

# ISAS Special Report

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## **Workshop on ‘Citizenship and the South Asian Diaspora in the age of Globalization’, 19 – 20 July 2016**

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### ***Executive Summary***

- *Study of the South Asian Diaspora highlights challenges of definition, measurement and dynamics of immigration, flow of people and policy-making.*
- *Conceptually, citizenship is the third space providing the citizen with rights and entitlements but also invoking a moral commitment.*
- *In combination, Citizenship and Diaspora is of relevance to nation states, international organisations, individuals, corporates, social and community networks within a global context.*

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- *The topics covered address a number of policy-relevant questions such as the management of labour and investment flows, the transnational nature of social networks, the responsibility of the countries of origin as well as host countries.*
- *Citizenship and Diaspora draw out a number of interesting features including the tensions and opportunities of the national and the transnational, the ebb and flow of globalisation, the importance of class rather than nationality.*

In a world where an unprecedented number of people are on the move, as a result of hardship and in search of opportunity, the subject of Diaspora and Citizenship is of particular importance. As part of the third South Asian Diaspora Convention which was organised by ISAS, July 18-19, 2016, at the Raffles City Convention Centre, three panels dwelt on this general theme. They raised issues focused on the definition of the key terms in a discourse that surrounds academic and public discussion about the conditions of life amongst the diaspora, and raised complex questions about the role of the nation state, citizenship and public policy. With the spread of global media and expansive social networks, citizenship is not just about legal rights and entitlement. Thanks to these developments, citizenship has become as much about the moral construction of identity and obligation. Hence in our global and connected times, the question of what makes a citizen has become relevant again.

The panel on July 19 consisted of three papers. The first of these was presented by **Dr Devesh Kapur**, Director of the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, USA. His paper drew on his forthcoming, co-authored book titled, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America*. The book is a treasure trove of data that Dr Kapur and his collaborators have amassed in order to answer a contemporary puzzle. This puzzle he addressed is how a population from one of the poorest countries, half-way around the world, with distinctive linguistic and religious characteristics and low levels of human capital, has emerged as the most-educated and highest-income group in the U.S. in little more than a single generation.

The second speaker, **Dr Didar Singh**, Secretary General of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry, India, drew on his recent book, *The Politics of Migration: Indian Emigration in a Globalized World* [Routledge, 2016]. In this book, Dr Singh studies the politics surrounding Indian emigration from the 19th century to the present day. Data and case studies have been gathered from five continents to explore the role that emigration policies have played and the importance of there being a strategic engagement with the Diaspora. The third speaker, representing the Indian Ministry of External Affairs: Additional Secretary, **Mr Dnyaneshwar M Mulay** spoke about India's actual engagement with the Diaspora. The question that underpinned these presentations was whether the empirical studies and academic research can generate policy-relevant insights for states and societies dealing with, or in need of immigration. The presentation of these papers was preceded by an address from **Mr B K Modi**, founder and CEO of 'Smart Dreams', who drew on his own life and career to speak about the Indian Diaspora in Singapore.

In his introductory and closing remarks, **Professor Subrata Kumar Mitra** outlined the scope and main objectives of the three connected panels. His first point drew attention to the conceptual issues that the very term 'diaspora' raises. Is the reference to a group of people in terms of a category – South Asian Diaspora – an inappropriate use of an essentially contested concept? Essentially contested categories are those that cannot be directly measured. For example, Singapore citizenship is a distinct category: there is a piece of paper to show that you are one, and its absence would imply that you are not. Is diasporic citizenship in that sense a distinct category? Is it a static or fluid phenomenon, which has fuzzy boundaries, with people dropping in and out at will? An equally complicated issue is how diasporic citizens identify themselves. When asked this question, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London said: "I am a Londoner, I'm European; I'm English; I'm English; I'm of Islamic faith; of Asian origin, of Pakistani heritage, a dad a husband." Are these different identities cohesive, and sustainable, in an age when developments like Brexit and the rise of the Trump candidacy indicate the rise of a new kind of ethno-nationalism in the West, a tendency that is likely to get stronger as the

growth of western economies slows down? Post-war expansion had made it possible to accommodate the immigrant within an expanding economic space. How long will it take for the resentment against Polish plumbers to be transformed into resentment against Indian doctors or Pakistani mayors?

People in the diaspora who are affected by these developments in their host countries do not have a voice in the making of these crucial decisions. How might their voices be heard? What is the role of the state of origin? Should one merely see the diasporic citizen as a source of valuable remittances or also as a responsibility? What is the obligation of the host state? Are diasporic citizens merely an economic asset, or is the hiatus between their aspirations to equal citizenship and the reality likely to cause disaffection, alienation and rebellion? What obligations do the diasporic people themselves have with regard to the home left behind and the new home – in terms of their sense of loyalty and the responsibility for bringing up children in a new mould?

Should South Asian states care only for their own people or, can they cooperate on foreign soil better than they do in the South Asian region? Should every South Asian state have a presence in every locality where their people are located or, can they reciprocally work together, making use of economies of scale?

On 20 July a set of eight papers were presented as part of the extended workshop on Citizenship and Diaspora. The papers focused on detailed empirical examinations of what happens to Citizenship in the age not just of Globalisation, but rather of *Glocalisation* – where the twin forces of universalisation and particularisation are conflated. They emphasised the need to revisit old concepts, explore new tools of analysis and propose alternative policies. The two panels were presided over respectively by **Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury**, former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and Principal Research Fellow at ISAS and **Mr Shahid Javed Burki**, former Finance Minister of Pakistan and Visiting Senior Research Fellow at ISAS. Along with the speakers there were 2 discussants, **Dr Jivanta Schottli** and **Dr Ronojoy Sen**.

In part I of the workshop, **Dr Chowdhury** opened the session by drawing attention to the historical depth of both Diaspora and Citizenship and to the political incoherence of South Asia – issues whose presence can be felt in the South Asian diaspora as a whole.

The four speakers included Professor Anthony D’Costa, Chair of Contemporary Indian Studies Australia-India Institute, University of Melbourne, Australia, who spoke about his recent book on Indian IT professionals in Japan. He was followed by Professor Mohan Dutta, Head of the Department of Communications and New Media, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at National University of Singapore who spoke about his ongoing research on Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore. Dr Jonah Blank, Senior Political Scientist at RAND, Santa Monica, California, USA presented his studies on the Bohra community worldwide. Finally, Professor Robin Jeffry, visiting research professor at ISAS and Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University and La Trobe University, mused about his own experience with multiple identities and the notion of “diasporic citizenship”.

The following summaries draw upon the paper abstracts written by the authors themselves.

On the topic of, *Diaspora and Techno-Economic Community: Indian IT Professionals in Japan*, **Professor Anthony D’Costa** spoke about how the phenomenon of international migration has been widely studied but that there has been little investigation of the contemporary phenomenon of professional mobility, to theorize and thus understand the workings of global capitalism and host country responses to foreign professionals. In this presentation he integrated the reasons for and the ways by which mobility of professionals is institutionally and structurally restricted and facilitated by states and capitalist firms in the understudied interaction between India and Japan. He argue that the changing structures of capital accumulation, from manufacturing to services in the context of global economic integration, induces the international movement of people, while mobility is circumscribed by national institutions such as governments, business, and labour. With respect to Japan it was further argued that the impediments to

international mobility posed by local institutions cannot be durable if the prospect for capitalist expansion is severely jeopardized. By using the IT industries of Japan and India, D'Costa indicated that hitherto inhibiting institutions (stickiness) in Japan must adjust to the imperatives of business competitiveness and expansion despite the institutional propensity to not do so. By extension such adjustments by Japanese institutions are argued to include, even if reluctantly, professional Indians as part of a techno-economic community in Japan.

**Professor Mohan Dutta** spoke on *Cultural performance as (be)longing: Negotiations of online and offline spaces among Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore*. Drawing upon a participatory ethnography conducted with Bangladeshi migrant construction workers in Singapore, the presentation explored the negotiations of culture, community, and space in the ambits of diaspora and citizenship. (Be)longing diaspora identity is interspersed with narratives of longing for a cultural site that is both spatially and temporally distanced. Cultural performance was theorized as a contested site where belonging is communicatively negotiated, both rooting into articulations of a Bengali imagination, and voicing an affective node of connection with the communities of the host culture. Migrant identity as a worker was juxtaposed amid cultural identities of a performer, depicting the fluidities of flows between culture and structure. Moreover, it was noted that notions of global citizenship are voiced amid struggles over identity as migrant workers. Through performance, migrant construction workers situate their identities amid global flows of labour, depicting the multi-layered and complex interplays among culture, structure, and agency. The digital is constituted into the everyday lives of diaspora performance as a site for enacting identity, working both dialogically and dialectically with material migrant spaces in the articulation of migrant identities.

**Dr Jonah Blank** followed with a presentation titled, *Global Diaspora, (Neo)Traditionalist Islam: How the Daudi Bohras Use Modern Tools to Forge a Six-Continent Community*. In his talk Dr Blank explained that one of the greatest challenges for diaspora communities is assimilating the values of a new society while maintaining traditional culture and heritage. Many communities fracture as a result. The Daudi

Bohras—a Shi’a Muslim denomination numbering more than one million, originating in India’s Gujarat state and now spread throughout six continents—demonstrate that this challenge can be overcome. Over the past four decades the Bohra clergy has attempted—with great success—to establish an identity that is at once universally Islamic and unique to the group. Moreover, it has done so not by rejecting innovation, but by embracing it: the Bohras have used modernity as a tool to reinvigorate their core beliefs and practices. This program has leaned heavily on communications technology (Internet, streaming video), but has also included modernist ideas such as gender equality, Western education, and occupational diversity. Partly as a result of these innovations, the Bohras have weathered a succession dispute that might otherwise have proved incapacitating, and to weave its far-flung members into a globalized diaspora community.

The final presentation in Part I was by **Professor Robin Jeffrey** whose talk was titled, *Bi-lingual, Multi-cultural, Dual-national: reflections of an Austral-Canadian Indo-phile on “diasporic citizenship”*. Jeffrey was born in western Canada to a Scots father and English mother, both of whom were migrants. He came of voting age as Pierre Trudeau made “bilingualism and multi-culturalism” Canada’s official social policy. Jeffrey came to India in the late 1960s and has lived in India for 15 per cent of his adult life. He came to Australia in 1973, married a Sri Lankan-born Australian and became an Australian citizen in 1992, while retaining Canadian citizenship. He has worked in Singapore for part of each year since 2009. A few questions arise from these details. Was Jeffrey especially fortunate to have been born at a time and place that made such mobility possible? Is such smooth mobility more or less likely in the globalized world of today? To what extent do such diasporic people have national loyalties, and if so, to which countries? Is “national loyalty” likely to wane over time in a world where global mobility, in technological terms, has never been easier?

**Dr Jivanta Schottli** made the following comments as discussant. The four papers covered the range of meanings associated with the Diaspora. From the tragic and poignant, scepticism and suspicion to championing and celebrating the Diaspora. In their themes, the presentations were contrasting but complementary, covering issues relating to the movement of low-skilled as well as high-skilled labour flows; the importance of

community networks but also an insight into how the individual navigates multiple identities. Perhaps what needs more attention is the *politics* of the Diaspora. Does it weaken the nation-state? Does it add another level to interactions between and below the level of the state? Does it provide a new instrument of foreign policy as we have seen in the case of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. When he addresses Indian diaspora he is in fact combining the domestic and the international – speaking to the diaspora and to a domestic constituency. Former PM Cameron joined PM Modi on stage in London, also carrying out foreign policy and domestic politics simultaneously. This brings us to the question of citizenship as a regulatory device, as a way of controlling, attracting, integrating the diaspora. But it is also a means of exclusion. We need to ask why we are looking at the Diaspora at this moment in time? Is it a symptom of globalisation or reflects a concern with de-globalisation. By returning to the Diaspora do we run the risk of further fragmentation or can we look towards the possibility of creating a new moral economy and new social contract?

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Part II of the workshop was chaired by **Mr Shahid Javed Burki** who spoke about the work that had been done during his time as Vice-President at the World Bank on the impact of remittances on the countries of origin. He pointed out that they had observed a phenomenon which they described as a diasporic *lifecycle* where members go through different phases of integration, wealth generation, investment, philanthropy and ultimately, interest in the ‘homeland’.

The four speakers included Professor Riaz Hassan, Director International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia and Visiting Research Professor at ISAS and Dr Habibul Khondker, Professor at Zayed University in the UAE, followed by Mr Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, Country Director for Sri Lanka, of the international organisation, International Alert and Dr John Solomon, Assistant Professor of History from NUS.



**Professor Riaz Hassan**'s presentation on *Nation Building with non-Nationals: South Asian Workers in the United Arab Emirates* examined how the UAE, like the other Gulf states-Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia- is a resource rich but population poor country. Along with other Gulf States it has embarked on nation building with the help of non-national migrant workers, who in 2015 constituted a majority of its workforce. The non-national migrants have contributed to transforming the UAE into one of the world's richest countries over the past fifty years, with a per capita GDP in 2015 of over US\$43000. According to the most recent population estimates only 11 percent or 8.2 million of the UAE population are Emiratis. Fifty five percent or 5.1 million of its workforce are migrant workers from South Asia performing myriads of nation building tasks. Most of them are employed in semiskilled jobs, earning around US\$800 per month. Notwithstanding their pivotal role in nation building and contributions to the UAE's economic prosperity which enhances the well-being of Emirati nationals, they enjoy no residency and citizenship rights. While most major labour-receiving countries have opted to incorporate migrants and their offspring into their citizenry, the UAE has developed very exclusionary policies to keep foreign workers separate. These policies are predicated on maintaining Emirati identity, preserving Emirati citizenship welfare privileges and social stability. The presentation examined these policies in some detail and sought to explore the factors accounting for ethnic, religious and industrial peace using empirical evidence from a survey of returned Pakistani workers from the UAE.

**Dr Habibul Khondker** spoke on *Class, Mobility and Identity: Bangladeshi Diaspora in the Age of Globality*. There is a long history of mobility of the inhabitants of the region of Eastern Bengal, what is now Bangladesh (Amrith, 2013.) Scholars have made valuable contributions to the social history of Bangladeshi migrants to North America (Bald, 2013), Britain (Eade, 1989) and elsewhere. The presentation explored the mobility of two classes of Bangladeshi diaspora occasioned by the forces of globalization since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. As the uptake of construction work in the Gulf States attracted tens of thousands of Bangladeshi workers, Bangladeshi professionals too became outward bound exploring avenues of upward social mobility. Geographical mobility for the

middle class professionals led to opportunities for further accumulation of wealth and status while for many working class migrants, geographical mobility did not always result in upward social mobility, yet both groups in the diaspora were impacted by the conditions of globality on their identity marred by ambiguities and indeterminacy. Drawing on the examples from the Gulf states as well as elsewhere, Dr Khondker explored the questions of class and identity among the Bangladeshi diaspora. Through a disaggregated examination of Bangladeshi diaspora, he presented conceptual and theoretical explorations of global diaspora and migrant identity.

**Mr Amjad Mohamed-Saleem**'s presentation was titled, *What's Diaspora Got to do with it?* With nearly three million Sri Lankans overseas, living across the world (approximately fourteen percent of the country's population), Sri Lanka's diaspora-to-population ratio is known to be one of the highest in the South Asian region. Sri Lanka is now exploring ways to engage its overseas community for future growth and reconciliation. Engaging these stakeholders in development (and ultimately reconciliation) necessarily relies upon sound knowledge of, who they are. However, knowledge about them is not sufficient to foster collaboration. The foundation of effective engagement strategies, especially in the context of Sri Lanka, is trust-building. Instilling trust and gaining confidence involves the integration of Overseas Sri Lankans into the Sri Lankan framework for development and reconciliation. This will allow them to share their human, social and cultural capital, as well as to foster economic growth by bridging their countries of residence and origin. Their intercultural position ensures that they are uniquely placed to adapt to, become part of and, contribute to multiple communities. This, in turn, may lead to greater social cohesion and further social and economic integration, so that their contributions can truly be maximized.

Finally, **Dr John Solomon** spoke on *Old and New: Layered migrations and the Indian Diaspora In Singapore's History*. He discussed how Singapore presents itself as an interesting case study on migration because contemporary immigration patterns have rendered Singapore a site of encounter, interaction and contestation between so-called "old" and "new" diasporas. A substantial segment of recent migrants are from China and

India where many Singaporeans citizens trace their ancestry, or are also of Chinese and Indian descent. While cultural commonalities present opportunities for interaction, and in the case of new citizens and permanent residents, integration, challenges remain in certain key areas.

The Indian community has been highlighted as an example of some of the difficulties that exist in bridging connections between old and new communities, in this case the Singapore Indians and so-called “New Indians”, or recent migrants. Many of these issues are related to competing notions of citizenship and its relationship to place, position and temporality. While many of the factors involved are unique to contemporary processes of globalisation, there are nonetheless some parallels in the past. Not only was the Indian diaspora incredibly diverse in terms of languages, ethnicities and religions, if we look at the history of the Indian diaspora in Singapore, prior to the formation of the Singaporean nation state, various settled or internally-oriented Indian identities interacted with more transient or externally-oriented identities at different times. These complexities were the result of layered migrations within a transcolonial world. Dr Solomon examined some of these interactions in Singapore’s past and discussed the possibility of using these histories to better understand contemporary developments.

At the end of the second session, **Dr Ronojoy Sen** offered some points of discussion. He emphasised the class dimension of the Diaspora and the need to examine the politics of diaspora. He also drew attention to the fact that there are a variety of diaspora communities including very strong sub-national ones such as the Bengali diaspora!

## **Conclusion**

As a crucial interface between state and society, citizenship is the third space, providing rights and entitlements on the one hand but also invoking a moral commitment, on the other hand. The wisdom so far believed that all rights and no moral commitment, produced the disinterested citizen, interested only in the maximum benefits and

protection possible. On the other side of the spectrum, the disenfranchised but morally committed, led to nativist and, sons-of the soil movements.

However, the phenomenon of the diaspora raises a different set of questions – can the immigrant who adopts a new country, in the hope of securing a better future, completely let go of his past? Should he or she be made to do so as part of the new social contract with the adopted and host-country?

And with the diaspora in its midst, can states find new ways of coping with the demands and needs for multi-cultural, national rights but also recognise and at times, even encourage transnational commitment?

On the whole, the papers presented in the three panels indicate a complex issue of contemporary relevance, with deep implications for conceptual and policy analysis. The questions of definition of the core concepts, the methodological issues of measurement of the size of the diasporas, explaining the dynamics that underpin the pace and direction of the movement of these vast groups of people, and finally, formulating policies that would offer them a fighting chance for survival on foreign soil and create conditions for a level playing field would continue to engage the attention of the research community of ISAS.

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