

**Is there an Indian Question in Post-Apartheid South Africa?
A review of the period leading to the second democratic elections**

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The Indian¹ vote and its underlying Indian question was at the centre of the debate during the 1999 South African general elections campaign. Like the Coloured vote, the main political parties included the Indian vote as central to their campaign. Before we try to understand whether there is a so-called Indian question² in post-apartheid South Africa, we will attempt to sketch a profile of this segment of the South African Population. This will help us understand the voting patterns of South Africans since Indians form an integral part of the population. The mere fact that they have been singled out during this campaign might be an indication of their status and perceptions in a South Africa supposedly rid of racial and ethnic affiliations enforced by the apartheid regime. We will review several surveys conducted during the year preceding the second general democratic elections, and extract information pertaining to the Indians' declared intentions of vote. We will then try to establish voting patterns, where possible. Foremost in this article, is the assessment of the so-called Indian question, as it re-surfaced during the electoral period.

The 1996 Census

For the first time ever in South African history, the census of 1996 – the results of which have been published in July 1999 – allows us to sketch a rather accurate profile of the Indians. We are now able to assess the actual size of this population segment, as well as the various socio-economic groups of which it is composed. The apartheid census only had rough estimates of the numerical size of each ethnic group as defined in the Population Registration Act of 1950, which formed a cornerstone of the apartheid policy. This census did not include any meaningful socio-economic data. The introduction to the *Census in Brief*³ report tacitly draws attention to this difference: "In October 1996, South Africans were counted for the first time as citizens of a democracy. More than 100 000 people were employed to collect information on persons and households throughout the country, using a uniform methodology".

The criteria employed were the same as the major classification categories that were reflected by the Population Registration Act of 1950: African/Black, Coloured, Indian/Asian, White, unspecified/other⁴. The reasons underlying the choice of using population categories defined by the erstwhile apartheid state, do not fall within the ambit of this article. Despite any reservations that one may have about the chosen group labels, they nonetheless function as an invaluable tool for the State to address the crucial issues of social imbalances and the need for redressingsocio-economic problems.

It is important to observe that the *Census in Brief* uses Indian and Indian/Asian interchangeably, without any form of explanation. This reproduces the category used by the apartheid classification system, which was to subsume the Chinese component of the population, no matter how small, as an integral part of the Indian category. For the sake of this exercise, we will not question this choice and will accept the criteria and figures used in the latest census, the first of its kind in South Africa.

A socio-economic profile of the Indians

We have extracted the necessary data from the national census publication to present up as comprehensive a profile as possible for the purposes of this article. The South African population can be broken up in the following manner: Africans/Blacks represent 76.7% of the population, Whites form 10.9%, Coloureds constitute 8.9%, Indians make up 2.6% while the unspecified/other category of 0.9% constitutes the balance.

There are 1 045 596 Indians, of which 790 813, i.e. 75.63% live in the province of Kwazulu-Natal, 15.43% in Gauteng, 1.25% in Mpumalanga, 0.97% in the North West, 0.53% in the Northern Province, 1.85% in the Eastern Cape, 3.86% in the Western Cape, 0.27% in the Free State and 0.22% in the Northern Cape.

National distribution of the Indian group(percentages of the total Indian group)

(chart here)

From this chart, it is obvious that the vast majority of Indians, as a result of historical factors live in Kwazulu-Natal. This is an important factor in understanding the political concerns and focus of campaigning parties for the 1999 general elections. Although the Indian group in Kwazulu-Natal only represents 9.39% of the province's population, this Indian segment represents 75.63% of the total Indian population of South Africa. Since the second largest concentration of Indians being in Gauteng (15.43%), we will focus our study of the Indian vote on these two provinces.

The purpose of this first attempt at sketching a profile of the Indian population of South Africa is to try to understand who this segment represents. Many researchers have written about the so-called Indians, assuming many of the parameters composing this population. This was done thus far in the almost complete absence of any meaningful national data, except for that provided by the apartheid state, which only concentrated on certain aspects of the Indian population (namely estimated numerical size, religious affiliations and vernacular languages) for the purpose of segregation. Even attempts by independent researchers to establish a socio-economic profile of the Indians remained an isolated and indeed a limited exercise since the data available was more regional than national. Researchers studied the impact that the discriminatory laws had on the Indians, and especially on the Indian working class. It was not until the post-apartheid era that it became possible to put the Indian population into perspective, and into the larger font of the South African Nation.

We have extracted data pertaining to where the majority of Indians are concentrated, the kind of dwellings they live in, their access to basic resources, their level of education, and their income and unemployment levels.

Households:

A household, as defined in the Census in Brief, consists of a single person or a group of people who live together for at least four nights a week, eat from the same pot, and who share resources. Special attention was given in Census '96 concerning the exact type of dwelling a household occupies, in order to, among other concerns, address the question of distribution of resources and equipment. From the 12 categories of dwellings used in the census, we have selected the ones occupied by most Indians and occupied by the smallest number of Indians.

60% of Indian households live in a house or a brick structure on a separate stand or yard. This means a family home, regardless of the size and the number of people forming the household.

0.44% of Indian households live in informal dwellings, shacks - eg. in an informal/squatter settlement.

In the same categories, the national averages are respectively: 47.8% living in a family home (the majority of South African households) and 11.58% living in informal/squatter settlements.

Access to energy resources

97% of Indian households have access to electricity directly from the authority for cooking, heating and lighting purposes vs. a national average of 49.47% which reflects the uneven distribution of access to energy resources: 33.74% to Africans and 96.6% to Whites. As far as access to water is concerned, 97.6% of Indian households have direct access to water through a tap inside their dwelling, vs. a national average of 44.7% (Africans 27.3% - Whites 96.4%).

Education

Census '96 provides figures on the levels of education of the entire population. We have retained three variables in order to sketch a rough educational profile of the Indians:

- Attendance at an educational institution (5-24 years) on a full-time basis: 66.36% of Indians vs. a national count of 68%
- Higher education: All education undertaken by those who have completed their Standard 10 (grade 12) at accredited institutions. Certificates, degrees, and diplomas issued by an accredited institution are all regarded as examples of higher educational qualifications.
10% of Indians vs. a national count of 6.2% (whites 24.1% and Africans 3%)
- - No education at all:
6.5% of Indians vs. a national count of 19.3% (1.2% of Whites and 24.3% of Africans)

Unemployment

In the economically active segment (15-65 years) excluding institutions (institutions are communal temporary, semi-permanent or living arrangements for people in special circumstances, for example, prisons, police cells, boarding schools, homes for the aged or the disabled, hotels and hospitals):

Income

The individual monthly income amongst the employed (15-65 years) falls, for most Indians within the R1501-R2500 bracket and represent 21% of the Indian segment, vs. the national count for this category of 13%. In the same income bracket, Africans represent 11.73%. 1.5% of Indians fall into the lowest income bracket of R1-R200, together with the White group, vs. 11.2% in the African group.

It would be rather reductionist and indeed erroneous on our part to claim that we could have drawn a comprehensive profile of the Indian population from the raw data contained in the *Census in Brief*. Ours is a brief sketch from which we can nevertheless observe the following: the geographical distribution of the Indians almost entirely derives from their 139 year-old history in South Africa.⁵

From the variables that we have selected, one could hastily conclude that the Indian population, being on or above the national average, is a privileged segment of the South African population. However, one has to take into account that any national average in the South African context emerges from a very wide spectrum, ranging from total deprivation to extreme wealth. The national average of this spectrum hardly becomes representative in the sense that the majority of people live in the deprivation end of the spectrum. One can nonetheless observe that the figures reveal that emphasis the Indians place on education. From the figures, one can see a population relatively advantaged in the South African context, that in a way reveals the apartheid State's design of dividing its population hierarchically through its access to different levels of resources

The Indian question in the 1999 general elections campaign

During the 1999 general elections campaign, some parties and high profile politicians actually made statements about the Indian Question, which surprised some South Africans. One could indeed have assumed or expected that in the context of the second democratic elections of post-apartheid South Africa, such notions should not have featured on any electoral agenda. The issue of nation-building at the heart of the political debate was marred by concerns about minority voting patterns. The Indian population – especially in Kwazulu-Natal where it represents 9.4% of the total provincial population – was singled out by the ANC⁶. In a province where the ANC is challenged by the Zulu majority IFP, the Indian electorate could be the joker.

Thabo Mbeki, President of the ANC and candidate for the presidency of the country, wrote an open letter to Indians, telling them that have a vital role to play in the long walk to the socio-economic and political transformation of South Africa. "You, the African-Indians⁷", he said, "are a people who have demonstrated enormous talent, initiative and commitment to the success of your families and your country, South Africa." He further went on to say: "Our success as a winning nation will depend, in good measure, on the valuable contribution you are making, and will continue to make to the task of reconstruction and development of our country." By telling Indians that they should call themselves African-Indians, Thabo Mbeki was actually stating that there IS an Indian question, that there IS an Indian identity issue, that there IS a population with one foot in Africa and the other in

then weighted back to household demographics estimated by Statistics SA. We have extracted the data pertaining to the Indians and have drawn the following range of patterns and concerns. "The average Indian", according to *Reality Check*:

- More than any other group, classifies him/herself first by race (55%)
- Feels unable to influence developments in the community (59%)
- Believes women have been discriminated against and need special help (81%)
- Thinks crime has escalated (95%) and believes in the death penalty (92%)
- Says it has become harder for people to find jobs (94%)
- Thinks the economy is getting worse (88%) and feels poorer than before (79%)
- Would not like a child to marry somebody of another race (59%)
- Believes education has deteriorated (84%) and will continue getting worse (69%)
- Mostly expects the government to do the right thing (68%)
- Is not sure (48%) or worried (36%) about South Africa under Mbeki

In attempts to establish intended voting patterns, the *Human Sciences Research Council* of South Africa conducted two surveys, one in November 1998 – the EPOP – and the second one in March 1999 - the Omnibus survey - in which a racial group breakdown helps us to establish the evolution or the intentions of the Indians. Once again, the group in which Indians were to be surveyed is labelled as 'Asians'.

Question: If there were an election tomorrow, which party would you support?

	November 1998	March 1999
ANC	6.1%	26.7%
NP/NNP	51.6%	26.9%
DP	7.5%	13.9%
IFP	2.2%	0.8%
ACDP	1.3%	0%
UDM	0%	2.6%
MF	-	2%
Would not vote	19.5%	3.1%
Don't know	9.3%	7.2%
Refuse/uncertain	2.5%	Refuse 16.9%

The above figures, apart from being self-explanatory, reveal that the traditionally NP support base was eroded in favour of 1) the ANC and 2) the DP. This reflects the national trend as far as the eroding of the NP/NNP's support and a substantial gain for the DP, which displaced the NNP by becoming the official opposition. From November 1998 to March 1999, there was a substantial shift in the intentions of the vote. One can also observe that the number of surveyed people who were not prepared to vote in November 1998, had indisputably dropped in March 1999, from 19.5% to 3.1%. A certain level, then, of political mobilisation of the Indian undecided electorate had been reached by March 1999. Once again, the undecided Indians were not an isolated phenomenon in South Africa. By the end of April 1999, 10% of all registered voters remained undecided as to how they would vote if an election were to be held the next day. These voters predominantly came from the ranks of those who were dissatisfied with government performance and the state of affairs in the country, and yet had not found any opposition party that they felt articulated their interests or constituted a viable alternative to the government¹⁵.

The vote

The vote is secret. There is therefore no way of knowing from the poll how individuals of selected ethnic groups voted. Since 1994, a certain degree of social mobility has entered the urban and rural space. People have acquired the democratic right to live wherever they desire. Although most people still live in the formerly apartheid-designated areas, it is impossible to determine how people voted, without scrutinising each voting district's voters roll. We have obtained the list of voting results from historically Indian areas in Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng, but realised that there is absolutely no scientific way of establishing the Indian voting patterns from those lists. In a forced sense, non scientific at all, one could use the names on the voters roll as a biased ethnic determinant, which further, would require to constitute a sample to interview. The only possible indication of an

Indian vote is to scrutinise these lists and extract the percentages received by the Minority Front. Voters choosing the Minority Front exclusively canvassed on Indian concerns and only targeted Indians.

As an example, and for the sake of this exercise, from the exhaustive list of voting districts in historically Indian-dominated areas, the Minority Front scored 8.45%, representing 21 285 votes. We therefore have to rely on provincial and national results and resort to interpretation. The Minority Front, which is the only exclusively Indian political party, won one seat in the National Assembly and XX in the Kwazulu-Natal provincial legislature. A. Rajbansi, leader of the Minority Front, crossed the floor to the ANC shortly after the elections, putting into practice the intention of his party to support the majority party. The eroding of the NNP support base in favour of the ANC and the DP, both nationally and provincially, could mean that the pre-1999 Indian NP - support base did follow the same pattern.

The apparent shift in the electoral voting pattern of the Indians in favour of the ANC and the DP is probably a due to a belief that they would be able to better negotiate their cultural identity with prominent parties rather than through an ethnic party like the Minority Front. The Indian question is not going to disappear in the foreseeable future. It is a question of how well Indians are able to integrate the Nation and at the same time retain their Indianness as South Africans. The question remains: Are they South Africans of Indian origin, Indian South Africans, African Indians or Indian Africans? For as long as they do not, in their majority, drop this hybrid hyphenated identity, they will continue to raise questions as to their identity. For as long as they hold on to a larger project that differs from the South African one, by defining their identity along cultural and religious parameters outside of South Africa, politicians will find scope to address the Indian question.

¹ The use of 'Indian' to designate a specific segment of the South African population is problematic. Should one repeatedly use the qualifier 'so-called' to distinguish them from the citizens of India? Should one use the various forms of hyphenated identities that some politicians and members within this population segment use. Should one use inverted commas to indicate the difficulties in using the term? We have considered the various options and have decided to use the term Indian for the sole purpose of consistency in this article.

² Historically, and during the apartheid era, the Indian question centred around the issue of accepting the descendants of indentured labourers and passenger Indians as part of South Africa, forcing them out or enticing them through 'lucrative' repatriation schemes, to return to India. To curtail India's intervention in the affairs of South Africa at an international level, and because of the inability of the apartheid regime to rid South Africa of its Indian component, Prime Minister Verwoerd declared, in 1961, that Indians formed a permanent population of the country.

³ Report No. 03-01-11 (1996), Statistics South Africa, July 1999, Pretoria.

⁴ The latter category of 'unspecified/other', in our opinion, could represent individuals having deliberately refused to indicate their affiliation to any ethnic group for they preferred being counted as non-hyphenated South Africans. It is quite unlikely that individuals 'forgot' to indicate it, since the Census enumerators were briefed to remind people to answer all questions.

⁵ Ebrahim-Vally, R.: "La stratification de la communauté dite indienne d'Afrique du Sud", unpublished PhD thesis, Université Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, October 1995.

⁶ As were the Coloureds in the Western Cape where the NNP was supposedly challenged by the ANC.

⁷ Thabo Mbeki, President of the ANC, open letter and speech in *Phoenix*, 25 May 1999.

⁸ Padayachee Marlan, "Mbeki engages in battle of words to secure Indian vote", *Sunday Independent*, May 30, 1999, page 8.

⁹ Mbeki Thabo, Statement by ANC President, *ANC Election News*, May 1999.

¹⁰ Khumalo Siphon, "Racist article outrage", *Daily News*, 25 March 1999.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Quoted in the *Mail and Guardian*, Moodley N., "Parties appealed to Indian Fears", May 28-June 3 1999, p. 6.

¹³ The Independent Poll was conducted in March 1999 on a random probability sample of 2322 registered voters who were likely to vote on June 2.

¹⁴ Rajbansi A., Letter to *The Post*, May 19-22, 1999, "It's making mischief to link MF with ANC".

¹⁵ Mattes Robert, "South Africa's current political environment: parties, issues, the economy, government and leaders", Press release, 24 May 1999, Idasa 1999.

These fears were the tangible fears that the ANC and its most prominent and respected members such as N. Mandela, T. Mbeki, K. Asmal and M. Valli Moosa, tried to address. Moreover, in an attempt to canvass votes for the ANC, illustrious Indians like sociologist Fatima Meer, film producer Anant Singh, sports executive Sam Ramsamy and playwright Ronnie Govender formed "The Concerned Citizens Group" during the 1999 campaign. This group, on which the ANC relied to gain Indian votes, urged the Indians to vote for the ANC. This is reflected in the following statement: "Your single vote can either condemn us as a people who side with our former oppressors, or it can redeem our reputation, established by our forefathers, as a people who stand with the oppressed and the poor: Let us reaffirm our loyalties to the country of our birth and to the vast majority of her people."¹²

The outgoing National Party government successfully canvassed the Indian vote, exploiting the very same fears of a minority. Many Indians, in the 1994 elections, voted for the National Party, out of fear of a *swart gevaar* (black peril) and of being swamped by a black majority. From 1994 to 1999, these fears have not been attenuated, and the apparent lack of political indecisiveness of the Indian masses seemed to remain. "The Post", a national Indian weekly owned by Independent Newspaper, reacted in its "Comment and Opinion" column of the 19-22 May edition to intentions of votes expressed in several pre-election polls. In an article entitled, "Will our children look back with pride?", the columnist Sathish Jaggernath virulently criticised the readership of their intentions to vote for parties other than the ANC: "If the predictions are correct, the Indian community is about to commit its most deplorable act of political suicide". Drawing on examples of Indian leadership who fought all forms of tyranny in India and in South Africa, the journalist went on to state: "The Indians who dare to vote NNP or DP will effectively be spitting upon the graves of their forefathers."

A survey conducted by Media and Marketing Research for Independent Newspapers¹³ found that to the question: "Which party do you feel cares about you?", 30% of Indians surveyed felt that the NNP did, 29% felt that no party cared about them, 16% felt that the DP did, 13% felt that the ANC cared about them whilst 0.4% put their trust in the IFP and none chose the UDM. The fears of minorities did surface during the 1999 elections campaign, across the country. The poll indicated that many voters "... (feel) alienated, especially in Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal and the Western Cape, where between 17% and 19% of voters said they believed that no political party cared for them."

The 1994 elections saw large numbers of Kwazulu-Natal Indians vote for the NP at national level and for the Minority Front led by Amichand Rajbansi at provincial level. The MF was back in action in 1999 and campaigned on an ethnic ticket to secure votes at both national and provincial level. The inability of the other political parties to address the immediate concerns of the Indians in impoverished Kwazulu-Natal areas like Chatsworth and Phoenix paved the way for A. Rajbansi to use the political vacuum. He presented his party as an effective opposition against the NNP and DP, whom he branded as "white parties", as the party capable of addressing their concerns of a disgruntled Indian population. The Minority Front however, never had the pretention or intention to rule and its leader declared at the Chatsworth and Phoenix public meetings in May 1999m, that "It (is) the policy of the MF to work with the ruling parties, whoever they were. Now they are the ANC and the IFP".¹⁴

Perceptions of Indians

The feelings that campaigning politicians tried to address in order to secure the Indian vote are reflected in several surveys conducted during the electoral campaign They are the feelings of a minority which feels threatened by a 'new order'. Even though it would be incongruous to attribute these feelings to the entire Indian population of South Africa, they were obviously shared by a substantial enough number of Indians for them to become an issue - the Indian question. Let us now look at the expression of the Indians themselves through three surveys conducted between November 1998 and March 1999.

The *Reality Check* project is a joint venture between Independent Newspapers South Africa and the Kaiser Family Foundation. Its purpose was to take stock of South Africa's new democracy from the perspective of the people. 3000 national households were surveyed. The household survey was comprised of 100 questions. Respondents were interviewed in their homes. The data was

India. At the same time, the campaigning Mbeki was trying to embrace this population by calling on their sense of responsibility and contribution to *one* nation.

An interesting anecdote about his use of the hyphenated identity of the Indians is that it raised a heated debate within some Indian circles. Some Indians complained to the then Minister of Constitutional Development, Mohamed Valli Moosa, about Mbeki's use of 'African Indians' and contested this by stating: "(we) are Indian-Africans". These Indians, it seems, preferred affiliation to the land of origin to the land they live in. What they – these Indians and Mbeki seemingly – is on a sort of hyphenated identity. The outcome of this tussle of words was that Valli Moosa informed Mbeki and the wording was reversed.⁸ Furthermore, the battle for the Indian vote resulted in an NNP poster being banned by a judge. The NNP apparently produced a poster which read: "Thabo Mbeki says the ANC does not need the Indian votes". The ANC learnt of it and had the poster banned.

In an entirely different vein, Thabo Mbeki made the following statement: "I am confident that just as the Indian community had made a telling contribution during the struggle against apartheid, so once again, it will rise to the occasion to meet this central challenge with the same dedication and commitment which this community has so courageously displayed in the past". Here, the ANC President and President-Elect draws on the leadership qualities and contributions of "Mahatma Gandhi, Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker, Nana Sita and many others"⁹. Here, the Indians are an integral part of democratic South Africa, and deservedly so. The ANC Election News of May 1999 also carried a front-page picture of then President Nelson Mandela addressing 1000 community leaders in Lenasia, a densely populated former Indian township in Gauteng. The headline read: "Indians have nothing to fear – Nelson Mandela". The then President emphasised that "... no community had sacrificed as much as the Indian community" and confirmed that "... Indians will remain an integral part of our Rainbow Nation in the future, under a new generation of ANC leaders." Mandela also urged "the Indian community not to think like a minority, but to become part of the majority," and "to support the process of change".

At a rally on 23 May 1999 in Laudium – another former Indian township in Gauteng – where Kader Asmal, then Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry and a member of the ANC Executive, opened his speech by challenging the audience on their identity: "Indians? What Indians? There are no Indians here, except for His Excellency (the Indian High Commissioner sitting in the hall). Indians are in India. There are no Indians. There are South Africans."

Addressing the Indian Fears

All major political parties, the ANC, the NNP and the DP as well as the Minority Front and the Freedom Front did at some stage during the electoral campaign either address the political identity of the Indians or appeal to what was perceived to be the "Indian fears". The Indian fears in Kwazulu-Natal were fuelled by an editorial in the IFP-owned newspaper *Ilanga*. This editorial written in Zulu, dated 23 March 1999, later led to the suspension of the editor, Amos Maphumulo. From other national and provincial newspapers, non-Zulu speakers were able to assess what the *Ilanga* "racist editorial" was about: "In a scathing anti-Indian editorial, *Ilanga* accused Indians of being responsible for the problems of Blacks, and its writer hoped for a day when an African would give birth to another Idi Amin."¹⁰ The editorial said: "... During the black-on-black riots, Indians were clandestinely inciting the clash by distributing weapons to African youths so they could fight each other so the black nation could be exterminated"¹¹.

The IFP, given that the *Ilanga* is its official mouthpiece in Kwazulu-Natal, distanced itself from the controversial hate-speech contained in the editorial by suspending the editor. On 28 March 1999, the *City Press* carried an article stating that *Ilanga* readers pledged support to the suspended editor. Until 30 March, the editor remained unrepentant. The *Natal Witness* carried an article on 30 March 1999 entitled "Suspended editor apologises", in which Amos Maphumulo was quoted as saying: "I believed I was stating a point held valid by most of our readers". Whilst the editorial created much national debate around hate speech and the dangers of singling out one minority, it did fuel further racial fears amongst the Indians of Kwazulu-Natal.