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Breaking Links: Post-partition Indian Migration to Thailand

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Abstract: Thailand has long been a destination for South Asian migrants as well as a second home for an Indian diaspora. Recent migrations such as occurred in the post-partition period have been relatively understudied, however. In this paper, I focus upon the migration to Thailand in the late 1940s in order to understand how recent arrivals influenced and integrated into existing transnational communities. I am specifically interested in the trajectories of individual migrants and the public representation and organization of Thailand's evolving Indian diasporic community.
Southeast Asia has long historical relations with India dating back to over 2000 years. Coedes (1968) in his book " *Historie ancienne des etats hindouises d' Extreme-Orient"* give a detailed account of these relations between India and Southeast Asia. The result was the spread of Hinduism into the region over many centuries along with an untold number of South Asian practitioners. Indian settlement in Southeast Asia, documented from as early as the 6th century BCE, has contributed greatly to the development of the national culture of the countries in this region.
As a result of the historical linkage between South and Southeast Asia, Indians moving to Southeast Asia are not entirely 'foreigners'. This paper explores the trajectories of the more recent Indian diasporic community, specifically those that settled in Thailand in the late 1940s. I attempt to analyze the aspirations of the newer migrants and their social life outside of their homeland. The first part of this paper will began with an understanding of diaspora in general followed by a brief history of Indian diaspora in specific countries in Southeast Asian region followed by a detailed account of the Indian diaspora in Thailand. This paper is based on past literature written on Indian diaspora, personal observations, and interview with Indians residing in Bangkok.

1. What exactly is a Diaspora?

Vertovec (1999) explains Diaspora as
> …a term used to describe any population considered transnational, which originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, span the globe (1999: 277).

Cohen argues that a diaspora emerges from the growing sense of group ethnic consciousness in different countries. A consciousness sustained through a sense of distinctiveness, common history, and the belief in a common fortune (1997: 26). He places diasporas into five main categories: *victim diasporas* (Jews, Armenians), *labor diasporas* (Indian indentured labor, Italians, Filipinos), *colonial diasporas* (Ancient Greeks, British, Portuguese), *trade diasporas* (Lebanese, Chinese), and *cultural diasporas* (Caribbean). The long established Diasporas of the Armenian, Chinese, Indian, Jews and Irish are seen as more of a mature diaspora with a long history of migration and integration.
One such example of mature diaspora is the Indian diaspora in Malaysia. Over the past 130 years, the number of foreign migrant workers in Malaysia has grown from around 84,000 to over 3

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million. These migrant workers mainly came from China and India and were mostly on a semi-permanent employment contracts. The more recent foreign workers come from South and Southeast Asian countries, and are dominated by the Indonesians. These workers migrate to Malaysia for economic opportunities.

After 1870s, Britain's 'forward movement' in Malaya resulted in the country's increasing integration into the global economy which enabled the production of mineral and agricultural commodities. Labor migration thus became an important element of Malaya's economic growth model and the related social structures. The country's main commodities of exports included tin, coffee and sugar. While the Chinese entrepreneurs monopolized the tin production and recruited workers from China to work in the mines, European planters largely involved in coffee and sugar cultivation and relied on indentured labor from India. In early 20th century, the planters switched to rubber because of the rubber boom in 1909-10. The rubber cultivation required employment of a large, cheap and "disciplined" workforce and British India with the poverty-stricken population and caste-ridden society was the ideal provider of this labor since were cheap and were willing to work under new conditions to escape the caste restrictions in India. The state and planters saw the Indian laborer moved for Malaya as another tradable commodity in the production cycle (Kaur 2013). The recruitment was done through two systems - the indenture system and its alternative, the Kangani system. Under the indenture system the workers were employed with written labor contracts through either labor recruitment firms in Madras (Southern India) or employers sending their own agents to south India to recruit workers directly. These agents would provide a certain amount of money as advance to individuals willing to migrate on the condition of signing the contract to work for a fixed period (ranging from three to five years) upon their arrival in Malaya. However after 1910 the kangani system (informal system) was brought into use. Under this system whenever the Malayan estate needed more labor they would send their most trusted workers as labor brokers (kangani) to recruit people from the kangani's own locality or caste. This lead to chain migration since labor was recruited only from specific caste and specific places in south India. The kangani system meant that the labor recruited were superior compared to the indentured labor since they were recruited by people with personal knowledge of resource pool. Additionally under the kangani, more of women were recruited as labor. However the system was abolished in 1938 as it gave a lot of power to kangani who abused it for personal benefits.

Unlike Indian diaspora in Malaysia, which was more of a forced labor, the Indian migration to Thailand was more voluntary ranging from traders to political refugees. The migration and settlement of Indians in Thailand varied between different linguistic groups like the Punjabis, Sindhis, Parsis, Gujarati Sunnis, Dawoodi Bohras, Tamils, Pathans and the Bengalis. The first traders who came to Thailand were the Bohra Muslims from Gujarat and the Muslim and Hindus from Tamil Nadu. The Gujaratis were mainly involved in precious stones and rice exports to India. The other groups were involved mainly in textiles. The little India (Pahurat) is a centre of the Indian commercial community of mostly Sikhs. Additionally the Dawoodi Bohra Muslims and the Tamil Hindus with interethnic marriages among the earlier migrants have led to indigenization of their institutions.

The number of people of Indian origin in Thailand range between 100,000 to 150,000[1] with many living here for generations. However the actual number can be much higher than this official counts as an increasing number of Indian settlers have gained Thai citizenship overtime. The Tamil community has been in Thailand since the 1800s. The Tamils were mainly bankers who dominated rural credit transactions in large parts of mainland Southeast Asia including Burma, Thailand, Malaya, and Cochin China between 1880 and 1930 (Rudner 1994, cited in Markovits 2009: 18). The large-scale immigration from Punjab happened in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

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[1] Data from the Ministry of Indian Overseas Affairs website: http://moia.gov.in/writereaddata/pdf/NRISPIOS-Data(15-06-12)new.pdf

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with economic and political changes brought about by the British Empire. This led the male Sikhs from land owning Jat caste to either join the British Indian Army or work overseas to make an addition to their family incomes. Between 1880 and 1920, Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, Burma, and China saw an increasing number of Sikh migrants seeking job opportunities (Dusenery 1989: 5-7). Although the Indian community in Thailand seems small, it holds a great significance to the study of Indian diasporic communities living outside of their homeland. Indians in Thailand have made significant contributions to the host country, both financially and socio-economically, and at the same time maintain their ethnic links with their homeland. This is evident by the fact that most maintain a home in both India and Thailand. The increasing population of Indians in Thailand has created subsectors in the Thai economy to service sectors like Indian food and Indian services. At the same time, a regular visit to India by these Indians living in Thailand is common and children are sent to India to further their education. Majority of the Indians settled in Thailand hold a Thai nationality and engages in various business fields based on their ethnicity as mentioned earlier. Additionally there are a large number of Indian professionals working in Thai private companies and other professional fields. There are several community organizations run by different groups like Thai Bharat Cultural Lodge established in 1930 to promote cultural interaction between India and Thailand. The Lodge also runs two schools in northern Thailand for the Thai students. Another organization is the India-Thai Chamber of Commerce, the oldest foreign trade chamber in Thailand formally registered as India Chamber of Trade in 1969 and had its name changed to the India-Thai Chamber of Commerce in 1974.

2. Patterns of Indian Migration in Thailand

The motivation behind the groups of Indians to leave their homeland and form a diaspora in Thailand ranges from frustration to attraction. The factors provoking this movement include social, economic, or political coercion prompting people to leave their homeland in search of improved opportunities. According to Mani (1993), the most important factor was economic. The poverty-ridden life in the villages, due to droughts, crop failures and unemployment, prompted Indians to move to Thailand to seek better opportunities. In addition, political problems like the partition of India and Pakistan in late 1940s was important factor. The Indians (Hindus and Punjabis) living in Pakistan had to leave their homes, businesses, and belongings during partition in search of a secure place. They were faced with the challenges of integrating with an alien society and to re-create their new homes. Since Thailand was comparatively a peaceful country and there were family links with the earlier settled immigrants, it made it easier for the politically displaced families during partition to create their new homes in Thailand. In addition the economic success of the earlier immigrant also attracted more Indians to test their fortunes in Thailand. Generally the immigrants followed the migration of their earlier relatives. As Brusie & Varrel (2012) argues Diasporas take root in places and places are the markers on migration routes. Migration and migrants change space and create places reflecting *where* people come from, *how* they migrated and *what* relation they have to the host society.

Women on the other hand mostly arrived in Thailand due to their marriage with men settled in Thailand. These factors are also seen as the contributing factors for the internal migration within Thailand. The Indians that landed in provinces found Bangkok more attractive for capital gains and thus moved to Bangkok after sometime. Since Bangkok already had a number of Indian settlements, it was easier for the newcomers to settle in the areas with Indian concentration (Sandhu & Mani 1993: 957-959). Additionally men after getting married to women settled in Bangkok (and vis versa) got the opportunity to move to the capital city for better fortunes.

3. The Religious aspect of the Indian Diaspora

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Since a home was recreated, there was also a necessity of religious places to serve the social needs of the diasporic Indian community which in the case of Thailand was relatively unchallenging. For Indian communities, religion is an important element of Indian diaspora (Vertovec 2000; Parekh 1993). The strong roots of belonging come from Hinduism, an ethnic religion of India (Parekh 1993: 140). Over 85 percent of overseas Indians worldwide are Hindus who refer to their homeland as 'Mother India' with deep spiritual and emotional admirations fulfilled through routine visits and pilgrimages. However not every overseas Indian is a Hindu. Several religious minorities exist within the Indian diaspora such as the Muslims and Sikhs. The heterogeneity and diversity are the factors that distinguish the Indian diaspora from their counterparts in the respective countries (Singh 2003: 4-5). What really bind the Indian diaspora together are the emotions, acquaintances, customs, feelings and attachments that appeal to generations of emigrants for their motherland. These create a sense of belongingness and a unity in diversity through a unified identity of the motherland. Indian media plays an important role in preserving this identity among the ethnically diverse Indian diaspora by promoting the Indian values, customs, and the links to the motherland. The long history of migration has made the Indian diaspora experience great social, religious, economic, political, cultural, and other changes. This may involve abandoning some traditional practices, adapting new one and evolving a distinct way of life overtime. Thus I agree with Ben-Rafael (2010) that diasporic conditions under which they live, are important to be understood. These conditions may vary both within and between diasporas. Diasporic community may want to absorb in the new environment, but when they attribute to their dispersion a particular significance that values bearing loyalty, they try to remain distinct from the others, as a diasporic community. This is made possible with the establishment of institutions and networks that help them to adopt the common patterns of their ethnic group grounded in them. Thus diasporic community tends to maintain their original identity by being less absorbent to assimilation when compared to the non-diasporic groups (Ben-Rafael 2010: 1-2). However with Hinduism having a historical base in Thailand, it is easier for the Hindu diasporic community to feel rather more at home. Weber (1978) sees religion, history or a language bringing in the sense of belongingness and thus being the major components of community formation. Just like any other religious communities, contemporary Indians focus on the construction and preservation of their religious institutions wherever their work and life takes them (Waghorne 2004: 14). Building a religious place of worship is a commitment to the tradition tangibly as increasing concern for old values happens when some migrants in the diaspora try to distinguish their way of life from the surrounding cultural environment (ibid 2004: 19). However in Thailand, Hindu influences are found everywhere even in Thai temples raising questions like how Hindu are Thai temples.

Tweed (2006) sees religions situating individuals and communities in time and space positioning them into the four chronotypes: the body, the home, the homeland, and the cosmos (Tweed 2006: 101). Religion positions the body in relations to other chronotypes and the religious also position themselves by constructing, adorning, and inhabiting domestic space. Therefore the imagined boundaries of the home shrink and expand across cultures as the religious participate in finding a space and making a place. Homeland is an imagined territory inhabited by an imagined community and thus its borders shift overtime and across cultures. Religious homemaking creates a social space drawing boundaries between *us* and *them*, thereby constructing a collective identity (ibid: 104-111). Religion is thus a social phenomenon providing a group identity and a source of personal inspiration thereby creating a space for the migrants. This space in Thailand was easily created for the Indian diaspora with the already presence of Hinduism and an addition of more recent religious processions on special days like for the Hindus on Ganesh Chaturthi, and Navratri, and for the Sikhs on the birthdays of their gurus. What is evident is the presence of an increasing number of self defined Buddhist in these religious events that also share a common belief in Hindu gods as an

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integral part of their daily lives. In her study on Hindu diaspora in Singapore, Sinha studies the importance of religious processions:

> …processions serve several functions: spreading divine power, marking territory, enhancing unity and solidarity within the community, and registering religious distinction and difference (Vineeta Sinha 2008: 159).

The overseas Indian community represents different regions, languages, cultures and faiths. In Thailand, the Punjabi migrants centered their activities on the Gurdwara originally established in 1909 and was later moved to Phaurat in 1932. The Hindu from Uttar Pradesh founded the Vishnu Mandir in 1920 acting as the cultural and literary center for the community. Later in 1924, the Arya Samaj was founded and the Punjabi Hindus formed the Hindu Sabha in the same year, which later was changed to Hindu Samaj in 1945. These were formal religious organizations established to serve the religious needs of the Indian community in Thailand. As Sinha puts it in the case of Singapore, "efforts to reproduce elements of Hinduism outside India reveal a continuous orientation to India, which is approached as an authentic, legitimate religious-cultural reservoir for nourishing the religion beyond Indian shores" (Vineeta Sinha 2011: 25).

With the reproduction of religions outside of homeland, there also emerges the need for religious commodities giving rise to a market to serve the diasporic community in particular. The Hindu life features a religious life requiring performance of religious duties that gives rise to an informal network of Brahmins based on the ritual services to the laity. Under this informal network, Brahmins perform their religious activities in a religious market of demand and supply. This develops a demand for religious labor of the Brahmins opening an opportunity for Brahmins from India to make a living by providing their religious services. With the establishment of Hindu communities, a loose network of relationships started with the Brahmins in Hinduism (Gyanis in Sikhism), acting as the key religious figures. When an individual approaches the Divine (Hindu or Sikh Gods), the Brahmins or Gyanis became important mediators between an individual and God, thereby acquiring an explicitly strong position. Essentially for the Hindu community the Brahmins[2] are a must to conduct rituals like marriages and others like celebration of festivals and delivering religious teachings. It is virtually impossible to conduct any religious ceremony without a Brahmin[3] since Brahmins maintain their authority over religious services and possess the knowledge to perform rituals. Thus temples (or places of worship) and the mediators (Brahmins and Gyanis) become significant part of the social life of Indian diaspora. Furthermore to fulfill the religious requirements of the diaspora, these mediators were imported from India on short-term renewable contracts. However the institutions can employ only a limited number of individuals due to the visa and work permit requirements by the Thai law. Overtime with more Indians migrating to Thailand, the demand for Brahmins to perform religious activities also accelerated. Additionally more cultural communities were established to serve the cultural needs of the growing Indian population in Thailand, which again required increasing number of Brahmins. This prompted the already employed Brahmins to invite their friends and relatives from their own villages to migrate legally and sometimes illegally on tourist visas to fulfill the growing demand of their religious services. Thus the Brahmins working in Thailand originate mainly from the same or surrounding village in India and maintain their religious network. These Brahmins (and Gyanis) help to maintain a major link between the diasporic Indian communities and the motherland. Revered saints from India are often invited by representatives of the Indian communities in Thailand and other neighboring

[2] A priestly class that has spiritual supremacy by birth. Being the highest-ranking caste in the society, this class represents the ideal of ritual purity and social prestige. Because of this purity, Brahmins are called upon to perform important religious duties like officiating weddings, funerals, ceremonies, and interpreting and teaching the scriptures

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countries to give preaching. There is also a reverse movement where pilgrims travel from Bangkok to Varanasi, Amritsar, and other holy places in India. Often times these pilgrimages and their itineraries are organized by Indian religious organizations in Bangkok.

4. Acculturation with the host society or Preservation of the Ethic heritage?

As Baumann argues the preservation of religious specificity is different from dominant religious affiliation of the host country but does not hinder the social integration of the group. Instead keeping the heritage of difference and a merging with the host society's socio-economic patterns go well together (Bauman 2004: 77). The Indian communities in Thailand do maintain their native religions and cultures in addition to taking part in the religious activities of the host country. An evidence of the acculturation with Thai society is, for example, the observance of Buddhist holidays and Royal ceremonies by the Indians along with the local Thais. A representative from each of the ethnic Indian group is present on the celebration of Royal birthdays and ceremonies to observe the rituals as in the picture below.

Head Brahmin of Hindu Samaj presenting a religious image to HRH Princess Soamsawali

Diasporas maintain 'dual homeness' securing a collective in its local environment deepened with an external reference of belongingness (Ben-Rafael 2010). Diasporas are often motivated to settle in areas already inhabited by other diasporic communities. In Thailand, the long existence of the Chinese community for example and the historical presence of the earlier settled Indians have prompted more Indians to migrate in more recent centuries. Several generations of Indians have settled in Thailand but maintain links with their homeland. Transport and communication facilities have also eased these links with the motherland and with other similar diasporic ethnic communities in different countries. In addition, securing jobs and their futures insert pressure on diasporic communities to acculturate into the new host environment. With effective acculturation, they learn the host language and acquire new symbols. Both new and earlier settled Indians have acquired written and spoken Thai language proficiency and have a picture or a poster of HRM the King in their homes to show their respect and the inclination to be part of the Thai society. On the Kings birthday, the Hindu temples observe it as a special day, which sometimes include processions organized by the temple authorities as in the picture below.

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Priests and the members of the Indian community carry the King's photo and the Thai flag on the occasion of the Kings' birthday.

5. Identity formation

As Brah points out:

> the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from the later generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was left behind recently, and by the experiences of distruption and displacement as one tries to reorient ate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political, and cultural realities (Brah 1996: 190).

As the diasporic community settles over generations a new national identity is acquired that becomes the primary identity and the original identity subsides to a secondary level (Ben-Rafael 2010:4). This certainly holds true in the case of Thailand where the younger generation of Indians, born or bought up in Thailand, identify them and maintain loyalty with Thailand rather than India. This however leads to the problem of identity crisis especially for these young Indians, where they are recognized by the non-Indians as Indians with their ethnic looks but are not seen as Indians by the fellow Indians when visiting India. This also opens a space for the newly developing hybrid identities whereby an individual is no longer positioned between two cultures (Anwar 1975, cited in Mukudam & Mawani 2007: 203) but rather is allowed to self-identify himself as an Indian, Thai, or a Thai-Indian depending on the situations. Sometimes however this hybrid identity leaves the younger generation in a dilemma- 'who exactly are we?'

Aman is a 20 year old third generation Sikh, whose grandparents originally lived in Pakistan and migrated to Thailand during the India-Pakistan partition in 1947. Aman sees himself more of a Thai as he was born in Thailand and went through the Thai education system. His parents are comparatively more Indian and patriotic even though they cannot speak Hindi or Punjabi (their native language) fluently. Aman and his parents visit Thai temples more often than the Gurudwaras. "We like the Buddhist teachings and carry our Sikh identity at the same time by wearing the turban." However the grandparents who are living together as a joint family carry the Sikh identity forward. Aman is maintaining the Sikh identity only for the sake of his grandparents. He says, "I will wait until my grandparents are not alive and will cut my hair. It does not help me in anything and I don't see why I have to do it. I will choose what is good and carry on with it and if it's not good I will not carry it". The turban differentiates him from others on the outside and puts him into

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the identity crisis. However on the inside every Indian family including Aman's, maintain Indian traditions. For example the kids are sent to International schools run by Indians so that they can learn the home language (Hindi or Punjabi) while being in a foreign land. In addition the food culture is also maintained where Indian food is served during the weekdays while weekends are generally left people to eat outside depending on their likings. Every Sunday people from the Indian community will gather at their religious places of worship to perform their religious duties and these gatherings thus become social gathering of particular communities. For example the Sikhs gather in Gurdwaras and Hindus gather in their temples on Sundays in Bangkok. Since Sunday is a day off after a busy week of work, it provides an ideal day of the week to organize gatherings where people can revitalize and reunite themselves with their fellow community and community members. These places of worship organize special religious activities like sermons, rituals, or community eating bringing the members of the community together. One such example is the Gau-dan (donating a cow), which is organized annually at the Hindu temple in Bangkok. The members of the Hindu community through donations support the event. Cow is of great importance to the Hindu religion. Even during the ancient times, kings and others donated cows to Brahmins since donating a cow during a lifetime brought great merits to the individual. The temple makes such merit accumulating opportunities available to the Hindu community living in Thailand allowing them to feel home away from home.

Head Brahmin of Hindu Samaj with assisting Brahmins collectively performs the ritual of gau-dan with the member of Hindu community in Bangkok.

6. Conclusion

This paper began with exploration of the term diaspora and the importance of the study of the Indian diaspora in parts of Southeast Asia. Several diasporic communities lie in this region and a study of these communities is essential to the understanding of how the ethnic cultural and social lives are maintained while being away from their homeland. The overseas Indian community constitutes a diverse, heterogeneous and wide-ranging global community representing different regions, languages, cultures and faiths. The common thread that binds them together is the idea of India and its core values. Overseas Indians comprises of the People of Indian Origin and Non Resident Indians and are amongst the communities that have successfully integrated with the local community of the host country. In addition the Indian diasporic communities share a strong bond with their country of origin reflected in their language, cultures and traditions that have been maintained over the centuries, and continue to be unique. The growing popularity of Indian films, dance, music, arts and culture in foreign countries is an evidence of that. In more recent years, the relationship between India and its diasporic community is growing with the help of new

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transportation and communication facilities.

The focus of this paper was on Indian diaspora in Thailand that migrated here for different reasons, some voluntarily for economic opportunities and others forced by circumstances like the India-Pakistan partition. The Indian diasporic community reproduced traits of their culture, like language, food, dress, and religion in Thailand. However these traits did not remain fixed but elements from the host majority culture were also adopted and combined to create new hybrid forms. Such hybrid forms are created by mainly the third generation (and some times the second generation of the migrants) who may not maintain much connection to their homeland in comparison to the earlier generations. The first and second generations however continue to maintain links with their relatives in their motherland. Thus the second and third generations of Indians have reconstructed their identity self identifying themselves as Thai-Indians thereby taking the pride of their nationality and integrating into the host society. Religion plays a very important role in binding the diasporic community with their motherland. Several religious and cultural communities have been set up in Thailand in order to cater the social needs of the Indians here.

In conclusion the Indian community in Thailand has maintained their Indian ethnic heritage, evident in their religion, language, customs, and food, thereby maintaining links with their homeland, India. At the same time an acculturation with the local Thai culture has also happened evident in the learning of the local language and active participation in the local cultural and religious practices.

7. Acknowledgment

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