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## The conceptual understanding of diaspora: A sociological perspective

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### Abstract

The present article deals with the theories and concepts related to diaspora from a sociological perspective. It analyses a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that organizes our concepts of and understanding of the empirical world of diaspora in systematic way. This chapter deals with the typology and features of Diaspora, Approaches to Diaspora and presents a Classical versus Contemporary Understanding of Diaspora.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Migration, Movement, Homeland, Culture

### Introduction

#### Understanding Diaspora

The term 'diaspora' defined as the "dispersion of the Jews among the gentile nations" and as "all those Jews who live outside the biblical land of Israel". In addition, the term refers to "the situation of people living outside their traditional homeland" (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1993). In common, language the diaspora refers "the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Compass, 2005).

"The term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word "Diaspeirein" (Diaspeirein = dia+speirein), 'dia' = across, 'sperin' = to scatter'. The term originated in the Septuagint (Deuteronomy 28:25) in the phrase *esë diaspora en pasais basileias tës gës* though shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Compass 2005). It was originally used to refer to the dispersion of Jews after the Babylonian exile in 586 BC and to the aggregate of Jews or Jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine. Cohen argues that Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile. Other people abroad who have also maintained strong collective identities have, in recent years, defined themselves as diasporas, though they were neither active agents of colonization nor passive victims of persecution. Therefore, it is clear that the meaning of diaspora varies a great. However, all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that "the old country"- a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. That claim may be strong or weak, or boldly or meekly articulated in a given circumstances or historical period, but a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background. (See Cohen 2001) [3]. In current parlance, however, the term is applied to describe any group of people who are so dispersed (Baumann: 2000) [2].

For the concept to be applicable, strong collective images of the homeland should exist. In terms of identity, there is a strong sense of community with other members of that Diaspora and an uneasy relationship with the host society (Safran: 1991). That is, Diaspora is something more than 'ethnic minority' resulting from migration. Diaspora requires a trans-national existence-dispersal and diffusion throughout the world. In addition, a time-aspect is required; dispersal alone does not necessarily imply the constitution of a Diaspora population. It needs to have existed for some time and it needs to be an enduring condition. However, we do not necessarily see the Diaspora concept as implying everlasting dispersal or a firm establishment in new societies.

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Diasporas may be enduring yet define themselves as temporary residents where they are. The central role of homeland is often accentuated in definition of diaspora. However, this has recently become an issue of contention in debate. For example, Clifford has argued that a homeland lost must not necessarily serve a crucial role in identity formation in the diaspora. Rather:

“Decentred, lateral connections may be as important as those formed teleology of origin/return. In addition, a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering adaptation or resistance may be as important as the projection of specific origin” (Clifford 1994:306) <sup>[6]</sup>.

It is thus not necessarily territory, but the lack of it, which defines diasporic communities. The relationships between territory, displacement, and resistance are complicated. It is in the process of displacement that identity is shaped, or reshaped, but that process requires a sense of a place left behind. In order for displacement to serve a function in meaning-creation, place or the imagination of a shared place must have existed beforehand. (Schulz, Helena Lindholm 2003:10) <sup>[12]</sup>

### Typology and Features of Diaspora

Cohen (2001) <sup>[3]</sup> in “Global diasporas” presented a typology of diasporas such as victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas is more unambiguous than the history and development of diasporas suggests. Some groups take dual or multiple forms; others change their character over time. Africans and Armenians are shown to be analogous victim diasporas. The British have been represented as imperial diasporas, the Indians as labour diasporas, while the trading diasporas have been typified by the Chinese and Lebanese. Finally, the people of the Caribbean abroad are usefully characterized by as a cultural diaspora. Further, he says that he is not suggesting a perfect match between a particular ethnic group and a specific type of diaspora. Quite the contrary Cohen fully aware that the Jews were not only a victim diaspora, but also one that was periodically successful in trade and commerce and one also that now evinces a high-level degree of cosmopolitanisms appropriate to our global age. Likewise, the Chinese were indentured labourers (therefore a labour diaspora) as well as a successful trading diaspora. In the case of Indians, exactly the reverse holds. While they are regarded as archetypes of a labour diasporas, they also have an important mercantile history (Cohen 2001) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Cohen (2001:26) <sup>[3]</sup> gives common features of diaspora. These are

1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;
2. alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;
3. a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievement;
4. an idealisation of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
5. the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;
6. a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the believe in a common fate;

7. a troubled relationship with the host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;
8. a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement;
9. the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.

### Approaches to Diaspora

Vertovec (1996) <sup>[14]</sup> suggests four ways of approaching the idea of diaspora.

(1) Social category: The first and most literal, is that of social category: for example, referring exclusively to the experience of the Jews, who dispersed throughout the world over the centuries. This concept of diaspora often focused on a forced displacement and therefore, was centered on negative experiences in terms of alienation, loss and victimization.

(2) The second way of thinking about diaspora, membership of a diasporic community implies a self-conscious attachment to the place of origin as well as a sense of being somewhere else; a sense that one can share with others whose roots are left behind in the same country. To that extent, the first-generation immigrant may have a choice as to whether or not to become part of diaspora. There is less of a choice for daughters or sons when the parents have clung to their cultural and linguistic roots: these people and their offspring, if they retain that sense of identity, constitute a diaspora, but the term diaspora is sometimes applied rather loosely to cover all individuals who share a foreign heritage within the host culture (Vertovec 1996) <sup>[14]</sup>.

(3) The third ways in which the term diaspora is used is a ‘mode of cultural production’: Cultural identity is fluid, produced and reproduced so that it often results in hybrid forms of expression. in British South Asian example, bhangra music or curry houses , neither of which could have come into existence without the interaction of different cultures; each marks the presence of the diasporic community within the majority culture and the way that each has influenced the shape of the other (Hall,1990; Vertovec, 1996) <sup>[14]</sup>. This cultural approach sees the diaspora as part(s) of the host culture(s) and vice-versa.

(4) ‘diaspora as a problem’: Transnational communities may be, and often are seen as problems of threats to state security and the social order when seen from right-wing perspectives within the host countries (Vertovec 1996, p.54) <sup>[14]</sup>. Here the individual’s connection with the country of origin calls into question their loyalty to the host country. The existence of hybrid cultural forms and multiple identities are viewed as diluting or undermining the traditional norms of indigenous population.

### Classical Versus Contemporary Understanding of Diaspora

In the contemporary world situation, the classical definition and characteristics of diaspora may be a debatable issue in several ways and can give a deeper probe and balanced understanding of diaspora. Such as

1. Unlike the classical diasporas the modern diaspora is not necessarily a product of forced dispersion. For example, the Indian in the post-1970 to developed countries has been a result of pull factors then push.
2. The notion of the original homeland arises several problems because it could be used to mean different things in different contexts. Therefore, the collective memory, vision or myth, which shapes the identity of the diasporic community are bound to be in a state of flux. This is especially time across generations and among the twice migrants. Another group of people feels that there is nowhere truly home for the diasporas. The diaspora are de-territorialized groups living in a state of permanent exile.
3. The classical understanding about the diasporas that they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulted from it. This is again a little bit problematic because it depends upon specificity of the context since identification with the host society varies from one context to another depending on the socio-economic status of the immigrant and the politico-economic and legal conditions of the host society.
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would eventually return when conditions are appropriate. As opposed to the traditional view, "myth of return" is no longer considered to be important defining characteristics of diaspora especially with the second generation. Many young South Asians who have been born and brought up in other countries do not want to return to their parental homeland. The successive generations reconstitute their culture and cultural identity within specific diasporic context. New generations of the Asians in Britain as Brah writes, even when they describe themselves as 'Asian', this is not to reaching back to some 'primordial Asian' identity. What they are speaking of is a modality of British Asian-ness. These homegrown Asian British identities inaugurate a fundamental generational change. Sometime even when there is an opportunity or a compulsion to migrate, they tend to do so to other countries, which offer greater economic opportunities rather than returning to the place of their origin. For example, the Fiji Indians preferred to migrate to New Zealand and Australia than to India after 1987 crisis.
5. The believe that they should committed to the maintenance of restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity. This aspect of the diaspora of engaging in the politics related to the homeland and the mobilisation of communities around it in varying degrees transform ethnic communities into diasporas. This has also manifested itself in the support, lead to various ethnic movements like the Khalistan movement in the home country.

Vertovec (1998) <sup>[15]</sup> observes that diaspora- is the term often used today to describe practically any population which is considered 'de-territorialized' or 'trans-national'-that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation states or indeed span the globe". To take a different stand Unlike Vertovec, Tambiah (2000) <sup>[13]</sup> argues, "There is intensification in the creation of diverse diasporas populations in many locations, who are engaged

in complex interpersonal and intercultural relationships with both their host societies and their societies of origin. Rather than being deterritorialized, they in fact experience and live in dual locations and manifest dual consciousness". In this regard as Needham has pointed out that, what is required for the study of diaspora is not a single definition but a polythetic field of enquiry.

In the contemporary world of trans-national cultural exchanges movements of people between nations is no longer an exile in any complete sense. Identities and cultures are delocalized, but rarely detached from memories of the past places and times. As Rayaprol says that "The disjuncture between place and culture cannot be characterized either as a mere homogenization of cultures (e.g. 'Americanization' or 'Westernization' of the world or the melting pot thesis) or as a heterogeneous blooming of distinctive identities independent of one another (e.g. the metaphor of 'salad bowl' in the US). In Geertz's (1986) memorable phrase, 'like nostalgia, diversity is not what it used to be'. People evoke the past in highly selective ways and construct a present that is a hybrid of multiple cultures and experiences. As a result, neither nostalgia nor diversity remains unproblematically pure and simple" (Rayaprol 1997:2) <sup>[8]</sup>

The 'homelands' people reconstruct tend to be fictive communities, part real and part imagined. In imaginary homelands, Rushdie writes of the sense of loss felt by exiles and expatriates and their urge to reclaim what was lost. In the process of reclamation, he says, we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; ..... We will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind..... (Rushdie 1991) <sup>[9]</sup>

The deterritorialized identities of refugees, immigrants, and other displaced peoples, facing what Said (1979) <sup>[11]</sup> has called 'a generalized condition of homelessness', are reconstructed in imaginative ways in their new environments. For thousands of these displaced persons, it is journey from the ex-colony to the post-colony, where they experience and express their nostalgia for the past in various forms. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) <sup>[4]</sup> points out, Anderson's (1983) <sup>[1]</sup> idea of imagined communities assumes a new meaning and life in the immigrant context.

It becomes most visible how imagined communities come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced people cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality... Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:10-11) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Rayaprol raises, a central problematic question in immigrant culture that how does one conceptualize the process of reconstruction. Liisa Malkki (1992) <sup>[7]</sup> points out, the dominant metaphor to describe the relocation of peoples and culture has been botanical, that of 'transplantation'. For an example these books like 'The Banyan Tree' (Tinker 1977) on Indian immigrants and 'Transplanting Religious Traditions' (Fenton 1988) suggest that the relocation of immigrants is a smooth journey of people who neatly pack their roots and transplant them later in an orderly manner in the new society. Such a representations glosses over the fact

that immigrant constitute an epistemological crisis of great magnitude, involving changes in legal and political status, ruptures in families, struggles for economic mobility, and tensions between the older social and cultural values and the norms and values of the new society (Rayaprol 1997:3-4) <sup>[8]</sup>.

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