



A Study of Understanding Women in Diaspora with Special Reference to Indian Women

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Abstract

Over the years the term diaspora has undergone transformation by acquiring a wider meaning. It is on record that at one point or another people moved either voluntarily, transported or dispersed from their place of origin to an alien place for trading and colonising purposes. Diasporic communities manifest themselves in various forms depending on the context one looks at them. In thinking of the Indian diaspora, the questions that come to the fore include: relations between parents and children; race relations between Indians, blacks, and whites; the place of Indian food and music in the preservation of Indian communities, etc. This paper explores the clothing practices of the working women in the Indian diaspora across the globe. It aims to identify the clothing practices of the Indian working women in the diaspora and also know the factors that affect their dressing.

Keywords: Clothing, Culture, Diaspora, Working women

Objectives of the study

- To identify the clothing practices of the Indian working women in the diaspora.
- To find out the factors that influence their choice of clothing.
- To find out the connection between clothing and profession

About the study

This is an exploratory study about the clothing practices of the Indian working women in the diaspora across the world. The views of various researchers across the world over a period of time have been collected and compared.



Limitations

As this is an exploratory study, the conclusions drawn here cannot be generalized.

Introduction

Etymologically, two words 'speiro' (to sow or scatter) and 'dia' (over) form the term 'diaspora.' Diaspora is a Greek loanword which is the equivalent of 'dispersion' or 'scattering of seeds'. In the ancient time, Greeks were known for their penchant for migration to conquer lands for colonising purposes; as such the term diaspora was used for those citizens of dominant city- states who migrated on such mission.

The different types of Diaspora are as follows:

- Victim diaspora, e.g. Jews, Africans, Armenians
- Imperial diaspora, e.g. British
- Trade diaspora, e.g. Lebanese, Chinese
- Deterritorialised diaspora, e.g. Caribbean peoples, Sindhis, Parsis
- Labour diaspora, e.g. indentured Indians

Indian Diaspora

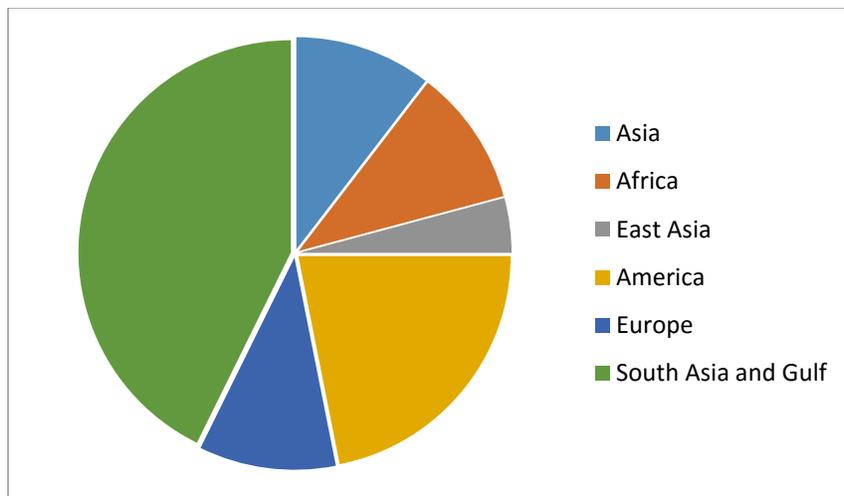
The Indian Diaspora is estimated to be second largest in the world and has a diversified global presence. It is estimated at over 25 million, is spread across more than 200 countries with a high concentration in regions such as the Middle East, the United States of America, Malaysia, South Africa, etc. It has not only increased in numbers but has been gaining universal recognition for the unique contributions to its host countries, be it skilled and semi-skilled work force in the Gulf region or technocrats and educated professionals of Indian origin. Members of the Indian Diaspora do play a significant role in mobilizing political support for in their country of residence on issues of vital concerns to India.

Indian communities abroad have evolved as distinct diasporic entities. They are nevertheless Indians as they manifest in varying degrees the survival, persistence or retention of several social patterns and cultural elements. (Jayaram, 2003)



Indians abroad are involved in active economic and cultural competitions. Some even experience ethnic discrimination either explicit or covert. Not surprising that they have been in academic focus for some time.

Spread of Indian Diaspora (Region- wise)



Source: Ministry of overseas Indian affairs website

Indian nationalists strongly object to any attempt to separate out the three main Indian ethnic/religious groups – Sikh, Hindu and Muslim – for they see this as feeding destructive communalist sentiments in India itself. (Parekh Bhikhu, 1994)

How we are to characterize the Indian diasporic community as 'Indian' given that it is constituted of such diverse elements as South Asian Hong Kong Muslims, Canadian Sikhs, Punjabi Mexican Californians, Gujarati East Africans now settled in the U.S. by way of England, South African Hindus, etc. In the United States, at least, the Indian community has occupied a place of considerable privilege, and many Indians could deflect the moment of recognition that 'Indianness' and being 'American' do not always happily coincide.

In recent years, with a declining economy on the one hand, and the congregation of Indians in clusters that visibly put them apart on the other hand, Indians have for the first time become the targets of racial attacks. Sikhs have insisted that they be exempt from the law that compels



bicyclists and motorcyclists to wear helmets, for such helmets cannot be worn over turbans, and their religious faith requires Sikhs to wear turbans. The 'Kirpan' has been an issue of contention in California schools.

Characteristics of the Indian Diaspora

In thinking of the Indian diaspora, the questions that come to the fore include:

- Relations between parents and children
- Race relations between Indians, blacks, and whites
- The place of food and music in the preservation of Indian communities
- Celebrating festivals
- Marriages/ Funerals
- Greeting and other expressions
- Languages spoken
- Family dynamics
- The clothing practices

Indian ways of clothing

Indian culture is characterized by brilliant colors, spices and musical traditions. While traditions vary by geographic region, you will see men and women in both modern and traditional dress wherever you are. However, residents of larger cities more commonly dress in modern Western clothing. In the past couple of decades, the overseas community has grown into an energetic and confident diaspora over 25 million strong that has given India a presence in many parts of the world. A successful, prosperous and politically influential diaspora is an asset to India, for it acts as a vibrant bridge between the countries, adding sustenance to their bilateral relations. It is not a one way interaction that benefits only one side; both India and the diaspora have something to gain from the connection, in real as well as intangible terms.

Many Indian women wear the *Sari*—yards of colorful embroidered or printed silk or cotton wrapped around the body—at community functions and celebrations like weddings. At such



occasions, women might wear *Kurta*, also made of silk or fine cotton, a long shirt worn over tight-fitting leggings. Shawls made of silk or wool and elaborately embroidered or woven with gold or silver threads or beads and draped around the shoulders are an added touch to women's costumes.

Hindu women might wear a *Bindi*, or ornamental dot, which sometimes indicates they are married, but is also worn as a fashion accessory on their foreheads at celebrations. Indians are very fond of gold jewelry, and many women wear simple gold ornaments like rings, earrings, bangles, and necklaces daily, and more elaborate ones at special occasions. Jewelry is often passed down through the generations from mother to daughter or daughter-in-law. (Hindu online, 2013)

Factors affecting the women's clothing in the Diaspora

Dress codes are written and, more often, unwritten rules with regard to clothing. Clothing like other aspects of human physical appearance has a social significance, with different rules and expectations being valid depending on circumstance and occasion. Even within a single day an individual may need to navigate between two or more dress codes. The following are the factors affecting the women's clothing in the diaspora:

- **The cultural background of the home country:**

The cultural background of the home country has a lot of impact on the dressing style of anyone. The religion, customs, traditions, etc followed in the home country to a great extent influences the clothing patterns. Many Muslim women wear head or body coverings like hijab, burqa or abaya that proclaim their status as respectable women and cover their body appropriately.

- **The cultural background of the resident country:**

The country of residence also has a great impact on the dressing of Indian women in the diaspora. While in the west, women don't have to worry about covering their head or sleeves or their neck line. Dressing can be more liberal up to the extent that they want. As against this, while in the Muslim countries, women have to dress conservatively. They are expected to cover their heads and sleeves and also not allowed to wear tight or revealing clothes.



- **The social/economic status:**

Wearing expensive clothes can communicate wealth, the image of wealth, or cheaper access to quality clothing. All factors apply inversely to the wearing of inexpensive clothing and similar goods. The observer sees the resultant, expensive clothes, but may incorrectly perceive the extent to which these factors apply to the person observed. Clothing can convey a social message, even if none is intended.

- **Marital status:**

Traditionally, Hindu women wear 'sindoor', a red powder, in the parting of their hair to indicate their married status; if widowed, they abandon sindoor and jewelry and wear simple white clothing. However this is not true of all Hindu women; in the modern world this is not a norm and women without sindoor may not necessarily be unmarried. Indian Christian women wear wedding rings to indicate their married status. Some women may pierce a diamond in their nose or wear a special chain in their neck which is called 'mangalsutra' in Hindus.

- **The personal choice and comfort:**

For some women, clothing is just a matter of personal choice. They may choose to wear or not to wear certain things just because they like or dislike it. Their choice of clothing is indifferent to their cultural background or any other thing. Also the comfort level of the clothes matter a lot to a working women.

- **The type of the organization where the women is working:**

White collar work place clothing has changed significantly through the years. In a corporate office, appropriate clothes are clean, business casual clothes such as a dress shirt, polo shirt, and trousers, or other similar outfits. Women's work clothes expanded to include the suit (and its variants) in addition to the usual dresses, skirts, and blouses. Sometimes a single item of clothing or a single accessory can declare one's occupation or rank within a profession.



Connection between the choice of dressing of Indian women in diaspora and their profession

Clothing is closely associated with the profession of the women in the diaspora. Especially in case of working women. They prefer to wear clothes which do not cause any hindrance in working. They want clothes to give a feeling of being smart, active and sober.

For example a teacher/lecturer would prefer being conservatively dressed up whether it is a Muslim country or even the so called forward west. It is because they are going to be in touch with students all the time and by no means intend to distract them in any way.

Women working in corporate world however take some liberty as far as dressing is concerned. Especially when they are working in non-Muslim countries. They wear smart western clothing or a good blend of Indian western combination clothing to look good. However women working in Muslim countries cannot take the liberty of wearing short or revealing clothes to work. They still have to be soberly dressed up even though they wear western outfits.

Doctors and nurses generally dress up very simple and they prefer white or light colours at work wherever they are.

However the homemakers dressing sense does not have that much of an impact of the diaspora as the remains at home and just go out occasionally with their families for shopping. So they tend to mostly stick to their basic dress code. However with time, it has been observed that minor occasional changes are noticed in case of home makers too.

Conclusion

From the above discussion we can conclude that diaspora is not a discipline in itself, but only an area of specialised study, utilising the data, concepts, methods and theories of many disciplines. Researchers believe that it is important for its theoretical significance. Societies with large sections of immigration population are social laboratories where the salient theoretical perspectives of social science disciplines can be tested. Diasporic situations enable us to trace and analyse certain key social processes like the formation of ethnic identity and the shaping of ethnic relations.



As far as the clothing practices are concerned, personal rules of an individual are of prime the selection of clothes. Fashion should be done within limits of decency and cultural limits. Therefore, it is obvious that selected clothes depend on a number of factors. Choice of clothes enhances the personality hence should be done with utmost care. Since diasporic situations require interactions of cultures, they provide unique avenues for understanding the dynamics of culture.

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