Contemporary India and South Africa

Legacies, Identities, Dilemmas
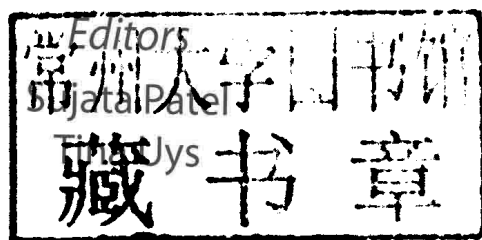
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Preface and Acknowledgements

November 2010 marked the 150-year commemoration of the arrival of the first group of Indian indentured labourers in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The arrival of Indians in South Africa 150 years ago provided the impetus for the Centre for Sociological Research (University of Johannesburg) and the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (University of Witwatersrand) to host an international conference in October 2010. The conference sought to reflect on South African and Indian dialogues on social justice and contested transitions. It was conceived out of a broader theme than the mere commemoration of 150 years of Indians in South Africa with the theme 'South Africa and India: Dialogues on Social Justice and Contested Transitions'. Over a period of two and a half days renowned scholars from both India and South Africa participated in pertinent and critical debates that bear historical relevance to both countries. The consensus that developed was that discussions such as the ones explored and analysed at the conference should be made available to a broader audience in the form of a published volume.

The idea of organising such a conference came from the Consulate General of India in Johannesburg. We would like to thank our fellow members of the organising committee of the conference namely Mr Vikram Doraiswami (then Consul-General of India in Johannesburg), Professor Adam Habib (Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research and Innovation, UJ), Professor Dilip Menon (Centre for Indian Studies, University of the Witwatersrand), Professor Shireen Motala (UJ) and Dr Mariam Seedat Khan (Department of Sociology, UJ) for their involvement as members of the Programme Committee in the coordination and preparation of the conference. Ms Annelize Naidoo (UJ), Projects Officer of the CSR and her team of students ensured that the logistics of the conference ran smoothly. We would also like to extend a special thanks to all who presented papers and chaired the sessions at the conference.

An event of this nature can only come to fruition if substantial financial support is provided and efforts and commitments given by individuals and institutions. We would like to acknowledge

We attach the following disclaimer from Mr Vikram Doraiswami:

> As is often the case with independent intellectual discourse and in keeping with the highest traditions of free speech, a good many things are said and discussed in a conference such as this that fall well beyond the positions and perspectives of any Government. Naturally, it should be understood that the mere fact of there being support of institutions of the Government of India for the event does not mean that the Government of India, or its constituent institutions either subscribes to or endorses the views in this book in any manner or form, either partially or wholly.

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Legacies and New Identities: Contemporary India and South Africa Compared

Sujata Patel and Tina Uys

In 1860 the first Indian indentured labourers arrived in South Africa; 2010 marked the 150 years, a year chosen to commemorate this historic event. Set against this background, the book is an outcome of a group of Indian and South African scholars who set out to explore contemporary challenges in both countries through the prism of history. The collection of articles in this book are diverse and intriguing in their individual capacities. When taken together, however, they take on even greater significance. The first section deals with legacies and relates to the Indian experience in South Africa at the micro level. Contemporary studies in sociology of migration have tried to capture the complexities of these legacies of 19th-century out-migration from India to South Africa, Fiji, Surinam and other regions. This literature has emphasised the negative fallout of indenture and located it within the colonial structures of labour use (Northrup 1995). Alternatively recent studies in diaspora (Brah 1996) have highlighted the social imaginaries of these migrants and now citizens as they negotiate between a reconstructed notion of 'India' and their real present and future in the country of citizenship. Articles in the first section integrate these two perspectives that of migration and of diaspora when they explore South African-Indian 'lived experiences' through an examination of their history and subjectivities as class, caste and gender. Simultaneously and for the first time, we introduce the reader to the imaginary of indenture in the field of out-migration. This represents a research orientation that needs to be further advanced.

However, legacies and identities need not be examined only in terms of out-migration of Indians to South Africa and other regions of the world within the colonial auspices. The question of identity is much larger and concerns itself with exploitation and oppression of many groups, not only Indian-South Africans. Both South Africa and India have had a long history of group-based identity movements being organised against colonial and post-colonial states. While the Indian nation-state divides people of India into religious communities, caste and tribal identities, it is clear that these intersect with class, gender, language and regional identities. On the other hand, South Africa divides its population in terms of race (Black African, coloureds, whites and Indians). Race, of course, also intersects with class, gender, religion and region. Thus, any comparison regarding identities will have to locate how the two nation-states have structured identity formation in these two territories (Uys and Patel 2011b). The second section considers the national, or meso-level, context in which not only South African Indians with an indentured legacy but also those living in India were and are expected to operate as South African and Indian citizens. This citizenship has to do with democracy and the varied ways in which it has been institutionalised after 1947 in India and after the end of Apartheid in South Africa. The focus of the second section is on democracy and the difficulties of transition. Both states have tried to introduce democracy in tandem with the capitalist economic structures and elite-driven political projects. Both have placed value on education as a means of mobility. Capitalist economic structures have created further exclusions which exacerbated earlier exclusions. Now these have also led to environmental degradation. The second section explores the contradictory institutionalisation of democracy and its projects regarding education and its inclusive repercussions. It also highlights the environmental question that organises the capitalist processes.

In the final section, a macro, or cross-national analysis is undertaken from both Indian and South African points of reference. The key imperative here was to problematise the role of the two states — South Africa and India in the global South (IBSA) and in the global arena as regional powers (BRICS). From this, it is evident that this text begins to tackle critical questions at all levels of societal analysis, and does so with a great sensitivity to matters temporal, theoretical and methodological.

Migration, Indenture and Identities: Being Indian in South Africa

2010 provided an occasion for reflection on the experience of forced and voluntary movement of Indian labour in an era of colonial 'unfreedom'. This history of Indians in South Africa addresses questions of exploitation and dispossession as well as Indian participation in the struggles against inequality and exclusion. It is an attempt to capture the details and texture of the lives individuals and communities made for themselves under adverse conditions (Desai and Vahed 2010).

British colonial regimes' exploitative labour practices in both South Africa and India created a linkage and bond between the two countries that could never be broken. Some of the contemporary perspectives on the history and sociology of indenture is caught in ideological and political language. Since the late 20th century these perspectives have increasingly been used by political commentators and historians as well as other social scientists who, for example, argue that indenture is slavery (North-Coombes 1984). The new field of diaspora studies have tended to stereotype the cultural traits of the migrant, suggesting that all migrants share a similar culture and that they can be perceived as being part of one larger community of Indians.

The articles in this section debunk many of these positions by reformulating the questions regarding migration. The contributors open up their specific questions to the existing discussions and thus contribute substantially the study of the history of Indian migration in the 19th century, and the nature of the contemporary Indian diaspora. The articles portray the many tensions that inform the fragmented and collective identities of Indian migrants, who as contemporary South African citizens must explore and understand their new identities whilst steeped in historical memories. Therefore, the first set of articles in this section begins by introducing the present tensions that structure the identity of Indians in South Africa, as they negotiate being South Africans and Indians simultaneously.

Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed's article relies upon a combination of methods. On the one hand they excavate official archives and court papers, whilst on the other visual records (such as photographs to capture the 'life and times' of the indentured) are not ignored. The stories that they record suggest that the

indentured were not simply victims of the 'system'.To survive and even challenge the strictures of indenture they employed ingenious ways. Desai and Vahed argue that the many stories of pain and abuse, the horrible living conditions, rampant disease, and suffering of the indentured must be contrasted with those who successfully made new lives in Natal. The stories that emerge should also raise serious doubts about continuing to see indenture as a new system of slavery.

Mariam Seedat-Khan provides a sociological story of indentured women's experiences. This article is based on rereading secondary literature in conjunction with 20 qualitative interviews conducted with Indian women in South Africa. It records how, on 4 October 1860, men, women and children boarded the *Belvedere* in Calcutta and set sail for the shores of Natal. Eight days later the *Truro* left Madras and both ships arrived at the port of Natal in November 1860. Soon more arrived in search of a better life: they were going to work under what they thought would be ideal conditions. The dream was shortlived. The pre-embarkation barracks were far from adequate. The conditions on the *Belvedere*, *Truro* and other ships were inhuman. Death and disease saw families lose loved ones. Women were raped and subject to hard labour. Conflict ensued and violence was commonplace on the ships. The article records harsh experiences endured and outlines how this experience contributed to the development and building of strong ties among the women and their families. Women were instrumental in maintaining and promoting a familial environment. These experiences strengthened their role in South Africa and within the Indian community. Women in particular were determined to maintain a sense of family, community, religion and identity.

V. Geetha's article discusses the various ways indenture was represented by different interlocutors and commentators in the late 19th century and early 20th century in Tamil literature and among nationalist and Dalit politicians. Her article starts with the narration of a dream of a lonely old woman in Madras, Subbulakshmi, before her death in the 1980s. In her dream, she hears a Tamil indentured woman labourer in South Africa beseeching her for help. This dream helps Geetha open up a new window to understand the desire and the helplessness of being in indentured labour, a desire to free oneself from caste and

gender strictures and to search for freedom in a new land where nevertheless everything was uncertain.

Geetha's article attempts to track the figure of the woman as indentured labourer in South Africa (and elsewhere) as she appears and retreats in Tamil popular imagination during the early 20th century. It does this through a critical consideration of a mélange of texts and their contexts, of production and reception: Mahatma Gandhi's writings on the plight of indentured labour, Dalit responses to the indentured labour question, tales that circulated in the popular sphere, were the stuff of family and common memory, poetry and song that dwelt on life across the vast seas.

The next three articles highlight how the commemoration of 150 years of an Indian presence in South Africa has allowed the Indian community in South Africa to reframe their politics, and to interrogate the memories of their histories as migrants. This event has also facilitated greater understanding of their present and their future as South African-Indians and as global citizens. The articles discuss the two kinds of actors that have organised this event at the South African end. For the South African state, there was hope that the celebrations would help to consolidate links with India as well as strengthen its position within the South-South alliance. This event also allowed the Indian community an opportunity to be recognised as an integral part of South Africa's citizenry.

For some ordinary South Africans of Indian origin, 150 years of living in South Africa represented a milestone. This is the first time that they could celebrate their presence in South Africa as full citizens during a national event, fully acknowledged by the South African state (Thurman 2010). Yet, this moment also created ruptures and failed to generate a consensus among South Africans of Indian origin about themselves and their future. Rehana Vally attended the celebrations of the 150 years of Indian presence in Laudium, the erstwhile Indian township of Pretoria, and uses this as a backdrop to discuss and reflect on the reasons that led the residents to organise this event. Through intensive interviews with three generations of women, she discusses how the event has led many to the reopening of old debates on the forms, processes and opportunities/disadvantages of being migrants, of living as an excluded group in South Africa, of building solidarity with each other and the religious and/or generational divisions among them today.

For the former white rulers, the South African Indians were a homogeneous community, and because they presented a united front in opposing apartheid, the rest of the population also viewed them similarly. The post-apartheid democratic era is characterised by a resurgence of ethnic and sub-ethnic identities and in some cases a reinvention of the divisions of the 1860s. Brij Maharaj's article underscores the various divisions and tensions related to class, religion, language, geographic origins and associated changes that have structured the Indian community in South Africa. This division, he argues, has intervened in forestalling the creation of solidarities among Indians and has also affected the organisation in Durban which wanted to celebrate the 150-year events. Maharaj's article discusses how the divisions influenced the discussions regarding the purpose of celebration, who organised these events, and the roles the South African and Indian governments played. Finally, he asks if unity is possible and whether it should be strived for. Is it possible to build a democratic, progressive platform from the grassroots that could articulate the problems and challenges facing the community, without harking back to the ethnic politics and feuding of the past or becoming the surrogate of any political party?

What kinds of solidarities do the Indian community need to build? This question is answered by Lubna Nadvi through a discussion of the movement organised by informal traders (mainly but not exclusively from the Indian community) working at the Early Morning Market (EMM), a 100-year-old fresh produce market in the city of Durban (also known as eThekwini). The traders were informed by the city authorities that the market was going to be demolished in order to build a mall and that they would be relocated almost immediately. A vigorous civic campaign ensued with the EMM Traders Association combining forces with broader civil society locally, nationally and internationally and opposed the City of Durban. The author argues that this contemporary struggle is significant as it takes place 150 years after the first indentured Indians arrived in South Africa, many of whom had been involved in setting up and trading at the EMM once their period of indenture had ended. The indentured workers' early struggles bore fruit as they passed on the ownership of their fresh produce businesses to their subsequent generations, who prospered despite remaining amongst the working class. It is this current generation that once

again has to revisit the struggles of their forefathers and mothers, and face the brutality of a neoliberal, still imperialist, corporate state agenda. The article attempts to document the journey that the campaign to 'save the market' has taken since the beginning of 2009 and suggests that the Indian community needs to rediscover its histories to fight contemporary battles.

The final article in this section by Ravindra Jain provides an anthropological critique of Indian diasporic integration in South Africa by considering historical processes and the limits of social justice. His narrative is steered by methodological considerations. First, two major modes of historical discourse are employed. The so-called 'presentist' history works its way backwards from the contemporary formation of the democratic Republic of South Africa in 1994 up to sustained political moves for dismantling the apartheid regime that was introduced in 1948. The other stream of historical narrative — broadly chronological (conventional history) — is built on the conceptualisation of (a) the formation of the South African 'nation' under the special historical conjuncture of three 'city states' of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town as the nuclei for a largely agricultural-extractive (big and small farms and mining) hinterland rather than a network of urban-industrial complexes as in much of European and North American historical development; and (b) the history of political conflict and cultural-linguistic accommodation and rivalry between the British and Dutch colonial powers. This is the backdrop ('historical anthropology' of the title) of the growth of a multi-racial, multicultural society in South Africa with particular reference to its Indian component. The latter narrative is marked by indentured immigration followed by interstitial mobility of Indian South Africans and traversed by the troubled history of international support (political alliance between the Indian National Congress and the African National Congress) as well as the cleavage (variations in the Indian boycott of the apartheid regime in South Africa) as the salient political dimension of the India–South Africa interface.

Methodologically, his analysis proceeds along a three-pronged path: (a) delineation of socio-cultural and politico-economic processes in diaspora rather than reliance on procrustean typologies as historical or cultural products; (b) commensurately, the interpretation of the India–South Africa interface diachronically and synchronically with a view of comparison in the social sciences

as cultural translation; and (c) reading this interface by calibrating epistemology and ontology of this particular discourse on the same page. In other words, the method of historiography followed moves away from simply 'abstracting' generalities from 'raw data' (as in many positivist sciences) to sketching family resemblances among and between the phenomena (ontology) and analytical concepts (epistemology).

The Contemporary Contradictions in Nation-state: Democracy, Education and Environment

This section explores the challenges that are being faced by both countries today and provides evidence for shared experiences of contested transition as well as a compromised social justice. As scholars and citizens, we need to acknowledge that the two countries share similar attributes. First, both countries are poor with high levels of inequality. They share a colonial history, where resources were extracted for the benefit of the metropole. Additionally, they also share a commitment to install democracy in tandem with capitalist economic structures. And last, both countries are organising the economy and the polity through elite-driven political project(s). These processes have yielded contradictory trends in the two countries particularly with regard to the role of the state which has created and encouraged political divides and maintained inequalities.

In spite of these similarities, South Africa and India are generally considered very different societies. The most obvious differences relate to population and geographical size. They also experienced different forms of colonialism. While South Africa was characterised by settler colonialism combined with an influx of migrant labour from different parts of the world (including India), in India the British created an elite group to rule for them and India has been and still is a major exporter of labour. South Africa's economy advanced quite quickly during the first half of the 20th century, mainly on the basis of extensive mineral resources. A huge black working class developed and the economy quickly progressed to large-scale industrial production. However, the apartheid policies put in place formally by its nationalist government from 1948 when it came into power hindered the establishment of democracy in South Africa. Around the same time India became a democratic state and initiated a policy and programme of development to

wipe out its inequalities, which its political elite argued came from colonialism. The Indian economy was mainly based on agriculture at this stage, with very little industrialisation. This was the first stage of transition for India and entailed transition from the colonial system to a democratic social order.

Transition also entails two further dimensions, the second being primarily economic and involving the worldwide expansion of capitalism as a result of the growing integration of national economies into a global market and a predominance of economic liberalisation. There is also a third dimension related to the transformation of unequal social relations, inherited from pre-colonial and colonial pasts. While these three transitions are happening simultaneously in South Africa (the so-called triple transition) in India they are several decades apart, the political having occurred in the late 1940s and the economic (in this sense) since the 1980s, with the social overlapping both transitions in different ways (Uys and Patel 2011a).

We consider three themes in the political dimension of the triple transition — all three related to the state: democracy (with associated concerns relating to citizenship), education and environment. We include articles that discuss how these divides can be understood in the context of the common history of injustice and exploitation that both nations were subject to. Critical issues of transition at economic, social and political levels are addressed. Issues such as exploitation, class and socioeconomic conditions are critical for both South Africa and India and there are important lessons that these articles articulate.

The first article by Janis Grobbelaar discusses how South Africans are currently — once more — anguished about their future; that the South African journey that set out from the 1994 momentous small miracle has begun to seriously beg the question of — where to. Underpinning the article is the ultimate question as to whether or not the post-1994 state is able to build a just, fully participatory, economically equitable and secure South Africa for its entire people in the light of the enormous disparities of wealth and life chances that have typified society since its inception. The article suggests that what South Africa has experienced since 1994 is a successful formal societal transition rather than a winning socio-political transformation. Five key elements of the negotiated revolution are explored in regard to the former: the political