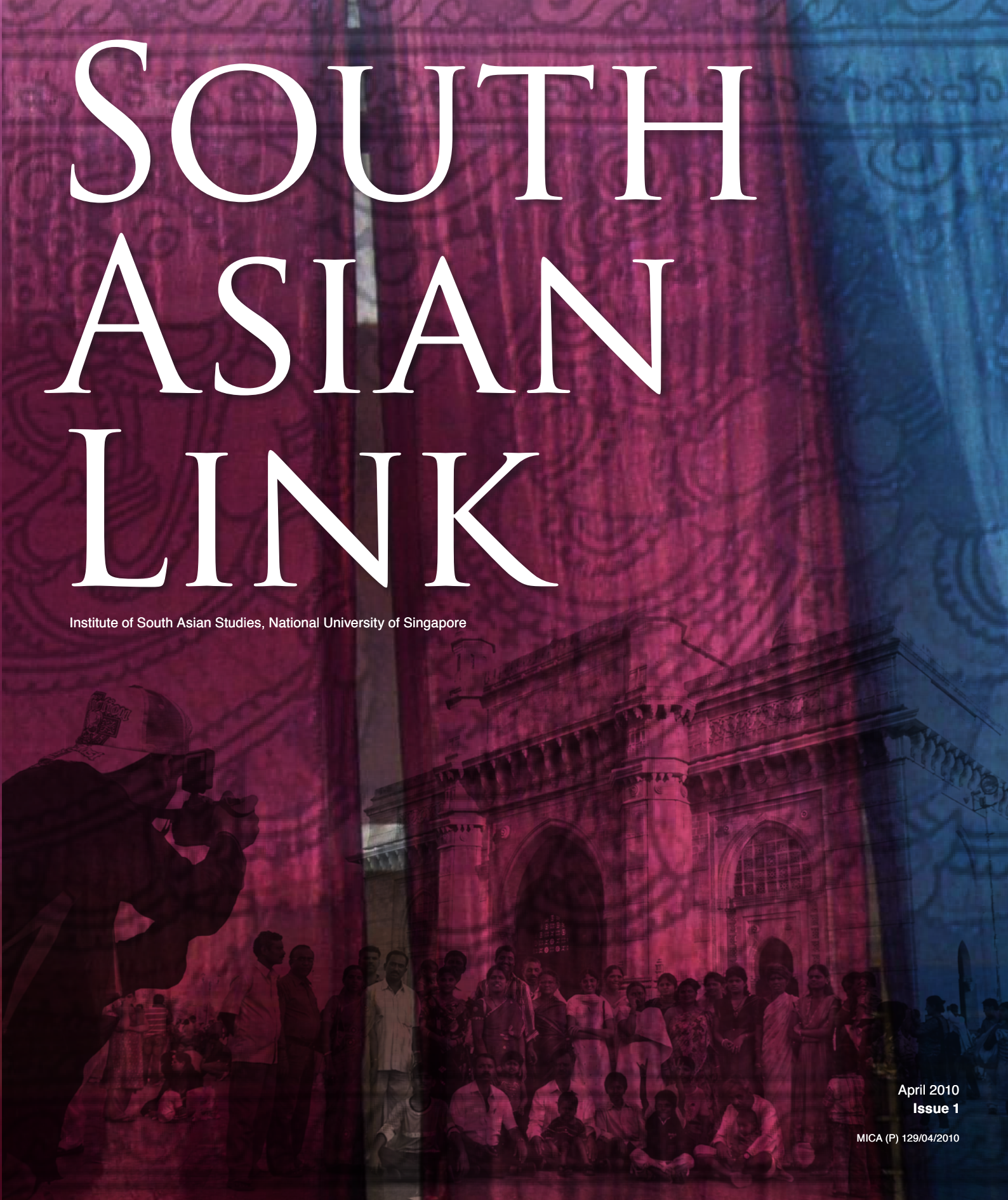
South Asian Link

Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore



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Director's Message

In the past few years, Singapore has been the location for a flurry of activities connected with the worldwide South Asian diaspora. In 2006, the National University of Singapore produced the *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, probably the most comprehensive and authoritative account of the global South Asian diaspora to date. Several communities organised and held international meetings in Singapore. For instance, in 2007, the 14th International Sindhi Sammelan witnessed about 650 Sindhis from all over the world converging in Singapore for their annual conference. A year later, Singapore hosted the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, an annual gathering of overseas Indians. At the same time, the various South Asian communities in Singapore organise annual events to celebrate such occasions as Diwali, Vesakhi, Poila Baishakh, Durga Puja and many others. Now, Singapore is gearing up for the launch of the Indian Heritage Centre. To be completed in 2012, the centre will celebrate the journey and contributions of the Singaporean Indian community through permanent exhibitions and cultural programmes.

All these activities have given Singapore visibility as an intellectual and social centre of the worldwide South Asian diaspora. And as Singapore becomes home to a vibrant South Asian community, it is well-placed to function as a cultural, educational and business hub for a burgeoning and increasingly connected global South Asian diaspora network. The Institute of South Asian Studies is pleased to announce its latest initiative, the setting up of the *South Asian Link*, to position Singapore as a hub for the global South Asian diaspora, linking with various international diaspora groups and individuals to facilitate connections and interactions among them.

South Asian Link will carry out several important activities. It will develop ties with the global South Asian diaspora, maintain a network of active participants among South Asian communities in different parts of the world, and will disseminate periodic newsletters on news and developments relevant to the South Asian diaspora. At the same time, it will organise regular social and cultural activities for networking and for the promotion of South Asian culture and heritage. International conferences and workshops on issues and developments in the South Asian diaspora will constitute a key component of our activities. We expect eventually to collaborate with established networking groups in Singapore and worldwide to coordinate activities and integrate networks.

Several activities are already in the pipeline. Plans are afoot to invite prominent members of the diaspora to Singapore and to 'brainstorm' areas of activities that would interest the global diaspora. Sequels to the successful *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* are being prepared, and the first to be published will be the *Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora*. Our first issue of the newsletter, *South Asian Link*, will be released in April 2010. The newsletter will showcase our various activities, while highlighting happenings and developments in the various South Asian communities around the world.

We hope you find the information in our newsletter useful and relevant.

Professor Tan Tai Yong

a POSTCARD

from Singapore

S. D. Muni

I have visited and lived in many countries in Asia, Europe and the Americas, but the experience of living in Singapore is different, and pleasantly so. You are away from India yet quite close to it. A number of flights at reasonable cost are available to all the major cities of India to attend emergency and short notice social as well as professional matters. Life is hassle-free and without tension. Telephone connections are easy, loud and clear. One can even obtain all the important Indian news magazines and papers on a regular basis. There is no dearth of Indian provisions, including the most exotic spices, sweets and savouries.

The mundane material conveniences apart, Singapore keeps you free of racial, religious and caste-based conflicts. The way the Singapore constitution and the government has managed inter-racial and inter-communal relations is indeed remarkable. There is a lot that India and the other South Asian countries can learn from this experience. Diwali is a public holiday, unheard of anywhere outside India. Serangoon Road represents Indian culture as powerfully as Chandni Chowk in New Delhi or M.G. Road in Chennai or Bangalore. Every weekend, the entire weight of the Indian, nay, the South Asian diaspora can be felt on the small stretch of Serangoon Road, from Little India to Mustafa Centre. The majority seems to be chasing the "Singapore Dream" and have come particularly from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, but there are also people who have fulfilled their dream and even obtained Singapore citizenship or permanent resident status. I could never imagine that there would be a stream of Indian chartered accountants, lawyers, information technology and management experts coming to Singapore. Many enterprising people from India and other South Asian countries have established thriving businesses in Singapore.

The growing number of the Indian and South Asian diaspora is impacting the content of Singapore's cultural life and information network as well. The visibility of the South Asian diaspora has made local Singaporeans curious about this growing presence. This curiosity has also resulted in a certain amount of unease. There are many local Singaporeans who prefer not to have South Asian/Indian tenants or competitors. Perhaps the Indian spicy cooking and argumentative or self-righteous behaviour is not compatible with the locals' pragmatic and business-like approach. The relationship between the diaspora and the locals is a subject of live, but not antagonistic, debate in the Singapore media and public policy discourse.

While contributing to the economy of Singapore and their own prosperity, one thing that the Indian and South Asian diaspora should take back home is the experience of harmonising their social, religious and cultural diversities. If the South Asians can make their governments live in harmony and cooperate with each other they can create a Singapore dream in South Asia as well.

A food court in Little India, Singapore

Professor S. D. Muni is Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore

a POSTCARD

from Bloomington, United States

Sumit Ganguly

Last year, I completed six years as the director of a nascent India Studies Program at Indiana University, Bloomington. I will be on a much needed and most welcome leave during this calendar year. The time away will enable me to concentrate on my research and writing which, of necessity, had not received the attention that I would have liked to devote to it because of my administrative burdens. All academics who take on administrative positions recognise that such endeavours, though not without merit, inevitably consume more time than one had initially anticipated. My experience as the director of this small but thriving program has been no different.

Despite the demands of administration, I have not allowed myself to go to seed yet. This year, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, will publish a new book I have edited on Indian foreign policy and Columbia University Press will publish my co-authored book (with S. Paul Kapur) entitled *India, Pakistan and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia*.

Fortunately, I have plans to spend several months this year at two of Singapore's finest academic institutions – the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University and the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. In a milieu that is intellectually active, professionally supportive and personally attractive, I hope to get a great deal accomplished freed from the bulk of my earthly cares.

I then have plans to return to Bloomington for a couple of months. If the gods have smiled in the meanwhile, I hope to have sufficient funds to carry out a project with a close friend and professional colleague on the divergent states of civil-military relations in India and Pakistan. Thanks to the generosity of an old and loyal friend and unquestionably France's leading scholar on contemporary Indian politics, I plan on teaching for a week in France at a sea resort to boot!

Come late summer, I will follow my wife to Calcutta (Kolkata) with our little daughter in tow. She plans on doing fieldwork in phonology for her doctoral dissertation in linguistics during the fall. Returning to my hometown for an extended stay, after 35 years in various parts of the United States, will, without a doubt, pose unique challenges. I am forced to wonder how my family and I will cope with this fascinating but demanding milieu.

The year ahead offers both intriguing challenges and fascinating opportunities. Of course, based upon previous leaves and sabbaticals, I know that a year away from one's home campus can be filled with serendipity. The best-laid plans can be upended, one's writing can move with great dispatch or lag and unexpected vistas may well open up while more carefully planned routes encounter hurdles. The uncertainties notwithstanding, I eagerly await the onset of the new year. Being freed from the quotidian duties of administration and teaching is one of the great delights of the life of an academic.

Entrance gate to Indiana University, Bloomington

Professor Sumit Ganguly is Director of the India Studies Program Indiana University, Bloomington

a POSTCARD

from Colombo, Sri Lanka

Dayan Jayatilleka

I am back home now. However, for the past five years, I was a member of the South Asian diaspora and that too in three roles in three countries – Australia, the United States and Switzerland. While in Australia, I wrote my book on Fidel Castro. In the United States, I was an adjunct Professor at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and, in Switzerland, I was Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva.

In Australia, the Sri Lankans are a large community, well integrated into the local society. In some cities, their social profile is mixed between white and blue collar and student, while in others such as Brisbane (where I was based), Perth and Canberra, the composition was comfortably upper professional. Unfortunately, there is an ethnic split running through the Sri Lankan community, which is more muted in the quieter, richer cities, but full blown in the larger ones.

While the opportunities for self expression afforded to the various communities, through federal funding of radio stations, etc., play a positive role in helping maintain cultural identity, it is a pity that their Australian experience has not acculturated the two wings of the Sri Lankan diaspora – the Sinhalese and Tamils – into appreciating the virtues and the relevance back home of Australian multiculturalism and liberal pluralism.

Sri Lanka's Cabinet Minister for Human Rights speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council Special session on Sri Lanka in May 2009

Instead, the opportunities available for cultural self expression have unwittingly widened the Sinhala-Tamil rift or, at best, not played a role in healing it. Indeed, these ethnic communities themselves are shot through with other social and sub-cultural resentment spilling over from the old country; some of these of a class character. The class factors reinforce the ethnic ones, with the more Westernised, comfortably off older migrants being far more integrated with or tolerant, while the less Westernised, newer migrants, with more experience of the 30-year war, are more hostile towards the ethnic 'Other' and more prone to ethnic 'Othering'.

A rare and precious exception is Sri Lanka's small Eurasian community, referred to as Burghers, the first wave of migrants from Sri Lanka who are present in significant numbers in Australia. In a delightful irony, these people, whose mass migration was perhaps the first sign of the ethnic unravelling of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), have proved to be the only collectivity to cultivate an overarching Ceylonese or Sri Lankan identity in Australia, as evidenced by their cultural events and leisure activities. It is as if they are the only Sri Lankans on the planet, while the rest of us are Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims.

In the United States, I thoroughly enjoyed integrating easily into Washington D.C., which I had visited many times before from my mid-teens onwards. My wife and I moved between 'think-tank alley' and the chocolate city's streets with ease, checking out the seminars, the jazz and blues concerts, appreciative of Washington's intellectual culture and the almost Athenian access of its leading institutions to its citizenry even in the aftermath of 9/11. The downside of my experience there as a member of the South Asian diaspora was as a teacher where, apart from a few exceptions, my South Asian students had no sense of their South Asian identity, which had been eroded to the point of non-existence, not so much by their American adventure or life stories but by the hidden intensity of actual academic and potential professional competition.

Geneva was different. It was not the formal fact that Sri Lanka was at the time South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Chair, but far more the congruity and commonality of the social, cultural and intellectual formations of South Asian diplomats that imparted a high degree of conviviality among us – almost a regional comfort zone. Reinforced by common aversions to terrorism, the colonial experience, Western interference, intervention and hegemonism, this common South Asia core found itself a comfortable component of a larger, democratically, if not demographically de-centered yet fused Asian diplomatic community. Thus, during the Special Session on Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council in late May last year, it was my happy lot to secure the strong, combative support of the entirety of South Asia, with not a single Asian vote being cast against us.

I must say that I had an eventful stint in all the three cities. Each provided me a different experience and a different perspective of being a member of the South Asian diaspora.

Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore

United Nations Human Rights Council session, Geneva

Cinema in Scuthall, United Kingdom, 1976

Understanding
THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Rajesh Rai

The study of diasporas – a term described by S. Vertovec as "any population…which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides in, and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the border of nation-states" – has emerged as a key area of scholarly inquiry in the humanities and social sciences. Underlying the interest in the study of diasporas is the continued, unrelenting movement of people across national boundaries. The *International Migration Report*, published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs points out that the number of international migrants was almost 191 million in 2005, an increase of 14 million over the last five years. International migrants comprise about three per cent of the world's population, and in developed countries, approximately one in ten individuals is an immigrant (*International Migration Report*, 2006: 1). Although these figures are staggering by themselves, yet, because they exclude descendants of migrants born in the 'host land', they comprise only a fraction of global diasporic communities.

The Indian Diaspora

Indians constitute a substantial portion of contemporary international migrants. Taken together with descendants of earlier streams of migration, a conservative estimate of the global Indian diaspora is approximately 20 million according to the *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*. Although not the largest, it is acknowledged to be the most widely dispersed diaspora. The former British colonies – Burma (Myanmar), the Caribbean islands, Malaysia, Mauritius, Fiji and South Africa – where colonial-led capitalist enterprises encouraged the recruitment of Indian labour in the 19th and early 20th centuries – account for a major segment of this diaspora. Following the end of the Second World War, the movement of Indians has largely been focused on the developed world – the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the notable exception being the large number of transient Indian workers in the Gulf States.

In Singapore, the Indian diaspora is made up of both these streams. Formed initially by the settlement of Indian labourers, merchants, administrators and imperial auxiliaries during the colonial period, the Indian diaspora in the island city has increased substantially due to the migration of professionals from the subcontinent over the last two decades. Consequently, between 1980 and 2005, the Indian resident populace has more than doubled (from 154,600 to 309,300) and the Indian segment of the total population has grown from approximately 6.3 per cent to 8.7 per cent during the same period according to G. Shantakumar in *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia* (edited by K. Kesavapany. A. Mani, and P. Ramasamy).

Singapore-based Scholarship on the Indian Diaspora

Given that Indians form a key component of Singaporean society, there has been a long-standing interest in the

study of the Indian diaspora. Even before the term 'diaspora' became a popular expression in academia, important foundational works on Indians in Malaya and Singapore had been published in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the 1990s, the desire to bring together research on Indians in the region was manifested in the production of the monumental *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, edited by K. S. Sandhu and A. Mani.

The publication of *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* in 2006 marked a further milestone. The volume, coordinated by the South Asian Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore, was the outcome of a Singapore-based initiative that sought to bring together burgeoning scholarship on the diaspora to produce a standard reference on the subject. Sixty-two academics – many based in the diaspora – contributed to the making of the *Encyclopedia*. Written in an accessible style, the volume is well-illustrated, with some 800 photographs and 140 maps. Thematic sections comprise about one-third of the *Encyclopedia*. These explore streams of Indian migration from "The Age of Merchants" to the contemporary "Age of Globalisation", alongside chapters that deal with Indian leadership and the diaspora, key aspects of the people's lives, and the rich literary works that they have written. The bulk of the volume is made up of detailed accounts of the formation and development of Indian diasporic communities in 44 countries and regional profiles spanning six continents.

Investigating the Diaspora

The expansion in the scholarship of the diaspora in recent decades, however, is not simply a matter of surveying wider geographical frames, that is, local, regional and global. Rather, it is the disruption of essentialist notions of culture and identity bounded by the nation-state – ingrained in the multi-locale framework adopted in diasporic studies – which is possibly its most significant contribution to scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. That is not to say that the nation-state no longer matters, but rather that this framework requires the student to foster a deeper appreciation of the need to delve into diverse histories, memories and origins that go into the shaping of migrant identities and accounting for temporal changes. At the same time, studies of the diaspora have also come to be transformed by the spread of information-communication technologies and hyper-mobility, as evident in the contemporary period. These have posed questions on notions of 'rupture' and 'exile' that have long underpinned works on the diaspora. It is precisely at sites where scholarship on the diaspora has come to intersect these transformations that one witnesses some of the most exciting developments in the field.

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Culture and Economy
IN THE SRI LANKAN DIASPORA

Darini Rajasingham Senanayake

The Sri Lankan (formally Ceylonese) diaspora has assumed increasing self-consciousness and importance with successive waves of migration from the Indian Ocean island to almost every continent over the last two hundred years. While the Sri Lankan diaspora is relatively small compared to other Asian diasporas such as the Indian or Chinese communities, it is fairly significant, with over a million people living outside the country. However, the import of this diaspora may not lie in its size but rather in the influence that individuals and communities who have originated from the island have exerted in host or receiving countries and communities overseas, sometimes over several generations.

It is possible to map various historical phases in the formation of a Sri Lankan diaspora. In recent times, accelerated globalisation and new information and communication technologies have enabled development of transnational communities and diaspora-consciousness among immigrants and refugees from the island. Members of the Sri Lankan diaspora are present today in Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, Australia, the Middle East and South Africa, with implications for the economy, the culture, the politics and the future development of the island. Of course, the Sri Lankan diaspora is culturally and economically diverse. The differences are contoured by the history and generation of migration, the social capital of the immigrants, host society policies vis-à-vis immigrants and related identity politics, multiculturalism, and patterns of cultural accommodation in receiving communities.

Although we are most familiar with the scenes of protesting youths of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in recent months, the achievements and contribution of people of Sri Lankan origin in their host counties over time has been remarkable. For instance, in *One Hundred Years of the Ceylonese in Malaysia and Singapore: 1867-1967*, the author, a Malaysian Ceylonese, Durai Rajasingham, provides a historical account of the diversity of migrants from Ceylon to East Asia during the British colonial period. The book documents and pays tribute to the contributions of Ceylonese professionals to nation-building, the economy, business and arts and letters in the host society.

Historical Mapping of the Sri Lankan Diaspora

Sri Lanka is an island of many migrants, constituted by people from many diasporas – Indian, Arab, Chinese and European. Strategically located at the intersection of major trade routes linking the east and the west, the island's ports provided sanctuary to travellers and trading communities plying back and forth from China to the subcontinent to Europe, the Middle East and Africa, for centuries before the arrival of the modern nation-state or the dawn of the information age. As a result of its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, from the early 1500s, Sri Lanka was colonised by competing European empires, starting with the Portuguese, followed by

the Dutch, and finally the British, for about 150 years apiece, until its independence in 1948. In turn, the island sent out travellers, traders, professionals, migrant labour and, more recently, refugees. Collectively, these migrants have come to constitute a modern Sri Lankan diaspora, which sometimes overlaps with, and yet remains distinct from, a larger Indian diaspora.

Given its size and strategic location, Sri Lanka has been more open to the world and international flows of goods, people and ideas than some of its larger and more land-locked neighbours. While from ancient times to the present, Theravada Buddhism was carried by monks from Sri Lanka along the "Sea Silk Route", travellers, visitors and colonisers were to leave behind an island of hybrid histories and ambivalent legacies. The island's people and cultures were romanticised in colonial anthropological literature that dwelt extensively on the cultural diversity of its inhabitants and their harmonious coexistence – until the pogrom of July 1983, which sharply divided the island's two dominant communities and precipitated an unprecedented outflow of refugees. The post-1983 mass migration gave rise to the most clearly articulated Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora identity.

Recent studies of the Sri Lankan diaspora have focused primarily on migration during the past 30 years of conflict between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which resulted in a large flow of refugees to all parts of the world. Some families have been divided and live in multiple continents. However, prior to this conflict-induced displacement and migration, there were earlier waves of migration from the island during the colonial and early post-colonial period. The rise of post-colonial majoritarian nationalism meant that, in the early 1970s, there was a migration of the Eurasian or Burgher community to Australia and Europe. Generations of students and professionals from the country also served in British colonies in Africa and East Asia, intermarried and settled in these places. During the conflict between the government and the Marxist-Maoist *Janatha Vimukthi Peremuna* in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a refugee exodus from southern Sri Lanka, particularly to London.

More recently, a large number of women and men have found employment in the Middle East and constitute transnational communities. The notion of "diaspora" may be broadly defined to signify not only the "scattering of people" due to political persecution (as in the original use of the term in the Jewish tradition), but also the emergence of transnational communities and the economic and socio-cultural dynamics of migration. Conflict-induced migration and economic migration has often merged and blurred the distinction between economic migrants and refugees. In recent times, the Sri Lankan diaspora has grown and been engaged with post-colonial conflicts and, increasingly, reconstruction and development in the homeland.

Reclaiming a Multicultural Diaspora for Peace and Reconciliation

In the aftermath of almost 30 years of armed conflict between the state and the LTTE, which has generated and accelerated waves of migration from Sri Lanka and fractured a multicultural social fabric that was once famed for the peaceful coexistence of diverse faiths and cultures, the diaspora metaphor may be 'good to think with'. Diaspora also connotes the mixing and mingling of cultures, peoples, histories and the plurality of identity. It signals multiculturalism and hybridity while connoting cultural, religious and historical ties to Sri Lanka, Ceylon, Taprobane and Serendip (from which the English word serendipity originates), as the island has been known at different times to different trading communities that settled there. The study and understanding of the Sri Lankan diaspora may serve to pluralise history and identity and, indeed, the history of identity in Sri Lanka beyond the confrontational ethno-nationalist identity politics that was consolidated in the recent armed conflict. It may provide a conceptual frame for the accommodation of cultural diversity and pluralism and reclaiming Sri Lanka's multicultural past.

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THE BANGLADESHI DIASPORA

A Study and Analysis

Iftekhar A. Chowdhury

Bangladesh's population, at 150 million, is one of the largest in the world. In recent times, the number of Bangladeshis living abroad has grown exponentially and is now approximately 5.5 million. At the country's independence in 1971, there were no more than 300,000. Most reside in the United Kingdom and some in North America. A vast majority of them are from the north-eastern district of Sylhet, with its strong and historical migratory culture. This expatriate community contributed significantly to the independence movement of Bangladesh by strongly lobbying for support among British and American political parties and the media, as well as raising funds. In terms of occupation, those in the United Kingdom are largely caterers owning over 15,000 restaurants. They are the reason why today 'chicken tikka masala' is considered one of the foremost fares of British cuisine.

The challenges initially confronting Bangladesh's war-torn economy and the 'pull-factors' emanating from those already abroad led to the swelling of numbers going overseas. The oil and gas-based prosperity of their fellow Muslim nations of the Middle East in the 1990s, and the demand for workers for their booming construction industry saw the number of Bangladeshi migrant workers to that region grow at a phenomenal rate. The government stepped in to assist the process and created a separate Ministry of Overseas Employment and Expatriate Welfare. It was mandated to organise short-term migration, negotiate memoranda of understanding with host countries, and upgrade worker skills through 37 mostly newly-opened training centres. The purpose was to meet the more specialised demands of newer markets such as South Korea and Singapore. Remittances from the workers going abroad, amounting now to US$9 billion annually, became the second largest foreign-exchange earner of the country, next only to the exports of ready-made garments. Officials and the media began to refer to these workers as the nation's 'unsung heroes'.

The diaspora can be divided into two segments: one, the non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs), the early settlers mostly in the United Kingdom and North America, though also in parts of Europe and Australasia, numbering about a million. They include second and third generation Bangladeshis, many assimilated in their host societies. However, for a large number, emotional links with Bangladesh remain. Bangladesh authorities are seeking to translate these sentiments into investments. Encouragement is also provided by policy-support measures. Among them are rules allowing for 'dual nationality' where possible, waiving visa requirements in other cases, and facilitating investments by planning for Special Economic Zones specifically for NRBs. Policies also aim at transforming the 'brain-drain' into 'brain-gain'. Incentives are provided for the better-skilled to return.

The balance – the migrant workers – constitutes the other segment. They live mostly in the Middle East – 1.8

Demonstration by Bangladeshi immigrants in Rome, Italy

million in Saudi Arabia alone and slightly less in the United Arab Emirates, as well as in Malaysia. They provide the bulk of the remittances. However, their welfare poses a great challenge. There are always allegations of exploitation and corruption, both at the sending and receiving ends. There is constant vigilance exercised by a watchful media and several human rights groups. Bangladeshi diplomacy has become active in getting international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation and the International Organisation for Migration to focus more on migrant issues.

The diaspora, both the NRBs and the migrant workers, is wooed by mainstream Bangladeshi political parties, mainly for funds. Voting rights abroad is a growing demand. Many NRBs are engaged in host-country politics. However, their tendency to 'ghetto' at times creates social problems. Bangladeshi expatriates have contributed to the intellectual arena of the host societies, including medicine, the sciences, arts, architecture and literature. Some, who interact with extremist sections of other diasporas, unfortunately become vulnerable to forces of radicalism and fundamentalism. That is why both the host countries and Bangladesh are anxious to expose them to the traditional Bangladeshi narrative which is more tolerant, moderate, and secular.

There is ample scope for rigorous studies on how the rights, interests and welfare of such diaspora groups can be protected and advanced, their skills and capabilities further sharpened and honed, and their absorption and assimilation into newer circumstances rendered easier and harmonious. These might include the collation of 'best practices' for a more constructive role by such communities, both at home and abroad, as well as proposals on the productive use, rather than wasteful consumption, of remittances. Singapore could provide a good hub to conduct such research, given its background in the successful handling of diverse communities. This would help Singapore develop the wherewithal to offer related technical assistance to labour-exporting sending countries. Diaspora communities, properly organised, can be an asset to both the developed and developing worlds. This is more so at a time when the inexorable process of globalisation is unfolding in an earth that, some argue, is becoming increasingly 'flat'.

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THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN East Asia and Southeast Asia

Kalyani K. Mehta

The Indian diaspora has become a popular focus for many research studies and publications. A quick visit to a library's catalogue or internet search reveals the variety of complexities that characterise communities in the Indian diaspora. According to some literature, the Indian diaspora may be traced to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or even Sri Lanka as these countries are often classified as the "South Asian" nations.

The Southeast and East Asian countries that will be included in this brief sketch are Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. Some of them were British colonies in the past such as Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Hence, the route by which migration from the Indian continent occurred was a function of these countries' status as part of the British colonial empire.

There are some variations in the Indian diasporic communities in East Asia and Southeast Asia, and these will be addressed first. The size of the Indian diaspora varies from a few thousand (who may have retained their cultural identity but changed their citizenship) to as many as a few million in Malaysia. Therefore, the impact on the nation in which the diaspora lives is influenced by its size. The heterogeneity within the diasporic communities is also not similar in many cases. In Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), until recent decades, the Indians consisted mainly of Sindhi and Gujarati merchants. Since the 1990s, there has been a small stream of professional Indians from different parts of India, who are referred to as 'expatriates' and they are concentrated in the urban areas. In Singapore and Malaysia, heterogeneity is one of the distinguishing features of the Indian community.

The exercise of tracing the waves of migration leads one to reflect on the process, for example, was it mainly voluntary or involuntary? When one traces the inflow of Indians in Thailand and Indonesia, it is clear that the process was propelled by religious devotees known in Thailand as "Brahmanas" spreading Hinduism and later by Buddhist monks who were missionaries of the faith. In Indonesia, Muslim Gujarati merchants brought Islam to the people. Indonesia has had very interesting waves of religious influence from India - Hinduism, Buddhism and then Islam. In contrast to the religious streams of migration, under British rule, indentured labour or convicts from South India were brought to Malaysia (or Malaya as it was then known) and Singapore by the British administrators to serve their term. This explains the large numbers of South Indians in Malaysia and Singapore. Other waves of immigrants from the coastlands of India included traders, Gujarati traders in particular, who sailed out to sea in search of better economic opportunities. The 'push' factors were natural calamities in their homeland, for example, plague, and exploitation by landlords. Initially, the Indian diaspora consisted of mostly males, but as they settled down,

Three generations of an Indian shopkeeper's family in front of their store in Malaysia

their mothers, wives and daughters-in-law joined them. However, many Indian families returned to India during the Second World War and the Japanese occupation. Some of them returned post-war and rebuilt their lives. From the 1950s, many of these Indian communities began to establish organisations to provide social networks or to sustain their cultural heritage. As the second generation grew up, most attained higher levels of education, became professionals and/or joined politics. Some became businessmen and made major economic contributions to the many countries they settled in and those who joined the government have risen to very high political posts, for example, Singapore's S. Rajaratnam who became Second Deputy Prime Minister and later Senior Minister of the city state.

What are the key issues faced by the Indian diaspora in this part of the world?

In countries such as Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and Japan, where the number of Indians is small, assimilation is not taking place. The way the overseas Indians retain their identity is to practice their Indian way of life in the private sphere of their homes, while in the public sphere they mingle with the majority and aim for economic gain.

There are issues related to cultural heritage and the use of the mother tongue. Senior members of the diaspora are concerned about the dilution of their cultural traditions over time, with successive generations distancing themselves from their ethnic norms. Language maintenance is a challenge especially when the youth are surrounded by other spoken languages, for example, Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia.

According to some scholars, racial discrimination is a barrier to the progress of the Indian diaspora, for example, in Malaysia. Developments in 2008 have revealed the economic and political discontentment experienced by some sectors of the Indian community in Western Malaysia.

In conclusion, the Indian diaspora has in general made significant contributions to the economic and spiritual aspects of countries in the region. Intermarriages are likely to increase in future and concerns about identity and cultural heritage will persist.

Kalyani K. Mehta is Associate Professor at the Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore

PUBLICATIONS

***Aging and the Indian Diaspora: Cosmopolitan Families in India and Abroad* (2009)**

Author Sarah E. Lamb, an associate professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at Brandeis University, examines the recent proliferation of old age homes and the increasing numbers of elderly living alone in India – a phenomenon related to extensive overseas migration and dispersion. In this account, Lamb illustrates how older persons are innovative agents and participants in social-cultural change and probes extant cultural assumptions about aging, social-moral relations amongst people, genders, families, the market and the state that exist in India and the United States.

***Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents* (2009)**

In this mix of history, memoir and reportage, author Minal Hajratwala traces the roots of her Indian family by addressing questions that face every immigrant: Where do I come from? Why did we leave? What did we gain or lose? Starting at her great-grandfather's flight from British India to Fiji, Hajratwala outlines how her ancestors slowly spread across five continents and nine countries over the course of the 20th century. In this book, she also highlights the impact of historical movements like colonialism, Indian independence, apartheid and immigration policies that shaped her family's perspectives and lives. Born in San Francisco, Hajratwala has spent seven years travelling all over the world and interviewing around 75 members of her extended family. A poet and performer, she has also worked as an editor and reporter for eight years at the *San Jose Mercury News*.

***The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (2006)**

Sixty-two academics – many based in the diaspora – contributed to the making of the *Encyclopedia*. Written in an accessible style, the volume is well-illustrated, with some 800 photographs and 140 maps. Thematic sections comprise about one-third of the *Encyclopedia*. These explore streams of Indian migration from "The Age of Merchants" to the contemporary "Age of Globalisation", alongside chapters that deal with Indian leadership and the diaspora, key aspects of the people's lives, and the rich literary works that they have written. The bulk of the volume is made up of detailed accounts of the formation and development of Indian diasporic communities in 44 countries and regional profiles spanning six continents.

***The Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora* (Forthcoming)**

The Sri Lankan diaspora has assumed increasing self-consciousness and importance with successive waves of migration from the Indian Ocean island to almost every continent over the last 200 years. Although the Sri Lankan diaspora of the 21st century is primarily a result of the past 30 years of conflict between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, earlier generations of migration from the island during the colonial and early post-colonial period had existed prior to this conflict-induced displacement.

The *Encyclopedia* aims to examine the Sri Lankan diaspora as transnational communities and their political, economic and cultural links with the homeland. It will provide an in-depth analysis of socio-economic and political developments among the diaspora over time and in difference places, and will address core issues of demography, economy, politics, culture and future development. The *Encyclopedia* will focus on the relationship between culture and economy in the Sri Lankan diaspora in the context of globalisation, increased transnational culture flows and new communication technologies. In addition to the geographic mapping of the Sri Lankan diaspora in the various continents, thematic chapters may include topics on the Sri Lankan diaspora in relation to new information and communication technologies, 'long distance nationalism', citizenship, Sinhala, Tamil and Burgher diaspora identities, religion and the spread of Buddhism, and the Sri Lankan cultural impact.

HIGHLIGHTS

Indian Heritage Centre

Singapore is gearing up for the launch of the Indian Heritage Centre. To be completed in 2012, the centre will celebrate the journey and contribution of the Singaporean Indian community through permanent exhibitions and cultural programmes. The centre, which will be set up on Campbell Lane against the picturesque backdrop of Little India, will cost an estimated S$10million to S$20million to build. The Indian community is raising around S$1million of the required amount, with the Singapore government funding the rest.

Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre

The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore was officially inaugurated in August 2009 by Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen. The centre will be a partner institution of the new Nalanda University which is being established near the site of the ancient university which existed 2,500 years ago in the Indian state of Bihar. The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre was set up with funds mainly from the Singapore Buddhist Lodge which gave S$1.3million while other patrons include Singapore's Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Lee Foundation. Its main goal is to promote the study of interactions among the civilisations and societies of Asia, including trans-national Buddhism.

National University of Singapore Museum

The South Asian Collection at the NUS Museum was established in 1959 after a donation from the Government of India consisting of sculptures, paintings and textiles. Thereafter, the South Asian Collection grew under the scholarship and curatorial guidance of art historians Michael Sullivan and William Willetts. In the 1960s, the Collection was further expanded by donations from Malcolm MacDonald, the former British High Commissioner to India and Chancellor of the University of Malaya. The earliest exhibition of South Asian art at the University of Malaya Art Museum (the predecessor of the NUS Museum) dates back to April 1959. Curated by Michael Sullivan as part of the Singapore Festival of the Arts, the exhibition was aptly named The Art of India. Today, the South Asian Collection at the NUS Museum forms only half of the original Collection from the 1960s. After the separation of Singapore from the Malaysian Federation, the Collection came to be divided in 1966 with the second half now residing in Kuala Lumpur at the Museum Seni Asia, a university museum nestled in the heart of the University of Malaya.

Gandharan Buddha, 3rd – 4th CE, Stone and Schist,
H:56cm, L:25cm, W:13cm, NUS Museum South Asian Collection

Feet of Bodhisattva, 2nd – 4th CE, Stone & Schist,
H:19.2cm, L:21.8cm, W:11cm, NUS Museum South Asian Collection

NEWSMAKERS

Farah Pandith

For the first time in its history, the United States Department of State created the post of Special Representative to Muslim communities and appointed 42-year-old Farah Pandith to this position in June 2009. Born in Kashmir, India, Pandith was a baby when her family migrated to the US in the late 60s. Pandith's current role is an expansion of her earlier brief where she was responsible for engaging with Muslim communities in Europe as Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the Department of State. Pandith was preparing to leave office in March 2009 after the new Obama administration took over but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was so impressed with her earlier work that she urged her to stay on and continue her work on a global level.

Before joining the Department of State, Pandith worked at the National Security Council from December 2004-February 2007. As Director for Middle East Regional Initiatives at the Council, the American Muslim was responsible for coordinating US policy on "Muslim World" Outreach and the Broader Middle East North Africa initiative.

Her journey to government began in 1990 when, as student body president at Smith College, Massachusetts, Pandith gave a speech on the importance of respect and diversity. Then First Lady Barbara Bush (who was visiting the college) liked it so much that she asked for a copy and also later helped Pandith move to Washington after she received her master's degree from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, Boston. Pandith did her thesis on the insurgency in Kashmir and specialised in International Security Studies, Islamic Civilisations and Southwest Asia, and International Negotiation and Conflict Resolution. She is currently a member of the Board of Overseers of The Fletcher School.

Besides working in the government, Pandith has also done a stint with the US Agency for International Development and been vice president of international development for a Boston-based firm (1997-2003).

Venkatraman Ramakrishnan

Professor Venkatraman Ramakrishnan became the seventh Indian or person of Indian origin to be a Nobel laureate when he shared the 2009 Nobel Prize for chemistry with two others for their work on ribosomes. They showed how ribosomes, the molecules that translate the code of DNA into active proteins in the body, function at the atomic level. The DNA inside every cell in all organisms holds the blueprint for how a human being, plant or bacterium looks and functions. But the DNA molecule itself is passive; it is the ribosomes in cells that put the blueprints into effect. The trio's work has led to breakthroughs in the development of antibiotics that disable infections by binding with specific pockets in the ribosome structure of bacteria.

Venkatraman Ramakrishnan at the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony, December 2009

Fifty-seven year old Ramakrishnan has been attached to the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology, Cambridge, England since 1999 and became a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge in 2008. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society (elected 2003), Member of the National Academy of Sciences, US (elected 2004), and won the Louis Jeantet Prize for Medicine in 2007.

Born in the temple town of Chidambaram in the state of Tamil Nadu, Ramakrishnan began his scientific life as a physicist. He did his B.Sc in physics from M.S. University of Baroda (Vadodara), India, in 1971 and then went to Ohio University in the US for his Ph.D in physics. After, however, completing his Ph.D in theoretical physics in 1976, Ramakrishnan, or "Venky" as he is known by his peers, found that he was more interested in doing work on ribosomes so he decided to switch his field and enrolled in the biology graduate programme at University of California, San Diego (1976-1978). The son of two biochemists has not looked back since then.

Venky's father C.V. Ramakrishnan and mother R. Rajalakshmi together founded the department of biochemistry at M.S. University in 1955 and won global recognition for their work on the role of nutrition in brain development. From helping girls of the minority community affected in the 2002 Gujarat riots to lecturing at the M.S. University, Ramakrishnan has kept the links alive with his alma mater.

Ambiga Sreenevesan

The immediate past president of the Malaysian Bar Council, Datuk Ambiga Sreenevasan, a third generation ethnic Indian immigrant, was one of eight women selected across the world to receive the prestigious "Women of Courage" award from US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in Washington in March 2009.

President of the Bar Council two years in a row from 2007, Sreenevasan joined the legal fraternity in 1982 and runs her own practice. Always at the forefront of the civil liberties movement in Malaysia, Sreenevesan has fought for religious freedom and women's rights and worked to amend Malaysia's Federal Constitution to make sure that the testimony of women carried equal weight as men in Shari'a courts. Despite death threats and having a Molotov cocktail thrown at her house, she continues to take a firm stand on national issues such as gender equality and good governance.

Sreenevasan was born in Seremban, West Malaysia, in 1956 where her father Datuk Dr G. Sreenevasan, was posted. A prominent urologist, he was later the main person behind the Institute of Urology and Nephrology at Hospital Kuala Lumpur. Sreenevasan's paternal grandfather had migrated to Malaysia from South India. While growing up, Sreenevasan remembers her father being very inspired by Malaysia's first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and his call for racial unity in the country. (Ethnic Indians, an estimated two million plus, form about eight per cent of Malaysia's multi-racial population of 28 million). Sreenevasan studied at a convent school in Malaysia and went for her university education to the UK. She credits the time spent there with moulding her thoughts on the fundamental freedom of thought , speech and human rights.

Ambiga Sreenevasan receiving the award for "International Women of Courage" from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (L) in March 2009 while US First Lady Michelle Obama (R) looks on

Writing the Diaspora

Meira Chand

Every writer struggles to find a meaningful context within which to write, the exact angle at which to align themselves to the universe. Relegated to a peripheral position on the edge of an alien society, the diasporic writer's work is stripped of homogeneous meaning. Trying to see with the alien eyes of the adopted culture into a mentality and heritage very different from the writer's own can result in pastiche; adhering to the marginal viewpoint, or looking back to a homeland, will quickly present limitations. The writer must find a way beneath the surface to the jugular vein of the new culture, and find also their relationship to it.

The world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji*, was written by a courtesan in tenth-century Japan. If Murasaki Shikibu were writing today and were she a Japanese Nisei in Sao Paulo or San Francisco, she would undoubtedly have an urge to reclaim her homeland, most probably a place she has never known. Looking out of the window onto a scene very different from what she is imagining on paper, she will not be capable of reclaiming the thing that is lost, and indeed never known but for the stories of her parents and grandparents. She will instead create what Salman Rushdie famously calls an imaginary homeland, a Japan of the mind. Yet, curiously, the partial nature of her memory and imagining, and its very fragmentation, may make the writing all the more evocative. Trivial things become symbols just as, for the archaeologist, the broken pieces of ancient pots lead to a vivid reconstruction of the past.

That metaphor of the broken pot has become a pertinent one for me. In a novel just finished that is set in pre-Independence Singapore, and in one recently begun that explores the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army, I again face the dilemmas that confront the diasporic writer of historical fiction. The Indian National Army was an almost unique historical occurrence. People of the Indian diaspora were brought together with a common overwhelming concern for the Motherland, prepared to die for its freedom. Already, that great episode fades into history and it is the writer's task to piece together the remaining fragments for a new generation.

Inquiry in the form of historical fiction is regarded by historians as a speculative exercise as opposed to academic inquiry, yet it can nevertheless recreate a valid and important hypothesis of what might have been. While historical record constructs the shape of an earlier time, fiction creates an intimate sense of experience that not only links us to our past but also brings it alive in the present, and shows us its enduring relevance to ourselves.

History is in essence an ongoing story, and the telling may differ vastly according to who is telling the tale. The story of colonialism from the viewpoint of the coloniser will be a narrative at variance with the tale that is told by those who were colonised. Until recently power was with the coloniser and the colonised, many of who were migrants in the diaspora, did not have a voice. Yet, memory is what connects us to the past, and memory is the key to accessing the buried remains of history. Without memory we cannot reflect upon ourselves, and in this regard historical fiction has an important role to play. The no-man's land between fact and fantasy, between history as rigorous scrutiny of sources and history as part of the world of literary forms, becomes fertile territory within which to explore and understand anew the relationship between public history and our own private lives. It is this space I occupy as a novelist of diasporic material.

Unlike earlier generations, today's diasporic writers have a new sense of plurality, straddling a fast moving multi-cultural world. They have turned cultural margins and the worlds between cultures into unique writing ground. Intent on reinventing themselves, they recall lands they barely know, searching for roots through their books, forging new roots in countries far from their ethnic origin. They insistently speak of their own histories wherever they take place, in America, Canada, Britain or elsewhere. Their voices are redefining the literary map. The world they take their readers into is the world of the immigrant, filled with fragmentation, rebirth, lost memory, facing every day the problems of definition and identity. And if these writers have no tradition to draw upon in the way of Chekov or Charles Dickens, then already they are forming their own traditions. Apart from individual racial histories, they have the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, resettlement and life in minority groups or ghettoes. A new diasporic literature is being formed from this cultural transplantation, and the accompanying examination of the mechanisms of coping and discrimination.

Meira Chand is a Singapore-based writer

Britain's Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles, the Duchess of Cornwall, visit the Dawoodi Bohra Mosque in Northolt, Middlesex in 2009

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iSAS
Institute of South Asian Studies

The Institute of South Asian Studies was established in July 2004 as an autonomous research institute within the National University of Singapore. The establishment of the Institute reflects the increasing economic and political importance of South Asia, and the strong historical links between South Asia and Southeast Asia. The Institute is dedicated to the study of contemporary South Asia. It aims to generate knowledge and insights about the region, and to disseminate them in a manner that is useful to policy-makers, the business community, academia and civil society.

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