

Women Of Indian Descent In Southern Africa Author(s): KAMINI KRISHNA

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WOMEN OF INDIAN DESCENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The migration of Indians to the various countries of Southern Africa took place at different times, for different reasons along different routes. Gradually, countries in the region experienced the settlement of Indians who contributed extensively in diverse areas of activity in their adopted homes. Indian women, along with their menfolk, actively participated in various local sectors that helped them establish a firm footing in the new countries. Even during the early period in South Africa, Indian women took active part in politics aside from their involvement in the economic sector. However, the scenario was different in other countries, where women were vibrant in the economic arena, but remained silent in the political one.

KAMINI KRISHNA

INTRODUCTION

As a prelude, this article investigates the reasons behind human migration, which is often explained in terms of “push and pull” factors. According to the *World Savvy Monitor* (“Human Migration”, online at <http://worldsavvy.org>) “pushes” are the conditions in the country of origin that provide the motivation for leaving and “pulls” are the conditions in the country of destination that lure migrants to leave home. Both pushes and pulls are often closely related and hard to set apart. The decision to migrate is complex and may be cultural, economic, personal, political and/or social in nature. The causes of migration are perhaps best understood as components of a cost-benefit analysis—if the perceived benefits

outweigh the perceived costs migration is undertaken. Segmentation of the labour force contributes to migration as well. Wealthy countries develop a large service delivery industry and the jobs generated bring about a surge in demand for unskilled immigrant labour, an inevitable outcome that is usually not favoured by the native population. As long as worldwide economic development remains uneven, migratory pressures will exist. According to the International Organisation for Migration (*World Migration Report: Future Migration Building Capacities for Change*, 2010, online at <http://publications.iom.int>), there were an estimated 214 million international migrations in 2010. If growth continues at the same pace as during the last twenty years, it could reach 405 million by 2050.

According to the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, India has the second largest Diaspora in the world after China. The overseas Indian community is estimated at about 25 million, spread over every major region in the world (“Non-Resident Indians and Persons of Indian Origin”, *Wikipedia*, online at <http://en.wikipedia.org>). The present scenario of Indian migration is not a new phenomenon since migration dates back to earlier times. There were diverse reasons for Indians to migrate to Africa depending on the benefits different countries offered. Much before the British colonisation of India, Indians were found living in the coastal regions of East Africa (George Delf, *Asians in East Africa*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, p1). Many were ship owners engaged in money lending and considered masters of finance (Reginald Coupland, *East Africa and its Invaders: From the Earliest Times to the Death of Seyyid Said in 1856*, London: Oxford University Press, 1938, p27).

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THE MIGRATION OF INDIANS TO THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

The migration of Indians was furthered by the British in colonial times, as they wanted cheap labour for developing South African sugar plantations and East African railway projects. During the nineteenth century and until the end of the British Raj, much of the migration was of poor workers to other British colonies

under indentured labour arrangements. An event that triggered mass migration was the Slavery Abolition Act passed by the British parliament in 1833, which freed slave labour throughout the British colonies. This left many plantations devoid of an adequate workforce as newly freed slaves took advantage of their freedom.

South Africa

The Natal region where labourers were required for sugar plantations was home of the Zulus. The men there saw themselves as warriors and agriculture was managed by the women. Sugar plantations however needed male workers and this proved instrumental for importing labour from India. Moreover, according to Devi Moodley Rajab (“Indian Women in South Africa”, *Confluence*, 2011, online at www.confluence.org.uk) “the blacks, some of whom belonged to martial tribes were difficult to deal with”. In addition, as the local Africans were economically self-sufficient, they were unwilling to subject themselves to employment by colonial farmers. By 1840, there was also a vast movement of people from the Natal to the north for varying reasons—a phenomenon known as *Mfecane*. The migration of Indians into various parts of the continent played a pivotal role. An ongoing event for almost a hundred and fifty years, Indians found themselves transported, voluntarily or otherwise, to the British Empire’s excursions into the numerous constituent regions of Africa.

Indians arrived in South Africa in two waves between 1860 and 1911. Over a hundred and fifty thousand indentured immigrants and entrepreneurs came from Gujarat to the Natal in the mid-1870s (Surendra Bhana and Joy B Brain, *Setting Down Roots: Indian Migration in South Africa 1860–1911*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1990, p23). While 62 per cent were men, 25 per cent were women and 13 per cent children (William S Winship and Peter Brighton, “Genetic Disorder in the Indian Community of South Africa”, *South African Medical Journal*, vol101, no7, July 2011, p481). Most of the initial migrants were drawn from what are today the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu with some from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. According to THR Davenport (*South Africa: A Modern History*, London: MacMillan Press, 1987, p116) the Indians who arrived in South Africa until 1860 were mostly lower caste Hindus. Those that arrived after 1880 were called “passenger Indians”, as they paid their own travel expenses and were a community of traders mainly from Gujarat (Indian High Commission in South Africa, “The Indian

Origin Community in South Africa”, online at <http://www.indiansinsouthafrica.com>). Another social group of the educated and elite migrated as a result of the early opportunities provided by mission schools in India. They were mainly accountants, civil servants, lawyers and teachers (Maureen Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985, p185). Indians however were subjected to immense hatred from both the Whites and the native Africans due to their industrious nature and ability to compete with both communities. On one occasion, the South African leader Field Marshal Jan Smuts called them “the Asiatic cancer that had to be eliminated” (Rajab, 2011, *ibid*). There were also instances of Indians being transported by the Dutch as slaves to the Cape as early as 1771. For example, a Malayali Brahmin merchant, Kalagu Prabhu was deported to the Cape, as the Dutch believed he had conspired with Hyder Ali, the Sultan of Mysore, to overthrow the Raja of Cochin (*ibid*).

The Indian population gradually grew and at present comprises about 1.15 million or 2.5 per cent of South Africa’s total population of 45.5 million (Indian High Commission in South Africa, *ibid*). Most are descendants of indentured labourers brought by British colonisers. South Africa has the highest number of people of Indian descent on the continent (“Non-Resident Indians and Persons of Indian Origin”, *ibid*).

Durban, where Mahatma Gandhi worked as a lawyer during the early 1900s, has the highest number of Asians in Sub-Saharan Africa making it the largest “Indian” city outside India (Anahita Mukherjee, “Durban: Largest ‘Indian’ City outside India”, *The Times of India*, 23 July 2011). It should be noted that when the indentured labourers arrived in the Natal, there were women among them as well.

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East Africa and Northern Rhodesia

The induction of Indians into East Africa began in the late 1860s with the export of 30,000 Indians mainly Sikhs from the province of Punjab. Most were on a three year contract to provide labour for various public works, notably the laying of railway tracks from Mombasa on the Kenyan coast to the Ugandan

capital of Kampala, resting on the shores of Lake Victoria—a distance of 580 miles. Both skilled and unskilled Indian labourers were recruited and employed in the development of East Africa. Cecil Rhodes, who aimed to promote the growth of the British Empire in Southern Africa, appointed Harry Johnston, a company official to govern the land from a centre at Fort Jameson (now Chipata). Both men believed that the land should be ruled by the Whites, developed by the Indians and worked by the Africans (KK Virmani, *Zambia: The Dawn of Freedom*, New Delhi: Kalinga, 1988, p14). Such statements by the colonial masters sowed the seeds of anti-Indian feelings. Indians were seen in 1905 in Fort Jameson, the cultural extension of Nyasaland (now Malawi). Johnston encouraged Indian immigration to get clerks, telegraphists and traders into the country.

According to Lewis H Gann (*A History of Northern Rhodesia: Early Days to 1953*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1964, p146), settlement of Asian traders in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) first occurred at the behest of the British South African Company administration. However unlike the population of Indians in South Africa, the number of Indians was small and most were skilled artisans or business people (Joan M Haig, “From King Cross to Kew: Following the History of the Indian Zambian Community through British Imperial Archive”, *History in Africa*, vol34, no1, 2007, pp55–66). While the initial settlers were Muslims, they were soon followed by Hindu traders (Laxmi M Singhvi, “Other Countries of Africa: Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora”, online at <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in>) mostly from Gujarat (BJ Phiri, *A History of Indians in the Eastern Province of Zambia*, Lusaka, 2000, p4). The commonly held view by the administration was that the Asian traders would develop the native trade in grains, oil seeds and wax, which the European traders found troublesome and this would also protect the Africans from harsh European dealings (Gann, *ibid*). Pioneer Asian traders earned their capital locally by working arduously. They moved from door-to-door mending shoes of European customers, doing market gardening and later used the small amounts of money generated as capital to take part in the African trade. In this, they competed with pioneer White settlers, thus evoking hostility from them (Floyd Dotson and Lillian Dotson (*The Indian Minority in Zambia, Rhodesia and Malawi*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p37).

Indians came to Northern Rhodesia via Bulawayo, Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa. The main reason for the indirect route was geographical. As it was a landlocked country, migrants had to first cross its coastal neighbours. The total population in 1911 was 827,536 with only 39 Indians and there were no Indian women until that year. At the time of independence, there were 3,545,000 people

with around 8,900 Indians (“Northern Rhodesia”, *Wikipedia*, online at <http://en.wikipedia.org>). Today with the country’s population at just over 13 million, there are about 13,000 people of Indian origin or point one per cent of the total population (Indian High Commission in Zambia, “Bilateral Relations”, online at <http://www.hcizambia.com>).

Between 1888 and 1896, Britain fought against Arab slave traders (Slavers War) on the border of Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia. Sikh soldiers from India were brought to fight against Arab and Portuguese slave traders. After a tough series of fights, the slavers were subdued and in 1896 a local infantry unit called the Central African Rifles was formed. About 100 Sikhs were retained as artillerymen, instructors and post commanders (*The Soldier’s Burden*, online at <http://www.kaisercross.com>). During the Ngoni Rebellion of the late nineteenth century, the Central African Rifles

provided military support across Northern Rhodesia when it was requested (*ibid*). According to Robert G Gregory (*India and East Africa: A History of Race Relations with the British Empire 1890–1939*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, p2) the founders of the British East Africa Company, Sir William Mackinnon, Sir Donald Stewart and Sir John Kirk, helped provide an outlet for India’s surplus population. Delf (*ibid*, p14) however alleges that Indians left for greener pastures outside and knew that life in Kenya for instance held more hope of prosperity than India itself did. Indentured labourers in South Africa from impoverished backgrounds most likely opted to leave India for a better life and Indians from the trading class and some artisanal groups, certainly hoped for better opportunities in a new land.

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THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Women of the Indian sub-continent and in the Diaspora are commonly believed to be “dutiful” and “passive” (Dhianaraj R Chatty, “Sammy and Mary go to Gaol: Indian Women in South African Politics in the 1940s”, paper

presentation, Conference on Women and Gender, University of Natal, Durban, 1991). This view must be analysed and understood in the context of gender construction and relations in Indian society. Women are highly regarded and honoured in Sanskrit scriptures and the Quran, particularly as mothers but the relationship with the spouse is one of subordination. The Laws of Manu, which formed the basis of Hindu law in the ancient period, stated that a woman should not be independent. Her father has authority over her in childhood, her husband in her youth and her son in her old age (Kalpana Hiralal, “‘Docile’ Indian Women Protest, We Shall Resist: Passive Resistance in South Africa 1946–48”, *Journal of Social Sciences*, vol22, no3, 2010, p153). A loyal wife dutifully followed and worshipped her husband regardless of his character or worth (*ibid*, p158). These attitudes prevailed amongst Indian immigrants of the Diaspora. According to Julia Wells (*We Have Done with Pleading: The Women’s 1913 Anti-Pass Campaign*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1991, p30) women were largely confined to their homes and occupied a “particularly low status”.

Indian Women in South Africa

While some Indian women were forced to work in the fields in South Africa, they were occupationally the most stagnant group under racist rule. Although some fought alongside their men in the *satyagraha* or nonviolence movements, the taboos of culture, religion and societal norms kept others locked in the restrictive duties of domesticity. Even though Indian women played an important role in the communal and social life of their country, much of their work in the household and family (supporting their men and children) was not recognised. The revolutionary leader Mahatma Gandhi however brought about a dramatic change in the role and status of Indian women (Devi Moodley Rajab, “Political Beginning of Women of Indian Origin in South Africa: 150 Years from Indenture to Democracy”, *Confluence*, 9 August 2010, p2). This was in both South Africa and India, when at his bidding they came out in large numbers from the shelter of their homes to play a part in the freedom struggle of their respective countries. During the First Satyagraha Campaign of 1906–08 in the Natal, a movement that protested against a series of discriminatory legislation that restricted the economic, political and social freedom of Indians in South Africa, Indian women volunteered to participate actively. However, they were

discouraged by male members of their community, who saw it as derogatory to their manhood if they sacrificed their women in resisting a law that was directed only against men (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Ahmedabad: Navjeevan Press, 1961, p11).

During the Second Satyagraha Campaign of 1913, Indian women from various religions, sects and linguistic groups played a pivotal role in supporting their men against the Searle Judgment, which invalidated all non-Christian marriages, that is, all Hindu, Muslim and Zoroastrian marriages were declared null and void (Rajab, 2010, *ibid*). This meant that most married Indian women in South Africa were reduced to the status of concubines whilst their progeny were classified as illegitimate and deprived of all rights of inheritance, property, assets and legal claims. On 23 September 1913, sixteen women were arrested, tried and sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour in Pietermaritzburg Jail. According to Wells (*ibid*), as women were acting in defence of their religion and domestic role, their participation was condoned and even encouraged. Overall, the campaign of passive resistance was a qualified success, as it eased the most irksome restrictions on Indian mobility and succeeded in having the offending ruling overturned.

Until the late 1930s, Indian women were still largely tradition bound. However, by the beginning of the 1940s, confronted by changing socioeconomic conditions, the first signs of political activity amongst a small group of educated and politically conscious individuals appeared. In this period, a large number of working-class households depended on female breadwinners due to high male unemployment. This provided a stimulus and platform for Indian women to become politically motivated and challenged the myth of them being just “docile” and “passive”. Between June 1946 and May 1947, over 1700 individuals, 20–25 years of age, of whom 297 were women, served jail sentences some as many as four times (Surendra Bhana, *Gandhi’s Legacy: The Natal Indian Congress 1894–*

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1994, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1997, p15). Hiralal (*ibid*, p161) reports that Indian women protested vociferously, challenged legislation, countered imprisonment and sacrificed family relations. They fought outside the confines of their traditional roles as daughters, wives and mothers. Thus, socioeconomic crises provided the basis for political protest.

Discriminated against by apartheid legislation (Group Areas Act applied in 1950), Indians were forcibly moved into specific townships and their movement restricted. Casual racial epithets like *coolie* were used during the years of apartheid. A number of Indian women from both Hindu and Muslim communities fought against discriminatory apartheid rules and for women's rights. Their voices were loud, their actions led to imprisonment and their participation in defiance marches heroic. The second generation of women renewed the earlier political pledges of the *satyagraha* movements and gave utterance to the aspirations and fears of the new and more hardened society. The advent of the Second World War brought greater dynamic changes to the political landscape and encouraged the participation of a small group of emancipated women, bringing them into leadership positions within the ranks of the movement.

The most prominent woman in the South African Indian Congress in the 1940s was K Goonam, a medical practitioner who was appointed vice president. In October 1946, three women (Zainab Asvat, PK Naidoo and Suriakala Patel) were elected to the Transvaal Indian Congress executive committee. There was thus a broadening of the base of Indian women's participation in organisational politics. In the Natal, Goonam played a prominent role in the Congress forging links with women activists in the Congress Party of South Africa and the African National Congress (ANC). In 1950, to create solidarity between Indians and Africans, she appeared on the platform of an African women's anti-pass meeting in Durban and pledged the support of Indian women in their fight. Her unbroken record of involvement in politics spanning a period of over 50 years is a story of active campaigning—18 imprisonments for her passive resistance activities, dodging security police and being forced into exile for many years. In 1990, she returned to her home in Durban where she practiced medicine until her death in 1998. Asvat was one of the first Indian activists to be placed under house arrest in the 1940s. Addressing a gathering of about 800 women at the Avalon cinema in Durban in June 1946, Asvat, who had been arrested the previous night and then released, ignited the crowd with her words.

“Let us pledge that we shall continue the task which we have undertaken. We have sown the seed of our struggle. Let it not perish, let us water it with our heart’s blood. Let us pledge, long live resistance”.

While Veeramah Pather declared that although individuals would disappear from the mortal scene, the struggle would go on, Khatija Mayat urged all Indian women to heed the call of the Transvaal and the Natal Indian Congress and support the battle against the Ghetto Act—the name by which the Asiatic Land and Tenure Indian Representation Bill was commonly referred. Goonam declared that the Indian people were virtually at war with the South African government and Cissy Gool of Cape Town stated that South Africa was witnessing the real beginnings of a national struggle, which was still in its infancy. She pleaded with women to come out boldly, as without them the struggle would be weakened. An examination of historical records of Muslim women’s involvement in the freedom struggle also highlights the names of Zora Meer, Fatima Meer and Amina Cachalia (Asvat’s sister). Fatima Meer, a sociologist was repeatedly imprisoned for short periods of time and harassed by the security police for nine years. Despite persecution, she was instrumental in the formation of the Women’s Federation of South Africa, a national coalition of Black and White women in protest against pass-laws for African women. An active member of the South African Indian Congress and later the Natal Indian Congress, her political life blazed a trail of unbroken defiance against a racist regime.

In response to the abovementioned calls, hundreds of men, women and even children went to prison. In turn, their determination in the face of brutal assaults spurred the community, thus swelling the ranks of volunteers. The Indian community in South Africa owes much to women for the valuable and crucial role they played in the liberation of their people. In relinquishing their traditional role to don the mantle of resistance, they sacrificed material comfort for a higher principle. As aptly stated by Valliamah, “who would not want to die for one’s own motherland”? The proud heritage of the Indian community has been largely forgotten today due to a lack of exposure arising from prejudice

In Northern Rhodesia, Indian men initially ignored local politics and when they did engage in it, their involvement was indirect and as such they were accused of being collaborators of the ruling government, intent on preserving their privileged position.

and cultural chauvinism. It is time to restore in the consciousness of all South Africans the importance of the Indian struggle against apartheid and smash the widely held stereotype of Indian women as passive dependents. Women of Indian descent possess *shakti* and are an invaluable asset to the country. Their role in the struggle for freedom ought to be a great inspiration for future generations.

Indian Women in Other Parts of Southern Africa

This section examines the arrival of Indian women in other parts of Southern Africa such as Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and their gradual involvement in the economic sector. While women of Indian origin did not carry out manual work with their male partners, they did gradually participate in the economic sector. However, they did not take part in politics in their new homes. In fact, Indian men also initially ignored local politics and when they did engage in it, their involvement was indirect and as such they were accused of being collaborators of the ruling government intent on preserving their privileged position. Asian support for African nationalism came very late to Zambia (Chiwomba TM M'kunga, "The Development of the Asian Trading Class in Chipata, Zambia, 1900–64", Masters of Arts Dissertation, University of Zambia, 1992, online at <http://dspace.unza.zm>). Anthony St John Wood (*Northern Rhodesia: The Human Background*, London: Pal Mall, 1961, p123) has averred that Asian traders in Lusaka supported the colonial government to safeguard their trading activities. Phiri (*ibid*, p38) has argued that the view held by several scholars that Indian traders in Africa worked in harmony and were devoid of any conflict in their trading activities is a myth, as trade rivalry among Indian traders was rife during the colonial period in Northern Rhodesia. Grace Keith (*The Fading Colour Bar*, London: Robert and Hall, 1966, p86) has commented that in times of economic and political crises both Europeans and Africans used Asian traders as scapegoats. Both groups held discriminatory feelings against Indians—the former regarded them as a threat to their business and the latter feared them as subsequent masters after European rulers. A main reason behind the late involvement of the Indian community in Zambia's freedom struggle and the lack of women's participation was that the colonial authorities were not as harsh towards their subjects nor had the racial bias taken the shape it did in South Africa with the apartheid laws in the context of Afrikaner society. Further, as problems between Indians and the

European rulers as well as native Africans were successfully handled by the men, the women maintained their cultural prejudices.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In retrospect, this paper gives a brief account of the migration of Indians into Southern Africa. Currently, international migration as a subject dominates national and international debates in many fora and the United Nations has been trying to address its various dimensions. It has focussed on the collection of data and its analysis and the dissemination of information in the sector of trade for shaping national policies (*International Migration Report: A Global Assessment*, 2006, online at <http://www.un.org>). However, reasons for migration in the nineteenth and twentieth century were very different from those of the late twentieth and present century. In the previous centuries, the destitute situation of the Indians was exploited and they were encouraged to migrate to Africa for so-called greener pastures.

In South Africa, women of Indian origin participated in different sectors in their new homes. In retaliation against harsh segregating policies, they leapt into the political arena. The descendents of indentured labourers from India fought for democracy in South Africa. **Not only did the *coolies* spearhead the revolution but eventually they moved forward and acquired prominent positions in government. Nelson Mandela appointed six South Africans of Indian origin in his cabinet.** In other parts of Southern Africa such as Northern Rhodesia now Zambia, while women of Indian origin were active in the economic sector, they were silent in politics. ❧