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RE-MAPPING CASTE AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS:
SHORT NARRATIVES OF SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction: Caste, Class and the South Asian Diaspora

Thanks to Bollywood, a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) is predominantly imagined, back home in India, as super-rich, fully westernized in manners and doing India proud in foreign lands. One reason for this as explained by renowned Bollywood producer-director Late Yash Chopra, in his address at the first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Expatriate Indians Day) in 2003, is that as a director he is also working as a ‘historian’ and carrying on his shoulders the ‘moral responsibility [ ... ] to depict India [and the Indian Diaspora] at its best’. In this regard, Ghassan Hage also notes that the ‘last thing’ the migrants (particularly men) would like to share with their families back home is shocking stories about racism, discrimination or prejudices that they may have experienced in public or the workplace. Such a revelation would obviously be followed by ‘why did you make us suffer and move to the end of the world just to get demeaned and insulted?’ (Hage 2005: 494). Hage further notes that therefore the migrants’ familial and class experiences, be it in films, literature or even some sociological studies, are often ‘portrayed as a positive experience’ and this is ‘how the whole migratory enterprise continues to legitimise itself’ (2005: 494). It could be argued that this is one of the reasons the alleged ‘racist’ attacks against Indian students received so much attention in the Indian media. It was not just discrimination but the notion of discrimination and second class treatment (based on skin colour and origin) against the revered and much envied diasporic Indian that created such a media furor in India (see Baas 2010; Jakubowicz and Monani 2010).

Thus, diaspora’s real and imagined families often act as ‘social laboratories’ where according to N. Jayaram the ‘salient theoretical perspectives’ of social science and other disciplines are tested (2004: 15). And most of the researches (anthropological and sociological) conducted on South Asian Diaspora in Australia are inquiries into the interrelation of gender, race and ethnicity using cinema, literature and general case studies, such as, Marie De Lepervanche’s Indians in a White Australia: An account of race, class and Indian immigration to Eastern Australia (1984), where she embarked upon an anthropological fieldwork journey, writing about the pioneer Sikhs (a prominent South Asian ethnic migrant community). Her study of the Punjabi community of Woolgoolga, a place in New South Wales, undertaken in the 1970s, provided the basis for understanding how the White Australia ideologies, policies, and practices affected the community. Through her interaction with the Punjabi community in the villages, she recorded the fascinating story of their community development, successful establishment of the Punjabi settlers (in many cases belonging to low caste and class) whose banana farming and cane-cutting jobs provided the source of income, the connections between these pioneer settlers with their home villages, and their arranged-marriage alliances with partners from India. She noted that this continuing contact with their culture and customs also provided a secure foundation for their adjustment to different social and cultural attitudes in Australia (see also Lepervanche 2007). Cultural and literary theorists such as Bill Ashcroft et al. have also noted that

Since diaspora is also often the pre-condition for a particular class of ex-colonized people and often involves access to greater educational and economic opportunities, “class” becomes an important issue in diaspora studies. (2002: 219)

However, most studies on South Asian Diaspora have been restricted to accounts of ‘race’, ‘cultural
practices’ and the process of immigration and point to the carrying forward and re-creation of home and its culture with languages, customs, art forms, and even arrangement of objects as immigrants adhered to their traditional cultural practices so ostensibly that the concepts of ‘class’ and ‘class consciousness’ in these diasporic communities often get masked by racial or ethnical affiliation and fail to be highlighted (see also Sharma 1989: 49; Jain 2001: 1381).

Mary Ann Tolbert, using the metaphors of ‘blood’ and ‘bread’, originally proposed by Adrienne Rich in her essay titled ‘Blood, Bread, and Poetry’ (1984: 171), to describe politics of location that affirms and presents the complex ties of ‘blood’—representing one’s familial links—and ‘bread’—representing one’s economical or source of income (Tolbert 1995: 331). As it is

[T]ogether the ‘facts of blood and bread’ locate each of us socially and politically at any given moment in relation to our access to power, our relative freedom from oppressive treatment, and our assurance of our own human dignity, integrity, and worth. (Tolbert 1995: 331-332)

‘Blood’ and ‘bread’ here thus represent family and class locations of South Asian diaspora immigrants as they delineate interrelated experiences of social formation and economic authority in relation to Australia and South Asia. Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy have respectively explored the dynamics of class, caste, and regional biases in a pre- and post-independent India in their works Coolie (1936) and The god of small things (1997). As most of the issues are a product the original Hindu caste-class-patriarchy nexus and a corrupt political system that nurtures them, both in the Indian subcontinent and its Diaspora, some South Asian diaspora writers based in Australia are also highlighting it in their works now. As the Australian labour market forms the basis of migration from Indian subcontinent, this economic (class) basis results not only in betterment of people who immigrate but also in highlighting a clash of class consciousness in the diaspora and back home, as majority of migrants are educated middle class or working class (with technical skills) who are sending money back home and creating through remittances a medium of relationship and belonging (see Bhagwati 2010; Singh et al. 2010; Singh 2006 and 2007). Nevertheless, in South Asian diaspora’s interaction with the ‘others’ and sociocultural adaptation to host countries ‘race’ is always in parenthesis as the primary term for ‘class’. This is because, ‘class’ often acts as a special variant that can give rise to various new forms of oppression and at the same time resistance. In plain terms, ‘class consciousness’, as also observed by Marxist critics, refers to beliefs that a person or community holds regarding one’s social status or economic rank. In the South Asian context, class mobility is dependent on education, standard of living, and tacitly understood markers of cultural sensibility and values. On the other hand, ‘caste consciousness’ is based on notions of purity and pollution, and denotes the religious and sociocultural practice of societal stratification characterized by hereditary transmission of a life-style which includes a vocation, status in a hierarchy, and social interaction or exclusion. P. Pratap Kumar notes that

Caste consciousness is deeply endemic in South Asian society and that is perhaps the only way they understand how social status is derived within that society. It is this consciousness that seems to tempt social groups and individuals to either display their caste name as part of their last name or discretely acquire caste names if they came from a lower order caste groups. (2012: 225)
As a historical process in the classical Indian sub-continental (primarily Hindu) culture there exist four socio-economic categories called varnas (classes)—Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kṣatriya (warriors and rulers), Vaiśyas (merchants and artisans) and Sūdras (untouchables or outcastes). These not-so watertight compartments or ‘historical roles’ initially referred to or enveloped individuals towards a particular societal goal, more or less like the western class system, where in a sense everyone was a beneficiary of the social construct. But with invasions from foreign powers, such as Turks, Portuguese, and the British, the idea of jati or sub-castes (classes) within castes strongly took its roots into a modern and complex one that intermingled with class consciousness and the changing economic and cultural values (see various arguments proposed by Indologists Basham 1967; Dumont 1980; Quigley 1993).

In the Lukácsian sense ‘class consciousness’ in the Indian sub-continent and its diaspora is not just an outcome of economic position but of the ‘class’ and ‘caste’ struggles or differing attitudes towards exploitation and oppression (see also Rees 2000: 12). Lukács in History and class consciousness has referred to it as ‘reification’ i.e. the freezing of an institution or social construct into a force that starts to rein and restrict human beings (Rees 2000: 13).

In the pre-independent India under the British rule all castes worked together towards the same political goals but were still discriminated at social levels. In the post-independence India, economy has grown steadily but unevenly over the last three decades, thus giving rise to wider class divisions and social hierarchy: Upper class vs upper-middle class vs middle class vs lower-middle class vs lower class as opposed to the two class model of the pre-independent India: Upper class (capitalist class or the bourgeoisie class) vs lower class (working class or the proletariat)—where anti-working class attitudes can easily be found among freedom-fighting leaders who belonged to the bourgeois class; or the three class model of the newly independent India and rising India: Upper class vs middle class (babus or the petty bourgeoisie) vs lower class. And with globalization, now the classes are being further classified with adjectives like ‘new’, ‘old’, ‘urban’, ‘rural’ and ‘semi-rural’ within this larger structure, thus increasing the divide or creating a virtual fight over cultural and material superiority in the subcontinent and diasporas (which can perhaps be seen in the sheer number of diaspora associations running in Australia based on religious, regional, and other divisions).

So, is there a persistence of caste and class consciousness in the South Asian diaspora? It can well be argued that a discourse on class is historically rooted in caste and sub-caste identity. As early as the eighteenth century, class consciousness was being associated with caste identity (see Sahai 2005; Kumar 2012). Despite historical and literary evidence that suggests that the consciousness of caste and class (two very moldable institutions) is fundamentally linked to contexts such as wealth, education and gender norms, it has nevertheless been seen as de-linked from these social realities in the diaspora. Scholarly studies on caste, and its close proximity to class consciousness, have paid more attention to the traditional Indian sub-continental setting. But what about the complex carrying forward of caste and class consciousness in the Indian sub-continental diaspora? P. Pratap Kumar has observed in relation to Indian sub-continental diaspora in the UK, South Africa and Fiji that

the caste and social status have not been radically de-linked from each other. The presence of caste consciousness in the diaspora albeit without the operative mechanisms of jati, meant that caste remains in some sense notionally significant. (2012: 224)
In the diaspora situation the dynamicity of ethnicity, caste, and class consciousness is more significant psychologically and symbolically than in actual behavioural practice at least in the public sphere (see Kumar 2012). On the changing nature of caste consciousness in India C. Jeffrey observes that

Caste is changing in rural India. As it changes, it poses new and exciting questions for geographers interested in the reproduction of social inequality and resistance to this reproduction. Caste as a religiously and culturally sanctioned system of resource transfer appears to be on the wane. [ . . . ] But caste as an identity, form of social organization and basis for staking claims to resources remains significant. (2001: 231)

With changing government policies in India, there’s a new identity formation along the lines of economic and political interests of groups belonging to various castes: Forward Class, Backward Class and the Dalit. In the last fifteen years in India, due to various challenges to the rigid multiple hierarchies and political movements supported by the Dalit intelligentsia (both academic and non-academic), lower-castes have successfully started re-asserting, celebrating and expressing pride in their heritage. There is an upward movement economically among the lower caste groups (see Rao 2009).

The next question is: Why do South Asian immigrants become so faithful to their culture in foreign lands while at home they seem to desire reform and favour Western culture? Why this celebration of dual belonging? Amartya Sen argues that the Indian subcontinental diasporic population sees no contradiction between being loyal citizens of the country in which they are settled and where they are politically and socially integrated and holding on to the class identity/cultural identity of India (2005: 73-74). According to S. L. Sharma, ‘it is a defence mechanism against a sense of insecurity in alien settings … [and also] a compensatory mechanism for the loss of status in foreign lands’ (1989: 49).

While researching on South Asian Diaspora literature in Australia I came across certain short narratives that contained issues related to persistence of class and caste consciousness and pointed towards its complicated nexus with gender, education and ethnic identity. Despite the centrality of caste in South Asian sociology and study of its impact on diasporas in UK and USA, I haven come across only two studies, Costa-Pinto (2007) and Vahed (2007), on this subject from Australia. This paper attempts to fill this research gap by studying the association between caste and class. In this paper I use examples from selected short narrative pieces by Sujatha Fernandes, Vijay Mishra, Chitra Fernando, Sunil Govinnage, Glen D'Cruz and Christopher Cyrill, South-Asian-Australian writers and academics, to illustrate the diversity and clash of caste and class experiences within the South Asian migrant community.¹ These short narratives, by writers belong to diverse South Asian groups with different migration histories—Indian, Fiji-India, Sri Lankan, and Anglo-Indian, provide preliminary insights and highlight certain common factors in the workings of caste and class consciousness. These include aspiration to own luxury, domestic and sexual exploitation, relegation from original class and family expectations within a class structure, maintenance of status quo, and the future possibilities or break

¹ Other South Asian-Australian diaspora writers, such as Rashmere Bhatti (’The Good Indian Girl’), Manik Datar (’My Sister’s Mother’), Michelle De Kretser (’Life with Sea Views’), Hanifa Deen (’Curry, Crusades and Scripture’), Yasmine Gooneratne (’Bharat Changes His Image’), Neelam Maharaj (’Festivals’), Satendra Nandan (’The Guru’) and Renuka Sharma (’Paternity’), have also highlighted workings of class and caste consciousness using the same markers and influences that are under consideration in the present study.
from class consciousness, often reflected in other writers’ works too that are based on Geertzian notion of ‘blurred genre’ or ‘genre mixing’ or ‘impressions’ gathered from facts, fiction and faction—fictionalized aspects of factual observations (see Geertz 1980; Van Maanen 2011).

I feel South Asian diaspora writers are among the best observers of a society under transition and the issues they are raising today in Australia helps in creating a dynamic multicultural oeuvre. Edward Said in his work Culture and imperialism (1993) has also shown how a writer is never neutral. He notes:

I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure. (1993: xxii)

South Asian-Australian writers through their ‘interpretive imagination’ provide the readers with ‘a structure of attitude and reference’ (Said 1993: xxii; xxvi). Their work alerts us to put an equal emphasis on the workings and carrying forward of the baggage of South Asian class and caste issues in Australia. In fact, the ideas highlighted in their works about contemporary society and culture’s dominant thought, attitude and way of life point to the present topography of South Asian diaspora in Australia. I also contend that the trends observed with reference to South Asian class structures in these short stories and autobiographical short narratives facilitate projections into the future although it remains to be seen in time how the next generations of diaspora negotiate their identities and contexts within inherited class networks and structures.

‘Pocket Full of Stories’: Class and Caste in the Narratives of South Asian Diaspora

One of the prime issues associated with class consciousness is the aspiration to own luxury. A point not limited to the first generation as several second generation individuals also show the same propensity towards conspicuous consumption. The narrator in Indian-Fijian-Australian academic Vijay Mishra’s ‘Dilkusha’ recounts how at an evening party in Sydney, the primarily Indian origin guests arrived in designer wear and ‘began to talk, about cricket, about wealth, about cars, about riches, about flats, houses, children’s education: to be a doctor is a blessing but to be a dentist divine [. . . ]’ (2004: 132). These immigrants attended Indian functions actively, looked for Indians with whom to associate, and sought friendship and company of other Indian-Australians. This is not merely to ward off their loneliness or isolation but also to maintain their class or status quo by showing off their prosperity or success within their own community that helps the immigrants assert and establish self-worth within the social milieu of Australia.

It can be further argued that ‘race’ works as a kind of ‘class’, and prominent western intellectuals such as Karl Marx and Max Weber also ‘taught Europeans to view their own society in terms of class’ (Tinker 1977: 15). A point well illustrated by David Cannadine in his book Ornamentalism (2001), where he too argues that it was ‘class’ or ‘social prestige’, not ‘race’ per se that drove the British empire. Taking this as a salient feature of colonial beginnings of a conceptualization of class-caste nexus in India, it can be argued that in fact class, caste and race are so intertwined among Indian-Australians that this logic is used to condescendingly look down upon the Aborigines and some other immigrants for higher class positionality. This notion, although a complex one, forms the process by which class identities and differences have been deeply manifested in Australia and amongst its various diasporas.

Indian-Australian writer Sujhatha Fernandes in ‘A Pocket Full of Stories’, presented through the eyes of a young narrator, highlights sexual exploitation of a servant girl from Mangalore in the household of a Goan family and the role of traditional sociocultural prejudices in maintaining the exploitation of the
lower’ castes/classes. This family at one level is Western in behavior and thought but at the same time being conscious of their upper-class status is also trying to replicate the Indian/Goan social structure while living in Sydney. Nandini, a Mangalorean servant girl from India, who belongs to another caste and low-class, is presented to the readers as only ‘a small, skinny, black girl’ (Fernandes 1999: 90) who knows a lot of stories—a dreamer. Nandini’s sexual exploitation plus class exploitation is seen working throughout the story. She is repeatedly raped and later made pregnant by her Indian-Australian employer. The whole family blames Nandini, the low-class and caste girl, for her own exploitation and she is made to leave Sydney for the trouble she has caused the family. For the writer, narrator and readers it is not just a rape in physical and sexual terms but it is rape of a dream, of a conjurer whose ‘pocket was full of stories [. . .] never ending multicoloured [. . .] tales’ (Fernandes 1999: 91). Nandini is unable to take a stand against her employer because of a deep rooted class-caste consciousness, where she has been taught to be supportive of or at least compatible with or submissive to people belonging to upper class especially the ones responsible for her bread and butter.

According to Anand Giridharadas, author of *India calling* (2011), in the Indian subcontinent ‘you’re eternally a master and eternally a servant. And servants in many ways have been seen and taught to see themselves as being not someone who is situationally inferior, but someone who is eternally, intrinsically inferior’ (http://www.npr.org/). Class differences, exploitation at work, and status consciousness away from homeland in a foreign country is a recurring theme in many short stories and very well highlighted in Chitra Fernando’s ‘The Chasm’ from *Women there and here* (1994) by exploring difference in attitude towards two individuals belonging to different class stratas of Sri Lankan society, who have just immigrated to Australia. In the first case, Manel, a Sinhala nurse, who has arrived only eight months ago from Sri Lanka, is used as a servant in the house of the Registrar of the hospital, Veeran Tampoe, a Tamil from Sri Lanka. Veeran’s wife, Nelun, hates cooking, washing and cleaning and to her [. . .] the timely arrival of Manel, a common or garden weed, had saved her from a situation which would have come dangerously close to crushing the lily on those occasions when hospitality demanded lavish meals. (Fernando 1994: 53)

Although, Manel is not a servant but a trained nurse, for the Tampoe family and their other Sri Lankan friends in the small community of Alice Springs her status is of a poor commoner from homeland, who ‘wasn’t one of them’ (Fernando 1994: 54). In Manel’s treatment by others, especially the Tampoes, we can also read a reverse in ethnic discrimination. Manel is often the butt of jokes because of her accent and mixing of her ‘ps’ and ‘fs’ as ‘English wasn’t her first language’ (Fernando 1994: 54). Her way of speaking differs a lot from the other migrants’ convent school and foreign university educated accent. One of the community highbrow thinks that Manel’s mixing with them on intimate occasions will make her ‘feel like a fish out of water’ but is assured by Veeran that ‘he would see to it that Manel didn’t stray from her side of the social fence’ (Fernando 1994: 54). No one from the community likes Manel and this is reflected in her treatment at a picnic party where she has been invited to assist the Tampoes (Fernando 1994: 55). The affluent members of the community gave ‘suppressed smiles, the meaningful looks, or simply the slight curtness’ which was brought on by something she’d said innocently, but they also tried hard to be civil and expected ‘deference’ in return from Manel (Fernando 1994: 55). She knows what they feel about her and her class but when she is not even allowed to eat the food with

2 ‘Nil Manel’ (blue water lily) is the National Flower of Sri Lanka and in Portuguese it means ‘God is with us’.
them during the picnic, she decides that she cannot take it anymore and politely but assertively says

You are rich and educated. So maybe you thought me a fool. Maybe I was a fool to think you liked me. I am a simple village woman. To me your ways are strange. So, I think I’ll leave your picnic now. (Fernando 1994: 62)

The educated and rich people of her own community are unable to understand her pain, although they believe that Australia is fair to everyone and is a land of opportunities, money and equality but to them ‘all this equality business has turned that girl’s head and she forgets that there are boundaries which must be respected’ (Fernando 1994: 57). They want their status quo to persist in the small Sri Lankan-Australian community. They know that Manel is liked by one of the Australian doctors working in the same hospital and feel that it is his ‘attentions’ that have gone to her head. They see a possibility of Manel’s marriage and her becoming a surgeon’s wife thereby attaining a higher status. The community further feels that it is the Australians’ fault that a status quo is not being maintained: ‘These Aussies—decent chaps and all that—but a bit dense when it comes to the finer points of birth and breeding’ (Fernando 1994: 62). And even if she is able to marry an Australian doctor, for the Sri Lankans in Australia a change in Manel’s ‘civil status’, will ‘never change her ancestry’ (Fernando 1994: 63). They won’t give her the same respect as they would give to a person having a reputed family name and equal or higher status. Here one is reminded of Roland Barthes’ remarks, in Mythologies, that when the petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the ‘Other’, he comes face to face with him, blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the example of Manel, how the dominant Sri Lankan community seeks to contain the ‘Other’ and maintain its status quo and place in society in the diaspora is most revealing. They caricature, silence and marginalise her, and turn her into a comic spectacle or clown—using ‘strategies of negation’ (Dissanayake 2002: xx). The difference between the privileged and unprivileged in homeland continues to be a marker of a class boundary in Australia as the ‘migrants mark the outer limits’ and also provide a point ‘which gives the norm some scope and dimension’ (Sarup 1996: 12).

Families and communities in the diaspora can also expect to receive new, young migrants from time to time. After the low class Manel, the second visitor to this small community is Vijay, a sociologist from Colombo, on a ten-day holiday. His ‘being a friend of Veeran Tampoe’s brother automatically made him the prized possession of the Tampoes’ (Fernando 1994: 53). And his visit and stay offered the Tampoes an opportunity ‘for an entirely natural display of large quantities of crystal, silver, an elegant blue-and-white dinner service and a twelve-piece walnut dining suite unavoidable at lavish meals [. . . ]’ (Fernando 1994: 53). Vijay first feels elated by their hospitality and is touched by their gestures of friendliness but later on observes the community critically and understands that ‘the covert intent of the Tampoe-Mendis-Ahamed probing concerning his family and friends’ was in order to find out if he was ‘one of them’ (Fernando 1994: 56). And also if he knew the right people, studied in the best university, and if his views on Yale, Oxford and Cambridge were similar to theirs. Although, they were satisfied about his ancestry, yet

There was something about him that they were beginning to find disconcerting: the occasional expression suspiciously like amusement as they were talking about serious matters, his observation on men, manners and morals. These indicated not the outsider, but the apostate.
Being a sociologist, these immigrants with their class consciousness are at best subjects for Vijay’s ‘ironical contemplation’ (Fernando 1994: 56). To him

They’re like primitives. No one at home in Sri Lanka will believe this [. . .]. There was here the rage, the frustration of the disposed. The supermarket cornucopia and the electric plenty were there; they laughed all the way to the bank. Yet deep within, they were dispirited. The landscape, its endless flatness broken only by huge bumps of rock or deep clefts, overwhelmed them. They talked to people. An exchange of sounds with no engagement of the spirit. (Fernando 1994: 61)

Soon the community realizes that Vijay, although one of them in terms of class, is a man who ‘dreams of equality’ and class and social revolution back home (Fernando 1994: 57). He is of the view that the subordinate position of women, represented by Manel, is inextricably linked to a class-based capitalist system, and the community and family structure within that system. For him, only if the capitalist economic system is changed can the exploitation of women and lower classes end. With his leftist views that are anti-status quo, Vijay is not welcome anymore in this community, as he notices in the ‘absence of conventional hospitality formula—the polite request to come again’, while taking leave (Fernando 1994: 63-64). This further reflects the coldness of their hearts and the false expectations and values that people adhere to in the name of traditions, customs, and social practices in a community (see Paranjape 2007: 354).

David Cooper argued, in The Death of the Family (1962), that human and especially women’s oppression was grounded in the family and class, which ‘obscurely filters out most of our experience and then deprives our acts of any genuine and generous spontaneity’ (8). Cooper’s central argument was that the family was crucial to hegemony, ‘reinforcing the effective power of the ruling class in any exploitative society by providing a highly controllable paradigmatic form for every social institution’ (1962: 5-6). The immigrant community’s search in Fernando’s story is for a status quo ante, to maintain the state in which class structures worked before migration—not just economically but behaviourally too. Being the first to arrive to Australia from their respective communities they feel a notion of ‘ownership’ of this small community and the opportunities offered and have a vague feeling of the power to exclude others like Manel, low class recent immigrants, from better prospects and therefore behave in an antagonistic manner in their formal relationship to such individuals.

Class consciousness and the process of migration are thus interrelated as migration is not always a highly individual decision. The concentration of migrant families from South Asia in the major capital cities of Australia has a number of implications for the job markets, services, and possibly community relations (see Inglis and Wu 1992: 204). Here I would like to refer to a story that specifically addresses the issue of education and profession. This is Sri Lankan-Australian writer Sunil Govinnage’s story titled ‘Arrival’ from Black swans and other stories (2002), where Jayadeva, who has recently immigrated to Australia with his family from the war-torn Sri Lanka, is surprised to note that ‘there was not a single soldier or security officer guarding the airport’ (2002: 38). To him Australia is really a lucky country: ‘No Civil Wars. No ethnic divisions, No wars at all!’ (Govinnage 2002: 38). He could immediately see a better future for his family as
He carefully stepped out of the arrival lounge, placing his right foot first, as he was setting out on an important journey, a custom he had learnt as a child from his parents. [ . . . ] he was stepping out into a new country, to lead a new life. (Govinnage 2002: 39)

Officials at the airport were polite and people fast and efficient, and his immediate reaction is to think that indeed it is a lucky country—‘his second homeland’ (Govinnage 2002: 35). But the very next experience gives him pause. The family meets a taxi driver, a migrant from Lebanon, who was an ENT surgeon back home but is now driving a taxi to sustain his family in Australia. Although he is bitter about the Australian Medical Council Exam, a must for Asians, which he couldn’t pass and although it took him two years to recover from this shock, he and his family have adjusted and are happy. He sarcastically says to Jayadeva’s wife, who is a pediatric surgeon:

‘Welcome to this lucky country. [ . . . ] The exam is there to eliminate candidates. [ . . . ] If you come from a white country, like England or South Africa, there are no exams for doctors. All the doors are open to you’. (Govinnage 2002: 40-41)

But if you are an Asian then ‘it’s a long journey’ (Govinnage 2002: 41). The taxi driver is frustrated on how Australia—the ‘clever country’—treats its ‘educated migrants’ (Govinnage 2002: 40). Migrants with professional skills are often disappointed when they discover that their skills may be in poor demand or their qualifications not recognised by the Australian rules and regulations. Furthermore, the only work available to them carries not only less pay, but it lowers their occupational and therefore social status both in Australia and back home.

The narrative that I move on to now presents the other side of the coin—what about immigrants who were at a position of social disadvantage in the class ladder in their home country? Such as some Anglo-Indians. In the words of V. R. Gaikwad, Anglo-Indians were

mid-way between two cultural worlds, and under the peculiar conditions of their origin and socio-cultural development, Anglo-Indians could never get to know the West to which they aspired to belong, nor did they have emotional ties with India where they really belonged [ . . . ]. (1967: 4)

Glenn D’Cruz in his autobiographical piece ‘Beyond the Pale’, reflecting on his family life in India observes that they were part of ‘the Anglo-Indian railway class, and lived on a modest income in a humble abode without running water, domestic servants or the various other conveniences of bourgeois life’ (D’Cruz 2004: 230). But his father, who was highly class conscious, knew that to escape their marginal status in a post-independent India, he must migrate and look for success and a new identity. He believes, that as an immigrant in Australia, attaining social mobility through ‘respectable’ jobs is a necessity, especially for Glen and others like him who are second generation immigrants. Glen notes about his father’s class consciousness and life in Australia:
My father had a somewhat bizarre obsession with office work, and hoped that I would become a clerk, a position that signified a high social status among his generation of Anglo-Indians. He even made me sit the public service entrance exam, against my wishes, when I was fifteen. A few years later he got me a job as a sheet metal worker’s assistant because he feared that remaining idle for three months between the end of school and the beginning of university would be bad for my ‘character’. (D’Cruz 2004: 226)

In the eyes of Glenn’s father, his son’s early lifestyle in Australia as a musician is seen as something with ‘no ambition and no prospects’ (D’Cruz 2004: 226). It represents wasting an opportunity. Through his research into the Anglo-Indian community, Glenn notes the factors that shaped his father’s attitude and principles. He knew that the Anglo-Indians did not have emotional ties with India but only ancestral links. He now knows why his family immigrated to Australia in the early 1970s. He realises that it is in Australia ‘despite experiencing various degrees of racism’ and not in India where his ‘father’s bourgeois ambitions were more or less realised’ (D’Cruz 2004: 230). It is in Australia that his family ‘managed ultimately to acquire the accoutrements of middle-class life—‘respectable’ jobs, houses, cars and so forth—all of which seemed beyond their grasp in post-independence India’ (D’Cruz 2004: 230).

Christopher Cyrill’s autobiographical short story ‘The Ganges and its Tributaries’ is also a fine example of the genre of family history, where the second generation narrator attempts to understand as well as portray the life experiences of the first generation South Asian immigrants. He acts as a ‘chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones [and] acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history’ (Benjamin 1968: 256). Cyrill notes how his Anglo-Indian family grew and extended in Australia: ‘My parents began sponsoring relatives to Australia in 1976. Every three months or so a different aunt, uncle and their family would arrive from India and stay with us until they found jobs’ (Cyrill 1993: 163). He further notes that

[ . . . ] As soon as they [family members from India] appeared in the doorway of Gate 8B, I expected the women’s saris and the man’s knee-length shirts and cloth pants to change, as if Australia would disrobe them. I hoped that the accents I heard would disappear by the time each family had left the airport.

When he saw our relatives my father gasped, as if he was trying to decide which language to speak in. (Cyrill 1993: 165)

So, the arrival and relocation of the extended family, although a happy occasion of meeting and celebration, for Christopher is also a moment of dislocation: ‘I cannot recall any time when my parents and I were alone after the first of my relatives arrived. It seems now as if I was always being displaced from my bed by an aunt or uncle [. . . ]’ (Cyrill 1993: 166). Cyrill’s father explains his motives to come to Australia:

‘Opportunity. India is starving and I want my children to be fat. I once wanted you to marry an
Indian girl, but now I want you to mix your genes. You are Anglo-Indian born in Australia. You are like a trinity—marry, mix’. (Cyrill 1993: 167)

Lack of opportunities in India i.e. economic constraints motivated Cyrill’s father to leave his original homeland which, however problematic, was the only homeland he had ever known before he decided to migrate to Australia in search of livelihood or economic betterment of the family.

Anglo-Indians assumed that they would be treated well. However, the White Australia Policy made sure that Anglo-Indians were not treated any better than other non-white migrants. Therefore, despite economic success, the class status failed to improve (see James 2001; Leonard 2007; Blunt 2011). Cyrill’s father then comes up with a new idea of the envisioned future and loyalty for his family (other immigrants and Australians) and a solution to the dilemma of identity and class consciousness:

‘The world is getting smaller. One race, soon there will be only one race. I want my grandchildren to eat naans with spaghetti. No more cousins marrying cousins. At the start there was only one country; now water separates us. Drift, you must mix. [. . .]’. (Cyrill 1993: 167)

The ‘one race’ that Cyrill’s father looks forward to is actually a race where genes of all the nationalities get mixed. The image of grandchildren eating ‘naans with spaghetti’ is the image of a cosmopolitan and multicultural society as proposed in the ‘melting pot’ model. According to Sneja Gunew food ‘has long been an acceptable face of multiculturalism’. She further notes that in Australia

one of the few unthreatening ways to speak of multiculturalism is in relation to food, in other words to say that all migrants have improved the diversity of national cuisine. The usual way in which this diversity is celebrated is through a multicultural food festival. (1993: 16)

But Cyrill’s father takes the metaphor of food to an entirely different level. For him race mixing or integration is a positive option not just for Anglo-Indians but also for other migrant groups present in Australia and indeed the whole world. Once people become related by marital relations the hatred in the world will also diminish, as his father says, ‘they cannot hate without hating themselves’ (Cyrill 1993: 167). Here we see a trajectory, a journey of an immigrant deprived of class status in both homeland and hostland. His first project is to bring India to Australia—by getting as many Indian relatives to Australia as possible—in order to build a sense of community in the new homeland. Realising the futility of that project he goes to the other extreme—a world where there are no class barriers at all because everyone is related!

Conclusion: Making Sense of Changes

These narratives, works of fiction added with facts and observations from real life, clearly present
multiple interpretations on the broader context of social, structural and economic changes occurring in South Asian diaspora in Australia where the majority Australians are mute observers with no major role to play. In some cases this leads to a reinforcing of conservative ideologies as traditionally valued common sense ideas. However, migration to Australia has brought new social and class distinctions amongst the South Asian migrants as each family, in setting its strategy for life in the new homeland, faced a central question: whether to give priority to social security or economic advancement? I have argued that despite the modern nature of South Asian diaspora in Australia and despite the egalitarian nature of Australia and even if caste as an institution cannot be practiced publicly or caste consciousness has not survived, this consciousness has very subtly merged into class consciousness and a demonstration of social status in relation to others. The ‘others’ being those who do not belong to the same jati, linguistic group and economical level, as the control is still in the hands of first-generation families thus affecting everyday experiences. Also, in most cases immigration from the Indian sub-continent to countries like Australia is prominently based on experience-sharing stories from the peer group particularly belonging to the same caste/class back home.

Apparent equality or illusory social relations or class solidarity or retention and reproduction of class separations, ancestral customs, language and religion, and marriage patterns in the diaspora consciously and unconsciously from the first to the second generation often obscures the role of the class under these family narratives and histories. But an analysis of the behaviour, language, and subscription to a common ethnic or national identity in the diaspora highlights social differences and class identities that are also linked to society, power and circumstance. Class separations are readily expressed and manifest themselves through such acts as the branding of the lower classes, conspicuous consumption, spatial settlement practices and educational or job-related decisions. It also gives a person a sense of personal location, which in turn is linked to a person’s lived experience, in homeland and hostland, and shaped by gender, ethnicity, religion, race, sexual orientation, nationality, education, and occupation (see Canella and Grieshaber 2001). Education and employment are important signifiers of class position both in the diaspora and homeland as these are the very ideas that deny or down-play the significance of classes.

Class and caste identity in the South Asian diaspora helps in making sense of social, cultural, economic and political changes taking place around an individual and family. In the South Asian diaspora short stories there is a wide spectrum of representation of class and caste consciousness (added with ethnicity) from Manel and Nandini, who are subjected to an extreme form of re-assertion of old class structures and disillusionment to the attitude of Cyrill’s father, who wants his children to ‘mix’ and bring in new patterns of equality, not just culturally but through matrimony as well. In conclusion, a more multidisciplinary dialogue or study of South Asian diaspora in Australia, within anthropology as well as literary and cultural studies, may help explore some of the questions raised in this paper and highlight new class consciousness and subjectivities. This will help us understand the dynamics of the whole project of migration. In other words, our understanding of the class and caste consciousness is crucial to our understanding of the new world emerging around us.
References


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