

MULTI-LITERACY AMONG CULTURAL DIASPORAS

Lachman M. Khubchandani
Centre for Communication Studies Pune
Indian Council of Social Science Research New Delhi

Abstract: In migration studies the term diaspora has acquired currency as “cultural groups living trans-locally outside their ancestral country”. In the cultural realm, these groups transcend the bounds of political and administrative institutions, and the onus of defining the canvas rests within the confines of the community itself. Andersen (1983) calls such groups ‘imagined communities’. Describing the necessary elements of a new kind of diaspora, a virtual community, Barlow (1996) points out that even when one loses place and continuity in time, there is a basic desire to connect, to interrelate through a value system, a sense of collective stake as well as shared adversity — a sort of communication ethos. In such a scenario, we are now entering into a communication era where dispersed cultural groups, sharing a common heritage, explore space through convenient modes of mobility and electronic ‘networking’. Cultural diasporas utilize potentials of interactive technologies in a creative manner, introducing diverse information highways (websites, e-mails, search engines, and other networking devices). Novel Information Communication Technology (ICT) devices can supplement or replace traditional channels of communication which, hitherto, have been linked with physical proximity (i.e. neighbourhood, school, village, metropolis, etc.). An overlap of electronic information channels in many of their domains potentially enables communities to create a multi-environment for collaboration, discovery, design.

Key words: bilingual sensibility, communication ethos, cultural diasporas, information communication technology (ICT), power and trust in communication, Sindh workies, virtual community

INTRODUCTION

In modern times we find many cultural groups “dispersed outside their ancestral abodes”. These groups, known as *diasporas*, often transcend the bounds of political and administrative institutions. The onus of defining the canvas rests within the confines of the *community* itself. Anderson (1983) refers to such groups ‘imagined communities’, that characterize the illusionary nature of primordial identities leading to the formulation of new configurations.

Describing the necessary elements of a new kind of diaspora, a *virtual* community, Barlow (1996) points out that even when one loses place and continuity in time, there is a basic desire to *connect*, to interrelate through a value system, a sense of *collective stake* as well as *shared adversity* — a sort of *communication ethos*. Cyber space is regarded as “an undefined place where geography becomes irrelevant”. Space becomes quite *fluid*, encouraging interactions between the local speech community and the time-sharing dispersed diaspora; one illustration is the installation of *Trinidadeshwara Shiva* in Trinidad, a case of shifting sacred space in the context of global Hindu identity. Such initiatives

usher in a new era of *living together*, resembling McLuhan's notion of *global village* (Khubchandani 2003). In such a scenario, we are now entering into a communication era where dispersed cultural groups, sharing a common heritage, explore space through convenient modes of mobility and electronic networking.

Sweeping trends of the ICT (Information Communication Technology) revolution have metamorphized the contents characterizing 'knowledge' and 'culture'. Consequently, the world at large is becoming more conscious of the issues concerning technological expansion, information deluge, and so on.

Symbolically, man lives in different layers of space. A *base* for the community's solidarity, a sense of belongingness, can be identified with:

- The *communitarian* space manifested through the density and intensity of interactions among its members.
- The *physical* space, as delineated by state boundaries protected with varied accreditations and privileges for specific speech, creed, etc. in a political set up.
- The *cyber* space, tapped by dispersed conglomerations of people engaged in various socio-economic activities on the global scale, and /or induced by 'perceived' links of language, religion, tradition or any other socio-cultural traits (Khubchandani 1998).

Cultural diasporas utilize potentials of interactive technologies in a creative manner, introducing diverse information highways (websites, e-mails, search engines, and other networking devices). Novel ICT devices radically affect the traffic regulations of human communication (Illich 1985): "Computers are doing to communication what fences did to pastures and cars did to streets."

These enclosures and regulations undermine the spontaneity and autonomy of community life. These devices can supplement or replace conventional channels of communication which hitherto have been linked with physical proximity (i.e. neighbourhood, school, village, metropolis, etc.). An overlap of electronic information channels in many of these domains potentially enables communities to create a multi-fid environment for collaboration, discovery, and design, and interactions through more than one language.

Many diaspora studies have been engaged in examining the profiles of linguistic minorities living outside their 'home' regions (Fisher and Vemury 2011). These studies direct our attention to the processes of transplantation among migrant groups, characterizing diasporal links fostered among different populations away from their ancestral abodes. What role do 'home' and 'host' cultures play in developing relationships among diverse communities living together in a single space. Cultural diasporas generally sustain their identity away from their place of origin by cherishing salient features of rootedness. In a way they live in many spaces. Diasporic experiences involve achieving multiplicity of social and cultural memberships in the host milieu.

Members of a diaspora usually acquire the language of the host region as a source of social empowerment. At the same time, an urge to cultivate their ancestral language (may

it be the mother tongue and/or the heritage language), leads them to be engaged in plural literacies; as a normal course, these are acquired at different levels outside the formal education system. In the trans-national context, they deal with the problems of the dilution of identities and the complexes of uprootedness, nostalgia, etc. The dialectic of exclusion and alienation also distinguish them from the host culture.

THE CASE OF SINDHI DIASPORA

The partitioning of India in 1947 and, since then, the accelerated pace of urban 'job-oriented' mobility among migrant communities have led to the emergence of many new linguistic diasporas ancestrally linked with South Asia, like Sindhi diaspora in Indian subcontinent and in many parts of the world.

With the growing intensity of ICT networks, the Sindhi diaspora is being transformed as a virtual reality in cyber space. This collective reality generates a sense of binding, of belongingness, among Sindhis across the globe. In this backdrop, I probe into the dynamic of dispersal of Sindhi speakers, as an aftermath of the Partition enacted on an epochal scale over six decades ago. I focus on the issues of multiple literacies among the transplanted Sindhis in India; it has been further extending to the overseas as well.

Sindhi merchant networks, known as 'Sindhworkies', are one of the most wide-ranging of all diasporas from the Indian subcontinent since pre-colonial times. These groups belonging to Hyderabad (in lower Sind, today in Pakistan) and to Shirkapur (in upper Sind) are spread from the Pacific (Luque and Gabriel), to Hong Kong, Jakarta, Singapore, Penang, extending to London (David 2000, 2001, 2005), Manila (Thapan 2002), Kobe, Cairo, Malta, Brussels, Panama, New Jersey, California and to numerous other parts of the world. Studies by Markovits (2000), Falzon (2004), Narain & Siu tung (2003), and Kavita Panjabi (2005), present insights in understanding these entrepreneurial groups characterized by a set of trans-local trading linkages. While maintaining the base in their homes in Sind in pre-Partition days (now mostly in India), a majority of them are concentrated in rim countries around the Indian Ocean (the Gulf and East African coast), the South-east and the Far-east (particularly Japan and Hong Kong).

The defining characteristic of Sindhi diaspora is its ability to adapt to a variety of contexts and cultures, and constant cultivation among themselves of contacts, knowledge and relationships. How are diasporic links being fostered among scattered, diffused populations with their ancestral region across nations?

A few pilot studies of the use of Sindhi language among migrant Sindhis in India (Thakur 1960, Khubchandani 1963, Daswani and Parchani 1978), reveal that Sindhi has been yielding place to regional languages and to lingua francas like Hindustani and Angrezi (South Asian English). In these situations, the Sindhi language, is primarily retained as a symbol of *identity* for ingroup interactions (for details, Khubchandani 1963, 1991, 1997).

LANGUAGE RIGHTS

The over-arching reality of the subcontinent is denoted by a wide spectrum of linguistic and cultural diversity in everyday life. The masses at large, in spite of wide divergences on

surface, share a deep sense of collective reality in their verbal repertoire across languages. It gets amply illustrated in creative writings in Indian vernaculars, maintaining a *common* communication ethos, even when inspired by the bonds of *plural* cultural heritage.

“Language needs” in a plural milieu are viewed as a social and political construct on a heterogeneous speech spectrum (Khubchandani 1992). New vistas of ICT, with converging attributes of harmonization and synchronization, can indeed go a long way in generating a sense of binding and security among all sections of society.

Trans-local community strategies adopted by various cultural diasporas need to be considered in working out alternate paradigms of language development that could meet the requirements of communication in a plurilingual world. A speech spectrum gets manifested through the *fusion* of mother tongue and other language(s) signifying various processes of language blends, as in code-switching, code-mixing, and codes-floating i.e aesthetic intermingling of different codes for effective communication (Khubchandani 2011).

The universal human rights movement in the contemporary World Order is gathering momentum with an agenda to assure dignity to every human being irrespective of her/his caste, creed, culture, nationality and language. The movement articulates many issues concerning the identity, freedom of expression, upholding copyright and privacy in communications, and protecting the heritage of individual groups and nations.

With the spread of the avenues for mediation facilitated by technology, individuals often get deprived from one’s own primary, personal, practical experiences; with the result they lose the self-reflecting processes of checks and balances, that threaten society as “a community of communicating individuals”. The global reach of electronic communication, and the erosion of ‘distance’ in a three-dimensional reality, implies disregard for cultural, social and linguistic *particularities* that could ultimately lead to the denial of ‘true’ community. These ideological and legal debates as ‘perceived’ in the context of an individual *per se* as well as of a community, lead us to reflect over the philosophical, technological and socio-political dynamic of the Human Rights Movement. In contemporary societies, mass media’s omnipresent ‘perfect’ images, allow individuality to degenerate and give way to a conditioned reflex to mass, public rituals and generalizations. We need space to exercise our basic human right to *imperfection*.

From this perspective, human communication is seen as resting on two pillars: *power* and *trust*. The contemporary focus on ‘language empowerment’ as projected by Foucault (1977), seems to miss the ‘trust dimension’ of *negotiating activity* in human communication; a sense of ‘transientness’, in Wittgenstein’s terms as demonstrated in urban multilingual landscaping in metropolitan areas, particularly in advertising.

CONCLUSION

Linguistic rights of diasporas are essentially *cultural*, the fulfillment of the human urge of gratification to a particular heritage. One notices such trends of *exclusiveness* in the treatment of Sindhi literature as well. The dynamic of living in many communitarian spaces is apparent in the feeling of restlessness among many Sindhi writers settled in India and in Pakistan. A kind of cultural insecurity of being marginalized in the shadow of ‘state-

sponsored' literatures draws some writers of Sindhi in India to express their feeling of being 'in exile'. But they are not equipped to express their 'undiluted' native sensibility either. A Sindhi writer's deep past (of Sindh, now in Pakistan) gets impinged in the diffused space in India in a number of ways hybridizing her/his poetic output irrevocably. The plurality and the mobility of the diasporic experience in creative writing transcend the insularity of physical space. For immigrant writers, charged with intense native sensibility like that of the Indian poet A.K. Ramanujan (writing in Kannada and English) :

Poetry becomes a dialogue between two spaces –one naturalized, another innate [...] Each self, assumed of privilege, punctures and is punctured by another equally self-validating space
(cited in Akshaya Kumar 1998).

One should be optimistic that the trans-linguistic experiences of a migrant Sindhi writer in a plural milieu can pull her/him out of the nauseating feeling of being in perpetual 'exile', and aspire for more positive goals:

*The man who finds his homeland sweet
Is still a tender beginning.
He to Whom every soil is as his native one
Is already strong.
But he is perfect to Whom
The entire World is a foreign land.*

▪ **Victor Hugo**

These efforts enable enterprising diasporas to translate their vision into a reality, by *thinking globally* and *acting locally* to create an effective community bondage among cultural diasporas diffused on the globe.

REFERENCES

- AKSHAYA Kumar (1998). 'Parody as subterfuge: Cultural politics of A K Ramanujan's Poetry'. *New Quest* (Pune) vol.127: 7-15.
- ANDERSON, Ruth Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London.
- BARLOW, John Perry (1996). 'Is there a 'There' in cyberspace? Cyberhood Vs. neighbourhood' *Span* (Feb-March issue). 8-10.
- DASWANI, C.J. and Sundri Parchani (1978). *Sociolinguistic Survey of Indian Sindhi*. Mysore : Central Institute of Indian Languages.
- DAVID-KHEMLANI, Maya (2000). 'The Sindhis of Singapore: Language maintainance or language shift?' *Migracjiske Teme*, vol.16, no.3, 271-88.
- _____ (2001 a). *The Sindhis of Malaysia : A Sociolinguistic Study*. London: Asean Academic Press.
- _____ (2001 b). 'The Sindhis of London': Language maintainance or language shift?' *Migracjiske I etnikke Teme*, vol.3, 215-38.
- _____ (2005). 'Communication between grandparents and grand children : Focus on Malaysian Sindhis'. *The International Scope Review*, vol.6, no.11.

- FALZON, Mark-Anthony (2004). *Cosmopolitan Connections: The Sindhi Diaspora 1860-2000*. Leiden : Koninklijke Brill ; 2005. New Delhi. Oxford University Press.
- FISHER, Rob, and S. Ram Vemury (2011). 'Diasporas — Critical Issues : Diversity and Recognition', Inter-disciplinary Seminar. Freeland, Oxfordshire, UK.
- FOUCAULT, Michel (1977). *Language, Counter Memory, Practice*. Oxford : Basil Blackwell.
- ILLICH, Ivan (1981). 'Taught mother language and vernacular tongue'. Preface to D.P.Pattanayak, *Multilingualism and Mother Tongue Education*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press.
- KHUBCHANDANI, Lachman M (1963). *The Acculturation of Indian Sindhi to Hindi: A Study of Language in Contact*. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, (University Microfilm Corporation, Ann Arbor); Abstract in: *Linguistics, An International Review*, vol.12.
- _____ (1991). 'Transplanted Sindhis' Chapter V. *Language, Culture and Nation-Building: Challenges of Modernisation*. Shimla : Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- _____ (1992). ' "Minority" cultures and their communication rights'. In : T. Skutnabb-Kangas and R. Phillipson (eds.), *Linguistic Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____ (1997). *Sindhi Heritage : The Dynamic of Dispersal*. Lecture delivered at Sindhi Academy, Delhi.
- _____ (1998). *Language and Communication Rights : Community, State, and Globalisation*, Lectures delivered at Indian Institute of Advanced Study,. Shimla (manuscript on the Internet, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore).
- _____ (2003). 'Living together in a multilingual world : Exploring a new Communication Order', Symposium on Information Society and Sustainable Development, *World Summit on Information Society*, United Nations, Geneva.Rev. 2004. *Indian Anthropologist*, vol.34, no.1, New Delhi. 41-54.
- LUQUE, Carmen and Pernau Gabriel. *Between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean*
http://www.bnc.es/publicacions/bmm/44/ang_22.htm
- MARKOVITS, Claude (2000). *The global World of Indian Merchants 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama*. Series : Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society No.6. Cambridge U.K : Cambridge University Press.
- NARAIN, Kirti, and Kevok Sin-tung (2003). *Co-Prosperity in Cross-Cultural Indians in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong : The Commercial Press.
- PANJABI, Kavita (2005). *Old Maps and New Legacies of the Partition*. Seagull.
- THAKUR, U.T (1959). *Sindhi Culture*, Ph.D. dissertation, *Sociological Series No.9*. Bombay : University of Bombay.
- THAPAN, Anita Raina (2002). *Sindhi Diaspora in Manila, Hong Kong, and Jakarta*. Manila : Ateneo De Manila University Press.
- WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (1973). *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.). Oxford : Basil Blackwell.