rising social status of a ritual’s host; Werbner ‘Migration Process’, Ballard ‘Introduction’).

A less studied, but growing field of interest concerns cultural production and reproduction of religious belief and practice among South Asian *youth*.⁵ Again, it is a field too broad to summarise with any justice, but key findings generally indicate that young people adapt their own interpretations of belief, consciously decide the nature of their religious values, and specify for themselves modes of participation in ‘religious community’ activities. For example, the young Muslim women described by Knott & Khokher (1993), above, conduct their own discussion and prayer groups.

The examination of *media and communications* in the South Asian religious diaspora is very new. In this field, Marie Gillespie has produced a most valuable ethnographic study of the role of transnational television and film in the formation and transformation of identity among young Punjabi Londoners. Reminiscent of the already mentioned notions of ‘triadic relationship’, multi-locality, fractured memory and desire,

Gillespie looks at (among other things) the transformational ties such media creates between India and persons throughout the diaspora.

The connections and relations of 'absence' between these places are greatly strengthened by modern communications systems, which have augmented a sense of diasporic awareness among the Punjabi families in Southall. The connections may be as simply symbolic links between viewers of the same blockbuster Bombay movies; or they may be more concrete links between kin and friends in the form of 'video letters' and home videos of weddings and other rites of passage, especially coming-of-age celebrations. ..or they may serve to disseminate propaganda for the Khalistan ('Land of the Pure') movement... or videos of the lives and works of a Sikh *sant* (holy man) may be circulated across the globe, to be used in religious worship and instruction. (7)

'It is clear', she observes, 'that the VCR is being used for the purposes of reformulating and "translating" cultural traditions in the Indian diaspora' (87). This occurs not least in the viewing of 'sacred soaps', when 'religious or "mythological" films are viewed for devotional purposes, particularly (but not only) in Hindu families, and their viewing is often integrated into daily acts of worship' (Ibid.). When watching episodes of the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* made for TV in India, Hindus in Britain may light incense, perform 'devout salutation' when a deity appears on screen, conduct *puja* before or after viewing, and establish that, once commenced, the video must be watched in its entirety 'out of respect.' Gillespie demonstrates ways in which patterns surrounding the consumption of transnational media -- including the modes through which it is viewed and discussed -- both serves to secure the conservative valuing of

‘traditional’ South Asian culture among older South Asians in the UK, and to prompt cosmopolitan admixtures of South Asian and other cultural streams among younger, British born-and-raised Asians.

By way of ‘microelectronic transnationalism’, Amit S. Rai examines contested modes of constructing Hindu identity in diaspora via electronic bulletin boards and discussion groups (such as *alt.hindu*, and *soc.culture.indian*). Indeed, a casual ‘surf’ of the Internet reveals hundreds of home pages and hypertext links to sites designated to the world-wide maintenance and propagation of South Asian religions (including the *Global Hindu Electronic Network*, the *Jain List Home Page*, *Sikhnet*, and the *Muslim World Monitor*). As mentioned at the end of the previous section, it is likely the ‘legitimacy’ and ‘authenticity’ of such constructions of religion will continue to be hotly contested in the future -- particularly given their relatively anonymous-yet-collective and elite (given the highly educated, middle class users of the Internet) mode of production.

Context, Agency and Change

Previous studies comparing the range of phenomena found in the South Asian religious diaspora have examined -- indeed, have focused upon -- structural conditions obtaining for different Indian communities overseas (Jayawardena ‘Migration’, Patel, Angrosino). But these studies have underscored such conditions to the extent of being deterministic and wholly functionalist in their explanations of diversity and change. In these accounts, social, cultural and religious transformations outside India occur almost entirely due to ‘external’ structural conditions (especially demography and political economy), or at best, to some kind of conjunction between these and some

rather mysterious ‘internal’ community ‘needs’ (usually relating to ill-defined notions of ‘identity’).

Evaluating aspects of structure -- and change amongst such aspects over time -- is certainly a necessary step in ‘comparing histories’ (Peel) of social formations like South Asian religious groups outside South Asia; however, without additional levels of analysis, such structure-only analyses often result in portraying social groups as but passive recipients of change wrought by overwhelming ‘forces’, rather than as active agents participating in transformational processes of many kinds.

While bearing in mind structural matters -- ‘the constraints imposed upon these actors by the wider social order in which they are enmeshed’ (Mitchell, 9) -- we must also bring into the equation ‘(a) social reality as constructed through actors’ practical accomplishments and (b) the meaning of social phenomena as resulting from actors’ construction and negotiation of their interpretations’ (Holy, 6).

Clearly, diasporic phenomena need to be approached by way of both structure (historical conditions) and agency (the meanings held, and practices conducted, by social actors). Further, an historical perspective is not only necessary generally for comparative social analysis, but specifically for the study of transnational populations since, as Robin Cohen observes, ‘Some diasporas appear to have mutated across several phases and assumed different forms, refurbishing themselves as they go along’ (‘Rethinking’, 16). Hence, by way of approaching the study of diasporic peoples and phenomena, Roger Ballard has emphasised the need to account for variable ‘trajectories of adaptation’ (‘Introduction’), Paul Gilroy has called for an appreciation of ‘*routes*’ as well as ‘*roots*’ (‘There ain’t’, ‘Black Atlantic’), and James Clifford has underscored the need for ‘specific maps/histories’ (319).

In order to account for meanings, actions, and ‘contextual parameters’ -- in other words, for ‘contextualizing’ phenomena -- among South Asian populations in a variety of geographical and historical locations, a broad range of factors must be accounted for in a systematic way. Clarke, Peach and I (‘Introduction’) have proposed a number of such factors appropriate for comparative analysis of overseas South Asian populations (cf. Jayawardena ‘Migration’, Knott ‘Religion, ‘Bound’).

In this essay, I have suggested various ways of thinking about ‘diaspora’ and, thereby, different ways of considering what is happening among South Asian religions outside South Asia. This discussion has also been set in relation to methodological questions of history, structure and agency. It is primarily to the topic of agency to which I wish to return by way of conclusion.

Throughout his compelling and insightful introduction to the volume *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*, Roger Ballard invokes the notion of ‘adaptive strategies’ to emphasise how diverse South Asian groups in the UK follow their own distinctive dynamics. He suggest that these groups ‘are best understood as being in the midst of a vigorous process of adaptation, and thus busily engaged in deploying their own particular set of cultural, linguistic, religious and kinship resources to plot a better future for themselves’ (29). From such a perspective we are also able to realise, Ballard states, that ‘the new minorities have become an integral part of the British social order, and they have done so *on their own terms*’ (Ibid.: 8; emphasis in original). Such a perspective is a significant corrective to a long-standing ‘deprivationist’ view towards ethnic minorities as rather helpless and passive pawns whose life courses are wholly determined by the whims of a racist society (see Ballard ‘New clothes’).

Although I wholly concur with Ballard with regard to the general perspective, I raise a *caveat*. That is, too much emphasis on own-term strategies and the like can not only sound very much like functionalism (i.e., people do such-and-such because it does something else for them), but more distractingly, it can sound like rational choice theory. The latter presumes that among social actors ‘selection of a course of action is rational and will be the most effective means of realising their preferred goal’ (Hechter 264). Complete with overly economic notions such as ‘rational trading’, ‘benefit/cost calculation’, ‘probability of success’, ‘profit-sharing’ and ‘group rewards’ (Ibid.), rational choice theory infers that social actors are ever aware of what they are doing, and do so for maximum individual benefit. To suggest that ‘adaptive strategies’ involve conscious, logical choices and deployment can sound a lot like these assumptions within rational choice theory.

In the same introduction, Ballard (30ff.) makes an important analogy between cultural and linguistic practice (an analogy compellingly undertaken by Drummond). ‘Just as individuals can be bilingual’, Ballard emphasises, so they can also be multicultural, with the competence to behave appropriately in a number of different arenas, and to switch codes as appropriate’ (31). Unfortunately, a rational choice-like model is perpetuated when he goes on to say that such individuals ‘must constantly decide how best to behave in any given context.’ Surely conscious choices affecting individual and group trajectories are frequently and very importantly made. But this is not all there is to it.

Non-conscious acts of ‘crossing’ or cultural reproduction were evident to Bob Jackson & Eleanor Nesbitt in their research on the reproduction of beliefs and practices among Hindu children in Britain. They conclude that:

While acknowledging that some practices may reinforce boundaries, our studies suggest that the situation is not clear cut and is becoming less so.

Rather than being individuals with a fixed sense of belonging to this groups or that, or feeling comfortable in only one type of cultural situation, it became clear that, in general, the children we were studying could move unselfconsciously from one milieu to another. (174-5)

Such examples of ‘crossing’ and ‘milieu-moving’, I believe, differ from the usual notions of ‘hybridity’ discussed in much literature within Cultural Studies. While the latter celebrate new mixtures, the former indicate ways in which individuals not only create syncretic forms, but are competent in -- and can improvise from -- a number of (in some ways discrete, in some ways overlapping) cultural and linguistic systems.

Cultural competence and improvisation are, of course, core features of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*: the non-conscious set of dispositions and classificatory schemes that people gain through experience, which provides a kind of repertoire for situationally competent action, improvisation and the generation of new practices. Bourdieu describes habitus as something historically patterned yet open to adjustment in relation to the changing conditions of the social field. It is a concept particularly useful for approaching the subject of agency in diasporic cultural practice and reproduction. Appadurai suggests such as well, yet he believes we must re-work the concept with reference to ‘a general change in the global conditions of life-worlds: put simply, where once improvisation was snatched out of the glacial undertow of habitus, habitus now has to be painstakingly reinforced in the face of life-worlds that are frequently in flux’ (‘Global ethnoscares’, 200).

In addressing questions as to how we can methodologically best grasp, in a comparative manner, myriad changes among transnational communities such as those which are represented among South Asian religious groups abroad, we need systematically to take some account of (a) facets of historically conditioned structure (not least patterns of migration and policies of 'host' states) plus (b) composite parts of *habitus* (achievable only through ethnographic study) multiplied, as it were, by (c) the conscious intervention of social actors coupled with (d) the outcomes of mediation, negotiation, and contestation within and between self-defined social groups. All of these complex matters are addressed when we considered the complimentary three meanings of 'diaspora'.

Notes

¹ Including Armstrong, Sheffer 'New field', 'Emergence', Safran, Clifford, Cohen 'Rethinking', 'Global Diasporas'.

² See especially the Hugh Tinker trilogy, as well as Kondapi; Clarke, Peach & Vertovec 'South Asians Overseas', Vertovec 'Inventing', Ballard 'Desh Pardesh', van der Veer 'Nation and Migration'.

³ See especially Appadurai 'Global ethnoscares', Glick Schiller *et al.* 'Toward', Clifford, Kearney, Hannerz 'Transnational'.

⁴ See Schwartz, Morris, Bharati, Jayawardena 'Culture', Burghart, Vertovec 'Inventing', 'Community', 'Hindu Trinidad', 'Official', 'Reproduction', Ballard 'Desh Pardesh', van der Veer 'Nation and Migration', 'Authenticity'.

⁵ See Drury, Jackson & Nesbitt, Knott & Khokher, Ballard 'Introduction', Baumann, Vertovec & Rogers.

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