Digital Diaspora : Through Routes to Roots

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ABSTRACT *Diaspora is a problematic concept which in a simple way refers to the movement of population from its original homeland. There are different kinds of diasporas based on its causes. Here my paper analyses the Indian diasporic engagement in relation to visual culture. Visual culture, as a postmodern concept breaks the difference between high culture and low culture. It encompasses images, T.V, videos, films, advertisements and the most powerful social media too. This paper discusses the present century diaspora in connection with these aspects and tries to bring out the unseen elements of diaspora in reality.*

Diaspora is a Greek word, a combination of 'dia' (across) and 'speirein' (scatter). In the simplest way, it refers to the movement of population from its original homeland. Diaspora is a complex concept since the migration of people is due to different reasons: economical, political, religious, geographical and academic. Originally, the concept is referred to the historic experience of particular groups, specifically Jews and Armenians. Later it was extended to religious minorities of Europe. The term 'dispersion' has a wider significance and diaspora is one of several kinds of dispersion. There are different kinds of mobility and dispersion which include migration intended to acquire education, jobs, land, settlement, new citizenship or a combination there of. There are also mobile traders and itinerant labourers who circulate between homeland and extraterritorial opportunities; there are victims of mass deportations, refugees and asylum seekers. Some choose mobility, others have it thrust upon them; some are uprooted, others uproot themselves; some eventually return home, many are assimilated, and the remainder may become consolidated into diaspora communities.

Indian migration in different stages and its various aspects have been widely discussed in Indian English literature. The lives of Indians as immigrants in several nations have found special attention and always celebrated in such literatures. There are several noticeable writers in this regard like V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, M.G Vassanji, Kiran Desai etc. They discussed diaspora at different levels: the lives of immigrants, their problems, nostalgia, loneliness, alienation and glorified India's rich cultural heritage which the Indian diaspora is concerned about.

Since the late 1970's, 'diaspora' has experienced a veritable inflation of applications and interpretations. There emerged the concept of diasporic transnationalism which refers to the ties of migrants and their collectives who entertain sustained social formations across borders while being settled in countries of immigration, thereby forming transnational fields or spaces. Both diaspora and transnationalism deal with homeland ties and the incorporation of people living 'abroad' into the regions of destination. Diaspora approaches usually focus on the relationship between homelands and destination countries. The concept 'home' has gained some deep interpretations in the light of diasporic studies. It is no longer a limited concept confined only to one's land of origin. Home is socially constructed and the diaspora create home in host nations. Home is about practices, symbols and values that are intrinsically tied to a feeling of belonging in a place. Home then, is a site of belonging; one can feel a sense of belonging, even if temporary whilst not feeling completely at home. A feeling of belonging is a necessary prerequisite to a feeling of home, even if the former does not always lead to the latter. There happens a reterritorialisation, the recreation of an alternative space of belonging. Diaspora create home by instilling the rhythms, resonances and habits into the spaces they occupy; they do it with their languages, customs, art forms, arrangements of objects and ideas. Here the image of home relies on the appropriation and negotiation of local symbols as well as the use of symbols from the homeland.

Diasporic communities maintain a common vision, memory or myth about their homelands. They believe that they will never be accepted by their host societies and therefore develop their autonomous cultural and social needs. They continue support their homeland and always be connected to it. Transnational diasporic groups are related by culture, ethnicity, language and religion not only in the sense of transnational dispersal but also in terms of intense and constant interaction at a transnational level. So diaspora is an imagined community, the term coined by Benedict Anderson. According to Anderson, an imagined community is different from an actual community because it is not based on everyday face to face interaction among its members. Anderson believes that a nation is a socially constructed community imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. He defined nation as 'an imagined political community'. As Anderson puts it a nation, ' is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of its fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Web).

Diasporas as imagined communities are reconstructed and reinvented. Diasporas should be seen as depending not so much on displacement but on connectivity. Diaspora is not static in present century, it sets in motion. Media and broadcasting play significant roles in the changed concept of diaspora. In this context of intersection of connectivity and cultural reinvention and reconstruction that media

technologies and diasporic media become crucial factors in the production and transformation of diasporic identities. Home is not linked with a fixed place. According to Tomlinson, there is a shift from mobility to connectivity. Through its modes of address, its temporal structure, its predictability and safety, broadcasting allows a conversation to take place by incorporating all citizens into a common dialogue. The media facilitates a form of cultural citizenship, a resource for the exchange of views based on common source of information. Broadcasting is a mode through which the increasingly challenged borders of the nation state and its increasingly diverse citizenship can be held together and allowed to imagine themselves as a part of community. Media are thus part of the everyday imbedded routines and practices that go toward understanding a place as home. Media make a place distinguishable, give it a certain character and reinforce its norms of citizenship and belonging. In this sense, media play a role in the construction, from the inside out of what Fortier calls a 'space of belonging'. A feeling that one understands his immediate surrounding environment is vital to feelings of home. To feel safe, we need to feel we know what is going on in our world. Through knowledge and understanding, some sort of control over the place one is in can be experienced, same routines and rituals can be established and others can be engaged in. The media become a symbol for wider public opinions, norms and values. Media can aid in constructing and comprehending a secure place.

Media are part of everyday reality. Media and reality are fused into a complex and multi layered space of belonging and home for participants. The complexities, ambiguities and diversities of wider Indian society are organised, simplified and understood through Indian media leading to a positive sense among citizens. This diversity and heterogeneity, the various media, information and communication technologies that are utilised by diasporas and the media they support and sustain play an important role not only in the articulation of diasporic identities but in holding together networks and relationships. Diasporic media enables new ways of coexistence and experiencing together. Apart from bringing some enjoyment and time pass, electronic media bring about new possibilities of being in two places where they receive the broadcast and the place where an event actually takes place. They are not only in two places at once, but media effectively give them the opportunity of producing spaces where remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronised. Diasporic media can transform diaspora from aggregates of migrants into active and vibrant diasporic networks. As Mandeville points out, 'diasporic media can and should be understood as much more than simply a means by which information of interest to a given community can be exchanged or by a means for communicating images of that community to the wider society...we need to understand these media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundary of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and re imagined'. (Mandeville, 169.)

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Communication technologies have always been crucial to the maintenance of diasporic relationships with the homeland. Appadurai points out that diasporas are changing in light of new forms of electronic mediation and stresses the relationship between 'spatialized neighbourhood' and the new 'virtual neighbourhoods of international electronic communication'. The World Wide Web is changing the way diasporic or immigrant lives are experienced. Digital

diaspora, e diaspora or virtual diaspora is an electronic migrant community whose interactions are made possible through new technologies of communication. Historically, the emergence of diasporas occurred in tandem with the development of and increased access to online public content and mobile phones. However, the widespread growth of social networking platforms over the last ten years has resulted different kinds of diasporic connectivity. Internet connects technology with migration and diaspora and has become the primary means of developing and maintaining the diasporic public sphere. Contemporary diaspora populations experience relationship with their homelands that were not possible for classical diasporas. Diasporas can be seen as 'margins of the state' which in this digital era extend and remark the conceptual boundaries.

Internet is a finely meshed tool, constituting an appropriate research site for advancing the study and comprehension of migrant networks and influence abroad, adding to more fertile conceptions of diaspora and transnationalism. Community structures destroyed by migration are often rebuilt only with the help of the internet, thereby also engendering new forms of community abroad. The 'virtual world' is ideally suited for connecting diasporas at the local and global levels. It provides a forum to exchange ideas, debate and mobilize opinion as well as support, friendship and acceptance between strangers. Internet is now the central framework for such networks, so that observing online structures can provide insights into diasporic community characteristics. It helps the construction of new political identities, discourse with transnational space, fundraising and campaigning for action. The internet has allowed most of these communities to discover and rediscover this shared imagination and commonality. Internet has also taken up a central function in many migrants' day to day lives through different forums, emails, face book, online chat, weblogs, private homepages, ethno portals etc.

Recent studies show that the percentage of internet using migrants is increasing steadily. The situation of exile and dispersal is constituted by specific communication problem. This issue can be solved via internet. Therefore, analysis of internet sites, their usage and thus emerging communication paths can add to the understanding of migrants' bridging behaviour, as well as the differences and similarities within and between transnational communities and diaspora. Internet thus becomes a meeting point for private and public, personal and communal migrant interaction. Online platforms are used for personal discussions between friends, the organisation of community activities or the publication of alternative information about the home country's or diaspora's situation. Through these information, dispersed diasporas gain political and community visibility. Online and offline worlds interact and not independent of one another. So that analysing online behaviour allows us to draw conclusions about over all general interests (offline). The analysis of internet phenomena aids in overcoming problems of 'methodological nationalism' and groupism, as internet sites and their users do not limit themselves to national or group boundaries. Online networks are instead grouped around topics and interests rather than geographic background or neighbourhood proximity.

Diaspora areas and territories can be analysed in three steps: first in the host country, where the community bond plays the essential role; then in the country or territory of origin, a pole of attraction via memory and finally, through

the system of relations within the networked space that connects these different poles. The third factor named network connects both these earlier factors. This involvement of Indian diaspora can be seen from different viewpoints. This include,

Internal interaction of migrants within one online community and within one country. This contains information and data exchange among migrants in their host nation. This may limit their discussion within the members of their own particular online community. People working in an institution or a company can create their own online groups like whats app groups and can discuss many matters including political and social issues. They are able to maintain privacy and find their own place where they are free to express without any restriction from the employer. This creates a feeling of security among the migrants.

Interaction with the residents and organisation in the country of origin. The migrants in this digital era have a lot of routes to reach their roots. The social networking sites like face book, twitter are best examples. They keep themselves online and even they come to know more information than those who live in the country of origin. There was a time in India, at the tile of classical diasporas that the migrant's family members were eagerly waiting for the postman or for a landline call from them. Now the situation has changed. Internet provides many facilities to get connected with one' relatives which include free calling facilities, instant messaging, free video chat etc. more than this, such connections develop charity among migrants and give them opportunities to do some good to their native land. Nowadays, the trend is getting reunited with old school and college mates and creating whats app groups. While we chat with an immigrant friend, it is difficult to know whether he/she is in the native land or the host nation.

Interaction with the residents and organisations in the host country: this is a wider type of networking. Immigrants come to know about the situations of other immigrants of their native land without the limits of an organisation or a particular community. Indians develop a positive attitude towards other Indians and they ready themselves to help them in difficult situations like diseases, employment problems, issues in the host country, exploitation etc. there are many examples for such positive attitudes. Recently, there happened an unlucky incident in Saudi Arabia where an Indian (Thamilnadu) house maid was mistreated by her employer. Her arm was chopped off, was brutally beaten and admitted in the hospital. Social media, especially, immigrants in social media played an important role in creating a worldwide reaction against such an atrocity. India government took necessary actions and the lady reached India

Diasporic and migrant ones develop media spaces, spaces for identity, expression and participation. This helps them in surpassing geographical restrictions and connecting locations and places. In a discussion of diasporic issues like free expression, identity crisis, sense of belongingness etc., it is necessary to include the growing mobility of people across boundaries with the diversification of media and communications. This reduces the tension between diaspora and nation. It also reduces the difference among diasporic communities associated with class, caste, age and generation. Media is a mirror for seeing the self and it provide a shared platform for individuals by giving them the sense of self as individuals and as citizens. Connecting with media provides solutions to many issues and it makes the

diasporic community think from 'I' to 'WE'. The changed image of diaspora that the paper has discussed is open for discussion and further studies.

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