

# From Denial and Displacement to Re-adjustment: Indian Diaspora in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

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One of the most unique and important changes that occurs in a society when a new community enters is the presence of diversity and difference. The new people are different in many ways—colour, race, religion, culture, worldview, goals and ideals—from the local communities. In the process of making a living among the local communities, the immigrant community needs to negotiate these differences. Both the new community and the locals are different to each other. This mutual difference is the breeding ground for mutual suspicion, prejudice and alienation. The immigrant community disrupts the social, cultural and economic order of the locals. In its initial stages the immigrants tend to be more in a mode of assimilation and gradually renegotiate their presence by establishing their own life-style, worldview, cultural and social institutions. This in the long run not only changes the landscape of the locals, but also the immigrants become different from their own ancestors. In other words, they not only force a new identity for the locals, but also for themselves – hence their own alien-ness from their mother land and its people. The South African Indian story remarkably captures this scenario.

When, for instance, the Parsees immigrated to India during their persecution in Persia, they made agreements with the ruling Hindu kings in the

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west coast of India that they would be loyal subjects and assimilate into the culture. Generations on today, they are a remarkable force in Indian politics and economy. They have renegotiated their presence in the Indian society. Even though they did not become politically separate entity, they certainly became a distinct group with their culture, religion, social and economic presence and negotiated a place for themselves in the larger Indian milieu. The Jewish community also did the same. These examples show not so much assimilation as the model that they had followed. But rather in a vast cultural diversity of India, they had created their own space for their cultural and social identity. It is the diversity and difference that marks these examples. The Indians in South Africa are none the different.

Discussing the new religious pluralism in America, David Machacek points out that the old paradigm of assimilation had to give in to a greater recognition of diversity. He says,

Instead of assimilating American social practices and cultural beliefs and values, the new immigrants, often using religion as a primary resource, appear to be actively renegotiating the terms of American social and cultural life (Machacek 2003:147).

The Indian immigrants to South Africa went through, I shall argue, three stages as it were before they renegotiated their religio-cultural and social space within what is often popularly referred to as the 'rainbow nation'. These stages are—the initial denial, displacement and the eventual readjustment. To all these stages, or rather processes, it worked in both directions. That is, the denial involved both self-denial and the social, political and cultural denial by the dominant group (the white community). The displacement involved a self-displacement in both cultural and social but also in physical terms. It also involved displacement by the politically and economically dominant community (white) vis à vis what became known as 'group areas act'. The eventual readjustment, as in the two previous two processes also involved both the oppressor and the oppressed. It is the result of a very conscious and deliberate renegotiation of political, economic, social and cultural space, unlike in the case of the American experience of the immigrants.

## **The Denial**

In the second part of the nineteenth century, at the request of the Natal government, the then government of India acceded to the request to supply cheap labour to work on the newly introduced sugarcane plantations. Since by then the slavery was strictly abolished in the British colonies (1833), a new system called the 'indenture system' was devised to introduce cheaper labour supply in the colonies (Thomas 1985; North-Combes 1991; Motwani 1989). It is a moot point whether the local African labour supply was inadequate, unsuitable, unreliable and so on. The plantation owners in the Natal colony, nevertheless, motivated for the Indian labour on the grounds that the local Africans were not reliable and not skilled in the agricultural sector. Newspaper advertisements went out in India requesting for labour supply using a attractive slogan—'gold for chillies!' The first shipment of Indian labour arrived in Durban in September 1860. In the next six years there were more than 6000 indentured workers were brought and in those six years already complaints about ill-treatment were reported and between 1866 and 1874 for nearly ten years the scheme was suspended (Thomas 1985: 25). When it was resumed in 1874, promises were made to protect their religious and cultural rights and the newspaper advertisements in India made it a point to refer to those promises. Between 1874 and 1911 when the immigration of the Indians was finally stopped, there were about 146000 new immigrants brought to Natal. These new immigrants included both the indentured Indians and the 'Passenger Indians' or the merchants who came at their own expense in pursuit of trade (Henning 1993: 56).

During this formative period between 1860 and 1911, Indian immigrants made tremendous efforts to assimilate and adopt the colonial master's culture, such as acquisition of English language skills, changing their dress code to western garb, the etiquette, and so on and so forth. All of these social and cultural changes were often due to the voluntary efforts by the immigrants to please the masters. Then there were forced attempts to make the immigrants to conform to the European way of life. The colonists forced the Indians to have their rituals and prayers conducted only on Sundays as it was the only day of rest. In an effort to further subjugate the immigrants, they introduced harsh punishments for lapses at work, restrictive measures, such as poll tax and penalties for becoming free from the indenture system (Gandhi

1972: 118; Meer 1980: 690)<sup>2</sup>. It is this double sided denial that is the hall mark of the Indian identity crisis. On the one hand, they denied their own language, culture to adopt and assimilate into the new society. On the other hand, the colonial masters denied their self-dignity by subjecting them to harsh measures in an effort to control them.

The Indian immigrants arrived in South Africa motivated by economic prospects. It is that dream to succeed in the new world that kept them going and made them to give up something very close to their heart, viz., their language and culture only to bemoan that loss some generations later. Wearing hats and conducting themselves like the European had become the standard for the Indian to achieve in order to conform. Their self-denial on the one hand, and the social denial by the dominant society on the other is not merely at the external changes of life-style, but it is the very thinking and consciousness that was affected, and as such it went to the very core of their being. In other words, assimilation into the dominant culture was seen as a window of opportunity to access the prosperity presented by the colonial economy.

Despite their many attempts to assimilate into the colonial culture and thereby to gain access to the economic prospects, life was not made easy for them. It did not take very long to realise that their dream of becoming economically prosperous was not only difficult but almost impossible in the face of harsh treatment from their employers. By the 1890s the Indian community had spread to Transvaal, Cape and Free State colonies. Many indentured labourers, upon completion of their contract, opted to become free

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<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that such poll taxes were not peculiar to the Indian labourers. It was part of an overall colonial approach to African labour in the colonies 'the intention being to force them [African labourers] into the wage sector, on the theory that African farmers were underemployed on their own land. Taxation of this kind began in Natal in 1849, and in time it spread to nearly the whole of colonial Africa' (Curtin et al. 1992:519). Text in paranthesis is mine. The amount of tax paid by the African labourers was far greater than that was charged to the Indian indentured labourers. For instance, in Transvaal the African labourers who worked and lived on the European farms had to pay 125 sterling pounds a year and those who worked on the European farms and lived elsewhere had to pay 25 sterling pounds a year (see Curtin et al. 1992:519).

and become self-employed in engaging themselves in various small scale farming activities, such as vegetable gardens. Some entered the service industry by becoming waiters, butlers, and so on. The relative progress made by the Indian community in various fields caused serious concern, mainly among the colonists as opposed to the plantation owners. While the colonists were afraid of economic competition from the Indians, mainly from the merchant classes, the plantation owners supported the continuation of the indenture system. The colonists, nevertheless, managed to force the government to impose annual penalty of three pounds if the indentured labourers did not return to India upon the completion of their contracts. According to the original agreement, the indentured labourers could either renew their contracts or return to India. But if they remain and become free of the contract, they were liable to pay the three pound penalty and one pound tax (Gandhi 1972:118; also see Meer 1980:690). Let alone the indentured Indians, even the merchant classes could not pay such penalty. The harsh laws on the one side and the brutal treatment on the farms on the other made the immigrants very desperate and frustrated.

Already by the end of the first decade of their arrival in Natal, the indentured Indians had begun building temples, shrines and other cultural centres to strengthen their community bonds and to fall back on their religious and cultural heritage in times of hardships. These religious and cultural centres became the places where they could go and find some solace and comfort. As I noted in an earlier study:

These early temples and schools seem to have become centres of religious and cultural activities. Reading of the scriptures, story telling and staging religious dramas became the activities of these centres where people could meet not only for social activities but also for religious activities. These centres seem to have provided the much needed sense of belonging as members of one Hindu community (Kumar 2000:18).

As I shall show later on, these cultural and religious centres became the tools for negotiating their new identity and claim their due space in the diverse landscape of South Africa.

The denial of self identity and value imposed upon themselves in an attempt to become part of the broader colonial game of political and economic expansion reduced the immigrants to the level of disposable commodity in the ever changing labour market. No wonder the colonists saw no permanent value for the Indian immigrant and hence their call to repatriate. All further immigration to Natal stopped in 1913 amidst the controversy about the working conditions of the indentured labourers. Those who remained in the colony and moved about the different provinces in search of economic prospects became people with no home. The government of India sent emissaries to negotiate their citizenship during the early part of the twentieth century but to no avail. They continued to be treated as non-citizens and only in 1961 in the life time of the third generation of the immigrants the issue of their citizenship was resolved (Bhana and Pachai 1984:240).

### ***The Displacement***

The displacement of the Indians from India due to colonial expansionism between 1860 and 1913 is euphemistically called 'indentured' labour system. In practice it was not very different from the displacement of people from Africa through slavery. As such, the phenomenon of displacement became the hallmark of the colonial period. It is an older form of movement of capital equipment from one place to another. In the context of modern globalisation people displace themselves voluntarily today and sell their skills in the larger global market place which has no national boundaries. A sense of displacement could also be experienced by the modern immigrant, even if it is not the same. Undoubtedly, the sense of displacement experienced by the mid nineteenth century immigrants in the context of colonial expansion is unparalleled by its characteristic of total helplessness in the foreign land and in the face of many unfriendly laws that militated against them.

The Indian immigrants in Natal became displaced by the lure of economic prospects first on their own accord to some extent. That is, they offered to come to Natal as indentured labourers. But once in the new land, they suffered several displacements as they were moved from farm to farm and colony to colony and finally in what became known as Group Areas Act. The Orange Free State became independent from the British Empire in 1854, Natal

progressed from being a colony to acquiring Responsible Government in 1893, Transvaal colony, Representative Government in 1907, The Cape Colony Representative Government in 1853 and later in 1872 became a Responsible Government (Curtin et al. 1992:312). Eventually South Africa as whole was declared Union of South Africa in 1911. In 1940 the Nationalists came to power and in 1950 they introduced the most infamous Group Areas Act that forced Indians again out of their homes and were resettled in several townships that were earmarked for the Indians under the apartheid principle of 'separate locations' for separate race groups. By this time Indians built a substantial number of temples and mosques and other cultural centres and when they were moved out of their locations, they left those places of cultural and religious significance. Even though some temples and mosques were moved from those previous locations, some were left in tact, such as the Second River Temple at Cato Manor, Sufi Mosque at Riverside Road in Durban. Thus, the Indians may have been moved out of their previous locations, but their landmarks, such as temples and mosques with mango trees in those complexes were left intact.

When the Indians moved to the new areas, such as Chatsworth and Phoenix, they began to engage in a vigorous activity of building their religious and cultural centres again, only this time with much more conscious attempt to stay. The 1961 ruling by the government to give Indians the citizenship status (Pachai 1979:57) and the subsequent establishment of the infamous House of Delegates in 1984 for Indian affairs under the new system of government known as the Tricameral Parliamentary System (Motwani 1989:33) enabled the Indian community to deepen their roots into the South African soil and to begin to assert themselves as a people. They used the system and began to become prosperous in business, service sector and in various fields, such as education, law and medicine.

### ***Resistance and Readjustment***

The narrative of the Indian resistance to the various forms of denial and displacement perhaps began quietly when the first batch of indentured labourers protested at the brutal treatment meted out to them on the farms. The fact that already by 1874 the 'Protector of Indian Immigrants' (Law 19 and 20) was established (Henning 1993:54) shows that the promises made by the

European farmers were not fully delivered and that there were many irregularities in the system. Coupled with the brutal treatment on the farms, the anti-Indian sentiment was visible by the 1890s. This anti-Indian sentiment was due not only to the relative economic success that the Indian made after becoming free from the indenture system, but more importantly due to the growing commercial activities of the 'free passengers' or the merchant class. (For more discussion on the merchant class politics see Swan 1985.)

Gandhi's passive resistance movement needs really to be located in the context of the merchant class resistance to the European colonists' control of trade as Swan rightly points out in her work (Swan 1985). Of course, the granting of 'Responsible Government' status to Natal colony in 1893 assisted the European colonists to introduce the Act 17 of 1895 to repatriate the Indians (Motwani 1989:15; Brain 1989:261). Gandhi arrived in Natal in 1893 and was quickly involved in the merchant resistance politics. Being a victim himself of racial discrimination when he was thrown off the train in which he was travelling, he was able to understand the harsh treatment to which both the indentured labourers and the merchant class Indians were subjected to. Even though his immediate call was to assist the merchant classes in their resistance against the European colonists' oppressive laws, Gandhi needed the broader support of the indentured labourers as well in order to make it a common Indian problem rather than something exclusive to a section of the community. The role that Gandhi played in the resistance politics was quite crucial, especially in the period between 1907 and 1910 in Transvaal area in dealing with the oppressive laws against the Indian immigrants (Kumar 2000: 5). It is also about the same time that the Black Africans were also beginning to assert themselves for their political and economic rights. The year 1912 saw the founding of the African National Congress (ANC) and the subsequent leaders of the ANC found inspiration from the resistance politics of Gandhi, especially in his passive resistance movement. There is, however, no evidence to show that Gandhi was directly involved in the struggle of the African communities. But the successors in the leadership of the Natal Indian Congress that Gandhi helped found during his time in South Africa did forge stronger ties with the African leaders in their common struggle against the colonial domination and the white minority rule.

It would be missing the point if we do not pay attention to the role played by religious institutions, their leaders and their symbols and religious



centres in the overall resistance against the colonial domination in South Africa. The sheer presence of a substantial number of religious centres, temples, mosques and other institutions of the Indian community throughout South Africa even by the end of the nineteenth century needs to be seen as a major social resistance to the colonial oppression. The temples, mosques and the various religious centres built by the Indian community during the early years as an escape from the oppression of the colonists gradually became centres of resistance. First, they changed the landscape of South Africa for good by entrenching non-European culture in the midst of the dominant European culture. Even when the Nationalist government, under the Group Areas Act, removed the Indians from their former locations to designated townships (Chatsworth, Phoenix and so on) they could not totally change the landscape. Some of the oldest and prominent temples and mosques stayed in the former Indian locations even after they were occupied by the whites (e.g., Sufee Sahib Mosque in Durban North, Cato Manor temple). The Grey street in Durban, which cut right through the heart of Smith and West streets, had to be kept intact with all its Indian business. The cultural impact on the Durban landscape by the Grey street Indian set up is undoubtedly remarkable. Thus, all of this mere presence of the Indian centres of culture and religion was in itself a social and cultural resistance that enabled the Indian immigrant to later both draw from them as well as use them to lobby for their religious and cultural rights in South Africa.

Much of resistance discourse tends to focus more on the revolutionary politics and ignores the more silent resistance that people can offer through performance of religious rituals, establishment of religious centres, insistence of their languages vis à vis European languages for communication and various forms of the arts and culture. The role that mother tongues of Indian immigrants played in the days of the colonial rule and later during the apartheid era has been well documented. The role that the Ramayana and other Hindi poetry, the Tamil and Telugu religious songs played in instilling self pride and national pride in their mother country India is remarkable (Lutchman and Shukla). At a time when the community was faced with the oppressive social system, religious rituals and cultural centres have provided the Indian immigrant a sense of solidarity, identity and community (Kumar 2000:211). Much dependence on vernacular poetry, songs, music and films by the Indian immigrants had to do with the fact that they could derive comfort and also find

social and personal identity in those forms of culture. Most certainly they provided opportunities to resist the cultural domination by the colonists and later by the white culture during the apartheid.

Nearly a century and half had gone past since the Indian immigrant made his home in South Africa. Starting from Gandhi and during the apartheid period many prominent Indians aligned themselves with the Black African struggle for freedom. Many went to jail and even to exile. When the apartheid government finally came to an end in 1994, many Indians played vital role not only in the negotiation process for a new constitution, but also served in prominent cabinet positions in the new government and have contributed enormously to the emerging and developing democracy in South Africa. The new constitution has provided for the recognition of Indian cultural and linguistic rights and practices. Indian customary marriages have been given due legal recognition, which they did not enjoy in the days of apartheid. The Indian immigrant is no longer an immigrant but has acquired a unique status of being a South African Indian. He is proud to be South African and also proud of his Indian heritage. It has become a moot point whether Indians in South Africa should consider themselves South African first and Indian second or the other way around. When the Government of India made an offer of dual citizenship to South African Indians, much controversy arose with most people criticising the double standard of the Indians. That is, on the one side wanting to be South African and wanting to be Indian on the other. Most ordinary Indians tended to reject the Government of India offer to take up dual citizenship. For them citizenship was a political act whereas being culturally proud of their Indian culture is a natural sense of who they are and where they came from. As the Indians, after so much of struggle in South Africa, continue to readjust to the changing social and political environment of South Africa, they need to demonstrate their dual identity of being socially and politically South African and culturally Indian. In this readjustment process they need to resist the temptation of totally denying their own unique identity of their past and at the same time become genuinely South African. Whether in South Africa or anywhere else, the immigrant community has to continuously go through this resistance and readjustment processes.

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