Go home! Go home to Mumbai! The anti-Indian discourse in the post-apartheid era

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Abstract

In South Africa, Indians constitute a vulnerable ethnic minority, and have been 'sandwiched' between the economically dominant whites and the African majority. Historically, there have been tensions between Indians and Africans because the former enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared to the majority, primarily because of community survival strategies, and their religious and cultural heritage. The aim of this presentation is to analyse some of the challenges facing South African Indians in the post-apartheid era, which will reveal significant continuities with the apartheid era. An incipient anti-Indianism is infiltrating South Africa's democracy. The first theme in this discourse is that South Africa needs an 'Idi Amin'. The second theme is that South Africans of Indian descent should relocate to India. Since 2009 those opposed to the destruction of the century-old Warwick market were taunted with chants of '*Hamba khaya*! *Hamba uye eBombay*' (Go home! Go home to Mumbai!), from groups aligned to the ruling party in front of senior ANC leaders, with impunity. In 1994 sociologist turned politician, Yunus Carrim, contended that an important gauge of the success of SA's non-racial democracy would be the "degree to which Indians are integrated into the post-apartheid society". Judged by this yardstick, there are ominous signals that the non-racial, democratic experiment may well be over.

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Introduction

There are certain common themes evident in the indentured experience in South Africa, Mauritius, West Indies, Fiji and Malaysia. Indians in the indentured diaspora have had varying fortunes, and have had little or no political influence in the different colonies. They had no political ambitions and were passive by nature. As they attempted to adjust in an alien and hostile environment they encountered conflict initially with the colonial rulers and subsequently with the indigenous majority.

Indians in the indentured diaspora have always been vulnerable in the colonial and post-colonial eras. The aim of this presentation is to analyse some of the challenges facing South African Indians in the post-apartheid era. Indians constitute a vulnerable ethnic minority in South Africa, and have been 'sandwiched' between the economically dominant whites and the African majority. This paper is divided into two sections. The roots of indenture in South Africa are briefly assessed in the first section. This is followed by an analysis of an anti-Indian discourse which was gaining momentum since 1994. There have been tensions between Indians and Africans because the former enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared to the majority, primarily because of community survival strategies, and their religious and cultural heritage.

South African Indians were not a homogeneous group, and have experienced various divisions and tensions, particularly between the traders and the working class. The commercial, merchant and professional Indian class were perceived as an economic threat to white South Africans in the province of Natal, and this was reflected in racial prejudices, which were transformed into policies limiting their access to land, housing, and trading opportunities. There was increasing evidence that political organisations were used to articulate merchant interests, sometimes at the expense of the working classes. The latter also competed with Africans in the urban labour market, especially in secondary industry, where there was a huge demand for unskilled labourers. Indians had a comparative advantage over Africans in that they were more highly urbanized (even compared to the rest of the indentured diaspora).

Consequently, the incipient conflict between these two groups resurfaced episodically, more so in the post-apartheid era. This has increased the vulnerability of the minority group, who also believed that they were being sidelined in affirmative action and black economic empowerment schemes. While those in the business and professional sectors thrived in the post-apartheid era, working class Indians increasingly feel disillusioned, marginalised and excluded from the rainbow nation.

Indentured Roots in South Africa

The origin of South African Indians can be traced back to the agricultural labour requirements of colonial Natal in the mid-nineteenth century. During this period sugar cane had been identified as the most profitable commercial crop suited to the climate of this region. However, a major shortcoming was an unsatisfactory labour supply. Successful cultivation of sugar cane required a high labour per hectare ratio. Furthermore, the labour had to be semi-skilled, especially for harvesting and milling activities.

Indentured labourers toiled under arduous and formidable conditions, and were subjected to inhuman abuses and exploitation in Natal e.g. flogging, inadequate medical treatment, excessive fines for minor offenses, and pay deductions for absenteeism (Meer, 1980). Indentured labourers were vital to the economy of Natal because they "could be worked up to fourteen hours a day, with pitiful wages further reduced through excessive fines for minor transgressions" (Meer, 1985:46).

The Indian question in South Africa featured prominently on the national agenda for the greater part of the 20th century. Politicians from diverse parties were unanimous on one issue - the Indian population in South Africa should be reduced to the minimum possible. This was a key issue in the Nationalist Party election manifesto in 1948: "The party holds the view that Indians are a foreign and outlandish element which is unassimilable. They can never become part of the country and therefore must be treated as an immigrant community. The party accepts as a basis of its policy the repatriation of as many Indians as possible" (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1967:1). In 1914 Gandhi had argued that "compulsory repatriation was a physical and political impossibility" (Dvorin, 1952:162). The main mechanisms to try to force repatriation was denial of political rights, limited trading and employment opportunities, and restrictions on their ownership and occupation of land through legislation which would reduce many to harlotry.[1]

There is little doubt that the various restrictions on Indian land tenure were ultimately conceived to curb their economic expansion. Associated with this were the restrictions on trading licences and the refusal to grant loans to Indians. Initially, these policies were confined to the local state, but as the pressure from the white electorate mounted the central state was forced to introduce sweeping legislation which culminated in the Ghetto Act (1946) and the Group Areas Act (1950). Hence, the social and economic prejudices of whites against Indians were sanctified by legislation, and adopted as state policy (Maharaj, 1995;

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[1] For a chronological list of the major anti-Indian legislation passed between 1885 and 1946, see Singh, G. 1946. The Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946. Durban: Council for Human Rights, pp. 10-18.

1997).

Although a disenfranchised and voiceless group, Indian aspirations were articulated at different times by the different political organisations - the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), Natal Indian Association (NIA), Natal Indian Organisation, South African Indian Congress and the South African Indian Organisation (SAIO). These organisations differed in terms of their strategies, but their objective was the same - to fight for the rights of the Indian community. In an atmosphere of increasing hostility and intolerance they utilised every peaceful measure to expose the injustice and violation of human rights in South Africa. This included passive resistance, recourse to the law, and appeals to India and the United Nations.

There were tensions between indentured labourers and Zulu labourers since 1860. It had been conventionally argued that the abundant indigenous Zulu labour was inadequate and unsuitable, hence the need for indenture. However, on the contrary, the local Zulus comprised a proficient labour force and were "by no means disinclined to labour, or unwilling to render it to the planters, but upon their own terms and at their own times" (Daily News, 13/11/60). There is adequate evidence which reveals that while Natal was arranging for the introduction of indentured labour, the Zulus were working diligently in both the skilled and unskilled sectors of the economy (Dhupelia, 1982; Meer, 1985). As a result of the relative material progress of the traders vis-a-vis the Africans, Indo-African relations in Natal were characterised by incipient tension and conflict.

The interaction between African workers and the Indian petty bourgeoisie was primarily exploitive in Durban. However, Indian businesses provided opportunities for African workers and their families to escape from the austerity of direct local state control. The traders "provided the basic infrastructure of the squatters' slums: the bus services and retail outlets - the services which could be provided because of the particular position of Indian people as a 'buffer group' in the racial hierarchy of urban segregation" (Hemson, 1977:103).

The nascent tensions between Zulus and Indians burst into riots in Cato Manor in 1949. The apartheid state viewed the violence as a racial conflict between Indians and Africans, and argued that this justified its policy of racial separation. However, while there was Indian-African tension, the riot was a "complex phenomenon, fed by white prejudice and Government policy as well as by the aspirations of an embryonic African bourgeoisie" (Ladlau, 1975:19).

While the riots appeared to be unplanned, structurally, they were predetermined by the nature of the South African social formation, where Indians were perceived to be occupying a 'middleman' buffer position between whites and Africans. Social anthropologist, Hilda

Kuper, argued that like Jews in other countries, Indians were being used as 'scapegoats' by the dominant ethnic groups:

> Sufficiently wealthy to serve as a bait for greed, too few to be feared and, in the main, ideologically opposed to counter aggression with physical violence, their ethnic difference and cultural diversity serve as excuses for discrimination and oppression (The Star, 4/6/79).

The riots were followed by probably the most intense cooperation between Indian and African organisations culminating in the NIC forming an alliance with the ANC, and participating in the 1952 Defiance campaign and the drawing up of the Freedom Charter in 1955. This tradition of non-co-operation with the apartheid regime continued into the 1980s when more than 80 percent of the Indian community rejected participation in the tricameral parliament because it excluded blacks. However, there were dramatic shifts in political affiliation in the post-apartheid era.

Post-apartheid anti-Indian Diatribe
The oppression of Indian indentured labourers and their descendants, and their resistance and support for non-racialism during the British colonial and apartheid eras, is well known and documented. Axiomatically, there were great expectations that everyone will be equal in South Africa's non-racial, rainbow democracy.

Sadly, since 1994 there have been several racist attacks against South African Indians from those aligned with the ANC and IFP. With the exception of Madiba's lone, fading voice, there has been a raucous silence on such attacks from the ruling party, which may be interpreted as tacit support. An insidious anti-Indianism is intensifying in the post-apartheid era, as the following examples illustrate.

i)   *An 'African mother will be blessed to give birth to another Idi Amin'*
In March 1999, the editor of the Inkatha Freedom Party-owned Zulu newspaper, *Ilanga,* blamed Indians for continuing to oppress Africans, and wished that "maybe here in South Africa as well an African mother will be blessed to give birth to another Idi Amin" (an allusion to the 1971 expulsion of 60 000 Indians out of Uganda by Idi Amin Dada) (Ramsamy, 2007:475). The editor, Amos Maphumulo, was later suspended, but the controversy persisted in the Indian community.

ii)   *'Brave men to confront Indians'*
In early 2002, internationally renowned playwright and composer, Mbongeni Ngema released an inflammatory anti-Indian song, *AmaiNiya,* in the Zulu language in which he called for

> strong and brave men to confront Indians who do not want to change … Even

Mandela has failed to convince them to change. Whites were far better than Indians … we are poor because all things have been taken by Indians. They are oppressing us (Singh, 2002:2).

The song was condemned by the South African Human Rights Commission, and was subsequently banned from the airwaves. Ngema responded that as an artist he was merely reflecting the views of many Africans. There was support for Ngema's views as encapsulated in the following letter to the <u>Sowetan</u> newspaper, which had an African readership:

I was disgusted by the banning of Mbongeni Ngema's beautiful song, which laments the oppression of blacks by Indians. It is a known fact that most Indians are worst racists than whites ... The Indian people are opportunists and the real racists in South Africa and the rest of Africa. Our people are treated like dogs when working for Indians. In most workplaces Indians treat black people like nothing. They do not think blacks have brains to shape their own destiny. In Parliament today and in government parastatals, you find more Indians than black people holding senior positions. In KwaZulu-Natal total racism is meted out to blacks by Indians (Mokoena, 2002:16).

Another view from within the Indian community (albeit a minority one) was that rather attacking Ngema there was need for honest reflection and introspection:

Instead of making hypocritical indignant accusations of racism in the light of Mbongeni Ngema's attempt at getting some dialogue going, Indians should rather honestly ask themselves why is it that Africans generally despise them so much. Using jealousy as an argument is a stupid over-simplification of a much more complex issue. As an Indian, I witness daily the attitude that Indians display towards Africans, sometimes in their presence but most times, cowardly in their absence … Indians must extricate themselves from their little enclaves and start integrating themselves as South Africans and stop marginalising themselves. Africans, on the other hand, must give them a chance and stop treating them like foreigners in their own country (Thaver, 2002:9).

Bronwyn Harris, a former Project Manager at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation at the University of Cape Town, contended that Ngema's song was xenophobic and also raised questions of identity and citizenship:

AmaNdiya does not only portray negative stereotypes that are drawn on racial lines. It also creates prejudice through the language of xenophobia. By presenting "Indians" as outsiders from India, the song raises questions about belonging within South Africa. This moves beyond race alone because it introduces

concepts of citizenship and nationality. It implies that "Indians" are not South African and therefore have less legitimate claim to their citizenship than others (Harris, 2002: 2).

Contrary to Mbongeni's (who has benefitted enormously from the largesse of the state) assertion, there are exploiters in all communities. He revealed his prejudice and bias by focusing only on one community. Mbongeni's defence that he intended to start and public debate is spurious, and his fear of debating with intellectuals committed non-racial was revealing. Mbongeni's closeness to the ruling elite may explain the deafening silence from political leaders and the government on the song, which would normally have elicited spontaneous and unequivocal condemnation from those committed to non-racialism.

iii) 'Hamba khaya! Hamba uye eBombay'

More recently, the attacks against South African Indians have escalated. For example, since 2009 Indians opposed to the destruction of the century-old Warwick market which had an umbilical connection with the descendants of indentured labourers, were taunted with chants of '*Hamba khaya! Hamba uye eBombay*' (Go home! Go home to Mumbai!), from groups aligned to the ruling party in front of senior ANC leaders with impunity. One possible reason for the anti-Indian hype was that when Africans

> compare their material standards with that of minority communities, they find themselves seriously disadvantaged … When the majority community is beset by want, anxiety, dissatisfaction and fear, it tends to exhibit a lack of compassion and tolerance for minorities. It may become dangerously hostile when the minority community next to it … is prospering and on the rise socially, economically and politically (Meer, 2000:59).

The David and Goliath battle between the eThekwini Metro and those whose livelihoods depended on the Warwick market has made international headlines since 2009. According to City Manager, Mike Sutcliffe and Deputy Mayor, Logie Naidoo those who were opposing the development of the mall in Warwick Avenue were variously: preventing poor people from enjoying the privileges associated with malls; pursuing narrow, ethnic, racist agendas; opposing a 'golden opportunity for investment'; opposing the democratic majority; and wanting the traders to remain 'trapped in the second economy' (Maharaj, 2010).

The bureaucratic and political leadership in Durban violated all regulations pertaining to democratic consultation and public participation, as well as the common human decency demanded by the South African Constitution, as it favoured mall developers over the poor and disadvantaged Indians and Africans whose livelihoods depended on the

Warwick Market. Outdated laws were dusted off the shelves to restrict the market operations and frustrate those who engaged in honest labour, in order to favour 'tenderpreneurs'. In true Gandhian, passive resistance tradition, the traders resorted successfully to legal action and interdicts to keep the market open. In early 2011 the 'tenderpreneurs' abandoned their bid for the mall project as other more lucrative ventures funded by the public purse beckoned.

The dominant discourse was racist and blatantly anti-Indian, and cries of *hamba khaya eBambayi* bellowed from the rent-a-mob at meetings convened by the city leadership to rubber-stamp the destruction of the market. This has now been confirmed by a Wikileaks report on the 17 July 2009 public meeting organised by the eThekwini municipality:

> Durban Mayor Obed Mlaba opened the meeting with an address in Zulu and accused 'certain business elements' of not wanting to give up control of the Warwick and of hiding behind the plight of poor vendors. Chairperson of eThekwini Business and Market Committee Faso Majola spoke after the mayor and said in Zulu that, `Indians only want to protect their interests in the Warwick area and they don't want township people moving in'. Head of eThekwini Business Support and Markets Philip Sithole declared that, `Let us take the food from the mouths of the Indians! Now is the time for Africans to be in power! We will remove them all and replace them with blacks!'[2]

According to eyewitness, activist intellectual, Trevor Ngwane, "many people left the ICC thinking that the main social benefit of getting rid of the market was getting rid of the Indians and that the proposed mall would provide business opportunities to long-denied Africans".[3]

According to the Wikileaks report:

> The anti-Indian sentiments expressed by local ANC-appointed leaders and supporters … stand in contrast to the multi-racial ideals of the ANC … at its core, the (Warwick mall project) is about the displacement of South Africans of Indian descent by black South Africans. The (Warwick mall) plan is backed by the ANC, and it is simply a matter of time before the EMM is changed forever. Indians are increasingly becoming marginalised in Durban and their political influence has diminished over the years.[4]

A positive outcome from opposing relocation of the market was the emergence of non-racial

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[2] http://www.wikileaks.org/cable/2009/08/09DURBAN94.html#par10
[3] http://www.abahlali.org/node/5495
[4] http://www.wikileaks.org/cable/2009/08/09DURBAN94.html#par14

solidarity, a bane to those who demonstrate a callous disregard for the needs of the poor, and who are used to defending mediocrity and dividing with racial barbs.

iv)   Other Attacks

Other attacks include the head of South Africa's Government Communication and Information Services, and the President Black Management Forum, Jimmy Manyi's suggestion that there are too many Indians in KwaZulu-Natal, and that many of them buy their way to the top. The leader of the ANC Youth League Julius Malema made reference to '*amakula*' (coolie - a derogatory term for Indians) when addressing a meeting in Thembelihle, "where service-delivery protests have been lent a sharper edge by perceptions that Indian residents of nearby Lenasia are treated better by the government".[5] <u>The Times</u> newspaper questioned Melama's motives, and warned about its ominous consequences:

> What is Malema's intention in using such language - perhaps to incite a Rwandan-style genocide? We are no rainbow nation. That much is clear. And the glibness with which supposed leaders manipulate race and dispossession to fight their causes will surely come back to haunt us all. We have already witnessed the shocking atrocity of foreigners being attacked and killed in South Africa. This time, if we are not careful, it will be our people who are targeted.[6]

Then there was the racist attack on respected Judge Chiman Patel, when he was a candidate for the position of Judge President of KwaZulu-Natal province. According to Judge Isaac Madondo, a candidate for the same position, a person of Indian descent should not be appointed as KwaZulu-Natal Judge President because of "… all kinds of things which need more insight which a person who is not African cannot be privy to — We were oppressed, but not in the same way".[7] Struggle stalwart and retired Judge Thumba Pillay responded with outrage that this attack was an indictment on the Indian leadership in the ANC:

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[5] http://mg.co.za/article/2011-10-21-no-room-for-racism

[6] http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/editorials/2011/10/20/manipulation-of-race-for-gain-has-no-place-in-this-sa

[7] http://mg.co.za/article/2011-10-21-no-room-for-racism

> The statement attributed to him (Madondo) shows his ignorance of the history of the Indian South Africans, both in terms of their suffering from the time of indenture and the complete lack of knowledge of their struggle for freedom ... What is most surprising is that there is an almost deafening silence from the high profile leadership within the Indian community; those who enjoy the confidence of, and pay homage to, the ruling party (<u>Sunday Tribune</u>, 23/10/11, p. 1).

In an editorial comment, <u>The Times</u> newspaper acknowledged that while there were many stereotypes about race in South Africa,

> when public officials, in positions of power and responsibility, use race to deny, blame and negate the value of others it becomes dangerous. Such talk, whether in private chatter or a public utterance, is unacceptable. But it is an especially sad day for this country when a judge, being interviewed to occupy a leadership position on the bench, uses race to dismiss the ambitions of a brother judge ... If the commission appointed Madondo, could Indian South Africans expect an unbiased judge if they were to appear before him?[8]

A silent question was whether it was possible to build a democratic, progressive platform from the grassroots level that could articulate the problems and challenges facing the South African Indian community without becoming the surrogate of any political party. There have been whispers of forming an "Indian" political party, even reviving the NIC (which was mercifully aborted and a return to cabal politics averted). Minority political parties are inevitably destined for the fringes. Politics is about power. In South Africa minorities have to engage with the mainstream political parties and government, which often only respond to the language of mass action and mobilisation. A return to constituency based electoral systems could increase the voice and influence of minority voters.

Conclusion

As racism, ethnic chauvinism, xenophobia, cronyism and the celebration of mediocrity become more pronounced in the new South Africa, and the ruling elite blatantly flout democratic principles forged on the anvil of struggle, the disillusioned descendants of indentured labourers anxiously retreat into their religious and cultural cocoons which is sometimes interpreted as a form of racism. However, racism is clearly not the preserve of

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[8] http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/editorials/2011/10/20/manipulation-of-race-for-gain-has-no-place-in-this-sa

one community. If Indians are prone to withdraw into their own culture, other communities are just as much swayed by racial considerations. The anti-Indian vitriolic in the post-apartheid era is disturbing.

South African Indians need to consider ways in which they can contribute towards nurturing and consolidating our fledgling democracy, as well as assisting in the process of reconciliation, reconstruction and development. There is also a need to reach out to other communities in a way that is not condescending - but out of genuine concern to shed prejudices and break down barriers entrenched by apartheid.

The various deprecatory comments and racial slurs made over the last decade may well be an appropriate warning to the South African Indian community to awake and arise from their apathetic slumber – or else the history of East Africa may well repeat itself. There are ominous signals that the non-racial, democratic experiment may well be over. Perhaps it is time to take a leaf from the book of the indentured. As Desai and Vahed (2007) reveal "the indentured were not simply prisoners of 'the system' but often imaginative, creative human beings who found all manner of means to resist, survive or escape the strictures of indenture" (p.26), "who resisted and contested the attempts of employers and the state to control their lives" (p.13).

The challenge for South African Indians is to decide whether they would identify with the majority and in the process develop a platform for constructive engagement with the government of the day, or whether they would continue to regard themselves as a minority, and hanker for some form of connection with India. A major problem has been a dearth of astute, credible leadership in the community, who can genuinely represent the working class and the poor. Largely as a result of a lack of astute leadership Indians face the possibility of being politically marginalised in the post-apartheid era.

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