

Indian Diaspora in West Asia

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- trace the historical background of the Indian diaspora in West Asia;
- know the profiles of Indians in the Gulf region; and
- familiarise yourself with the Indian diaspora in Israel.

13.1 Introduction

The Indian diaspora in West Asia is mainly concentrated in two regions: the Persian Gulf countries and Israel. In spite of India's historical relations with many countries of West Asia, the Indian diaspora remained very small in size until very recently. The main focus of this section therefore would be on the migration, settlement and consequent emergence of the Indian diaspora in the region in recent decades.

13.2 Historical Background

Trade and cultural contacts between India and West Asia go back to antiquity (Ahmad 1969). These contacts were widespread extending up to the eastern Mediterranean and also covering large parts of Central Asia. Archaeological and literary evidence suggests that India and West Asia had trade relations since at least the days of the Indus Valley Civilization.

Three major trade routes have connected India with West Asia. Perhaps the oldest among these was the Persian Gulf route running from the mouth of the Indus to the Euphrates. The second was the overland route from the Indian passes to Balkh, down the Oxus to Caspian Gates, passing through and culminating at Antioch. Finally, there was the sea route down the Persian/Arabian coasts of Aden and up to the Red Sea. Until at least the beginning of the Christian era, Indo-West Asian trade was indirect, that is part of the Indo-Roman or Indo-Greek trade (Rawlinson, 1926).

Maurya Emperor Ashoka the Great not only exchanged ambassadors with Syria, Egypt and Macedonia, but also took up the cause of spreading Buddhism to parts of Central and West Asia. Arab scholar Alberuni found traces of Buddhism in Khorasan, Persia, Iraq and Syria. The cultural traditions of Central Asian countries were similarly influenced by the spread of Buddhism during the Kushan period, especially in its later phase. Trade relations were further strengthened by the great Silk Route trade between China and the West in which Indians acted as intermediaries. During the medieval period the friendly

visits of the Khwarezmian scholars al-Beruni and Abulrazzak Samarkand form a glorious chapter in the history of contacts between India and Central Asia” (Kaushik, 1997, p.64). These contacts were multifaceted involving not only trade and political/diplomatic relations but also literature, philosophy, religion, medical knowledge, musical instruments, etc.

13.3 Indians in the Gulf Region

In so far as the Gulf coast was concerned, a considerable number of Indians appear to have migrated there in the pre-Islamic era “either to establish businesses, seek employment with Arab traders, or just to escape instability at home. Among the seven Indian groups that migrated to Arabia and settled down in Bahrain, Oman and Obulla (Basra) in this period were the *Zuth* (known in India as Jats), the *Bayasira*, and the *Siabja*. Thus at the time of the advent of Islam, there were many Indian settlers in Arabia who were involved in various activities” (Ahmad, 1971). Apparently all these groups got completely assimilated into the respective societies of their migration.

The seventh to 10th century period is said to be the “golden age” of Indo-Arab trade. This period began with the rise and spread of Islam and the founding of Baghdad in 762 A.D. as the capital of the Arab World. So close were the relations between India and the Arab world that the ancient port of Obulla was called ‘the marches of India’ which later developed into Basra” (Ahmad, 1971). It is very likely that a significant number of merchants and a variety of artisans and professionals must have migrated and settled down in this region. Mention may be made of the *vizier* to the Caliphs of Baghdad: “A fact less known to historians, however is that the illustrious family of the Barmakids who acted as *viziers* to the Caliphs of Baghdad for a couple of centuries during the Abbasid period were originally Pramukhs [chiefs] (hence Arabic: Barmark) and were the priests of the Buddhist monasteries in Balkh in central Asia whence they had migrated to Damascus after the establishment of the Umayyad government there. This family in all probability came from India originally” (Ahmad, 1971).

Indian Merchants in the Gulf

Medieval Arab sources provide the earliest evidence of the presence of colonies of Indian merchants in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea areas. “They reveal that Hindu merchants were present in the port of Shiraz on the Persian shore of the Gulf at least in the ninth century and that they also frequented the coasts of Oman, Socotra and Aden” (Gopal, 1998; Marcovits, 2000, p. 10). Sindhi and Gujarati merchants, both Hindu and Muslim played a dominant role in maritime trade and finance across the Indian Ocean (Marcovits, 2000). During the later medieval period there was a considerable amount of exchange of Arab and Indian scholars and religious leaders. According to Maqbool Ahmad (1971, p. 38), the establishment of Muslim kingdoms in the South and the introduction of the Arab educational system and the *Sharia* brought in its trail a large number of Arab theologians, jurists and men of learning to India throughout the later medieval period. As will be noticed some Indian Muslim scholars also visited the Arab countries and acquired eminent positions in their respective fields of knowledge there.

Vasco da Gama noted the presence of Indians on the shores of East Africa in 1498 and subsequently in the ports of the Red Sea and in the interior of the Arabian peninsula (Gopal, 1992, p. 220). Port towns of Mocha and Aden and inland cities of Taif and Sanna were also inhabited by the Indians of

Ormuz (Gopal, 1998). The ruins of a Hindu temple were found at Kalhat, the principal Omani port of the fifteenth century, which further suggests a settlement of Indians in Oman (Miles, 1966, p. 526).

In Iran, besides Omuz, Indians in small numbers had settled down in Yezd, Shiraz, Isfahan, Tehran, Resht, Gilan, Khorasan and Mashad. Following the establishment of a new port of Gombroon or Bandar Abbas in the late 17th century Ormuz declined to insignificance and the Indians shifted to the new city. In 1760 when Bandar Abbas was abandoned by the Persians, the Indians shifted to Abu Shehr, Bushahr, and to the Iraqi port of Basra. Towards the end of the 18th century Gujarati Baniyas were replaced by a new group of immigrants known as Shikarpuris who hailed from Sindh (Gopal, 1997).

In the 17th and 18th centuries Indians traveled via Iran to Central Asia, the Caucasus region and Tzarist Russia. They were active as merchants as well as moneylenders in Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Baku, Semakha, Derbent, Kokand, etc. Scholars have also noted the existence of a Hindu temple in Iran and another at Baku "where a perpetual flame burnt and priest was always in attendance" (Gopal, 1998, p. 121). Outside India, Nepal and Tibet, the temple at Baku was a major centre of Hindu pilgrimage.

In contrast to the 17th and 18th centuries in which India's impact on the Persian Gulf region was sporadic and confined mostly to trade, it was quite comprehensive in the later 19th and the first half of the twentieth century. Indo-Gulf relations during this period were "varied and multi-faceted." For about a century or so India was not only a major partner in the Indo-Gulf trade and commerce, its impact on the Gulf countries in terms of initial modernization and cultural renaissance, reform movement and many other aspects of socio-cultural life such as cuisines, musical instruments, interior designing and architecture was also substantial (Elmadani, 2003). It was also during this period that a number of Indian merchant communities were more firmly established throughout the Gulf/Red Sea region. It hardly needs to be emphasized here that the Gulf region was virtually an extension of British India and that the Indians in the Gulf enjoyed privileges as British subject.

The British administration in the Gulf helped settle a number of Indian communities across the region. Among these the 19th century Muscat hosted three distinct Indian communities: Thattai Sindhi Bhatias, Kutchhi Bhatias and Khojahs or *Luwatiyyas*. Some of the prominent entrepreneurs from these communities continue to flourish even today (Allen, Jr., 1981, pp 39-51). Besides Oman, Indian merchant communities also existed in Iran, Aden and the Trucial States (United Arab Emirates) (Al-Sayegh, 1998; Jain, 2004b).

Besides trading in a wide variety of goods, Indians were also involved in the pearl-fishing industry in some of the Gulf countries, namely Bahrain, Oman and United Arab Emirates. Pearl fishing was the mainstay of the Gulf economies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some idea of the nature and magnitude of this industry can be had from the fact that 18% of the total Bahraini population was involved in this industry in the early 20th century. Corresponding figures for Kuwait, Trucial Coast emirates and Qatar were 25%, 31% and 48% respectively (Zahlan, 1979, p. 22).

In the Red Sea region Yemen is one of the countries where Indians have been settled for a long time. Although Indo-Yemeni trade and cultural relations go back to antiquity, the evidence of the Indians' presence in Yemen is

available since only the early seventeenth century. The Indians were found to reside in almost all the major towns of Yemen, including Mocha, Sana'a, Hodeida and Beital-Faqui. The Indians began to settle in the port town of Aden after its occupation by the British in 1839. By the time the British left Aden in 1967 their population had risen to more than 20,000. Besides Aden, there must have been thousands of Indians in other towns of Yemen, but their history is sketchy. Today Yemen hosts the largest permanently settled Indian diaspora in West Asia (Jain, 2003c).

With the decline of pearling industry in the 1920s and 1930s Indian merchants began to concentrate their attention on general trade, importing goods not only from India but also from Europe, America and Japan. These trends were further to strengthen after the Second World War.

Indian Labour Diaspora

The migration of Indian labour to the Gulf countries appears to be a recent (i.e., post-oil boom of 1973) phenomenon, but in fact it was not so. The Indian manpower presence in the region dates back to the early oil exploration days when a few Indians had been employed by the D'Arcy Exploration Company in 1902 (Seccombe and Lawless, 1986). Anglo-Persian Oil Company incorporated in 1909 employed more than 368 in December 1910, 158 Indians in January 1910 and in subsequent years this figure was to grow into several hundred and to a peak of 4,890 in 1925. The pattern was repeated in other oil companies in the 1930s and 1940s. Thus, in spite of a restrictive nationality clause, the Gulf countries have relied on foreign manpower to perform various skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled tasks (Seccombe and Lawless, 1986, pp. 548-74).

As already mentioned, the migration of Indian labour to the Gulf countries is not a new phenomenon; it can be traced back to the early 20th century in the wake of the oil discovery in the region. Subsequently a few thousand Indians worked in various Gulf oil companies. This situation more or less continued until the mid-1970s when, following the hike in the oil prices during 1973-74, there was a substantial increase in the oil revenues of the oil producing and exporting Gulf countries.

As a result, development programmes, which included creation of amenities like schools, hospitals, houses, improvement of transport and communication, etc., were taken up. This resulted in a spurt in demand for not only highly skilled technical experts but also for semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Therefore, the major outflow of Indian migrant workers in the last three decades has been to the Gulf countries where a few million workers are estimated to be employed. The largest number of Indian workers is in Saudi Arabia. Other major employers of Indian workers are the UAE, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. The number of workers who were given emigration clearance for contractual employment abroad in the past few years and data on distribution of labour outflow is presented in tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 of this unit.

It must be pointed out here that India is not only the second most populous country in the world with surplus labour, it also has a vast reservoir of well trained and educated manpower. Therefore, as soon as the opportunities to earn better wages arose, Indians were the first among groups of immigrants to flock to the Gulf countries. Moreover, as already pointed out, there has been a tradition of outmigration from India to various countries, including the Gulf region, at least since the nineteenth century.

Table 13.1
Annual Labour Outflows form India to West Asia, 1976-2005

Year	Number of Workers	Year	Number of Workers
1976	4,200	1991	197,889
1977	22,900	1992	416,784
1978	69,000	1993	438,338
1979	171,800	1994	425,385
1980	268,200	1995	415,334
1981	272,000	1996	414,214
1982	224,257	1997	416,424
1983	217,971	1998	355,164
1984	198,520	1999	199,552
1985	160,520	2000	243,182
1986	109,234	2001	278,664
1987	121,812	2002	367,663
1988	165,924	2003	466,456
1989	125,786	2004	474,960
1990	143,565	2005	549,000

Source: Annual Reports, Ministry of Labour, Government of India.

Note: The figure given in the above tables do not include the persons who are running businesses in partnership with foreign nationals; those who emigrated on visit visa and stayed on to get a job and those skilled workers and professionals (like doctors, engineers, chartered accountants computer specialist etc.) in whose case emigration clearance is not necessary.

Each year a large number of workers go to West Asia, and particularly to the six G.C.C countries. In all, over six million contract workers have migrated to these countries during the past four decades or so. Besides these, during the same period at least six million Indians belonging to the following categories have gone to the Gulf countries: (i) workers in whose case emigration clearance is not required such as supervisors, skilled workers, semi-skilled workers, drivers, cooks and clerical workers; (ii) businessmen, entrepreneurs, etc; (iii) illegal migrants (those who overstayed visit visa and got employment).

Migration of Indian contract workers abroad has not been uniform. The trend declined during 1992-98 but peaked in 1999-2004. Fluctuation in migration figures can be explained in terms of a number of political economy factors: fluctuation in oil prices, law of labour demand and supply, Arabisation labour policy and the changing profile of labour demand itself. Thus in 1999 there was a sharp decline in the number of persons migrating for employment to Saudi Arabia. This was primarily due to the determined efforts to enforce Saudisation. The situation has improved since then, particularly in 2002, although not to the level of the mid-1990s.

The majority of such workers are recruited in the four South Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnakata. Together these four states send about 70% of migrants to the Gulf countries (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2005). In this context, it would not be out of place to mention that the channel of recruitment or migration plays an important role

in the relative success of workers. A survey of 800 South Asian males employed in skilled or unskilled jobs in Kuwait showed that about 34 per cent moved through the network of friends and relatives and about 50 per cent through recruiting agents, and that those who went through friends/ relatives earned a higher salary, found the job to fit their expectations, and were happier than those who went through agents (Shah, 2000).

Table 13.2
The Distribution of Annual Labour Outflows from India to West Asia by
Country of Destination, 1982-1990

Country	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
Bahrain	17,069	18,894	15,514	11,246	5,784	6,578	8,219	8,520	6,782
Iraq	35,268	13,001	11,398	5,855	5,040	2,330	4,284	5,085	1,650
Kuwait	9,764	11,490	5,466	5,512	4,235	7,354	9,653	5,679	1,077
Libya	10,433	5,900	5,179	2,449	2,552	2,272	593	632	305
Oman	39,792	49,120	43,228	37,806	22,417	16,362	18,696	16,574	34,267
Qatar	14,357	7,772	4,362	5,214	4,029	4,751	4,654	7,991	3,704
Saudi Arabia	78,297	83,235	88,079	68,938	41,854	57,234	85,289	49,710	79,473
U.A.E	19,297	25,559	24,286	21,286	23,323	24,931	34,029	26,189	11,962
Others	15,288	7,024	8,410	4,729	4,415	3,544	4,471	5,406	4,345
Total	239,5452	24,9952	05,922	163,035	113,649	125,356	169,888	125,786	143,565

Source: As in Table 2.

Table 13.3
The Distribution of Annual Labour Outflows from India by Destination, 1991-1996

Country	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Bahrain	8,630	16,458	15,622	13,806	11,235	16,647
Kuwait	7,044	19,782	26,981	24,324	14,439	14,580
Oman	22,333	40,900	29,056	25,142	22,338	30,113
Saudi Arabia	130,928	265,180	269,639	265,875	256,782	214,068
U.A.E	15,446	60,493	77,066	75,762	79,674	112,644
Others	7,121	19,974	20,476	20,476	28,866	26,162
Total	197,889	438,338	425,385	425,385	415,334	414,214

Table 13.4
The Distribution of Annual Labour Outflows from India by Destination, 1997-2004

Country	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Bahrain	17,944	16,997	14,905	15,909	16,382	20,807	24,778	22,980
Kuwait	13,170	22,462	19,149	31,082	39,751	48,549	54,434	52,064
Oman	29,994	20,774	16,101	15,155	30,985	41,209	36,816	33,275
S.Arabia	214,420	105,239	27,160	58,722	78,048	99,453	121,431	123,522
U.A.E	110,945	134,740	79,269	55,099	53,673	95,034	143,804	175,262
Qatar	—	—	—	—	13,829	12,596	14,251	16,325
Others	29,951	54,952	42,968	67,215	45,996	50,015	70,942	51,532
Total	416,424	355,164	199,552	243,182	278,664	367,663	466,456	474,960

Source: Ministry of Labour, Government of India, *Annual Reports*, 2003 & 2005.

Table 13.5
Estimated Population of Overseas Indians in West Asia, 2001 and 2005

Country	PIOs	NRIs	Total	Total (2005)
Saudi Arabia	—	1,500,000	1,500,000	1,600,000
United Arab Emirates	50,000	900,000	950,000	1,300,000
Oman	1,000	311,000	312,000	450,000
Kuwait	1,000	254,000	295,000	400,000
Bahrain	Nil	130,000	130,000	170,000
Qatar	1,000	130,000	131,000	180,000
Others				
Yemen	100,000	900	100,900	120,000
Israel	45,000	300	45,300	60,000
Egypt	40	1,350	1,390	1,500
Lebanon	25	11,000	11,025	12,000
Libya	400	12,000	12,400	15,000
Syria	1,800	-	1,800	2,000
Total	200,265	3,250,550	3,450,815	4,310,500

Source: High Level Committee (2001). Figures for the year 2005 are author's own estimates.

Economic Profile

The Indian diaspora in the Persian Gulf region is in constant flux for two important reasons – continuous ‘circulation’ of migrants, and the upgradation of the skill composition of the workforce. The unique nature of the diaspora and the fact that there is hardly any social scientific study on the subject makes it difficult to comment authoritatively. In the absence of systematic studies, it is only natural that newspaper reports should come in handy. These sources clearly suggest that the vast majority of Indians in the Gulf countries have been earning their livelihood honestly and in a legal manner, while a very small minority of them is involved in illegal economic activities such as smuggling, extortion and even begging. Interestingly, latter reports are more numerous and precisely documented than earlier reports.

Indian immigrants in the Gulf region have two major class segments (a) skilled, semi skilled and unskilled workers, and (b) professionals and entrepreneurs. The proportion of each class segment in the Gulf countries varies from country to country. Nevertheless it is widely believed that labour constitutes about 60-70 per cent of the total migration outflow from India to the Middle East. This situation is sociologically akin to the earlier ones in South Africa, Fiji, Malaysia and Burma where indentured and/or *kangani* labour and petty bourgeoisie consisting of a variety of skilled personnel and traders migrated simultaneously and yet remained apart from one another (Jain, 1990; 1999).

The available data on the occupational status of Indian workers in the Gulf countries suggest that until the 1980s about 40 per cent of them were employed in the construction and transport industries. Utility and maintenance constituted another important category of employment followed by office and paramedical services.

Since the late 1980s there has been a gradual shift in the socio-economic profile of the Indian migrants to the Gulf. The preponderance of workers in the construction industry and other skilled and semi-skilled sectors has been slowly reversed. A recent demographic study done in the U.A.E. indicated that there has been an upward flow in white-collar jobs. Indians have a stranglehold on textile, gold, electronics and construction industries. A sizable number also operate hotels and restaurants. According to the figures provided by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, skilled and unskilled workers accounted for about 70 per cent of the Indian migrants, white collar workers for about 20 per cent and professionals had a 10 per cent share in 1998. The study referred to above had also found that in the early 1990s approximately 57 per cent of the Indian population in the UAE earned less than 5,000 Dhiraams a month (3.6 Dhiram to a dollar) whilst those earning above 25,000 Dhiraams a month were about 10 per cent. The rest figured in between these income brackets. In effect, more than three-fourths of the Indians in the U.A.E. earned less than 10,000 Dhiraams a month.

A good number of Indian immigrants in the Gulf countries, particularly in the UAE, Oman and Kuwait, are involved in a variety of business activities (Jain, 2004a; 2005b). Some of the business houses such as the Jashanmal in the UAE, Malhotras in Kuwait and Khimji Ramdas in Oman have since long been there. Many others are of more recent origin. Major Indian business houses have their operations all over the Gulf countries. Apart from individual entrepreneurs, a considerable number of Indian companies are also involved in joint venture enterprises in the Gulf countries.

Another class segment of the Indian petty bourgeoisie in the region consists of professionals such as engineers, doctors, management executives, chartered accountants, bankers, architects, lawyers, teachers, etc., who constitute about 10 per cent of the Indian immigrant workforce. The professional migrants are drawn from all over the country.

The NRI remittances and investments have played an extremely important role in India's economic development. India's foreign exchange receipts from remittances have increased several-fold during the past three decades or so. According to one estimate whereas India's forex receipts totalled less than \$300 million in 1974-75, by 1984-85 this figure had increased to \$2,500 million. The West Asian share in the country's total receipts was 12 per cent in 1974-75 and 58 per cent in 1984-85. According to estimates made by Gulati and Mody, Kerala accounted for 42 per cent of the country's remittance receipts from West Asia in 1981-82.

NRI deposits have immensely helped India in averting its balance of payment crisis. A time series data compiled by the Department of Economic Analysis and Policy of the Reserve Bank of India on India's balance of payment trends since 1948-49 show that Non-Resident Indian Deposits (NRDs) have risen continuously since the mid-1970s. The data further suggest that the dependence on NRs was negligible up to 1974-75. After touching \$40 million in 1974-75, these deposits rose steadily to \$1.04 billion in 1979-80. The dependence on NRDs grew substantially in the 1980s from \$1.8 billion in 1980-81 to \$10.4 billion in 1989-90 and \$10.6 billion in 1990-91, before falling for the first time in 1991-92 to \$7.8 billion. The reversal in the rising trend of NRDs was clearly linked to large-scale withdrawal of such deposits by Non-Resident Indians following the outbreak of the Gulf War in late 1990. Since then the NRDs have picked up again and India's forex reserves, excluding

gold and SDRs, were estimated to be \$10.2 billion by January 1994, \$34.0 billion by 1999, and over \$150.0 billion by 2005.

It goes without saying that Indian workers who generally migrate without their families for a number of reasons, save most of their earnings as they get free food, accommodation and transport during their stay in the Gulf countries. The remitted money is mostly spent on the upkeep and maintenance of the households, paying outstanding debts, purchasing land and building houses, and buying consumer durables. Lavish expenditures on marriage and other festive occasions have also been reported from the Gulf migration areas in Kerala and elsewhere. It appears that very little amount of remittances is used for economically productive purposes.

As Nair (1989, pp. 344) put it: The available evidence suggests that migration and the resultant receipt of remittances do not seem to have made any significant impact on the economic growth rate of the state economies. Nor did they have a substantial effect on employment rates, labour market conditions, agricultural development and industrialisation. It would appear that the major part of the remittances which flowed into Kerala seeped into other regions of India through the mechanism of trade in consumption goods and construction materials caused by the changes in consumption patterns and the boom in the house construction sector.

Although most of the Gulf workers send their remittances through official channels, a considerable number of them also send their money through *hawala* and other illegal channels. These channels usually offer some commission for every dollar. Moreover, *hawalas* are also fast and reliable channels of remitting money. Attempts to curb such transactions have not been successful in the past.

Regarding NRI investment in India it can be effectively argued that the desire on the part of the Gulf and other NRIs to invest in India and to retain their Indian citizenship should be seen not so much as an expression of their patriotism but as pure and simple economic calculation. If India provides a competitive advantage in business operations for the NRIs they would be more than willing to invest in India; if not, they might go elsewhere. This was seen during the 1990-1991 Kuwaiti Crisis when the Indian economy began to show the balance of payment crisis. The NRI investment in India had begun to decline and a considerable number of NRIs did not renew their FCNR deposits on maturity; instead they preferred to invest the money abroad. The successful subscription of the Resurgent India Bonds by the NRIs in 1998, which fetched \$4.16 billion, was mainly due to the scheme's favourable price to the NRIs. It is significant to note that the contribution of the NRIs in the Middle East accounted for about 40-50 per cent of the total receipts. Presently the Gulf remittances to India are estimated around ten billion US dollars.

A small number of Indian immigrants in the Gulf countries particularly in the UAE are involved in such criminal activities as smuggling, trade in narcotics and arms, extortions, and other subversive activities. Dubai has long been associated with smuggling of gold, silver, precious metals, and electronic goods. A number of Indian and Pakistani smugglers live and work in Dubai. Until recently about 150 tons of gold and 1,300 tons of silver used to be smuggled into India every year.

The Emirate policy in regard to smuggling appears to be one of turning a blind eye to such activities, of course so long as there is no breach of the peace. Otherwise the local authorities are known to come down with a heavy hand on troublemakers. Thus, about three thousand Pakistani and five hundred Indian Muslim immigrants (mostly illegal) had to face deportation for their involvement in a demonstration against the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992.

One recent irritant in Indo-UAE relations involving some NRIs was the March 1993 bomb blasts in Bombay in which 257 persons were killed, over 700 injured and property worth Rs. 27 crore destroyed. Whether this was a reaction to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 is not known, but the fact remains that the Government of India had carried out a massive crackdown on Dawood Ibrahim's cartel. Dawood Ibrahim, who has extensive business interests through his D-Company in the UAE and who is presently suspected to be living in Pakistan, has been declared a "terrorist" associated with the Al-Qaeda by the Interpol.

Smuggling and use of South Asian children for camel races in the Gulf countries, elderly Arabs marrying poor, young Muslim girls and the clandestine flesh trade are some other dimensions of undesirable Indo-Gulf trade which are carried out by a few Indian migrants. In recent years extortion has emerged as another "industry" for some Gulf-based Indian "entrepreneurs". This enterprise is thriving in some metropolitan cities of India, especially Mumbai. Its conspicuous presence has been particularly noted in Bollywood (the Mumbai film industry), which annually produces about 800 films. It is well-known that the Abu Salem faction of the Dawood Ibrahim gang has been behind extortion threats to film personalities for the past five years. Film producers admit that extortion threats are common and that most of them pay up quietly after a bit of haggling over the sum. Between January 1995 and January 2000, ten well-known film personalities were gunned down or shot at by extortionists.

Apart from extortion, some Dubai-based gangsters have also infiltrated the Mumbai film industry. Globalisation of the entertainment industry, competition from cable television, piracy through the influx of DVDs and VCDs in the market, and unlawful private screening of films have all given a blow to the Indian film industry. It is against this backdrop that the infiltration of underworld black money has occurred in the industry.

The Mafia is not only interested in producing films but also in grabbing distribution rights of films in the blossoming overseas market. The overseas market, which until recently was a "mere pocket money" option for Hindi film-makers, is now emerging as the big factor. Not surprisingly, "the overseas territory started becoming a favorite demand of extortionists". It gives "the gangsters an added advantage. Using a dummy distributor as a front, he can launder the money under the guise of bringing in forex. This white money is used to finance his benami but legitimate businesses in the construction, transport and hotel industries".

If Dubai provides a safe haven for a variety of criminals, the pilgrimage cities of Mecca and Madina have emerged as child beggars' paradise. Estimatedly, about 1,000 to 1,500 Indian children (both boys and girls) are annually involved in this begging racket, especially during the Haj time. About 400 of them are sent from Murshidabad district of West Bengal alone. Estimates suggest

that the mafia running this racket earn about Rs 5 lakh per child annually (after deducting the expenditure). Depending on the number of children involved in the racket, the economics of begging in Saudi Arabia by Indian children runs into multi-crore-rupee business.

Social Organisation

The layman notion of social organisation among overseas Indian communities is represented in Rabindranath Tagore's analogy of the Banyan tree. Tagore held the view that Indian settlements abroad are akin to the spread of a grand old Banyan tree. Implicit in this analogy is the assumption that Indian culture as well as social organisational patterns can be transplanted overseas. This view obviously does not correspond with the reality. The nature and patterns of social organisation among overseas Indian communities have varyingly been affected by numerous local factors. Perhaps the most generic among them was the nature and conditions of employment. The kind of initial employment (e.g. indentured or wage labour, trade or profession, etc), and the socio-political conditions in the colonial/metropolitan societies under which such employment was taken up constitute the broad parameters of the evolution of varying social organisations and community life among overseas Indians. Changes in such social organisational elements as caste, kinship and family, religion, etc., have occurred due to these conditions in different places. Hypothetically, it would seem that the degree of freedom of immigrant Indians in various colonial societies was a major factor in transforming the indigenous patterns of social organisation among the overseas Indians. Thus overseas Indian communities in the West Indies, Mauritius and Fiji, which were primarily formed due to the slavery-like indentured labour migration, exhibit more radical transformation in their social organisational aspects than the less coercive *Kangani/Maistry*-recruited overseas Indian communities in Burma, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka. To countries where Indians migrated more freely under "passage" or "free" migration system (e.g., Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania), social organisation among them shows least transformation. Similar arguments can be advanced in relation to the more recent 'brain drain' emigrants and their communities in Britain, Canada and the USA. This remains an empirical issue whether the above-mentioned hypothesis is also applicable to the Indians in West Asia. The purpose of this brief discussion is to show that compared to the "Banyan Tree" view of the overseas Indians, it is far more fruitful to study the emerging patterns of social organisation among them from the political economy perspective.

The Banyan Tree view presumes that transplantation of socio-cultural patterns abroad is an unhindered exercise. This however, has never been the case. The migration process itself sets the limits on this presumption in terms of selectivity of migrants, their motivation and destination of migration, etc. The working and living conditions of Indians in the Persian Gulf region amply demonstrate this. To begin with Indian migration to West Asia is male-dominated. A great majority of Indian migrants to the Gulf either cannot afford or do not want to take along with them their wives, with the result that there is an extreme sex imbalance in the diaspora, particular among the workers. This seriously hampers the formation of an Indian "community" in the Gulf countries. The middle class comprising professionals and entrepreneurs are an exception but even here all family members are not there for a variety of reasons. Grown up children seldom live with their parents as most of the time they are in India or abroad for their higher education, which is expensive or lacking in most Gulf countries.

Short-term stay and inevitability of returning home is the hallmark of the Indian migration to the Persian Gulf region. A recent study in Bihar found that about two-thirds of the working class migrants to the Gulf stayed between 2 to 6 years, and 85 per cent between 2 to 8 years. The same study also found a high degree of circularity among the migrants: 25 per cent were once migrants, 42 per cent twice migrants, 21 per cent thrice migrants and 12 per cent had migrated four times or more (Rahman, 2003). We do not have comparable data about the middle classes. Thus short-term stay and circularity both these factors keep the “community” in a flux.

The attitude of the host society is another factor in any consideration of a community life among the immigrants. The Gulf countries are absolutely clear on this count.

As Weiner (1982) put it, “migrants are incorporated into the economic structure, but are excluded from the social structure. Separation, not integration or assimilation, is the goal Social contacts between Arabs and expatriates are minimized An increasing number of migrants stay for extended periods, and some may remain legally ‘temporary’ resident, with little notice they can be asked by the government to leave.”

The above quotation underlines a number of pertinent issues regarding the attitude of the host countries of the Middle East. Legally, there is no question of permanent resident status, naturalisation and citizenship for the Indian migrants. Politically, the Gulf regimes are authoritarian – no political or trade union rights. Economically, market forces and a bit of anarchy (split labour market in wage structure, coercion in domestic service sector etc) is the norm. Socially, the Gulf societies are patriarchal in ethos and practise. There is a certain social duality in terms of Arab vs non-Arab in the Gulf countries. Fortunately, there is no racism in the Gulf region but ethnic articulations such as *watni* vs. *non-watni* (native vs non-native), and Muslim vs non-Muslim are rather strong. Finally, Islam is the state religion in all the Gulf countries and any criticism - direct or indirect - is absolutely prohibited and can be severely punished.

The above discussion suggests that for the vast majority of Indian immigrants, particularly the working class, there is no organised community life in the Persian Gulf countries. Some degree of community life can be said to exist among the middle classes. To what extent this community life is based on traditional Indian social structure and institutions such as the caste system, family and kinship, village and caste panchayats (agencies of social control), religion and festivals, regional-linguistic ties, etc, is difficult to tell for lack of any study on the subject. In fact we do not know even the social origins of the contemporary professionals, traders and other entrepreneurial groups working and living in the Persian Gulf region. However, newspaper reports and knowledgeable people about the region suggest that regional-linguistic ties are particularly strong among the immigrants in the Gulf. These ties probably supersede religious ties. Thus community life appears to be organized in the form of regional/linguistic associations. It would not be out of place to suggest that the reproduction of the “community” among the Gulf Indians is perhaps done more through fresh immigration and less through procreation.

Except for those few who have been there for a very long time (mostly descendants of earlier generation of traders) and have identified themselves completely with the culture of the host societies, the vast majority of

Indian immigrants in the Gulf countries continue to hold the more or less same identities and patterns of cultural consumption as in India. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that for all practical purposes the Gulf countries are an extension of India. Most migrants to the Gulf return to India within two to six years and the non-labour migrants who visit India for attending marriages of relatives and for doing business, pilgrimage and sightseeing do so more often than any other groups of NRIs. There is also an impression that most Gulf NRIs seek spouses in India itself, which further extend and strengthen the bonds of family and kinship across the Arabian Sea.

The social life of Indians in most of the Gulf countries is highly segmented. They are required in most cases to live away from the areas of native Arabs at campsites where the workers have to live a regimented life. There is therefore little scope for building a "community" among the working class Indian immigrants in the Gulf countries. However, many middle class Indian migrants who expect to remain in the Gulf for many years live with their families and have begun to evolve a network of socio-cultural associations, which cater to their needs. These include schools, sports clubs, art centres, ladies associations, etc.

In this connection Weiner (1982) wrote in the early 1980s: "The process has only recently started, and it is done with a minimum of conspicuousness. Indian sports clubs in Kuwait, Bahrain, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Oman – places, in which the middle class can meet, eat, engage in sports, and conduct their social life – now have long waiting lists for membership."

In Oman land was given by the Sultan in 1974 to enable the Indians to build a social center. "There are now several schools for Indian children, a Roman Catholic Church, a few Protestant churches, and several temples, including a Gurudwara for the Sikh community" (Weiner, 1982). Similarly, Bahrain and Dubai also have one temple each, the Bahrainian temple being over 100 years old. Elsewhere "Hindus must observe their festivals in less conspicuous locations, or in private." Non-Muslim Indian immigrants in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to take along with them any religious books or idols. Any negative reference to Islam – even if mild or indirect – is considered blasphemy. Thus in 1992, a Sharjah court had awarded a six-year jail-term to eleven Indian theatre activists (all from Kerala) for staging a play "The Ants That Feast on Corpses"

Thanks to globalisation, the Indian entertainment industry which includes films, musical concerts, fashion shows, theatres, etc, has expanded tremendously in the 1990s. The Middle East connection through the underworld and/or otherwise is well known. Regular shows of films, music concerts and plays are organized in major cities of the region to packed houses. The audience includes not only the non-resident Indians but also the Arab masses. Perhaps this has something to do with cultural and civilizational affinity between India and the Middle East.

Sports and particularly cricket is another Indian industry which has been expanded and extended to the Gulf region. Although the favourite sport of Arabs is football, cricket matches are particularly popular in the region, particularly in the UAE. The World Cup has acquired considerable prestige and popularity. Similarly, Indian food, fashion and jewellery are some items which are gaining ground in the Middle East in a big way. As Professor Jain

put it in a wider context, “the diasporic Indians display a dogged attachment to religious, linguistic, culinary and performative aspects of Indianness.” Additionally, in the Arab/Islamic context the Indian expressive and performing arts serve as complementary items to art forms, which cannot develop due to religious sanctions.

13.4 Indian Diaspora in Israel

The Indian Jewry which has been living in India for about 2000 years consisted of three distinct communities: Bene Israel, Cochinis and Baghdadis. Whereas the origins of Bene Israel, and Cochini Jews who lived for centuries in the Konkan region and the Malabar Coast of India respectively are lost in antiquity, the Baghdadis immigrated into India from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Yemen etc. in the 18th and 19th centuries and were mostly settled in Bombay and Calcutta (Weil, 2002).

At the time of the creation of Israel in 1948 the total population of Jews in India was less than 30,000. In 1951 their estimated population was as follows: Bene Israel 20,000, Cochinis 2,500 and Baghdadis 5,000 (Israel, 1998, pp. 8-10). Since then emigration mainly to Israel and other countries has reduced their population in India to about 2,000 at present. According to one estimate, 25,214 Indian Jews had migrated to Israel between 1948 and 1987 (Abraham, 1995, p. 110). These emigrant Indian Jews and their descendents particularly the Bene Israel and Cochinis, are now very well settled in their new homeland. Today, about 60,000 Jews of Indian origin constitutes a separate diaspora in Israel.

The settlement and “absorption” of Indian Jews in Israel has not been an easy task. Thanks to the Israeli state-controlled “Absorption of immigrants” policy the Indian Jews who in India were mainly city-based and specialized in a variety of occupations were made to settle in agriculture-based *moshavim* or development towns (Abraham, 1995, p. 115; Kushner, 1973). This “from ship to village” settlement policy in the case of the Indian and other Oriental Jews initially resulted in their economic marginalisation in the Israeli society. The marginalisation process was further compounded by the educational, cultural and welfare policies and programmes of the government.

The State Education Law of 1953 and the “Jewish Consciousness Programme” of the late 1950s advocated “single curriculum” for all Jewish children, which was heavily loaded with Ashkenazi history and literature. Extensive courses in European subjects kept the children of Oriental Jews at a disadvantage. In the 1960s the Bene Israel were socially discriminated against on the ground that they were not “full Jews”. Their marriages were subject to verification. A socio-religious issue soon turned into a major political controversy. In 1963 a bill declaring the Bene Israel as “full Jews” was defeated by the Mapai and National Religious Party. Finally in 1964 the relevant directive against the Bene Israel was removed by the Chief Rabbinate following a resolution passed by the Knesset in a specially convened session on the issue (Stritzower, 1966). Though the controversy was resolved, it left the community stigmatised.

Since then the Indian Jews in Israel have made significant progress in all walks of life. There is considerable educational and occupational mobility among them. Initially they had to work extremely hard in order to get adjusted in the new economic and socio-cultural environment in Israel. In spite of discrimination and challenges the Indian Jews have been successful in adapting themselves to the Israeli society. The formation of associations

like Central Organisation of Indian Jews and Israel-India Cultural Association in recent years reflects the consolidation of the Indian Jewish diaspora in Israel.

13.5 Conclusion

India's trade ties and cultural relations with the Persian Gulf region date back to antiquity, but the evidence of Indian settlement in the region dates back only to the sixteenth century. Small communities of Indian traders called *baniyans* existed in present day Iraq, Iran, Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When the region came under British influence in the 19th century, Indian merchant communities flourished in a number of towns in the Gulf countries. The Indians served as bankers, importers and exporters, customs, farmers, and agents for local merchants, government contractors, financiers, etc.

The emergence of the Gulf countries as oil producing and exporting economies and the consequent demand for labour changed the size and complexion of the Indian and other expatriate communities in the region. With the increase in oil prices in the mid-seventies Indians began to migrate in large numbers to the Gulf countries for a variety of jobs, and this trend has been continuing since then. Currently, there are about 3.5 million Indian expatriates in the six GCC countries and Yemen. Indians constitute about one-third of the total expatriate population and ten percent of the total GCC population. The largest number of Indians live in Saudi Arabia (1.6 million) followed by the UAE (1.3 million), Oman (450,000) and Kuwait (400,000). Thanks to the colonial legacy, the Indian diaspora suffers from a number of disabilities in the Gulf societies/states which are essentially rentier and patriarchal in nature.

Outside the Persian Gulf region Israel hosts the second largest permanently settled Indian community in West Asia and North Africa. Following the creation of Israel in 1948 over 25,000 Indian Jews had migrated to Israel until 1987. In spite of facing many difficulties in Israel, Indians are now very well settled there. At present they number around 60,000. The Indian diaspora in West Asia is one of the least researched areas of contemporary transnational human movement and settlement.

13.6 Further Reading

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