

# Indian South Africans: Challenges of Cultural Identity in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

*The Indian population in South Africa formed a distinctive quality of diaspora in their host land country. First appears in the Colony of Natal as slaves, but now many Indians hold important positions in the field of politics, the business, the community organizations and different professions. However, the integration of Indian South Africans is still not successful in the South African Society because of their distinctive cultural identity and specific characteristics for which they are easily not accepted as the citizen of the South African country by the indigenous African Blacks. Indian South Africans saw as exclusive diaspora particularly in regard to their habits, customs, religions and as well as their higher standard of educational qualifications and their significant economic status. The indigenous Africans black peoples see Indian origin peoples with great suspicion and disbelief not only for their thought about the Indians that they were beneficiaries of the apartheid discriminatory policies and do not want to integrate but also for their different cultural identity which makes exclusive as compare to indigenous African blacks. Nevertheless, the uncertainty about the future of the Indians still exists even after the establishment of democracy in the country.*

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## 1. Introduction

Indian South Africans (ISAs) seen as a minority community in the post-apartheid South Africa with a total population of 1, 409, 100 which is only 2.5% of the entire population of South Africa. (Statistics South Africa, 2017) ISAs also regarded as "South African Indians (SAIs)", "South Asian diaspora", "Persons of Indian Origin (PIO)", and "Indian Community" etc. in South Africa. The PIO diaspora in South Africa formed a distinctive diaspora with their diverse cultural and traditional practices and which is makes them a unique diaspora among the other present diaspora communities not only in South Africa but in Africa as whole. But after the so many years of their first arrival in South Africa, they were still faced lots of challenges due to their different culture and tradition which is makes them separated from the indigenous African black community peoples. With the introduction of democratic government in South Africa the apartheid racial discrimination policy was abolished by the ANC government and introduced Affirmative Action (AA) Policy to compensate for previous discriminations. But AA polices mainly favouring the African blacks and despite of the fact that Indians along with the indigenous blacks considered as the historically disadvantaged groups.

## 2. Indian South Africans

The history of ISAs in South Africa is long back to 1860's when British colonial government of India sent Indians to Natal (the then British Colony) as indentured labourers for work in the sugarcane industries, which were established by the then British Colony of Natal. The migration of Indians mostly from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and some of the Indian peoples also belongs to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. After their arrival they not only work in the Sugar plantations but also worked in various other fields such as in railways, municipal services, coalmines, dockyards and as domestic workers.

There are 150 indentured labourers of the first group migrants reached in the province of Natal in a ship called as "Truro" in 1860. The reason of this migration was that the local Zulu workers of Natal province were refused to work as labourers in the sugar plantations and they had a strong faith that the agricultural works are the activities of female persons in the society. This process of migration of indentured continued till the abolishment of indentureship 1917.

After the indentured labourers there was a second wave of migration started after the period of 1880's and this second group of migrant Indians regarded as "passenger Indians" because they came to the province of Natal as free passengers. The second group of Indians is mainly belonging to traders from Gujarat state and those were coming to South Africa because of their attraction towards new economic opportunities in the country. This second group of Passenger Indians set up retail shops in South Africa. The Indian population in South Africa reached to approximately 125,000 during the period of World War I, which was held from 18 July 1914 to 11 November 1918. The new or the third group of migration to South Africa from India mainly belongs to different fields such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, accountants and administrators and some other professional groups, most of the migrated peoples belongs to Gujarat.

According to Prof. Narendra Bhana, "arriving virtually as slaves in Natal, today many Indians occupy senior positions in business, the professions, and politics and community organisations. Nevertheless, the pioneering labourers made great sacrifices and laid the foundations for future generations. Various White governments made attempts to repatriate them to the land of their origin (this was strongly resisted and demonstrates that the pioneers were determined to sink their roots into South Africa). With the advent of the first truly democratic elections, and the election of the ANC Government much uncertainty still exists about the future of the Indians. Many Indians perceive the policy of affirmative action as

favouring the indigenous Blacks and as another obstacle for the Indian community. However, enormous opportunities are opening up as many Whites are leaving South Africa to seek the security of other developed countries". (Bhana)

### 3. Indian Cultural Identity In South Africa

The term cultural identity can be defined as the feeling of affinity with a particular class or group with common cultural tradition. It's an element of self-conception and self-perception of an individual and it is associated with the concepts of religion, ethnicity, social communities, social class and nationality etc. and they constitute their own form of culture and tradition in the society. Thus, cultural identity can be both characteristic of the individual and also of the cultural groups those poses the similar form of cultural identity and tradition.

Indian diaspora in South Africa is seen as very unique community among all other present communities in South Africa such as African blacks, coloreds and whites because of their distinct culture, religion and language. According to the South African Population Census 2011, the Indian South African can be culturally divided into four broad groups along linguistic lines such as Hindi, Gujarati, Telugu and Tamil and they are also partitioned along the different major religions: Hindu (41.3%), Muslim (24.6%) and Christians (24.4%) and some other minority religions (9.7%). Nevertheless, despite these differences Indians were united under a common cultural identity of "Indians".

Since the migration of indentured laborers from 1860 onwards, the Indians in the present course of time have established in nearly all different fields of South African society including business, government, media, academia, medicine and law etc. Many Indians also hold significant positions of prosperity and leadership. Though, the major part of Indian diaspora is belonging to the category of middle class.

The majority among the Indian South African peoples regards themselves as 'South African' before 'Indian,' but they also kept a unique cultural tradition from their ancestors. Various numbers of Temples and Mosques were visible in the places wherever a large number of Indians are settled, for instance, the "Hare Krishna Temple", popularly acknowledged as the "Sri Sri Radhanath Temple of Understanding", in Chatsworth, where a sizeable PIOs are settled. The temple is very famous for its remarkable architectural designing, golden color windows and marble tiles, beautiful golden statuettes and crystal chandeliers. A significant number of Indian populations hold a form Hindu religion and culture. Holi, Diwali, Navaratri, Kavadi and Eid are some major festivals seen every year among the Indians. Indian films are also enjoying a strong hold along with South Indian and Hindi shows in South African TV Channels via Satellite TV. Hindvani and Lotus FM are two major radio stations of India which provides entertainment through Indian news and music. The "Miss India South Africa" fashion show is very popular among the Indian youths where they exhibit their tradition and culture. Bharatanatyam and Kathak, two of the famous Indian dance forms still practices in South Africa by fusion with African dance forms.

The city of Durban is a home to nearly 80 percent of Indians and the city is branded as the largest Indian city outside of India. In the city of Durban, Indians are among those major groups having their own business. The culture and tradition of the Indians is visible everywhere in the city of Durban. According to Archana Shah, "its Victoria Street Market is redolent of the aroma of spices and incense. The 'bunny chow', which is a dish unique to South African Indians, originated in Durban. This is a hollowed-out loaf of bread filled with an Indian curry of your choice. The term derived from the word's 'bunny' (referring to Bania or Gujarati-speaking people) and 'chow' (slang for food). Every year the Bunny Chow Barometer competition attracts hundreds of entrants. (Shah, 2012)

### 4. Challenges To Cultural Identity Of Indians In South Africa

There is a long era of struggle for the Indian South Africans in South Africa during the period from their first settlement in the country, they faced discriminations during the colonial rule, they get segregated by apartheid government during apartheid era and in the post-apartheid South Africa they again discriminated through affirmative action policy. However, all these struggles, exploitations and discriminations are not solely contributed as a challenge to cultural identity of Indians; there are several other factors also responsible to the downgrade of Indian identity in South Africa.

The paper divided into four periods to analyze the challenges faced by Indians during 158 years of journey in South Africa:

- ◆ Colonial Period (1860-1910)
- ◆ Union of South Africa (1910-1948)
- ◆ Apartheid era (1948-1994)
- ◆ Post-apartheid period (1994 to date)

#### 1. Colonial Period (1860-1948)

The Indian South Africans faced severe problems during the period of their first settlement in South Africa starting from 1860's. Indian South Africans went to South Africa as indentured labourers but treated like slaves in the hands of their so-called masters. They worked very hard to meet their daily basic needs. Indians were forced to work in a very derogatory working condition and the owners of agricultural industries/sugarcane plantation factories forced them to work for the whole day in the industries and even some of them were working in the night time. Indians are lived in a very unhealthy and hazardous condition in the slum areas of British Colony of KwaZulu Natal, because of the fact that they haven't their own land in their host land country. Indians are called as "coolies" by their White recruiters and they also face inhuman treatment in the hands of their so-called masters. In the words of Archana Shah, "the indentured laborers were overworked and malnourished, and had to endure squalid living conditions described by historians in such terms as 'primitive', 'brutal', 'inhuman', and 'akin to slavery'." (Shah, 2012)

Indians are considered as blacks along with African community peoples by the then British colonial government of South Africa. The colonial government had a strong believe that the Whites were born to rule and thus, they had every right

to rule the blacks and as the new entrants in South Africa Indians were worst marginalized with no one voice on their marginalization in the country.

## **2. Union of South Africa (1910-1948)**

In 1910, South Africa formed by the previously independent states. The system of Indian indentureship ended on 12 March 1917 with the passage in the British Parliament of the Defense of India Act, however, after the invalidation of indentureship only 23% of those Indian migrants returned to their homeland. The remaining Indian population considered as "second class citizens" and again faced the same discriminations as they faced before the "abolishment of indentureship".

## **3. Apartheid Era (1948-1994)**

In 1948, the Nationalist Party (NP) in South Africa came into power and they also enshrined the discriminatory rules and regulations which are existed in the country from the colonial period. The major setback for the Indian identity comes through the election campaign of the NP with the agenda of repatriation of Indians. In their election manifesto, the NP declared that, "Indians are a foreign and outlandish element which is inassimilable, and vowed to repatriate as many Indians as possible." The racial segregation policies, instituted from the starting of the apartheid era in 1948. The NP Government and its racial discrimination policies completely breakdown the backbone of other race group peoples along with Indians. All these discriminatory policies of the government are visible in the every aspect of South African society. For instance, the sanctioning of "White only" policy in the employment, education and economic sector marked specified areas for the other race group peoples where they could settle, buy property and do their business, in which schools or universities they sent their children or wards and even also restricted to go hospitals which was built for Whites.

The worst form of apartheid discriminations against Indians comes through the infamous "Group Areas Act, 1950". Indians are restricted to a specific area which was marked for them by the racial government and under this act, Indians are not only restricted to own land in that particular area but also their all economic activities such as trade and business were restricted to that particular area. According to Prof. Bhana, "the NP government identified four racial groups: Whites, Blacks, Coloreds and Indians. In theory each racial group would have their separate facilities where they could enjoy unfettered rights. However, in practice, the best facilities were reserved for Whites and other groups had vastly inferior facilities. For instance, the Whites who comprised about 20% of the country's population were allocated 80% of the land in South Africa." (Bhana) The NP government enforced a strong job reservation policy through this Whites were able to hold prominent positions in different sectors of South African society such as social, economic and political. Whites were earned more and a higher standard of living as compare to Indians and other race groups.

## **4. Post-apartheid period (1994 to date)**

The apartheid racial discriminations policies were abolished in 1994 and with these the first democratic

government was elected in South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC) emerged as a victorious party and elected to form government with Nelson Mandela as their first black President of the country. All previous discrimination policies were started to abolish in a systematic way by the ANC government from 1994. The government further taken step to empowering the previously marginalized sections with some new policies such as "Affirmative Action (AA)" and "Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)" through the "Employment Equity Act (EEA)" of 1998. During both the colonial rule and apartheid era, the local blacks discriminated by the many companies due to prevailing discriminatory laws during those periods. Thus, the main focus through AA policies is the upliftment of the black people, and the government also defined that only people of African origin come under the category of blacks. Indians are not considered as black enough to get the facilities and benefits provided by the AA. Thus, the AA policies was strongly criticized by the Indians and due to this opposition President Nelson Mandela and his ministers given the assurance that Indians along with colored peoples, treated equally with African Blacks under AA policies.

However, despite being the historically disadvantaged community the Indians were not benefited from the AA policies as they are viewed as being "not black enough." There is a popular saying among the Indians are, they were discriminated during apartheid era for not White enough and now they considered as not black enough to get the benefits of AA policies. Indians were marginalized despite of the assurances provide by ANC government, for instance, University of Durban-Westville, started to increase the number of black students in the university after the regulations of AA, but, before that Indian origin students were hold the majority in the university. The University of Natal started to take only African blacks and neglected Indian students, despite of the fact that previously Indian students were accepted more as compare to blacks. Thus, against this discrimination of Indians, an Indian community politician Amichand Rajbansi, formed Minority Front Party, the main motto of the party was to fight against the all discriminatory policies against the Indians and demand for their social justice in their host land.

Many Indians do not know their native language due to the previous system of education in which Afrikaans and English were get emphasis as the medium of study for so many years in the schools. Still many Indians do not know their roots in India because of their lost Indian Identity in a White dominated society.

There is a significant growth in the crime rate in South Africa in recent days and Indians were the worst victims of the growing crime rate in the country. In the words of Dr. Praveena Singh-Kaw, "They are subject to robbery rape, murder. Our children are no longer safe, our education system and economy have deteriorated, and our homes are subject to invasion". (Shah 2012)

According to Dr. Anand Singh, "For the first time, middle-class Indians were being exposed to the degree of deprivation, unemployment, and crime that was already part of the lifestyle of African townships almost since their inception. The gun

licenses by the Indian residents increased drastically... houses have fast been transformed into near fortresses... it radically altered the entire landscape of these areas... widely generated fear of walking on the streets alone...and substantially reduced the value of property." (Singh, 2005) The post-apartheid government is failing to control the growing crime rate in the country, which is further enhanced to insecurity and fear in the country.

According to Prof. Dubey, another major challenge to Indian identity in the new South Africa is their failure of integration in the country, despite being the citizens of the country. (Dubey, 2010) Black peoples seen them as the beneficiaries of apartheid racial policies along with the Whites and still not accepted them as their own people.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite all these challenges before the Indians in the rainbow nation, Indian community always considers South

Africa as their home and they are the proud citizens of the country. The post-apartheid governments also trying to reduce the crime rate in the country and provide all kind of security to their citizens. In 2010, former Finance Minister of South Africa, Pravin Gordhan announced "an increase in funding for the police, courts and military over the next three years" for the prevention of crime in the country.

With their greater wealth and superior education, Indians also gets the advantage in the recent period, able to access many sectors in the country such as trade and business for their social and economic upliftment. They also now permitted to going other areas of the country for reside or doing business which was restricted for them under colonial rule and apartheid government. New opportunities are open up for the Indians as many White peoples left the country. The post-apartheid governments also permitted Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu, Telugu, Tamil and Gujarati etc. as the medium of instruction for Indian students in African schools.

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