South Asian Diaspora

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In the modern era of globalization, integration, and transnationalism, we see changes in how individuals operate both within and between states. This phenomenon is seen the most with the idea of a diaspora, or a group of people connected by religion, culture, or language that live outside of a shared ancestral region, be it a State or nation.

The identity of the South Asian diaspora (which includes peoples claiming roots in India, Pakistan Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan), is highly related to the colonial practices of the United Kingdom. Tactics of divide and rule were meant to separate the peoples of South Asia in order to stop nationalism and in turn, revolts against British rule. This was not only highly effective but its effects are still seen on identity within postcolonial South Asia and as a result, the diaspora groups that left it. The diaspora cultural identities are divided by nation-states but they are still highly interconnected when it comes to politics. Identity in postcolonial South Asia and its diaspora is tied to religion, language, and shared kinship of events and tragedies related to those factors.

Background History

South Asia cannot be discussed today without recognizing the role of British colonialism, particularly with a focus on cultural identity. This is especially evident in the practice of divide and rule, a group of policies that were important in separating the peoples of South Asia and fixating on aspects that made them different which is most notable in cultural cleavages such as religion and language. Given the sheer impact of such policies, it is no surprise that in the modern-day we still see the legacy of British rule and policy in the South Asian diaspora.

A turning point in British policy in colonial India was the Indian Rebellion of 1857. As stated in Neil Stewart's "Divide and Rule: British Policy in Indian History" in the rebellion, South Asian nationalism was used as an idea of unifying a perceived nation of people under a

common identity and removing British foreign rule. The rebellion changed British policy; the new policy enacted during the post-Indian Rebellion period, heavily focused on divisions of caste, religion, and ethnicity within the military and civilian populations. This was described by civil servant, John Strachey, as preventing "the growth of any dangerous identity of feeling from a community of race, religion, caste or local feeling." (Stewart, 50).

The 1857 Indian Rebellion resulted in a particular targeting of the Muslim population on the subcontinent. The British perceived the South Asian Muslim populace as the major instigators of the revolt but also did so to play on already present differences, according to Belkacem Belmekki's "Muslim Separatism in Post-Revolt India: A British Game of *Divide et Impera*?" Senior officials, such as Charles Rikes, influenced the British India government to enact policies that negatively targeted Muslims particularly in limiting their job opportunities within native government positions (Belmekki 118). This was primarily done in order to sow religious division and separate the religious communities of Hindus and Muslims in British South Asia (Belmekki 117-118).

The divisions highlighted by Belmekki would prove to be incredibly impactful, as it formed the basis of what would eventually be the modern State of Pakistan and the partition of British India. The partition in particular was incredibly violent. As discussed in Chandni Saxena's "Dimensions and Dynamics of Violence During Partition of India" these events were specifically on religious lines, built up by the divide and rule policy of the British. During the era there were bands of men that would patrol villages ready to attack those of the opposing religion. Specifically in Punjab, a state located in the Northwest of British India (now divided between India and Pakistan), there were events such as the burning of entire villages mass lootings and rape within villages, the destruction of refugee trains and ambushing of refugees (Saxena, 918).

The relationship between State and religion within the diaspora is highly important because of the religious differences and formation of new States effectively split the original homeland. This forever changed notions of loyalty between religious groups and created a tense relationship between the post-colonial peoples of South Asia, diaspora included. Specifically with the diaspora in terms of inter-state relations we see how the diaspora's policy and political goals are directly tied to such tensions and State conflicts primarily rooted in religion. Diaspora interest groups such as the United States India Political Action Committee lobby against American military aid to Pakistan in order to help India. There are also conflicts of loyalty with minority religious groups, many of whom have their own diaspora interest groups such as India's Sikhs. These divisions based on issues of religion, in what was essentially a united region up until the partition, make the South Asian diaspora highly unique relative to others. The shared kinship makes it so the cultures are interconnected via trauma done to each other and it runs so deep that politically you cannot talk about the policy goals of a State like India without mentioning its rivalry and bloody history with Pakistan and vice versa.

South Asians in the United Kingdom

In the years following the end of the second world war, the British hegemony over the globe began to weaken as a period of decolonization began. Yet as a byproduct of the British colonial era, war and civil unrest became prominent push factors for South Asian migrants. The rushed partition of British India into Pakistan and India followed by the Bangladeshi War of Independence and the ongoing dispute over Jammu and Kashmir have left parts of South Asia unstable. Similarly, the incentive to move came from pull factors such as the openness of twentieth-century United Kingdom immigration policies. The British Nationality Act of 1948 extended citizenship to all people who had lived under the British Empire, many South Asians

were already citizens and had the right to travel to and live in the United Kingdom (Sharma, 2020). All of this has led to the existence of a robust and diverse South Asian diaspora community within the United Kingdom which has made a significant impact on the social, and political dimensions of the United Kingdom.

The social landscape of the South Asian diaspora in Great Britain is rooted in the diversity of ethnicities, religions, and languages. "Among South Asians in the U.K for example, there are people from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Muslims, and Christians… speakers of Punjabi, Gujirati, Hindi, Urdu" (Kumar, 330). Despite these differences, the diaspora has shown the ability to work and live together. This is best exemplified by the legacy of Asian Youth Movements (AYM). The Asian Youth Movements were prominent local organizations in the 1970s led by second-generation South Asians who were responding to racism within their communities. This includes incidents of racism from police or white supremacist groups as well as systemic racism present in schools and immigration laws. For example, in 1979 when British citizen and Pakistani mother Anwar Ditta was barred from bringing her children back to the United Kingdom due to complications with British immigration policy, the Manchester and Bradford AYMs organized on her behalf. Through collaboration with other organizations such as the Indian Workers Association (IWA) and countless hours of protests and lobbying politicians, the Asian Youth Movement was able to reunite Ditta with her children (James 2021). This incident serves as an example of what Anandi Ramamurthy, author of *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movement*, refers to as "an expression of self-help and unity amongst South Asians and other minority ethnic groups" (James 2021).

Similarly, South Asians leveraged their power of organizing to make political impacts in the United Kingdom. Once again the Bangladeshi community's efforts in this regard exemplify

this impact as they were able to influence British foreign policy through mass demonstrations. In 1971 during the struggle for Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan, thousands of South Asians, many of whom identified as Bangladeshi, came together for a rally in Trafalgar Square, England. This was known as the "Recognize Bangla-Desh Rally" and the protestors demanded that the British government recognize Bangladesh as an independent nation-state. Within a year of the demonstration, the United Kingdom became one of the first countries to formally recognize the sovereignty of Bangladesh (Ullah 2021). Furthermore, South Asian political activism was also led by the aforementioned IWA, founded in 1937; the association organized to support labor and civil rights legislation and also lobbied for Indian independence (Nasta, Stadtler, and Visram, 2017). These events are examples of how the South Asian diaspora influenced politics in both their host country and country of origin. History clearly shows that South Asians of all backgrounds had a significant impact in shaping the political landscape of the United Kingdom.

South Asians in the United States

While the South Asian presence in the United States did not substantially increase until the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, otherwise known as Hart-Celler, the pre-1965 contributions of the diaspora to the politics of their home countries are not to be ignored (Lee, "Legacies of the 1965 Immigration Act").

Prior to this legislation, South Asian immigration was severely restricted and racism was rampant. The 1923 Supreme Court case *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* declared that South Asians were ineligible to become naturalized citizens due to their being neither white nor of African descent (Hess 65). Justice Sutherland, who composed the majority opinion and was born in England, was said to have been "unable to forget his inherited prejudices against the nation of

India," rejecting Thind's argument that he was a white person because he was of Aryan descent (Hess 67). Bhagat Singh Thind, the plaintiff, was a member of the Gadhar Movement, a group of expatriate Indians who supported overthrowing British rule (Coulson 4). This ruling was supported by British officials who were wary of Indian nationalists becoming prominent in the States. The revolutionary Indian National Congress expressed discontent with the decision and continued to put pressure on U.S. immigration policy towards South Asians in the years just prior to Independence. It was established early, then, in the South Asian American diasporic experience that they were not only unable to clearly fit into racial lines that had been demarcated for many centuries but were also inextricably tied to the colonial pasts of their sending nations.

The Hart-Celler Act removed immigration quotas, instead basing entry on professional skills, family reunification, and refugee status (Lee, "Legacies of the 1965 Immigration Act"). This emphasis on highly-skilled laborers and family connections created 3 distinct groups of post-1965 South Asian immigrants: The Early Movers, The Families (primarily family unification), and the IT Generation (Williams 3). From 1965 to 1980, there were, on average, 25 thousand Indian immigrants and 5000 Pakistani immigrants per year, a stark increase from the 12,000 that were in the country prior to the Act's passage (Minocha 350). The Early Movers consisted of technically skilled physicians, engineers, and academics who were desirable to the economic interests of the United States especially in the midst of the Cold War (Minocha 364). Brain drain, or the exodus of qualified professionals from a sending country, became of increasing concern to the developing economies of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (de Haas 233). Between 1958 and 1966, India lost more than 188 million dollars in potential income to emigration (Minocha 365). With the passage of the 1990 Immigration Act, which introduced the H-1B skilled worker visa system, the United States saw an influx of information technology (IT)

workers (“Immigration History”). More than half of all awarded H-1B visas have been given to Indian workers. The self-selectivity of these immigrant waves decreased with time: as migration costs lowered, lower-income groups were able to settle in existing ethnic enclaves, often in major metropolitan areas such as the San Francisco Bay Area and the Tri-State Region. As of 2019, there are 5.4 million South Asians living in the United States, with Indians making up 80 percent of the total population, followed by Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (“Demographic Snapshot of South Asia”).

The political activities of the South Asian American diaspora are exemplified by the 1998 Yellow Cab Strikes in New York City (Khan 1). On May 13th, 1998, female activist Bhairavi Desai successfully led 24,000 taxi drivers, who made up 98% of the ride-hailing workforce in a near-complete shutdown (Khan 1). The workers, primarily of South Asian descent, were demanding better wages, less discrimination, and a restructuring of the car leasing system that was in place. They had arrived in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, drawn by advertisements in Pakistani and Indian newspapers promising the opportunity for “independent work” and enough money to send remittances. Most of these early workers intended to return to their homeland, which is why even though there was some discontent with the industry, they were reluctant to organize in favor of better working conditions. The working-class positions that the taxi-cab drivers occupied stood in stark contrast to those held by skilled professionals, illustrating an income divide that alienated portions of the diaspora. Desai, who had no relation to the taxi industry, but had a keen interest in labor organizing, formed what was proclaimed one of the most multiracial, multiethnic coalitions of workers in the country: the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA). She appealed to the feelings of illegitimacy many South Asian drivers had amongst members of their own community, creating a sense of kinship by appealing

to their family activities and listening to their concerns. (Khan 9). Interestingly enough, Desai also defied gender expectations by gaining the respect of a majority male industry. The NYTWA's labor activism is a prime example of the South Asian American diaspora realizing their own political power and especially de-emphasized existing ethnic divisions.

As the South Asian diaspora began to form a cohesive identity in the United States, inevitably, instances of hate arose as well. In Jersey City, New Jersey, the period between 1987 and 1988 was a fearsome one. An individual who claimed to be a member of the "Dotbusters" referred to the Indian men and women who wore *bindi* on their foreheads as "dotheads," writing in a local newspaper: "If I'm walking down the street and I see a Hindu and the setting is right, I will just hit him or her." (Gutierrez 33). This letter is said to have precipitated the attacks on over 15 men and women of Indian descent, including the murder of one, 27 year old Navroze Mody, who was brutally assaulted by a group of ten youths (Gutierrez 30). Members of the local Indian community (which numbered around ten thousand) believed they were being targeted by the Dotbusters due to their high concentrated enclave presence in parts of the city, making them more visible, and thus vulnerable, to attacks (Gutierrez 31). The potential for violence associated with the separation of groups based on ethnicity and shared identity is not unique to the South Asian diaspora. The legacy of these hostile attacks, and the protests stemming from them, has remained in the fabric of the Jersey City Indian community ever since.

Modern Aspects of the Diaspora

In order to understand the full extent of the South Asia diaspora, it is important to recognize the modern connections between South Asian migrants and their homeland. Components of the modern South Asian diasporic experience include political struggles, feelings

of isolation, and remittances, one of the predominant ways that migrants have contributed to the development of their home countries.

Remittances are money or goods that migrants send back to families and friends in origin countries and are often the most direct and well-known link between migration and development (Levitt and Dehesa 2003). Based on what we see with remittances, there is a strong connection between diaspora and the country of origin with South Asia. According to the Migration Data Portal 2021 report, India has been the largest recipient of remittances since 2008 and in 2018 alone, India received 79 billion USD in remittances. Knomad data shows that remittances in total make up around 3.17% of India's GDP, 9% of Pakistan's GDP, 6.7% of Bangladesh's GDP, and 24% of Nepal's. The trend shows the large role that remittances play in the economies of this region, hence why many South Asian countries have been coined with the term "remittance economies". In 2019, over 200 million migrant workers sent $554 billion to their families in developing countries which is a figure representing more than three times the annual flow of official development assistance and more stable than foreign direct investment (IFAD 2021). Knowmad data cites that in 2020, the top three source countries for remittance outflows in current USD were the United States (68 billion), the United Arab Emirates (43 billion), and Saudi Arabia (35 billion). These are some of the superpowers in our world today with strong economies and a large population of South Asian diasporic migrants settled in these countries. It is interesting to note that the data collected by Knowmad, IMF, and the World Bank only focus on remittances transferred through official channels, such as banks, but many transactions occur via money transfer and are not accounted for. World Bank Data has suggested that official figures are likely to underreport the remittance flows by as much as 50 percent and that the total

remittance including informal remittances is substantially greater than the officially recorded amount.

One might wonder, why are migrants sending remittances regularly and such large amounts of it too? Many migrants still feel a kinship to their homeland and the desire to help lift their families out of poverty, improve their access to health, education, and housing. We have even seen that despite COVID-19, remittance flows remained resilient in 2020, registering a smaller decline than previously projected. Remittance flows to low-and middle-income countries were recorded to have reached $540 billion in 2020 (Knomad 2021). Some of the key drivers for this continuous steady flow despite a pandemic was the migrants' desire to help their families by sending money home and drawing on savings despite their personal needs. It is clear that the engine for the development of many South Asian countries is remittance flow from private funds abroad.

Among the modern aspects of the South Asian diaspora is the question of dual-citizenship. Dual citizenship refers to the status of an individual who holds the nationality of two different countries at the same time (Levitt and Dehesa 2003). Individuals with dual citizenship enjoy the same rights and have the same responsibilities as the citizens of each of the two nations. South Asia lags behind in terms of the number of countries that recognize dual citizenship and as of 2009, the only countries in South Asia that recognize dual citizenship were Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (Tadai 2010). Through data analysis and case studies, it was discovered that dual citizenship-recognizing countries have similarly high levels of remittances and "brain drain" and that state demand for financial capital and human capital appears to be strongly associated with dual citizenship recognition. Many members of the South Asian diasporic community strive to obtain dual citizenship so that they can have the same

political rights as others in their host country. This concept of dual citizenship also represents the blending and intermixing of identities.

Furthermore, members of the diasporic community experience severe feelings of nostalgia which contributes to group consciousness and community. We see group consciousness in the form of groups, either political or cultural, that attempt to link the diaspora to the homeland or provide a voice for the diaspora collectively within the host nation as they are aware of their place in society. There are many such examples of this but some of the most notable include the IWA in the United Kingdom, one of the oldest interest groups for South Asians that spun off from the greater independence movement (Sood 2019). The feeling of isolation is common among migrants, but we have seen the rise of many communities such as “Little India” or “Little Bangladesh” across areas in destination countries that specifically attract migrants of the South Asian diaspora because it provides them a sense of home away from home and community. In North America, for example, we see large Indian communities in California and Texas but also in New York City we see a big Bengali community, mostly concentrated in Queens, and a large Sri Lankan community concentrated in Staten Island.

Conclusion

We can see the ideas of cultural identities shift following British colonialism and the movement of people within the subcontinent following the partition. Identity in South Asia is highly unique as though the divide and rule tactics of British colonialism split a once united people culturally, the newly created State dynamics keep them intertwined due to kinship over violent events of the past. Despite this, the South Asian diaspora has still proven to unite abroad through social and cultural movements, proving that the struggles of being an out-group in a host country doesn’t care much for the nuanced history of identity in the homeland, discriminating all

the same. Ultimately, all of this goes on to show the complexities of the South Asian diaspora and how the group is not a monolithic entity.

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