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Book Review

Indian Transnationalism Online: New Perspectives on Diaspora

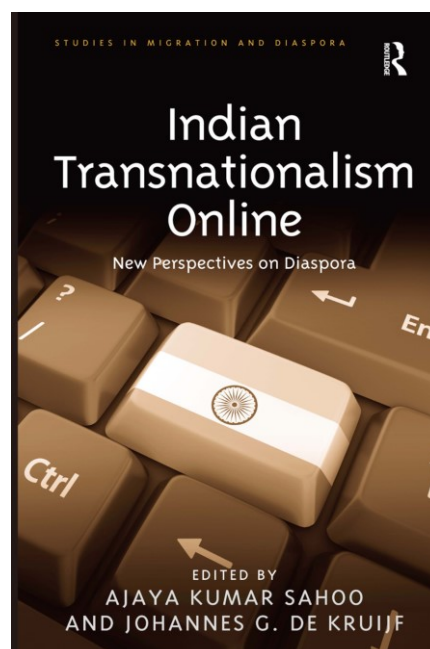
Sahoo, Ajaya Kumar & De Kruijf, Johannes G. (eds.) (2014): Indian Transnationalism Online: New Perspectives on Diaspora. Ashgate. 228 pages. ISBN 978-1-4724-1913-2.

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The recently published anthology brings together a heterogeneous group of scholars. While some contributors are already well known for their previous work on diasporic and transnational “Indianness” such as Urmila Goel on the Indian diaspora in Germany, Vinay Lal on Hinduism in the USA, and Ananda Mitra on Indian diasporic websites, others are young scholars entering the field of study with innovative ideas and approaches. Remarkable is the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds.

The content is divided into two sections focusing on Identity (Chapter 1–6) and Power (Chapter 7–9) but the book’s focal point clearly is – by referring to Anthony Giddens – reflexive self-identity enabled and encouraged by the Internet. This identity changes over time, develops, transforms, and adapts to varying life-phases. While building on the assumption that life-circumstances generated by migration are particularly challenging for negotiations of identity and belonging, studies of transnationalism comprise dynamics abroad as well as in the respective



home countries. Most of the chapters do include different localities in this sense, though a strong focus on the Indian diaspora in the USA remains. The editors acknowledge in the preface that they do not touch upon dynamics of exclusion (or the 'digital divide') and misuse of new technologies but they mention these questions as following from the papers presented in the volume. The book bears testimony to the ongoing trend of internet studies with a focus on migration and connectivity. The comprehensive Introduction by De Kruijf presents theoretical frameworks, outlines dominant theories on transnationalism, diaspora, and self-identity and its linkages with emerging digital cultures. Although he refers to notions that are introduced in the following chapters, it is not a new question under which the papers have been compiled. De Kruijf rather situates the chapters as case studies in an existing corpus of theoretical and empirical studies. While the book is overall very well edited, only a fraction of the works and authors cited in the comprehensive Introduction are listed under references. This is a very unfortunate mistake, as particularly the literature overview would be very helpful to readers who are new to this area of research.

In Chapter 1, Usha Raman and Sumana Kasturi follow three women bloggers, located between the USA and India. The analysis suggests that a transnational identity is created through the act of blogging. They come to the conclusion that diasporic media practices may serve both to preserve traditionalism and to facilitate the performance of a liberal, cosmopolitan subjectivity. This view is based on the understanding that new media do not imply an ideology of its users per se and should be rather seen as value-free tools.

By drawing mainly from his own theoretical work on identity in a cybernetic space ("that is produced at the congruence of the real and the digital", p. 47), Ananda Mitra presents his prediction that the 'national Indian' will vanish and a 'trans-Indian' will dominate the future (Chap. 2). He argues for "a 'trans-national' who has expanded opportunities to reformulate both the self and the place that the self dwells in" (p. 47). Thus, 'trans-Indian' can describe diasporic identity constructions as well as identity discourses of Indians situated in India. Crucial are the creation of a virtual presence and the connectivity of this person – marked as Indian – with discourses and cultural practices from any chosen part of the world. While Mitra's conceptualization is interesting because of its multilateralism, his concept is restricted to a certain class made up of professional migrants and urban upper-middle classes who do create digital selves. His prediction leaves out a vast majority who is not only denied access to the digital world but also does not partake in the described processes of "Americanization" in India.

Similar to Mitra's cybernetic space seems Emily Skop's 'ThirdSpace' (Chap. 4), a space that is "located between the two poles of 'here' and 'there'" (p. 81). Migrants who engage in transnational activities create new spheres of interaction within these thirdspaces, and the Internet can be seen as their most vital tool. Skop develops a "continuum of embeddedness" to analyze these engagements and describes

five stages that range from the most engaged migrants to moderately connected ones, rather disinterested onlookers, dissatisfied witnesses, and disconnected bystanders (p. 95).

An insightful methodological discussion is brought in by Urmila Goel (Chap. 3). She presents the sole study from a non-anglophone context in this book. Her chapter is the only one including a critical self-reflection about positionality and the researcher's role in constructing ethnic labels. With her empirical case study of a digital forum called "Indernet", she demonstrates how a community marked as Indian is intentionally created. This leads her to the term of the "ethnic entrepreneur" (p. 75ff), which also includes researchers who work on those marked as Indians and thereby reproduce constructed "Indianness".

With reference to the construction of "Indianness", Vinay Lal emphasizes the role of diasporic agents in the US in forging a fixed Hindu identity with a conservative hindu-nationalist connotation (Chap. 6). He describes the active reinterpretation of Indian history and a gradual development of a rhetoric that propagates Hinduism as a superior world religion. Lal shows how these discourses reflect in civic engagement, citing examples of campaigns that took advantage of arguments about multiculturalism, diversity and citizenship in the US to push a hindu-nationalist agenda. But the same people, Lal argues, refuse to accept multiculturalism and tolerance in the Indian context.

Scheifinger's rather descriptive account of the digital network of a Hindu institution belonging to the religious path of Advaita Vedanta (Chap.5) seems slightly misplaced in the Identity section. Although he depicts the online manifestation of an important practice connected with the religious leader in the example of online yatras (religious tours across India) and the consequential deterritorialization of the ritual by transcending physical locations, Scheifinger's conclusion about new transnational modes of connectivity is neither new, nor touches it upon questions of identity.

The second section of the book broadly concerns questions of power, although the theme is not overtly evident in all chapters. Mirian Santos de Ribeiro de Oliveira (Chap. 7) analyses the (re-)construction of transnational Indian identity through online NRI (Non-Resident Indian) forums. She describes NRI-oriented activities towards an inclusive Indian identity from the perspective of agents located in the 'homeland', therewith stressing the dynamics of simultaneous deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Unfortunately, the reader does not learn much about these agents, other than the changes their platform facilitates in terms of transnational connectivity.

Emilia Bachrach examines online advice forums of the Vallabh Vaishnava sect (Chap. 8). Similar to Scheifinger, Bachrach notes that the sect's online presence represents a continuation of 'traditional' forms of proselytization like pilgrimages

and practices like the devotee-guru relationship. In comparison to Scheifinger's observation, Bachrach identifies more than a digital support system and comes to two conclusions: Firstly, she observes demographic changes facilitated through the employment of new media (more young users); secondly, she demonstrates an impact on the very understanding of religion and ritual practice.

Ashish Saxena (Chap. 9) renders a rather descriptive chronological account of the internationalization of Dalit activism. He confirms but does not explicate the initial question of how globalization "may become a means for their [Dalit] identity construction" (p. 191). His account of Dalit groups and their diasporic involvement is well researched but a focus on online activism, other than listing websites and newsletters, is absent. The chapter's incorporation into the volume appears more like the attempt to include a marginal perspective complementing the dominant focus on an elitist US-Hindu-diaspora. Goel's contribution from the German-speaking region being the only other exemption, this is a commendable initiative since the almost exclusive view on Hindu migrants is a point of criticism. Nevertheless, the book is a welcome addition to the growing scholarly corpus on transnationalism, online culture, and questions of identity for the Indian context. While some articles, especially in the first section, include interesting theoretical reflections, the strength of the book lies in the empirical case studies. For researchers and students the anthology is a good starting point to explore these questions. Practical assets are the glossary and a helpful index.