



Mumbai Münster Institute of Advanced Studies (MMIAS)

Room No. 102, Ranade Bhavan, Kalina Campus, University of Mumbai,
Santacruz (East), Mumbai 400098, India

Tel: +91 22 2653 0262 | Email: nbharucha.mmias@mu.ac.in

University of Mumbai



Nilufer E. Bharucha

Co-Director, MMIAS
University of Mumbai

Klaus Stierstorfer

Co-Director, MMIAS
WW University Münster

Report on the Challenges of Migration and Citizenship: African Americans and Asian Americans, 1850-1925 by Professor Amritjit Singh on 15th February 2023

The Mumbai Münster Institute of Advanced Studies (MMIAS), University of Mumbai, had organised a Talk on *Challenges of Migration and Citizenship: African Americans and Asian Americans, 1885 - 1945* under the MMIAS International Interdisciplinary Lecture Series 2023. Professor Dr. Rajeshri Varhadi, I/C Director, University of Mumbai's Law Academy and Professor, Department of Law, University of Mumbai, was the Chairperson for the event. Professor Dr. Nilufer E. Bharucha, Co-Director, MMIAS, welcomed the participants and introduced the speaker for the session, Professor Amritjit Singh, Langston Hughes Professor Emeritus of English and African American Studies at Ohio University (OU), USA.



Professor Dr. Nilufer E. Bharucha, Co-Director, MMIAS

Professor Bharucha then requested Professor Amritjit Singh to deliver his Talk. Professor Singh started the session by mentioning how the dimensions of diaspora studies are changing since the rate at which diasporic communities integrate with the host culture is now relatively fast due to globalisation. He believes that technological advancement has played a major role in this change. He gave a brief background about his own migration experience to the United States, and how it is considered as the nation of immigrants, sometimes even termed as the 'nation of nations'. He doesn't disregard this notion, but wishes for the consideration of another narrative of the United States where the issues of citizenship are at the centre.

Professor Singh discussed how when one looks at migration along with the involvement of non-immigrants group into the dynamic, which is the realistic scenario, the narrative alters. These non-immigrant groups include African-Americans as their migration was non-voluntary. The Chicanos, a group of Mexican-Americans, who lived in parts of Mexico that were later occupied by the United States, are also considered non-immigrants. He observed that if any of these groups are in the mix, then the wider narrative of migration changes.

He talked about how when the Irish, Italian, and Finnish people initially migrated, they faced discrimination, but the subsequent generations empowered themselves by taking on the 'White' identity. In their homeland, they never considered themselves to be 'White', but after migrating to the United States, they donned the identity to seamlessly assimilate and avoid discrimination. He contrasted this with the scenario of the African-Americans, for whom the discrimination never ends. He also spoke about the history of Civil War and all the struggle that led up to the moment in 1863, when President Lincoln declared the emancipation proclamation, and the Black community was finally given basic citizenship rights. He worked to successfully make the 14th Amendment permanent.



Professor Dr. Amritjit Singh

Professor Singh narrated how the Democrats asked Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican candidate of 1876 presidential election, to withdraw the federal troops from the South in exchange for an indisputable win in the elections. As soon as he removed troops from the South, Reconstruction came to an end (1865-1877). Professor Singh questioned how could the issues of three million Black people be resolved in just twelve years and how can a South, where most white women had lost their husbands to the war, be reconstructed in such a short span of time?

The ruling in the case of Plessy vs Ferguson in 1896, according to Professor Singh, marked the permanent segregation of African-Americans and the Whites, which even the most conservative judges declared to be a wrong decision.

In order to understand the impact of anti-migration laws, Professor Singh gave an example of the Chinese in the United States who were building rail roads along with the Irish. In the 1850s, there were around 100,000 Chinese immigrants, and if the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had not been passed, they alone would have exceeded the percentage of all Asian-Americans currently residing in the US.

Professor Singh explained how the National Origins Act, 1924, was a strategic move as it was easier for the state to assimilate people of backgrounds that already exist in the country and was an effective way of excluding the others. Germans and Irish migrants were already present in the US in substantial numbers and were therefore given a leeway. However, Greeks, Jews, and Polish migrants, whose presence in the country was negligible, were excluded. They also passed the Asian Exclusion Act, which ensured that no more people from Asia would be able to migrate to the US. Professor Singh brought up individual cases of Asians who were denied citizenship due to them not fitting in any broad category that had been mandated.

Professor Amritjit Singh then presented multiple images related to immigration in the US from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth century. He showed the picture of an Immigration Station where migrants were treated like criminals and restricted in compartments. They were stripped and searched without any privacy. He also showed the images representing the involvement of the Chinese in plantations in Southern states like Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as in building railroads. He showed the art of Jacob Lawrence, a famous Black American artist, that depicts the movement of Black people from the South to the Northern cities to save themselves and their families from persecution and to get whatever jobs they could to survive. Another work from the same artist depicts a black man and a noose, which correlates to the constant fear of the possibility of being lynched that black people, especially young black men, live in.



Professor Singh also showed cutouts from past journals which made derogatory comparisons between the minorities. The images also included Sikh workers in the West Coast. In Bellingham in 1907, Indians, most of whom were turbaned Sikhs, almost got lynched. He showed an image of the passengers on the Komagata Maru steamship, which largely comprised Sikhs trying to migrate to Canada, but had been denied entry. He stated that it is not enough to talk about United States only as the nation of immigrants but one also has to see it through the context of citizenship and the issues regarding it.



Professor Singh then proceeded to read the words of Thomas Jefferson, and said that even though the latter condemns slavery, his perspective rings with the privilege of power because of his concerns with the repercussions that the Whites might face at the hands of the black community if the hierarchy ever switches, rather than being concerned with what the Blacks were experiencing.

He explained why he puts the history of the Black Americans and the Asian Americans together, even when it doesn't run parallel. He stated that while the Asian community was kept from becoming a part of the United States, the Blacks were also being deprived of the citizenship rights they previously gained. He read *If We Must Die*, a poem by Claude McKay, which extends the message of resistance against the oppression that African-Americans face. He also mentioned the works of Rudolph Fisher, a radiologist and a short story writer, which depict the generational differences in diaspora communities over cultural changes and how both sides accommodate this shift.

In conclusion, Professor Singh shared the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. who talked about the beloved community where each individual's dignity is maintained and no rights are infringed upon. He encouraged the participants to conduct comparative studies with different cultures and ethnic communities.

Following Professor Singh's Talk, the Chairperson Professor Dr. Rajeshri Varhadi made her observations about the topic and commented how as a lawyer it interests her to study this topic.



l-r: Professor Dr. Amritjit Singh, Professor Dr. Rajeshri Varhadi, Professor Dr. Nilufer E. Bharucha

Ms. Kirti Risbud, MMIAS Research Associate, offered the vote of thanks

Students and teachers of the University attended the Talk. The Talk ended with refreshments for all the participants.

To view the complete Talk, please visit the link below:

<https://youtu.be/FentXGBB79M>