

Tamils and Greater India: some issues of connected histories

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The idea of connected histories has been in vogue for some time especially in the context of maritime history and linkages in the early modern period. As an alternative to global history and world history, both of which emerged in the very specific context of reactions to area studies and Euro-centrism, connected histories seems to have the potential to interrogating both older geographies and to provide us with a framework of looking at trans-spatial connections differently. A central and distinguishing feature of connected histories is to understand and contextualize movements and intersections of people, objects and ideas. Not surprising therefore that migration and migrant experiences have constituted an important medium for understanding space and the porousness and flexibility it accommodates over time. Migrant experiences manifested in different ways acquiring important features that were part of the milieu in which migrants operated. So if Hinduism and Buddhist culture provided a certain template to overseas Indian activity in the early historical period, Islam and its emphasis on a particular mode of public urban culture became a dominant frame for commercial negotiation and cultural interactions in the Indian Ocean world for the greater part of the medieval and early modern period. In the nineteenth century and thereafter, in the century of European Imperial enterprise, new mechanisms of negotiations were provided by ideas of progress, civilization and shared citizenship that became the basis of new kinds of narrative productions, including scholarly historical work. It is from this vantage point that the paper looks at the possibility of revisiting the Tamil factor in understanding anew south and southeast Asian connections, of revisiting existing work to ask fresh questions mostly about the multiple lives of the 'Greater India' idea and how the Tamil experience in south east Asia was written into it and how in contrast Tamil groups in Malaya worked around a different set of imaginings and reference points to make sense of their historical experience both in relation to the natal base and to their land of adoption.

Tamils, Overseas Indians and Editors: some reflections in Indian Ocean journalism

How were the Tamils positioned within the emerging reportage on the category of the Overseas Indian so prominently featured in the journalistic repertoire of publicists and social commentators working along a transnational axis of print and circulation? We know from recent works on Indian Ocean journalism and the emerging transnational public sphere that a very vibrant network of cities enabled the cohering of a distinct mode of cosmopolitan sociability that opened up and interrogated issues of geography, citizenship, identity and entitlement. The social lives of people and objects transcended the boundaries of nation, continent or sea and through individual life stores and institutional processes produced complex trans-societal interactions and geographies. Among these imagined geographies, the idea of Vishal Bharat or Greater India was an important and recurrent one and in the constitution of which the Tamil factor enjoyed a curious signification even if ironically, the Tamil imagination of its own landscape was not necessarily confined to the idea of India. In fact one could argue quite legitimately that the Tamil engagement with the debate on imperial citizenship, on immigrant/identity politics reconfigured

substantively and quite decisively the relationship with the natal base asserting in the process the need to find new locations of legitimacy, identity and affect. This became especially evident in the narratives that began to emerge and proliferate around language and cultural practice among Tamils in Southeast Asia. How and whether these have entered into the writing of post colonial, even post national professional histories is another matter but certainly an issue worthy of some investigation.

The articulation of an Indian Ocean print culture occurred in the larger context of urbanization in Asia and the Indian Ocean as part of an Imperial system and the emergence of a strong network of publicists and educated non western literati stretching from Dar e Salam and South Africa to Malaysia and Singapore even beyond. What connected these dispersed cities and their elite was a shared circuit of aspirations and beliefs stemming from a common identification with western liberal values purveyed through the colonial education system, with particular notions of tradition and heritage and a more immediate set of instrumentalist concerns about improving the lot of their less privileged counterparts and making information available. Thus we have someone like P.S.Aiyer the editor of Colonial Indian News (Natal) introducing a Tamil section for his readers so that many more people of Tamil extraction could familiarize themselves with overseas news even as we have a wide ranging network of Theosophists and revival Buddhists deliberating on matters of religion and heritage speaking for an expanded constituency. At the same time we have a strong case put forward for the toiling immigrant, for labour whose rights had to be safeguarded even if these meant contesting the might of Empire. Each of these initiatives was part of the transnational print culture put together by enterprising elites deploying modern means of communication¹.

The background to this empire of letters and to the multiple modes of representation it accommodated was provided in part by the differential experience of migration within the Indian Ocean. We know for instance that the mid nineteenth century and thereafter saw an unprecedented increase in the movement of Indians across the Indian Ocean. Close networks of communication and circulation had always existed and many of these networks that lapsed briefly in the latter decades of the eighteenth century came alive in the nineteenth even though they responded to a very different set of pressures coming from an increasingly colonized world economy. Thus controversies related to emigration – its modalities, its management and ramifications featured prominently in the reporting and these in turn helped in the cohering of a discourse on Indians overseas.

There were two identifiable skeins in the emerging discourse. One was a running appreciation of the vitality of Indian capital and the antiquity of Indian connections and the other a vocal concern about the state of labour whose profile did not do much to bolster notions of Indian greatness. Thus writing on the duties of Indians towards overseas Indians, for the February 1928 issue of the Hindi monthly *Vishal Bharat*, Bhavani Dayal referred to two notions of Greater India, one that he extolled and the other that he abhorred. The former quite predictably alluded to the pre-colonial network of Hindu-Buddhist cultural connections and continuities across the Indian Ocean while the latter embodied the reality of colonial subjugation, when Indians were in his

words, ‘moved by the foreign state and merchants who sacrificed them for their own trade interests’ and as a result of which, India became ‘known as the coolie country and Indians as the Coolie race’. The redemptive note in this otherwise damning indictment was provided by ‘one gain namely, that more than twenty lakh Indians who had settled in colonies outside and having attained prosperity beyond their imagination had done India proud’. Dayal’s voice was not exceptional – indeed he echoed the sentiments of a generation of publicists and intellectuals who chose to represent the cause of Indians overseas and who despite their sincere endeavours to speak for the toiling poor and plantation labour, nevertheless set up categories that in some cases mimicked older, colonial taxonomies of populations and in others betrayed not so much only a class position as a knee jerk endorsement of a discursive rhetoric that had become influential and also seen as a vehicle of emancipation.

How were Tamils and the Tamil experience written into the emerging journalistic category of Overseas Indians? This question is important not merely because Tamils represented an important and substantial ethnic and language category within indentured labour that moved across the Indian Ocean but also because an earlier history of Tamil connections and contacts became the basis for more than one reading of Greater India. The reportage that was put forward by journals and their editors whose common cause occasionally with professional historians in this issue gestured to one dominant strain in the emerging discourse on an expanded and exalted idea of India and on the maritime energy of the Tamils who were the vanguards of Indic culture to the lands in the east. It was not entirely a coincidence that editors like G.Natesan of the Indian Review carried the writings of historians like R.C.Majumdar who worked out in the capacity of a professional historian the idea of Greater India even as he gave space for other/multiple versions of the Greater India concept. The question is also important because Tamils themselves both labour and capital had very little investment in this idea - contemporary Chetty narratives either in the form of personal reminiscences or in their own newspapers were preoccupied with more immediate issues of community reform and political representation to bring greater pressure on the colonial state to enable them to negotiate the pressures of ethnic politics in Southeast Asia. Labour on its part, or rather on the part of publicists speaking for them either from within or from radical intellectuals outside were more concerned with immediate problems of relief and repatriation and subsequently of integration with the host society. Their spokesmen spoke a language of common emancipation for the working class and for varieties of entitlement under the rubric of imperial citizenship and that echoed right across the ocean through a wide-ranging circuit of print and circulation. The same was true of businessmen and traders in South and East Africa – where they floated newspapers and journals thereby established a network of shared information

That the representation of Tamils as historic agents in the world of the Indian Ocean enjoyed currency in different and discrete locations and registers has been examined by a number of scholars. For instance, Susan Bayly refers to the Tamil Muslim geographies with nodal centers stretching from Nagore to Penang and also to the way these groups imagined their space of circulation, interconnections and practice. Of course this imagination accommodated a more universal dimension and was as Engseng Ho’s work has demonstrated part of a Hadrami diaspora with its articulations on public space and order. With Tamil Hindu migrations of the nineteenth and twentieth century both capital and labour, a different model of self definition and of geography seems to have worked and which in part fed into the larger mainstream Greater

India notion put forward by both professional cultural historians and intellectuals like Kalidas Nag and R.C.Majumdar and publicists like G. Natesan or Taraknath Das and Banarsidas Chaturvedi. The version however, was ruptured at several points partly by the experience of immigrants themselves and the narratives they chose to adopt over time.

Newspapers and periodicals that took up the cause of Indians overseas from whatever location identified Tamils as the most important group in Southeast Asia – Burma, Malaya and Indo-China. Here, as in relation to other groups in Africa or elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, there was a running appreciation of mercantile enterprise that was held out as a legitimate basis to demand greater protection for the rights of overseas Indians, who constituted an India outside its immediate territorial limits. There was also the vital question of looking after labour and its concerns such as issues of wage control, emigration procedures and the thorny issue of repatriation. It was in this sense that publicists like Banarsidas Chaturvedi and Taraknath Das spoke of Greater India – an idea that was expected to urge Indians at home to look more carefully at their compatriots elsewhere and take greater interest in their situation. Both in Singapore and Malaya newspapers like the Straits Times and the Singapore free Press and Native Advertiser carried pieces on the Tamils in terms of labour migration related issues as well as cultural practices of Indian communities including the chettiers. Indian owned and managed journals debated these issues and threw up serious and committed activists like Lanka Sundaram or Nilkan Perumal who also happened to make a strong case for the enterprise and commercial vitality of Tamil commercial communities like the Chetties. The result was a reinforcement of the success story of Indian capital and of the difficulties faced by Indian labour. Echoing the strains of Gujarati pride that resonated in the journals relating to East Africa where the success of Gujarati mercantile enterprise was seen as the foundational basis for Imperial success, journal editors gave space for extended observations on the vitality of Indian immigrants and how their energy and enterprise had to be commended. Admittedly there was in this complex dynamics of caste and community self representation as well as of nationalist rhetoric that invoked ideas of tradition and civilization of the Indic variety and which did not always converge. Representations of Chetty enterprise in Burma, Malaya and Indo-China were almost always framed in glowing terms. In contrast to the depressed immigrant coolie, was the Chetty whose presence the Indian Review observed was a ‘theoretical undesirability but a practical blessing’. This admittedly was the line adopted by Indian associations in Malaya in the 30’s and which journals like the Indian Review or the Hindi or Vishal Bharat reflected quite regularly and enthusiastically. Intellectuals responded to this quite enthusiastically – we have the poet Tagore’s article published in the 1924 edition of the Indian Review where he acknowledged his appreciation of the energy demonstrated by the Chetty and Chinaman in Malaya in contrast to the degraded coolies who remained perpetually coolies. Evidently this strain of public opinion provided an important context for the development of the Greater India idea as articulated by professional historians and intellectuals who among other things were in conversation with French archeologists and scholars and experimented with the ideas of a creative and dynamic India that colonized in the best sense of the term but not by the adoption of coercive state power and violence. India here was the giver, the noble civilizer whose ideas were assimilated and adopted by other peoples across Asia. It was thus not merely fortuitous that the Indian Review should also carry the serialized versions of R.C.Majumdar’s writings on Greater India even as it relentlessly advocated safeguards for Indian labour and its future. Tamil historians, professional scholars that is like Nilakanta Sastri and S. Krishnaswami Ayyangar endorsed this line of thinking and extolled the maritime energies of ancient Tamils who were ‘primarily responsible for the spread of Hindu

culture to the islands of the east and the indo-Chinese peninsula, reaching even as far as China'. Interestingly the Chetties themselves in the journals and newspapers they sponsored held a different conception of their location as well as of their geography.

Where did the coolies, immigrant labouring groups figure in the scheme? Evidently their aspirations and activities needed to be protected and managed but could not be written into the history of India's glory and exploits. Theirs was a story of toil and degradation but even here it was possible to discern in their history a potential to interrogate the burden of caste and also to reengage with issues of entitlement and citizenship. Their self definition thus required not so much a history of antiquity and tradition as it did of language and cultural practices that could thereafter become the basis for a new set of demands in the country of adoption and residence. The geography and history of their choice was neither simply determined by India nor even by the demands of Tamil separatism but by a more complex notion of cultural ecology and material choice.