

Exploring Diaspora through 'Roots' and 'Routes'

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Abstract

Diasporas are essentially travellers occupying an in-between space. In this context then, the idea of diaspora involves the idea of departure. This idea of departure however is often fraught with tension, anxiety, trauma, memory, separation, (dis)placement, (dis)location and (dis)ease. The paper thereby is an attempt to explore this idea of diaspora using Vijay Mishra's idea of diasporic imaginary to examine Indian diasporic communities. In doing this, the paper will use Subhash Ghai's movie *Pardes* (1997) as a trope to further understand concepts of 'old' and 'new' diaspora.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Indian diaspora, Trauma, Memory, Identity*

The study of diaspora has acquired great relevance in post-colonial studies. Diaspora now has become a space for articulation of identity through movement and travel. Although, the term diaspora was largely coined during the Classical Age, its study has become an important theoretical tool to examine movement and dislocation happening all over the world today. This paper is an attempt at understanding and exploring diaspora by chiefly using V. Mishra's idea of "diasporic imaginary" (2005, p.1) as an entry point to theorize and analyze Indian Diaspora so as to highlight the contemporary position of Indian diasporic communities and its role in 'Nation-making' process. Finally, using S. Ghai's movie *Pardes* (1997) as a trope, the paper intends to examine concepts of 'old' and 'new' diaspora and establish the fact that the idea of 'homeland' even though it is 'imaginary' is still an idea which every diasporic Indian strives to achieve, ultimately affirming to the age old belief that 'You can take an Indian

out of India, But Not India out of an Indian'.

Diaspora has become an important field of study today. The launch of the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* in 1991 by K. Tololyan highlights not only the importance of diasporic studies as an instrument of analysis but also the need to do away with the sharply defined borders of the nation state especially in today's era of globalization and multiculturalism. "Diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment," Tololyan (1991) writes in the first journal of *Diaspora* (p. 5). According to Tololyan, the term diaspora that once described only the Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersion, has become broader to include immigrants, refugees, expatriate, overseas community, temporary workers and so on. The effect of globalization and liberalization is a major reason for this. However, in order to understand diaspora in its present context, we need to first study its historical specificities.

The word 'diaspora' derives from the Greek word 'dia' meaning 'through' and 'speirein' meaning 'to scatter'. The *Webster's Dictionary* refers to diaspora as a 'dispersion from'. Hence, the word connotes the idea of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs. The idea of diaspora involves the idea of departure. It thus invokes the idea of journey or multiple journeys. While talking about the definition of diaspora, V. Mishra in his seminal lecture delivered at Victoria University of Wellington titled "The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora (2005)" talks about diaspora's culture-specific association. He states,

The Oxford English Dictionary refers quite explicitly to John vii, 35 ('the dispersion; ... the whole body of Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles after their Captivity') to make the connection clear. The OED, with its characteristic homage to the written word, locates the first use of the term in Deuteronomy xxviii, 25 where we find: 'thou shalt be a diaspora (or dispersion) in all kingdoms of the earth'(p. 3).

For Mishra, the word diaspora is dynamic in character today, and it can be thus referred to as "any group living in displacement" (Clifford, 1994, p.310). Calling it a postmodern phenomenon, Mishra (2007) says that diaspora intends to dismantle a "logocentric and linear view of human affairs, essentialist notions of social and national cohesion that connected narratives and experiences to

specific races and to origins...” (p.3). Nevertheless, at the crux of the notion of diaspora is the image of journey. But not every journey is to be understood as diaspora because diasporic journeys are not about temporary sojourns. They are “essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere’” (Brah, 2017, p. 443). Hence, they are not to be understood as casual travel, although it works through travel practices. Even though the idea of travel has a happy and exciting image affixed to it, this however, is not the case when it comes to the idea of travel, viz-a-viz, diasporic journey/travel. “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way,” writes Mishra (1996, p. 189). In this context then, what needs to be examined is the history of the slave trade and indentured labour and the painful journey of these slaves and labourers to an unknown land to work in plantations – who had to undertake the painful journey due to abject poverty and later on due to the call of the glitz and glamorous post-capitalistic world. Diaspora, thus as H. Lahiri (2019) states is a “social formation outside the nation of origin. It is a phenomenon involving uprooting, forced or voluntary, of a mass of people from the 'homeland' and their 're-rooting' in the hostland (s)” (p. 4).

Haunted by a sense of self-imposed exile and situated within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, diasporas thus, are “people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passports. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia” (Mishra, 2005, p. 1). There is thus a sense of fear-one that might lead to loss of identity. The diasporic community thus, oscillates between real or imagined displacements. A closer analysis, however, reveals that diasporic communities as Mishra (2005) says, “occupy a border zone where the most vibrant kinds of interactions take place and where ethnicity and nation are kept separate” (p.1). They are thus fluid and ideal formation creating alternative public spaces and “forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference” (Clifford, 2017, p. 452). However, it is the fluidity of the polyglot crowd that at times makes the autochthons crowd anxious. This is because diasporas have a progressive and a reactionary streak in them:

A people without a homeland is not an aberration but an already prefigured cultural 'text' of late modernity. In other words, the positive side of diaspora (as seen in the lived 'internationalist' Jewish experience) is a democratic ethos of equality that does not privilege any particular ethnic community in a nation; its negative side (which is a consequence of its millenarian ethos of return to a homeland) is virulent racism and endemic nativism" (Mishra, 2005, p. 18).

Diasporas are not separatist so to say but at times may have separatist or irredentist moments. This is primarily because their idea of 'homeland' centres on a 'real space' from which "alone a certain level of redemption is possible" (Mishra, 2005, p. 2). Homeland thus, is the real '*desh*' against which all other lands are '*videsh/pardes*'. So when, the real '*desh*' cannot be experienced/achieved, the diasporic community strives to create a utopic '*desh*' in '*pardes*'. This utopic '*desh*' in '*pardes*' then is what Bhabha refers to as the 'third space'. This third space thus provides the diasporic community a spatio-temporal 'in-between space' to discuss, confront and negotiate aspects of cultural hybridity. This, however, is seen as clamouring by the autochthons and breeds in a fear – the fear that their idea of nationalism is under threat from the diasporic community, which ultimately compels them to ask, "What do we do with them now?" (Mishra, 2005, p. 16). It is this fear that compelled George Speight to lead a coup against the government of Mahendra Chaudhry, an ethnic Indian and his Fiji Labour Party in 2000. This is to be read against another truth about diasporas that is, diasporas do not return to their homeland.

It is because diasporas do not return to their homeland, barring a few, diasporic communities try to create another '*desh*' in '*pardes*' using their 'imaginary', which Mishra terms as 'diasporic imaginary'. It is to be noted that the word 'imaginary' here is used in both its original Lacanian sense and in its current usage as found in Slavok Zizek's works. Imaginary, as Zizek (1989) defines is the state of "identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we would like to be'" (p.105). The idea of the nation thus is connected with the citizens' imaginary identification with it. True to what B. Anderson (2017) said in his essay "Imagined Communities", nation is indeed an "imagined political community... It is imagined because the members

of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 124). Nation, also, has a meaning only when declared as an absence. The idea of nation, thus, is seen at extreme risk from the Other (the diasporic community) since the Other has varied ways of enjoying the idea of Nation that does not specifically mirror the idea of nation of the autochthons. This is the reason why there is a growing atmosphere of racist phobia and hate crimes, ultimately leading to the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and USA. The term right-wing populism is used to describe groups, politicians and political parties that are generally known for their opposition to immigration, especially from the Islamic world and for Euro-scepticism. Right-wing populism in the Western world is generally associated with ideologies such as anti-environmentalism, neo-nationalism, anti-globalization, nativism, and protectionism. Take for instance, the former US president Donald Trump and the former Chancellor of Austria, Sebastian Kurz who won election because of their right-wing populist themes like anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant policies with focus on protectionism. The current trend of Islamophobia too is attributed to this. The concern for the natives then is 'What if the immigrants take away their jobs?' and get entitlements to the same benefits and privileges that are being enjoyed by a nation's 'real' citizen. In this context, the Other (the diasporas) are seen by the autochthons as someone who wishes to steal the nation's enjoyment. However, in this imputation to the Other, "we repress the traumatic fact that we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us (cited. in Mishra, 2005, p.5). Enjoyment, then is always imaginary and the autochthons ascribe to the Other what they wished to have and enjoy.

The diasporic community, on the other hand, enjoys two kinds of 'Nation-Thing', which the autochthons or the nation-state considers as a loss of their organic connection with the nation-state, something that otherwise has always been taken for granted by them. Diasporas then signify a "Gesellschaft, an alienated society without any 'organic laws', against the nation-state's own Gemeinschaft or 'traditional, organically linked community'" (Mishra, 2005, p. 6). The nation-state sees the world of diaspora as an ideal world without taking into consideration their traumatic past. However, the fact remains that the dominant group's homogeneous entity remains intact only because of the diasporic community's idea of homeland.

The diasporic imaginary is also very complex because while they want to create a '*desh*' in a '*pardes*' and wish not to be regarded as an exclusive group in '*pardes*', they vouch for a racialized nation-state and aim to construct Purism in their own '*desh*'

...some of the strongest support for racialized nation-states has come from diasporas; some of the most exclusionist rhetoric has come from them, too. Even as the hypermobility of postmodern capital makes borders porous and ideas get immediately disseminated via websites and search engines, diasporic subjects have shown a remarkably anti-modern capacity for ethnic absolutism. In part, this is because diasporas can now recreate their own fantasy structures of homeland even as they live elsewhere.” (Mishra, 2005, p.8)

In other words, the diaspora wants a pluralistic society in the West but advocates a purist society in the East. Racial purity thereby is of paramount importance here. At the same time, the nation-state too needs diasporic communities to remind itself of the value of homeland and nation. Hence, diaspora's idea of homeland and nation is very different from the autochthons. To further elucidate this, let us talk about the Indian diaspora, which although is a comparatively recent phenomenon but its historical roots go way back to the '*ghummakar*' tradition, a tradition that took the “gypsies to the Middle East and to Europe, fellow Indians to Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka as missionaries and conquerors, and traders to the littoral trading community around the Arabian Sea” (Mishra, 2005, p. 12). In the modern world though, it all began during colonialism when the imperial forces started transporting people to work in plantations and colonies. There is however, a radical break in terms of narrativity between the diasporic movement then and today's diasporic movement. Mishra (2005) refers to them as the 'old' diaspora and the 'new' diaspora:

The old (that is, early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically, nineteenth-century indenture) and the new (that is, late modern or late capitalist) traverse two quite different kinds of topographies. The subjects of the old – 'before the world was thoroughly consolidated as transnational' – occupy spaces in which they interact, by and large, with other colonized people(s) with whom they have a complex relationship of

power and privilege, as in Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam; the subject of the new are people who have entered metropolitan centres of Empire or other white settler countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US as part of a post-1960s pattern of global migration. The cultural dynamics of the latter are often examined within a multicultural theory. (p. 13)

The binaries of 'old' and 'new' are sharp and contrasting. V.S Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) perfectly encapsulates this. Mohan Biswas' parents, Mrs Tulsi symbolize the old diaspora whereas Anand, Owad represent the new. However, the 'old' and the 'new' Indian diaspora are not to be treated as isolated communities for a close analysis reveals that the 'old' has now amalgamated with the 'new', which brings me to my next point of analysis. Subhash Ghai's movie *Pardes* (1997), is a perfect example of the Indian diasporic lives. America is the land of hope and freedom. "My first day in America/It's living up to be/ I'm finally here with my fantasy/This is where I'll find my destiny", as the lyrics of the song "My first day in USA" goes. The film has Amrish Puri, Shahrukh Khan, Apoorva Agnihotri and Mahima Chadhury in the leads. Amrish Puri (Kishori Lal) is the first of his family to migrate to USA and establish himself as one of the richest and powerful businessman in the States. On his visit to India, he chooses Mahima Chadhury (Ganga) to be his daughter-in-law because he wants to reform his westernised son Apoorva Agnihotri (Rajiv) with an Indian 'touch'-to bring him closer to his Indian 'roots' through the 'route' of marriage with a 'sanskari' Indian girl. Shahrukh Khan (Arjun) who is an amalgamation of the 'old' and 'new' diasporic world is given the task of uniting Ganga and Rajiv. "Pardes ko Ganga jaisi bahu ki jarurat hein (The foreign land needs a daughter-in-law like Ganga)," Kishori Lal says [my translation]. It is to be noted here that in Hindu tradition, Ganga means pure and sacred. In this context then, it can be said that Kishori Lal wants to purify the West and create a racially pure and absolute 'desh' (India) in 'pardes' (USA).

Kishori Lal belongs to the 'old' diasporic world and there are instances in the movie when Ghai gives us an insight into the construction of 'old' diasporic self-contained 'little Indias'. Take for example, the scene where a felicitation ceremony is organised for Ganga on her arrival in the States. We see nothing sort of a 'little India' with the gathering consisting of only Indians. The idea of

nation and nationalism in a 'home' (USA being their home now) away from 'Home' is invoked when Ganga sings "*I Love My India*" much to the happiness of the Indians present there. The lyrics of the song beautifully signify it: "*Yeh Duniya, Ek Dulhan/ Yeh Mathe Ki Bindiya/ Yeh Mera India/I Love my India/ Watan Mera India/Sajan Mera India.../Karam Mera India/Dharam Mera India.*" This thus signifies that the Indian diaspora no matter how far they are from their homeland will always strive to establish a 'little India' wherever they are thus, affirming to the popular adage that 'You can take an Indian out of India, But Not India out of an Indian'. The union of Arjun and Ganga (who fall in love with each other because the westernised Rajiv misbehaves with her) and Kishori Lal's approval to their union suggests that the 'old' diasporic Kishori Lal has finally accepted the 'new' way of love of the post-capitalistic diasporic world. The 'old' and the 'new' diasporas reflect "the very different historical conditions that produced them" (Mishra, 2005, p.14). Nevertheless, be it the old or the new, diasporic consciousness lives and oscillates between the tension of loss and hope – loss of the motherland and an exclusivist identity in a foreign land and hope of creating a utopic motherland in a foreign land and forging an inclusive identity in harmony with the autochthons. In this context though the question arises, what if through dislocation; through the dislocated journey of diaspora, the diasporic communities have instead found their 'real' location; their 'real' home since diasporas do not return to their 'real' homeland? If this be the case, then diasporas indeed are hybrid in nature that (is) deeply soaked in complexities and conflicting identities especially for the second and later generation of diasporas.

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