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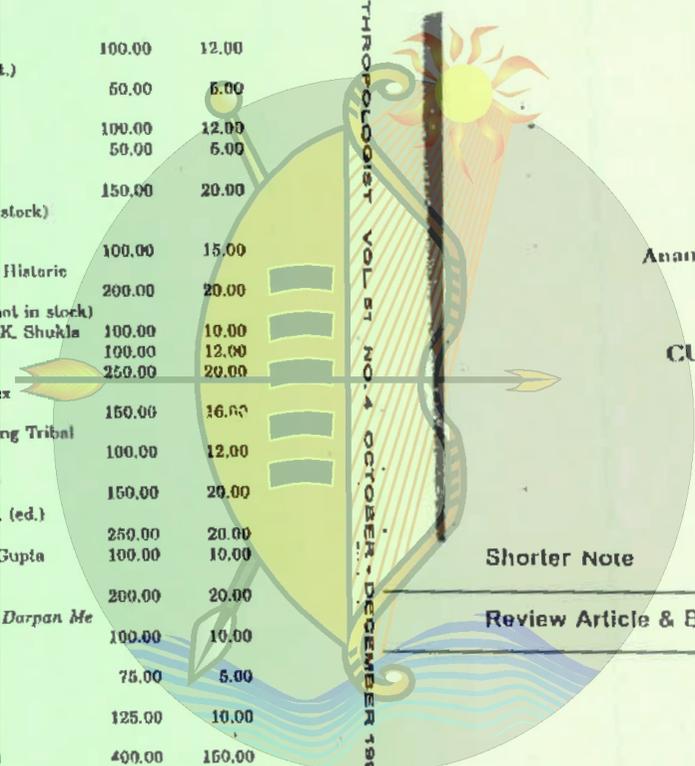
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THE EASTERN ANTHROPOLOGIST

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THE EASTERN ANTHROPOLOGIST VOL. 13 NO. 4 OCTOBER - DECEMBER 1988



Anand Singh

CULTURAL POLITICS AND IDENTITY AMONG INDIANS
IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

Shorter Note

Review Article & Book Reviews



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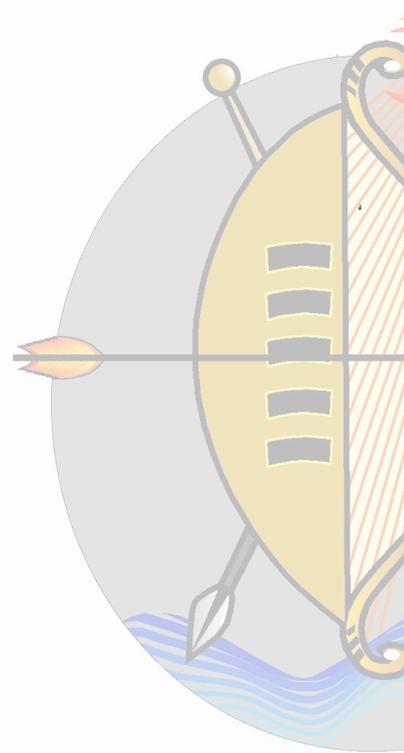
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Anand Singh

CULTURAL POLITICS AND IDENTITY AMONG INDIANS IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA



The widespread study of Indian immigrants in the different colonies since indentureship in the nineteenth century can be broken down into several easily identifiable paradigms. Among these are the cultural persistence model used in Trinidad by Klass (1961); adaptationist perspectives in South Africa, Malaysia and Fiji, respectively by Meer (1969), Jain (1970) and Mayer (1973); Furnival's (1948) plural society model in the context of colonial society of South East Asia; Jayawardena's (1980) approach in Guyana and Fiji through emphasis on ethnicity; and Drummond's (1980) cultural continuum model. Each have their host countries. A common tendency among the writers has been to treat the Indian immigrants as undifferentiated and homogenous masses. One of the major preoccupations in ethnographic data collection has been to examine how customs and cultural institutions have persisted under adverse and generally hostile conditions. Whatever the approach was to the analysis of their data, their general inclination has been to demonstrate the perseverance, endurance and resilience of the Indians against the adversities they faced. Ultimately, most studies were a demonstration of how Indians maintained and reproduced their "cultural identities" through preservation of their institutions and continuation of their customs. On this issues, Jain's (1993 : 52) statement for instance captures the outcomes of the studies done on Indians overseas: "Rural isolation, ethnic identity and the sheer tenacity of Indian institutions have been considered as major mechanisms for preserving the Indian culture."

While I am inclined to agree with Jain's assessment, it is not without caution. There are at least two major problems with such a position. First, it does not point towards the process and associated tensions among Indian immigrants that led towards the sustainability of regionally specific cultural institutions. Second, such a position tends to cast an inaccurate image of homogeneity on "Indian culture". India is too large a country with an equally big population to generalise in such simplistic terms about its wide ranging social formations. While many have acknowledged the immigration of Indians from various regions in ANAND SINGH, Department of Anthropology, University of Durban-Westville, Durban (South Africa).

India where the cultural orientations vary widely, none has ventured to research and to illustrate the details of how regional cultural variations were sustained wherever Indians settled. For instance, people emigrated from the states of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and others, and maintained specific customs and traditions through the medium of their respective dialects. Hence, identity among people of Indian origin was not merely based on a simple reproduction of an 'Indian identity' although in a broad sense the tendency to identify with the ancestral homeland, viz., India has given rise to a generalised identity that tends to ignore regional variations. This has created a situation that has produced models of generalisation about Indians and their cultural continuity. Jain's (1994) paradigm on 'civilisations and their settlement societies', where India is the civilisation and the Indian diaspora are the settlement societies, is a recent addition to such an amalgam of theories. The two social formations are deemed to be linked by a dialectical relationship to each other. While by virtue of the relationship being dialectical and hence dynamic with ongoing changes and adaptations, there is a simplistic and uncritical notion of Indianness attached to the model, without taking into cognisance the inclination to persist with maintaining regional identities.

In South Africa such a situation has existed since the arrival of Indians. Between 1860 and 1913 approximately 152000 indentured and passenger Indians, migrated to South Africa. The present estimated population according to the most recent census, is approximately one million. While coexistence has been a norm among people of Indian origin, as witnessed in the English medium schooling systems, neighbourhoods, and mixed employment and commercial patterns, there has been a tendency among people of the various linguistic backgrounds to assert their distinctive identities. This has manifested itself in various ways, especially in the choice of marriage partners, cuisine patterns, deities, the days of the week on which people choose to fast, among a range of other regionally specific customs. The state, however, during white domination always treated Indians as an undifferentiated group. While English and Afrikaans speaking Whites were given state support to maintain their languages and cultural institutions, no such recognition was given to Indians. As a result Indians were left to pursue their cultural and linguistic interests independent of state support. This created a competition for scarce resources, especially in the pursuit of these interests and in a sense set the two major Indian linguistic groups, viz., Tamil (South) and Hindi (North), apart from each other.

Integration into South Africa's polity

Integration into South Africa's polity was largely dependent on

the class backgrounds of the Indian population and began largely in the north coast of the Kwazulu-Natal province. In this area, commonly referred to as the sugar belt, the topography is one of rolling undulating hills, made green by thousands of hectares of sugar cane. It stretches from approximately fifteen kilometres outside the boundaries of the province's biggest city, viz. Durban, to more than one hundred and twenty kilometres further north along the coastline. The geographical and climatic conditions are ideal for the plantation of sugar cane which is fully exploited by small and big commercial farmers alike. However, perceptions within the Indian population about how segments of its population were integrated into the wider economy was often shaped by which linguistic group was dominant in a particular area. Inter-group perceptions and cognition of one another became an important factor in maintaining linguistic boundaries among people of Indian origin in South Africa. Conspicuous forms of linguistic boundary maintenance was evident in the patterns of settlement throughout the country. People from the different linguistic groups tended to cluster together and maintain a semblance of a coherent and closely knit community. Noting some of the factors that are common to ethnic identity and ideology, Eriksen (1993: 68) commented that "Ethnic identities can be seen as expressions of metaphoric kinship. Some notion of shared descent may be a universal element in ethnic ideologies."

The settlement of Indians in South Africa was to a large extent an expression of Eriksen's articulation of ethnic identity. Briefly, it happened in this way. Soon after the indentured labour contracts expired, many opted for land as compensation for their willingness not to return to India. Most of the former indentured labourers, who eventually became significant contributors to the production of sugar cane and cash crops in Kwazulu-Natal's north coast, were of North Indian origin. During the major part of the twentieth century their domestic patterns were a virtual recreation of the domestic unit in India. Characterised by three and sometimes four generation structures (*kutuum*), the domestic unit reproduced as many norms as possible from rural India. Hindi has been the lingua franca in most households up to the 1960s. Ritual practices are distinctively North Indian, arranged marriages based mainly on caste preferences are still the norm, kinship terminology and structures are equally relevant, and the cuisine styles are distinctive adaptations of North India. The domestic unit was the main source of labour with a distinct division of labour between the sexes. Men managed and worked their farms while women were responsible for domestic chores and child rearing. Education through the English medium was also made a priority as parents' affluence grew.

The earlier phase of the post-indentured period did not see many people of South Indian origin enter into large scale cane and cash crop farming in the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Most of them who were brought to work as indentured labourers, either opted for land outside of the main sugar belt to engage in cash crop farming on a comparatively smaller scale, or for employment in hotels, local municipalities and other forms of menial labour throughout the country. Their main concentration has been and still is especially around the greater Durban area. For many of these post-indentured labourers (especially South Indian), recreating the extended and joint families were not as easily accomplished. Opting to remain as labourers kept them at the mercy of their employers, viz., Tongaat Sugar Company and Durban Municipality, who provided housing that was especially engineered to cater to the nuclear family. Each abode was a basic two bedroom unit that was meant to accommodate a maximum of four people. However, perseverance and strong commitment to family values have kept siblings in close vicinities to one another. This became a pattern that evidently served to entrench family unity and identity. The education of their offsprings was foremost in their priorities. Much of what was earned, especially by individuals with stable and sober minded characters was directed at this purpose. Very often, individual parents by themselves were unable to cover the costs of their children's education. The proximity of the families and the commitment they shared in educating the offsprings of their siblings held the 'dispersed' households of the South Indians in close bondage and unity with one another.

The building of schools for children of Indian origin were historically self initiated efforts by people of northern and southern origins. The state assisted only to an extent and regarded the education of the Indian child up to 1960 as a privilege only. For this reason most young girls prior to 1960 completed on an average only the first four years of school while young boys went up to eight years. Those who managed to complete up to ten years of schooling often sought employment as teachers, which up to the early 1980s was among the more prestigious jobs that Indians could acquire. Schooling was democratically organised and did not exclude pupils on the basis of caste, religion or linguistic background. The predominantly British based colonial influence did not place consideration on Indian based norms, and therefore precluded the possibility of recreating any pattern of Indian village-based lifestyle beyond the household. The situation has historically been an acceptable one, with religious and vernacular classes being held after school hours. The teachers were unpaid volunteers and the children attended mainly on their parents' instructions. Their education therefore was to service a more globally based economy than a regional one based on religious and localised

requirements.

The absorption of the farming community into the mainstream economic activities in the province, either as commercial sugar cane farmers or market gardeners, was generally characterised by family labour and a reliance on capital that was raised solely through their agricultural efforts. Access to credit was a privilege that was seldom acquired. Most farmers who expanded their agricultural enterprises were able to do so on the basis of leasing property through legally binding contracts, mainly with White entrepreneurs. As leased land was productively worked, capital became more easily accessible and more land was purchased as part of the household enterprise. Many farming households consolidated their positions as self financing entrepreneurs through this process and expanded phenomenally into large scale commercial production. Their success enabled them to sustain aspects of their ethnic identities, especially in marriage and in strong close knit family ties. The ability to ensure a minimal dispersal of household members set them apart for instance from their African counterparts in the rural areas, where the latter have over the last century been characterised by broken households, migrant labour and fictive kinship relationships. Farm enterprise for Indians has been a springboard into higher education, professional qualifications and upward economic mobility that was more conveniently and broadly achieved by at least the second generation. The relative successes in maintaining stable family units, acquiring improved educational levels and professional vocations, and entering into various forms of employment and business are often articulated as results of the strengths of religious beliefs.

In KwaZulu-Natal's north coast it assumed a distinctively North Indian character. In the farming areas where one of the major municipalities is named Tongaat, the surname 'Singh' (Kshatriya caste) has historically been associated with large scale sugar cane and fresh vegetable farming. Other farmers are also generally of North Indian background, but from a range of other castes. Collectively, their North Indian descent has produced a common bondage and identity that has permeated almost every aspect of their social lifestyles. However, the situation was not an actual recreation of a North Indian rural village community, but only a semblance of it, that is based on symbolic ethnicity.

Persistence and ambiguities in symbolic ethnicity

Gans (1996: 146) argues that

"symbolic ethnicity can be expressed in a myriad of ways, but above all, I suspect, it is characterised by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and pride in tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behaviour."

What emerges from this kind of pride are actually more generalised traditions that are a semblance of their past rather than the ability to recreate old structures and social processes. This is a result of the inevitability of adaptation and transformation that foreign surroundings impose upon newcomers. Gan's reference to Jews and Catholics in the United States of America for instance is an illustration of this point. Both groups underwent significant changes by transforming indigenous cultural patterns into symbols. They were guided by a pragmatic imperative that generated solidarity and identity in a way that did not exert undue interference in other aspects of life. The situation with North and South Indians in South Africa demonstrated similar manifestations.

In the eyes of the casual 'non-Indian' observer, differentiation between individuals of North or South origin is by no means an easy task. The choice of professions, anglicised linguistic accents which are distinctively a variation of South African English, unfettered coexistence as neighbours, spontaneous forms of inter-group socialisation, and democratic schooling in English medium schools, are features which create conditions for greater commonality than differences among North and South Indians. These factors veer towards a creolisation of social habits because the regional symbolisms of both groups do not overtly feature in their day to day lifestyles. Moreover, Indians in South Africa are recipients of a more powerful Eurocentric-American based hegemonic culture. This produces two distinct private and public identities among many descendants of North and South India. The private identity is one that is generally ethnically based, in which pride of geographical, linguistic and religious backgrounds shape and determine household norms, personal choices and marriage preferences. These factors also play an important role in the nature of their private discourses where pride of geographical origin is often expressed. In their public images the presentation is generally one of hard working career minded individuals who are not averse to interacting, learning and sharing with others. The flexibility in this public image has a deep rooted history that can be traced back to colonial India and white dominated South Africa where modernisation imposed democratic forms of schooling and employment. Ethnic issues in these forums are usually not contested, unless in joking relationships or where imbalances might be found in workplaces with a predominance of one linguistic group over the other.

It is especially in the private domain and among clusters of individuals in work places and elsewhere that the social division among North and South Indians occur. The dynamics associated with these differences are expressed in a number of ways. At least two aspects I choose to discuss here will help to highlight the differences between Hindi and Tamil speaking individuals. Dogmatism about being of either

Tamil or Hindi backgrounds are often expressed in both subtle and direct ways. It is not unusual for conversations among people from similar linguistic backgrounds to often talk about the hardships of acquiring employment where there is a predominance of one group over the other, especially if there is a perception that a person or persons from the dominant group are part of the recruitment committees. Some of the statements below reflect the mutual mistrust that exist among Tamil and Hindi speaking groups. In a conversation with an ex-school friend whom I met after many years, I asked "Where are you now?" His reply: "I was driving a big truck for the Durban Municipality. I was being well paid and very happy there. But you know what happened? These Tamil bastards worked me out of there to put their own kind in my place. But now I am very happy driving a bus for the Durban Corporation. There's no such nonsense there." In another conversation a friend remarked "Ya, I am working for a very big building contracting firm... We got things under control there. The Tamil 'ohs' got no show there. They never used to employ Hindustani 'ohs' before. But now that we are gone up the ladder we make sure that they don't stop our 'ohs' from coming when more people need to be employed." Similarly, a conversation to which I was marginal but listened with interest, dwelt on the ethnic undertones that have emerged around employment practices in the state regional education department. A retired inspector of schools, of South Indian background began the conversation. "That fellow is taking out all the experienced people from the top posts in education and giving his friends their jobs." A response: "Ya, but all those guys there are damn sell-outs anyway. The old guys haven't been able to do much for Indian education... May be the new people might be bolder and challenge the White man on his policies in education, although I am not convinced that they are much better than the old guys". The respondent was of Hindi speaking background, and when the retired inspector left the gathering the respondent remarked: "Do you know why he's saying that? The Tamil people won't have a say in Indian education like they used to ..."

Such prejudices and mistrust abound within South Africa's Indian community, although publicly, especially among others of different racial backgrounds there appears to be a shyness to show out such community divisions. These issues are however linked to the broader economic situation in South Africa, where competition for resources and employment has often been of an intense nature. It is also not unexpected to find in places where large numbers of people of Indian origin are employed that the majority would be of South Indian background, since in South Africa, like Malaysia, most Indian immigrants came from the South.

Yet, despite such harsh undertones between the North and the

South Indians, there is a tendency to coexist. Those who remain avowedly Hindu tend to latch on to a nostalgic allegiance to the languages, cultures and religious practices of their ancestral origins. The behaviour patterns are characterised by more subtle forms of love and pride in conventional norms than by overt and publicly declared patterns of behaviour. At least two issues are presently held up with the nostalgia that is characteristic of immigrant communities in their host countries, viz., religion and marriage. In South Africa's main region that accommodates people of Indian origin, viz., the Greater Durban Area, a number of temples stand out with distinction in terms of their names, architecture and regional origins. North and South Indian temples are the hallmarks of Tamil and Hindi speaking religious identities in the area. Most temples are centres for ritual worship and sacrifice, with little or no emphasis on the higher philosophical teaching of Hinduism. India's vastness and highly differentiated social system has produced myriad ways of prayer and worship in its villages. However, the caste backgrounds and varying origins of Indian immigrants in South Africa made it impossible to recreate any particular pattern of worship that reflected a particular village's or locality's ways of doing things. Temples however, have only been able to uphold more generalised versions of Northern and Southern ways of worship, and access to and use of them are not restricted to either group. There is common acceptance of one another in such places of worship and regional origins and linguistic background are never an issue, although the committees that oversee their administration are generally linguistic specific. Two famous temples for instance within Durban, viz., the Mariaman Temple in Isipingo, south of central Durban, and another close to the Central Business District, Vaidyanatha Desvarar Alayam Temple, commonly referred to by local people as the 'Ungeni Road Temple', are both of South Indian origin. But both are patronised by all linguistic groups of the Hindu population. The former is frequented during the Easter period where many take vows or pray for redemption after set periods of fasting through saltless or vegetarian diets. Animal and chicken sacrifices, to either Mother Kali among Hindi speaking descendants and to Mariaman among Tamil speaking descendants in Isipingo are widespread practices. In the Ungeni Road Temple, which once provided facilities for wedding among both linguistic groups but has presently discontinued, worship does not take the form of ritual sacrifices. Many who patronise it, do so to seek spiritual advice, or to have their astrological charts read, which is often followed by *Naugraha* fasting, which takes the form of saltless fasting for nine successive Saturdays - praying for the planets to operate in one's favour and to remove all obstacles from one's path towards spiritual and material progress.

In addition to temples, the establishment of the so-called "neo-Hindu" movements, such as the Divine Life Society, International Centre for Krishna Consciousness, The Chinmaya Mission and the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, have done much to encourage people to engage in the study of the scriptures. Their appeal and forms of worship has cut across linguistic barriers and regional origins, thereby getting people to ignore such issues and converge on common platforms through a more universal approach to religion. Each of the organisations have acquired large followings from the four major linguistic groups among Durban's Hindus, viz., Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Gujarati. The common uniting factor among these movements is that all recitations are done in Sanskrit. However, in personalised issues such as marriage, there is still a common tendency to choose partners from within linguistic groups. A senior monk from one of the above centres once remarked:

"People from other racial groups may consider the choices that people make in marriage from within the Indian community as being ethnocentrically based. But while they are entitled to believe in what they please, the choice of the religious Indian is simply based on value systems. Without compatibility in a marriage there can be no sustainability. I would even go so far as to say that Tamil Hindus may prefer to marry among themselves, while Hindi speaking Hindus may do the same. We must understand that within the household people feel very strongly about wanting to continue with certain traditions, and that such traditions may never appeal to those who do not wish to acquire an interest in them. It is in these kinds of adherences that incompatibilities arise and eventually lead to the break down of marriages."

Between Tamil and Hindi speaking Hindus in the Greater Durban Area such adherences persist with pride, although inter-linguistic marriages do occur on a sporadic basis. Marriages have in fact been the determining factor in the differentiation among the successive generations of Indians in defining and sustaining their linguistic and regional identities. These issues have become the determining factors in maintaining symbolic ethnicity within the Indian population in South Africa and have become the driving force in sustaining a linguistically based group identity.

Linguistic ethnicity and South African politics

Although symbolic and linguistic ethnicity are interlinked and coexist, they are separable. While symbolic ethnicity is the medium through which cultural and social practices are maintained, linguistic ethnicity is the communicative medium through which symbolic ethnicity is articulated. In its indigenous surroundings linguistic ethnicity can lend itself towards powerful mobilisation campaigns, such as in India

where mainstream populations in different states ensured that their cultures and traditions are carried by their communicative languages (Mukherji 1994). But among minority groups, as Edwards (1996: 227) rightly points out, in which language shift has occurred in the recent past, the value of language can remain as a symbol in the absence of the communicative function. Referring to a cursory survey he did in Quebec, Canada, he found that most of those upon whom he focussed, were well settled but not new immigrants. They thought themselves as Americans, spoke mainly English, but retained French for private purposes. Among South Africa's Indians a similar scenario exists. Most are settled third, fourth and fifth generation Indians, speak mainly English, and are either unable to speak their respective languages, or communicate in it only during private meetings. Yet there is still a tendency for most to refer to themselves as "Hindi speaking", "Tamil speaking", "Gujerati", "Telegu", or "Muslim".

During the years of apartheid when former President, P.W. Botha, formed the tri-cameral parliament to cater to the political needs of Indians, Coloureds and Whites, in the exclusion of Africans, the process unearthed the latent forms of linguistic hostility that lay dormant among Indians for generations. Linguistic ethnicity became an important mobilising factor among those who identified with the segmented politics of the tri-cameral system. The media added to the divided image by creating the impression that politics among the Indians was an unambiguous demonstration of the North-South divide, despite the knowledge that support for Indian politicians did not spring from homogenous linguistic constituencies only. Indians were accommodated under the wing of the House of Delegates (HOD), while Coloureds were accommodated in the House of Representatives and Whites in the House of Assembly. As opposed to the extra-parliamentary groups such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) and banned organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC), among others, the tri-cameral Indian and Coloured political parties were unrepresentative of the majority of their racially based population categories. Their defence of their positions was that it was more meaningful to engage in this form of "participation politics", as they generally referred to it than in the politics of their opponents who, they claimed, veered more towards anarchy. In the HOD there were two major parties, viz., the National People's Party and Solidarity. Their formation was widely perceived as being overwhelmingly linguistically based, with the former being a base for North Indians and headed by Amichand Rajbansi, while the latter was seen as being largely a home for South Indians, headed by Jayaram Reddy and Pat Poovalingum.

Arising out of these perceptions was a widespread belief that each party was essentially one that represented the interests of the two

major linguistic groups in the Indian population, viz., Tamil (South) and Hindi (North) speaking groups. Support for either party was in essence, among many who either chose to vote or who were coerced into doing so, a demonstration of solidarity with the linguistic group that either party was perceived to represent. Symbolism became an important means by which legitimacy and popularity was sought. Garlanding with fresh flowers for instance, an Indian custom with eminent guests, was one way in which supporters demonstrated their acceptance of politicians. In India the practice is generally to remove the garland immediately after it is bestowed on the politician, whereas among HOD politicians the practice has been to keep it on for as long as it was possible and visible to the public. Addressing religious gatherings and other associations of cultural interest were equally important in mobilising community support. They clung unto the symbols that Indians have cherished for generations and tried to consolidate their power and legitimacy through them. Education for instance, has been the hallmark of achievement among Indians and it was a factor they exploited to the full extent. Religious holidays such as Diwali, and the introduction of Indian languages in schools, created distinct ethnic markers for Indian school children in the 1980s. During 1985 and 1986 there was euphoria about introducing children of Indian origin to their respective Indian dialects. The situation gave rise to a significant increase in enrolment in the country's only department of Indian languages situated in its east coast University of Durban-Westville, which was set up during apartheid as a university for Indians only. A number of Indian dominated schools began offering Indian languages as part of the curriculum and parents encouraged their children to add on their respective dialect to their list of subjects. This appeared to have earned for the House of Delegates a tacit form of approval from a sizeable proportion of the Indian population. However, the ground they gained from their language policy in Indian schools was lost almost as fast when the then Indian Minister of Education in the HOD gave children a choice between doing an Indian language and Right living - a subject which permitted them the freedom to work at leisure on any topic of their choice. Enrolment in the Indian Languages Department at the University of Durban-Westville dropped swiftly the following year and it has not recovered ever since then.

The language issue within the HOD manifested itself in its most negative forms when the leadership of the NPP and Solidarity engaged each other in a public war of words that later ended in a court case. Public perceived the exchanges generally as a less than professional performance and essentially a war between people of two major linguistic groups than between the two parties. An observer once commented:

"They positioned themselves along linguistic lines and by virtue

of doing so they simply started mistrusting each other on that basis. Their lack of inclination towards genuine democratically inclined politics will simply keep them at the level they are operating right now, i.e., along linguistic lines."

While the press tended to exaggerate the differences between the two linguistic groups, people at a local level built up strong personalised relationships with representatives from each party. Their support for such individuals was often based on such relationships and ignored their linguistic backgrounds. However, they became intensely important issues during election periods, but largely in secluded and private surroundings where individuals felt they could speak freely among people of the same linguistic backgrounds. The sensitivity of this issue was generally cautiously handled and not flouted publicly. However, in other areas of interaction as illustrated below, the differences between the groups have been more overtly and vociferously expressed.

Linguistic ethnicity and the media

The divisions among North and South Indians arise out of numerous differences that range from claims of primordialism to petty prejudices that are meant to acquire hegemony by one over the other. There is a tendency for instance, among sections of South Indians to see themselves as the only indigenous people of India. The intention here is to view North Indians as part of the marauding and invading masses from neighbouring continents. The position appears to have gained some currency as indicated in the media and other areas by an alleged South Indian, labelling himself as 'Dravidian'. He wrote to a local newspaper on the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), asserting the view that North Indians are actually of European origin, and are as such, foreigners. The presentation and rhetoric of the letter was undoubtedly an attempt to set South Indians apart from North Indians. The letter predictably elicited swift responses in the press. These expectantly, dismissed his views as merely theoretical and as part of the colonialist drive to sow division among Indians since the eighteenth century, in order to impose their rule with greater ease. The editor of the paper however appeared to have seen this debate with distaste and announced the correspondence on the issue closed.

Cultural symbols, notably music - as conveyed through the electronic media - often becomes a ready source of regional identity and cultural assertion. The history of public broadcasting among Indians in South Africa is rooted in the country's racial politics. Ever since the invention of the electronic media, access has been limited in deliberately restrictive ways to people of Indian origin. For several decades during apartheid Indians were subjected to the humiliating experience of no more than an hour of music on Sunday mornings only. All five major

linguistic groups, viz., Tamil, Hindi, Telegu, Gujerati and Urdu had to contend with this allocation by sharing it equally. The time was strictly for music only, and items such as interviews, independent news gathering and phone-in discussions were forbidden by legislation. Ongoing representations by Indian political and cultural leaders to establish an independent twenty four hour radio station to meet the needs of the Indian populations in South Africa were fruitless. As South Africa's political position became more volatile during the later years of apartheid, such a possibility became even more remote, since it posed possible challenges to the state's methods and techniques of news production and dissemination. An innovative challenge to the state's monopoly over radio air waves occurred when a station called Radio Truro was set up in neighbouring Swaziland. It was named after the first steamship that brought Indian indentured labourers to the shores of Natal in November 1860. Although the mission of the station was to provide only for the cultural needs of the nation, it was however a major political victory over White racism in South Africa. However, its life-span was brought to an abrupt halt several years later when the South African government no longer felt threatened by such a venture and when the size of advertising revenue that was being lost to the state was realised. An alternative radio station, viz., Radio Lotus, was set up within South Africa, although not without stringent control through the tentacles of the state.

The relatively small size of South Africa's Indian population of under one million, or barely two per cent, and its range of linguistic groups did not make the task of ensuring satisfaction in air time to each group an easy one. The two main contending groups were those of Hindi and Tamil speaking backgrounds. Beginning with the assumption that North Indian (Hindi) music would have a greater appeal to the listenership, a 70/30 allocation to Hindi and Tamil music was initially followed. Planning for the station however was first dictated by conservative thinking, taking into consideration what the older generation would consider appropriate for programme content. More open and public debates about the style and content of the station's functioning led to major reviews in the division of time for the two major linguistic groups. Tamil speaking listeners objected to the discrepancy in time that favoured North Indian music. As a result, over the last three years, since 1995, a 50/50 policy was adopted by the station's management, giving equal time to both North and South Indian music. The adoption was not without its problems, since several listeners, supposedly of Hindi background, phoned in to complain about the frequency of Tamil music and threatened not to tune in again to the station. But the opposition to particular linguistic music is not merely one sided. In an attempt to highlight the plight of local Indian musicians, a local newspaper, circulated

mainly within the Indian population, referred to the complaints of a Vee Naidu. Referring to him as a 'prominent musician', they voiced his complaint that, "locally produced Tamil music was grossly under-represented by Radio Lotus while only Tamil artists who sang in Hindi were given favourable airplay". The complaint was countered by the management and other local musicians, including several of Tamil backgrounds themselves, as not being an accurate reflection of the station's management of airtime policy.

The linguistic ethnic division brought out against Radio Lotus is by no means an isolated form of quibbling between the Tamil and Hindi speaking Indians. What happened in Radio Lotus is only a fraction of the Hindi/Tamil disputes that have taken on a more public form of dirty linen washing in another emerging Indian dominated community radio station, viz., Radio Phoenix. Named after a major Indian working class township, the station actually began as a hobby and as a pirate radio station from the home of an electronics enthusiast - a South Indian. After initially covering a ten kilometre radius and increasing his listenership single-handedly, he tried to legalise the station through public appeals for support. The response was reported in the media as phenomenal and the application to the Independent Broadcasting Corporation to operate legally was met with a positive response. However, it did not take long for linguistic differences to prevail over the launching of the station. Local media reports abounded with accusations and counter-accusations of linguistic bias allegedly functioning as a norm in the management of the station. What was being reported in the media is a sense of dissatisfaction in the Tamil community over a lack of air time on programmes of South Indian content, and over the alleged hegemony that a group of North Indians acquired over the station.

The problems surrounding Radio Phoenix appeared to have begun through an alleged conspiracy by a North Indians based clique to dominate the station. A senior and renowned figure in the Indian community, known for his radio announcing skills joined Radio Phoenix's management team early in 1996. By November of that year he submitted his resignation stating that he had served his purpose at the station and that he was giving way to younger blood. However, he listed several concerns, the first one of which was "the playing of Hindi instead of Tamil songs when he was not in." Others of South Indian origin in the station also grew belligerent over the alleged North Indian take-over. By the following year matters had peaked to a point that produced the following caption in a Sunday newspaper - "North v South 'bias' boils over at Radio Phoenix". The content of the report illustrated serious divisions among the station's personnel between the two groups. Once again a South Indian member raised the issue of "the unfair presentations of music programmes, which

were mainly North Indian". Another of his female colleagues who held the post of Public Relations Officer, withdrew from the station after accusing the management of trying to establish a North Indian hegemony in its outlook. She was quoted as saying: "It was clearly evident that every South Indian nomination was rejected. I believe I was ousted because I am South Indian and because of my forthright and outspoken manner". Another former South Indian employee who lost favour with the management for alleged 'financial irregularities' claimed that the administration of the station was highly problematic. He stated: "There is an ongoing problem with North and South Indians. A glaring example is that the present board has seven North Indians and one South Indian, while there are 42 North Indian presenters and seven South Indian presenters". A response from the management dismissed this as 'sour grapes', claiming that there was always an attempt to ensure a balance in programme content. In a separate newspaper report there were claims of a "North Indian speaking cabal wanting to take over."

The purpose of the public outcry from members of the South Indian community was also to draw the attention of the state appointed Independent Broadcasting Association (IBA) whose role it was to grant licences to community based radio stations. The IBA's response to the problem was two fold: they stated that they had no problem with the day to day functioning of the station, but that the real issue is the policy making structure itself. The authorities' major concern was to avoid splits within the community, although they were satisfied that the management had met the conditions required of them to function as a community station. The station manager reported that the IBA received written as well as taped copies of the minutes of their bi-annual general meeting, which exonerated them of alleged ethnic bias. An interesting statistical observation was made by the manager which subtly reinforced linguistic ethnicity within the Indian population by indicating why the votes fell in the favour of North Indian candidates. He pointed out that the total number of South Indian individuals at the meeting was 84, and North Indians - 106, while eight described themselves as others. Voting thus appeared to be cast strictly along linguistic lines. One South Indian delegate observed that "the *roti wallas* came well prepared to make sure they take over the station". Although the IBA was prepared to accept the authenticity of the management, the entire process smacked of ethnic conspiracies and chauvinistic behaviour from both sides. While executive members of the Radio Phoenix Board tried to deny that such divisions existed, the differences between the two sides were too entrenched and conspicuous to ignore. The fact that the manager sought to provide such ethnically based statistics is an affirmation of the prevalence of such thinking.

Conclusion

There are at least two forces that appeared to work against the cohesion and coexistence of Indians in South Africa. While wide ranging research to understand the 'external' threats that Indians faced in their host countries to their social and cultural survival have been made, too little has been done on the 'internal' threats to their social sustainability and solidarity. The external threats here are references to the hostilities they faced either from the colonialists or from the local indigenous populations. Most often immigrant Indian communities had to adapt to the hegemony that both forces tried to engineer in the politics of domination. They often found themselves as minority groups, both in terms of the regional origins in India and in terms of being an 'Indian minority', and of having to coexist among several linguistic and cultural groups. In South Africa the language of the colonialists acquired supremacy over the others, leading to English and Afrikaans becoming the communication mediums. Despite this, identification with the respective Indian based regional languages continues, albeit more on sentimental lines than otherwise. These are the issues that give rise to symbolic and linguistic ethnicity that keep South and North Indians apart from each other, especially when scarce resources such as access to the electronic media, have to be shared.

In the Greater Durban Area where most Indians live and have been deprived of access to resources that could have saved much of what has been lost linguistically and culturally, the tension between North and South Indians rose to levels that are still unknown elsewhere among Indians living overseas. While there is a reasonable degree of coexistence among the various linguistic groups, as shown in the sharing of religious facilities and living in the same neighbourhoods, there is still a tendency to maintain distinctive identities. For this reason it is inaccurate to talk in terms of 'Indian culture' and its continuation in ways that ignore the tensions among the various groups. Such generalised references to Indian immigrants blurs the variations that ought to be brought out more clearly in attempts to understand cultural identities of immigrants from a particular country. The concept 'cultural identity' requires careful articulation that can adequately capture the contexts in which groups and sub-groups function. A clearer distinction needs to be made between regional identity and national identity, and which one may acquire precedence over the other and in what context. Not always is the latter overbearing over the former, especially when one group feels deprived in comparison with the other. For instance, in India the North is perceived to have a hegemonic advantage over the South. History, according to many, is skewed in favour of Northerners such as Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, the Rajput kings, and others, thereby obscuring the history of

the South. Similarly, in other contexts, the inhabitants of what was once Yugoslavia no longer see themselves as being bound together through a common nationality (Pajic 1994). Linguistic and religious ethnicity have become instrumental factors in mobilising support to assert regional identities in India (Mukherji 1994) and elsewhere, and in more extreme cases, in ruthlessly violent forms of ethnic cleansing, such as in the former Yugoslavia, Burundi and Rwanda. While this is unlikely to occur among Indians in South Africa, what the differences between the linguistic groups raise are reasons for concern over the deprivation and erosion of cultural identities, which are so invaluable to the social landscape of multi-cultural societies. What began as sheer neglect over the failure to extend the courtesy to sustain Indian languages and customs, through political insensitivity, actually led to in-group tension and divided public utterances which could have been avoided if measures were taken to facilitate continuation of South Africa's cultural diversity. Such divisions, however, are likely to continue, unless the democratically elected government pays as much attention to the Indian languages as is being currently paid to African languages and English and Afrikaans. An Indian languages professor once commented when he failed to gain the approval of the apartheid officials during the 1970s to include Indian languages in the curricula of Indian dominated school: "The best way to deculturalize a person is to take away his language". However, in post-apartheid South Africa, as during apartheid, the situation is no better for Indians. A recent comment in a daily newspaper serves as a appropriate conclusion in this year 1998 for the purposes of this paper:

"Now that Indian South Africans enjoy political and legal equalities, they are seriously grappling with promotion and respect for the five spoken languages that came to KwaZulu-Natal for the first time in 1860, together with Sanskrit as part of Hinduism".

Respect indeed, is an issue that is yet to be established towards the Indian languages by the country's democratically elected government. On languages, while the state's major preoccupation is with resuscitating respect for the African languages, Indian languages are of no serious concern. For this reason, self reliance and the tensions that have arisen through lack of adequate resources to propagate the Indian languages, will continue to be reproduced, and cultural identity will be shaped and determined by the dynamics intrinsic to these processes.

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