**REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA**

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**Lecture26**

**Lecture 26: The South Asian Diaspora**

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugees, migration, and diaspora. So today we are going to discuss the South Asian diaspora. According to Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, as they have mentioned in their work, The Age of Migration, I quote the critics here. There can be few people in either industrialized or less developed countries today who do not have personal experience of migration and its effects.


This universal experience has become the hallmark of the age of migration. So the South Asian diaspora, which is estimated at around 24 million individuals, approximately 2% of the South Asian population altogether, primarily comprises 20 million Indians. And this is a study by Padma Rangaswamy, which is available in her work, South Asian Diaspora. The South Asian diaspora is a result of the movement of people as well as goods, commodities, ideas, beliefs, and cultural habits from the Indian subcontinent, which is one of the largest diasporas in the world now.

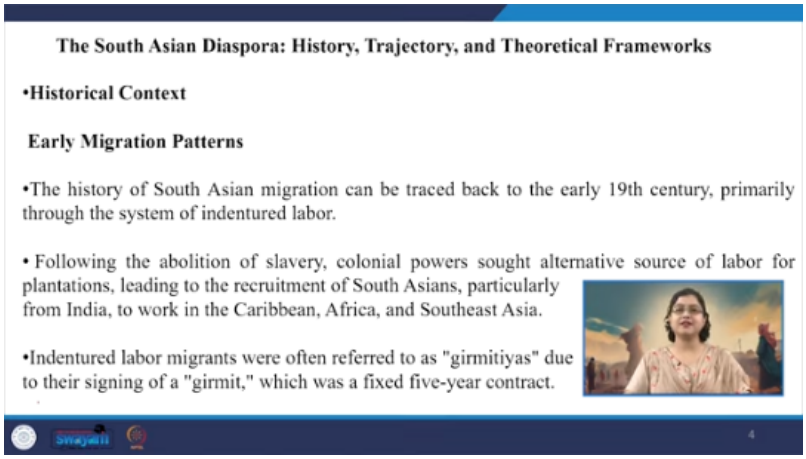
This diaspora's history is often divided into two distinct phases. One is the 19th-century colonial phase, and then we have the 20th-century post-independence phase. While there

are noticeable contrasts between these two phases—the colonial phase and the post-colonial or post-independence phase, there also exists a remarkable continuity between the two phases, particularly in terms of the descendants we have from the 19th-century migrants, right? The descendants from the two phases, you know, have a kind of continuity in terms of experiences, right?

So, as far as the 19th-century migrants are concerned, the pre- and post-independence phases have a remarkable continuity as well. The descendants' experiences can be interconnected. They can identify with each other's past in a way—the legacy that they carry forward. For instance, the Indian-Caribbeans who settled in Canada or the Indians who migrated from Uganda to Britain and subsequently moved to the US highlight the interconnectedness of their histories. Now, looking at the historical context of the South Asian diaspora and discussing early migration patterns, we see that the history of South Asian migration

can be traced back to the early 19th century, primarily through the system of indentured labor. Following the abolition of slavery as an official process, colonial powers sought an alternative source of labor for plantations, which led to the recruitment of South Asians, particularly from India, to work in foreign lands, including the Caribbean, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The indentured labor migrants were often referred to as the Girmityas, right? So, Girmitya and Girmit are terms derived from a more formal word—agreement, or contract terms.

The labor contract, right? So, girmitya is a more colloquial word used by the labor migrant population itself. So, indentured laborers, as I was saying, are also referred to as girmityas due to their signing of a girmit or agreement, which was a fixed five-year contract. Now, the girmit system distinguished these migrants from other Indian laborers who typically operated under informal verbal agreements. The distinction became increasingly important as the indenture system became more formalized, and it represented one of the first modern labor contracts introduced to the Indian subcontinent alongside other contracts.




that were assigned by the sepoys or the foot soldiers in the Indian army, who often came from similar backgrounds as the labor population. This migration process created significant Indian communities in different foreign lands, such as Trinidad, Guyana, and Mauritius, and they established a diasporic identity, which was characterized by cultural retention and adaptation. So, here I am going to read an excerpt from Salman Rushdie's Imaginary Homelands. I have iterated these same lines in another lecture from this course, but I find these lines vital, and so I am repeating them for the sake of explaining and trying to understand the diasporic experience. So, Rushdie says as follows, I quote,

'Exiles or immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.' 'But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost.' 'That we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind,' unquote. So, in addition to indentured labor, earlier forms of migration included the movement of merchant families who traveled for trade and commerce, particularly to East Africa, as well as the Indian Ocean. So, these merchants laid the

groundwork for the establishment of vibrant communities that would later flourish as diasporas while maintaining connections to their homeland through trade networks. In the post-independence migration scenario—that is, the mid-century onward—we see another wave of migration from South Asia, particularly after the independence of India and the birth of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1947. This period was marked by economic opportunities and political instabilities, which drove many South Asians to seek better prospects in Western countries. And especially, there was a bulk of the population from

South Asia moving to the United Kingdom, to Canada, as well as to the United States. The influx of South Asians into these regions led to the formation of distinct diasporic communities, which played crucial roles in their host societies while retaining cultural ties to their countries of origin.

The colonial phase saw mass migrations driven by the demand for labor in plantations and colonial enterprises. Many South Asians were recruited as indentured laborers, a form of migration that involved significant hard work and hardship, but at the same time also established enduring cultural connections. In contrast, the post-independence phase was marked by a shift in motivations, with many South Asians migrating for educational and economic opportunities, often driven by aspirations for a better life. This historical trajectory reveals that the South Asian diaspora is not merely a collection of isolated experiences.

This entire diasporic identity, or the discourse centering on this diaspora, is shaped by shared histories of colonialism, global capitalism, as well as cultural exchanges. The interconnected stories of these diverse communities emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding of diaspora, one that acknowledges the ongoing relationships between migrants and their homelands, as well as the complex realities of identity and belonging. So, mainly comprising groups of exiles, refugees, migrants, as well as other populations, diasporas actively participate in the political dynamics of both their home and host countries. The study of the South Asian diaspora has greatly benefited from the contributions of various scholars, including Khalid Koser, Reena Arya, Nassim Taleb, and Kiran A. L. Kaur, all of whom have explored its complexities, its various facets, and have studied the discourse centering on diaspora through diverse lenses. Each scholar brings unique insights into the economic, cultural, and gender dimensions of migration, thereby illuminating the multifaceted nature of diasporic experiences.

Khalid Koser has addressed the phenomenon of migration in his multiple works. His work titled International Migration: A Very Short Introduction categorizes various forms of migration, including voluntary migration, forced migration such as refugees and asylum seekers, as well as economic migration. Koser illustrates how these categories influence migrants' experiences as well as the challenges they face. The author emphasizes that migration is not just a local or national issue but a global phenomenon that affects countries and communities worldwide. So, he examines the interconnectedness of migration trends and policies across different regions through his various works.

In the chapter titled 'Why Migration Matters,' written in 2009, Khalid Koser notes that, as quoted by the critic, 'After slavery's collapse, indentured laborers from China, India, and Japan moved overseas in significant numbers—1.5 million from India alone—to work in the plantations of the European powers.' So, Koser highlights a significant trend in migration: a rapid increase in women's representation among migrants. This began in the second half of the 20th century, especially in the 1960s. And it further accelerated in the 1990s, at the turn of the century. By 2005, nearly half of the world's authorized migrants were women.

Notably, in regions such as Europe, North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, the former Soviet Union, and Oceania, there were more female than male authorized migrants. Thus, female authorized migrants were more visible in these parts of the globe compared to male authorized migrants. Koser points out that while women have traditionally migrated to join their partners, an increasing number are now migrating independently. In many cases, these women are the primary earners for the families they leave behind. Several factors have contributed to this shift.

To quote the author: 'In trends especially evident in Asia, there has been growth in the migration of women for domestic work.' 'This is sometimes called the maid trade.' 'Organized migration for marriage, with women sometimes referred to as mail-order brides, and also the trafficking of women—above all, into the sex industry.' The maid trade involves migration driven by the demand for household labor in wealthier countries, particularly in the West.

And it is coupled with the economic pressures faced by the women in their home countries. So, there are both the factors, the push and the pull factor. There is a push factor back from their home country where the women are facing economic pressures and there is this

imperative push to earn in order to run their household. And on the other hand, the Western countries offer varied opportunities.

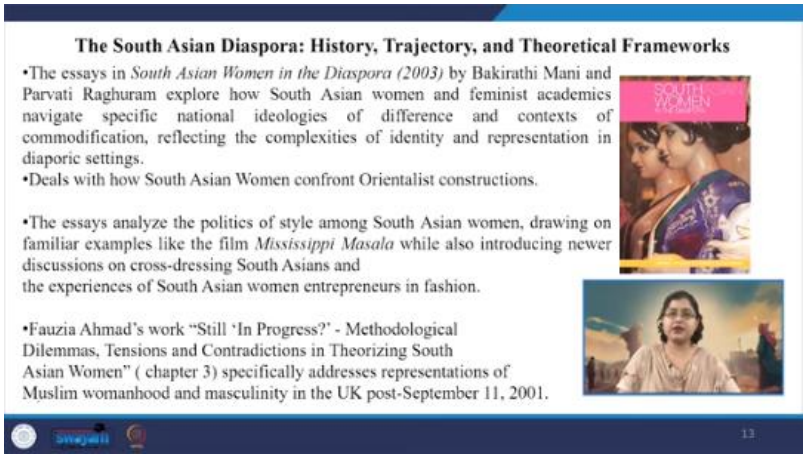
So there is this trend, this tendency of women taking up some household labor demanded by the wealthier countries. Particularly, we can think of the European countries and America, where the women are moving in bulk from the Asian countries. So in the mail-order bride phenomenon, women from developing countries enter into arranged marriages with men from more affluent nations. It is especially the NRI population from South Asia who are working in the Western countries and who have a very good professional profile, who have a very good career to boast and they choose women from their homeland, take them as bride to these affluent nations, right?

So these arranged, you know, marital relationships are also coded as mail-order bride phenomenon. Many women from nations such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh migrate to cities in the Middle East, Europe as well as North America, seeking better job prospects and the chance to send remittances back home. So Parvati Raghuram in her work, Women, Migration and Citizenship researches a global perspective, delves into a similar kind of analysis and she builds on it in order to include the intricacies of women's experiences within the South Asian diaspora, particularly emphasizing how these individuals, how the female populace in the diaspora, the female South Asian diaspora navigate their identities across various cultural landscapes. So, the essay is written in the edited volume South Asian Women in the Diaspora by Bhakirathi Mani and Parvati Raghuram.

This work was published in 2003. It explores how South Asian women and feminist academics navigate specific national ideologies of difference and contexts of commodification, reflecting the complexities of identity and representation in diasporic settings. The work examines how South Asian women confront Orientalist constructions. The essays in this book analyze the politics of style among South Asian women, drawing on familiar examples such as the film Mississippi Masala,

and also introduce newer discussions on cross-dressing South Asians, as well as the experiences of South Asian women entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. So, Fauzia Ahmad's work, Still in Progress: Methodological Dilemmas, Tensions and Contradictions in Theorizing South Asian Women, specifically addresses the representations of Muslim womanhood and masculinity in the UK during the period following September 11, 2001. So, in the post-September 11, 2001 period, what the Muslim population experienced in the

UK has been recorded through this work by Fauzia Ahmed. Ahmed examines the impact of state policies that particularly targeted Muslim subjects, demonstrating how these policies are intertwined with broader national agendas related to race, class, and religion.




So, the concluding section called Engagements features four essays that highlight women's interventions in local spaces and offers a rich exploration of women's roles in various communities. Samina Zahir's essay on a community arts project in Birmingham illustrates how cultural initiatives can empower women and foster a sense of belonging. Further, Rani Kawale's chapter on queer women's public spaces in London examines the complexities of identity and community, revealing how these spaces can serve as sites of resistance and affirmation. Right.

So, we have earlier discussed through authors such as Shani Mootoo, Shyam Selvadurai, and even Rohinton Mistry how a person with a different body and a different sexuality—a person who is queer, transgender, lesbian, or gay—finds it more difficult to interact in a host society outside of one's home country. So, the person is multiply vulnerable and multiply marginalized, first for their skin color, for being a visible minority, and then again owing to their ethnicity, as well as their language and sexual orientation, right? So, there are resistance and affirmations happening at multiple levels, you know. So, the person, The question of identity, community, and even social spaces is actually fraught with all these problems, these questions.

Hasmita Ramji's discussion of Gujarati Kutchi Hindu women in London further emphasizes the diverse ways in which cultural practices and identities are negotiated in a diasporic context. We have essays—some seminal essays by critics and scholars such as Nandi Bhatia, Nayanika Mookerjee, and Hasmita Ramji—which represent an innovative approach to the concept of diaspora. By centering South Asian studies, these contributions

suggest that South Asia itself can be viewed as a node within the broader framework of diaspora. So, South Asia is one of the points of contact within the broader frame of diaspora, further challenging the traditional notion of a fixed point of origin. Ramji's contributions delve into the lived realities of Gujarati Kutchi Hindu women in diasporic settings, exploring how cultural practices and community engagements shape their identities.

She addresses the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and transnationalism, highlighting the ways these women negotiate their cultural heritage while adapting to new environments. Together, these essays underscore the importance of understanding diaspora and transnationalism as fluid and interconnected processes. So, diaspora and transnationalism are two interrelated concepts that explore the experiences and identities of migrants and their communities in a globalized world. They both examine how people maintain connections across borders and the cultural, social, and political implications of these connections. So, there is a significant overlap between the two concepts.

They are interrelated, but not quite the same. While diaspora and transnationalism are sometimes used interchangeably, as I was saying, the two terms reflect different intellectual genealogies and frameworks because they focus on different aspects of the migrant experience and identity. Diaspora approaches typically concentrate on the relationship between homelands, which are often referred to as referent origins. So, while diaspora emphasizes cultural ties and collective memory related to a specific homeland, on the other hand, transnationalism focuses on the active, dynamic connections and identities that migrants develop across borders, right? So, talking about diaspora and diaspora discourse, homeland plays a central, key role in explaining the question of collective memory and cultural ties.

So, homeland serves as the referent origin, which is sometimes not as available or not as important when discussing transnationalism. So, in their work 'Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods,' Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist note that while diasporas can be considered transnational communities due to their cross-border connections, communications, and cultural exchanges, not all transnational communities can be classified as diasporas. So, while diaspora primarily refers to religious, ethnic, and national communities, transnational approaches extend to a wider area of social formations, which include networks of businesspersons, social movements, and various forms of civic engagement that transcend national borders. Diaspora is often associated with a specific country of origin and its corresponding host countries, focusing on the organizational and cultural ties that bind these groups together. On the other hand, transnational communities can include cross-border village communities or borderland communities that may not fit the diasporic framework.

So, we will end our lecture here today. Let us discuss further transnational communities and how they differ from diaspora communities. Thank you.