

IMAGINED INDIANS

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A review of Peter van der Veer, ed., *Nation and Migration: The politics of space in the South Asian diaspora*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1995. *Anthropos*, spring 1997.

Hardly a trope invented by a social scientist during the last few decades has had a similar impact to Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities". Although he wrote already in the first chapter of his famous book that virtually all communities beyond the family are imagined, and although others have later noted that in a certain sense, we even imagine our parents, his catching phrase has become a synonym for abstract, anonymous communities which have to be actively imagined by their members in order to exist at all, since they are not automatically being reproduced through ongoing social processes.

This peculiar creative or inventive quality of modern large-scale communities, mediated by markets, state institutions and mass communication, is a central premise for the papers collected in Peter van der Veer's *Nation and Migration*, which can be seen as a sequel to Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec's excellent *South Asians Overseas* (Cambridge University Press 1990). *Nation and Migration*, a more narrowly focused volume than the former, asks questions of long-distance nationalism, political uses of religion and ethnic revitalisation. Although, as van der Veer notes in his Introduction, nationalism and migration might be seen as opposing processes -- there are "contradictions between the notion of discrete territoriality in the discourse of nationalism and the transgressive fact of migration" (p. 2) -- migration often leads to a reinvigoration and rephrasing of national identity, frequently with

important political consequences. There are several causes for this: Migrants tend to be socially and culturally marginal, and may thereby develop a strong cultural sensitivity as well as being forced, by the majority, into a collective identity with an ethnic or religious prefix. In ethnically segregated societies, further, politics is naturally most efficiently organised along ethnic cleavages. Nostalgia can also be an important factor, not least in the face of xenophobic attitudes, and many migrants -- not least political refugees -- engage directly in political processes in their country of origin. This final dimension, unfortunately, is not covered by the contributors to *Nation and Migration*, despite there being a chapter by Verne A. Dusenbery on Sikhs in North America. (A chapter on Tamils in Europe would surely have filled this gap.)

Four of the nine chapters deal with descendants of Indian indentured labourers in former plantation colonies. John D. Kelly describes the schismogenetic relationship developing in Fiji between native Fijians and Indians on the basis of their differing religion, where the increasing Christianisation of Fijian identity is countered by Hindu revivalism. Anti-Indian tendencies which led to violent incidents after the 1987 coup-d'etat, have placed the Hindu missions and Indo-Fijian politicians in an extremely precarious position. As native Fijians can draw on Romantic nationalist notions of authenticity, the tendency among Indo-Fijians presently seems to be a withdrawal from politics and a separation between religious and political spheres. A different kind of situation is analysed in the subsequent two chapters on Trinidad and Guyana, where both of the major ethnic groups are descendants of immigrants, Indian (or "East Indian") and African. In a piece comparing the two countries, Madhavi Kale discusses ambiguities of belonging (which recalls V.S. Naipaul's memorable musings over his confusing identity as an "East Indian from the West Indies") and argues that in spite of modernisation and political integration, Indians in the Caribbean continue to distinguish themselves strongly from mainstream Afro-Caribbean culture. In the following chapter by Aisha Khan, one central aspect of this process is elaborated, namely the role of religion among Muslims in Trinidad, who make up about seven per cent of the population. In particular, she

discusses notions of authenticity and purity -- central concepts to any identity politics -- by looking into the relationship between Indo-Trinidadian and Afro-Trinidadian Muslims; in other words, persons who share the same religion but who have different ethnic identities. The latter, few in number and often considered "inauthentic" for being converts and not "rooted", have accordingly re-fashioned their origin myth by pointing to the fact that many of the African slaves brought to Trinidad were Muslims. The differing role of class among Indos and Afros is also brought into the analysis, which nicely brings out some of the intricacies and dilemmas created at the intersection between different criteria for belonging and identity. Steven Vertovec, in the next chapter, also writes about Trinidad, but his focus is on the larger Indo-Trinidadian community, the Hindus, who he compares with Hindus in Britain. In Trinidad, Hinduism has become increasingly politicised since the late 1980s, and is being perceived as a direct competitor, in the cultural and political domains, to the dominant "creole" culture. The situation in Britain, Vertovec goes on to show, is a more fragmented one. Hindus in Britain are a smaller minority, and are both more dispersed and more diverse in terms of origins, than in Trinidad. As a result, Hinduism is much less efficiently politicised in Britain, and although British Hindus are probably no less proud of their religion than Indo-Trinidadians, their Hinduism forms less of an imagined community and is largely confined to private spaces.

The five remaining chapters discuss "ethnogenesis" or the formation of collective identities in different ways. Dusenbery's piece on Sikhs in Vancouver concentrates on the re-fashioning of history and problems of caste and egalitarianism, while Susan Slyomovics' chapter on Muslims in New York concentrates on the significance of public rituals for the development of collective identification, as well as discussing the locally conditioned articulation of Islam in the USA. Madhulika S. Khandelwal's piece on Indians in Queens, New York, indicates that strong local identities may be a viable alternative to national identity among minorities who are for various reasons not fully assimilated, whereas Sallie Westwood's very engaging chapter on the "Red Star" youth project in Leicester, thematising some of the same issues as Khan, describes the relationship between gender, ethnic identity

(African/Caribbean and South Asian) and explores, like Khandelwal, the importance of local identity for diasporic populations. Finally, Parminder Bhachu takes on an issue only hinted at by most of the contributors, namely cultural change. South Asian women in Britain, she argues, are not merely "defined by exclusion", but re-fashion their way of life at the crossroads between the past and the present.

Nation and Migration is a book about South Asian Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims living outside South Asia, but it also contributes substantially to the anthropology of contemporary identity politics, providing nuanced case studies warning us against single-factor reductionism and simplistic models of nationalism. Its most interesting perspectives lie, in my view, in the analyses of identity and place, which show that when the imagined community is dispersed and deterritorialised, and the migrant group is not acknowledged as first-class citizens, commitment to locality can be a viable alternative to conventional national identity.