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Edited by Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec

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Introduction: themes in the study of the South Asian diaspora

Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec

The total number of people of South Asian descent who are living outside South Asia is quite small compared to overseas communities of other origins. Exact figures are hard to obtain, due to major national differences in census taking and to the rapid fluctuations of some migrant populations, but a current date total for South Asian peoples living outside Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka is about 8.6 million (Table Intro. 1). This is fewer than 1% of the current combined populations of these South Asian countries, which is some 1,000 million. Much higher ratios of overseas to home-based populations are recorded by Jews (over 11 million worldwide, while only 3.5 million live in the state of Israel), Chinese (some 22 million overseas with 1,000 million living in China), Africans (estimated at 300 million outside Africa compared to 540 million in Africa itself), and Europeans (perhaps 350 million around the world with 700 million in Europe). Yet while their relative numbers are considerably less than for others, overseas South Asians are more dramatically spread around the world – especially in English-speaking countries (Map Intro. 1). Moreover, due to diverse contexts of migration and settlement, a variety of factors have differentially contributed to South Asian community development overseas. Sometimes overseas South Asians have socially fragmented and at other times they have been consolidated; in some places South Asians have disregarded many of their cultural traditions, in other places these are steadfastly maintained. The divergent histories of overseas South Asian communities have much to tell about international migration processes, social and cultural change, political development and ethnicity.

For more than 2,000 years, people from South Asia have travelled and established themselves abroad. Buddhist pilgrims and missionaries penetrated most of Central and East Asia, merchants from the subcontinent forged economic ties along the coast of East Africa, and various Indian

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[More information](#)2 *Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec*Table Intro. 1. *Overseas South Asians by major area, by country: 1987*

UK	1,260,000	United Arab Emirates	382,302
Netherlands	102,800	Oman	190,000
France	42,000	Kuwait	355,947
Germany (FRG)	32,335	Yemen (PDR)	103,230
Spain	10,000	Iraq	85,000
Portugal	7,300	Saudi Arabia	79,987
Sweden	7,046	Qatar	51,500
Austria	3,131	Bahrein	48,050
Norway	2,900	Yemen	14,000
Switzerland	2,863	Lebanon	15,000
Denmark	2,552	Iran	6,300
Other	9,107	Jordan	4,506
Total Europe	1,482,034	Other	319
		Total Middle East	1,317,141
Mauritius	700,712	Trinidad	430,000
South Africa	350,000	Guyana	300,350
Kenya	70,000	Surinam	140,000
Reunion	65,000	Jamaica	33,600
Tanzania	40,000	Guadeloupe	23,000
Libya	35,500	Martinique	10,000
Malagasy	21,250	St Vincent	6,000
Zambia	20,900	Grenada	4,000
Mozambique	20,850	St Lucia	3,840
Zimbabwe	16,000	Panama	2,100
Nigeria	14,000	Other	4,440
Seychelles	5,200	Total Caribbean and Latin America	957,330
Malawi	5,000	USA	500,000
Liberia	3,066	Canada	228,500
Algeria	3,003	Total North America	728,500
Ethiopia	3,000	Fiji	839,340
Zaire	2,711	Australia	99,200
Other	13,260	New Zealand	15,000
Total Africa	1,389,722	Other	569
Malaysia	1,170,000	Total Pacific	954,109
Burma	330,000	Grand Total:	8,691,490
Singapore	169,100		
Bhutan	70,037		
Afghanistan	45,600		
Indonesia	30,000		
Hong Kong	20,180		
Philippines	12,100		
Thailand	6,802		
Brunei	5,500		
Japan	2,685		
Other	752		
Total Asia	1,862,654		

Sources: see facing page.

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dynasties held sway over much of Indonesia and Southeast Asia. However, although these examples of hegemony, travel and trade left many cultural marks abroad, no sizeable South Asian communities were established. It is only since the nineteenth century that substantial numbers of South Asian peoples have migrated throughout the world and established themselves in new settings.¹

Modern mass migrations from South Asia have taken place within two broad periods or sets of circumstances (Jayawardena 1973), and it is according to these that we have structured this book. The first is a phase conditioned by imperialism, in which large numbers of South Asians – particularly Indians – were transported in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to various colonial territories around the world, where they would serve mostly as indentured labourers; others followed freely as traders and administrators. The second, current, phase has occurred since early this century, in which persons of South Asian descent have travelled freely and in increasing numbers to western countries and the Middle East to undertake occupations of all kinds – unskilled, skilled, entrepreneurial and professional.

Most overseas South Asian populations have followed a similar trajectory, which is akin to those for other migrant groups. One descriptive scheme, devised by Speckmann (1965) to outline the history of Asian Indians in Suriname, can serve to summarise the development of a number of South Asian communities outside South Asia. This consists of five stages: (1) immigration (causing social disarray and anomie); (2) acculturation (a reorientation of traditional institutions and the adoption of new ones); (3) establishment (growth in numbers, residential footing and economic security); (4) incorporation (increased urban social patterns and the rise of a middle class); and (5) accelerated development (including greater occupational mobility, educational attainment, and political representation). The sequence – reminiscent of Park's (1950) race-relations

Sources: Figures in this table are based largely on Arthur Helweg, *Statistical Information on Overseas Indians Worldwide*, mimeo, compiled 1987, no place or date of publication. Exceptions are given below.

Figures for the UK are based on the *Labour Force Survey, 1987*, published by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, HMSO, London.

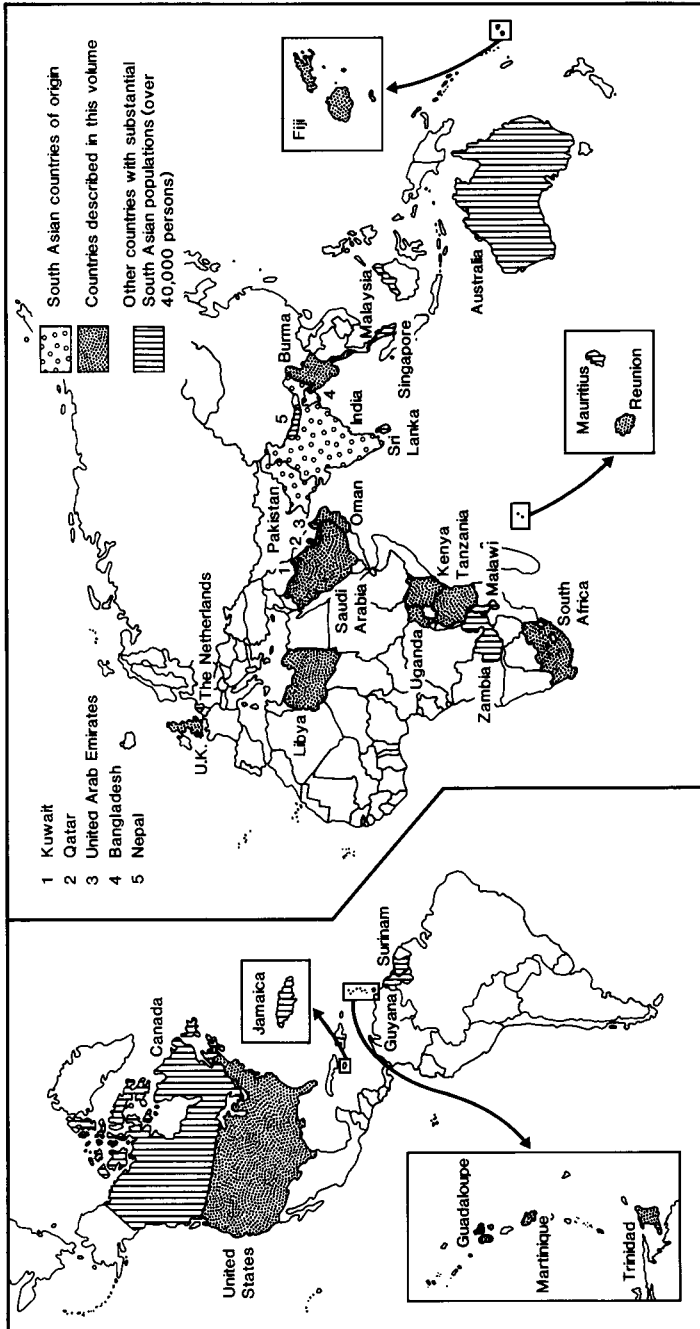
Figures for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are derived from Knerr's chapter in this volume.

Figures for Kuwait are derived from the 1985 *Year Book* of Kuwait.

Figures for Singapore are derived from the 1987 *Year Book* of Singapore.

Figures for Thailand are derived from the 1987 *Year Book* of Thailand.

Figures for Reunion, Guadeloupe and Martinique from Singaravelou's chapter in this volume.



Map Intro. 1 Sources and destinations of South Asians overseas

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cycle – represents more of an ideal type than a truly analytical model. In most contexts of South Asian migrant settlement, a host of independent factors have intervened to influence community development.

By referring to an interdependent set of themes or issues, patterns of similarity and difference can be more readily discerned among the many overseas South Asian communities established during the two general periods of South Asian migration. These themes and related issues, which recur throughout this volume, are outlined below under four rubrics.² In the following sections, aspects of the development of overseas South Asian communities within the two periods are summarised according to these themes.

(1) Migration processes and factors of settlement

The themes grouped under this heading are drawn initially from Jayawardena (1968), who saw them as variables directly channelling socio-cultural change among South Asians overseas (these are reiterated by Vertovec in chapter 4 to emphasise certain issues affecting South Asians in contemporary developing countries):

(a) *type of migration*: indentured or otherwise bound by contract, free passage (for purposes of education, employment or business), or political refugee; related to these types are the motivating conditions (so-called 'push' factors) in areas whence migrants came; whether migrants move with intentions of permanent settlement or hold a 'myth of return' (Anwar 1979);

(b) *extent of ties with South Asia*: presence or absence of kinship and marriage networks; property and other economic ties (including remittances); political involvement and organisational affiliation in country of origin; ability to visit the homeland for social, economic and religious purposes;

(c) *economic activity in new context*: type of employment and contract; degree of ownership or unionisation; extent of assets and investments; degree of ethnic economic specialisation, encapsulation and interaction *vis-à-vis* other ethnic groups;

(d) *geographic features of settlement*: predominance in urban or rural areas; isolation, segregation, or dispersal (Robinson 1986); proximity to other ethnic minority communities; location of important community centres;

(e) *infrastructures of host society*: existence of governmental migrant or refugee settlement policies; availability of housing, loans; existence of government authorities to monitor race relations or special interests of the minority South Asian community.

(2) Cultural composition

The composition of overseas South Asian communities is largely influ-

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enced by the factors listed in sections (a) and (b) above. Fundamental bases of differentiation within any South Asian population will include:

(a) *religion*: proportion of main faiths (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Christian); presence or activities of sects or movements within these traditions (such as Swaminarayanis or Sai Baba devotees among Hindus, Sunni or Ismaili Muslims, and moderate or pro-Khalistan Sikhs); extent of organisation; existence of centres of worship; prevalence of priesthood abroad;

(b) *language*: the extent to which Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and other languages such as Punjabi and Gujarati are used in the new context; the creation of a creolised South Asian language or use of a non-South Asian lingua franca; availability of literature in specific South Asian languages;

(c) *region of origin*: involving differing ethnic, religious, and linguistically plural backgrounds; cuisine, dress, folk traditions and art forms; pattern of domestic makeup; extent of urban or rural traits;

(d) *caste*: including influence of regional traditions or ritual and occupational specialisation; specific religious orientations; predominance and place in original local hierarchies; extent of the attenuation of the caste system and caste consciousness;

(e) *degree of 'cultural homogenisation'*: or creation and use of a generalised (non-regional) corpus of South Asian cultural phenomena (including terminology, cuisine, dress, Hindu religious practices).

(3) Social structure and political power

The topics under this heading are inter-related, and stem subsequently from themes outlined under both headings above:

(a) *extent of ethnic pluralism*: number of ethnic groups and relative proportions within total society of immigration; economic niche associated with each ethnic group; period of arrival of South Asians *vis-à-vis* other migrants;

(b) *class composition*: whether the South Asian community spans a number of class groupings or is characterised predominantly by a single class makeup; presence or nature of solidarity with non-South Asian members of class;

(c) *degree of 'institutionalised racism'*: existence of patterns of discrimination by public authorities or legislation militating against incorporation of migrant community; nature of stereotypes of South Asian minority by others and extent of media involvement in stereotyping; existence of widespread 'blame' placed on migrants during periods of national economic recession;

(d) *involvement in party politics*: nature of state constitution and franchise (facilitating or militating against fair migrant participation); extent of membership or representation of South Asians in prominent political parties; existence or nature of South Asian dominated parties; existence

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or nature of coalitions between South Asian parties and others; weight of South Asian community vote in elections.

(4) Community development

Finally, the effective development of community activity, collective sentiments, and a strong ethnic identity consequently depends on virtually all of the issues suggested above. Other critical features are:

(a) *organisations*: political, union, community, religious, cultural; their history, objectives, and efficiency; existence of community media;

(b) *leadership*: nature of charisma or message; patronage networks; ability to bridge cultural divides within South Asian community; effectiveness of liaising with non-South Asian leaders; legacy of corruption;

(c) *ethnic relations*: nature of social 'boundary' markers (Barth 1969); history of conflict or cooperation; nature of formal and informal socio-economic networks among ethnic groups; whether ethnic groups interact only in specific contexts (Furnivall 1939); extent of differentiation of social institutions; and role of the state in formalising ethnic relations or differentially incorporating ethnic groups into state systems (Smith 1969);

(d) *scale*: size, distribution, and composition of overseas South Asian community *vis-à-vis* others; effects of continued immigration on fusion/fission tendencies of migrants (see chapter 9 by Bhardwaj and Rao).

In comparing the two main phases of South Asian migration, colonial and contemporary, the patterns which emerge from an observation of the above themes and sub-themes differ considerably. It is useful to review, in a general fashion, the developments stemming from these two sets of migration in order to set the stage for the more detailed analyses of specific contexts provided in this volume.

Colonial and post-colonial contexts

The large-scale emigration of South Asians, predominantly as indentured labourers, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be interpreted as a significant feature of the vast colonial expansion in that period, especially represented by the British Empire. South Asians (namely, Indians), themselves drawn from a colonial territory, travelled to other colonies far afield under various schemes and circumstances. Many remained in these colonies, from which they and their descendants entered the post-colonial era of independence and Third World development. Their histories and current situations are widely varying, as a thematic summary reveals.

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Four types of migration characterise South Asian transplantation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That which resulted in the largest and most widely dispersed settlement of South Asians abroad was the indenture system, which functioned between 1834 and 1917.³

With the Act of Emancipation of 1834, slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire. In tropical colonies worldwide, owners of sugar and cocoa plantations desperately sought cheap labour. Through arrangements with British colonial authorities, a system of indentured Indian immigration was established, based in Calcutta and in Madras. (Similarly, following the abolition of slavery in their own colonies in 1846 and 1873 respectively, French and Dutch planters reached agreements with British authorities in India to obtain labourers under the same system.) Recruiters were sent into the hinterlands to acquire potential emigrants, who in turn signed contracts of indenture to serve on plantations abroad for a period of at least five years; during this time, indentured workers received a basic pay, accommodation, food rations and medical facilities, and, depending on the contract, free or partly paid return passage to India. The territories, numbers, and years pertaining to the system, under which some 1.5 million persons migrated, are listed in Table Intro. 2. Economic opportunities in the receiving colonies following the expiration of indenture contracts saw to it that only about one-third of these migrants chose to repatriate; subsequently, the descendants of those who remained have multiplied to become communities of substantial size – some, even national majorities or the largest racial block (Mauritius, Guyana, Fiji).

A second type of South Asian contracted labour migration took place to Southeast Asia and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). This involved two similar systems of recruitment, both of which used a network of middlemen and debt relationships: the *maistry* system used to acquire labourers for plantations in Burma (Chakravarti 1971), and the *kangani* system which gained workforces to tap rubber in Malaysia (Arasaratnam 1970) and to pick tea in Ceylon (Kondapi 1951). Davis (1951) estimates that between 1852 and 1937, 2.5 million Indians went to work in Burma, 2 million to Malaysia and 1.5 million to Ceylon. However, the short-term (even seasonal) nature of the work schemes and the proximity of these territories to India meant that the vast majority of these migrants returned home rather than settling abroad.

South Asians travelling to foreign colonies for purposes of commerce constituted the third type of migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has been mentioned that Indian merchants had for many centuries engaged in trade along the East African coast; with the

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Table Intro. 2. *Indentured Indian immigration by colony in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries^a and Indian population by country, 1980^b*

Colony (country)	Period	Indian immigrants	Indian pop. (est.) 1980
Mauritius	1834–1912	453,063	623,000
British Guiana (Guyana)	1838–1917	238,909	424,400
Natal (South Africa)	1860–1911	152,184	750,000
Trinidad	1845–1917	143,939	421,000
Reunion	1829–1924	118,000	125,000
Fiji	1879–1916	60,969	300,700
Guadeloupe	1854–85	42,326	23,165 ^c
East Africa (Kenya/Uganda)	1895–1901	39,771	79,000/430 ^d
Jamaica	1854–85	36,420	50,300
Dutch Guiana (Suriname)	1873–1916	34,000	124,900
Martinique	1854–89	25,509	16,450
Seychelles	1899–1916	6,319	n.a.
St Lucia	1858–95	4,350	3,700
Grenada	1856–85	3,200	3,900
St Vincent	1861–80	2,472	5,000

Sources:

^aDeerr 1938: 98; Davis 1951: 101; Roberts and Byrne 1966: 129; Gregory 1971: 53; Tinker 1974: 104; Lal 1979: 18; Singaravelou n.d. For various reasons (cited by the source authors), these figures are not entirely accurate. However, they do provide a relative indication of proportions. Further, it should be noted that these figures do not represent net immigration.

^b(Except for Guadeloupe) Tandon and Raphael 1984; *The Economist* 1984; Singaravelou n.d. Data not available are designated 'n.a.'

^cThis total is for the year 1967 (Singaravelou 1975: 86).

^dThese figures are much lower, of course, than those prior to the expulsions of 1972 (see Twaddle 1975; Tandon and Raphael 1984). In 1970, the Indian population of Kenya was 182,000 while that of Uganda was 76,000.

increase in transportation, urbanisation and administration which accompanied colonial expansion, these merchants were able to push their trade further into the interior or into urban markets (Twaddle, chapter 7; Gregory 1971). Other Indian merchants, too, quickly came to undertake business in colonies which hosted their indentured counterparts, particularly Fiji, Mauritius and Natal (South Africa).

Finally, Tinker (chapter 1) points out that Indians were also used by colonial authorities for clerical and administrative duties in overseas territories. This was especially so in Southeast Asia, and East and South Africa.

These various types of migration had direct consequences for the

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following three aspects of settlement. *Ties with South Asia* were at a minimum for indentured labourers, since they were on average geographically furthest from South Asia, were highly restricted in their movement and activity while under indenture, and were doubtless resolved to the severance of their ties to their homeland once they had decided to remain abroad following the termination of their indentureship. *Maistry* and *kangani* contracted labourers remained most strongly linked to South Asia, since their short-term migrations allowed them to return home as they wished. The commercial migrants – and to a lesser extent, the ‘imperial auxiliaries’ – remained well connected to their areas of origin through economic and marriage networks, frequent social, religious, and business visits, and property or business ownership.

The *economic activities* of the migrants were largely a function of their original migrations, too, and have only gradually changed in nature among their descendent communities in recent decades. Among each migration type and in each geographical context, South Asians occupied an ethnically based economic niche.⁴ For example, indentured Indian immigrants to the West Indies, Mauritius, Fiji and South Africa became the rural labourers and independent farmers, especially in the sugar industries. Indian businessmen in East and Central Africa constituted the majority of the commercial middle class, while many Indians in Southeast Asia were associated with privileged civil service positions.

Indians’ *settlement geography* followed their occupational specialisations, and was often related to the *host society’s administrative infrastructure* for overseeing the welfare of the migrants. While under their indenture (or other) contracts, South Asian labourers in overseas colonies were restricted in their residence to the plantations. Eventually, they were permitted to settle elsewhere, but always within the vicinity of the estates, in order to provide a permanent supply of labour. Varying patterns and processes of settlement ensued in the different colonies, but almost everywhere the result was the isolation of the South Asian community in rural enclaves. In Trinidad, the ex-indentured Indians had considerable freedom to establish their own villages and lifestyles (Richardson 1975), while in British Guiana (Guyana), though hampered by the limited inhabitable space available along the coastal strip, they were none the less segregated (Despres 1969). In Mauritius, the migrants devised a means for collectively purchasing plots and founding villages (Benedict 1961), but in Fiji a unique colonial policy sought to ensure the indigenous Fijians’ welfare by delimiting the area and tenancy permitted to Indian settlement off estates (Mayer 1953; 1961). In South Africa, legislation specifically restricted the movement and settlement of Indians, such that 80% came to live in Natal, where they were permitted to purchase only 0.01% of the