

# **The Politics of Belonging: Socialisation and Identity among Children of Indian Origin in Secondary Schools in Durban**

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## **Introduction**

As the era of racial and ethnic separateness (apartheid) in South Africa moves further into the annals of history, the new era of integration is being steadily entrenched. While apartheid was internationally condemned and popularly opposed inside the country, a *laissez faire* type of integration is gradually replacing this system of social rigidity. Apartheid was an exaggerated form of political, economic and social insulation that forbade racial intermingling and sanctioned the existence of separate amenities and living spaces through legislation (Group Areas Act of 1950). However abhorrent apartheid was, it should not be construed that the majority of people had a natural aversion for maintaining social boundaries and a natural inclination to intermingle. In reality, people in all kinds of heterogeneous situations have a proclivity towards demonstrating bonds that emerge out of a sense of 'sameness', as documented in a wide range of literature (Enloe 1973; Levine & Campbell 1972; Eriksen 1993; Miall 1994; Alcock 1994; Pajic 1994; Pries 2000; Saporito & Lareau 1999; Westwood & Phizacklea 2000). Among these references Saporito and Lareau's (1999) work shows the closest relationship to the data that this paper presents. Their fieldwork, carried out in a densely populated urban school district in the north-eastern United States, supplied them with compelling evidence that race, particularly among Whites, is a powerful force in guiding family choices for school selection. While their paper addresses conceptual and theoretical issues, the evidence is not presented within a theoretical framework—an issue upon which this paper places emphasis.

Two respected authorities on migration and nationhood, Westwood and Phizacklea, focus on the disorienting effects of space and time which migration creates, on how migration affects our understanding of national affiliations and the nation state and on the impact of cross national economic relations on everyday life.

The nexus of their contribution lies in their attempt to show how people who cross borders and live increasingly diasporic lives still seek to recreate semblances of their places of origin in order to engender a 'politics of belonging'. Although not covering transnational issues, this paper follows in the spirit of Westwood and Phizacklea's theory of the politics of belonging, in an exercise that illustrates how the end of South Africa's era of apartheid does not necessarily imply the end of insular boundaries based on race. The paper is produced out of interviews, particularly with standard sixes (Grade eights) from what used to be exclusively Indian and White schools during apartheid. The choice of grade is deliberate in that it is from this stage onwards that children begin to determine their career paths and become more conscious of their sense of belonging. Through interviews, observations and conversational analysis, this paper presents data that reflect upon the mindsets of middle class standard six Indian pupils and the values that they imbibe and play out in their lives at school and at home. Conventional categories of race—White, Indian, Coloured and African—are also used here for similar reasons to those of Fedderke and de Kadt (2000:260) who said:

We consider it important to record the information under these contrived rubrics since the system of racial estates and statutory race classification had profound implications for the administration of educational matters and for the distribution of educational resources and opportunities.

Fedderke and de Kadt's paper illustrates, through history and statistical analysis, how the educational process was strongly affected by racial factors. But their paper does not focus on contemporary social factors in schools, nor does it illustrate how this history has influenced contemporary patterns of socialisation and how it will impact on the future.

### **Expectations and Parental Control**

The transition from primary to secondary school among middle class Indian families in Durban is often accompanied by a carefully thought out process that is guided by opinions and advice from family and friends. Embedded in these initiatives are conscious efforts to selectively choose environments that are consistent with middle class norms of school character, reputation, performance in student pass rates and—very importantly—the dominant racial category in the school. Very often such class preferences are closely linked to racial preferences as well. It has become state policy that parents should send their children to the schools that are closest to their places of residence. However, this policy has not been followed since its inception—

particularly by White and to a lesser extent by Indian parents. While White parents ignored the policy and insisted that their children be admitted to traditionally White schools, many Indian parents have also made concerted efforts to avoid sending their children to schools where there has been evidence of increasing numbers of African pupils. In formerly White dominated Group Areas that were close to Indian dominated suburbs, which had schools with mainly Indian pupils, White parents refused to enrol their children there. This situation offers an important challenge to anthropologists and other social scientists that seek to understand how the racial identities of the past are reproduced by patterns of socialisation among teenage school going children.

Expectations of children by middle class Indian parents in Durban are entrenched through generally strict forms of social control that place emphasis on various issues. The common issues are the type of schools that are attended, the subjects that are chosen and the levels at which they are taken (higher or standard grades), the choice of the children's friends and their patterns of socialisation after school hours, as well as during weekends and holidays. In the first three issues emphasis is on gaining control of children in the hope that they will make careful choices for entry into tertiary education. High school life is widely dominated by vigilant parental management of children's time, especially with respect to school homework and extra tuition in subjects relevant to children's tertiary career choices. At least five subjects appeared most frequently in responses to questions about current performance and future goals with career opportunities in mind. Mathematics, physics, technical drawing, computer science, economics and accountancy were the most widely taken subjects—which are effectively building blocks towards high earning careers. The types of infrastructural development in many middle class areas do not cater for reasonable access to public transport between homes and schools. For this reason parents' motor vehicles or lift clubs are the means by which children are ferried to their schools. This dependency relationship in transport has two advantages for parents who monitor their children's movements closely. First, it is an important control mechanism that ensures that children attend school and return home within expected times and, second, it allows parents to monitor homework and provide their children with personal attention.

The choice of companionship is also closely monitored and structured, largely around gender and age groups. Cross gender relationships are encouraged to remain at the level of acquaintanceships and children are expected to socialise with friends of their age groups. Friends are often from within the neighbourhoods and the same schools, although contact after school hours is minimal and mostly non-existent. Attendance at birthday parties and sports events, though infrequent, comprised the most widely cited situations that permit a measure of casual

socialising. These events, shared with school and district friends, occurred no more than five times in the year, usually during weekends, and chaperoned by parents.

### **School Choices and Mind Sets**

There are three types of schools, where the primary determinant for entry is the fees, from which South Africans have to choose:

- private schools that may or may not require boarding and are priced at levels that are only attainable by families with upper-middle/upper class incomes;
- previously all-white schools that converted to Model C (commonly referred to as 'fee paying schools'), where fees were substantially raised and state subsidy is reduced to 75% of the schools' requirements—thereby curbing the pupil intake and restricting class sizes; and
- totally state subsidised schools that have significantly reduced school fees.

The options for most South Africans, including people of Indian origin, are therefore restricted. However, there is a point of convergence generally in the types of subjects that are taught in schools. While students have choices to make from the subjects that are offered and in which they may choose to complete their schooling, the choices are generally standardised throughout the country. In the cases where pupils aim for tertiary education it is usually in universities, technikons or technical colleges. The point of divergence, however, emerges in several factors, viz. the resources in schools—especially computers, laboratories and sports facilities, commitment by school managements and teachers to their daily work and the environments within which the schools are located. Complaints of varying magnitudes have surfaced several times during the course of this research, which were counter-checked in varying ways to establish their veracity. The common complaint about Indian dominated schools was that teacher morale and commitment has been eroding ever since transformation of education began in 1994, when Indian teachers were made to feel insecure about their jobs in urban areas—threatened by the state to be relocated in distant rural areas. While there was a general upholding of the fabric of norms and responsibilities in education, the commitment was restricted to academic responsibilities only. But the perception of behaviour of pupils and the quality of education did not rank as high as those of White dominated schools. Sport in Indian schools, largely through the lack of facilities and reduced school fees, is not taken as seriously as in White dominated schools. The comparatively exorbitant school fees in these White dominated schools permits the hiring of coaches for certain codes of sports on a part time basis, thereby relieving the pressure on

teachers to carry out these tasks. In Indian dominated schools, teachers are apathetic towards spending more time in schools than is required for classroom work, especially if they are not getting paid for it. Their justification for minimal interest in sport is also influenced by the political environment in which they function. In response, an Indian principal believed that Indian parents' decisions in education are reflective of the situation that Indians in general find themselves in in South Africa:

The Indian in this country must first fight for survival—and his survival lies in his/her ability to focus on the best possible education he can get to enter the job market at an advantage over the other race groups. Giving equal weight to sport and education is a luxury we cannot afford in this climate of affirmative action. The Whites are in control economically, so they are creating space for their own kind, and the Africans are getting the best positions whether they qualify for it or not. So for our children to make it in the world they must excel in their academic work and just give sport a secondary position (Interview with principal, 13 February 2001).

Distinct differences between the standard sixes in predominantly White schools and predominantly Indian schools emerge when their knowledge about sports and sports stars is discussed. Pupils of the former category of schools better knew the details and dynamics of games such as cricket, rugby, hockey and swimming—a tradition that was established during apartheid. Much of this is attributed to the fact that sports in these schools are taken with a similar level of seriousness to academia. At least three out of the five school days in the week are dedicated to sport after the regular six-hour classroom work—either in practice or in competition with neighbouring schools. Pupils' interests and competitiveness in their chosen codes of sport were substantially higher than in the Indian dominated schools. The orientation they receive in former White schools contributes towards a significantly broader range of experiences and preparedness for life's challenges. With Olympic size swimming pools and a minimum of three well maintained sports fields and equipment, pupils are provided with a conducive atmosphere to engage in their sport preferences. On the contrary, Indian dominated schools have minimal space and equipment for sports in their fields. Neither principals nor teachers have the same level of enthusiasm to encourage their pupils to indulge in sport on a regular basis. Most if not all pupils leave the school premises once lessons are over.

However, one common point of convergence among the pupils from both sets of schools was the way in which international cricket was followed. Most pupils, like the adults at international matches, tended to support teams in a complex manner. Support for South Africa's international team was conditional upon which

country they played at particular times. For instance, a match between India and South Africa inevitably splits support along racial lines. People of Indian origin tend to support India, particularly Hindus, while Muslims often tend to remain ambivalent about the match. The reverse is the situation in a match between Pakistan and South Africa. South Africa's history of White privilege and exclusion of Africans, Indians and Coloureds from competitive sports is still a point of reference and a factor that continues to feed into the inclination towards ethnic and racial exclusiveness. It is around such mindsets that the issues of ethnic and racial boundaries are overtly and emotively articulated.

### **Adaptation and Integration**

Exploring the characteristics that determine standard sixes' adaptation and integration into high school life requires an intimate understanding of family values—determined largely by religious, linguistic and class status, minority fears in South Africa and the history of the racially based politics of exclusion. These factors require insider based participant observation that is also based on covert methods of extracting information that would otherwise not be revealed. Although highly contested and controversial, the covert method of extracting information tends to produce information in a spontaneous and uninhibited manner. However, the covert method was initially often unintended in that the groups of people among whom I often found myself took me to be of similar orientation to them. It was through silent participation in conversations and witnessing actions at an intimate level as part of a group that I ascertained how children were advised and prepared to enter into high school. Their orientation from their domestic domains is a complex mental preparation that converges towards creating a symbiotic relationship among recognising their individuality, meeting family obligations, keeping up the family tradition of hard work or commendable scholarship and taking these further through educational achievements. These are generally lessons of oral communication, frequently repeated and meant to inspire children, instil in them a sense of ethnic and racial identity and history and prepare them for schooling in mixed racial environments. References to the hardships of grandparents, parents and Indians as indentured labourers, the nobility of their religious practices and their frequent encounters with racial prejudice—past and present—are intended to sustain their social insularity, levels of determination and achievement.

The mindset that is created in this type of process is carefully manufactured through the interaction with friends, relatives and other Indian pupils, in order to adapt to and integrate into junior high school, but also to do so with cautious and selective minds. Their preparation for integration into a mixed schooling

environment is not to enter into a racial melting pot, dissolving their ethnic or racial identities, but to help them adapt to competitive situations, which is necessary in a country where post-apartheid transformation is still based on racially determined criteria. While Whites were politically and economically privileged for more than three hundred years, Africans have done so now and in turn aspire to economic domination. This leaves minorities such as people of Indian origin and Coloureds (people of mixed descent) in a perpetual state of uncertainty. The situation with affirmative action is that although in law it caters for the three previously disadvantaged groups *viz.* Africans, Coloureds and Indians, preference for jobs and entry into rewarding medical fields of study is given mainly to Africans—thereby recreating another sense of racial exclusivity in the era of post-apartheid transformation.

### **From Junior High to Senior High School: Prospects for Interracial Friendships**

Collection of data for this aspect of pupil relationships was first based upon observation over two week periods in 2000 and 2001 at five schools during the two breaks that pupils are given during a normal day. While socialisation during these periods was relaxed and casual, the clusters and groups of pupils were distinctly racially based. In the three predominantly White schools where there was a smaller population of Indian pupils that was however bigger than that of African pupils, short periods of jocular interaction occurred between White and Indian or African pupils. But this was restricted to an exchange of a few words rather than a prolonged period of casual interaction. There was more frequent interaction between African and Indian pupils than between White pupils and either of the two other groups. In the two predominantly Indian schools, where there was a complete absence of White pupils but a small number of African pupils, the pattern of socialisation was similar in that African and Indian pupils also socialised separately. Here too the atmosphere presented an outward sense of the congeniality expected of school environments. But after more frequent contact and through more intensive interviewing, pupils tended to speak more openly about their reservations about freer racial intermingling and the social distance they still tended to feel from their White and African counterparts. Their predominant exposure to life was still entrenched in family based values, adherence to their respective religions (Hinduism, Christianity and Islam) and acquired tastes that had a particularly strong ethnic basis. Food was often a point of reference to the kind of company they kept. While Hindu and Muslim children were being brought up on mainly oriental cuisine, Christian children—particularly White, were being brought up differently. Not having lunch with White children for instance was also a deliberate avoidance relation in that many swapped and shared

lunches. To Hindu and Muslim children doing so with Christian/White children meant being exposed to eating beef, pork and food that is not halal, a warning that most children claimed to heed from their parents.

It was after acquiring these preliminary data that more extensive and intensive interviewing took place. Although students from standard six (Grade eights) were the main focus, some discussion took place with pupils from the higher grades to cross check information and test for inconsistencies and variations. Socialisation among pupils was generally age based—with most of them drawing their companionship from within their classes or standards. They mostly entered into high school with friends from primary schools or from their neighbourhoods. In a sense this reinforced the pattern of socialisation among them—they stuck to whom they knew best. However, the pattern of racially based clusters of friends was evident throughout the standards/age groups in the schools. It was apparent that pupils were not inclined to move out of their social groups or to ignore race as a factor in their relationships. They were making conscious decisions about whom they socialised with and when they might ignore boundaries. For instance, the greatest amount of inter-racial contact occurred in an effortless and spontaneous manner. A number of children conceded that they befriended many people across the colour lines and that sport had been one of the areas in which a reasonable amount of camaraderie had been able to develop.

The notion of difference and 'us and them' is often reinforced by the way in which teaching staff and school governing bodies are constituted. In the predominantly White schools staff were still predominantly White, while in the predominantly Indian schools staff were still predominantly Indian. The absence of mixed staff perpetuated the racially based perceptions of schools as either Indian or White. One way of ascertaining when these perceptions rise to the fore among the pupils was to analyse their reactions in times of disappointment with their teachers. Indian pupils from the former White schools still referred to their teachers as 'those White teachers' when they showed dissatisfaction over personal grievances. In the former Indian schools, however, the Indian pupils did not use such racial tags in times of their disappointment, although the descriptions of their disliked teachers were no less aggressive, especially when a teacher was characterised as lazy, uncaring and/or incompetent. While Indian pupils in the former White schools were either unsure or ambivalent about having Indian teachers to teach them, Indian parents were still generally adamant that the approach of the Indian teachers to teaching was preferable. Most parents drew from their own experiences in their childhood days and recalled with nostalgia the quality of education they had received. But this was often coupled with their awareness of the deteriorating conditions and low morale in state sponsored schools, of which Indian dominated



schools were a part. Their attraction to the White dominated schools lay in the discipline, resources and positive publicity that they received. But it was also clear that it was a status issue to send their children to these schools, although none admitted it. In the Indian schools, however, despite disappointments expressed about teachers, the pupils were generally happy with the *status quo* and more ambivalent about changing their teacher composition than their Indian counterparts in the previously White schools. Complaints about teachers were sometimes strong and consistent from a range of interviews that were carried out independently between individuals or groups. At other times pupils' criticisms of teachers were found to be unfounded and often lay in their own apathetic attitudes towards work in school. Their pride and sense of belonging to their schools emerged when pupils from former Indian schools compared their matric results (Grade twelve) with those of more prestigious White dominated schools. Apart from the pupils of some private schools, who write an independent international matric examination, all South African matric pupils write the same public examination in all the provinces. Although one of the Indian dominated schools had only one matric pupil with outstanding results (6 distinctions) for the year 2000, and the neighbouring Indian dominated school had five such pupils, they felt an equal sense of pride of belonging to their schools. These students immediately assumed the position of role models and provided a basis for comparison with the White dominated schools where the fees were significantly higher and the facilities in greater abundance and of significantly better quality. They provided a platform from which academic achievements could be measured, advertised and touted for future enrolments. Performance in academia and discipline are the two issues that have risen to the point of respectability in Indian schools.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Future Patterns of Socialising and Non-racialism in South Africa**

The increased racial integration in schools since the general election in 1994 marked the end of an era of White privilege and segregation in all aspects of South Africa's political, economic, social and cultural lifestyles. Through the more than forty years of institutionalised and legislated forms of separate existence, the country's four major racial groups lived and mainly accepted the boundaries imposed upon them, notwithstanding their own boundaries spawned out of their own religious, cultural and domestic preferences. The choices of schools by parents and the patterns of companionship in schools, after school hours and during weekends and holidays provide a strong symbolic message about the sense of belonging among children in schools. The information reflects consistency with Saporito and Lareau's (1999)

account of the multiple dimensions of race in framing educational choice in a densely populated multiracial suburb in the north-eastern USA. It simultaneously fits into Westwood's and Phizacklea's paradigm of the 'politics of belonging', though the circumstances of our respective researches are different. While the focus has been restricted to children of Indian origin, the exclusiveness they portrayed was symptomatic of the broader pattern of socialisation by children of other racial categories. Collectively, their patterns of socialisation were symbolic of the inclination by people of similar orientations to remain distinct. It resonates with Gellner's (1983) point about the situation in Turkey—that the attempt by the Ottoman Empire at nation building did not lead to a common consciousness. The seven major groups, viz. the Turk, Greek, Slav, Arab, Armenian, Syrian and Kurd, are as distinct today as they were when nation building first began in Turkey. Likewise, the Chicago School's research into state sponsored programs for racial equality showed that race was as strong in the 1990s as it had been in the early 1900s (Eriksen 1993). People of African origin in the USA still maintain an identity that is intended to demonstrate racial differences between themselves and other racial and ethnic populations, despite the fact that reference to them changed over the years from Negro, to Black, to African American.

The new era of fair and equal access to state resources is actually meant to erode racial and ethnic biases and confront them with the apparent intention of destroying them. However, out of sheer necessity, transformation in South Africa has to continue to address the issue of race by allocating more resources to those deemed to be the most disadvantaged segment in the country viz. Africans. Herein lies the contradiction in the processes accompanying transformation, where contestations for resources emerge also from the rank and file of those classified Indian and Coloured who have arguably been equally marginalised and whose residential areas and facilities have been equally deficient in resources. While this situation applies mainly to the working and underclasses, it draws solidarity from the middle and upper classes of the previously designated race groups, reinforcing the proclivity towards a sense of belonging. So while affordability and proximity to schools have theoretically become the new points of access, they are vitiated by tendencies towards in-group sentiments. The end of the old order not only implies the death of the repressive past, but also the birth of new fears and anxieties about protecting ethnic and racial boundaries. Increased integration is one of the biggest threats to the survival of such boundaries and it therefore generates new forms of adaptation to maintain a sense of belonging among people of common origin—as grade eight pupils exhibit in their patterns of socialisation.

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