

Foreword:

Indians in South Africa

Ela Gandhi

Many may look upon the title, 'Indians in South Africa', as though we are referring to a homogeneous group when we speak of Indians in South Africa. Far from it. A deeper look will reveal that there are those of Indian origin who arrived in South Africa even before the 1860 indentured workers arrived. These were slaves captured by colonial powers, and brought to this country. Then there were the 1860 indentured workers from India, and other indentured workers from other parts in the East, who arrived thereafter. These were lured to come to South Africa only to find themselves being sold to various people for various types of menial jobs, and remained enslaved to the purchaser with little if any rights for five years. Thereafter they could return to India, or remain and be re-indentured or try to eke out a living under stringent British colonial legal conditions. Both these groups struggled under terrible conditions and the many stories of their sufferings, trials and tribulations have been written about extensively in many books and articles. So, I will not repeat them here.

In addition to these two groups, there were Indians who had some money and came to South Africa to do business. Again, they had great difficulty to build businesses under colonial rule, but also great resilience and foresight which saw them being able to survive and educate their children. Others came as professionals to provide a service to local people. They too, had many challenges in terms of the racist colonial policies and the legalised racist attitude that prevailed in the country at the time. Nevertheless, through hardship, they toiled, so that their children could obtain education.

The key to the initial social development of the Indian groupings, therefore, was education. Many schools were built by people of Indian descent through their own hard work and savings. These include the Sastri College and the M.L. Sultan Technikon among many others. Both provided vital education and skills training. But there were also many primary schools that were built as

government aided schools. Among the early ones, was the Natest School that still exists in Phoenix Township today. In addition, many skilled teachers provided private education to the many youth who were unable to gain admission to the few high schools that existed at the time. This was known as the Congress School and admission was free, and voluntary service was provided by a number of dedicated teachers. So, clearly, education was an important aspect of life of the community that originated from India.

The next generations began to prosper as their skills and education levels rose, but the limited scope of employment and lack of access to some jobs reserved for whites only, prevented some from accessing employment of choice or even studying for highly qualified jobs such as engineering. Some with great talent obtained bursaries to travel overseas where they were able to train as well as get employment. These were South Africans of Indian origin who migrated and continue to live in various countries of the world. But a large number stayed on in the country while some became engrossed in the struggle for liberation, sacrificing careers and family life. Some died in the struggle. Others suffered many years of incarceration together with fellow comrades. Yet, they remained loyal to the struggle and free future South Africa.

Proportionately a large number of people of Indian origin were involved in the struggle for liberation. But of course, as with every community, there were those who became government agents and played a nefarious role in tracking, torturing and eliminating people who were participating in the liberation struggle. As in the July uprising in 2021, there were some Indians who did show racist tendencies and were violent, while by far, the majority of the South African Indian population was peaceful but also fearful. Despite the fear, evidence indicates that there were Indians who assisted those who were wounded and took them for medical attention and dropped them off closer to their homes, fearful of entering the townships where the population was entirely of another race group. These are the effects of racially segregated townships in which South Africans were forced to live since colonial times. As effects of history, we are compelled to continue to live in these segregated conditions.

Culturally, and in terms of religion, there was a strong effort made by our forefathers to keep the Indian traditions and languages alive, as well as the various religions they belonged to. At great personal sacrifice, people-built temples, churches, and mosques and worshipped in their various traditions. Like other South African communities, the Indian community too, is diverse in terms of language and religion, and other stratifications related to class, caste, and

gender. As with the Christian faith, the Hindu and Islamic faith have different denominations.

In the last twenty-five or more years, the centrality of the English language as the de facto South African lingua franca, has resulted in other languages being side-lined, and so today, the youth mainly speak English. Very few read, write or understand their own traditional languages. In addition, no substantial effort has been made by many to learn the isiZulu language of the majority of the people in the KwaZulu-Natal province, either by the people or by the government. This is a factor that further alienates one group of people, whose mother tongue is isiZulu, and those who only know English. Similarly, the traditional Indian religious heritages have become a less important aspect of the life of the youth in most religions, with the exception of the Islamic faiths, where the traditions are still being followed rigidly by all, and handed on from generation to generation.

So, in the first number of years post-1994, there was recognition of the contribution of the people of Indian descent in the national liberation struggle, and a variety of forms of anti-apartheid activism in the local communities. As a result, many Indians were appointed in many governance positions in the public and private sectors. But, over the last number of years, the numbers have dwindled. Even so, a process is unfolding where the racial boundaries between the different groupings in KZN are being blurred, as we see more and more cross-cultural marriages and the children of such marriages following their own traditions. Gandhiji, many years ago, had predicted in a speech at the Johannesburg YMCA on 18 May 1908:

If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen?

But, while this was said in 1908, since then, many divisive strategies were adopted by the then colonial and alter apartheid governments to create a wedge among the different race groups. One such system of separation, was the group areas act, through which the race groups were separated into different geographic areas in which each race group was placed like pawns on a chess board. They were not allowed to attend schools together and in many other ways contact between the races was minimised, if not prohibited. Any intimate relationship between white and black was prohibited by law and was regarded

as immoral. Education was so strangely racist, that every child became aware of race from an early primary school level, where children were taught about the different race groups in South Africa. Being differentially allocated to the different race groups, white schools received proportionately the lion's share of resources available, which in turn caused additional forms of alienation and antagonism.

This was manifested in the 1949 riots between Indian and African communities. This was soon after the Nationalist party came into power in the 1948 elections. As in July 1921, the security services failed to protect the population and killing, looting and inciting to violence, were allowed to continue with impunity. It was the African and Indian leadership of Chief Albert Luthuli and Dr Monty Naicker and others who went from area to area addressing the communities to stop the mayhem, that brought about a calm after the storm. It was this initiative that brought an end to the carnage that was taking place. Again in 1985, the African community in eNanda was deprived of water, roads, schools and municipal services. Outbreaks of cholera and typhoid were experienced and when these infections were carried by workers to the white areas, then only did the municipality intervene by bringing tankers of water for the people and attending to their health needs, albeit half-heartedly and also not fully committed to the refuse removal from the area.

While this was happening in eNanda, adjacent to eNanda, the Phoenix Township was developing, providing housing for the Indian community displaced by the floods in the Springfield area where the uMngeni river swelled and broke its banks causing hundreds of Indians living on the banks in informal housing to be affected. Their homes and belongings were destroyed by the flood. The housing was small and congested, but comprised of bricks and tiles, giving the appearance of affluence. The community also had tap water and sewer toilets in their homes. They had tarred roads and government schools built by the House of Delegates, comprising of Indians, which was part of the Tricameral parliament (1984 – 1994).

Despite there being African residents residing in eNanda too, some unknown forces began spreading resentment towards the Indians who were living in eNanda, many of whom have lived there for generations. So, over 5 days in August 1985, over 10 000 Indians were forcibly made to flee from their homes and sought shelter in community halls in Phoenix. The apartheid security forces were conspicuously absent. The House of Delegates again intervened, and built homes for these internally displaced refugees, and accommodated

some, while others found new homes elsewhere.

And then, as is well-known, in July 2021 there was a spate of violent and looting incidents throughout KwaZulu-Natal, that also spread to parts of Gauteng. Like everywhere else in the Province of KZN, there was no police protection and people were forced to protect themselves. Indians in Phoenix, Chatsworth and elsewhere too, had to fend for themselves. Once more, even though we were liberated, no protection was provided to the community. A result was that some angry attacks did take place and some lives were lost. An estimated 350 people were reported to have died and there has been as yet no account of how or where they died. The 35 people who died in Phoenix became the centre of attention on social media. In the commentary of some politicians, and in some reports in mainline newspapers, Indians were accused of being racist and instigating violence. The community was once more made to feel vulnerable and terrified. Those with means, were able to seek shelter elsewhere. But the rest of the 800 thousand-odd families in these predominantly Indian residential areas were left to their own means.

South Africa is liberated. Indians played a role alongside others in this liberation. The liberation movement spoke of building a South Africa which belongs to all those who live in it. Yet there is a small yet powerful faction that continues to raise racial, ethnic, and exclusionary nationalist innuendos causing uncertainty and fear among vulnerable groups such as refugees, immigrants, and Indians who were born and lived in South Africa for generations and who have never had the opportunity to even visit another country outside South Africa. This is their only home. The patriotic grandmothers who had faced gun toting police during the liberation struggle now have to live in fear of their's and their children's lives.

It is important therefore to tell the story of Indian South Africans, and that some of these important factors, also be expressed. While there are stories of some who have been able to achieve much after the liberation and the opening up of opportunities for them to excel in their field of expertise, the stories of being mugged, assaulted and even killed – irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, or class –, are a blot on the emerging democratic order in South Africa.

These realities are not only experienced by the South African Indian community but sadly by all communities. eNanda is said to have the highest crime rate and rate of gender-based violence in the country. So, this violence is not limited to racially based violence, there is xenophobic violence, criminal violence and also gender-based violence that are plaguing our country and is a

Ela Gandhi

blot on the high regard South Africa once enjoyed in the world. Now is the time when South African Indians must unite with peace loving people of all the other race groups in our country and abroad, in order to turn things around and bring about peace and prosperity in this country which we know as our motherland. There is much to do in order to protect our country against all forms of violence, to protect it from environmental degradation and to assist all our people to be able to lead a better life.

This is a challenge we all face. Like Martin Luther King Jnr. said, in the last chapter of his famous book of 1968, *Where do we Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*

Our hope for creative living in this world house that we have inherited lies in our ability to re-establish the moral ends of our lives in personal character and social justice. Without this spiritual and moral reawakening, we shall destroy ourselves in the misuse of our instruments (p. 183).

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