Introduction

Men and women have been on the move since the earliest beginnings of human societies. Migration in small and large groups, and the establishment of new homes, have been among the strongest creative forces in the peopling and settling of the world's land mass and the making of human history. However, in the last two and a half centuries, far larger movements of population have occurred than ever before, changing the face of many local societies and of the planet itself. Among the most dramatic of these relatively modern flows of people have been those who travelled as slaves from Africa across the Atlantic, the Chinese who journeyed overseas as labourers and traders, the Europeans who migrated to northern America and to temperate climates in southern Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and the peoples of the Indian subcontinent who have spread out around the world in significant numbers. Such major flows of people have been propelled by demographic pressures, the forces of economics, and politics. Some have left home of their own free choice, whereas others have been compelled, whether formally or not. Some have been lured by hope, others driven by fear. For all of them, the technology of swifter travel has been a critical factor, as metalled roads and the internal combustion engine superseded human and equine feet as the fastest mode of travel on land, and as the sailing ship gave way to the steam ship in the nineteenth century, and eventually to mass air travel in the twentieth, to enable movement between continents and across oceans.

The focus of this book is the overseas migratory experience of the peoples of the Indian subcontinent, or South Asians. The political map of their region of origin changed radically in the mid-twentieth century. In 1947 the British withdrew from their imperial rule of two hundred years, leaving a partitioned subcontinent and two independent nation states, India and Pakistan, followed swiftly by an independent Ceylon, later known as Sri Lanka. Pakistan was composed of widely separated western and eastern wings, and the eastern wing split away to form Bangladesh in 1971. To accommodate these changes the whole area is most conveniently

referred to as South Asia, and its peoples as South Asians, except where the people of the particular countries of the subcontinent are referred to. Out-migration from South Asia was not the largest of modern migratory movements. By the last decades of the twentieth century, somewhere over 9 million people of South Asian descent lived outside the subcontinent, outnumbered by those of African, Chinese, European and Jewish descent who lived outside their homelands.[1] However, they had become widely spread – in Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, North America and the Pacific. Not surprisingly, given geographical proximity, other parts of Asia had the largest number of migrant South Asians. Malaysia had the largest South Asian population (nearly 1.2 million) but this was well under 10 per cent of the total population. However in some other places, though they were fewer in number, they now formed a very significant part of the local population. In Trinidad, for example, though their numbers were relatively small (just over 400,000) they made up about 40 per cent of the population, similar to the percentage of the population of African descent. In Fiji they had come to outnumber the indigenous Fijian inhabitants with a population of over 800,000. In the United Kingdom, the South Asian population was larger than that in any other European country, and indeed of any other country in the world except Malaysia. In 1991, according to the last UK census of the century, and the first which counted ethnic minorities, the minority population was just over 3 million (5.5 per cent of the total), and of these almost half were of South Asian origin. Of the South Asians the majority were Indians, followed by a much smaller group of Pakistanis, and by a yet smaller group of people whose origins lay in Bangladesh. A decade later the actual numbers of all three groups had risen considerably, though Indians still outnumbered Pakistanis and Bangladeshis grouped together and were the largest single ethnic minority in the UK. The three South Asian groups together accounted for 3.6 per cent of the total population and 45 per cent of the ethnic minority population.[2]

[1] C. Clarke, C. Peach and S. Vertovec (eds.), *South Asians Overseas. Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1.

[2] The actual numbers in the UK in 1991 were Indians (840,255), Pakistanis (476,555), and Bangladeshis (162,835). By 2001 the actual numbers were Indians (1,053,411), Pakistanis (747,285), and Bangladeshis (283,063). The 2001 figures are available on the internet at National Statistics Online – Population Size. The Censuses for 1991 and 2001 are published by the Office for National Statistics, UK.

For worldwide numbers in 1987 see Clarke, Peach and Vertovec (eds.), *South Asians Overseas*, p. 2. A further source to be found on the internet is the CIA World Fact Book. Although ethnic minorities are not always given in the same way for each country, it is useful because it is regularly updated. Patterns of overseas settlement and the reasons for these will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.

The absolute size as well as the distribution and concentration of people of South Asian descent outside the subcontinent makes their migratory experience of considerable interest and importance. South Asians have made a significant and distinctive contribution to the economies, societies and cultures of the places to which they have gone, whether as semi-free labourers on contracts of indenture on plantations in Natal, the Caribbean and Malaya; as traders and entrepreneurs in East Africa; as semi-skilled industrial labour in Europe; or as high-flying professionals in electronics and computing in the USA. Moreover, they have increasingly influenced the politics, economies and cultures of the places which they and their ancestors left, as they have gained in wealth and political articulation, and used modern technologies of travel and communication to fashion many kinds of close links with their former homelands. (This is particularly the theme of Chapter 5.) More broadly, this modern experience of migration is part of a far longer history of the interconnections between South Asia and a wider world. Movement and migration was no new experience in India by the start of the nineteenth century, as Chapter 1 shows. But it was rapidly and dramatically transformed by new modes of travel, within the political context of imperialism and decolonisation, and the economic environment created by the industrialisation of the western world. As the South Asian migrants' individual experiences showed, they were increasingly, if often unwittingly, players in a global world, moved by global forces which reached down to the villages from which they came. It was not until late in the twentieth century that commentators began to use the phrase 'globalisation' to describe and help to explain some of the transformations of the modern world and its growing interconnectedness. Increasingly flows of goods, investment, finance, services, people and ideas link the world together, compressing older ideas of space and separation, fashioning new types of economies, polities and societies. Among these flows, different types of movements of people are of great importance. South Asians overseas reflect many of these different types, from unskilled labourers to highly qualified professionals, from small-time peddlers and shopkeepers to multi-millionaire owners of modern industries. Their experience illuminates a key part of recent world history and deserves close attention.

But should we call this outflow of peoples from South Asia a diaspora? The word came into English usage in the late nineteenth century, as a borrowing from a Greek word (διασπορα), which meant to 'disperse' or literally to 'sow over', and was used to describe the scattered Greek communities of the ancient Mediterranean world. This was originally a neutral word merely indicating geographical dispersion, but in English it soon took on sinister and catastrophic overtones of forced expulsion of an

ethnic and religious minority from its homeland, of persecution and exile. The Jews were the classic example. But in the later twentieth century, as scholars became interested both in older and newer forms of forced and free migration, the word acquired a far looser meaning, describing almost any group of migrants permanently settled outside their place of origin. Not surprisingly, there has been much scholarly literature on how the word diaspora should or should not be used.[3] For the purposes of this book I shall use it to denote groups of people with a common ethnicity; who have left their original homeland for prolonged periods of time and often permanently; who retain a particular sense of cultural identity and often close kinship links with other scattered members of their group, thus acknowledging their shared physical and cultural origins; and who maintain links with that homeland and a sense of its role in their present identity. This avoids any essential notion of compulsion and victimisation, (though compulsion may have been present in some cases), recognises the many reasons and contexts for migration, and emphasises the transnational nature of diasporic groups. It is also analytically useful as it points to different aspects of such migrants' lives and helps us conceptualise their experience, in particular social forms, connections and relationships, senses of place and self, and the ongoing processes of evolving culture in new contexts.[4] However, if this exploration of diaspora gives us a tool for understanding the experience of the millions of South Asians abroad, is it appropriate to speak of one South Asian diaspora? As subsequent chapters will show, South Asian migration involved great diversity – different kinds of people in socio-economic terms moving at different times for different reasons; people of different religions, reflecting religious diversity on the subcontinent, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis and Christians; people from different regions and linguistic backgrounds; and latterly people from different nation states. So great is the diversity of origins, characteristics and experiences, that it is most realistic to see South Asians abroad as members of different diasporic strands, or even as different diaspora groups originating on the one subcontinent, who have created many transnational communities which share a sense of origin in that region of the world.

[3] See the series on global diasporas edited by Robin Cohen, in particular his introductory volume, *Global Diasporas. An Introduction* (London and Washington, University College London Press and University of Washington Press, 1997); and the discussion in N. Van Hear, *New Diasporas. The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* (London and Seattle, University College London Press and University of Washington Press, 1998).

[4] See a particularly helpful discussion on the Hindu diaspora by S. Vertovec in his *The Hindu Diaspora. Comparative Patterns* (London, Routledge, 2000), particularly chapter 7, 'Three meanings of 'diaspora'', pp. 141–159.

There are many sources available for students of the South Asian diaspora and its peoples, particularly in the different countries to which they have moved. Among these are government documents which chart the movement of peoples and policies toward such movements, as in the case of Indian indentured labourers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or the immigration policies of the countries of the developed world in the twentieth century. For most receiving countries there are decennial census reports which to an extent document the presence of ethnic minorities, though these vary in their usefulness, depending on whether and what sort of questions about ethnicity, religion and place of birth are asked. Where ethnic minorities are perceived to be in some senses problematic there may well also be official enquiries and reports on minority experience in housing, employment, health and education, and press coverage of particular issues and events. The voices of people in the diaspora are most often heard in situations where they are educated, articulate and participate in public debate. Where migrants were illiterate, particularly among the earliest unskilled labour migrants, evidence of their own understanding of their lives may well come less directly, through the processes of oral history mediated by professional historians anxious to capture the past, or through newspaper reports or records of court cases dealing with instances of trauma and law breaking.[5]

Literature is yet another way of listening to the experiences of migrant South Asians, and there is a growing body of work by authors of South Asian descent, writing in English outside the subcontinent, which provides entry into the world of diasporic South Asians. For the Indian experience in the Caribbean there is the writing of V. S. Naipaul, for example. Born in 1932 in a small town in Trinidad, his writings have explored the experience of being in some senses an outsider in the different places he might have thought of as 'home' – Trinidad, Britain and India. His most famous novel of Indian life in the Caribbean, *A House for Mr Biswas*, was published in 1961, and he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. David Dabydeen, born in 1955 in Guyana, has explored through fiction the life of the early Indian labourers there, as in his 1996 novel,

[5] See, for example, the collection of memories edited by Brij V. Lal in *Bittersweet the Indo-Fijian Experience* (Canberra, Australian National University, Pandanus Books, 2004). For the way individuals' experiences can be used by historians to recreate the experience of indentured labourers, see Brij V. Lal, 'Kunti's cry', and J. Harvey, 'Naraini's story', chapters 11 and 18 of Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Chalo Jahaji on a Journey Through Indenture in Fiji* (Canberra and Suva, Australian National University and Fiji Museum, 2000). See also the fascinating attempt to 'hear' women's voices from Mauritius: M. Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy. The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Stanley, Rose-Hill, Mauritius, Editions de L'Ocean Indien, 1994).

The Counting House. Moving on into the twenty-first century in Britain, Monica Ali invites readers of her *Brick Lane* (2004) to empathise with the challenges of a young Bangladeshi bride brought to East London, coping with a difficult older husband, rearing a family and grasping the opportunity of a cosmopolitan society she gradually and painfully comes to understand. The growing genre of films dealing with life in the diaspora is also a serious source, even when many of them are also excellent entertainment. *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), about a Punjabi girl in England desperate to play football, is both hilarious and instructive to the sensitive observer. Even more immediate than autobiographical and fictional literature or film is the vibrant world of the South Asian diaspora to be found on the internet, where a range of sites devoted to news, lifestyles, job opportunities and marriage arrangements, provide insight into the issues thought to be critical or troubling to younger South Asians, and brings them together across national boundaries to reflect on what it means to be Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Muslim, Hindu and so forth in a cosmopolitan and fast-changing world. It is not surprising that diaspora religious organisations have also made increasing use of the internet to connect with their followers, and to present themselves to the wider society. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh organisational websites are important sources, but ones which have to be used with care and some knowledge of which group or sect is behind them.

Such unconventional sources bring alive the evidence and analysis of the South Asian diasporic experience provided in the growing academic literature on South Asians outside the subcontinent. This comes from a great variety of intellectual disciplines, ranging from anthropology, sociology, human geography and history, while some contribute to new sub-disciplines specifically studying diasporas, migration, issues of hybrid identity and culture, or the growth of transnational families and communities.[6] Much of the academic work on the diaspora has taken the form of case studies of particular groups at a specific point in time, or of particular localities with high densities of migrant groups. Others are collections of essays which reflect on a particular theme in the diasporic experience, such as religion, work or kinship. Many of these will be cited during this book and listed in the select bibliography. It is partly because of the growing weight of case study literature on South Asians overseas that this present book is written. It is therefore worth briefly indicating its intentions. It is written for several different kinds of readers who want

[6] A convenient introduction to the theoretical debates on diasporas in general and their study, particularly within disciplines influenced by post-modernism, is to be found in J. E. Braziel and A. Mannur (eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora. A Reader* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

an introduction to a complex but important topic which is of contemporary as well as historical interest, but with a particular slant towards students who want to progress from this to more advanced study of South Asians in the diaspora or other largescale movements of people. It cannot, in a relatively small compass, provide detailed coverage of the varied experiences of the many different strands in the South Asian diaspora. Moreover, primary evidence and secondary literature on the different diasporic strands is also very uneven and inhibits anything approaching total coverage. Understandably the evidence is most plentiful about areas and groups where there has been much official enquiry and collection of statistics about the arrival and growth of diasporic groups and their lives, by governments which have both motivation and the administrative ability to collect such material, as well as academic study by fellow citizens seeking to understand the dynamics of significant aspects of their own societies. Evidence from Britain therefore figures large in this work and it is clear that there are areas such as South East Asia where there is much work still to be done on the nature and experience of the South Asian communities there. However, the British case does also have particular significance because through it we can see the emergence of very varied diasporic strands in one country of destination, and track generational change over a lengthy period of settlement. The British experience is also one where the South Asian population is very significant in size and proportion of the total population, particularly in certain urban areas; and this offers evidence about interactions of significant minorities with the host society and political structure.

This volume seeks to offer a broad analytical way into the subject, first by sketching and contextualising the main flows of peoples out of the subcontinent since the early nineteenth century (the substance of Chapter 2), and then by focussing on the tasks which have to be done by each group of migrants and each generation of diasporic people. These 'tasks' are vital for establishing new homes and communities and taking advantage of new opportunities, for negotiating the way through the challenges of living in a different society and culture, and for retaining what are seen as essential links with kin and wider groups which share cultural norms, both in their new home and in the place from which they have come. They are discussed under the broad thematic headings of 'creating new homes and communities', 'relating to the new homeland' and 'relating to the old homeland', which are the titles of Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Another distinctive feature of this study is that it is written by a historian with a special interest in South Asia. My intention is to put 'South Asia' back into the story of migration, firstly by looking at the subcontinent from which migrants came, with its changing economy and society, and

the traditions and experience of mobility which contributed to the larger overseas flows of population in recent times (see Chapter 1). Secondly, South Asia, which is itself not a static given but rapidly changing in the twentieth century, is seen as a constant backdrop or presence in the lives of the peoples of the diaspora, as a region which provides many aspects of their senses of identity and meaning, one to which they return for short visits with increasing frequency, one where they have kin and friends, where they invest goods and money, and one in whose politics they are often interested. South Asians abroad cannot be understood just as local 'ethnic minorities' in the countries to which they go, as so often they are compartmentalised for policy makers and journalists. They are involved in a dense network of local and global connections which make them truly transnational people, at home in several places and responding to opportunities and challenges both local and global, and keenly aware of the emerging role of South Asia in a changing world environment.

1 Traditions of stability and movement

This chapter sets the scene for the rest of this study, by looking at the subcontinent of South Asia and its connections with the world outside, over time. Although individuals and family groups made the decision to move abroad, and we need to understand their small-scale and local decisions, these were taken in the context of a widening environment, that of the British Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and of a world of independent nations bound together by new patterns of globalisation in the later twentieth and the present centuries. Particularly crucial in this widening environment was the impact of demand for various forms of labour and skill, and the political issues related to immigration of people with different ethnic origins from the majority in areas where they sought to go.

1 The subcontinent under British rule: the image of rural stability

The great land mass of the Indian subcontinent, equivalent to Europe in size, came under the political control of Britain in piecemeal fashion from the middle of the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. In theory, the ruling authority was until 1858 the East India Company (EIC), a trading company whose origins lay in a royal charter of 1600. But as it transformed itself in the early 1800s into an organisation for governance and military control, its trading activities declined as a component of its activities and profit. This was with the exception of opium, which alone constituted nearly half of the country's exports, shipped east to China and South East Asia. The EIC was finally wound up after the rebellions in northern India of 1857, and, as formal imperial rule was vested in the British government, India became the largest country in the British Empire. During the final fifty years of its existence the EIC had struggled with the problems of extending political and military control over such a vast area while still attempting to make a profit. It constructed a structure of civil administration over those areas it controlled directly,

and where it seemed prudent it used a pragmatic system of 'indirect rule', keeping in place indigenous rulers who could be trusted as subsidiary allies to keep their areas peaceful and loyal. Even in the areas of its direct political rule it relied heavily on the many Indians who worked within its civil governmental structures, served in its huge army, and paid the taxes it levied. Increasingly, the British parliament and government found mechanisms for surveillance and control of the EIC's activities, so there was no radical change in practice when India came under the sovereignty of the British crown.[1]

The society over which the British came to rule was complex. By far the majority of Indians were to be found in the countryside, dependent upon agriculture. But there were significant differences according to region, in language, culture and the nature of the local economy and social order. In general there were some common patterns in rural society – the importance of the joint farming family, dependence on kinship networks and village communities, marriage with carefully defined hierarchical networks, and the comparatively low status of women compared with men. Across India as a whole there were significantly different religious traditions. The majority were Hindus, but there was a large minority of Muslims (mostly to be found in the north and west), a small group of Sikhs (clustered in the north-western region of Punjab), communities of Christians in southern India, whose origins lay almost at the start of the Christian era, and Parsis along the western coast, whose ancestors had fled from persecution in Persia. Such traditions had more implications than creating shared patterns of belief and worship. They created the boundaries beyond which marriages and close social interaction did not normally occur, and internally they could fashion hierarchies of status. This was particularly so in the case of Hindus, amongst whom the complex hierarchical patterns of caste society had emerged, built on ritual position reflecting Hindu ideas of purity and pollution, and socio-economic status, which in turn determined the nature of intra-Hindu social interactions and particularly of marriage networks.[2]

[1] On the extension of East India Company control over India see P. J. Marshall, *The New Cambridge History of India II.2. Bengal: The British Bridgehead. Eastern India 1740–1828* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), and C. A. Bayly, *The New Cambridge History of India II.1. Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988). P. J. Marshall also examines the extension of metropolitan British control over the company in *Problems of Empire: Britain and India 1757–1813* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1968).

[2] The nature of caste and how it changed over time, and the difference between *varna* (a pan-Indian notion of ritual hierarchy) and *jati* (locally ranked endogamous groups), is the subject of considerable historical debate. Modern scholarship has shown how caste, in either of these meanings, was not immutable. Change occurred over time in people's