

Caste among the Indian Diaspora in Africa

SURAJ MILIND YENGDE

Caste consciousness is common among the Indian diaspora worldwide, so is the practice of the caste system. This article looks at the Indian diaspora in Africa and tries to understand how Indians of various castes responded to life there. It argues that caste has changed form in the new social and geographical context but it has not been eliminated. A majority of the Indian diaspora in Africa still looks to marry within caste and endorses caste identities. This article also touches upon Gandhi's role in organising Indians in South Africa and tries to interrogate his understanding of the caste scenario there.

This article tries to contextualise the issue of caste among the Indian diaspora in Africa, a topic not discussed as much as that of caste in the Indian diaspora in North America and Europe. Caste identity has been central to the ways in which Indians overseas organised their society. The continuous migration of Indians means that there are clustered caste groups amongst the modern Indian diaspora in Africa, North America and Europe.

Migration to Africa in the 19th century was part of the broader expansion of the British colonial empire. This was supplemented by the mobility of Indian labour and trade to Africa. This article will present the diverse representations of caste among Indians in South and East Africa. It will also analyse Mahatma Gandhi's sociopolitical activism in understanding caste. In doing so, it will try to understand whether Gandhi really cared about caste or he was totally ignorant of caste practices in South Africa. The arguments in this article will be supported with broader arguments from literature that draws on empirical findings from South Africa.

Discussions on the Indian diaspora or the Indian existence in Africa inevitably veer towards analysis of indentured labourers, the contribution of Indians towards Africa's political economy or Gandhi's activism. Historians have played a key role in shaping the trajectory of Indian studies in Africa. Indian/South Asian presence in Africa is a widely-researched field of study and scholars covering Indians in Africa aim to understand a wide array of topics through interdisciplinary investigation: history, anthropology and literature are some disciplines that have guided research on the contours of the Indian diaspora in Africa.

This is not a new subject in diaspora studies. There are many studies relating to the Indian Ocean and its relation to the diaspora (Chaudhuri 1985; Bose 2006; Pearson 2007; Metcalf 2007; Carter 1996). The ever-growing tribe of Indian ocean scholars includes Isabel Hofmeyr, Pamila Gupta and Clare Anderson. East African literary stalwarts have also focused on the historically regressive space of littorals that connected Africa and India to the world.

This space is in tandem with global political authority. Islands like Mauritius with their creolised and French assimilated identity have Indian roots. They look up to India to certify their religious and caste practices, as do many other diaspora nations.

South Africa appears to be both different and similar in this respect. Indians were categorised as a "race" by South Africa's oppressive regime, thus uniting them in their fight against this regime. Indian activism in South Africa, and Africa in general, is premised on, and inspired by Gandhi's ideals—apart from a few socialist believers. The Kenyan-Indian labour unionist Makhan Singh, the Patels in Uganda, the flamboyant leftist Dadoo, and the Naickers in South Africa are widely respected and hailed for their political contributions.

Ramgarhias, Khojas and Mochis

The Austrian-born Hindu sadhu Agehanda Bharati from Syracuse University studied the social and religious practices among East African Indian communities. His work (Bharati 1972) takes a critical look on Indians in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Bharati studied Hindu literature in detail—and Muslim and Sikh religious practices as well—to show the reinvention of caste practices in Africa.

The Ramgarhias are often undermined and discriminated in India and elsewhere by the Jats who dominate Sikhism today. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is often disregarded when it comes to caste practices. The Ramgarhias are now a part of the diaspora having reclaimed their religious identity by taking advantage of economic opportunities. The

Suraj Milind Yengde (suraj.yengde@gmail.com) is with the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

establishment of Ramgarhia gurdwaras in East Africa—and the United Kingdom (UK) and continental Europe—is part of the community's effort to carve a separate identity through new institutions. Marriages, religious sermons, charity and fundraising drives among the community are conducted by appointed preachers of the caste. In Tanzania's largest city, Dar-es-Salaam, the Ramgarhia gurdwara is referred to as an Indian temple that dissolves the caste identity attached to a Jat Sikh gurdwara. Similarly, in Nairobi one is impressed with the massive infrastructure of the Ramgarhia's influential institutions. After seeing this, one wonders if it is easier to dissolve caste in a foreign land or caste becomes rigidly invincible forcing one to raise separate community centres for each caste.

The Bohra, Memon and Khoja groups of Indian Muslim immigrants predominantly from Gujarat have settled in East and South Africa while the leader of the Ismaili community, the Agha Khan, ordered his followers to settle in Africa and contribute to the African cause by establishing businesses. The Ismailis followed his directions and the community's success in East Africa is palpable in fields like housing, retail, manufacturing, medical and other professional services. The Agha Khan chain of hospitals is prominent all over East Africa.

However, the caste/sect dynamics do not disappear in light of the community's success. Marriages very often are encouraged within the community, dress codes are adhered to, and mosques endorse the religiously divided caste/sect system. Gijsbert Oonk (2013) explains how clothes, food habits, and marriages influence community formation in East Africa. Even today, Indian Muslims in South Africa look to their homeland to find a suitable bride or groom for their children. Parents desire partners with good morals and *paak* (pure) nature for their children. An aspect that is not discussed openly is the search for a partner from within the caste fraternity. This is true of both Muslim and Hindu communities.

The word "Mochi" is often denounced as a pejorative and someone who calls another by that term in say, Uttar Pradesh

in India, could well be prosecuted. However, in Cape Town the Mochis have worked hard to become an influential community. Uma Mesthrie, a South African historian, has traced the history of the Mochi community and its development. Her research on the shoemakers in Cape Town reveals how a community, stigmatised as an outcaste in India, can make the best of the opportunities in a foreign land to become wealthy and prosperous.

The shoemakers' influence haunted the Hindu Council because they were considered to belong to a lower caste. Following a legal battle, the Mochis built a temple and disassociated from the dominant Hindu Council.

Once they started getting wealthy, the Mochis in South Africa insisted that they were Kshatriyas and not low-caste cobblers. Mesthrie has reproduced the arguments proposed by the Mochi Mandal. It was later dissolved to form the South African Kshatriya Mahasabha. The *Daan Data Granth* published in 1995 says:

The true fact is that our ancestry is of the Kshatriya origin. However over the centuries we have taken to different professions and work...

In the thirteenth century AD the Muslims invaded India and our ancestors lost the battle. The Muslims annexed Sind in the beginning and started to convert Hindus into Muslims. Our ancestors who had the pride and dignity to be true Hindus, fled their land and trekked forward towards the South of India, finally landing at Kutch, Saurashtra, and various parts of Gujarat. Our ancestors under no circumstances conceded to convert to the Islamic religion and thus, took refuge with the Harijans in each village or town, where they finally settled.

...

The Harijan community would gather all dead animals in the villages and use their skins for various household functions. From these skins our ancestors made their first pair of shoes, known as 'mojadi' in those times. Mojadi making soon developed into a trade and the mojadi makers soon became known as 'Mochis'. This is how we, Kshatriyas, came to be known as Mochis. Even today, we have the traditional Kshatriya surnames of 'Parmar', 'Chavda', 'Chudasama', 'Gohil', 'Chauhan', 'Solanki' and many others. We do not denounce the fact that we are born into a Mochi home and we are extremely proud of this fact (Mesthrie 2012: 178).

They even changed their surnames and names in pursuance of the custom followed by untouchable or low-caste communities to get away from their low-caste identity. They adopted Rajput

surnames like Chauhan, Chavda, Jagas and claimed Kshatriya status. They also turned to vegetarianism, essentially a higher caste (Brahminical) tradition.

Post indenture, they continued working in the shoemaking business and came to be called Mochis. This was apparently a condescending term for the affluent Mochis in the later years in South Africa. The books *Hindu Charmakar Jati*, *Hindu Khatik Jati* and *Hindu Valmiki Jati*, address this phenomenon. They argue that cobblers and other low-caste untouchable groups are in fact part of the Hindu fold and were pushed to lowly status by Muslim invaders. For the Mochis in Africa this argument seemed to strike a chord.

Preserving Caste

Bharati (1972) has written about the purification process in East Africa among Indian low-caste communities who became economically well off after a few generations. They were uncomfortable about their "low caste" status. In India, in order to secure Hindu interests, certain Hindu organisations offered higher caste status to those performing havan and donating to temple trusts. Caste was for sale. Similar instances can be seen in South Africa as well. The case of the Mochi caste illustrates this. The untouchables who were threatened by the Brahminical Hindus to not cross the *Kala Pani*, a few decades ago, were, by the beginning of the 20th century, prosperous Hindus who could be offered a higher caste status with a procession and a thread around the neck.

Historians have shed light on the introduction of Vedic dharma practices by Arya Samajists and the influential Swaminarayan sect at the beginning of the 20th century. These practices also took place in most of the Indian residential territories in Africa, Australasia and Caribbean Islands. Tejaswini Niranjana's (2006) work helps us understand the social practices of Indians in Trinidad. Diaspora scholars like Brij Lal, V S Naipaul, Surendra Bhana, Fatima Meer, Dharam and Yash Ghai, Bill Freund, Kalpana Hiralal, and Indian scholars like Ajay Dubey have focused on Indian lives, political participation and cultural discourses in Africa.

Muslim groups like the Darul Uloom Deoband established madrasas to propagate their version of Islam in the south Asian religious context. Shared religious beliefs helped Indian Muslims forge an identity in South Africa. This identity became stronger as Muslim leaders of the Indian community participated in the anti-government struggle. Indian Muslims leaders like Yusuf Dadoo, Nana and Ahmed Kathrada played a prominent role in the struggle against racism. The children and grandchildren of this generation of Muslims then started a movement for a pure Islam. Gender separation and discrimination of the earlier versions of the religion were done away with. I was taken to a mosque in Johannesburg by my friend Shehnaz, an Indian Muslim student. She wanted me to experience a mosque not ordered on caste, gender and racial lines. It is one of the controversial mosques which allow women to enter the same space as male worshippers with an apparent Islamic divide of purdah.

Gandhi and the Caste Debate

Gandhi, for some, is a controversial figure who approved the hierarchical system in Indian society and defended it on various platforms. For others, he was a leader of the masses who wanted to change society. Whatever the case may be, Gandhi cannot be studied without studying his understanding of the caste system among Indians in South Africa. As much as Gandhi's objective to eradicate caste discrimination is lauded in Indian context, there are interesting questions on his role in the perpetuation of the caste system amongst Indians in South Africa.

Gandhi was admittedly ignorant of the untouchables' existence in South Africa. Prior to his departure to India, Gandhi was invited by the Dhed community for a farewell function on 9 July 1914. In his "Speech at Reception by Dheds" he says,

Had I known their caste, I would have certainly come earlier. I feel proud that I am now meeting [members of] this caste. They are our own brethren, and to regard them with the slightest disrespect not only argues our own unworthiness but is morally wrong, for it is contrary to the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita* (CWMG 14 1999: 214–15).

He naively confesses his ignorance towards the existing diversity of caste

representation among the Indian community. His call to Indians to not disrespect "these people"—indicating the Dhed community—suggests the existing caste hierarchy among Indians in South Africa. Gandhi had to face social challenges in South Africa, one of which was the rooted caste system. One south Indian untouchable indentured-turned Christian, Lazarus, kept on writing to Gandhi about issues of caste after he returned to India. Gandhi did not forget the episode pertaining to the Dheds and the *Constitution for Ashram* in 1915 has a pledge against untouchability. He also mentioned the Dheds, along with another untouchable caste, Bhangis, in his vows (CWMG 14 1999: 453–57).

Back in South Africa it is true that the 20th century Indian generation did not discuss or engage with the issue of caste as much as they did with race. This is due to the racial profiling imposed by the white authority. Gandhi brought a sense of nationalism to every Indian in India; such nationalism overlooked unequal social realities. Something similar happened in South Africa; leaders belonging to the privileged caste groups dominated Indian politics. Gandhi's only ideal was to fight against outside oppression and he did this with determination and vigour. Gandhi was the leader of the well-to-do bourgeois Indians in South Africa. He fought for the rights of Indians with a conservative political idiom.

Gandhi had not yet attained political maturity when he started accusing Indians (indentured) of being filthy and indulging in barbaric non-Indian practices. This in turn defined the class/regional divide. Even today, Indians in South Africa are divided into two groups, the north Indians as "Hindi" and the south Indians as "Tamil." The fragmented identity of Indians is one of the problems in addressing the social structure of the Indian diaspora. Gandhi who was not well-versed in caste practices then, did not consider caste a foreground of the subtle battle. His disinterest towards the lower-caste Indians was a political failing. Until his last years in South Africa, Gandhi aligned only with the passenger (traders and the non-indentured) Indians and rarely engaged with the indentured

Indians. Maureen Swan (1985) writes that indentured Indians were barely acknowledged till the last days of Gandhi's few passive resistance campaigns.

This hostility continued and till date the poor Indians, mostly in Natal, live in shanty townships. Ashwin Desai (2002) reveals the neglected past, and the grim present, of this community. Thomas Blom Hansen (2012) has also written about the underprivileged Indians and the class divide among poor Indians in Chatsworth. Bill Freund, Goolam Vahed and other scholars in Natal have also worked on this issue.

Gandhi's successors in South Africa continued his legacy. When Ahmed Kathrada, a senior Indian leader of South Africa, was asked about the caste system, he remarked with some discomfiture, "Please don't bring Indian problems here." On being asked about Gandhi's denunciation of the caste system in India, he was quick to point out to B R Ambedkar's struggle. Ambedkar's struggle sadly did not reach Africa perhaps due to the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party's non-interested "anti-caste, anti-race" diplomacy. However, the critical caste lens has not been turned on Gandhi's struggle in Africa by scholars so far. Even a complementary comparative study about Gandhi's years in South Africa and the anti-caste movement in India during the same era might be revealing.

Losing Caste on the Way

Travelling overseas was considered sinful and a certain way of "losing caste." Despite this many untouchable and low-caste communities along with a few Brahmins and other upper castes undertook the journey. The upper castes went on to become priests or teachers or clerks while jobs requiring hard labour were destined for the low-caste untouchables.

A well-known story will illustrate this. As the tale goes, during the late 19th century, indentured Indians were being transported to work in a dhow to the plantation sites in Natal. Often the indentured consisted of low caste, untouchable Indians along with a few upper castes. A Brahmin refused to share food with the untouchables in the dhow. He had his food prepared in separate utensils.

As the journey took about three months, it was a long time to cohabit without intermixing. One day a strong wave struck the dhow and all the food got mixed. The Brahmin having no other option had to eat the food which was cooked and touched by the untouchables. One Brahmin indentured labourer told his tale to the Wragg Commission (1885–1887) that was appointed in 1885 to investigate the conditions and complaints of Indian immigrants in Natal.

I am going back to India to see my father and brothers and sisters. Here I have eaten with different people and broken my caste. My friends in India will not even eat with me, so I must come back. When I go back I will ask my mother to cook, but I will tell what I have done; she will cook, and I will eat outside; she will not allow me to eat inside where she and my relative are (Desai and Vahed 2010: 177–78).

There was, of course, a project of purifying and reconverting to the higher caste order in East Africa; but, this privilege was only for wealthy Indians, irrespective of caste. A Brahmin with indentured status was not accepted back into the society. He was ostracised as much as the indentured of lower castes.

High caste indentured labourers regarded Africans as more acceptable than the lower-caste Indians. In one instance, an indentured of a higher caste preferred an African woman to a lower caste Indian woman when it came to looking after his children.

Another story of an untouchable sirdar in Natal plantation is recorded in the archives. They were recruited to maintain law and order. One had to be well-built to qualify as a sirdar. One of the sirdars had to investigate a Brahmin's household as part of his routine task. He entered and started touching various items in the house. The Brahmin is reported to have complained against the sirdar since his mere touch would "pollute" the gods in his house. Here is another sirdar from South Africa, Bhagvana, speaking about his experience after he returned to India.

Now, for the next five years, these people under me can't even squeak. Every dog has its day. What happened to me I still remember vividly, and won't forget for the rest of my life (Lal 2012: 52).

Caste fights often broke out on plantation sites. Many unrecorded events of

caste atrocities did not make it to the papers now in the archives.

Since the British needed cheap labour to work the plantations they had acquired from the Dutch settlers in South Africa, the untouchable, low-caste community exceeded 50% of the indentured population. Desai and Vahed (2010), however, explain that the indentured gave wrong information about their castes, because the authorities did not want Brahmins and Muslims as indentured labourers. Therefore exact figures are hard to come by. Surendra Bhana (1991) has studied ship records to map caste-wise representation of Indians. These records give us a fair idea about Indian communities who moved to Africa to get away from the caste atrocities. In some instances, Brahmins recorded their caste as Jat in order to be recruited on the plantation sites. Many also contended that they had lost their caste and that it had disappeared in Africa. But many scholars show that while caste was compromised, it did not disappear.

The younger generation of Indians in South Africa are certain that caste is a part of their lives. Many Indians in South Africa subscribe to matrimonial websites in India and often consult relatives in India. As some scholars in Africa argue, caste was not eliminated. It was just compromised. Empirical evidence suggests caste consciousness exists among Indians in South Africa. There have been little effort by the Indian community to discuss the caste issue; perhaps the ones who can discuss it are the ones who do not want to, because they are very much part of the caste system.

Conclusions

Caste changed forms and adopted an evolved identity through hybridisation within a new social and geographical context. Although the rigid caste practices in India are not duplicated in Africa, the essence and spirit of caste persists. The Indian diaspora in Africa generally condemns and distances itself from caste-ridden, poor, sexist, filthy, loud and unequal India. However, the ideology of degraded inequality sustains in a different form.

Caste has to be studied with fresh anthropological and historical tools.

Scholars need to conduct comprehensive research on the caste system, in conjunction with theoretical models used to study the African tribe and clan system. A Valmiki community activist in the UK once told me,

Caste migrates with you. It will be with you and your generations to come. No one can claim that we do not have caste here (overseas). Caste is everywhere, wherever Indians are ask them what is your caste and they will tell you. They have the idea of their belonging and they impose this through their practices.¹

Caste obviously transcends geography and takes on new forms feeding on native practices, like a parasite.

NOTE

- 1 Interview, President Valmiki community, Southall, 12 March 2012.

REFERENCES

- Bhana, Surendra (1991): *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal, 1860–1902: A Study Based On Ships' Lists*, New Delhi: Promilla.
- Bharati, Aagehananda (1972): *The Asians in East Africa: Jayhind and Uhuru*, Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Bose, Sugata (2006): *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carter, Marina (1996): *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*, Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Chaudhari, K N (1985): *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Desai, Ashwin (2002): *We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Desai, Ashwin and G Vahed (2010): *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860–1914*, Pretoria: HSRP Press.
- Desai, A and G Vahed (eds) (2013): *Chatsworth. The Making of a South African Township*, Scottsville: UKZN Press.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom (2012): *Melancholia of Freedom*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lal, V Brij (2012): *Chalo Jahaji on a Journey through Indenture in Fiji*, Canberra: ANU Press.
- Mesthrie, Uma (2012): "Gujarati Shoemakers in Twentieth-Century Cape Town: Family, Gender, Caste and Community," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38:1, 167–82.
- Metcalfe, Thomas (2007): *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini (2006): *Mobilizing India: Women, Music, and Migration between India and Trinidad*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Oonk, Gijsbert (2013): *Settled Strangers Asian Business Elites in East Africa (1800–2000)*, New Delhi: Sage.
- Pearson, Michael (2007): *The Indian Ocean*, London: Routledge.
- Swan, Maureen (1985): *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG) Vol 14* (1999): New Delhi: Electronic Book, Publications Division Government of India.