What does *Devi* do?

Uncovering Women's Worlds in Japan's Sindhi Merchant Diaspora

Ms. Mamta Sachan Kumar
Singapore University of Social Sciences
Singapore
mamtarughwani@gmail.com

Abstract

But what for the fortitude of the unwitting matriarch in pre-Partition Sindh, who held her family together and fed her peddling husband with news of home, rejuvenating his mercantile mind across vast seas? And what for the beguiled new bride who acclimatized to an alien culture and barters her broken Japanese at the wet market to cook a soulful pot of Sindhi *saee bhaaji* ('mashed spinach')? Or the devotion of the hymn-singing homemaker, who nurtures transmission of cultural knowledge to her children; the regular volunteer translating for foreign patients warded at Kobe's Kaisei Hospital; the English teacher; the socialite; or the charity worker vested in fund-raising for earthquake victims?

Women's worlds in Japan's Sindhi merchant diaspora are multi-faceted and deserving of singular mention. Their lives and roles are telling of a decisive hand in creating as well as sustaining a distinctly Sindhi diasporic identity amongst the Indian trading communities of Yokohama and Kobe. Yet their worlds remain largely veiled, in part through the women's own habitual indifference towards their value and a resultant inability to freely express themselves. Their coverage in most publications about the Sindhi diaspora is brief and typically appended to the history of a chiefly male-merchant settlement. This paper is an initiative to enter into the women's worlds through 16 stories situated in the post-Partition decades of the 20th century. The women's greatest support has in fact been their reliance on one another, systemically manifest in social groups that they have formed across generations and fostered by networks that transcend both time and place. These groups are critical structures, enabling the women to more than survive their hardships; they are an organized platform for the women to serve their community and most importantly, they have provided the women with an outlet to thrive, for their own sake.

Keywords

Sindhi diaspora; Sindhi women; Sindhi merchants; merchant wives; foreigners in Japan; Indians in Japan; social networks

Displaced: Women through (Her)story

New Year's Eve, 1976 – Umeda Station, Osaka

A young woman sits nervously aboard the Hankyu, engulfed in a cream fur coat. She shifts uneasily in her seat and her coat parts, betraying the shocking purple organza silk draped into a saree beneath. She crosses her legs and exposes a pair of hardy black boots. In a sea of sobriety, the slightest movement of her bangle-laden wrists and jewelled fingers is an assault to the eyes. Her own eyes are downcast though amused as she is by the perplexity of her presence, they twinkle. She contains her excitement within the yards gathered into her lap but her modesty barely mutes the alarm raised by the giant red dot adorning her forehead. And so she waits anxiously, for the Kobe Sannomiya-bound train to set off – just another hour before she reunites with her husband! Together they will attend the community ball, and she will meld seamlessly into the company of other saree-clad women.

Against the dreary winter night and a cloistering Japanese crowd, the new bride's displacement is as sorely striking as the majesty of the shiny, maroon-bodied locomotive that holds them all.

The vignette captivates with its romance of a young woman – let's call her *Devi* – journeying towards her love, and it entertains, through the absurd contrasts portrayed en route. But this endearing image of *Devi* acutely out of place is also real. It captures the incongruities embodied, managed and to an extent normalized every day, by the women of her community across generations. These are women of Japan's Sindhi merchant diaspora – a community of traders who mostly belong to the *Bhaiband* or 'business' caste of Hyderabad, an inland city of Sindh province, present-day Pakistan. Their stories inspire and inform this initiative to appreciate the position that women hold in the larger narrative of Sindhi merchant history, even as they themselves remain indifferent.

Devi isn't every woman but she *is* real and her story is one of many, its turns reverberating with the varied silences of others in this diaspora. In order to acknowledge the women's unique experiences, they have each been provided an alias for their given names. Older women in the community are specifically addressed as *Aunty [Surname]*, just like they are in reality.

A Brief History of Sindhi Merchants

The merchants of Sindh are reputed for their global trade networks across which they have long peddled their wares. The operation and items in circulation were both known as *Sindhwork*, and the operators – exclusively men –, were called *Sindhworkies* (Falzon, 2004; Kumar, 2010; Markovits, 2000). Their traceable history of trade with Japan dates back 150 years and has mainly been with the port cities of Yokohama and Kobe. The merchants' first known arrival coincides with the advent of Meiji rule (1868-1912) – a period of modernization in Japan which greatly facilitated foreign trade

relations.

Early contact with Japan could be characterized as either transient business trips or at best contractual stints, common in the deployment of *Sindhworkies*. While on contract, the men lived in provisional quarters for a few years at a stretch, oftentimes in shared space with other male kin but apart from their own families (Kumar, 2010). These regular but brief linkages evolved into familial settlements of a diasporic community, in the aftermath of the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947. It was a bloody war that divided the country by religion and left her people displaced. Classified as the minority Hindus, most merchant families were forced to abandon majority-Muslim Sindh and flee across new borders to seek refuge elsewhere within the subcontinent. In several cases, women and children (daughters in particular) were made to leave first out of fear for their safety, the certainty of a reunion with male family members hanging in the balance. Many ultimately met a tragic fate, separated indefinitely (Bhavnani, 2014; Falzon, 2004; Hiranandani, 2010).

Many Sindhi merchants who were able to mobilize their capital gradually made the permanent shift to their overseas bases, such as Japan. Both Falzon (2004) and Bhavnani (2014) describe the relative ease with which *entire families* moved out *together* to these outposts but this was not always the case. In these years following Partition, many families were split up once again, this time because the men had to relocate first to ensure job stability, as well as secure employer approval and arrange for basic amenities that would support the migration of their wives and/or children. The period of separation here varied greatly, with some women moving mere days after marriage while others, like *Aunty Tilani*, were married and apart for as long as 15 years.

With the marital networks serving as their gateway to Japan, the women then found themselves facing a variety of challenges that ranged from maintaining inherited customs, to adapting to their host environment. Both these day-to-day struggles and the women's attitude towards them are matters of importance. Much like how *Devi* had seized control aboard the train by finding humour in her predicament, the other women interviewed for this study often made light of their hardships in Japan – their self-induced moments of hilarity borne of the same source as their plight. It must be made clear that these women were/are relatively well-off – a fact that critically informs the backdrop to their lives. Compared to the trying conditions of post-Partition India and to the more modest arrangements of other migrant communities in Japan (see Komai, 2001, for example), they have lived lives of luxury even if their initial set-ups were minimal, their household incomes tight and their frugality habitual. They comprise a bracket of affluence – a merchant class; have had the affordability to not be gainfully employed, although this is also on account of conservative gender boundaries; and in several cases, privileged with the assistance of Japanese nannies or *obasans*.

Even so, class does not offer protection from patriarchy. In fact, class appears to work as both an enabler for subservience and a clearing to thrive in spite of the forces that bind. Indeed, the women dismiss the gravity of what they have endured and waive the significance of their roles even as they unmistakably display resilience in their buoyant

attitude towards their challenges. Consider *Aunty Kalwani* and her husband who married in 1953 and then lived apart for nearly a decade, with her staying behind at their home in Poona (India), moving to Japan only after her husband had established his own company. In those 10 years, he would visit her only thrice; they would only have children thereafter. In another account, *Manjeri* recounted being separated from her father, along with her mother and younger brother, for six years. She arrived in Japan as a five-year-old, also in 1953. When asked about the hardships her mother must have faced, *Manjeri* – now in her 60s and still a Kobe resident, would not elaborate even while admitting that her mother would confide in her about her struggles.

Unfortunately, neither are these cases of hardship unique nor the women's relegation of their suffering. All the women interviewed had a similar tendency to brush off the challenges that they have had to overcome. Instead, they were contextualized as commonplace. Separation for instance, was the 'norm' and so it was 'natural', and therefore, it was 'nothing'.

The Study of 'Sindhi Merchant Wives'

Unarticulated Discourse / An Acutely Androcentric History of the Community

> A Sindhi tradesman is born with a business background, *grows up* in an atmosphere of business and *assimilates traditions* and experience of business while he is still a child. *As he grows up*, he sits at his father's shop for an hour or two after school. He visits his uncles in Lagos and spends *holidays with his grandmother* in the Canary Islands. He hears of the gold of South Africa, the diamonds of Belgium and Israel, the gems of Ceylon and the electronics of Japan. As soon as he is 17 or 18, he joins his father or brother in business and by the time he is 30, he has started his own. (Hiranandani, 1980; italics emphasis mine)

As much as the tradesman must be credited for his daring, hard work and acumen, so must his custodians who once oversaw his upbringing and who now oversee his children's growth. The nurturance and cultural value transmissions that occur in these foundational years of the future trader cannot be skimmed over. Rather, they must be unpacked and scrutinized for their own value and for the value they add to the grooming of his mercantile mind. These long overlooked sites of trade – the non-economic institutions that support the rise of the merchant and ensure his durability, are constituents of the "invisible organization" (Cohen, 1974) embodied and helmed by women.

Perhaps it is partly through their own belittlement that the women's stories are not as widely recognized, and the kinds of lives they have led or roles they have played, not as extensively covered as the men's. Their persisting silence makes for unarticulated discourse (Butalia, 2000). The initial frustrations felt at their seemingly 'futile' and 'insubstantial' responses, have not only made the analysis for this paper extra challenging but have, in hindsight, served to illuminate their disparaging record in extant literature.

To start, for a diaspora whose trade networks have an ages-old, *global* establishment (see Bharadwaj, 1990, for a world map of the extensive spread), there sadly exists only a few historically detailed accounts in academic research (Levi, 2002; Falzon, 2004; Markovits, 2000). Other lines of focus have tended to expand on cultural domains such as religion and language (Boivin, 2004, 2008; Harjani, 2018; Jotwani, 2006; Lekhwani, 1994; Ramey, 2006; Schimmel, 1974; Yegorova, 1971), or are case-specific studies of the Sindhis, for example: Gibraltar (Haller, 2003); and, in Asia – Manila and Jakarta (Thapan, 2002); Hong Kong (Vaid, 1972; White, 1994); Singapore (Chandiramani, 1993; Aswani, 1995; Dadlani, 2002), Malaysia (David, 2001); Japan (Chugani, 2003; Kumar, 2010, 2011). Across most of this literature, women are contained in a chapter, feature peripherally to the dominant narrative of the merchants or given theme, or are most substantially covered in gendered comparative analysis, often within the context of Partition. They have never plainly been the focus of this diaspora's narrative.

Other than Bhavnani (2014)'s historical work on the Partition and Kavita Daswani (1998)'s biographical account of Sindhi tycoon – Kishinchand Chellaram, publications by Sindhi women authors are also rare and do not centre on the women, with the notable exception of works by Popati Hiranandani (1980, 2010). Analyses of the merchant diaspora by Japanese scholars like Shimizu (2005), Takezawa (2008) and Tsubakitani & Tanaka (2008), have given way to research initiatives now focused on the growing base of South Asian professionals in Japan (Azuma, 2008; Komai, 2001; Sawa & Minamino; also Ahmed, 2008). The shift makes it urgent to redirect scholarship to persisting gaps within the merchant narrative; gaps that have much to do about the contributions of women.

Shifting Focus from Men to Women

It becomes apparent rather quickly then, that in the making of a Sindhi merchant *and* a Sindhi merchant diaspora, women are indispensable. In fact, they hold leadership roles in the supporting arena of the socio-cultural domain and community affairs (Kumar, 2010). Any narrative on the merchants is therefore incomplete without the women's inclusion.

But the women are not just ancillary to the merchants' journeys. No, the women inhabit diasporic worlds of their own, worlds which necessarily intersect the men's but contain stories deserving of equal and independent mention. Plain and unabashed in full view to soak in, the women go about their ways – running errands at *Mandai*, the neighbourhood supermarket; revelling in community gossip round the restaurant table at their kitty lunches; and, lost in their firebrand exchange of Sindhi-style Japanese with the *obasan*, who by now is trained to reciprocate in kind. Their manner unadulterated and so innocently unravelling was a raw revelation, one that must be met with the intent to document.

Truth be told, beneath the unjustly trite and golden tag of 'Sindhi merchant wives', lies a

bustling patchwork of activity, embroidered with resilience, resourcefulness and networking prowess, stitched tautly for posterity.

The Women's Profiles

16 women were interviewed for this study. They comprise:

- post-Partition settlers who arrived in Japan in the early 1950s and 60s;
- daughters of these settlers who were then born and/or raised in Japan;
- daughters-in-law of these same pioneers; and,
- women who came to Japan similarly, by way of marriage, in the decades that followed.

The women span three generations and cross an age range of roughly 50 years: from the elders who are now in their 70s and 80s, to daughters, daughters-in-law and granddaughters, whose ages go from 30s through to 60s. The effort to attain a composite profile was to account for changing roles and conditions across time, in order to gather varied experiences and also pick up on persisting trends. Mother/daughter views of the same incident; the transition from daughter-in law to mother-in-law for some women; and, juxtaposing an older woman's recollection with her daughter-in-law's present experience, are some forms of comparative analysis that have proven insightful.

These women either currently reside in Kobe or Yokohama or have resided there at some point in their lives. As mentioned earlier, the two port cities are where the merchants have most actively traded in textiles, consumer electronic goods and other sundry items (Falzon, 2004; Markovits, 2000; Kumar, 2010), and are therefore home to the most prominent settlements of the diaspora.

Due to the time frame, both past and present auxiliary verbs ('was/is'; 'did/does' etc.) are used. As Sindhis are more readily recognized as 'Indian' or *Indojin* in Japan and are in several ways culturally in sync with customs classified as 'Indian', the terms 'Sindhi' and 'Indian' are used interchangeably on occasion, and distinguished when necessary.

The Women's Worlds

Circulation: Lifeblood of the Diaspora

Throughout the extent of his travels pre-Partition, the *Sindhworki* merchant had remained rooted to the affairs of Sindh through reliable circuits of information (Markovits, 2000, 2009). These loops were perpetuated with equal rigour by the matriarch. Women have played key roles in ensuring an active circulation of news from the homeland, to keep her distant husband afloat and have, for years *before* Partition, endured lengths of time living apart – all the while managing the household and raising children. "For several decades, many Bhaiband merchants had spent most of their working lives abroad, returning home only for a few months at a stretch before departing

once more. In their absence, their wives and mothers had become the de facto heads of the household", writes Bhavnani (2014, p.251). A merchant had once similarly revealed his grandmother holding the fort in the wake of her husband's demise. Her grip had kept her four sons from separating into individual lines of work, uniting them instead, and preventing the family from falling apart (Kumar, 2010).

This theme of circulation as detailed by Markovits (2009) is central to the analysis of the women's stories in Japan's Sindhi merchant diaspora. The flows that circulate occur in a variety of forms through the women's transnational social networks and localized groups. And their stories point to the same resourcefulness shown by their foremothers in the years preceding and following the trials of Partition.

Overlapping Networks of Influence

The women's worlds are transgressive – they orbit over seas and rotate back and forth across time, knowing no boundaries. These spaces that the women create and inhabit – the sites of interrogation that is, are hence neither fixed nor entirely physical in nature. Rather, they come alive as social capital in networks that overlap, and, as uneconomic as they may be, the structural connections that they foster wield great economic influence.

Relocating to the *Far* East might have engendered an illusion of disconnection for the women. It certainly did provide those in nuclear set-ups with a healthy distance for some freedom in their lifestyles but this did/does not mean a severance of ties with family and friends outside Japan. Their lives though to a large extent autonomous, cannot be studied in isolation as rooted strictly to Japan. There are several connections that transcend literal space and powerfully influence the relationships that form within it. In the women's stories, these connections show up in multiple ways: they are flows of knowledge across time and place; involve travels that regulate the circulation of cultural goods like food, clothing and updates on pop culture with videotapes of Hindi films; and concern relations from abroad or the past that have helped cultivate new friendships and create social ties locally.

Flows of Knowledge: Past / Maiden and Present / Marital

Consider *Devi*'s account – our heroine aboard that congested train. A Singaporean girl, she moved to Japan as a new bride in the mid-1970s, after a harrowing six months at her marital home in Delhi. As she detailed the activities that would fill up her day, *Devi* constantly referenced how things were done in her maiden home. They were her yardstick for what she knew at the time as well as a measure for all that she did not know, and would soon have to learn.

Unlike her mother who "used to slog at home", *Devi*'s chores in her small apartment that she shared with her husband were minimal and quickly dealt with. She expressed her thrill of using a vacuum cleaner which was unfamiliar to her because back in Singapore it

was always a *sapu* (Malay for 'broom'). She had to learn that the vacuum bag need not be replaced daily, just like fitted sheets – another new encounter, need not be removed for the bed to be dusted. There was also the enormity of handling money – very important business that it was. And buying groceries, which many would assume she would have some experience in, turned out also to be her father's domain as girls were expected to stay at home.

Once at the local markets, she searched to no avail for "Ayam Brand" sardine cans that are popular in Singapore but were not available in Japan. She was baffled by the array of seafood that lay in front of her at the wet market – what happened to good ol' fish? And she likened Japanese *ramen* to "Maggi noodles" – one of the few dishes she could prepare. The striking contrasts presented in *Devi*'s story alone reflect the sheer extent of unlearning and re-learning that she, and other women, must have had to do, to build their new lives in Japan. In fact, the women became each other's most critical resource of learning – a key function of the social groups that they formed within the community that will be elaborated on later.

But persisting ties with family and friends beyond the local community mattered as well, for it meant a reliable access to comfort food and cultural produce – Indian or otherwise. This open line of exchange was particularly significant in the accounts of older women who, back in the day, had no source of Indian spices or other international products that are now available at import stores like 'Kobe Spice' and 'Kobe Grocers'.

When asked about how they would gather the ingredients required to cook Sindhi food at home, the older women described 10-kilo-heavy tins that would come through sea-mail once every few months, filled to the brim with a variety of *daals* ('legumes'), *masalas* ('spices'), *kheechaa* ('assorted crackers'), and of course, the staple Sindhi snack of *paapad* ('papadums'). While a Japanese *bento* or 'lunchbox' was the norm for the men while at work or for the children in school, dinner was/is usually a Sindhi dish – with *saee bhaaji* ('mashed spinach'), *kofta curry* ('curry with meatballs or vegetarian dumplings'), Sindhi *kadi* ('gram-flour vegetable curry') and *daal khichdi* ('lentil porridge') given specific mention. This effort to ensure regularity of home-cooked traditional cuisine has made food an important distinguishing marker of 'Sindhi-ness' and 'Sindhi culture' for the younger women of succeeding generations. They recollect seeing their mothers perennially in the kitchen, either cooking by themselves or instructing the *obasans* who were taught Sindhi/Indian dishes and became skilled (to a fault) in their preparation. For instance, in detailing the entertaining exchange between one veteran *obasan* and her *okusan* ('mistress' or 'madam' of the house) as they oversaw the preparation of *ras gullas* – a Bengali sweet, Kumar (2010) notes how the latter "had her hand gently slapped by the *obasan*" when she had raised the pot's lid before time.

Travel as Circulation and a Means to Circulate

Travelling was (and continues to be) another way that the women in Japan maintained ties with friends and family overseas, and it has also ensured a channel for updates on

fashion trends. The frequency of travel varied across the women's experiences and was predictably lower amongst older women in their initial years of settlement. This was due to higher travel costs, lack of affordability and a more cautious climate in the aftermath of war – both the Partition and the American Occupation in Japan (1945-1952). For women who arrived in the '60s and particularly the '70s onwards, though not as commonplace as the present, travel still appears to have been more regular:

> Nobody used to travel so much like how they travel now to India, only those girls who were originally from Bombay, Poona, Kanpur… they would go back once a year or when their children would have holidays, they'd go to India to meet their parents… throughout the year they can't go because the children are in school!

Devi continued with an account of her own: childless at the time and without a visa for permanent residency in her early years, she and her husband would have to leave Japan every three months to renew their re-entry permit at immigration. They would travel to neighbouring Korea or to her maiden home in Singapore, or to her in-laws in Delhi, and kept this up till they had their first child eight years later. Interestingly, Japanese chiffon and georgette *sarees* – simply known as "Japan *sarees*" – were so much the craze in India then that relatives would request for them. In Japan too, the fabric sold like "hotcakes" and the women's husbands who dealt in them for their textile trade, "must've sold millions of metres", minting on their sales at the time. The rolls of fabric would be cut and eight to 10 *sarees* parcelled as gifts by the women to their *bhaabees* ('sisters-in-law') when they would visit.

As for themselves, the Sindhi women would flock to Hayashi Saree House to grab the latest prints – a shop in the upscale Kitano neighbourhood, walk-able from most women's homes and run by the Japanese daughter-in-law of an Indian trader. 'Hayashi-san', as she was known, would, ironically, get her supply of latest fabrics from the Indian merchants, i.e. the women's husbands. The women would spend 3,000 yen to 6,000 yen apiece (approximately US$15 – 30), depending on the print. These were "wash-and-wear" *sarees* popular from the mid-'60s till the '80s. The women would wear them while engaged in the most mundane of activities both at home and publicly, which arguably normalized their appearance in their surroundings to some extent. From conducting household chores like *Aunty Tilani* bathing then-toddler *Pushpa*, to *Aunty Vishni* strolling with her family in the park; or as the go-to outfit for an event at a prayer meet – the *saree* was the attire of choice. It was typical of the era and a most familiarly comforting manner of dress for most Sindhi women at the time, be they new brides or elderly grandmothers.

Sarees certainly were the more practical choice over the predicament of getting an entire *salwaar kameez* ('loose fitted pants and tunic') stitched – "who's going to stitch for us?" Rather, the *saree* blouse material that they would pair with their latest print purchase at Hayashi-san's store would then be tailored to perfection and delivered to their doorstep by one fine old Japanese seamster, coincidentally 'Hayashi-san' too. Though to sidestep his hefty charge of 3,000 yen per blouse, many got their blouses

stitched quicker and much cheaper on trips to India. And if travel was not in the pipeline, the blouses likely got sent back and forth through relatives or friends who came and went in the interim.

Old Ties, New Circles

If the Sindhi merchants' trade and marital networks are anything to go by, the likelihood of the women somehow already knowing each other through an old connection elsewhere was/is pretty high. The women corroborated this on more than one occasion. External networks influenced friendships that were formed in Kobe's social circles. *Devi* for instance, recounted the friendliness extended to her by one *Aunty Pishu* – an elder who had been around in Kobe for several years by the time of her arrival. It turned out that *Aunty Pishu* had three brothers residing in Singapore whom she would often visit and so she knew the Sindhi community there, including *Devi*'s parents. *Aunty Pishu* also happened to know *Devi*'s in-laws in Delhi, presumably through pre-Partition communal networks. In another instance, the mothers of two Kobe-based Sindhi women turned out to be friends from the same village in pre-Partition Sindh. This past connection became a binding tie for the women as it motivated the start of their friendship which has endured even after one has relocated from Japan.

The women's husbands' networks were/are also influential in the formation of their social cliques. Men who had sweated out their early years of bachelorhood together as *Sindhworkies* would later introduce their wives who then tended to rely on each other more closely than they would others. Connections in business across communities and places further meant that many relations were/are formed prior to settlement in Japan and not just within the Sindhi network. New to town, *Devi* was invited to join the weekly *Sukhmani Sahib* readings at the Kobe *Guru Darbar* ('Sikh temple'), by an elderly Sikh woman she got to know through her husband having once worked for the woman's cousins. Beyond the fulfilment of religious worship that *Devi* received, these Friday gatherings at the temple turned out to be an invaluable resource in itself, becoming a means to regularly meet other Sindhi and Punjabi women living in Kobe with whom she gradually formed lasting bonds of friendship (Kumar, 2012).

The Women's Social Groups: Their *Key* Resource in Local Circulation

Learning Japanese

The women's social groups were/are no doubt the communal grapevine, *trans*-communal in fact, and this cannot be summarily dismissed as cavalier or trivial. Circulation via the groups is regular, the secrets open and the information spread and shared, often putting the women in the know about community affairs ahead of their

husbands. These groups are the lifeblood of the diasporic social network and symbiotically, the network structurally holds them in place. In Japan's diaspora, these groups have long held a largely indiscriminate nature that transcends age and neutralizes status, and they feed practical information aside from gossipy opinion, like that of Japanese language classes.

For a majority of women arriving in the earlier decades, the grasp of Japanese appears to have come off largely through watching soaps on the television, or as they called it – "*hiru-no-dorama*" ('afternoon dramas'). None of the women (interviewed) arriving in the '50s and '60s took up formal language classes because they were not aware of any available at the time. For those settling in the late '70s – early '80s who did so, it was short-lived once children came along and personal time became a rare find. Many did not sustain an interest in learning more Japanese than the bare minimum required to run the household. And this was attained through routinal interactions with the building's caretaker, the grocer, the milkman and on occasions when they would visit their husband's workplace – with the Japanese staff there. Their husbands were another resource for piecemeal Japanese, most having picked it up on the go and through self-study. *Aunty Tilani* remembered memorizing her husband's notes of the names of vegetables, the shop's name and telephone number to get herself to a store in the vicinity, for example.

The women coming together served as motivation for them to take lessons as a group, even if just for a three-month course. *Devi* recounted how her husband had bought her beginner-level textbooks that were left untouched until a few years later, when she got together with a few other women to join classes at the local YMCA that one had heard about. When the course came to an end, the six of them all quit in unison – "they all got tired so they stopped; *Pishu* also stopped, so I also stopped". Any intention for a serious undertaking of the language was superseded by the joy of inclusion, the drive of solidarity and the camaraderie of the women, apparent in their banter. It was a delicious entanglement of vivacious and oftentimes clashing personalities which nonetheless upheld the fun and drama of group enterprise. *Aunty Pishu* in fact the oldest and last to join, and who has since passed on, was fondly remembered for her entertaining exchanges in Sindhi-style/dramatized Japanese, and for being the life of the group. Importantly, the group itself became a learning source for picking up the language – precisely the daily, functional type of usage that enabled communication in routines of their everyday lives, and which they so desired.

The Elderly Gatekeepers and the Politics of Inclusion

Much like *Aunty Pishu*, many elderly women played advisory, maternal roles and acted as gatekeepers for the new brides who would arrive in later decades. They would entertain in their homes and invite the handful in their circle as well as those new to the town for lunch. More elaborate dinner events were also organized at the Indian Social Society (ISS) – the community's "social centre", which the young women would attend with their husbands. These occasions effectively served to ease the transition for the

young women, were opportune for introductions to others and kick-started their integration within the close-knit community. The older women took on the avatar of pseudo mothers, their "hand" likened to that of the young women's own from whom separation was still raw, and whose cooking was sorely missed. Leftovers at the home gatherings would be packed and given to the young women to take along so that they would not have to worry about dinner. In the trying days of her pregnancy, *Devi* credited the elders as her "very helpful" support system, who would often visit her at the hospital, bringing along dishes specially prepared to ensure that she was well taken care of.

"I've got a new movie, we'll watch together, okay?!"

Old *Aunty Nathani* had found herself to be rather lonely in her Kobe apartment after her daughter-in-law had shifted to Taiwan. She had also just got her hands on the latest Hindi film video cassette and in her excitement, had telephoned *Devi*, who would oftentimes idle in solitude as well. The gesture was common – particularly among the elderly and younger women still free of the responsibility of children. For many who lived in the same apartment building, it was often an open-house policy, with doors left unlocked for other women – and mischievous children – to rush in and out for the slightest of reasons. On nights when their husbands were working late, which would happen often till the men were established, the women would gather at one of their houses to cook and eat together. They found comfort and solidarity in each others' company – making merry as they chatted over the kitchen stove with filmi tracks busting through the stereo in the background, for hours into the night.

"Why are you mixing with the 'elderly women'?" *Devi* would occasionally be asked.

"How do you like it?! She comes and sits in your house!" Her contemporary had once exclaimed indignantly.

But really, she had wanted an invitation too because it was important to belong to a group in a foreign country where the feeling of alienation constantly hovered. It was necessary to get out of the cloistering apartment once in a while – its compact size convenient for chores but stifling otherwise.

Just as there is boon, there is the bane of 'small-town life' within the sizeable city of Kobe, the crux of which lies in the dense clustering of Sindhi residences across a mere seven kilometres. Most of the women live a walk-able distance from each other if not in the same building, or are at most a few bus stops apart. And so, even as the women acknowledged the importance of being included in a social circle for the precious escape, or bemoaned its politics, they did so with mixed feelings. Their relationships hinged on a paradox: they swung/swing from being much-needed companionship and an invaluable resource, to being unwelcome intrusions into one's personal space.

The women's residential proximity suggests the strategic need to get along. Resources such as the ISS building (which also houses Sindhi families in apartment units above), the *Guru Darbar*, supermarkets and convenience stores, downtown *Sannomiya*

shopping district, the zoo, train stations and some of the international schools, are all located within the neighbourhood. To a significant extent, this allayed anxiety of setting foot in foreign land, not knowing the language and having no one but their work-ridden husbands to rely on. Relative to the hardships and trauma triggered by war in the subcontinent, Japan offered a life of peace and comfort for those that came in the early years. And for those that came later, there was eagerness and excitement to settle in a country reputed as the fast-rising nation of the East – a first-world country, or, as *Kala* put it: a thrilling "dream" to live in "beautiful" Japan. *Kala*, now well into her 70s and a grandmother to teens, likened the idea of a life in Japan to the filmi romance and fantasy encapsulated by a Bollywood blockbuster of the 1960s called *Love in Tokyo*. She was not far off from the realities of those who married into or were raised in families well-established, who, even in the '50s, received "royal service" from live-in help. These *obasans* demanded a monthly salary that then amounted to just 7,000 yen (compared to the current rate of 1000 yen / hour for part-time help) but were still a rare luxury to employ. The relative affluence of these families is clearly reflected as many others who started out on more modest monthly incomes of 100, 000 yen, were also able to afford part-time *obasans* from the pool of contacts circulated through the grapevine.

Third generation daughters spoke of the importance of proximity in developing their bonds of friendship, for it allowed safe and spontaneous meet-ups. They recollected how, in their growing up years, their mothers' networks facilitated the tapping on neighbours for help in child-minding, car-pooling for groceries, even hiring a van for the children to be taken to school in the mornings. Contrary to the notion of sheltering, the proximity nurtured an independent mindset amongst these younger women as they would walk out on the streets to friends' homes confidently on their own and often accompanied their mothers on daily errands. Conversely, one could argue that the close reach of daily necessities has also limited exploration beyond the neighbourhood, especially for the housewives, building over time a bubble that the women comfortably live in till today.

Nevertheless, the physical closeness does have its value and comes across like a worthwhile trade-off. Yet, it presents the conundrum of a serious lack of privacy. The situation makes for an interesting dilemma especially when one considers the healthy distance that Japan seemed at one point to offer – from prying relatives, especially for women once in joint households who bore the additional obligation of service to in-laws. "Japan nobody came, unless you tell them to come… it was expensive to entertain people", *Devi* said. Living apart and away – the distance enhanced by infrequent travel – Japan afforded a pleasing balance between selective engagement with external relations, control over visits and a fair measure of independence in lifestyle. Though the lack of kin support also meant a serious social handicap exacerbated by the language barrier, overseeing entirely on their own the domestic sphere of affairs, which no doubt took some learning, and the great responsibility of raising children. This is where the support offered by ties in the local community becomes crucial and maintaining the relationships sometimes at the expense of one's privacy, was/is necessary. Women in joint households in Japan, some enjoying the luxury of live-in *obasans*, still face the additional layer of invasion by having to live under the constant purview of elders' expectations. They too meet with the contradictory scenario of receiving both support and pressure from in-laws

and have had their own struggles compounded by the gendered responsibility to properly impart 'values' to their children.

Status vs. Solidarity, and the Social History of Women's Groups

Compared to the merchant diasporas found elsewhere in the region, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Jakarta, all of which number in the thousands, Japan's Sindhi population is much smaller. As Sindhis are subsumed under the more general category of *Indojin*, it has been hard to distinguish their exact count from other Indian ethnic groups. What is clear is that both communities in Kobe and Yokohama have dwindled greatly for a few reasons: members of the older generation have passed on; others have chosen to retire elsewhere with less extreme winters and resources such as their children or extended kin close by; families that were unable to financially sustain the tough economic climate have moved out; and, many of the younger generation who have studied overseas choose not to return, finding a more viable (English-medium) future in other countries. Going by the companies registered with the Indian Chamber of Commerce Japan (ICCJ), even in its heyday (mid-1980s), the total number peaked at a modest 200 (Tsubakitani & Tanaka, 2008). With an average family of four, this would mean a population of around 1,000 in Kobe's community; the figure in Yokohama presumably comparable or likely lower.

The communities in Japan have therefore never achieved a critical mass for status to matter enough. There was/is more to be gained from solidarity as a minority group, their distinction as a whole – as a class, of 'Sindhi merchants', holding greater significance. As a result, social status neither had much bearing on defining the women's groups nor was it given scope to thrive. Status was and continues to be largely neutralized, and differences downplayed in the interest of the common Japan-diasporic experience – "we were same; like it or not – everybody was helpful, everybody was friendly, everybody would come". There was no room for airs. New entrants who married into renowned family firms would set out class-conscious and fussed about 'quality' company only to realize rather quickly, that they were just as easily outcast by the rest – "she didn't want to mix with anyone when she came [so] nobody mixed with her". Showing off only got one ostracized as the talk of the town, that too just for the day – this was the extent to which the others cared, and thereafter "no one bothered".

Groups then, disregarded nominal differences in material wealth and formed more along lines of common interest or largely by "batch", i.e. the time of the women's arrival in the town. This implies a roughly generational distinction amongst groups, as the chronology of the groups' histories reveals.

For the women of the '50s, social life mainly revolved around gambling and prayer. There was no formal social grouping, rather, the handful of them were simply clustered as the pioneer batch and would meet quite regularly to lounge at the old ISS or "Club" grounds after lunch obligations were dealt with. The Club was a cosy, intimate space and so vital a host to community events that it has been described as "*nanano-jo-ghar*" or the maternal home. Indeed, the Club has consistently performed its dutiful role over the

years – functioning as a wedding venue on a few occasions and routinely holding bridal showers for the daughters of the town. The mood of the Club in the ’50s though, was more risqué. There, regular players amongst the women would gamble, dealing rounds of card games like Rummy and Flash (also referred to as “*Teen Patti*”). The women were as diligent in their attendance of the monthly *Satya Narayan Katha* – a full-moon prayer recited in reverence to the Hindu deity, Vishnu. Both gatherings were instrumental in giving the women a purpose – a *raison d’etre,* and much needed respite from loneliness and the household, by exposing them to a life beyond it, a life of their own.

By the early ’60s, the groups were more structured, with names, a defined schedule and a purpose. There were, for instance, the monthly home-cooking demonstrations that rotated across the houses of every member; or a kitty, where money was pooled and a lucky recipient drawn before the cycle repeated. Membership was limited more on account of practicality than for any other reason and women who were refused entry then went on to form groups of their own within their own “batch”. The formalized structure accorded the women an organizational capacity for greater social engagement. To illustrate – the Wednesday Group, touted as the first official ladies’ lunch group formed in 1963, was instrumental in starting the community’s Children’s Diwali Party, which they hosted for 20 years before another group – the Socialites (founded in 1973), took over.

The Children’s Diwali Party was/is a yearly event run entirely by the women and open to the whole Sindhi community. They would organize the children and line up the performances, make logistical arrangements for a lavish menu of Indian dishes, and oversee decorations for a festive set-up of the function hall at the Club. The children would practice for months, dancing to Bollywood hits and role-playing in deity costumes to characters from Hindu mythology. For many children, this event became the inaugural platform for their exposure to religious custom and Indian pop culture. For *Reena* and *Meera* – both now young mothers who were raised in Kobe, looking back, the annual Diwali function is an enduring legacy, with lingering importance for the learning that came through.

As Japan’s economy prospered in the boom of the ’80s, the Sindhi merchants peaked in number and the women attempted to leverage on their prominence by looking beyond the community to integrate with women across Japan’s Indian diaspora. The Kansai Indian Ladies Association or ‘KILA’ was registered as a charity with a proper constitution during this period. It was followed by the formation of Women’s World in 1985, which, with almost 200 members at its height, served as a platform for cross-cultural exchange and the formation of many friendships. ‘Women’s World’ magazines with articles penned by the women themselves, published details of their activities – fashion shows, drama productions, Japanese flower arrangement or *ikebana* events, to name a few. The resident Indian Consul General’s wife would be invited to grace monthly meetings as a grand gesture of community support.

The women were highly active members in creating a variety of cultural-value platforms within the community. On the religious and spiritual front, they led regular prayer sessions across different sects – Friday’s *Sukhmani Sahib* recitations at the *Guru*

Darbar; *Radhasoami Satsang* (an Indian religious organization) meets at a residence in the neighbourhood donated by a Sindhi family for *seva* ('service'); *Satya Sai Baba* hymn-singing at the ISS *mandir* ('temple'), which, interestingly, brings together many Indian and Japanese followers in prayer. The *Sai Baba* devotees have also more recently formed 'study circles' for more lengthy discussion of the *guru*'s teachings. Women leaders in the religious/spiritual arena spearheaded classes for the children known as *Baal Vikas* or 'child development', with an emphasis on their value development in religious worship. *Meera* and *Reena* vividly recalled having to learn and chant their *mantras*, the ceremonial act of performing customs, how to properly conduct the *aarti* ('prayer with a lighted wick or camphor') and not forgetting the songs of devotion they were regularly made to sing. Her exposure through her mother's participation in these meetings as a child has prompted *Meera*'s own attendance at *Radhasoami* sessions in Singapore, where as a married woman she now resides.

But the women were not just active within the community. Several occasions mark their efforts to bring cross-cultural awareness into the Japanese public domain. Every year, child ambassadors from the larger Indian community were chosen as the Kobe 'Prince' and 'Princess' and designated to take part in the annual city-wide Kobe *Matsuri* ('festival'). The theme for the Indian float would be decided by a committee comprised of Kansai's three key Indian organizations – the ISS, India Club and the ICCJ, and overseen by the Indian Consulate. In the summer of 1986, community daughters dressed up in theme as 'Brides of India' and paraded atop the float in a show of regional representation with various Indian ethnic wear. Additionally, the women have worked as translators and private tutors of English, and continue to do so. In Kobe, some have volunteered for years as part of an international team of 45 women at the local Kaisei Hospital, where many of their own children were born. There, they serve English-speaking foreign patients by assisting Japanese staff with translation of medical jargon and mediating for in-patient care.

Out of the picnics, theme parties, Bingo night games and the like, *Manjeri* – a founding member of the '70s Socialites group, highlighted the value of the cooking demonstrations which she credits with informing most of their "party cooking". The recipes gathered from these demos became invaluably enshrined when they were compiled by the women to raise funds for charity following the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake that struck Kobe in 1995. Unwilling to sit helplessly in depression in the months that followed, the Socialites decided to give back to the community by putting together their recipes for print and sale as a community cookbook. The project entailed gathering on the weekends where the women would painstakingly organize and key in the entries. They also raised capital through advertising their husbands' companies and other Indian contributors, ranging from aviation to import stores and restaurants, and even Hayashi Saree House. They sold over a 1000 copies and raised a total of 643, 000yen which they donated to multiple charities besides Kobe's earthquake victims, such cancer patients in the Philippines, Orissa cyclone victims, the Sadhu Vaswani Centre and Satya Sai Baba organization, amongst others. In fellow Socialite *Anju*'s words, "books were sold in both Japan and overseas – wherever we had contacts".

The closeness of the community, in both Kobe and Yokohama, is evident till today, with women at the helm of simple but time-honoured initiatives like the annual *sakura* ('cherry blossoms') picnic. The traditions continue as the women behind them are succeeded by generations of daughters and daughters-in-law. As the Sindhi merchant community dwindles in number, with now an estimated 50 families in Kobe, and a mere handful in Yokohama, there has been greater intermingling across the various Indian ethnic groups resident in the country. While in Kobe the Gujarati trading community has risen as most prominent, in Yokohama a growing number of Indians belong to the expanding base of South Asian professionals clustered in the Kanto region.

Women's Domain

Breaking Down Enduring Walls of Partition

The women's worlds, most apparent through their networks and groups, point to a blurring of the boundaries between the domestic/private and professional/public realms, conventionally overseen by women and men respectively. Tradition would dictate that the bounds of the woman's domain lie around the affairs of the household and as primary caregiver of the children. This is evident in the women's stories and unwittingly reinforced by their own dismissiveness towards the potential weight of their influence. However, the exact reach of their domain – of what in fact constitutes the 'domestic' or the 'private', becomes unclear and likely extended, when one considers that the women's social networks neither lie entirely within the gendered norms of the home, nor wholly undertake any professional dealing. What they *do* is to allow for transgressions of the 'domestic' into public spaces, or, in the case of home-cooking demos, they transform the 'inside' 'out'. In reciprocity, the outdoors, through the likes of the communal grapevine, potentially re-informs the dynamics of the private sphere, i.e. the household, by building on the women's knowledge base, opening up their minds and influencing husband-wife/mother-child relations.

When she had first arrived in Japan in the mid-1970s, *Devi* describes a wall partitioning the modest space of her apartment and her husband's office, in Osaka's business district of Honmachi. He was newly employed and worked long hours with no staff to assist but even so, when asked if she would step in next door to help, her reply was incredulous. "Why would I go there? I had no interest in going there," she exclaimed; not even to help vacuum the office space before clients arrived for the day's appointments. The wall then becomes symbolic of the partition held in place by enduring gender conventions, which keep the men and women separated even under the same roof. The dual home/office space provision that *Devi* and her husband had initially occupied, was granted by the employer her husband then worked for, at her husband's insistence. The co-existence of the feminine household and macho office, especially in the presence of other male – more precisely *Japanese* male – staff, was not just inappropriate, it was inconceivable. Aligned with conventional propriety, the request for a wall was therefore entertained without much resistance.

There is no suggestion of radical change in gender norms here – the women's schedules revolved around their husbands' office timings then and they likely do so now. If the women invited each other to lunch, it was only after they had catered to their husbands and sent them back to work with full bellies. Their dependence on their husbands, especially in the early days, meant that movement and activities were restricted but as they made friends with other women, this eased up – the dependence on their husbands lessened and that on other women grew, and their involvements beyond the house multiplied. Through their groups of friends, young brides learnt how to bargain for groceries at the wet market and how to ask for their fish to be portioned; they learnt the value of budgeting for gifts that they would buy for relatives when making those trips to India; they began "paying interest to money" in their gradual awareness on how to manage their finances. *Devi* spoke at length about her husband's work in our interview, citing on occasion specifics like the names and brands of textiles and companies that he traded with, the percentage of shares that he would earn from his workplace and how it was invested. It was not that she wasn't in the know but that she knew it from afar, contained in the domain of the home within which she would often advise, argue and to some extent affect his decision-making.

The women's groups endowed them with the capital necessary to transform the quality of their own lives. This and their placement in the diaspora – far away in relatively safe and foreign Japan, enabled them to both reinforce and break convention.

"But what would you do with yourself from morning to night?!" I asked, deeply frustrated with my informants' self-effacing responses to my interview questions.

"Ya, what would I do… nothing, no," replied *Devi*.

Concluding Remarks

While 16 women were interviewed directly, their stories have raised several others within and beyond the community who have had a part to play in the larger scheme of Japan's Indian diaspora. In some instances, these other women were figures of influence in the interviewee's pre-marital networks in her country of origin, or amongst her extended circle of in-laws. In other cases, they regularly featured in the interviewee's everyday life – the friend with whom she walks to the *satsang-ghar* or *gurudwara* ('prayer halls') every week; a fellow member of her social group who updates her gossip; or her neighbours in the same apartment building, from whom she learnt to cook and in whose company her loneliness disappeared. To pin the sample size as simply '16-strong' would therefore inaccurately reflect the full extent of the data pool. Even so, scores remain to be spoken to directly, at length, and their stories analyzed.

This paper is primarily based on material gathered from the interviews, which were mostly conducted online, with photographs from personal collections and copies of the women's edited publications (i.e. the cookbooks and social magazines) as supplementary resources. Other potential raw data such as old letters and related artefacts as well as

follow-up interviews preferably in person, would enrich the analysis as it stands.

Further, the material largely focuses on the post-Partition decades of the 1950s onwards, as this marked the main stream of Sindhi women's migration to Japan. It zooms in on the '70s to '80s window in fact – the heyday period for both Japan (economic boom) and the diaspora (peak population size and soaring businesses). Detail on the contemporary setting is therefore relatively lacking. A majority of the women are/were Kobe residents, which has meant a less substantial account of Yokohama's community. The latter, albeit much smaller, is older and has a noteworthy history of its own. In this regard, access to pre-Partition records and post-millennial accounts, as well as more extensive coverage on Yokohama residents, will garner more comprehensive data and analysis. Tracing the interconnections such as between the roles of the men and women, and cross-cultural relationships between Sindhis/Indians and Japanese, will also enhance understanding of the diaspora's longevity.

The web of interrelationships reflected in just 16 women's interviews, attests to how intricate and layered their diasporic narrative is. The diversity in profile for the sample here is promising but problematic too because its size limits both the extent of analysis and ability to reify conclusions drawn. This study while illuminating remains a preliminary effort, with the intention to be developed in scope and scale.

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End