

Diaspora Christianities

**Global Scattering and Gathering
of South Asian Christians**



Edited by Sam George

Foreword by Andrew F. Walls

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of South Asian Christians*

EDITOR

SAM GEORGE

FORTRESS PRESS

MINNEAPOLIS

DIASPORA CHRISTIANITIES

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Introduction

Sam George

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, South Asians are omnipresent! One may find them in every nook and corner of the planet, literally in every time zone and probably in every country of the world. On account of their growing and widespread dispersion, it is popularly claimed that ‘the Sun never sets on the South Asian diaspora akin to what was said of the British Empire in the past!’

South Asia comprises of several nations in the Indian subcontinent and includes seven countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Mauritius, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This geographical region was knit together as a common entity during the British colonial rule despite its many differences. Some tend to include Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) and in recent times Afghanistan also into South Asia. The autonomous region of Tibet and China’s interest in joining South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has further complicated the definition of South Asia. Some categorization even includes Iran in Southern Asia. However, in this volume, we will confine the definition of South Asia to the original seven nations.

According to the United Nations assessment of the International migrant stock in 2015 from South Asia amounted to over 32 million and increased by five million in the last five years and near 11 million over the last ten years. By early 2018, according to some estimate the

South Asian diaspora population has swelled to cross 50 million people. The most populous countries in the region, namely India and Pakistan constitute the major share of displaced people from the region. It must be noted that these numbers do not include what is often called the old diaspora from the region – the dispersion of people from South Asia prior to their nationhood when millions were taken to work in the Colonial establishments around the world as indentured laborers and who lost links to their ancestral homelands. Even though some have amalgamated with native populations in their adopted countries, many still consider themselves as part of the Indian diaspora even if their ancestry is remotely traced to Sind or Ceylon. See appendix for latest data and infographics on the South Asian global diaspora.

Christianity had a continual presence in the South Asian region for nearly two thousand years, beginning with the witness of Apostle Thomas who was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. The arrival of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama began a new era in Indian Christianity with the introduction of Roman Catholic strand in the late fifteenth century. Subsequently, German, Dutch, French, English, Scottish, American and other foreign missionaries along with various established ecclesial entities made their distinctive contributions to Christianity in the region. The Bible translation activities of Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, William Carey, Claudius Buchanan and others provided a major impetus to South Asian Christianity. After gaining independence from Colonial powers in 1947, Christians became more nationalized as Indian, Pakistani or Ceylon Christians and the expulsion of foreign missionaries in 1977 forced the Indian church to take the onus of missionary task with indigenous human power and resources. Over the last seventy years, the churches in South Asia have experienced sustained vitality and growth, while some pockets have struggled and declined. According to the official census reports, Christians in India remains around 2.5 percent continuously of the population over many decades, while Christians populace in Pakistan have dwindled because of persecution against Christians, political instability, and war, whereas there has been an explosive growth of Christianity in Nepal.

In the last five decades or so, the South Asian Christians have spread out more globally through record migration out of the subcontinent to far corners of the globe and many from other faith backgrounds have embraced Christianity in diasporic locations. Because of the colonial links, English language proficiency, professional education and skills, strong work ethics, business savviness, community orientation, resilience and other characteristic features of South Asians, there has been a substantial emigration of people from the Indian subcontinent and they have successfully transplanted themselves all over the world. Christian devotional songs and liturgies are sung in South Asian languages in every continent every week. South Asians congregate for worship and sermons are preached with distinctive regional flavor in every time zone. They are involved in mission locally in their adopted country while they also send regular remittances to support family, churches and mission projects back in their ancestral homeland.

This book portrays the fascinating saga of Christians of South Asian origin who have pitched their tents to the furthest corners of the globe and showcases triumphs and challenges facing this scattered community. The chapters in this volume present historical and contemporary lived religious experiences of South Asian Christians from a plethora of discrete perspectives. It deals with issues such as community history, struggles of identity and belonging, linkage of religious and cultural traditions, preservation and adaptation of faith practices, development of new ways of life, relationship and faith, evolving attitudes and ties to ancestral homeland and host nation, diasporic moral dilemmas as well as biblical reflections of South Asian Christians in diaspora.

The idea for this project was first conceived when I co-edited a volume titled *Malayali Diaspora* (George and Thomas 2013) which was launched at the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, the official annual gathering of non-resident Indians from around the world. My own journey across India and all nations of South Asia exposed me to Christians of different stripes, shades, and creeds. In recent years, I had the distinct privilege of traveling to far-flung ends of the world only to run into South Asians engaged in Christian ministry in their places of

habitation. The global missionary activities of the South Asians lie far beyond the institutionalized structures or organized assemblies, and often includes free floating itinerant evangelists and those who work in foreign Christian agencies and churches without any link to South Asia. Some have gone to study or work abroad and end up catching a vision for ministry, while others have married foreigners and minister to people across racial and ethnic lines. Just in the last year or so, I have met or talked with many interesting South Asians in the frontiers of Christian mission work in the world – a church planter in Panama City ministering among Spanish and Mandarin speakers, tentmaker professor in a leading university in China, evangelists and underground church pastors in closed countries in Central Asia and the Middle East, refugee workers in Turkey and Kenya, children and youth worker in Guyana and eastern Europe, software engineer cum pastor in Latin America and South Africa, English teacher in a communist Southeast Asian country etc.

Diaspora: People on the Move

Throughout this book, we prefer to use the term diaspora broadly to include all dispersed people, who find themselves in a place other than where they were born or belong to and their progenies. Some scholars debate about the use of the term ‘diaspora’ in academic circles to refer to recent migrant communities worldwide as they favor its usage it as in its original concept exclusively for Jewish dispersion. However, as this term has come to be used increasingly to include all forms of human dislocation, contributors of this volume employ a plethora of terms and descriptions to capture the essence of the experience arising out of displacement and practice of Christian faith in widely dispersed locales. Most contributors use the terminology of the diaspora to study the Christian faith of the scattered people originating from Southern Asia.

The word diaspora has a Greek origin (διασπορά) and means scattering or dispersion. It has many references in the Septuagint and a handful of references in the New Testament. It was used originally in referring to the scattering of Israelites or Judean heritage because of

forced exile, but now it is broadly applied to all displaced people like migrants, international students, guest workers, expatriates, refugees, and the like. Following the destruction of the First Temple and Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, the Jewish experience of loss and dispersion from the ancestral home and forced exile to Babylon of a large elite population constitute a central site to situate the concept of diaspora (Charles 2014, 5; Barclay 1996). However, usage of diaspora expanded as more Jews were living outside of the regions of Jerusalem than in it by the fourth century BCE and did not see the condition of being away from ancestral homeland as divine punishment but were comfortable “at home” while living abroad by choice in their diasporic locations (Collins 2000; Rajak 2002).

Though some use the term diaspora synonymously with migration, they are different in usage, meanings and nuanced in its understandings. Migration is primarily used in social sciences and by demographers to refer to the geographical movement of people, whether it be domestic or international. However, diaspora refers to a broader sociocultural, psychological and spiritual condition of living in foreign places because of migration and has an origin in Biblical and Jewish history. Migration is also often used to refer to non-human movements such as bird migration and software or technology migrations. The diasporic reality always includes future generation of migrants, while migration literature is only one generation deep. Moreover, the term migration is exclusively used to represent the foreign-born population and not their descendants who constitute an ethnic minority group in a foreign country or those who have mixed heritage one of which traces back to foreign stock. Diaspora usage generally denotes the context of overseas relocation for long term possible settlement and excludes domestic migration within a political nation-state for a shorter duration as in the case of tourists.

Tölölyan dates the concept of *diaspora* back to the period around 250 BCE when the Jews of Alexandria adopted the term to signify “their own scattering away from the homeland into *galut* or collective exile” (1991a, 3-7). By the early 1930s, scholars had applied the term

diaspora to the Jewish, Armenian, and Greek dispersions, what is commonly described as the classical diasporas. Safran argued that scholarly studies have paid “little if any attention... to diasporas” and includes “expatriates, expellees, emigrants, refugees, slaves, indentured workers, alien residents, ethnic and racial minorities” in the category of diaspora (1991, 83-99). According to Vertovec, the term diaspora can be applied to “describe any population that is considered ‘de-territorialized’ or ‘transnational’” (2001, 278). Jacobsen also took a similar approach in his recent study of South Asian religions (2004, xiv) and the establishment of the Center for the Study of Indian Diaspora in Hyderabad, India in 1996 resulted in several researches publications and gave an impetus to the widespread adoption of the term diaspora (Sahoo and Narayan 2008).

The substantial research that tilted the conversation in favor of diaspora came with the publication of the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* where he introduces diaspora as “term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meaning with the larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrants, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community” (Tölölyan 1991b, 4).” Another seminal volume that used the diaspora as its primary term is by Robin Cohen and argues that the usage of the term diaspora has evolved repeatedly to imply a positive and ongoing relationship between migrants’ homelands and their places of work and settlements (Cohen 1997).

Many Indian scholars of migration and related fields like Ajay Kumar Sahoo, Brij V. Lal, Laxmi Narayan Kadekar, Rajesh Rai, Prema Kurien etc. have also embraced the concept of the diaspora in their writings. Over the last decade or so, in the field of social sciences, culture studies/Anthropology, and religious studies, the diaspora focus has become quite pronounced and unequivocal. This interest coincided with issues of post-colonialism, identity, multiculturalism, globalization, hybridity, alienation, transnationalism and so on. Diaspora usage is gaining greater momentum and seems to better-suited address

complexities of modern human displacement to a myriad of places and cultures.

South Asians are very religious people and in diasporic settings, they exhibit a heightened religious consciousness. For South Asian diasporas religion seems to play a critical role, not only to establish social capital, cultural currency and a much needed cohesive force in foreign lands, but it is resulting in the transformation of religious traditions itself. The diversity of beliefs and practices of South Asian faiths are not replicated precisely in diasporic settings, but they seem to evolve into new forms as result of adaptations and accommodating host cultural elements across generational and geographical spectrums.

The diasporic living is marked by a series of gains and losses in every sphere of life including socially, economically, culturally, politically and religiously for the migrant, their ancestral land, and the immigrant nation. The motivations to move and factors causing displacement fluctuates considerably, depending on people, time of migration and socio-economic conditions in both countries or marriage alliance and family sponsorship. Some are forced to flee when their lives or livelihood are threatened, while others pursue to improve their academic credentials and subsequently economic opportunities. Some are attracted by the possibility of freedom and better living conditions while others are desperately forced to seek refuge in foreign countries because of growing political, religious or social oppression.

The diasporic space is a fertile and potent space for creative energy, adaptations, and creolization not only in music, food and literature but also in matters of faith experiences. The human mobility arising out of the latest transportation methods that are affordable, aided by new communication technologies, are causing intermingling of people and cultures like never seen before in human history. While such cultural diffusion and amalgamation lie at the heart of the development of diasporic consciousness, it also produces much confusion, pain, and conflicts. The new diaspora realities lead to the hybridization of identity, blending of cultures, the transformation of practices and beliefs through

imports and exports to and from dominant cultures of settlement. Unlike the migrants of the previous centuries, the modern diaspora communities maintain close ties with their ancestral homelands and sustain a transnational family, social, political and religious networks.

Since “the Bible is a metanarrative of diaspora” (Cuellar 2008, 1), readers of this volume can expect repeated references to biblical narratives of displacement, deportation, and exile as well as Christian theological and missiological dimensions of diasporas. The early Christian expansion occurred upon the Jewish diasporic network who were not only early converts to Christianity but also become a conduit to spread of Christian faith beyond ethnic, cultural and geographical boundaries. Likewise, today’s diaspora communities are at the forefront of changes within and advancement of Christianity in surprising ways. The increased human mobility and intercultural interactions in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century holds profound potential for cultural diffusion of the gospel of Jesus Christ and creating a new era of mission from everywhere to everywhere. As potential missionaries, diaspora Christians play a strategic role in Christian expansion and vitalization through natural cross-cultural interactions and missional involvement of all people everywhere (George 2011).

Diaspora Christianity: A South Asian Version

South Asians speak many languages, over fifteen hundred and more than fifteen official languages. In diasporic settings, the language centric churches hold a powerful attraction to immigrants and most South Asian first-generation diaspora churches are developed along the lines of language and cultural particularities. Such church services momentarily transport people to their ancestral homelands and congregations of their childhood which provide them with a deep sense of security and comfort amidst immigrant wanderings in foreign lands. It creates a strong sense of community and solidarity with their ancestors while meeting the yearning of belonging. For converts from other religious backgrounds, introduces them to alternative worship format and simultaneous immersion into a new culture and community.

It was German, English and other European missionaries who played a decisive role in the translation of the Bible into South Asian languages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which generated great missionary momentum and mobility to the South Asian Christianity. Then in the middle of the twentieth when almost all South Asian countries gained independence from their colonial masters, language specific church, and missionary work thrived across the region. Later, when people began to migrate out of this region, they carried with them vernacular Bibles and their respective culturalized Christianity to far shores of the world. Many scholars have attributed the creation and vibrancy of immigrant churches in the West to the power of vernacular as well as memories and culture specific aspects of Christian faith practices brought from ancestral homelands (Williams; Warner; Kurien; Ebaugh & Chafetz; Leonard).

However, as foreign-born children of the immigrants come of age and lose some of the linguistic and cultural skills, these churches are forced to adapt to minister effectively to the next generations. What defined and established immigrant congregations are getting undone within a generation and by their own children. Most of the subsequent generations of South Asians in Western Europe, North America, Australia, Southeast Asia, and even Africa are abandoning South Asian churches that their own parents began in favor of local churches in their respective nations while maintaining close ethnic links with one's own communities. At the same time, immigrant churches of one era are sustained by subsequent waves of immigrants with the same language, cultural and denominational affiliations. Any changes in immigration policies and the inability of some congregations in incorporating succeeding immigrants are resulting in a decline of those immigrant churches.

The tendency of pervasive politicking and church splits are all too common among South Asian Christian diaspora. Though it produces greater penetration and spread, it comes with deep wounds and mistrust within the community. If you have been involved with any South Asian diaspora congregations, it is inevitable that you have experienced

church breakups and may still bear the scars of severing in the body of believers. It may mobilize more into ministry leadership but risks heretical teaching without proper training of leaders and weaken our collective witness to those outside of the walls of our churches. Not all church divisions are always unwarranted, as there are times and circumstances where division may be more faithful option like sinful behaviors of church leaders, heretical teachings or other moral and doctrinal lapses.

Another common trait of the South Asian Christians abroad is the entrepreneurial spirit and starting of new fellowship groups wherever life takes them. Some who did not have any church involvement growing up in South Asia, after migrating overseas get very involved in church activities or becomes a pastor of an independent church, especially in case where his wife easily finds employment with her medical training while her husband is unable to find careers matching their education and prior work experience and end up hosting a prayer meeting at home which gradually grows into a church. There are cases of Indian software engineers having started multiple churches in Europe and North America by starting home-based Bible studies. The conceptual framework of ‘migrant as a potential missionary’ could help us explain the massive proliferation of South Asian Christian groups in diaspora and resurgence of religious sentiments in lands far from home.

One of the other key issues faced by South Asians in diasporic settings is the challenge of maintaining their unique identity in foreign cultural contexts. Several essays in this volume explore issues of identity, assimilation, community, hybridity and transnational linkages. It exposes the struggle of dealing with the otherness in host societies, fear of being stereotyped, and ambivalence in their sense of belongings. It examines the function of immigrant congregations for the reproduction of ethnicity and conflicts as well as contradictions these congregations create as they seek to pass on their culturalized faith to an Americanized second and third generation – who are more alienated than attracted by the features that met their parent’s needs.

An Interdisciplinary Approach: Blending Realities

This book takes a distinctive interdisciplinary approach to investigate a lived religious community by inviting scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines and geographies. All of them are of South Asian origin and their writings are drawn from their respective domain expertise. These chapters are presented from distinct vantage points of geographical locations (from every continent) and varied vocational backgrounds such as professors, missionaries, pastors, psychologists, journalist and others. They are seasoned and accomplished academicians as well as practitioners from multiple disciplinary expertise like history, Bible, theology, sociology, anthropology, ethics, literature and economics. It raises many profound questions of life such as who we are, where we come from, where we are going, who are around us, how to relate to others, why are we here, where is God in all this etc. It attempts to answer some of these questions and courageously broaches interrogations about life and faith in the context of human displacement. It presents the great diversity and complexity of Christian faith expressions in far flung geographical spaces, whose ancestral root can be traced back to the Indian subcontinent.

Almost all South Asian Christian denominations can be identified in the diaspora and this volume includes major denominations such as Anglican, Baptists, Brethren, Evangelicals, Reformed, Protestant, Pentecostals, and Independents. In a sense, the essays in this volume are community history and have an emic insider perspective. The ethnic backgrounds of essayists are as wide as Keralite, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Sindhi, Mizo, Pakistani, and Sinhalese. They make their homes in Africa, Australia, Caribbeans, Europe, Middleeast and North America. The subject of diversity is pervasive in this volume in the great assortment of eclectic voices and their characteristic faith practices are evident throughout this volume. As a result of this great diversity of backgrounds, insights and inferences required us to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to study the South Asian Diaspora Christianity.

Scope and Gaps: Boundaries

This volume makes a bold attempt to capture a more global perspective of a religious diaspora group, namely South Asians. Instead of making it exclusively about Indian diaspora, this volume is inclusive of nations in the region. It explores archetypal features of the diasporic Christian faith of South Asians along with some of the promises this frontier offers to the world Christianity as well as some of the predicaments facing scattered religious group in different parts of the world. Although, no one really identifies themselves as South Asian Christian anywhere in the world, we use this theoretical category to include all who hail from South Asia but now have migrated and settled in far-away places.

First, this volume focuses on Christians and does not include other religious groups in South Asian Diaspora, though it includes a few conversion accounts from other religions. It aims to highlight how Christians from this region constitute higher proportions and migratory nature of Christianity. It does include interfaith dimension and explores migratory tendency to established networks, global nature of Christianity, professions that scattered people from South Asia, colonial links and hurdles of religious beliefs that are deterrent to migration.

Secondly, South Asian Christians are not a homogenous entity and come in diverse shades, stripes and shapes. The South Asian region can boast of continual Christian presence for nearly two millenniums and a rich tapestry of religious practices and long convoluted history add to the complexity of writing projects like this. Sincere attempts have been made to be inclusive by adding voices from Sinhalese Christians, Tamil Christians from India and Sri Lanka as well as Kerala Christians of diverse traditions at far-flung destinations. It is unfortunate that the chapter on Nepali diaspora Christians failed to meet the timeline of this publication. Also, this volume does not include voices of Punjabi, Goan or Naga Christians and chapters on diaspora Christians from Bangladesh, Bhutan or Mauritius.

Thirdly, in this volume you may sense the complex task of interweaving disparate voices of Christians from many regions of the world and complicated migration history to paint a portrait of Christianity of the South Asian diaspora. The Syrian Christians of Kerala may trace their roots to the first century, while others are recent converts who embraced Christianity after migrating to foreign lands. The multiplicity of languages and socioeconomic class further confound this study as English is not the primary language of most authors in this volume.

Fourthly, this is a scholarly account of South Asian Diaspora Christianity as most contributors have advanced learning and some are attached to academia doing research and teaching. These papers are well researched and substantiated by author's ongoing community involvement and interest in studying them. This volume is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive but only intended as broad-brush stroke of a particular diasporic community. It fails to be fully representative of all South Asian Christians and does not cover every country or region where South Asian Christians have settled like the continental Europe, East Africa and Latin America.

Fifthly, a book on diaspora cannot be neatly delineated within fixed boundaries and you will find authors transgressing borders of South Asia to be inclusive of the origin and diasporic destinations of the people. E.g. Sindhis origin in Pakistan but after Partition migrated to India (where they are stateless) and then scattered all over the world. Contrarily, Zomis are spread over Burma, India (North eastern states) and Bangladesh. Also, the chapter on South Asian remittances include Afghanistan in South Asia because the World Bank data that was used for the analysis does so.

Finally, this volume is not expected to be the final word on the matter. It has numerous lacunae and we hope it will only inspire more students and scholars to undertake research and publication of Diaspora Christianity. I hope more migration scholars will pay greater attention to religious dimensions of different migrant groups and

theologians take note of growing interest in diaspora literatures. The role of digital media, the internet and social media in knitting diasporic consciousness and development of new spirituality is not adequately addressed here. We need more missiological reflections on the flow, hybridity, diversity, interculturality and virtuality. More theological reflections on displacement and diasporic living by South Asians are always welcome. A comparative study between different regions of the world will make an interesting read and with immediate relevance for immigrant churches everywhere.

Outline of the Book: What to Expect?

This volume is divided into four major categories: *first*, biblical reflections by two South Asian Bible scholars, one each from Sri Lanka and India; *second*, five chapters of historical analysis of the Old Diaspora covering East Africa, Burma, South Africa, Caribbean and Singapore; *third*, mapping of the New Diaspora of seven South Asian Christians in diaspora covering regions such as North America, Europe, Persian Gulf and Australia as well people groups/ nationality such as Telugus, Sindhis, Zomis and Pakistanis; *fourth*, four chapters about specific issues facing South Asian Christians in diaspora such as morality, remittances, hybridity, and death. I conclude this vastly diverse narratives by arguing for plural usage of diaspora Christianities in the title and the challenge of unity before the widely scattered South Asian faith communities. An appendix at the end features the latest demographic and infographic of South Asian diaspora population.

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