



**Report on the webinar on Lecture Series on the Indian Diaspora on 18 January 2021**

The CoHaB Indian Diaspora Centre (CoHaB IDC) had organised a webinar on the lecture series on the Indian Diaspora on 18 January 2021. The event was an international and interdisciplinary one with participants attending from India and the World. Professor Somdatta Mandal, Former Chairperson, Department of English and Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India, and Professor Anisur Rahman, Former Professor of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India, were the speakers at this webinar.

Professor Klaus Stierstorfer, Chair of British Studies, Vice Dean of Philology and Spokesperson of the “Collaborative Law and Literature Research Centre”, SFB 1385, University of Muenster, Germany, chaired the webinar.

The webinar began with Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha, Director, CoHaB IDC, University of Mumbai, welcoming the speakers and the audience. She spoke briefly about the webcasts organised by the CoHaB IDC independently as well as its collaborative events with the Mumbai University’s Department of Law and the WW University of Muenster, Germany, Mumbai University’s long standing academic partner. Professor Bharucha then requested Professor Stierstorfer to take over and introduce the two speakers.



Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha, CoHaB IDC, University of Mumbai

Professor Stierstorfer spoke of the importance of having a continuing dialogue in the field of diaspora. He also appreciated Professor Bharucha’s efforts at organising these enriching webinars.



Professor Klaus Stierstorfer, WWU, Muenster, Germany

The first speaker of the day was Professor Somdatta Mandal. She spoke on “Migrants beyond Definition: The East Indian Bengali Peddlers in the New World”. The presentation began by Professor Mandal observing how in recent history, nation states have sought new ways to control movement across borders. Although the South Asian migration to the western world is varied, complex and contested, the dominant narratives of post-war migration emphasise the interplay between the push and pull factor. She spoke about how the globalised economic system of production and consumption has led to immigration from poorer nations to richer ones through what Michael Fisher aptly calls ‘brain drains’ for educated people and ‘muscle drains’ for

manual labourers. Apart from these two binaries, she observed that there were several people who went to Britain from East India who belonged to the labour class and mostly comprised ayahs and lascars.

However, per her study, there was another kind of economic migrant par excellence who went to the western world with aspirations to better themselves. In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early two decades of the twentieth, when Asians in America were labelled as ‘sojourners’ in a foreign land and South Asian immigration to the country was very stringent, with most of them vilified and criminalised, there was a group of East Indians, particularly Muslim peddlers from the Hooghly district of West Bengal, who jumped ship in England and regularly went to the United States, the Caribbean islands and some places in South America each year. With excellent kinship ties, they traded in oriental items and became part of an international trading network.

At a time when the condition of Muslims in post 9/11, Professor Mandal argued that America has radically changed and when they have been hounded out by the administration and the general public, no one remembers these South Asian Bengali Muslims who have integrated so well in the multicultural American society that they are no longer a separate class or threat to recon. She focussed on the issues of nation and national identity with relevant examples to support her argument.



Professor Somdatta Mandal

Her presentation was followed by Professor Rahman’s talk on “The Cartographies of Diaspora: Reflections on Categories and Classes”. He began by talking about how diaspora is used as a blanket term but one only realises how there are several areas/issues that need to be discussed when dealing with the diaspora. Social scientists have realised this and there is a need for the students and academics to study this term “diaspora” further. Indian diaspora especially interests a lot of people today - one, because of the historical migrations and two, India being a multilingual and multicultural nation. As a result there are several kinds of diasporas. His presentation focussed on the different kinds of diasporas - how it began and where it has reached.



Professor Anisur Rahman

Professor Rahman started by talking about the history of diaspora (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when slavery was abolished) moving on to the present times. There was no indentured labour but professionals migrated in search of better economic opportunities. There were artists and traders who migrated mostly to gulf countries and to West Asia. As a result, this diaspora brought a new economic order back home changing the diasporic landscape. A new kind of professional

diaspora emerged. He conjectured that, at present, almost 50% of the professionals in the Silicon Valley are supposed to be from India.

Per Professor Rahman, as the generations of diaspora explore new destinations, the class and preferred destinations are changing too. The third generation of diasporics can be classified as technocrats, artists, engineers, doctors, etc. In fact the Government of India celebrates the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas to celebrate the Indian Diaspora and also to discuss the challenges faced by them. The Indian Government is also looking at options of connecting with its huge diaspora and aims at finding solutions at reconnecting them and how they can get back not just in memory but physically too. Around 30 million Indians are scattered all over the world.

Professor Rahman further classified diaspora in the following categories - Indentured Labour, Political Exiles, First Generation Migrants, Affluent Expatriates, Indians as naturalised citizens of other countries, etc. Diaspora is a dynamic term that means too many things to too many people. Hence the term “Diaspora” itself is in the process of defining itself. The diaspora sought at mastering the language of the country they chose to settle in in order to assimilate/reacclimatise in the hostland. He further spoke of how one associate the names of prominent diasporics when you think of the different types of diaspora - Indo-Canadian, Indo-British and so on.

He further spoke about how new areas of exploration are emerging in the field of diaspora in the process of finding oneself. He spoke of Civic Diaspora, which represent the will of the people. The Ethnic Diaspora defines itself in terms of the ethnicities involved. There are critical as well literary texts that try to address this issue. A Cultural Diaspora represents cultural nationalism that defines its own cultural markers. He also mentioned the State, National and Religious Diasporas that have their own locations and followers. Professor Rahman also spoke of how the diaspora can be talked of in primordial concerns. Diasporic constructions accept a political balance in order to continue living in the chosen hostland.

Professor Rahman ended his presentation by giving a few examples that to further elaborate on his talk.

Professor Bharucha then summed up the two talks before inviting questions from the audience. Both the presentations were well received by the audience and the ensuing discussion led to more ideas that could be a point of study in the future.

The webinar ended with a vote of thanks by Ms. Kirti Risbud, Research Associate, CoHaB IDC, University of Mumbai.

You may view the entire webcast on the link given below:

[Lecture Series on the Indian Diaspora](#)

**Date: 18 January 2021**

**Place: Mumbai**

**Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha**

**Director, CoHaB IDC**