Mapping Migration

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Culture and Identity in the Indian Diasporas of Southeast Asia and the UK

Edited by

Jerri Daboo and Jirayudh Sinthuphan

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1361-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1361-7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

This timely volume turns the focus of diaspora studies decisively towards a region which has a multitude of stories which do not gain the international attention that they merit. The choice of the English language advertises a firm intention to address that neglect, but also carries with it an irony, since so many lives have been deeply affected by the legacies of colonialism and exploitation. The essays in many ways have the benefit of personal testimony, which is informed by a variety of interpretations of theoretical language and insight, and so the humanity of the contributors is paramount in the minds of readers, rather than illustrations and examples being given of potentially stale theoretical formulas. This is immensely refreshing and obviously highly informative. In fact, the contributors are writing about culture, and manifestations of culture, and so we read through observations on adaptations achieved through language, religious practice, food, performance, education, family life and employment. Migration is a personal experience for every individual, and indeed for generation on generation, and cultural adjustment an inevitable and at times bruising encounter, which sees some contributors here for at least a time wishing to deny their own names. The writing in this book provides readers with insights into the lives of Indian diaspora communities in the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore, as well as Southall in the UK, in what Professor Jerri Daboo in the Introduction calls a "counterpoint" to the discussion about Southeast Asia, and it is a welcome addition to transcultural understanding.

Professor Graham Ley

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors and authors would like to thank all the participants and informants who took part in the research for the chapters in this book, as well as providing visual material.

We also thank the Chula Global Network of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, for providing funding to support the project and publication of the book.

Thanks to Dr Sharanya Murali for her assistance with copyediting and preparing the manuscript for publication.

INTRODUCTION

JERRI DABOO

In January 2016, the United Nations published a report stating that India has the largest diaspora population in the world, estimated at sixteen million people who were born in India but now living in another country (United Nations, 2016). This does not take into account the very large numbers of descendants of Indian migrants who have established themselves in diasporic communities around the world. These diasporas show the complex ways in which people negotiate shifting identities and cultures in the interplay between roots and routes that takes place in the process of migration and resettlement. Ideas of "home" and "homeland" take on particular meanings, for as Avtar Brah suggests, "the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins while taking account of a homing desire, as distinct from a desire for a 'homeland'. This distinction is important, not least because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of 'return'" (1996, 16). What are the issues, adaptations and negotiations that happen for those in a diaspora which is "home", and how is that "home" manifested and performed in different ways to locate a sense of identity that may be also perceived as "other" in the context of the nation-state?

This book offers different approaches to examining these questions by looking at case studies of Indian diasporic communities in Southeast Asia and the UK. The very scale of the movement of people from India over the centuries to many different countries provides a range of ways that they have integrated into those countries. In addition, the complex factor of the history of empire and imperialism is of major significance in both the patterns and motivations for migration and resettling, as well as how the communities find ways to be "at home" in their new location. Whilst the historical era of empire may be over, for Indian diasporic communities around the globe, the legacy of this history is still very present in a myriad of ways that impact on identity and cultural formations for second, third and subsequent generations who are trying to forge a sense of identity that is about both belonging and difference.

The focus on Southeast Asia and the UK is not intended to act as a direct comparison, but rather to shed light on and act as a counterpoint to

the specific ways in which community groups from the same "homeland" origin have constructed their diasporic lives in different ways. Countries in Southeast Asia have had a long history of migration from the Indian subcontinent for a range of reasons, but western imperialist expansion, and particularly that of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, led to an increase in the movement of people to the relatively nearby countries. The traces of this transnational flow can be seen from Malaysia to Thailand, Burma to Singapore, the Philippines to Indonesia, with language, religion, food, art and performance forms being used in different ways to help establish a sense of "being Indian" whilst also negotiating the identity of the particular nation of "home." For the diaspora in the UK, this is complicated further by living in the "home" of the seat of the Empire itself, and having to face that historical legacy on a daily basis. In this way, the Indian diasporas are a geopolitical post-colonial space, and so share those common legacies, whilst dealing with them in different ways.

This negotiation of identity is very much an encounter with the modern, with ways in which culture, aesthetics and beliefs move and transform when placed in a new location. The idea of "nation" has been heavily contested, and even perceived to be outdated in a globalized, transnational world. However, increasingly the idea of "nation" and "national identity" is one that is being promoted and appropriated as the fluidity and fixity of borders and boundaries of not just geography, but religion, ethnicity and politics become more defined, resulting in the necessity of deterritorialized diaspora communities to question further who they are, where they belong, and how they belong there. The establishment of the ASEAN union in Southeast Asia is forcing countries suddenly "united" to have a clearer identity of themselves as a "nation." What does it mean to be "Thai"? Can a person be just "Thai," or are they "Chinese Thai," or "Indian Thai"? And in the UK, the votes on Scottish independence in 2014 and to leave the European Union in 2016 have shown that the kingdom is not as united as the government in Westminster might want to make the country believe. The motto of the European Union is "United in diversity" and the policy of the ASEAN, using much of the EU as a model, states that it intends to promote awareness of "cultural similarities and differences between and among ASEAN Member States, as well as to protect the distinctiveness of ASEAN cultural heritage as a whole." If the EU "community" is currently disintegrating and showing the fragile nature of such unions, the countries in Southeast Asia are now asking themselves about whether there is a way to create a meaningful collaboration that enables a fair and progressive union with each other.

To address these issues, this book takes an interdisciplinary framework including cultural studies, sociology, history, linguistics, communication studies, ethnography and performance studies to establish a complex dialogue examining the different spaces of the Indian diaspora in a number of specific examples in Southeast Asia and the UK. Whilst there have been studies in this vein before, they often focus on economics or development. However, we are particularly interested in asking about the part that culture, in a broad sense, plays in identity formation in the diaspora space. We are using "culture" not just as a "way of life" but also the means through which people can express and transform their lives and communities through adaptation and translation of cultural traditions from the "homeland." By exploring various aspects of culture, from food to rituals, to language and performance, to the very way we relate to and speak our name, the myriad different ways that the sense of being "Indian" is translated and adapted into different national contexts sheds new light on the notion of a diaspora which is not homogenous, and yet not completely disconnected. The methodology of the chapters varies, drawing on theoretical discourse, ethnographic studies, and personal reflections to show how the global plays out in the local, and traces the transformation of culture and identity in specific examples. In this way, the chapters are also about personal experience interwoven with ethnographic research and theoretical discourse, with the authors negotiating their own identity in the diaspora spaces through consideration of the case studies.

This book emerged from a special panel on the arts and culture of the Indian diasporas in Southeast Asia and the UK that was part of an international conference on Culture, Communication and Transnational Societies held at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok in February 2016. The resulting wealth of material and thinking that was evident in the panel, and the challenges to established discourses often based in western theory that emerged, pointed to the value of making a collection of the talks from the panel into a book that could begin to offer new paradigms of thought with regards to culture, diaspora and identity. That many of the contributors are researching and writing about their own local space, as well as often being part of the Indian diaspora themselves, offers a richness to the enquiry based in personal experience, as well as academic rigor. Having each chapter offer an in-depth exploration into a particular local space means we can look at the global and transnational flow to and from India in different ways, whilst examining common themes of belonging, displacement, the legacy of empire, as well as how forms of culture and performance adapt and lead to new hybrid or syncretic forms. Above all, this is asking not just how culture can shape identity, but how

identity is constructed and performed in the specific locality, which can offer a way into understanding the wider global picture.

The eight chapters in the book are based in specific ethnographic or historic case studies in nations across Southeast Asia and the UK, and written by scholars from different disciplines. The collection begins with an investigation by Michelle Camille Correa and Gilbert Jacob S. Que into how the performing arts influence the identity formation of the Indian diaspora in the Philippines. In particular, they examine the work of Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher Shanti Sreedhar, and how and why she uses classical Indian dance to keep a sense of Indian identity for diasporic communities in the Philippines. In the second chapter, Harmony Siganporia offers a unique study of a small but significant community from India, the Parsis, who themselves were migrated "foreigners" in India after being exiled from Persia over a thousand years ago. The chapter shows how movements in and through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw scores of Parsis engage with the colonial construct known as the "South-East" of Asia. Trade and business opportunities may have been the impetus for this movement away from British India, but scattered and tiny as they were, these diasporic Parsi communities retained an acute sense of themselves, and were invested in creating the shape that some of their erstwhile "hubs" took, such as Hong Kong. This chapter is an account of these colonial mobilities facing East, even as it seeks to analyze what, in the present moment, allows us to access the remains of the legacies spawned by these movements. The following chapter by Jirayudh Sinthuphan looks at the communities of Burmese Indians in three locations: Moreh, India; Yangon, Myanmar; and Bangkok, Thailand. Through this, he seeks to explore the history of migration and the cultures of the communities of diasporas in relation to the negotiation of Burmese Indian identities.

The next two chapters examine the transnational flow of culture, religion and politics between the "homeland" of "Mother India" and the diasporic location of "home." We firstly move to Indonesia, with Muhammad Edy Susilo's study of two Indian communities in Yogyakarta, namely, the Tamils and the Sindhis. He provides an account of the waves of Indian migration to Java, the process of cultural and ethnic assimilation, as well as the attempt to also retain their distinctive identities and their connection to 'Mother India'. The fifth chapter by Jerri Daboo looks at the UK, in particular the diasporic town of Southall, where she investigates the connection between arts and activism in the Indian diaspora communities as they began to establish themselves from the 1950s. Encountering racism and violence, the communities began to find ways to

mobilize themselves politically, and express themselves artistically. Forms of music, film and dance migrated from India, were transformed in the diaspora, and then moved back again in a transnational flow of influence between homeland and home. She focuses in particular on the ways that women have used theatre performance to express issues that affected them, examining the Southall Black Sisters' version of the Ramlila from 1976, and Parminder Sekhon's powerful play *Not Just An Asian Babe* from 1997.

The final three chapters offer more self-reflexive approaches to ways of negotiating identity through culture and performance in the diaspora. Nur Afifah Vanitha binti Abdullah takes us to Malaysia, and presents the story of her own journey as a third-generation Indian descendant in Malaysia, moving between and across identity formations including ethnicity, religion, and her own name. Her search for the "meaning of self" will be explained in three main sub-topics: the process of self-evaluation, self-regulation and self-construction that the Indian community members experience in Malaysia. In the next chapter, Simmee Oupra also goes on a journey in search of her-self. She discusses her socio-cultural context as a fifth generation of an Indian diaspora family in Thailand, the types of connection with her ancestors' "India," and the attempt to make sense of self and socio-cultural contexts amid the cultural plurality of various religious beliefs practiced in the home through reflexive ethnography. She then discusses the stages of adaptation as a member of the fifth-generation Punjabi diaspora living in Chiang Rai, Thailand, who cross many cultural borders. As with the previous chapter, her name becomes a central feature of negotiation of identity and belonging. The final chapter is by renowned musician and composer, Kuljit Bhamra. Brought up in the UK to Punjabi parents, he was one of the pioneers of the sound of British Bhangra in the 1980s, and has crossed musical borders playing tabla with western classical and jazz musicians, as well as in film, television and theatre productions. In this chapter he talks of this process of transformation and adaptation of both his family, and the music itself. Through this, he negotiates his own identity as a second-generation migrant in the UK, moving between different cultures and performance worlds.

The Conclusion by Jirayudh Sinthuphan reflects on some of the key themes and ideas from the chapters, and examines the use of the arts and culture in exploring the complexities of diasporic identity through the work of Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul.

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CHAPTER ONE

NISHPAADAN KALAAEN SA PILIPINAS: IDENTITY FORMATION IN INDIAN TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES THROUGH THE PERFORMING ARTS

GILBERT JACOB S. QUE
AND MICHELLE CAMILLE CORREA

Introduction

Indian communities started to settle in the Philippines in slow but steady waves from the early 1900s, the biggest ethnolinguistic groups being the Sindhis and Punjabis. With economic mobility as their motivation for migration, the Indians in the Philippines settled and engaged in various forms of business, which were—and are—often taken care of by men. The women, meanwhile, usually engage in household matters (i.e., in the domestic sphere), which include teaching their children various aspects of Indian culture. The women also practice a range of forms of Indian arts and performance, and teach these to the children of the Indian communities. Due to a lack of Indian cultural institutions, Indian arts, particularly performing arts (from classical dance to Bollywood-style dance), are taught privately or performed at private Indian events.

In order to assert ethnolinguistic pride in the host country (i.e., the Philippines) and increase Filipino society's knowledge and appreciation for Indian culture, these Indian performing arts are brought to the wider public via events, which are often religious festivals such as Diwali (the Festival of Lights) and Holi. Film, theatre, song and dance are used by Indian transnational communities to help foster Indian identity, or what it means to be Indian, despite displacement from the motherland.

This chapter aims to investigate how the performing arts influence the identity formation of Indian transnational communities in the Philippines. Using an in-depth interview with award-winning performer, teacher, and choreographer Ms. Shanti Sreedhar of Natya Mandala, as well as participant-observation at festivals such as Diwali and Holi, this study explores the ways in which individuals and communities transfer, perform, and ultimately assert their Indian identity in their host country through the performing arts.

We anchor our investigation on the place of performing arts in the identity formation of Ms. Sreedhar, a prominent figure in performing and teaching traditional Indian arts, particularly classical Indian dance in the Philippines, as her story provides a well-rounded perspective on the benefits and struggles of imparting Indian culture and helping foster Indian identity among fellow Indians, as well as sharing aspects of Indian culture with Filipinos and other ethnic groups residing in the Philippines. Moreover, Ms. Sreedhar is in a very unique position to share her experiences and insights, as she both performs and teaches. While other performing arts groups contribute to keeping Indian traditions alive by making considerable efforts to be visible among fellow Indians and Filipinos, their efforts are limited to performing, and not spreading or teaching the techniques and skills used in the art forms. Furthermore, dancing as an art form physically asserts "Indian-ness" in a holistic way. This is because learning Indian dances, particularly classical dance, utilizes various aspects of Indian culture such as clothing, singing, meditation, literature, and playing musical instruments.

We aim to illustrate a number of points through Ms. Sreedhar's case. Firstly, that the formation of Indian identity through art is a gendered initiative in the context of the Philippines. As art in the Indian communities is often relegated to the domestic sphere, that is, within the domain of a mother's duties, it is the mother who raises and nurtures the artistic impulses of Indian transnational children. As such, although there is a desire to express oneself through performance and the arts, the opportunity is constrained by the predominantly domestic nature of the endeavor. This leads us to our second point, which is that the desire to express oneself artistically is further constrained by the lack of public spaces to freely practice and perform. Thus, "Indian-ness" in the transnational spaces of the Philippines is expressed in private spaces such as the home, hotels, and religious institutions. However, as India's soft power emerges through Bollywood, Indian art, and culture, these are now viewed in mainstream venues such as the Diwali and Holi celebrations in the SM Mall of Asia, one of the largest shopping malls in the Philippines.

With the space that is being afforded to Indian artistic expression, there is the potential that Indian art will transition from the private spaces of homes to the public spaces of larger performance venues, and ultimately, institutions.

In terms of terminologies used for this study, we consciously use the term "transnational" instead of "diaspora," noting that despite the settlement of the Indian communities in Metro Manila, its members remain "physically and mentally mobile" (Gowricharn 2003, 7). Indians in Metro Manila stay connected to India, the motherland, through travel, digital communication, cable television, and the like. These Indians may also migrate once more after marriage, or if they wish to study or work abroad, eventually settling in that other country. Our use of the term "Indian" includes Sindhis, following the usage of Kaur and Yahya (2010, 263) as this is one of the major groups of "Indian" transnationals in the Philippines. Sindhis originated from the province Sindh, presently found in Pakistan, and despite the absence of a Sindhi ethnolinguistic state within India, Sindhis are considered to be technically "Indian" in the Philippines, owing to their twice-migration and Indian citizenship (Thapan 2002, 1; Salazar 2008, 501). During the Indian Partition of 1947, Sindhi Hindus, who constitute roughly 25% of Sindh, migrated to India while many non-Muslim Sindhis from other parts of India migrated to Sindh, changing the society and culture of Sindh (Thapan 2002, 1). The Sindhi Hindus who went to India remained "Indian" while those remained in Sindh became Pakistani. By "Indian identity" we mean the sense of belongingness to India as the motherland, as well as integration with communities outside of India, which helps Indian transnational communities living in the Philippines to keep their culture alive.

The Indian Transnational Community in the Philippines: Sindhis and Punjabis

Indians have migrated in waves to places such as North America, Europe, Africa and Mauritius, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and West and Southeast Asia (Jain 2011, 46). They are often placed into three main groups of migrants: contractual laborers, indentured laborers, and voluntary migrants (Brown 2006, 30, 34, 39; Thapan 2002, 19; Bardhan 2011, 46–47; Gowricharn 2003, 2). Indians who migrated to countries where they experienced expulsion or threats were forced to move and settle in another country, and are thus referred to as "twice migrants" (Brown 2006, 45; Sahoo and Sangha 2010, 86, as "twice-removed"). Twice migrants also

include those who previously settled in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (formerly Burma), and East Africa (Brown 2006, 45–46).

From 1900–1945, Indian migrants who settled in Southeast Asia included Malayalis, Tamils, Telugus, Punjabis, and Gujaratis, who settled there due to an increased amount of Indian firms operating abroad during the British era (Jain 2011, 47; Thapan 2002, 19–20, 25). During the Partition in 1947, the land of the Sindhis and Punjabis was greatly reduced or taken away, and so many of them saw this as an opportunity to not only migrate to either India or the then newly-created Pakistan, but also to other countries to better opportunities. This resulted in an increase in the number of Sindhis and Punjabis settled in Southeast Asia (Thapan 2002, 20).

Indian migrants who worked as indentured laborers in Southeast Asia were mainly stationed at the plantations of British Malay and Dutch Sumatra (Thapan 2002, 19). Later on, they transitioned to other types of employment, such as taxi drivers, money lenders, guards, postal workers, or dairy farmers (Thapan 2002, 19, 144; Brown 2006, 20, 54, 57). Many Indian migrants in the Philippines were voluntary migrants, which makes the Filipino case different from other countries such as Fiji or Trinidad and Tobago where Indians settled for indentured or contract labors (Salazar 2008, 501). Most Indian migrants initially were men; their wives and children arrived later if the conditions were favorable (Brown 2006, 38). However, some of those who immigrated as bachelors found Indian brides from the local Indian communities, while some others eventually married Filipinas. Furthermore, despite long-time settlement in the Philippines, Indians remain "scattered" in the country (Rye 1981, 59), and have yet to establish a distinct transnational community. The exact number of Indians residing in the Philippines is difficult to determine due to the absence of official government statistics (Ministry of Indian Affairs, via the Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre 2012; Salazar 2008, 502–503; Kurian 2013, 12–13). Estimates indicate the population to be between 50,000 to 62,000 as of 2012. Sindhis and the Punjabis are the largest groups (Lorenzana 2009, 2–3; Thapan 2002, 10; Rye 1981, 56; Salazar 2008, 502). Roughly 7,000 of 7,800 Sindhis, and 40,000 of 51,000 Punjabis in the Philippines reside in Metro Manila (*Philippines-India Business Guidebook* 2006, in Salazar 2008, 502).

Sindhis are characterized by affluence owing to their reputation as industrialists and traders who have established themselves in the textile industry since their arrival in the Philippines (Thapan 2002, 27). Moreover, most are characterized by their Hindu religion, with some adopting Catholicism and Protestantism (Thapan 2002, 202, 204, 206); some adopt or convert to these religions because many good schools in the

Philippines are Catholic or Protestant, and require students to actively participate in school-initiated religious activities (Thapan 2002, 199). While both Sindhis and Punjabis engage in business activities in their host country, Sindhis have maintained their status as lucrative industrialists and traders from the first- to the third-generation migrants, whereas Punjabis have engaged in "small-scale money-lending business and trading" (Lorenzana 2009, 3), and selling jewelry, cloth, and appliances (Thapan 2002, 31, 144; Rye 1981, 60; Salazar 2008, 501). To maintain their businesses in the Philippines, Sindhis opted to obtain Philippine citizenship in the 1970s (Thapan 2002, 31; Rye 1981, 63; Salazar 2008, 501, 521). However, a good number of Indians also opted to keep their Indian citizenship and stay in the Philippines as permanent residents (Lorenzana 2009, 3; Salazar 2008, 503).

Punjabis are considered more "integrated" than Sindhis (Lorenzana 2009, 3) owing to more frequent interactions with Filipinos in their daily lives and work. Their Filipino language skills show the depth of integration due to their long-time engagement in small-scale moneylending activities in the Philippines, which entails regular and frequent interactions with their customers who are mostly low-income Filipinos (Lorenzana 2009, 3). Sindhis tend to be more adept with English, owing to their educational background in the Philippines where English is the medium of instruction (Thapan 2002, 146). While first-generation Punjabis who settled in the Philippines tend to have a weaker command of the English language, second-generation Punjabis who have acquired local education have a stronger command of English compared to their predecessors, but tend to move to and settle in more affluent Anglophone countries (Lorenzana, 2009, 7). This does not mean, however, that Sindhis have no Filipino language abilities. Despite their proficiency in English and Filipino, the second or third generation of Sindhis and Punjabis tend to have low proficiency in their heritage language (Thapan 2002, 82, 160; Lorenzana 2009, 5; Salazar 2008, 507). When communicating with each other, they mainly use English or Filipino because of the absence of a common South Asian language (Salazar 2008, 521).

Perceptions of Indian Transnational Communities

In a nation where the Western way of life predominates due to Spanish and American colonization of the Philippines, Indian transnational communities are likewise exposed to Western culture as well as Filipino culture. Although support and structures for teaching and preserving Indian languages, cultures, and religions among the Indian transnational

communities in the Philippines are scarce (Sahoo and Sangha 2010, 88), they can attend classes addressing these areas, such as *balvihar* classes (Salazar 2008, 507; Thapan 2002, 132–135), in certain institutions across the country, including Hindu temples, *gurudwaras*, other religious centers, and even in the homes of private tutors initiated by a member of the Indian community.

The Filipino perception of Indians tends to be generally unfavorable: Indians are seen as dark-skinned people donning turbans, growing long beards, and engaging in moneylending, also known locally as "five-six" (Lorenzana 2009, 6; Thapan 2002, 144; Salazar 2008, 510; Kurian 2013, 13). The name "five-six" came from the interest rates imposed by Indians, usually of Punjabi origin (Thapan 2002, 144; Kurian 2013, 13). Due to the popularity of "five-six" among the lower socio-economic bracket of Filipinos, the name remains (Thapan 2002, 144; Kurian 2013, 13). Other names which Filipinos use to refer to Indians are "Bumbay" (Lorenzana 2009, 6; Rye [1990] in Kurian 2013, 13), "Bumbai" (Thapan 2002, 46, 144) or "Bombay" (Rye 1981, 58; Salazar 2008, 499). The names came from the notion that Indians living in the Philippines originated from Mumbai (formerly Bombay) (Thapan 2002, 143; Lorenzana 2009, 6; Rye 1981, 58). As with the name "five-six", the name "Bumbay" is likewise perceived unfavorably. These perceptions encourage younger Indians to shed their Indian heritage, allowing them to think that this will help them be accepted by mainstream Philippine society (Lorenzana 2009, 8; Thapan 2002, 155). Nowadays, younger Sikh Punjabis opt for a clean-cut look, without the turban; they shave off their facial and head hair to avoid prejudice and quell the negative stereotypes by Philippine society (Thapan 2002, 144).

However, it cannot be denied that as India's international status has risen, Indian communities in the Philippines also experienced an upward trajectory in terms of economic cooperation, infrastructure, and culture (Salazar 2008, 512–513, 515). Economically, investments from India have been pouring into the Philippines, and trade between the two countries is strong. In terms of infrastructure, there is a "Little India" in Paco, Manila, where Indians come into contact with each other, as well as places of worship (Thapan 2002, 162–163; Salazar 2008, 506; Rye 1981, 60) and schools (Salazar 2008, 514–515). In terms of culture, Bollywood as a soft diplomacy tool has piqued the interest of Filipinos in the forms of Indian culture portrayed in these films (Salazar 2008, 514). Moreover, organizations such as the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce, the Bharati Ladies Club, the Indian Ladies Club, and the Merry Maidens' Club (Rye 1981, 62; Thapan 2002, 128; Salazar 2008, 505) have led to

cultural activities such as screenings of Bollywood films and celebrations of various Indian festivals (Salazar 2008, 505). Indian events such as the Diwali and Holi festivals are increasingly being held in open public spaces such as shopping malls, a popular gathering place for leisure and performances. Organized by the Indian Embassy, with the cooperation of organizations such as the Indian Ladies Club and the Federation of the Indian Chambers of Commerce, and the music group SingIndia Music for the Soul, these events are attended by both Indians and Filipinos. In this way, culture and performance from India has a place in society in the Philippines, and is increasingly visible. The next section will explore a specific case study of one practitioner of Indian dance, and her attempts to connect Indian communities to their identity and heritage through performance.

Shanti Sreedhar: Expressing Indian Identity through Dance

Shanti Sreedhar, an award-winning performer, teacher, and choreographer, is one member of the Indian transnational community in the Philippines who has made visible efforts to introduce and impart Indian culture. She is a first-generation Indian transnational woman who moved from Chennai to the Philippines in the 1990s upon her marriage to Mr. Sreedhar, another Indian who hails from Coimbatore, and is also based in the Philippines. Chennai and Coimbatore are both in Tamil Nadu, a South Indian state. Ms. Sreedhar is well-known in the Indian transnational community and even has strong links with the Indian Embassy due to her efforts. She is perhaps one of the most well-known among all Indian performers in the Philippines, along with her school, Natya Mandala.

As one of the most visible faces in the introduction of Indian culture in the Philippines, we examine her case as an Indian transnational performer through an in-depth interview. During the interview, Ms. Sreedhar shared her recollections and memories as a child growing up in India, her move to the Philippines, her family life, her teaching, and her art. By tracing her artistic life alongside aspects of the growth and development of Indian culture in the Philippines, we aim to illustrate how the once private, home-centered endeavor of introducing and imparting Indian culture is slowly but steadily coming to the fore among Indian transnational communities as well as mainstream Filipino audiences in more public spaces and spheres.

From India to the Philippines

Ms. Sreedhar hails from Tamil Nadu though her family was from Kerala, also in South India: she was born in Trivandrum in Kerala, but was raised in Chennai. She graduated with a degree in Commerce with Economics. Alongside this, she also studied Indian classical dance, and has been dancing professionally since the age of 10, with her training being in Bharatanatyam (Kalakshetra style) and Kuchipudi. In the Philippines, she performs as well as teaches both these dance forms. Ms. Sreedhar also speaks several languages including Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam, however, she admits that she is most proficient in Hindi. Due to this, she is comfortable dealing with Indians from different communities, particularly those from the Hindi-speaking northern states.

She has been living in the Philippines with her family for over twenty years. Despite being away from India for two decades, she still sees India as her home. As she explains, "It's like how you're rooted out of the place and the longing for the place is still there" (Interview, August 12 2016). Fresh out of college, she moved to Manila, the capital of the Philippines, after her arranged marriage. She notes, "Sreedhar's family, that's my husband's family, they first checked the horoscope. That's how the whole process starts. In horoscope, there's a count, like how much should match for the couple to be in good understanding and living. Ours was [sic] 100 percent match." (Interview, August 12 2016). The ceremony took place on August 18, 1996, in India, and Ms. Sreedhar arrived in the Philippines a month later, on September 25. Since her husband has been working in the Philippines since 1994, she was able to also find a second home in this country.

Ms. Sreedhar traveled alone to the Philippines after her wedding as her husband went back first to make arrangements for their house. As it was not her first trip abroad, since she had been traveling for artistic performances during her university years, she arrived in the Philippines and felt as if she were taking a field trip: "I didn't have that kind of maturity that I'm leaving my home country or hometown and I will settle. I was like, 'Okay, I'm going out for a field trip, I will look around and go back,'" she recalls (Interview, August 12 2016). Twenty years later, her memory of India is still as vivid as it was in the time she was there. She particularly remembers Chennai where she was raised, and feels that she has not made a proper visit to India if she does not visit there. She also visits her birthplace of Trivandrum, and her husband's hometown of Coimbatore, as well as new places that she and her family have not visited before. For her, Chennai is the first thing that comes to mind when she

thinks of India because of her memories of growing up there. Even her memories of food are connected to Chennai: "If I don't go to Chennai, I feel that I haven't gone to India. Even now, Chennai is the first thing which comes [to mind], because I have my friends there, all my schooling was there, even food, restaurants, everything is like Chennai" (Interview, August 12 2016).

Growing up in a close-knit conservative family further cements her relationship with Chennai, and consequently, India. She is one of three daughters, and as she was born and raised in a traditional Indian family, she spent a lot of time with them until she got married. Her protective father used to drop her and her sisters off at places and then personally pick them up. They were also not allowed to watch films in the cinema, so they watched these at home. Her education was traditional culturally as well, as along with Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi (both of which are South Indian dances), she learned Carnatic (South Indian) classical singing and playing the guitar.

According to Ms. Sreedhar, South Indian families, especially Tamil families, usually place great importance on ensuring that their children learn Indian arts and culture. Girls and boys learn how to dance, sing, and play an instrument. Her elder sister, for example, also learned Bharatanatyam and Carnatic singing as well as playing the veena, a stringed instrument. Her other sister, meanwhile, learned how to sing and play the violin. She started learning music, particularly singing, at the age of four. She recalls:

> The vocal Carnatic master used to come home. Me and my sisters used to learn together. When we finish that, we have our voice training in the house. And then we do our homework or whatever and play outside. You know how the kids play in the park; we have our own small park there and we go and play. It used to be just school, work, home. We were in a very protected environment. (Interview, August 12 2016)

She remembers that her teacher, whom she calls "Master," was like family to her: "Master's house was like our house" (Interview, August 12 2016). She calls her teacher's wife "auntie," and this auntie would make food for her and her siblings. Since "auntie" had no children of her own, they were treated like true daughters as they learned and practiced at the studio, sometimes at her Master's home.

Nowadays, whenever she returns to the place where she was raised, she feels that she has "lost connection with the roads and buildings, because every year there is something new" (Interview, August 12 2016). However, the difference does not end with India as a physical space. She

also feels that family relationships have changed as well, particularly in terms of how parents nowadays pressurize their children to do well in their studies and the arts. As she recalls her childhood in India, she feels that she had more freedom than children do today to pursue her love of the arts in her childhood:

> And I think parents put more pressure on all the studies and arts—they still do all that stuff. But I think with us, we were not pressurized. When I see my nephews and nieces doing this, I feel they're pushing, 'You have to do this, you have to do this.' With us, I remember, my parents gave us freedom. Anything, you can learn. And the day I say, 'No I'm not interested in this,' they say 'Okay, don't do it.' But the only thing they told us is if we do hundreds of things and not learn anything properly, then we lose focus. But I think around seven, with my sisters, we were very, very sure that we wanted to do dance. I had 100% support from my parents. (Interview, August 12 2016)

Even though Ms. Sreedhar is now married with one daughter, she is still able to pursue dancing as passionately as when she was a child. She credits her husband Mr. Sreedhar and his family for the opportunity to continue classical dancing despite her tasks at home and their family business. Although she admits that her husband's interests lie outside of classical dancing and singing, her husband and family nevertheless supported her upon seeing how passionate she is about classical dance: "When he saw me and there was music playing, without me knowing, my hands would be doing expressions [mudras] or whatever. He'd say, 'You know, people from jeepney are watching you; they think you're going crazy'" (Interview, August 12 2016).

Ms. Sreedhar thinks that her husband and most Filipino audiences are alike in their attitude toward Indian classical dance. Thus she has made her husband into a barometer of sorts on how to improve her performances. When she sees the "slightest dislike in his face" or signs of boredom such as constant checking of the mobile phone, she makes it a point to ask him why, after which, she exerts effort to improve her performance: "I need to make them happy for them to come back and watch my show," she states (Interview, August 12 2016).

Family Life and Passing on Culture

Aside from being an artist and a teacher, Ms. Sreedhar is also a homemaker. She especially loves to cook, as this is the way Indian homemakers show their love for the family. She wants to feed Indian food

that tastes like it did back "home." Interestingly, she only learned how to cook when she got married, since she spent most of her school years learning Indian arts. Ms. Sreedhar is also responsible for the administration and finance of their family business. This is where she puts her degree in commerce to use. Despite these demands of home and their family business, she also devotes time to cultivating her artistic life as well as passing this on to her daughter. Thus she ensures that her daughter, Sparsha, is similarly immersed in Indian culture even while living in the Philippines. She is learning Bharatanatyam and Carnatic singing from her mother, and Ms. Sreedhar says that her daughter is a better singer than dancer.

Since her daughter was born and raised in the Philippines, Ms. Sreedhar makes it a point to teach her daughter about Indian culture and practice it in their daily life in their host country. They celebrate Indian festivals, wear Indian clothing, follow the ritual prayer including *bhajans* and chants, and prepare dishes usually eaten on special occasions. Ms. Sreedhar tries to instill Indian values in her daughter so that she will have a clear understanding of her identity and her roots, She notes, "I tell her being twenty years in the Philippines does not change my basic mentality; I was totally brought up in India. I have the same thinking. Whatever I say somewhere, my thinking is still there behind me" (Interview, August 12 2016). She also adds that by raising her daughter as she herself was raised in India, her daughter appears to be more like an Indian girl who has been brought up in India and subsequently moved to the Philippines. However, since her daughter was raised in the Philippines and went to a local school, she also thinks and moves "like a Filipino": "She's more on the confused side," her mother states (Interview, August 12 2016). This identity confusion is a common situation among some members of second and subsequent generation Indians in the Philippines (Thapan 2002, 146). As such, Sparsha seems to be neither here nor there in terms of her identity, as it hovers the thin line between her Indian heritage and her acquired Filipino traits.

In order to address this identity confusion, just as Ms. Sreedhar was raised in a life steeped in culture and arts in India, she is likewise nurturing her daughter's identity through culture and art in their host country. This illustrates the ongoing role of the domestic space in nurturing Indian identity through the performing arts. It is Ms. Sreedhar herself who instructs and imparts the ways of Indian performing arts to her daughter, and the other children she teaches. From home to the classroom, Ms. Sreedhar makes an effort to introduce Indian culture to her students, especially those whose roots are in India:

> They have to know who they are, what the country (India) is, what their cultural art is, and why they're learning that cultural art, and what it is they learn from that. Directly or indirectly they learn a discipline, an art form, which is a form of prayer. That's the only thing I want all these kids to carry. At least if they achieve as much then it is enough for me. So at least it's there for the future generation. (Interview, August 12 2016)

Aside from students of Indian descent, Ms. Sreedhar also teaches Indian arts and dance to Filipino students. She feels that due to her different encounters with Filipinos, most of whom had plenty of misconceptions about India, Indian people, and Indian culture, she needed to spread her art to the Filipino community. Apart from several instances when she was able to work with some groups through private arrangements, Ms. Sreedhar joined the University of the Philippines Center of Ethnomusicology in 1999–2000. She stated that while she was introducing and teaching dance to the Filipinos, she also learned much about Filipino society and lifestyle through her students. For more than fifteen years, Ms. Sreedhar has been teaching Bharatanatyam to Filipino dance majors in the University of the Philippines while she still teaches in Natya Mandala outside the university. Collaborations between dancers from Natya Mandala and the University of the Philippines (all of whom are Ms. Sreedhar's students) are undertaken during dance performances. She has also worked with the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA). The various dance performances that Ms. Sreedhar organized were targeted at both Indians and Filipinos, depending on the purpose of the event, and these dance groups have performed in various places in the Philippines. Apart from events organized by the Indian communities or other major performances (such as those performed in the Cultural Center of the Philippines), Natya Mandala has also visited various schools and universities to perform and share their art with students. Through this, there is a gradual movement of Indian culture and performance from the confines of the home to the more public arena of the classroom, which is considered to be the student's second home. It is worth noting that Ms. Sreedhar views her role as teacher as akin to that of a mother who nurtures young people's identities through the transfer of cultural and artistic knowledge and ways of doing. We further examine this in the next section.

Teaching, Performing, Collaborating, and Spreading Indian-ness

After coming to the Philippines in the mid-1990s Ms. Sreedhar founded the Natya Mandala school and taught Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, with

more focus on the former. Currently, it is the only school in the whole of the Philippines that actively teaches and performs Indian classical dance. Aside from her background in and passion for dancing, Ms. Sreedhar decided to teach it after mingling with Indians who had settled in the Philippines, and was shocked to find out that they had no in-depth knowledge of their own culture: "It's such a pity, India's so rich in everything, and they have no clue about what they're doing. But I won't blame the Indians here at that time because it's a pity they were not exposed at all" (Interview, August 12 2016). Ms. Sreedhar states that most of the Indians in Metro Manila are more interested in learning Bollywood dance because they are more exposed to Indian popular culture than traditional culture. This was also seen by scholars studying Indians in the Philippines and abroad such as in the United States (Thapan 2002; Jain 2011; Kavoori and Chadha 2009; Gowricharn 2003; Punthambekar 2005). While Bollywood films do show aspects of India's culture and may be used to expose and teach transnational Indians certain aspects of Indian culture, Ms. Sreedhar's goal was to further root the Indian transnational communities by handing down India's classical performing arts to younger Indians, as well as non-Indians who may wish to learn them. She also wanted to show both young transnational Indians and Filipinos that Indians have a rich and diverse set of cultures, and negate the negative stereotypes that Filipino society has about Indians. In this way, the learning of the classical arts and traditions is significant for the transnational communities because this is the cultural capital that gives them more connection and rootedness to the motherland, its people, and its heritage.

Ms. Sreedhar decided to focus on Bharatanatyam more than Kuchipudi because she noticed that Bharatanatyam was more popular in many Indian transnational communities around the world; this statement agrees with Punathambekar's (2005) study on cultural citizenship in Indian transnational communities. Ms. Sreedhar stated that many Indians in the Philippines come and go (i.e., justifying the use of the word "transnational"), and that some who have learned Bharatanatyam from Ms. Sreedhar may wish to continue to learn it elsewhere. There were also many times when she encountered recently-migrated Indians who had learned Bharatanatyam elsewhere and wanted to continue learning it in the Philippines. She observes, "I stick to Bharatanatyam just because Kalakshetra is the most famous school in Chennai and the best part about a Kalakshetra student is they learn from me and they go to another country and join the teacher from Kalakshetra style and they pick up from where they've left" (Interview, August 12 2016). She mainly teaches dance at her

house, which shows the main way of teaching Indian culture in the Philippines: in the private and domestic spheres, other than her classes in the university.

Fig. 1-1: Ms. Shanti Sreedhar's students performing in *Sadhana*, CAP Theater, 2013. (Photograph courtesy of Ms. Sreedhar.)

It has been observed that teaching dance, language, singing, and other aspects of Indian cultures in the Philippines have been spearheaded mostly by women with lessons usually held in their houses (Thapan 2002, 130, 132, 134). This reinforces some of the traditional gender roles in Indian society where men are usually tasked to take care of business matters while women are tasked to take care of the household which includes teaching children cultural practices and traditions; there are women who also help out in the family business in some way, but this is not as common as men usually do not let women join in business discussions (Thapan 2002, 56–57).

Currently, Ms. Sreedhar has Indian students whose families come from all over India. In addition, some students interested in learning Bharatanatyam are from other expatriate families (i.e., Japan, Mongolia, Spain, etc.). Although Bharatanatyam is originally a South Indian dance, its reputation and legacy are well-respected in Indian communities inside

and outside of India since its revival in the twentieth century through the efforts of the likes of Rukmini Devi Arundale and Balasaraswati. Though the present-day Bharatanatyam style that was reconstructed in the nationalist movements of the twentieth century is a more simplified version compared to the "Bharatanatyam" seen in sculptures and paintings, it still carries a detailed dance language that embodies some of the images and philosophies of India. Bharatanatyam, like many Indian classical dance forms, is based on the teachings of the *Natyashastra*, so those who have a good background in Bharatanatyam may also develop a good understanding of the other classical dances of India. As students learn the dance, they will also learn aspects of Indian culture and society as Indian classical dances mostly or frequently tell stories from everyday Indian life, Indian literature, Indian mythology, and religion.

Fig. 1-2: Diwali Festival at the SM Mall of Asia, 2016. (Photograph courtesy of Gilbert Que.)

From the home, to the classroom, and then to public spaces like malls, the spread of "Indian-ness" is becoming more visible and palpable not just within transnational communities but within the host country as well. But its coming to the fore is not without challenges. Ms. Sreedhar stated that

the Natya Mandala had performed the opening numbers for Diwali in the early 2000s. However, in recent years, the Natya Mandala has not performed in the public Diwali festivities at SM Mall of Asia, where the annual festival is publicly held in Metro Manila. The festival, held originally at Glorietta, another mall (Salazar 2008, 505), is a joint effort by the Indian Embassy and other Indian associations to bring Diwali not only to the Indians but also the Filipinos. As the Diwali festival is a good opportunity to introduce Indian culture to Filipinos, different stalls selling Indian food, goods and services are set up, along with the line-up of some Indian performances. Respecting the sanctity and the religious affiliation of Bharatanatyam, Ms. Sreedhar has been refusing to perform in these kinds of events:

> How can you tell thousands of people not to eat [while performing]? And you know, they sell beer also there. It's against what I'm doing. I can't accept that. I cannot blame anyone for that but when you've learned something authentically we know what is correct. (Interview, August 12 2016)

Ms. Sreedhar would only allow the Natya Mandala to perform in places where food is not served while the dance takes place, or in places where the audience may focus on the dance itself just as a Hindu devotee worships a Hindu god through the practice of *darshan*.[1] However, she states that despite this, Mr. CJ Wasu of the group SingIndia Music for the Soul still contacts her every year in case she would like to let Natya Mandala perform. SingIndia Music for the Soul was founded by Mr. CJ Wasu and his wife Mrs. Ritu Wasu. They are Punjabis who are also frequent performers at different Indian public events such as the Diwali festival, and the new addition to the Indian festivals celebrated publicly in the Philippines, the Holi Festival.[2] Mr. CJ Wasu plays the tabla[3] while Mrs. Ritu Wasu sings; sometimes they have other musicians playing the sitar or other instruments. Mr. CJ Wasu also teaches tabla, but classes are usually private, unlike Ms. Sreedhar's Natya Mandala which is a public dance school.

The Diwali and Holi festivals, as well as other major Indian events and festivals, also see other performers apart from Natya Mandala (though

[1] From the Sanskrit term meaning "to view." It is to behold a deity, or anything sacred.
[2] Both the Holi Festival and the Diwali Festival are celebrated publicly in Metro Manila, and are both held at the SM Mall of Asia open grounds.
[3] A kind of Indian drum.