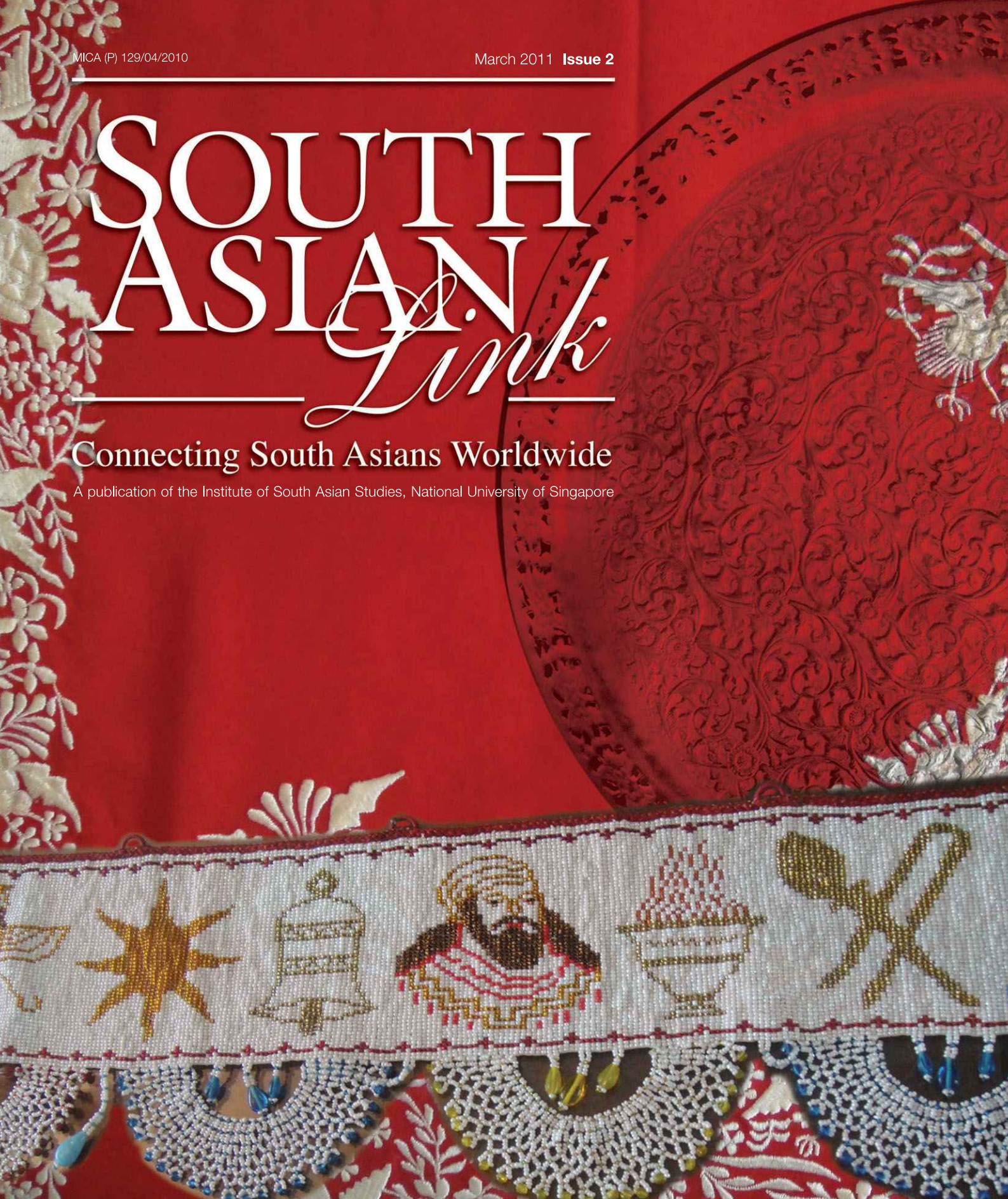


SOUTH ASIAN *Link*

Connecting South Asians Worldwide

A publication of the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore



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Director's Message

A myriad of South Asian communities have long been a feature of the Singaporean social landscape. Many of these 'minorities within a minority' contribute to the vibrant and cosmopolitan culture that Singapore is known for. In keeping with the spirit of the *South Asian Link*, this issue highlights the resident Bangladeshi and Nepalese communities in Singapore, as well as celebrates the history and contributions of the Singaporean Parsi diaspora as we commemorate with them, the *Jamshedi Navroze*, or Parsi New Year.

Additionally, we seek to move beyond the Singaporean compass and into the Far East, where the relatively undocumented Sindhi merchant diaspora in Japan is borne out of ancestral trade movements that coincided with the country's mid-19th century Meiji Restoration. The case of the Sindhi merchant wives is even lesser known. The gendered perspective of the featured article showcases these women's dynamic roles, both historically and in contemporary diasporic setting.

This issue of the *South Asian Link* also carries on with our series of postcard experiences depicting the lives of South Asians in the diaspora. This time we have a contribution from Australia.

As we anxiously wait to see who is crowned with the glory of this year's Cricket World Cup, the *South Asian Link* lends insight with a fine piece on the united front of South Asian cricket fervour as the region comes together to witness the play-offs on home grounds.

This year also sees two of the Institute of South Asian Studies' major initiatives come to fruition. The first event marks the inaugural congregation of prominent personalities from around the world to engage with fellow members of the South Asian diaspora in Singapore. This initiative aims to showcase the attractiveness of the city-state as a natural hub for the global South Asian diaspora. This hallmark event is the South Asian Diaspora Convention that will take place this July and culminate in an exciting cricket match that rings quite perfectly in synchrony with the South Asian heartbeat. The second event is the anxiously awaited release of *The Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora* that features an extensive contribution of about 40 scholars from all parts of the world with coverage of the diaspora across the globe.

This issue illuminates the great diversity of the complex phenomena, that is, the South Asian diaspora, paying due attention to a wide variety of communities across lines of gender, politics, business and socio-cultural domains of everyday diasporic living. We thank both our in-house scholars and external writers for their contributions, and hope that their keen insight enlightens your awareness of the nature and movements of this region and its people.

Professor Tan Tai Yong

Parsis in Singapore: CELEBRATING HISTORY and PRESENCE

Mamta Sachan Kumar

Come 21st of March, the Parsis in Singapore, just like their diasporic kin worldwide, will celebrate yet another *Jamshedi Navroze* – the Parsi New Year – that marks the arrival of the spring equinox. This time, the joyous occasion will be celebrated on 18 March 2011 in a much grander scale, in conjunction with the Iranian Muslim community, where a crowd of 500 from within and beyond the community are expected. The *South Asian Link* joins in the festivities with a tribute to the Singaporean Parsi community. Although only numbering around 200 today, this community shares great pride in a legacy of entrepreneurship skill, community service and an unmatched record of great philanthropy that stays true to the essence of their Zoroastrian faith.

It is understood that the first Parsi settled in Singapore soon after its modern founding by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. This would be one Mr Muncherjee who arrived sometime in the 1820s, presumably a trader en route either from or to China. His grave health later triggered arrangements for a Parsi burial ground to be established in Singapore. A plot was first purchased in Shenton Way with an adjacent lot bought in 1948 to set up a Parsi Charity Lodge for transiting merchants. The cemetery today sits in the Choa Chu Kang area.



Parsi Cemetery at Choa Chu Kang

Other notable Parsis who arrived around the mid-1800s include Mr Fromurzee Sorabji, whose son Cursetjee founded Little Cursetjee & Co., later becoming known as John Little & Co. Then there was Mr Dunjibhoy Hormusji who served on the Singapore Grand Jury in 1854; Mr Cama of Byramjee Hormusjee Cama and Co., who ran an English school on Tanjong Pagar Road that was free for locals; and Mr Heerji Pestonji Kaka and Mr Sorabji Kavasji, both of whom were associated with local print media.



Mistri Road and Parsi Road are located within Singapore's Central Business District

Undoubtedly one of the more famous Parsis of Singapore is Mr Navroji Mistri, who flourished in the aerated water industry and whose million dollar charitable gift to the Singapore General Hospital to construct the Mistri Wing for children has immortalised Parsi generosity. Singapore has recognised his philanthropy by naming a road after him that sits perpendicular to one named after his heritage (Parsi Road), in the heart of the city. For providing aid to the destitute during the turbulent period of the Japanese Occupation, Mr Mistri has also been honoured by the British government.

Parsi women have been equally committed in their historical and present activities in local community service. Examples include the commendable work of the late Mrs Nargis Medora and late Mrs Roshen Daruwalla, as well

as Mrs Shirin Ghadiali, Mrs Roshan Mistri and Mrs Nelly Doctor, the latter three all having once been President of the Inner Wheel Club of Singapore. But Parsi service to Singaporean society is not limited to any one sector. It includes the dedicated social work of Parsi women, the civil service of Justice of Peace Mr Jamshed Medora, and the representation of numerous Parsi children in sports at the national level. It also includes the work of renowned orthopaedic surgeons Dr Pesi Chacha and Dr Jimmy Daruwalla as well as the business tycoons of the day like Mr Pesi Davar, whose fortunes continue to benefit Parsis and others alike. This modest community has quietly and consistently devoted itself as a resource to the country.

Parsis in Singapore may have no designated socio-cultural or religious space to congregate but this has not deterred them from coming together. They continue to gather to practice their faith and pass it down to successive generations. They have monthly informal gatherings organised through their central body – the Singapore Parsi Zoroastrian Association which was established in 1954. The organisation oversees activities and plays a vital role in sustaining the community in line with the multiple other faiths practised locally, via its harmonious assemblage with the Inter-Religious Organisation Singapore.

Tracing the Parsi Diaspora: An Interview with Russi M. Ghadiali

I understand Parsis came from Persia, which is now Iran, but that is no longer the case. So would you call India the 'home' today?

At the moment yes. But I wouldn't say that all Parsis think of India as their home. Though their parents may have been born in India, children today who are brought up in the UK or US claim those places as their home; my children were born here. But the current generation still has a lot of connection to India so we take our children there so that they know their roots. My grandparents were from Iran but that's a long history. It has been 1,600 years since the ancestors of the Parsis left Iran. Of course, people still go on pilgrimages to Iran. In 2004, my wife Shirin and I went to get a sense of Iran, about our roots and how our religion used to be.

Can you identify with Parsis in Iran today? Or would you say there is a distinction between Parsis in Iran and in the diaspora?

Zarathushtis yes, to some extent we are the same. They are sturdier, a little bigger and look Iranian. They don't speak Gujarati, they speak Dari or Farsi, and their children speak English. When I went to Iran, we were told there are about 90,000 practising Zarathushtis there. They are called Zarathushti not Parsi. We are all Zarathushtis actually but we are called Parsis in India because according to our books, the last place we came from is called Pars. We derive Zarathushti from our Zoroastrian religion. So they are identified by this religious grouping but by ethnicity, they are Iranians.

On India and Parsi affiliation with the British...

We first landed in the town of Udvada and then lived in Sanjan [Gujarat] for 700 years because of our commitment to the Hindu ruler and that's why we are very closely intermarried. It has caused a problem in one of our blood cells; we have one blood cell less. The whole community has it; the research has been done by the Tatas. And so we are allergic to certain drugs like sulphur, for instance. Parsi communities built their own



Mr Ghadiali, former President of the Singapore Parsi Zoroastrian Association for over 20 years

housing in self-contained colonies that are over a hundred years old now, like my colony in Colaba. It has a compound, garden, school, fire temple and shops around it. There are other colonies spread out in Bombay, where exists the majority of Parsis, but now they say only 60,000 are left. It's on the decline because of this problem of not allowing people to remain in the religion if they marry outside. In India, children of a Parsi Zoroastrian father have the right to get initiated but not of a mother, but outside India we accept it ... we were only told not to convert the Hindu people back then when we couldn't even mingle closely with others, but when the British came, we were allowed to move out from those spaces... education was very high in the community, we could easily get jobs with the British, especially in banks; till then Parsis were mainly entrepreneurs. That is why our surnames come from our profession. My own surname is Ghadiali because my grandfather had a watch shop; 'ghadial' means 'watch'... Daruwallas, they have liquor shops, others take on the names of the places they come from like Bardoliwalla is from Bardoli...

On Parsis in the diaspora beyond India...

You'll find Parsis everywhere – in New Zealand, Chicago, New York and Hong Kong. Staying in the colony meant it was a hold on you. My batch of young people were the first from my colony to go to England to study and very few came back. Today, the youngsters feel they don't need anything else as they can get good jobs so they don't get married early or they don't want to have children. We are shrinking; at one point we were over 100,000. Slowly everything is changing and it is taking a toll on the community.

This interview was conducted by Ms Mamta Sachan Kumar and is featured here in verbatim.



Young Parsi girls dressed in traditional attire
Photo: courtesy of Zenobia Aspar

The Zarathushti: Parsi Faith, Culture and Identity

Legend has it that when the Parsis fled ancient Persia around 700 AD to preserve their Zoroastrian faith during the spread of Islam, they first landed on Indian shores aboard sea vessels along the western state of Gujarat and were met with an unagreeable Hindu king. Their request for asylum was rejected on suspicion of their actual intentions for having arrived from a battle zone they were thought to bear arms and meaning to disrupt the local state of affairs. They were given a cup of milk but no refuge. The priest heading the Parsi delegation was said to have added spoonfuls of sugar and returned the milk sweetened, with no overspill, in a gesture that sought to symbolise the peaceful intent and giving nature of the Parsis. They were neither there to disrupt the livelihoods of the Hindu people nor to harm or intrude upon the populace in any way, but to live in self-sustenance and to give back in return for a place to reside. The king, impressed by the gesture, agreed on conditions to let the Parsis make a home for themselves.

To this day, the communities are clustered in self-sufficient Parsi colonies, mainly in Gujarat and Mumbai, where some of the major charitable organisations have been led and funded by Parsi philanthropists who like the Tata and Godrej families, are regarded in high repute across the subcontinent and globally. It is argued that the historical circumstances faced by the Parsis coupled with their core religious doctrine of goodness in thought, word and deed, are the reasons that underlie their continued kind acts of charity and non-intrusive lifestyle.

Zoroastrianism

Parsi identity is entwined with their religion – Zoroastrianism. Zarathushtis follow the teachings of their lone Prophet Zarathushtra upon a vision relayed by the Almighty God or *Ahura Mazda*. Zoroastrianism is said to be one of the world's oldest religions, having been founded sometime between 1500 and 600 BC. The religion believes strongly in charitable action and hard work to the extent that it does not believe in fasting to ensure that the body stays well nourished. The other core principle is that of no wastage. This explains the manner in which a body is disposed of in death with the 'sky burial' – it is left within the bounds of the Tower of Silence for the vultures to feed on. As this tradition is not practicable in Singapore, Parsis here either choose the option of a cremation or burial.

Zarathushtis conduct their prayers within a fire temple or *Atash Behram*. Their seasonal festivities or *Gambar*s that celebrate the events in nature speak of a 'this-worldly orientation' that believes in birth into the physical world only once and not in reincarnation. Parsi children are initiated into the faith as they come of age in a ceremony called *Navjote*. Zoroastrianism does not believe in conversion.

Navroze Mubarak Baad

On the Parsi New Year or *Navroze*, the greeting of 'mubarak baad' is given for congratulations. A typical celebration in India includes starting the day with prayers at the fire temple, followed by gatherings with kin and an indulgence in the must-have *Dhun, Dar and Fish Patio*, which means white rice for wealth, yellow daal to symbolise gold wealth and fish for good luck and prosperity. Girls may adorn their ethnic *jahblas* such as the one worn by the child on the right. In the evening, families enjoy a Parsi play at a local theater with the actors typically speaking in Parsi Gujarati, which is considered to be less proper or polished; a 'romanised' version of sorts.

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More information about Parsis can be found in the book, Flame of the Faith: An Insight into the Parsee Zoroastrian Tradition (Singapore: The Anjumans of Singapore, Hong Kong, Canton and Macao, 2004). This book was first made known to us by Mrs Pheroza J. Godrej.

Guards and Gourmet: NEPALESE IN SINGAPORE

Hema Kiruppalini

Taxi Driver: *Where are you from?*

Nepalese Professional: *I am from Nepal.*

Taxi Driver: *Huh? Where is that?*

Nepalese Professional: *You know Mount Everest?*

Taxi Driver: *Oh, Yes! Nepal! So you must be a Gurkha?! Mr Lee Kuan Yew's bodyguard?*

Nepalese Professional: *No, I am not. I am an engineer.*

All Gurkhas are Nepalese but not all Nepalese are Gurkhas. Being Nepalese seems to be viewed as being synonymous with being a Gurkha, and this has become the namesake among the multi-ethnic Nepalese living in Singapore. A misconceived identity, but nonetheless it is a reality that the term 'Gurkha' and 'Nepalese' continues to be used interchangeably in Singapore.

The Gurkha Contingent was formed in April 1949 as a crucial component of the Singapore Police Force. The Sikh Contingent that formed an integral part of the armed forces in the preceding years had disintegrated in dishonour under the impact of foreign invasion and the Gurkhas were recruited as an alternative special force to replace the Sikh Contingent. The Gurkhas have made their historical mark in the Singaporean arms as well as through physical structures such as an estate and street names (Nepal Park, Nepal Circus and Kathmandu Road).

During the post-independence period, the Gurkhas played a key role in Singapore's internal security and continue to be valued for their impartiality. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Gurkha Contingent was deployed during some of Singapore's most tumultuous historical episodes when racial tensions



*The Singapore Gurkhas; the Khukuri is a traditional knife used by the Gurkhas
Photo: courtesy of Niven, 1987*

and frequent demonstrations prevailed. These included the Maria Hertogh riots (1950), the Hock Lee Bus riots (1955), the Chinese Middle School riots (1956) and the racial riots of 1964. In 1978, Changi Prison and Moon Crescent Centre were guarded by an elite Gurkha unit, known as the Prison Guard Unit, making it the first time that a country had enlisted Gurkhas as prison wardens. Currently, according to Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs, the Gurkhas' principle roles are to act as a specialist guard force at key installations and to serve as a supporting force in police operations.

A Gurkha is usually around 18 to 19 years old when he enlists into the Singapore Police Force. Gurkhas serve in Singapore for approximately 20 to 25 years and are thereafter repatriated to Nepal together with their families. At present, it has been estimated that there are about 2,000 Gurkhas. Together with their families, approximately 6,000 to 8,000



Gorkha Kitchen at Upper Aljunied Road

members of this community reside in Mount Vernon Camp on Upper Aljunied Road. Spanning 19 hectares, the Mount Vernon Camp is a self-contained area that includes various amenities to make Gurkha families feel at 'home'. Gurkha families reside in high-rise flats with a Nepalese architectural style. The Nepali-style flats are all each named after popular towns, districts, rivers and places in Nepal (eg. Pokhara Garden, Everest Heights, Babai, Makala, etc). Everest Heights is shaped in the letter 'G' while Pokhara Garden is shaped in the letter 'C'. From an aerial viewpoint they form the initials 'GC' – Gurkha Contingent. The camp also includes a majestic and traditionally architectural Nepali Hindu temple, a Gurkha Headquarters, officers' mess, family welfare centre, clinic and a minimart. The camp also hosts a large range of sporting amenities that include a large swimming pool, gymnasium, basketball court, *sepak takraw* court, tennis court, soccer field, track and field stadium, and playgrounds. In an effort to cater to Gurkha children, the camp has a school for Gurkha children (popularly termed as *bhitra* school by Gurkha families which translates to 'inside' school), and a GC Boys Club and Girls Club where Gurkha children can interact and organise games and cultural shows.

In Singapore, apart from the Gurkhas, there are other groups of Nepalese who in growing numbers reside either temporarily or permanently. They include Nepalese who migrate to Singapore in search of job opportunities, primarily in the food and beverage sector (such as students who look to Singapore to further their education mainly in the field of hotel management, tourism and hospitality) and a sizeable number of professionals who work as engineers, doctors, educators, etc.

Set up in 1995, Gorkha Grill was the first Nepali restaurant in Singapore. Although Gorkha Grill has since closed down, various new Nepalese restaurants have begun sprouting up since the late 1990s. At present, there are about 11 Nepalese restaurants in Singapore. These include Everest Kitchen; Shish Mahal North Indian and Nepalese Cuisine; Albert Café and Restaurant;

Kantipur Tandoori Restaurant; New Everest Kitchen; Gurkha Palace; Amber Authentic Indian and Nepalese Cuisine; Mini Nepal: Khana Khajana; Gorkha Kitchen; Himalaya Kitchen; and the Kathmandu House. These multiplying eateries offer employment and comfort to the increasing number of the Nepalese in Singapore.

Between the 1960s and 1970s, there were only a handful of Nepalese professionals who had already carved out a space for themselves in Singapore. Although the number of Nepalese professionals entering Singapore has progressively increased over the years, the professionals are now being outnumbered by the Nepalese in the food and beverage sector. Many of the contemporary flow of professionals perceive Singapore to be a launching pad for their subsequent ambitions and have made their way to Singapore on a transitory basis after having completed their degrees in Australia, Canada or the United Kingdom. They look to Singapore to find a job and acquire work experience. In spite of their growing presence in Singapore, many of them have not yet envisaged themselves as being a permanent part of Singapore.

The Nepalese Singapore Society was formed only three years ago on 10 January 2008 and this indicates the incipience of the new immigrant Nepalese community in Singapore. Other than the executive committee comprising members who are Singaporean citizens or permanent residents (eg. businessmen and professionals), the rest of the members are largely made up of non-Singaporean Nepalese. The two main Hindu festivals that bring together different strata of the Nepalese are the Nepali *Naya Barsa* and *Dasai* celebrations held in April and October respectively. Apart from a substantial number of Gurkhas, congregation of professionals, students and semi-skilled workers from the food and beverage sector is a common sight during these festive gatherings that is usually held at the Kantipur Tandoori Restaurant. The expansion of Nepalese ethnic restaurants has latently bridged the gap between the Gurkhas and the new groups of Nepalese and it serves as a realm for both groups to relish their Nepali identity in Singapore.

Over the last 20 years, the emigration of professionals, businessmen, restaurateurs, semi-skilled workers and students have added a new dimension to the Nepalese community in Singapore. Amongst them, those who have permanently settled in Singapore are a community in the making, and a fledgling diaspora with the majority of them having recently gained citizenship. Contrary to the latter wave of Nepalese emigration, the Gurkha community is distinguished by a British colonial heritage. Furthermore, the impartial positionality of the Gurkhas underscores their disengagement from Singapore and Singaporeans, thereby continuing to function as a gated community. Individually, the Gurkhas are sojourners and different contingents of Gurkhas have come and gone, but as a 'Gurkha community' in Singapore they remain a permanent entity.



The Gurkha Company of the Singapore Police Force, taken in 1944
Photo: courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Ms Hema Kiruppalini is Research Associate at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

Additional illustrations of the Singapore Gurkhas can be found in the book, Bruce M. Niven, *The Mountain Kingdom: Portraits of Nepal and the Gurkhas* (Singapore: WorldWide Publications, 1987).

External Publications on South Asian Diaspora

Nasrin Akter, *The Religious Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women in Canada: The Case of Bangladeshi Women in St. John's, Newfoundland* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011).

Deana Heath and Chandana Mathur, *Communalism and Globalization in South Asia and its Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Indra Rani Lavan Iswaran, *Celebrating 100 Years: The Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association, Founded 1910* (Singapore: Singapore Ceylon Tamils' Association, 2010).

Stephen M. Lyon and Marta Bolognani (eds.), *Pakistan and Its Diaspora: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Shafiqur Rahman, *The Bangladeshi Diaspora in the United States After 9/11: From Obscurity to High Visibility* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Pub LLC, 2011).

Faizal bin Yahya and Arunajeet Kaur, *The Migration of Indian Human Capital: The Ebb and Flow of Indian Professionals in Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Bangladeshis in SINGAPORE

Md Mizanur Rahman

Since the establishment as a British trading port in 1819, Singapore has attracted different ethnic groups and classes of migrants from almost all over the world and the history and fortunes of Singapore have been, as renowned migration scholar Brenda S.A. Yeoh (2007) argues, 'closely intertwined with migrants and migration'. A group of Bengali-speaking migrants (from what is today Bangladesh) have always lived in Singapore, since the early years of the colonial period. The early Bangladeshi community was very small and many of them married locals and integrated into the Malay Muslim community. The size of the Bangladeshi migrant population in Singapore has increased dramatically with the influx of economic migrants since the early 1990s.

Among these contemporary Bangladeshi migrants, one group comprises transient workers entrenched in the low-skilled sectors and the other group comprises professionals engaged in the high-skilled sectors. The former group of migrants are large in number and might be as many as 70,000 in any given year since the mid-1990s. They usually join construction, shipbuilding and service sectors. They are offered work permits with certain rights and obligations. One of the obligations is to return home after the expiration of the permit. Since the return is embedded in their immigration status, the common pattern of migrant families is to live under 'transnationally split' conditions where non-migrating family members are left behind.

The strong economic motivation shapes the everyday life of migrants in Singapore. They work hard to send remittances to their left-behind families in Bangladesh. Migrant remittances are often primary source of incomes for their families and are allocated for almost everything necessary for the family's sustenance and social mobility such as food, education, house-building, medical care, and social and religious rituals. Migrant remittances contribute to 11.0 per cent of the GDP (gross domestic product) of the



Bangladeshi migrants congregating in Little India

Bangladeshi economy. Despite the increasing securitisation of migration and surveillance of physical mobility globally, Singapore has pursued an active and transparent migration policy to invite lower skilled migrants from neighbouring countries in Asia and share its economic prosperity in the form of remittances with them.

The days that make a difference in migrant life as well as the social landscape of Singapore are Sundays. Sundays are very important to all transient migrants in Singapore. Bangladeshi migrants from all corners of the country congregate in Little India every Sunday, numbering as many as 30,000. Sundays are a time when migrant workers are free from the labour of work. They take time to concentrate on rejuvenating their relationships with friends and to find comfort in the company of thousands of their countrymen. Other groups of Bangladeshi migrants are armed with higher professional

and managerial credentials and are usually absorbed in higher-end occupations. They are offered employment passes and entitled to apply for permanent residency and subsequently citizenship. Professional immigrants are encouraged to bring in their immediate family members and enjoy benefits and privileges such as housing, employment, healthcare and education in Singapore. They are well-equipped to integrate into the multiracial, multilingual, multireligious and multicultural society in Singapore. The propensity for settlement remains attractive because of Singapore's success as a regional hub for education, healthcare, transport, telecommunication, and trade and commerce.

Multiculturalism, pragmatism and meritocracy that have informed and guided the government policy in Singapore since the independence in 1965, have also facilitated the integration of new immigrants into the Singapore society. Expressed by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, the government's policy towards new immigrants is not to 'assimilate' but to 'integrate different communities', that is, to build up common attributes such as one common working language, same loyalties and similar values and attitudes, so as to make the different communities a more cohesive nation.

Considering the geographical proximity and the life chances that Singapore offers to its new immigrants, many Bangladeshi professionals choose to become full members of the Singapore society by taking up permanent residency and citizenship.

Bangladeshi immigrants have established language schools and formed cultural organisations to perpetuate their cultural heritage and celebrate multicultural life in Singapore. Since the 1980s, the Bengali language has been taught to Singapore students. The language received a boost in 1994 when the government of Singapore recognised Bengali as one of the five South Asian minority languages (others include Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and Gujarati) as a second language to fulfill the requirement of the local education



*Bangladeshi immigrant family in Singapore
Photo: courtesy of Md Nazmul Haque*

system, that is, students are now allowed to take Bengali as a second language at the PSLE, 'O' and 'A' level examinations.

There are two Bengali schools, namely BLCF (Bangladesh Language and Cultural Foundation) and BLLS (Bangla Language and Literary Society), where children of Bangladeshi immigrants enrol to learn the Bengali language, arts and culture. There are at least four Bengali organisations such as the Bengali Association Singapore (BAS), Bengali Community Singapore (BCS), BLCF and BLLS that organise various social, cultural and recreational activities for the Bengali-speaking professional community throughout the year. They enhance family life, create a feeling of home and belonging to Singapore, and help sink roots deep locally.

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South Asian Diaspora CONVENTION 2011

Amitendu Palit



*A dance performance at the 2010 Diwali celebrations in Wellington, New Zealand
Photo: courtesy of Karim Sahai*

The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore, is organising the inaugural South Asian Diaspora Convention (SADC) in Singapore from 21-23 July 2011. The SADC is expected to be a landmark event in terms of scale and variety.

The South Asian diaspora is a heterogeneous fraternity with multi-faceted dimensions. Comprising diverse ethnic representations, it exhibits varied cultural attributes and adaptive traits. Though Indians and people of Indian origin are the largest segment of the diaspora, it has strong representation from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. The diaspora is far-flung and covers almost all parts of the world. In more recent years, dominant migration trends have seen the diaspora's largest presences in North America, Europe, Middle East and Southeast Asia.

ISAS has been closely examining various socio-political aspects of the South Asian diaspora for building knowledge on its different facets. The diaspora has been an important focus of research for ISAS. The institute has earlier been actively involved in the publication of an encyclopedia on the Indian diaspora. It will also periodically deliver a newsletter on the South Asian diaspora - *South Asian Link*. Currently, ISAS is engaged in the preparation of an encyclopedia on the Sri Lankan diaspora.

In keeping with its commitment to the study of the South Asian diaspora, ISAS aims to encourage greater interface among the community by facilitating the sharing of experiences

and exchange of ideas. The SADC aims to do this by providing a platform to the diaspora for exchanging views and thoughts between different segments of the community.

The unique aspect of the SADC is its attempt to bring the entire regional diaspora under an overarching umbrella. ISAS, as a Singapore-based research institute with focus on contemporary issues on South Asia, is well-poised to do so. Singapore has a sizeable presence of the South Asian diaspora. It has also historically played the role of a socio-cultural assimilation hub.

Held over three days, the SADC will have a series of distinguished speakers presenting on different themes connected to South Asia. The first two days



*Intercultural exchange through henna art in New Zealand
Photo: courtesy of Karim Sahai*

of the event will have plenary sessions devoted to specific themes. The first day is devoted to the theme 'Resurgent South Asia', while the second day's theme will be 'Singapore: The Springboard for South Asia'. The speakers – prominent industrial, business, corporate, academic and media personalities from different parts of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka), East Asia (China, Japan and Korea), and the United States – will speak in these plenary sessions on a variety of business, economic and cultural issues pertaining to South Asia. The event will also focus on Singapore's connections with South Asia, particularly the commercial aspects and business links. There will be a gala dinner in honour of H. E. Mr S R Nathan, President of Singapore, at the end of the first day. Informal networking and social interaction sessions will be part of the event. There are also plans to have cultural performances and a cricket match.

The SADC is being organised by ISAS and supported by various Singapore government agencies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore Tourism Board, Economic Development Board, Monetary Authority of Singapore and International Enterprise Singapore) and the

private sector. The convention will be inaugurated by Singapore's Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong. Senior cabinet ministers from Singapore including Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong will attend the event. There will also be a dialogue session with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

ISAS hopes to institutionalise the SADC and make it a regular occasion for promoting interface and integration among all segments of the global South Asian diaspora.

Dr Amitendu Palit is Head (Development & Programmes) and Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

Postcard from AUSTRALIA

Purnendra Jain

I have lived, studied and worked in Australia since 1982. Before arriving here with my family, we lived for a year in Tokyo and since then I have frequently travelled to Japan, sometimes for extended periods, for both research and teaching. In the last two decades, both Japan and Australia have transformed significantly, especially as far as the Indian diaspora is concerned.

When we arrived in Tokyo in 1980, the scant Indian community comprised mostly of officials working in the Indian Embassy or in a small number of trading companies. A sprinkle of Indian business people lived in the port cities of Yokohama and Kobe. In the local community where we lived just outside Tokyo, children very often identified us as *Amerikajin* (Americans); 30 years back, many Japanese thought that anyone in Japan who did not look 'Japanese' must be American (synonymous with foreigners or *gaijin*).

Although still not huge, the Indian community in Japan has grown significantly over the past three decades, especially through people working in the information technology sector. Close to 23,000 thousand Indians now live in Japan, mostly in the Tokyo area on temporary work visas. Migration to Japan is very difficult, unlike the United States, Canada or Australia. Indeed, Japan has effectively implemented a 'closed door' policy and keeps the number of migrants relatively very low.

Today, India has a much improved profile in Japan than, say, two decades ago. The professional Indian community is well regarded. Indian food has become particularly popular. In Tokyo alone, I have been told, there are close to a thousand Indian restaurants. However, language is still a great barrier – few Japanese speak English well and most are generally very shy when talking with foreigners. Japan can be a somewhat difficult place to live if one does not have the ability to converse in the Japanese language.



*Dilli restaurant in the Kitano-cho neighbourhood of Kobe, Japan
Photo: courtesy of Mamta Sachan Kumar*

When we arrived in Melbourne in 1982, there were few Indians and those who were here were mainly doctors and educators. Only a decade or so before, Australia had abolished its official 'White Australia Policy', but migrating from India was still rather a tough task. When we moved from Melbourne to Brisbane in 1983, it was something like moving to another country – even within Australia. Brisbane was known as a quaint country town. The Indian community in Brisbane then comprised mainly of 'Fijian Indians' who had migrated after the political instability in Fiji. The Brisbane 1988 Expo and the following year election of a new progressive government – after over 20 years of solidly conservative leadership – brought the city onto the world map. Since then it has grown exponentially and with it, Brisbane's Indian community.

When we went to Oxford University in 1993, we were so surprised to see people of Indian origin working at airports, driving taxis, buses and trains,

and of course contributing to many other walks of life in England. Indian grocery shops, restaurants, jewellery and saree shops in South Hall and elsewhere excited us, as these were not part of the landscape we were familiar with in Australia. This 1993 face of England is almost replicated now in Australia, although on a smaller scale given Australia's population size.

My family has now lived in Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, for 15 years. We have watched the number of Indian settlers and students grow manyfold in the last five to six years. In 1996, when we arrived in this city almost everyone knew each other in the Indian community. Now the number has swelled so greatly that at any gathering one comes across many new faces.

With the growth in the Indian population, we have more grocery stores, more Bollywood and bhangra, and an increasing number of Indian restaurants enriching this multicultural and multiracial country. It is not unusual to hear Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati and other Indian languages in busy market places and on public transport. However, this fast population intake also generates complex and challenging socio-cultural issues.

Recent attacks on Indians (students and non-students) are a deplorable blight on Australian society, which is known for its tolerance, easy-going nature, and reasonable law and order regime. Whether opportunistic or racial, authorities need to deal with such acts so that public safety and civility are maintained and anyone can walk in public places without fear of being assaulted, just because the colour of their skin gives them an appearance of being different from the majority.

I still feel, however, that Australia is one of the best countries in the world to



*An Indian eatery along a street in Adelaide, Australia
Photo: courtesy of Sivashangari Kiruppallini*

live – one where people from all parts of the world settle, work and contribute to this still 'young' nation. All of my family members feel privileged to be part of this great country. I am sure most Indians and other migrants have similar feelings, despite some dark spots such as treatment of the indigenous people, the white Australia policy and recent assaults on migrants.

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While the extent of colonial facilitation in Sindhi trade movement remains a point of contention, the equally salient but lesser acknowledged fact also remains that the critical roles and endurance of Sindhi women have gotten lost in these transitions. A variety of circulation flows or the constituent 'social' dimension, as French historian Claude Markovits has called them, were key to sustaining the merchant networks before the Partition, for they looped the men back to the affairs of the homeland. Some of these reverse flows from the *Sindhwork* headquarters in Hyderabad were probably partially instigated by the involuntarily immobile women, who likely personified the matriarch in the absent condition of her travelling husband. Her embodiment then of the invisible organisation that kept the family running and together is today transformed as the ethno-cultural transmitter crucial for the perpetuation of the community's diasporic 'Sindhi' identity. Where once the matriarch lay tied in Sindh to domestic caretaking, today as *okusans* (Japanese for 'mistress' or 'madam') of their households, they are tacitly entrusted with sustaining the socio-cultural domain of 'Sindhiness' by way of cuisine, communication and the infamous ladies' kitty groups.

Sindhi housewives in Japan are anything but sedentary housewives. While they manage the extra-firm dealings in a diasporic sphere completely divergent from that of their husbands, they are just as active in their daily routines and symbolically influential in their role of keeping the family firmly intact. In fact, the hardships encountered and endured by women in the diaspora take on a rather different and more complicated form than those experienced by the men. During the trying times of war, Sindhi women withstood multiple gap periods of no news about their husbands' wellbeing. When American air raids over Japan in the 1940s prohibited many Sindhi merchants from returning to Sindh for a prolonged period, Sindhi wives had to cope with their husbands' second marriages to Japanese women. In the post-1947 diasporic resettlement, these women became themselves a part of the circulatory flows they would once post information through. They became the mobile agents of Sindhi cultural sustenance and to date, are both a formidable resource and trigger in ethno-kin networks that perpetuate a largely endogamous Sindhi marital enterprise.

Within Japan, Sindhi women face a constant negotiation of cultural exchange with the indignant *obasan* – Japanese 'housemaids', generally senior in age and rather costly to employ. They occasionally still encounter street derision with hand-covered smirks by natives toward the misfit *gaijin* – a somewhat derogatory stereotype of the 'foreigner'. The women have accustomed themselves to run the household on meager grasp of the Japanese language, which they hybridise with a mix of Sindhi and to one's greatest amusement, some have taught the same to the local vendors they frequent! While the men share membership on the officially representative Indian Chamber of Commerce Japan, the women share the same in the informal but more ruthlessly competitive domain – their fashionable association

to a baffling number of lunch groups that cement their social stature as being of affluent 'merchant class'. These groups take on the most interesting titles of: the pioneering 'Wednesday Group', who today call themselves the 'Walking Group', to promote healthy living; for the newer incoming women of the day – 'Blossoms'; and the aptly termed 'Socialites' for the 'old-timers'. Most of the women have adopted vegetarian diets and frequenting the same few outlets have prompted the restaurants to modify their menus to suit their trusty patrons. There are also the more formal organisations such as the Kansai Indian Ladies Association (KILA), which was instrumental in raising funds for victims of the Gujarat earthquake in 2001. Sadly, with the diaspora currently in decline, KILA functions in a much smaller capacity today. In a similar way, the Socialites came together to share recipes and assemble a cookbook for charity in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake that devastated their hometown of Kobe in 1995.



*The Indian community's float at the annual Kobe Matsuri in the summer of 1986
Photo: courtesy of Chablani family*

Sindhi merchant wives embody meaningful intermediary positions in medical care and spiritual circles, such as their roles as interpreters since the 1970s in the International Ward of Kobe's Kaisei Hospital and their various activities in the *Sathya Sai Baba* movement (that finds an overwhelming number of Japanese devotees as a part of its following). Their work in these fields expands their reach from being transmitters within the Sindhi diaspora to being important mediators of cross-cultural exchange within the everyday setting. They take over from their husbands' once highly desirable roles as compradors in economic trade by engaging the many overlooked sites of 'trade' in diasporic living.

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The Encyclopedia of the SRI LANKAN DIASPORA

Peter Reeves



'Little Jaffna' – Tamil district in Paris

Within the Institute of South Asian Studies, there is a small working group engaged in a project which involves a worldwide group of scholars in the preparation of The Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora, which is scheduled for publication by a leading Singaporean publisher, Edition Didier Millet, in the second half of 2011.

Their aim is to provide a global account of the Sri Lankans who have migrated from Sri Lanka to take up positions in other parts of the world. For some this has been only a temporary absence from Sri Lanka; but in many cases those who began as 'sojourners' stayed on and became the founders of 'overseas' Sri Lankan communities which became, over time, established as a 'dispersed' Sri Lankan population with continuing links to Sri Lanka but with an involvement in their 'host' nations. These dispersed communities are now thought of as the Sri Lankan 'diaspora', the formation of which provides a demonstration of the factors which are involved in this process that has been important in shaping important elements of the context in

which the social, political and cultural life of nearly a million Sri Lankans is played out.

The Sri Lankan diaspora in the modern era began as movements from 'Ceylon' to other British colonial possessions – particularly Malaya and Singapore – although older linkages connected with education and cultural matters between Ceylon and South and Southeast Asia, continued to be important. Such linkages continued through the colonial period and were augmented as Sri Lankans were recruited for service in the colonial empire; as Sri Lankan merchants began operations in the wider South and Southeast Asian region; and as Ceylon developed its place in the global economy through the development of the plantation-led 'Dual Economy'.

The coming of independence in 1948 brought about major changes in the scope and nature of emigration from Sri Lanka. Independence raised, for instance, the issue of ethnic identity because, given the ethnic composition of Sri Lankan society, there were numerically small communities, such as the Burghers and the Moors, who recognised that the smallness of their numbers meant that they were unlikely to have influence in the new state. Consequently, many such people chose to go to other societies where they hoped to preserve their identity.

The search for economic and financial improvement continued to provide an incentive for Sri Lankans to emigrate in postcolonial times: merchants, traders, professionally-qualified lawyers, doctors, teachers, managers, accountants and the like ventured into former British colonial states, while others began to move to countries outside the former British Empire to make their fortunes. Then, in the later decades of the 20th century, the development of contract labour markets in a range of fields such as construction, domestic service, nursing and the like began to open up in nations which had the financial

capacity to offer contracts in order to obtain the labour, which their own citizens declined to undertake. Typically, the nations which looked to these contract labour markets were oil-rich Middle Eastern states (such as Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States) or East and Southeast Asian 'Tiger' economies (such as Singapore, Hong Kong or Taiwan); while it was the 'less-developed' states in South Asia – such as Sri Lanka – which had the populations to provide the labour to meet these needs. In the case of Sri Lanka it has been able to provide both male labour for construction and other industries and female labour for domestic service ('maids') and nursing. Contract labour of this kind does not entail long-term emigration and settlement; but the involvement of Sri Lankans in international economic systems of this kind; the experience of being separated from 'home' and family; and the importance of the remittances which they feed back into the Sri Lankan economy combine to make contract labour a key part of the diaspora experience in the late 20th and the early 21st centuries.

A further element in the development of the diaspora and an indication of its role in the future comes from the part which the diaspora played – and will play – in the tragedy of the 'Civil War', so-called, from 1983 to 2009. The diaspora was involved both in the ways in which the diaspora was affected by the long-drawn-out conflict and the ways in which the diaspora worked to affect the outcome of the conflict. Different communities in the diaspora opposed or supported elements in the conflict, and logic suggests that those in the diaspora will be important in helping the healing of the conflict and in the making of the new Sri Lanka that can assure its many communities the peace that all can share.

The completed encyclopedia will deal, firstly, with the context of the development of Sri Lanka's multiethnic population and its economic, political and cultural development up to the present day. Then, it will explore developments within the diaspora in areas such as literature and popular culture, cuisine, sporting activity, and business and entrepreneurial achievements. It will then turn to studies of the Sri Lankan diaspora communities



Sinhalese dancers

in South, Southeast and East Asia; Middle East; Europe (including Eastern Europe and Russia); North America; Africa; and Australia and New Zealand.

These community studies will look at the history of the development of the communities, their links with their host nations and their continuing links with Sri Lanka; the achievements of leading personalities, and the prospects for their continued growth. Finally, it will consider the future role of the diaspora and the diaspora's role in the future of Sri Lanka.

Emeritus Professor Peter Reeves is an independent scholar from his research base in Perth, Western Australia. He served as the first Head of the South Asian Studies Programme at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, from 1999 to 2006.

Publications

Rising China: South Asian Perspectives

The book deals with South Asian perceptions of rising China. These perceptions vary from country to country. Broadly, while India is viewing China's rise both with admiration and anxiety, for the South Asian neighbours of India, a rising China is generally a source of economic support and a strategic balancer vis-à-vis India. The book includes chapters on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal contributed by scholars and policymakers from the respective countries. Each chapter looks at the way the given country is viewing China's rise, explores the political, economic and socio-cultural constituencies that help crystallise this perception, and projects how that country's relations with China are likely to be shaped by these constituencies in the future.

The book brings together the varied South Asian perceptions of rising China at one place in a comparative framework. For the first time, an attempt has been made to identify and examine the political, economic and socio-cultural stakeholders, constituencies that influence the respective policy of individual South Asian countries towards China at this critical juncture of strategic flux in the world owing to China's growing weight in Asian and global affairs.

Edited by S. D. Muni and Tan Tai Yong, the book is to be published by Routledge in New Delhi in the second half of 2011.

More than Maoism: Politics, Policies and Insurgencies in South Asia

This book emerges from an ISAS endeavour to understand the ramifications of the so-called 'Maoist movement' and its bloody consequences in eastern and central India. The title reflects the book's core idea: there is much more than the doctrines of the late Chinese dictator underlying the unrest and conflict. The book contains more than two dozen contributions ranging from the last interview given by the murdered Maoist ideologue Azad to historical pieces on 'the Maoist idea' in South Asia, including Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It features seminal pieces by journalists, security specialists, development economists and social scientists, and aims to present readers with multiple lenses through which to understand and judge the conflicts.

Edited by Robin Jeffrey, Ronojoy Sen and Pratima Singh, the book will be published by Manohar in New Delhi in the second half of 2011.

Celling India: The Mobile Phone's Contribution to Capitalism, Democracy and Unsettling Society

Arguing that the affordable mobile phone is one of the most disruptive personal devices in human history, the book tells how the mobile phone came to India and explains some of the consequences. For politicians, senior bureaucrats and captains of industry, the growth of a cellphone industry has brought fierce contests and great wealth. For workers, whole industries have thrived on the selling and servicing of mobile phones. At the level of daily life, business practices have been transformed, family customs have been challenged and new ways of worshipping and transgressing have emerged.

Written by Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey, the book will be published by C. Hurst and Co. in London by 30 September 2011; with Indian and US editions.

Foreign Policy and Domestic Identity: India in South Asia from Nehru to Vajpayee

This book explores a key problem in international relations – the extent to which domestic politics affect a country's foreign policy. The book focuses specifically on one of the most volatile regions of the world, South Asia, and the way in which India's complex democratic political system impinges on its relations with its South Asian neighbours. The book argues that particular continuities and disjunctures in Indian foreign policy are linked to the way in which Indian elites, responding to the needs of domestic politics, articulated Indian identity. The manner in which these state elites conceive India's region and regional role depends on their need to stay in tune with domestic identity politics and such exigencies have important implications for Indian foreign policy in South Asia.

To understand how Indian political elites relate their own representations of 'Indian-ness' in Indian foreign policy, this study compares three historical eras of India's independent history to demonstrate how ideas of 'India' impact on the foreign policy actions of India in South Asia.

Written by Sinderpal Singh, the publication is forthcoming.

The Passion that Unites

Ronojoy Sen

South Asians cannot be relied to agree on too many things. But if there is one thing that most of them agree on and passionately believe in, it is cricket. The only other contender is Bollywood, but even that falls short by some margin. The 2011 World Cup began on 19 February and is being played in venues across three countries. It shows tangible proof of cricket's ability to bring the fractious people of the subcontinent together. It is also evidence of South Asia's pre-eminent place in global cricket – nearly 70 per cent of the game's revenue is generated from India alone.

The World Cup was last staged in South Asia 15 years ago in 1996, when the tournament was co-hosted by India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This time, Bangladesh is taking part in hosting the games, while Pakistan is out due to security reasons. The inclusion of Bangladesh, which made its entry into the charmed circle of Test-playing nations as recently as 2001, is not a mere sop. Bangladesh will not only be hosting the first match of the tournament, it will also host two of the quarter-finals. If the pre-tournament build-up is anything to go by, World Cup fever will be raging in Bangladesh, everybody seems to be breathing and living cricket there. This is a wonderful opportunity for Bangladesh to showcase itself before visitors and a global audience.

The 1996 World Cup was marred by the pullout of Australia and West Indies from the matches in Sri Lanka because of security reasons. In some senses it was poetic justice when Sri Lanka beat Australia to lift the Cup in Lahore's Gadafi Stadium. Unlike 1996, the run-up to this year's tournament has been fairly smooth. And unlike multi-discipline events like with the Commonwealth



Opening match of the Cricket World Cup 2011 between Bangladesh and India held in Dhaka

Games, where India scrambled to get its facilities ready on time, a reasonable cricketing infrastructure already exists in most South Asian cities pre-empting any major embarrassment – not that there have not been a few hiccups. The iconic Eden Gardens in Kolkata has lost the right to stage the India-England match because work on the stadium was not completed within the deadline. It not only hosted the World Cup finals in 1987 – the first time that the tournament had travelled outside England – but was also the site for the ill-fated semi-final between India and Sri Lanka in 1996, which had to be called off because of spectator trouble.

The World Cup is being held at a time when cricket is at the crossroads. Perhaps the only global game with three formats – Tests, 50-over matches

and Twenty20 – cricket’s administrators have a difficult juggling act on their hands. However, during a conference at Oxford to mark the centenary of the International Cricket Council in 2009, its South African Chief Executive Officer, Haroon Lorgat, told the author in an interview that he was confident that cricket could balance the three formats. ‘While there will be challenges, we have three viable and popular formats of the game at the international level, which is a huge advantage and something to celebrate. I can’t think of any other sport in the world that enjoys such a position,’ he said.

The 2011 World Cup will be a test of the 50-over cricket which has had the Twenty20 format snapping at its heels over the past few years. With the advent of the high-octane Twenty20 – which now has its own World Cup every two years and the annual Indian Premier League, involving several international stars – many had predicted that one-dayers will face a real crisis. But the one-day format has shown surprising resilience. In India, one-day games have always brought in the crowds and the past couple of seasons have seen no exception. The recent one-day series in South Africa and Australia were played before packed stands.

The 50-over World Cup – as opposed to the more recent Twenty20 – was a damp squib when it was held in the West Indies in 2007. A total of 51 matches played over 45 days failed to sustain viewer interest and excessive security spoiled the experience for on-field spectators. There were not many exciting matches and the final, which finished in complete darkness, was a fitting end to a drab tournament. To make things worse for sponsors, India crashed out in the first stage itself.

This time around, the World Cup is expected to be a much livelier affair even though the tournament will again stretch over 49 matches and 43 days, which is much longer than the football World Cup. This is likely to test the viewer’s patience but the long-drawn-out tournament is more than likely to be made up by packed grounds and high-scoring games, which most fans find exciting.

Though there is little to distinguish between the top five teams – Australia, India, Sri Lanka, South Africa and England – in the one-day format, India and Sri Lanka will start as two of the favourites. On the flat decks of the subcontinent, the Indian and Sri Lankan batting line-up is formidable. Home advantage will of course be double-edged. While the tracks will play to India and Sri Lanka’s advantage, there will also be the intense pressure of expectations. But that is something the Indian team should be used to. Pakistan will as always be the dark horse, and the constantly improving Bangladesh team may throw up a few surprises. However, Afghanistan, which was a surprise qualifier for the last Twenty20 World Cup, will not be there in 2011.

Whoever lifts the Cup on 2 April at Mumbai’s Wankhede Stadium, the one-and-half-month festival of cricket is likely to bring people of South Asia closer more than anything else can.

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The South Asian Diaspora in Singapore: CHALLENGES AHEAD

Kirpal Singh

From the time people from what is broadly termed 'South Asia' started coming to Singapore, it was a given that these newcomers were, first, quite fluent in English (ie. they usually spoke, read and wrote English in ways superior to most other migrants to the 'new' lands), and second, bound to achieve academic excellence followed then by professional excellence. I grew up with my own elders telling me tale after tale about so-and-so and 'see what they are today'. Given the homilies and the general admonishments it soon became abundantly obvious that if we, forming what today is called the 'South Asian diaspora' (and I am personally not sure if the term 'diaspora' can apply appropriately given its baggage of historic twists and turns) were to be recognised and taken seriously by the others – mainly the Chinese and the Malays – we had to carve a real niche for ourselves and it was this (a special, carved niche) that was going to act as the spur!

In the early years, we, the South Asians, strode well and excelled in many areas: from the legal profession to medicine to academia to teaching to the construction industry. But time has a way of levelling itself and it was soon quite clear that we were losing the edge – others were not only catching up but doing better than most of us. Thus began what I would call the slow demoralisation of the South Asian diaspora, especially here in Singapore. While a few still managed to maintain a good position – especially in law and medicine – by and large the decline had registered and was being felt. Among the Sri Lankans, is there going to be another to replace Mr S. Rajaratnam, who not only became a formidable shaper of the Singaporean identity but also gained worldwide recognition for his literary genius? Among Sikhs is there going to be another Justice Choor Singh, who rose from humble beginnings to become one of the most feared and respected justices of the Supreme Court? Among the Tamilians is there going to be a new Chandran Nair, who will both excel with academic excellence in science as well as contribute to the exacting genre of poetry in English? I could cite other examples to demonstrate the perceived general running out of 'celebrated names' among the diaspora.

So what happened? Well, an easy answer would be to blame the many new migrants from all over the world, who have made the field become much more competitive. Another response I often hear about is that because the first two generations of our diasporic community did so well and succeeded brilliantly,

their offsprings no longer felt the need to 'prove' anything and so became complacent with the result that they no longer stood out. Accepting both to a point, my personal feeling is that there is a deeper reason, and one which needs to be addressed.

Our forefathers generally arrived here as 'pioneers': they established themselves by opening new areas for excellence as well as exploring new ways of making their voices heard. They were proactive and frequently took the initiatives to move forward, calling for better standards, better professional benchmarks and a better quality of life. Their progeny, however, seems to have lost that sense of inventiveness, creativity and innovation. To do well, to be better than many around, is good in an economy which remains basically traditional. In the new landscapes of the 'knowledge' and 'creative' economies, the South Asian Diaspora – at least here in Singapore – does not seem to me to have matched their predecessors. We lag behind the others as a group – and this lag is going to grow more significantly unless we begin to closely examine our current complacencies and future orientations. While others are already making every effort to learn how to become essential parts of the new economic drivers we seem to be merely following, hoping for some miraculous stroke which will help us keep our jobs and allow us to live an 'okay' life. Our hunger seems to have dissipated and between the two poles of arrogance on the one hand and sheer laziness on the other, we appear to be caught, quite helpless and somewhat defeated.

My 'harsh' assessment comes from close contacts with the younger generation, while there are some real impressive individuals here and there who continue to shine and hold inspiration, the community as a whole seems to be heading south. A sad spectacle, in my opinion, that needs to be changed. We are in need of real enthusiasm and passion. If we want to stay significant and contribute essentially to the new Singapore, which is being fashioned right now, we have to wake up and begin the real hard work. Starting with understanding what our history has taught us and moving towards carving a new creative way forward which will galvanise our collective energies.

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Researchers at the Institute conduct long-term and in-depth studies on social, political and economic trends and developments in South Asia; and their impact beyond the immediate region. In addition, ISAS produces regular up-to-date and time-sensitive analyses of key issues and events in South Asia. ISAS disseminates these information to the academia, policymakers, business community and civil society.

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