The Forgotten Diaspora: Identity Formation for Ethnically Pakistani Singaporeans

Diaspora

Diaspora studies have been widening around the world. The term diaspora has even undergone many changes in terms of definitions and significantly has gone to include populations that have dispersed for reasons other than purely forced resettlement projects. “Diaspora is the term often used today to describe practically any population that is considered ‘deterritorialized’ or ‘transnational’” (Vertovec, 1997). Vertovec goes on to classify diaspora into three distinct meanings and they are differentiated according to the evolutionary trajectory of displaced people in foreign land. Diaspora can be seen as a (a) social form, this form is normally seen during the initial stages of resettlement, (b) a type of consciousness, this type is realized in succeeding generations of immigrants who become citizens of the adopted countries and finally (c) a mode of cultural production whereby in the age of globalization we can see the commodification of ethnicity and identity. We are interested in the second form, diaspora as a type of consciousness in understanding how identity is played out in the Singaporean context.

This essay will look into the Pakistani Diaspora in Singapore and will seek to understand the shifting contours of identity formation as a process of negotiation within the context of the nation state of Singapore. We will seek to understand how the complex interplay between state and ethnicity in Singapore as well as the situation of multiple South Asian ethnicities within the nation-state of Singapore provides for identity formation as co-constituted within the nation as well as separate from the bounds of the nation.

Early Migration to Singapore

Movement in the age of empire as described by Brown (2006) provides us an insight into the movements of South Asians in the early 20th century. We understand that the trade route of India to China was often used to transport ‘indentured labor’, ‘contract labor’ and also facilitated the ‘free Indian movement’. Although Pakistan as a nation-state was only conceptualized in 1933 and subsequently gained independence in 1947, we are able to read between the lines to understand that Pakistanis, who mostly hailed from the West, or North of India at the time, belonged primarily to the ‘free Indian movement’ as ‘more Hindus than Muslims were recruited—probably somewhere between 80 percent and 90 percent’ (Brown, 2006) and came from northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for indentured labor. While analyzing the makeup of contract labor we find that a majority came from South India, ‘under a recruiting system known as kangani’ (Brown, 2006). The predominance of South Indians in South East Asia and particularly in Singapore is important in understanding educational policies and the shunting of Pakistani identity to the periphery and will be furthered explored later on in the essay. Hence, it is a fair assumption to make that the majority of early Pakistani migrants who arrived in Singapore came for economic reasons and flexible citizenship (Ong 1993) can be attributed to these immigrants who eventually chose to settle in Singapore. However it becomes that much harder to pinpoint the reasons behind the continued citizenship of the succeeding generations in Singapore. This continued citizenship provides for an insight to how the next generation of Pakistanis see themselves within the
nation-state of Singapore. This continued citizenship can be looked at as a “cultural process of subjectification: a Foucauldian sense of self-making and being made by power relations” (Ong 1996:737) which thus has direct implications for identity formation which must be seen “as a condition of subjectivity and not as an object of analysis”(Cho 2007:11) for imagined communities (Anderson 2006) such as the Pakistani diaspora due to it being a community of interest that relies on a perceived shared cultural heritage rather than any face to face interaction in their everyday lives.

**Being Pakistani in Singapore (Condition of Subjectivity and a Cultural Process of Subjectification)**

State Subjectification and Language Policies  
Singapore operates under a CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) categorization of its citizens whereby every citizen is categorized under the aforementioned races. The shaping of ethnic boundaries and a lack of acceptance of a Pakistani identity within this framework has pushed the Pakistani identity to the periphery and has shaped numerous policies to the detriment of ethnically Pakistani Singaporeans. One such consequence of the CMIO categorization is the subsequent designation of race-language to each race, whereby the Chinese will learn Mandarin, the Malay’s will learn Bahasa Melayu and the Indians Tamil. A simple analysis of the policy up to this point highlights its myopic view of identity as the formulation of such policies immediately marginalizes Hokkien and Teochew speaking dialects for the majority of the Chinese population in Singapore while also not considering the plethora of languages that exist within India. The over simplistic categorization of Indians learning Tamil immediately ignores many socio-cultural differences within the Indian community. This gross oversimplification can be attributed to the large number of Tamil speaking South Indians during the inception of Singapore as a nation-state in 1965 as well as a need to manage effectively the different races in Singapore. Pakistani as a racial category in Singapore was pushed into the box of the other.

This immediately produces a self-other dynamic whereby Pakistani’s are seen as the outsiders within the geographical boundary of the Singaporean nation-state. The shaping of national language policies would thereby influence education policies and we see the lack of acceptance of Urdu, among other Non-Tamil Indian Languages (NTIL) in mainstream schools being a prime example of the subjectification of identity by the state. Computation for national exams prior to early 1990s required students to subscribe to a state-sanctioned mother tongue thereby forcing children of Pakistani descent to adapt to a foreign language, most choosing Malay, in order to engage with mainstream education within the country. The adoption of Malay can be said to have an important effect on identity formation of ethnic Pakistanis. This is due to the cultural as well as linguistic teachings incorporated into the syllabus of mother tongue languages whereby Pakistani children do not only study the adopted mother tongue but also the adopted culture that is intertwined with it. Children as such are predisposed to problems of fitting in a society where everyone has a clearly defined race (Siddique 1990:120). Pakistanis as such, fit within a larger Malay-Muslim community in Singapore (Aljunied 2006) whereby the close religious affinity that of Islam between the two
groups predisposes them to take on Malay language over the Tamil language meant for the Indian category. Furthermore the choice of language may in actuality be made in the vein of a strategic or an economic basis as it might be economically advantageous for a child of Pakistani descent to learn a language like Malay because of the geographical location of Singapore with the majority of its neighboring countries consisting of a predominantly Malay population (It is also important to remember in the earlier section of the paper wherein, Pakistanis migrated, did so on the basis of flexible citizenship). This has also led to the inadvertent mixing of both cultures and ethnic groups through physical mixing (through marriages) and intellectual mixing (through discourse of Muslims in Singapore being Malays). We see in such a situation that the mother tongue language as such ends up being a matter of selection rather than that of identity in such a context.

In the Singapore context we see that the Islamic quotient of Pakistani identity has led to an assimilation of sorts through religious subtext into the larger Malay-Muslim community situated in Singapore. Language as a cultural phenomenon and a marker of identity was limited by the state in Singapore prior to the early 1990s for racial groups outside the CMIO categorization and hence led to a warping of identity for various minority groups, including the Pakistani community. Aljunied(2006) quotes an article by Bibijan Ibrahim1(1977) on Indian Muslims whereby the “process of ‘Malayization’ had seeped into the behavioral codes of the minority community”. Bibijan examined the process by which they were culturally inducted into the larger Malay community rather than being situated within the dynamics of the Malay-Muslim community. She noted how they were two ends to the spectrum whereby on one end, Malay culture was adopted to a large extent by the Indian Muslims while retaining a sliver of “Indianness” while on the other end we see the total assimilation of Indian Muslims who become “Malays in totality” (Aljunied 2006).

Aljunied(2006) also cites research papers on Arabs by Lim Lu Sia2, Harasha Khalid Bafana3 and Nargis Mohamed Talib4 who argue that although Arabs in Singapore have in many ways adopted much of Malay culture and identity while simultaneously maintaining their uniqueness in different contexts and situations. It is a fair assumption to make that Pakistanis who can be viewed as a variation of Indian Muslims fall under similar trappings of identity reconstitution and Malayization while being subjugated and subjectified by the state policies in terms of language and lived experience of a diaspora which shares a common religion with a different ethnic group bounded within the geographical context of the nation-state.

Community Self Help Groups
The states approach to multiracialism and its proposed non-welfare policies led to community self-help groups being formed in order to form a social support for the various ethnic groups within the country. The three major players unsurprisingly belong to the Chinese, Malay and

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Indian communities that of Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) formed in 1992, Yayasan MENDAKI, formed in 1982 (Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community) and Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), formed in 1991 respectively. What ensues is a crisis in identity as the Pakistani identity becomes ambiguous in the avenues in which help is administered. Ethnically speaking, Pakistanis would traditionally fall under SINDA’s purview however due to decades of identity negotiation and reconstitution with respect to the lived experiences of the diaspora, Pakistanis as well as other racial groups who culturally identify themselves as Malay were shifted towards Mendaki to seek community funded assistance. This change was institutionalized by Parliament in 1988 when it amended the definition of the Malay identity in the broadest possible way in response to decreasing percentage of Malay political candidates (Group Representation Constituencies: A Summary of the Report of the Select Committee 1988: 6). Malay identity was redefined as “someone who is Malay, Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis, Arab or any other person who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay community by that community” (Aljunied 2010). In this instance we see the state redrawing boundary lines of ethnic configuration which further amplifies the problem of identity as the blurring of lines on what it means to be Malay in Singapore inadvertently cuts into the racial configuration of the Pakistani category. Hence where it was once solely the religious affinity to Malay that bounded the two identities, now it is a constitutional amendment that has complicated the concept of identity of Pakistanis in Singapore.

**Imagined Communities and Mediascapes**

Brown (2006:151) notes that the South Asian culture can be kept alive and reinvented in the space of the diaspora through audio and video cassettes. The case now however is with the advent of various new forms of technologies; cinema, Digital Video Discs (DVD), live streaming sites, YouTube and cable television, we see that diasporas are able to keep in touch with cultural happenings back in their perceived motherland by participating in the Mediascapes (Appadurai 1999) and imagines communities (Anderson 2006) among speakers of a native language which in this context, due to the mammoth size of the industry, would be Bollywood and Indian cinema. Bollywood, due to its use of Hindi which in its basic form is vastly similar to Urdu is a point of reference for South Asian Diasporas including the Pakistani diaspora. Kaur and Yahya (2010) observed in a study how the viewing of imported content helped reified cultural practices of older generations of migrants who have found a role model in their television counterparts. The proliferation of Indian serials and Bollywood provides for alternative content for Hindi-Urdu speaking communities in order to get back in touch with their shared cultural heritage from their motherland. We see that the messages and cultural dynamics of these Mediascapes help in solidifying the ideals of what it means to be of South Asian descent as it serves as a ‘mode of justification for a sense of being’ (Kaur 2010:269). Due to the shared origins and cultural practices of Indian cinema and television, Pakistanis identify, enjoy and reappropriate the messages and values espoused by the entertainment industry as it allows for a nostalgic experience and provides for a cultural point of reference (Martinez 2010; Kaur 2010).

Hence we can see that culturally, Pakistanis identify more so with the values and norms practiced by their Indian counterparts due to the shared historical origins however religiously
a closer affinity is shared to the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore due to shared
religion and often shared religious practices.

**Conclusion**

We have attempted to understand the evolution of identity and the assimilation of community
identity into the prevailing social structure within the Singaporean context. In analyzing the
formulation of a Pakistani identity in Singapore, we see that the state has played an
overarching role in the discourse as well as the management of ethnic identity. We
understand that identity formation is not merely an object of analysis but rather a condition of
subjectivity as mentioned by Cho (2007) due to the ever-changing contours of ethnicity as
defined by the state and practiced by the people. The growth of various forms of technology
help ensure that a top-down approach to identity by the state is counteracted by bottom up
initiatives played across various nation-states in the form of imagined communities.

In conclusion, we understand that the mixing of various South Asian identities within the
nation-state of Singapore has led to a peripheral push to the margins of society as exhibited
by the marginalization of native languages as a direct consequence of state policies. We also
find that despite situating itself within the nation-state, technology has eroded the stronghold
of physical borders with new flows of packaged identities allowing for identities to be co-
constituted within the nation as well as separate from the bounds of the nation.
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