

Challenging Perspectives on the Indian Diaspora

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Post-Mandela; Post-Apartheid; Post-Colour Bar; Post-Coolie!

Challenging POSTS through Institutionalised self-realisation of Indians in South Africa: A Case Study.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the substantive schematic shifts experienced by Indians in South Africa within a contemporary context. The discussion is positioned against the recent establishment of the 1860 Heritage Centre in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal, as the case study. Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, the process of writing and rewriting history has become synonymous with change. It is thus in keeping with the expectations of national and state strategies to more comprehensively amplify and document the historical archive. As such South African history writing has become more inclusive and representative. Indians through their visual representations in South Africa have been attributed a manufactured identity and presence, initially through the colonists' gaze and subsequently through an apartheid gaze. They have been variously projected to primarily possess an identity embedded in subjugation and second classness, to being portrayed with a sense of assimilation through distortion and feigned transformation. Their metamorphosis from 1860 indentured Indians, under hegemonic rule, to 2017, is characterised by the imposition of force which bore witness to the Indians enduring many processes of appropriation, integration, assimilation and even insertion so as to assert themselves in this country. This paper traverses this terrain through a discussion of the design and content of the 1860 Heritage Centre and its ideological position in South Africa.

Introduction: the loathsome 'coolie'

It was a typical warm Durban winter's day as I wandered through the new 1860 Heritage Centre in the city that was once home. Amidst the buses and taxis careering past me, stands this century old grand dame of Durban who was once home to The Epsom Road Coloured School. In typical South African style, a high steel security gate welcomes you onto the grounds of this centre. As I made my way to the reception I noted the silence of the grounds without a person in sight. This is new home for the story of Indian indenture and the story of Indians in South Africa.

The displacement of the Indians from the Indian subcontinent due to colonial expansion between 1860 and 1913 is euphemistically called the 'indentured' labour system (Kumar, 2005:397). Their arrival was motivated by their desire for economic freedom and a dream to succeed even if that required relocating to a foreign world. While many had intended to return to India, they stayed and created homes and built communities in this new home thereby developing the Indian diaspora (Oonk, 2007:11). But their stay here was a painful one with many trials and tribulations which they amiably overcame. However, as their determination and fortitude became more evident the colonists responded by reducing them to the catch-all phrase "coolie"¹ which also ensured that the Indian struggle in South Africa became primarily based on racial difference and cultural or ethnic uniqueness.

Indian agitators for example described Indians as being neglectful of 'sanitary measures [with] loathsome mode[s] of living', urging that as a result they should be "isolated within their own location quite separated from the white population" (Mukerji, 1959:24). Much of this sentiment was due to a general mistrust of the Indian and what was often described as a fear of the Indian. As Khan (1946: 39) notes, "... the more they [the Indian] advance, the greater is the fear of the European and the more sever the laws that are passed against them." The position of 'otherness' is attributed to this fear and thereby relegates the Indian to what Stuart Hall refers to as '...the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery...' (in Vertovec & Cohen, 1999:305).

However, as the Indian developed on South African soil, so did the antagonism towards them, with white traders insisting that measures be taken to secure the repatriation of Indians.

¹ *Kuli*, in Tamil, referred to payment for menial work for persons from the lowest levels in the industrial labour market. In the transformation of *kuli* to coolie, the distinct humanity of individual Indians was appropriated and eliminated as the person collapsed into the payment (Desai & Vahed, 2007: 13)

As a result, a series of restrictive and discriminatory measures were passed by the Natal Legislature (Moodley in Thompson & Butler, 1975: 253; Valley, 2001:81; Bhana & Pachai, 1984, Khan, 1946:10).

The struggle between politically dominant, predominantly anglophile Whites and entrepreneurial Indians trying to establish themselves, generated considerable ill-feeling. Further, as they tried to acquire necessary skills to progress in business and industry, political and economic colour-bars were increasingly being institutionalized to prevent their self-realization (Moodley in Thompson & Butler, 1975: 253). Despite many agreements between the colonial governments of India and Natal, these discriminatory trends continued until 1948 when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party came to power and institutionalized its Apartheid policies.

These new Apartheid policies built further upon the approximately sixty seven laws which restricted the Indians in South Africa. Thus known as one of the most psychologically destructive and insidious social engineering experiments in world history, apartheid, further discriminated against the Indians, giving them citizenship only in 1961, one hundred years after their first arrival. Their definition as ‘alien’ informed their ongoing resistance campaigns which came to define their history in South Africa. This history is well documented and is mentioned merely to illustrate the trajectory of the Indians’ advancement towards nationhood and making the place of South Africa home.

This year 2017 marks the centenary of the end of indenture and as such the complexity of the Indian South African story is realised with labels attached both implicitly and explicitly to this group of South African people. While the terms ‘colour bar’ and ‘coolie’ are no longer entertained or tolerated within social environments, its removal can be likened to the removal of apartheid from our legislation *vis à vis* the embedded reality in the psyche of the South African landscape which will take generations to eliminate.

Variedly Indians in South Africa can refer to themselves as *Indian South African*, *South African Indian*, *South African* or simply *Indian*². This system of classification is not only as a

² As a result of the varied forms of self-reference I deliberately use the terms interchangeably to reflect its usage amongst the Indian people in South Africa.

result of the country's history of segregation but also created as a result of their own political consciousness and economic access. While the powerful hegemonic force of colonialism and apartheid, carved up the landscape to apportion sections thereof to different race groups, the impact of the Group Areas Act³ is somewhat largely responsible for reducing the Indians to a homogenous ethnic group.

It is within these differently defined residential environments that the varied forms of self-definition emerged. These areas over time developed identities which impacted on the way in which the residents defined themselves either as *South African*, *Indian*, *South African Indian* or *Indian South African*. As this group builds upon and defines their political affiliation and consciousness, and acknowledges and reflects their aspirations through economic opportunities they shift in realising a self-referential identity. Each of the terms demonstrate a degree of connectivity to the motherland or a dissolution thereof (Singh, 2008:5-8). It further positions an affinity or lack thereof to South Africa which highlights an engaging fluidity emerging.

In 1999, a fifth label, *African Indian*, was proposed by former President Thabo Mbeki within his broader project of the 'African Renaissance'. Thomas Blom Hansen explained that Mbeki had advised the Indians to call themselves African Indians as

“it would make a major difference in how you [the Indians] are perceived. In this way you'd say to your fellow South Africans, 'This is my country, I am an African first, but I am also an Indian because my forefathers came here to work...'” (2012:26).

This was an attempt to incorporate the Indians into the new South Africa and the imperative of using 'African' as a prefix would have signalled complicity as true citizens of South Africa. However the Indians were “unambiguous” in their desire to be referred to as 'Indians' (Hansen, 2012:26).

This paper, essentially ethnographic in nature, attempts to capture the challenges of the aspects referred to above by providing a brief historical overview of the Indians in South

³ The Group Areas Act was first enacted in 1950 and was amended six times. It was consolidated in 1957 and again amended several times since then (Jain, 1999:74). This Act was thought to promote individualism with the different racial groups and therefore defined residential spaces within which each population group resided. This guaranteed the separation of racially distinctive groups and intended to prevent any type of racial integration (Moodley, 2012:60).

Africa and their location within the diaspora. The paper then discusses the 1860 Heritage Centre Museum as a case study which is in keeping with a national strategy to comprehensively amplify the national historical archive while simultaneously functioning within Homi Bhabha's third space. Finally it must be noted that this work has not been published before and is a work in progress.

Manufactured Indian

Varying visual representations of the Indians find expression in South Africa. In the early days of democracy in an attempt to reflect Mandela's rainbow nation any opportunity to reflect the multicultural society was one that incorporated the Indian body in whatever shape or form. This included representations such as traditional Indian dance, women in traditional clothes or traditional religious leaders invited to engage in religious performative aspects necessary to present a positive and healthy multicultural environment where all diversity was welcomed in this new democratic country. But Mandela is no longer part of the South African reality and as such the multi-cultural 'unity in diversity' campaign is no longer actively engaged.

Visual representations of Indians in South Africa bear testimony to the constructed/manufactured identity imposed upon them through the colonists' gaze and the internal gaze based on the 'mythic homeland'. As such Oonk (2007:13) expresses the notion that Indians outside of India reference the region from which they migrated rather than their nationality or religion. This is common practice for South Africans Indians especially with regard to Hindus who reference themselves as 'south' Indian or 'north' Indian which are institutionalised forms of self-realisation which is rich with embedded notions of inferiority and superiority respectively. Oonk goes on to add that it is common amongst diasporic communities to identify with India not so much as a nation but rather as a homeland where the prefix 'Indian' was not attached by the Indian as a self-referential device within the local context, but as a term used by the host nation to signify their difference (2007:13). Consequently in South Africa the race divide constituted 3 descriptions of *colour* (Black, White and Coloured) and one description via nationality namely the Indian.

The Centre of Heritage

This discussion is critical to the case study of the 1860 Heritage Centre (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

Signage at the entrance to the centre

In the city of Durban, which was the first port of arrival of Indians in South Africa, there are no other such standalone centres documenting the presence of the Indian in South Africa. As such it is interesting to note the absence of the word ‘Indian’ in the naming of the centre (Figure 1). Upon enquiry from the Curator, Selvan Naidoo, regarding this absence, I was informed that this centre was intended to reflect a greater purpose.

After some thought and deliberation we decided that Indian life, culture and history contributes toward the greater South African narrative. We are part of a collective, multi-faceted South African Identity. Our uniqueness is a part of our shared identity(...fluid hybridity). We want to encourage all South Africans to see this and not see the museum as a hegemonic museum catering to a skewed history that was perpetuated previously (Naidoo, 2017).

This position is further evidenced in the invitation to the launch (Figure 2) and the information brochure (Figure 3) distributed by the centre which completely removes the word ‘Indian’.



Figure 2

Official Launch invite

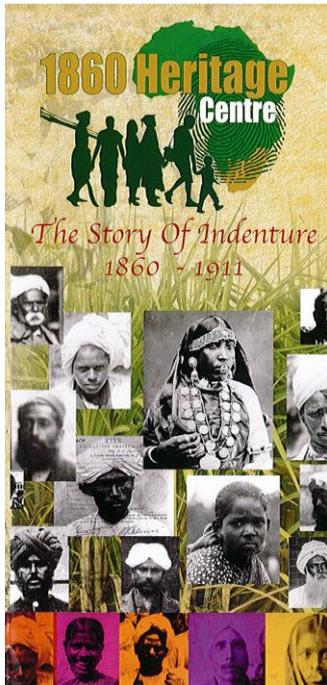


Figure 3.

Information Brochure

Thus the term 'Indian' as a self-referential form of identity has been forcibly removed by the community itself to reflect their fluid hybridity as incorporated within a particular geographical locale. The centre could as such become Bhabha's third space as it reflects the convergence of the Indian utilising and repurposing an old Coloured school within an environment that is devoid of any overt sense of Indianess. The space is thus neutralised at the outset as it stands devoid of identity but alludes to a space of identification which Bhabha says is "a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness..." (Bhabha, 1990:211). This suggests that the centre has opened up an avenue for the renegotiation of a fixed identity to a third hybridized space that is now shifting and fluid. This is further conceived through Bhabha's lens when he explains that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity, where hybridity is actually the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. In this way the new third space displaces histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of definition (1990:211).

The centre is now positioned as a socially neutral space which is attempting to push against the predetermined concept of a homogenous people through forms of identification that was constructed and created. Bhabha (1990) has conceived the third space as one that challenges

the hegemonic practices while re-articulating and negotiating thus signifying a resistance to labels and unitary identities. This then displaces the histories that constitute it while allowing for new possibilities.

IMAGE REMOVED BECAUSE OF SIZE

Figure 4

View of the centre's campus

This neutralised position can be clearly seen in the campus of the centre (Figure 4) which is a quiet reflective space devoid of any definition of the type of space the visitor is in. However, while the suggestion is that the centre is now supposedly capable of expressing neutralised identities, the experience of it is quite contrary. Figure 5, which is the entrance to the reception, provides a very subtle hint to the type of space you are entering through the use of sugar cane printed applique on the railing (Figure 6) and the wall (Figure 7). This draws your attention to the fact that the indentured Indians were originally brought to Natal as labourers in the sugar cane plantations hence the use of the sugar cane image on the logo.

IMAGE REMOVED BECAUSE OF SIZE

Figure 5.

Entrance walk way to reception.

IMAGE REMOVED BECAUSE OF SIZE

Figure 6

Detail of the applique on the railing

IMAGE REMOVED BECAUSE OF SIZE

Figure 7

Detail of the applique on the wall.

It is on these plantations that the Indians experienced totally abhorrent human rights abuses which are clearly elucidated in Desai and Vahed's *Inside Indenture: A South African Story 1860-1914* (2007) and will not be expanded upon here suffice to say that this was an environment in which their inferiority and homogeneity was taken for granted by the colonists.⁴

Upon entering the centre (Figure 8) a looming image of pathos in a young mother and her child greets you. Further headings such as “*what were their names?*”; “*Coolie*” and “*work, nothing but work, morning noon and night*”; overwhelm you by creating an ambience of despair. These are powerful reminders of the anguish of the Indians who clearly were conflicted with the sense of being alien in this foreign land. Thus Peter Can de Veer's dialectic of longing and belonging is a golden thread which runs through the exhibits across the centre.



Figure 8

Entry sight

But as one looks further the room allows the viewer to experience a modern day success story as well as it stops at the image of Mandela and his quote which says “it always seems impossible until it is done” (Figure 9). This positivity allows for a new possibility and as such

⁴ To White Natalians, the Indian trader presence which followed on that of the indentured worker was not entirely desirable as they soon threatened to compete with them in the economic field (Khan, 1946:7). As the Indians improved their economic condition, antagonism towards Indian traders grew, with white traders insisting that measures be taken to secure the repatriation of Indians or at the very least measures promulgated to discourage them from settling in South Africa. As a result, a series of restrictive and discriminatory measures were passed by the Natal Legislature (Moodley in Thompson & Butler, 1975: 253; Valley, 2001:81; Bhana & Pachai, 1984, Khan, 1946:10).

opens a door to a corridor which presents images from the commonly used stable of images (Figure 10) which are well-known and easily recognisable.

IMAGE REMOVED BECAUSE OF SIZE

Figure 9

The journey ends

IMAGE REMOVED BECAUSE OF SIZE

Figure 10.

Popular image of indenture

These are commonly used to reflect the indentured Indian in South Africa as merely a number with no agency and as part of a homogenous group of otherness. This image brings into sharp focus the reality that indenture apportioned no human dignity to the Indian except that of being a slave. And while this image is popularised through various media representations in South Africa, it subliminally reflects what can be seen to be an innate sense of fear and despair as well as providing a visual clue to the varied degrees of poverty, pain and suffering.

There are four other exhibition halls to engage with in the centre and that can only be done in a more exhaustive paper. However, the focus of this paper is to argue for the constantly shifting constructs of Indian identity in contemporary South Africa, where the Indian diaspora is still engaging with challenging notions of self-definition amidst established and establishing roots in what was once a foreign land.

Concluding thoughts

In the design of the centre, the Board of Directors constructed a centre as a result of negotiation in a 'third space' and the kind of centre they perceived and realised to be representative of their identity and culture in the challenging times offered by the post Mandela era.

According to Bhabha the third space serves as a corrective measure to hegemonic productions and suggests that identity and culture are complex, ambivalent and negotiable entities which reject fixity ...(1994). While he also points out that the third space is one of contradictions and ambiguities, it also enables negotiation and becomes a site for innovation, collaboration and contestation of meanings.

Thus while South Africans of Indian ancestry hold dear their motherland, many have never experienced it and as a result know their homeland only from outside and 157 years later are still being nostalgic for their place of origin thus often finding themselves rootless and holding on to memories created by generations gone by. At this juncture the 1860 Heritage Centre reflects a moment of unease as it struggles to decode the established fixed notions of Indian identity on South African soil and fails to reveal a critical, established and unified consciousness.

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