

Indian Diaspora at the Cross Roads: The Fiji and Malaysian Case

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Diaspora is a process and outcome of Globalization. It can be considered erroneous to say that Diaspora had its origin in the recent past with reference to the Jews. The historical records do not document the origin of Diaspora as being earlier to that of the Jews. But as it is natural any immigrant group has to have a conducive environment to retain their culture, proper demographic features, and the cultural linkages with their land of origin (real or imaginary) necessary for the formation of Diaspora. In the past, especially prior to the nineteenth century, it was difficult to maintain those linkages as firstly, communication was constrained from their land of origin as a result of distance and cost. Secondly, there was no large scale international migration so that the original culture could be retained. Thirdly, the migrant communities largely had no alternative but to assimilate with the host society socially and culturally in the course of time. In the modern period (post-nineteenth century) migration and its characteristics were quite different. Diaspora phenomenon became more pronounced after the European expansion and the colonization of the African and Asian continents.

Several aspects of Diaspora such as ethnicity, conflict and crisis, the developmental issues and the prospects of the Indian Diaspora have already been discussed by scholars in various disciplines. However, the recent trend of uncertainty and the prospect of Indian Diaspora in some of the former colonies have not been sufficiently dealt with by scholars. In this article, an attempt will be made to discuss and comment on some aspects of Diaspora in general and Indian in particular.

ETHNICITY: THE KEY ELEMENT OF DIASPORA

Ethnicity has always been a major element in state-building as well as the break-up of states and even more in the contemporary global situation. Almost every nation has had to deal with the problem of how to come to terms with different ethnic communities. The situation becomes more complex when it involves Diaspora communities. Empirically and theoretically, the subject matter has become significant to the academician today more than ever before.

The main source of conflict, which takes the shape of ethnic conflict, is largely due to conflicting interests in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres. The question which needs probing is how conflicting interests are managed by ethnic groups within the society?

A comparison can be made between the conflicting groups in different societies with regard to race relations and conflicting interests in various spheres. How is the behaviour of people of one race towards the other in developed societies? What is the process in an underdeveloped society? Let us examine a few cases in this regard.

Very often racial conflict occurs due to the combination of socio-economic, political and cultural interests. If one group perceives that the other group as hindering their interests, then they initiate conflict. It happens when the socially or politically dominant group perceives that the other groups are economically progressing better and are likely to alter the power equation in future, then they take steps to safeguard themselves from the threats of the other groups. This is common in many countries, especially African continents and the other underdeveloped and developing countries. This conflict takes various forms in different countries. Sometimes it becomes as serious as ethnic cleansing (Bosnia), unfavorable immigration laws, dominance and exploitation in various forms. In this case the majority (dominant) groups fail to recognize the positive contribution of the immigrant settlers.

Quite in contrast to this, developed countries manage the conflicting interests in a very rational manner. They extract more benefit from the immigrant settlers and, at the same time, the latter are subjected to less harassment. In developed countries, legislation serves to safeguard the interests of both groups even though there is bias in favour of the majority. In the United States of America, UK, Canada and Australia emphasis is given on economic

development. America's economy is highly dependent on the contribution of these immigrant groups. For example, the best talent and the expertise from India, China and other developing countries have been flowing to America and Europe. Consequently, these countries become economically, technologically and politically powerful in the world.

WHY CONFLICT?

Conflict is a very natural phenomenon. To understand the nature and cause of social conflict the theory propagated by Lewis Coser and George Simmel can be instructive. They view conflict as a 'positive' phenomenon. And conflict is not a cancer or contradiction to any society; rather it is one of the many processes to bring and maintain social order. Thus, the conflicting groups create several associative coalitions, which lead to innovation, creativity and development in society. At the individual level, it is their hostile impulse and psychological make up; and at the societal level, it may be the state of development in terms of ideological and cultural spheres which generates conflict among individuals, groups and in society.

Many modern societies are becoming multicultural as a result of migration and settlement of people across the globe. Many advanced societies such as USA, Canada, and UK are multicultural today as a result of immigration. Various ethnic groups combined together develop multicultural societies and contribute towards the growth of socio-economic and cultural heritage. Multi-ethnic groups in fairly literate, advanced and democratic societies influence the development of the country. Various ethnic groups compete (if not direct confrontation) with each other for their survival. Fair competition brings innovation, social order and development of the society. Many multicultural societies such as USA, Canada, UK, Singapore and Hong Kong are good examples of this. Probably the best example is the United States of America where group conflicts and competition contribute to the over all economic and social development of the society.

Many countries in the Gulf and Europe gainfully employ immigrant ethnic groups or Diaspora communities for their economic development. The interest is primarily economic than anything else.

The less developed countries are not aware of the positive

contribution of the immigrant people. Since the economic activities are confined mostly to primary production than secondary or tertiary, they (the earlier settlers or natives) do not perceive opportunity beyond that. The manpower is not being utilized optimally. Whenever immigrant groups carry on their economic struggle, the dominant groups in these settlement societies (Jain, 1993) perceive that they are taking away their privileges and hence initiate conflict. This has adverse impact on the economic sector. Countries such as Uganda, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana today are facing such problems. Much of the conflict is centered on the economic participation of the immigrant groups. In fact, these traditionally underdeveloped countries, and in some cases, the developing countries are still ignorant of the contribution of these migrant ethnic groups or Diasporas in a positive perspective. This myopia ultimately cost the states in the collapse of their already weak economic and political system.

CAN SOCIETY BE ETHNICALLY SINGLE?

Certainly not! The insulation and isolation of countries is a thing of the past. The world is becoming closer day by day. The present world is in the process of creating a global village. Human beings are also more mobile than ever before. Immigration and settlement became a regular phenomenon. This is the imperative need of the present society to bring people (especially skilled people in developed countries) to foster economic development. We can find the presence of diverse ethnic groups in any country. Thus maintaining a single ethnic society is a misnomer and passe.

However, in the case of single ethnic society, there also exist different layers of ethnic identities with an apparent single ethnic or pan-ethnic community. This also causes serious ethnic conflict within a particular pan-ethnic group. Very often conflict is more severe in these societies than any multi-ethnic societies; for example, Pakistan, Afghanistan and many African countries such as Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

DEMOGRAPHIC, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL SCENARIO IN SOME OF THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Many of the developed nations are multi-ethnic now. Some studies have predicted nations would be lagging behind economically after

few a decades if they do not introduce liberal immigration policy and bring people from different parts of the world (Suri, 2000:38). This study shows that the British economy can live to fight only if it imports skilled labour from the subcontinent, especially in the field of information technology.

In the case of Britain, population experts predict that only less than half of UK's population would be white by the next century. The latter (white) will thus be reduced to a minority. But can they help since they need immigrants for their economic development?

In 1999, Bill Clinton said, 'in a little more than 50 years, there will be no majority race in America' (Suri, 2000:38). This seems to translate that whites will no longer be the majority race.

INDIAN EMIGRATION AND FORMATION OF DIASPORA

Indian emigration had its origin in the Indus Valley civilization whose merchants frequently visited other lands. Emigration to African countries dates back to the second century AD. Indians then maintained a 'commuter existence', leaving wives and families and returning home periodically. Those who remained in Africa were called 'passenger Indians' because they were considered sojourners, not permanent settlers (Tinker, 1977: 1-3).

The nineteenth century brought a radical change to the character of emigration. The Indian Diaspora had its strong foundation in this period. The small-scale emigration became a mass movement to provide cheap labour for British and other European colonies. Conditions of abject poverty in certain sections of population and parts of India or the prospect of gaining wealth overseas, motivated people to sell themselves into virtual servitude.

INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE FORMER COLONIES: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Salman Rushdie observes: 'The Journeying of Indians all over the planet is one of the greatest sagas of our time. It is more an epic, replete with misadventures, be it Uganda, Trinidad, South Africa, Great Britain, West Asia, and now, Fiji.' He again says, 'But migrant people do not remain visitors forever. In the end, their new land owns them as once their old land did, and they have a right to own it in their turn' (Rushdie, 2000: 1).

In the last three decades, there have been major instances

when ethnic Indian communities have been at the receiving end of violence or mass discrimination. In the early 1970s, Ugandan dictator Idi Amin threw out thousands of Indians from his country. Countless families lost everything they had and migrated to Britain, North America and elsewhere. A decade and a half later, in 1987, a military general staged a coup in the tiny Pacific Island of Fiji to allegedly safeguard the interests of native Fijians from the economically powerful Indians and changed the constitution to prevent them from occupying senior political positions. As a result of this, 80,000 Indians migrated from Fiji. More recently, the democratically elected government headed by ethnic Indian Mahendra Chaudhury was thrown out of power by a coup led by a businessman George Speight. Much lesser known than these two high profile episodes were the anti-Indians riots in the Bambayi slums on the outskirts of Durban in South Africa in 1983, but country followed the apartheid policy, very few countries had diplomatic relations with it, and the news never made world headlines.

The position of Indians is relatively better in terms of socio-economic, cultural, and political aspects in some colonies of Trinidad and Tobago and Mauritius. But still they are victims of racism and discrimination.

A CASE OF FIJI

The population of Fiji is made up of two major groups: Fijian and Indo-Fijian. According to the most recent survey of the 1986 census, the total population of Fiji is a little over 770,000 (*Statistical News*, 1997: 2-3). It is split between two major groups, Fijian (51% or about 400,000) and Fiji-Indians (44% about 345,000).

Fiji has been in the limelight recently. As mentioned earlier the democratically elected government headed by Mahendra Chaudhury was over thrown in a coup led by George Speight. Indians who constitute the majority of the population, i.e. approximately half of the total population (44%) have not been able to secure political and economic powers.

Fiji is a country of settlers. The first Lapita settlers settled in Fiji around 1500 BC, mostly from other parts of Melanesia. Initially, they were coastal fishing people, but a shift in emphasis towards agriculture around 500 BC spurred a dramatic increase in population and tribal feudalism.

The Indian presence in Fiji can be traced to the latter part of the nineteenth century. A significant development took place after the World War II. A greater political awareness permeated in the thinking of the Fijian and Indian people, but racial segregation continued. Fiji became independent from Britain in 1970 and took to the parliamentary form of government. The Fiji Labour Party came into the limelight in 1985, and in 1987 formed a coalition government with the National Federation Party (Indo-Fijian Party) under Dr. Thimoci Bavadra. Within a month after resuming powers a coup was led by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka and he appointed himself as the President of Fiji.

The 1987 election was won by a shaky coalition, and while there was a Fijian Prime Minister and a cabinet with a Fijian majority, The new government was seen as Indian dominated. Demonstrations followed and the extremist Taukei movement set about destabilizing the new government. Indian-owned business establishments were petrol-bombed and there were violent attacks on Indian communities. One month later, on 14 May 1987, Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka invaded parliament and seized power in a bloodless coup.

The recent coup led by Speight against Choudhury is far more serious than the one reported above. This shows the vulnerabilities of Indians in the hands of the other dominant races.

Since attaining independence, Fiji has been bedeviled by communal divisions that have prevented the state from optimizing the use of its scarce material and human resources for the benefit of all citizens (Premdas, 1975: x).

INDIANS IN MALAYSIA

'Malaysia is a nation of ethnic minority with no ethnic group having a numerical majority' (Purcel, 1975: 65). Malays form the single largest ethnic group accounting 44 % of the total population, Chinese 36 % and Indians about 10 %, and others consisting of indigenous people, other than the Malays.

Although the Indians have a long history of crossing the Bay of Bengal from the Coromandel coast of South India first as traders, and later, as learned and holy men to sit in the Sultanic courts of Kedah (Ryan, 1962); the massive Indian immigration to Malaysia started only after late 1800's under the British rule. Indians especially from southern part migrated to Malaysia as labourers in

the rubber plantation during this time. North Indians were engaged in business, or worked as money lenders and they are mostly urbanites (Colletta, 1975:91).

Several studies conducted by scholars (Colletta, 1975; Ramachandran, et al., 1995; Nathan, 1989) have shown how Indians are being racially discriminated in the hands of Malaysian people and Government. The major plantation crops—rubber, oil palm, and cocoa—occupied a total cultivated area of 4.2 million hectares in 1990. 'The total work force employed in the plantation sector, including direct as well as contract employees, administrative staff, and factory workers, is estimated to be about 269,000, primarily Indian Tamils rather than Malays' (Ramachandran, et al., 1995: 394). Even though this sector contributes to the economy significantly the condition of the plantation workers is very pathetic. Almost 80 % of plantation workers live in very substandard dwelling, where the sanitation, electricity and health standards are miserable (ibid., 1995: 400).

The recent riot in Malaysia is one of the worst riot since 1979. The official figures state that it left 6 persons dead and more than hundreds of ethnic Indians injured. However, the actual figure, which is available from families and hospitals, shows that it is more than that. The riot areas, where Indians live, have been devastated. Malaysian authorities have announced plans to build 5,000 low-cost homes to rehouse squatters in a run-down district where the country's worst ethnic clashes for decades broke out. The worst part is that the Indians have been treated as third-class citizens and discriminated in the area of education, government services and other employment and economic activities.

CONCLUSION

Indians have contributed significantly to the development of their country of domicile. It has been proved in almost all the countries wherever there is a marked Indian presence. Though Indians went as labourers to all the former colonies they have made remarkable progress in the socio-cultural, economic and political spheres. The irony is the way the other major groups (the so-called natives) perceive Indians. The suspicion and the racial attitude of the natives in many of these countries still continue to haunt these hard working people of Indian origin.

The socio-economic and political system in Fiji is highly protected and respected by Indians. They are hard working and democratic in nature. The contribution of Indians to the political, socio-economic and cultural field is much more than the so-called early settlers (who claim to be the indigenous). Indians helped in reviving a vibrant democracy, creating a multicultural society and a sound economy.

It is time to learn lessons from the industrialized and developed nations. All major societies in the world are becoming multicultural. This is a fact and a gift of globalization process to human society. Multicultural societies are rich in terms of culture and individual talents. Also these societies can grow faster than the other societies if there is healthy competition among different ethnic groups to achieve social and economic progress.

Conflict and competition is ubiquitous in society. Healthy competition is necessary for the socio-economic progress. However, often there is violent conflict in these societies and the people of Indian origin oftenly become the victims. It seems that Indians are at the crossroads, doubtful about their survival in some of these countries. Some Indians prefer to migrate to safer countries to avoid a repeat of events that shattered Indians in Uganda and Fiji.

Communal conflict as a major barrier for development and justice in the world today. In the multi-ethnic states of the Third World, planned political, economic and social change cannot succeed unless conceived through the prism of ethnicity (Enloe, 1973; Melson and Wolpe, 1988). Development and change cannot follow a simple unilinear path driven by neutral factors such as capital and technology without being mediated through social process, in particular the recognition of ethnic interests. 'Ethnic pluralism cannot be ignored. It is an integral part of the environment; it is at once both the subject and object of change' (Premdas, 1995).

These countries, which got independence from their colonial rulers in the recent past, have to undergo a process of transition. At present these countries are at the stage of flux, gripped with problems such as underdeveloped economy, mass illiteracy and racism. It is obvious that these societies will have to overcome the problems of racism and other forms of conflict. They can overcome such problems if the countries incorporates multi-culturalism in various key social and political institutions.

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