

Book Review

Indian Diaspora: The 21st Century, Migration, Change and Adaptation

By Anand Singh

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Kamla-Raj Enterprises, Delhi (2007)

Indians, like many other ethnic groups, move freely about the globe these days, even while some people remain in their culturally and socially familiar locales. For virtually everyone these days, meetings of and interaction with strangers takes place almost daily. The movers and the settled encounter each other and change and adapt to this evolving new world while retaining or at least trying to retain ties to traditional homelands, familiar cultural lifestyles, and the remembered past. Then too, the descendants of the migrants grow up and find themselves accepted, rejected, or somewhere in between, often caught up in situations not of their own choice or making. These emerging situations enable almost everyone these days to learn, reject, accept, modify and/or adapt with and to alternative ways of life, behaviours and practices not previously available. Indians today are highly mobile, but hold fast to the old familiar ways of life and belief from their homeland while adapting to their new situations.

Gathering research papers about peripatetic Indians into a readable book is neither an easy nor a simple task. In this case, the design, focusing, and assembly of a set of related articles into an easy reading, theoretically and practically sound, and ultimately very valuable book, has been accomplished with skill and talent. Two protégés of Prof K. N. Sharma, a retired Professor of Anthropology to whom this book is dedicated, held a discussion in Oslo, Norway in 2005 and decided, because of their deep interest, to call for papers from word of mouth and the Internet on the topic of Indians overseas. Dr. Vinod Chandra of the University of Lucknow, India and Anand Singh of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban are to be congratulated for their ideas and initial conceptualisation. Dr. Anand Singh took on the task and used his expertise and hard work to develop this volume on the lives and experiences of Indians as they adjust and adapt to various overseas locales.

The nine chapters are appropriately sequenc-

ed, drawing the reader into a step by step examination of the travels, lives, experiences, and resulting identities of Indians who have moved to diverse settings around the world. Each chapter appears to have a different focus on one aspect of the broad topic, so that the whole is made up of different parts, but each builds on and is intimately linked to others. In the end, the entire set fit smoothly together. The reader gains valuable insights into the central theme from each chapter and at the same time, comes to appreciate the diversity and development of each of the sub-topics or chapters. Further the diverse methodologies chosen fit the focus of each author in their unique settings as they researched their particular aspect. The reader gradually becomes aware of and appreciative of the wide range of anthropological approaches used.

In Chapter 1, Singh introduces and identifies the globalisation and migration of Indians as a past and present phenomenon, resulting in maintenance of Indian identities coupled with adjustment and adaptation in unique settings all over the world. The diaspora is very like an adventure story as Indian people depart from their relatively secure homes and go off into foreign settings where others live in different cultures. In history, the movement was limited by fear of loss of status and the oppression of colonial powers, but today, the highly educated, English speaking, Indian professionals are in great demand as knowledge workers around the world. Singh introduces the major themes, then discusses each chapter and provides a summary account of what takes place, i.e., change and adaption from an Indian perspective. He captures too the historical setting, the range of methods used, and the rationales of the various authors for their works. Chapter 2, by Somadatta Mandal, reports on Bengali writers living overseas. Their longing for and continuing engagement in Bengali themes provides a convincing argument that the connections between homeland culture and exiles remains strong and vibrant. Methodologically, Mandal chose Bengali literature, and the rich subject matter within the many works by and about Kolkatta and surrounding areas of India. Chapter 3, by Gerelene Pattundeen, studied South African Indian women and their search for overseas work and a meaningful life. Her

networking approach is creative and methodologically sound given the directions of her interest. Chapter 4 by Goolam Vahed, discusses Indians in the location of Brisbane, where they are drawn from a variety of other locales, but gather together to maintain their deepest ties, which are of course, to India. Of course, these Indians are also busy adapting to and existing within the limits of Australian multiculturalism. Vahed describes through statistics, membership in clubs and organizations, religion, media, sport and music, and other aspects of the traditional concept we have of "community". Loshini Naidoo, in Chapter 5, is also situated in Australia, but is focused on her personal and family life experiences of adjusting and adapting to Australian society as an acculturation process. This differing focus and locale (Sydney) offers a balance to the Brisbane situation, and the methodology of personal participation and literature review adds insights from a still different perspective. Rupam Saran (Chapter 6) takes us to middle and secondary school settings in New York city. As members of a model minority, Indian students achieve a great deal, albeit within a sometimes hostile social environment, resulting in considerable stress and tension, particularly for those who fail to achieve.

Bandana Purkayastha (Chapter 7) looked at young Indians attending United States universities and the annual bhangra competition in which music, dance, performances and costumes bring them together in an event to celebrate their ethnicity. Identity as Indians, social links with each other, and ethnic awareness is maintained and built by participation in such celebrations. Vinod Chandra (Chapter 8) studied ten Indian families in Coventry, Britain, to observe the involvement of children in family run shops. Close ties, family loyalty and sacrifice of individualism to assure the well-being of the family led children to regard the businesses as "our shop". They helped in many ways, as

assistants, vigilantes, and managers, so that the family built businesses were successful both as business, as "family" and as ties to Indian thought and culture.

Kalpana Hiralal (Chapter 9) wrote about Indian family businesses in South Africa, especially about the historical and political influences that set the parameters and realities faced. Negative racial dynamics, white hegemony, and African vagrancy have played a role in limiting growth and development but Indian run businesses have played an important role and will continue with a strong presence in the future.

Overall, I found this book to be a competent and sound exploration of the Indian diaspora both content and substance wise, and as a methodologically fascinating approach to the study of the many Indians who have taken on new locations and new lives. One possible additional area not covered in this book but potentially useful would have been another chapter on communications, particularly with the Internet and the various groups using computers to stay in touch. But, as a reader, I felt pleased and privileged to access the many insights and the wide range of information about the Indian diaspora offered by Dr. Singh's book. Finally, in my own personal life I note the heightened awareness I now have of the Indian diaspora, for example, the recent Festival of Cultures held in my home town that featured Indian food, dance, and performance, the local newspaper account of Bengali children in and around my home town, and the Indian families who run local shops and involve their children in learning the business. Truly the connections between the topic, the book, and daily life around the world are many, and they are solid, and this book is a gem, a jewel that promotes understanding and enlightenment.

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