

## **How the Fearsome, Fish-Eyed Queen Miṇāṭci Became a Perfectly Ordinary Goddess**

William Harman  
Emeritus Professor  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA  
[wharman@bellsouth.net](mailto:wharman@bellsouth.net)

### *Abstract*

Distinctions between humans and deities tend to be ambiguous in South Asia: Humans regularly achieve promotion to divine status for being gifted gurus, great poets, spiritually adept seekers, martyrs who die for a righteous cause, or able power brokers, such as royalty. People need not necessarily die to achieve divine status, but it often helps. In some cases, jealous or unkind deities do their best to thwart mortals whose virtue, penance, or sacrifices are about to transform their human status into that of a competing divinity. This paper demonstrates that Hindu tradition tends to devalue historical uniqueness in favor of perceived divine, eternal patterns.

*Keywords: Goddess, Marriage, Festival, Power, Madurai*

### *Introduction*

While the Hindu belief in reincarnation suggests that most humans will achieve some sort of transcendental status eventually, tradition also specifies that deities may sometimes be demoted to human form for at least three reasons: (1) out of their own gracious compassion for human suffering, (2) as a punishment for conduct "unbecoming to a deity," or (3) as a stealthy disguise to accomplish some mundane task. Knowing this, Hindus have devised a system for distinguishing deities from humans. According to tradition, flower garlands placed on deities do not fade. Nor do deities blink, perspire, or leave footprints. A generic Tamil term for deities is *imaiyār*, "those who do not blink" And when they walk, they hover, it seems, imperceptible millimeters above the ground.

One of the more graphic representations of a world where rebirth recurs for deities as well as for humans is the Indian childrens' board game *Mokṣa Patamu*, or Snakes and Ladders. Using dice, participants make their way alternately up and down the ladder of rebirths, and each rebirth is determined by acts committed as deities, animals, or humans. Rebirths in various animal, human, and divine forms are predicated on the notion that every action performed (in this case, determined by the block on which you land) has its absolute result. A generous act can send you directly to one of the highest heavens; a crime will cause rebirth as an animal or a low-caste

human. In part due to the essential continuity of a world in which there are no radical disjunctures between the animal and the human or the human and the divine, scholars tend to describe the Indian cosmos as monistic (Marriott 1976a; Marriott 1976b). Here, there are no sharp divisions or dualities between heaven and earth or divine and human.

This notion of a graded continuum along which all souls move--whether divine, human, animal, or even spiritually sinister--is crucial in discussing Mīṇāṭci, the traditionally reputed, miraculously born (though apparently human) princess of the Pāṇṭiya dynasty of southern India. She must go through many changes eventually to become a goddess. Our discussion of Mīṇāṭci must, then, take into account a multileveled world in which human and divine realms overlap, and where this overlap most often occurs--in the contexts of royalty. In regal corridors, humans are exalted and deities deign to mingle with the best and brightest of mortals. Royalty and divinity are closely associated in South Asian political theory and ritual activity as well. Royalty presumably exercises civil power by virtue of divine permission, acquiescence, and assistance. If the rains fail, for example, royalty can be blamed for neglecting the proper relationships with divine powers that would normally promote fertility.

Indeed, royalty is said to be physically part-divine, constituted by "portions" of the gods (Harman 1995). So it is that acceptable and customary treatment for royal figures--indeed for most who lay credible claim to the exercise of civil powers--is the same treatment prescribed for deities in temples and includes, for example, ritual honours with special lamps and adornment with elaborate garlands and gifts.<sup>1</sup> This collapsing of royal-divine categories is also suggested by the use of identical words in several Indian languages for the terms *temple* and *palace*. The queen/goddess Mīṇāṭci exemplifies these dynamics in striking ways: Born into a human family to rule as a conquering queen, she eventually is recognized as a goddess. Stories portray her as a miraculously born queen-designate-become-goddess. Today, her reputation is so widespread that she has at least two major, separate temple / palaces, one on either side of the world. The earlier and larger one is the widely known, majestic fourteen-acre complex that remains the pride and spiritual focus of the famous Temple City of Madurai in southern India. In origin, this older shrine dates from at least the eighth century CE. It is still a popular place for pilgrimage and worship: depending on calendrical events, between 10,000 and 20,000 people visit this temple each day.

The second of Mīṇāṭci's major temples, a more recent five-acre complex, begun in the 1980s, continues to move gradually toward completion in Pearland, Texas. Priests from the Madurai temple serve the Pearland temple

---

<sup>1</sup> See this sustained argument imaginatively and graphically presented in Waghorne's (1994) provocative work.

on a regular basis, and the newer temple claims to address the religious needs of more than 1,400 immigrant Hindu families in the Houston area.

*The Queen/Goddess/Wife and Her King/God/Husband:  
Names, Relationships. and Other Preliminaries*

The identities of Hindu deities can vacillate between specific, localized forms and more generalized, universal appearances. The queen/goddess Mīṇāṭci, for example, is also known more widely as a form of Parvati, a goddess recognized throughout India. This is typical: The perception of divine power in any locale often comes to be associated with a more well-known and pan-Indian deity. This makes the specific appearance more recognizable, more comprehensible, and more available. Local deities are thus understood as forms or aspects of major ones, and major deities are rendered more accessible when portrayed as having specific, local forms. This process emphasizes once again the variable states deities and humans might occupy from one birth to another by assigning to them specific names indicating a specific state, birth, condition, or identity.

Queen Mīṇāṭci illustrates this well because she is known by a variety of local names. The best known is her title, the Goddess With the Eyes of a Fish--in Tamil, Mīṇāṭci. Among Westerners, the epithet Fish-Eyed Goddess may not sound particularly flattering, but it is complimentary in the Indian context: Large, unblinking eyes with dark pupils are considered a mark of human beauty. In addition, there are theological implications to the metaphor that focuses on the watchful care a mother fish gives her young (Brown 1947, 209ff.; TVP I: 333; Hudson 1971, 214, n.30). The name is particularly apt because the fish was the totem, or symbol, of the Pāṇṭiya kingdom, where she was born as a princess. Frequently we find references to a Tamil variant, Aṅkayaṛkaṇṇammai (the Mother with Beautiful Fish Eyes).

But there are other names for this queen/goddess, particularly used in the literature to describe her before she was married. One is Taṭātakai, a name of ambiguous etymological roots. Some scholars have tried to trace it to the Tamil words *taṭu*, meaning "to hinder or prohibit," and *kai*, which means "hand." The term is taken to refer to the gracious hand of the queen/goddess, which does not hinder or ward off devotees, but rather welcomes them invitingly. She is also referred to in the texts simply as Pirāṭṭi (Lady), a term often added as a suffix to form Taṭātaikaipirāṭṭiyār.

All these titles can be found in the varied literary corpus that describes and praises Mīṇāṭci. The popularity of the Queen Goddess of Madurai is such that several hagiographic texts have been written describing her youth.<sup>2</sup> The most common source we can trace to a thirteenth-century document

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the texts *Maturai Mīṇāṭciyamman...* ; *Mīṇāṭciyammai...* ; and *Maturai Aṅkayaṛkaṇṇammai*.

entitled *Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam*, or *The Story of the Sacred Games* (see also Harman 1987, 1987a).<sup>3</sup>

Mīṇāṭci is extolled and worshipped as a queen/goddess whose independence and power precede--indeed, are exercised despite--marriage to her husband. The celebration of her wedding is the temple's largest annual festival. In fact, it is one of the largest festivals in southern India. Like Mīṇāṭci, her husband has several names. Locally, as the handsome bridegroom, he is called Cuntarecuvarar, meaning the Beautiful Lord. The Sanskrit equivalent, *Cokkanātar*, is frequently found in texts. He is described as living and reigning with Mīṇāṭci in Madurai. Cuntarecuvarar is not simply the husband of Mīṇāṭci; he is also a form of the pan-Indian deity Śiva. Thus, despite Mīṇāṭci's regional fame, she is sometimes understood by pilgrims as no more than another form of Śiva's well-known all-Indian wife, Pārvatī.<sup>4</sup> Depending on a devotee's predisposition, preference, and frame of reference, either deity can be understood in general or specific terms: Pārvatī is Mīṇāṭci; Śiva is Cuntarecuvarar, and vice versa.

Several scholars have cogently proposed, though without conclusive proof, that the site of Mīṇāṭci's temple was once the shrine of a local, somewhat isolated Dravidian queen/goddess. The suggestion is that she was assimilated into the larger Hindu pantheon by her ritual and mythic marriage to Śiva, thus gaining more widespread acceptance and prestige under the identity of Pārvatī. Today, we can see traces of specific ritual customs not normally found in shrines to Śiva, customs that suggest Mīṇāṭci's earlier origins. Mīṇāṭci, for example, is the focus of worship for certain groups of local people, but these people will not worship her husband or perform the more respectable Sanskritic worship styles the temple seems to have adopted.

A unique and abiding feature distinguishing this queen/goddess and king/god pairing is the pervasive perception among devotees that Mīṇāṭci is, by far, the more powerful and efficacious of the two figures. As the queen and goddess, it is she who rules. Indeed, the marriage of the Madurai divine couple is regarded as the classic instance in southern India of the female-dominated marriage, an arrangement referred to as "a Madurai marriage" (Daniel 1980, 71ff.). In casual discussions, the question

---

<sup>3</sup> The best known devotional document dedicated exclusively to descriptions and praise of Mīṇāṭci is the *Mīṇāṭciammanpillaitami* and dates from the first part of the seventeenth century. It was written by the poet Kumarakuruparacuvāmikaḷ and seems to have been commissioned by the famous king Tirumalai Nāyakkar.

<sup>4</sup> Approaching the identity of Mīṇāṭci from this perspective, one text describes how Pārvatī once decided to be reborn in the city of Madurai in the form of Mīṇāṭci in order to satisfy a particular devotee's request. See Kirupa 1978, 1-6.

"Is yours a Madurai or a Citamparam household?" is taken to mean "Who rules in your house, the wife or the husband?" (Perumāḷ 1860, 103). The male-dominated marriage is called the Citamparam marriage, referring to Śiva's uncontested dominance, ritual and mythic, in the famous Śaiva temple of Citamparam. More about Mīnāṭci's perceived dominance follows a detailed description of her history.

### *A Summary of Mīnāṭci's Life*

I move now to a synthetic account of the life of the queen/goddess, depending primarily on *The Story of the Sacred Games*. This sixty-four-chapter document in eloquent Tamil poetry narrates how she was born as the daughter of a Pāṇṭiya king, became queen, and conquered all the world until she encountered in battle the Lord Śiva, whom she then married. He returned with her to Madurai, where the two reigned together as king and queen of the Pāṇṭiya kingdom until their son assumed the throne. They then retired to the temple, where they remain as an eternal presence ready to appear at moments of crisis.

The story really begins with Malayattuvaca Pāṇṭiyaṅ, Mīnāṭci's father, who was son of the founder of the city of Madurai. King Malayattuvaca Pāṇṭiyaṅ and his queen were childless, and because their religious devotion and good works did not seem sufficient to change this sad state of affairs, they began offering a series of horse sacrifices. These, they hoped, would please the deities and bring them a son. Unfortunately, horse sacrifices are not always conducive to the births of sons, and so the elaborate rituals were continued until they reached the point of bestowing on their sponsor extraordinary powers but still no children. At this juncture the jealous deity Indra, the king of the gods, felt threatened and intervened. He realized that if any human king successfully performed 100 horse sacrifices, that king could rightfully claim Indra's own throne. After the ninety-ninth horse sacrifice, Indra appeared and announced to the king that if he wanted a son, he should cease the horse sacrifices and perform instead "the sacrifice that brings forth a son," a reasonable suggestion, even from a deity who is not exactly disinterested (TVP I.4). The king agreed, but the results were not as expected: Instead of a son, the sacrifice produced a three-year-old daughter.<sup>5</sup> And to make matters worse, she was something of a freak, for she had three breasts (TVP 1.4. 19). The disappointed king complains:

I was without a son, and I performed great sacrifices (*tavam*)  
for a long time.  
(And when that failed) I performed the sacrifice that was  
supposed to produce a son  
And from that sacrifice I got a daughter.

---

<sup>5</sup> Note that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (9.1.13-32, 36-39) recounts the story of King Vaisvata Manu, whose "son-producing sacrifice" also brought forth a daughter. The daughter, named Ilā, is later transformed into a son named Sudyumna.

But God! Even though this girl has come with a face that  
shines like the moon,  
She has three breasts! Such an appearance will make even enemies  
laugh.  
So he thought, plunged in depression and unhappiness. (TVP 1.4.24)

The king's lament does not go unheeded, however. A celestial voice, that of Śiva's, responds:

O King! Treat your daughter as though she were a son:  
Perform for her all the rites as specified in the Vedas.  
Giver her the name, Taṭātakai. Crown her queen.  
And when this woman, whose form is golden, meets her Lord,  
one of her breasts will disappear.  
Therefore, put your mind at ease.  
In this way, Śiva graciously appeared in the form  
of words spoken from the sky. (TVP 1.4.25)

The king did as he was told, training his daughter as though she were the legitimate male heir to the throne. Once she is crowned (1.4.35), the king figures no more in the text: Shortly after the coronation he dies (1.4.41).

#### *The Queen: Her Conquests and Marriage*

The fifth chapter opens with Mīnāṭci as Pāṇṭiya monarch: Her rule is just and beneficent, but she rules as an unmarried queen, a situation that, the commentator notes (TVP 1.5.1 and 2), is not proper for an Indian monarch. Her mother laments her unmarried state (1.5.4), but Mīnāṭci assures her that there are better things to do than to marry, for example, conquering the world (1.5.5).

The female monarch then prepares her impressive array of soldiers for their assault on the guardian deities of the eight directions (TVP 1.5.6ff.). She leads the cavalry, followed by horse-drawn chariots, rutting elephants, and decidedly vicious hand-to-hand combatants. Significantly, the three southern kingdoms (Pāṇṭiya, Cēra, and Cōla) are portrayed as united under her command as she sets out to conquer the rest of the universe (TVP 1.5.18).

The attacking army is so impressive that its first scheduled combat with Indra never occurs: He flees at the sight of the troops (TVP 1.5.23), and his white elephant and wishing tree are taken as booty. In fact, the same occurs with the seven other guardians of the directions: The troops march directly to the abode of Śiva, Mount Kailāsa, where they encounter their first real resistance.

Mount Kailāsa is besieged. Then a genuine battle between Mīnāṭci's forces and the armies commanded by Nandin, Śiva's bull, ensues (TVP 1.5.27-31).

Blood and gore abound on the battlefield (1.5.32-38), and the Pāṇṭiya queen appears particularly savage in the fray. Nandin's forces are completely routed: He has no choice but to appeal to Śiva for help. With appropriate fanfare, Śiva graciously appears to survey the carnage (1.5.42). Then the miracle occurs:

The moment she saw him her (third) breast disappeared.  
She became bashful, passive. and fearful.  
She leaned unsteadily, like the flowering branch of a tree  
under the weight of its blossoms.  
Her heavy dark hair fell on her neck.  
She looked downward, toward her feet, with collyriumed eyes  
that were like *keṇṭai* fish.  
And there she stood, shining like lightning, scratching in the  
earth with her toes. (TVP 1.5.43)

Mīṇāṭci's minister Sumati then points out that the ancient prophecy made at her birth has been fulfilled: Śiva as he stands before her now will be her husband. Śiva instructs her to return to Madurai where he will marry her.

Love-struck and loaded with plunder from her victories, Mīṇāṭci arrives in Madurai. The city is elaborately decorated and the townspeople are ecstatic over the news of her coming marriage. They drink, dance, sing, shout, and throw off their clothes in an orgy of celebrative abandon (TVP 1.5.47--57). The extensive preparations for the wedding include assembling the bride's garments, preparing foods, and sending out wedding invitations (I.5.58-78). The list of wedding guests is impressive. The lengthy description of the wedding is unusually detailed.

Indeed, chapter 5, which begins with Mīṇāṭci reign as unmarried queen and which ends with her marriage to Śiva, who then takes over the Pāṇṭiya throne, is the longest of the sixty-four chapters. Eventually, Śiva and Mīṇāṭci retire into the temple precincts, leaving their son (and his sons) to rule. Sometimes their descendants call on them for assistance in a variety of tight spots.

*Marriage Changes ... a Queen into a Goddess; a God into a King*

In *The Story of the Sacred Games*, the marriage brings about significant transformations for the people of the city. Instead of losing a daughter and queen, the inhabitants of Madurai gain a son-in-law and a king, as well as a god who transforms Mīṇāṭci into a goddess. The Pāṇṭiya dynasty is infused with divinity. Once again, we are reminded that the lines dividing the human from the divine, and especially those dividing royalty from divinity, are permeable given the "proper" conditions.

Mīṇāṭci's transformation is more dramatic. The miraculous conditions of her birth suggest that she is a special princess. Still, her assuming the identity of a goddess never explicitly occurs until she marries the great deity Śiva: Generally, the female spouse of a deity also becomes a deity.<sup>6</sup> Other changes transpire with the loss of her third breast when she first sees her husband-to-be. According to the instructions of the celestial voice that spoke to Mīṇāṭci's father on the day of her birth out of the sacrifice, this event allows her to recognize her lord and master. But there are several other possible interpretations worth considering: The learned commentator of our text, Vēṅkaṭacāmi Nāṭṭār (1:357), says that the disappearance of the third breast indicates the change from male to female. Until the moment she meets Śiva, Mīṇāṭci's father treats her as his male heir, training her in the necessary sciences and martial arts. As though she were a man, she rules powerfully over Madurai and conquers all the regions of the world. In short, she acts like a man. But when she sees Śiva, she changes radically. This fierce warrior, one moment disemboweling her victims and smearing her spear with their blood and fat, whom none of Śiva's demons can defeat, suddenly becomes "bashful, passive, and fearful." Like a shy adolescent, she scratches in the dust with her toes, unable to meet Śiva's eyes.

Philip Spratt (1966, 268) would probably agree with Vēṅkaṭacāmi Nāṭṭār's interpretation: He regards the third breast as a phallic symbol in Indian mythology. According to his interpretive structure Mīṇāṭci's transformation is the loss of her masculinity: With two breasts she is now a proper woman rather than one with a penis. Now she can marry Śiva. However, David Shulman (1980, 209- 211) suggests that the change in Mīṇāṭci is not from male to female but from androgynous figure to female (see also O'Flaherty 1976, 342-343). Given the importance of divine androgyny in Śaiva thought, his suggestion makes good sense. Mīṇāṭci was, in some sense, the perfect ruler even before she met Śiva. Though not properly married, at least in her person she embodied the male/female complementarity crucial to the administration of an ordered cosmos and kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

In her transformation from a violent, aggressive, unmarried queen to a passive, submissive, married queen/goddess, Mīṇāṭci recalls a widespread

---

<sup>6</sup> This is not true when occasionally males are paired with goddesses, however. The general theory of what happens in Indian marriage is that women are transformed into the "substance" of their husbands. Men are not understood to be similarly "transformable."

<sup>7</sup> On the role of marriage as a way of both reflecting and creating an ordered cosmos, see Harman (1987b). Other interpretations of Mīṇāṭci's third breast include three offered by J. Lindsay Opie (1974, 217-220). They are that (1) the presence of the third breast signifies spiritual virginity, which is lost "in mystical marriage with Śiva," (2) the third breast symbolizes a surplus of fertility and maternal character, and (3) the third breast provided Mīṇāṭci protection against threatening males, "like the miraculous growth of beards or other deformities in Christian legends to protect virgin saints from pagan suitors." Kumarakuruparacuvamikal (*Mīṇāṭciyammai* .... 1902) claims that the third breast on Mīṇāṭci is simply intended as symmetry to match Śiva's third eye.

phenomenon among goddesses in much of India, one that Lawrence Babb (1970, 141) documents in his study of village religion in Madhya Pradesh. There the unmarried goddess (called Durgā, Mahāmāya, or Kālī) is a bloodthirsty killer: vicious and dangerous. But when the goddess is featured as Śiva's bride, she is transformed into "a benevolent goddess ..., an exemplar of passive devotion to her husband, and ... dutifully subordinate."

Mīṇāṭci is not the only one who changes: Her transformations begin when marriage becomes inevitable, and Śiva's occur at the ceremony. There, he becomes the Pāṇṭiya son-in-law and king. Normally, in pan-Indian iconography, Śiva is depicted together with his mount, the bull Nandin, snakes encircling his body, the crescent moon in his hair, bearing the tiger-skin clothing of the ascetic and the Indian laburnum plant. But all this changes at the wedding when Śiva becomes the locally incarnate Sundaresvarar of Madurai. Specifically, Śaiva elements are replaced with Pāṇṭiya royal symbols. The bull is replaced by a fish. The Pāṇṭiya king was known as He of the Fish (*Mīnvan*) and so Śiva assumes both the fish banner and that title. Similarly, Śiva is transformed from He Who is Crowned with Laburnum Flowers (*Koṅraicūṭi*), one of his pan-Indian titles, to He Who Wears the Garland of Margosa Flowers (*Vēmpaṇ*), an epithet of the Pāṇṭiya kings. And the ascetic paraphernalia of the unmarried Śiva change to the royal garb of a married monarch: Snakes become golden ornaments, the crescent moon becomes a jeweled crown, and the tiger-skin becomes costly garments (cf. O'Flaherty 1973, 238-250).

The royal Mīṇāṭci thus rises to the level of goddess without losing her royal attributes; the deity Śiva condescends to assume a royal station without losing his divine attributes. Distinctions between royalty and divinity meld imperceptibly, deliberately. The marriage constitutes a covenant whereby Mīṇāṭci and Cuntarecuvarar become an eternal royal couple living in the palace/temple that stands even today in the center of the old city of Madurai. A queen who once operated in the realm of mortal royalty becomes immortal and always available, no longer subject to the vagaries of history or to the precarious variations in dynastic fortune. This is true even though the Pāṇṭiya dynasty lost most of its power in the fourteenth century and ended by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Thus, if there are no longer Pāṇṭiya monarchs, there is no longer the need for them. The covenant, which is the marriage alliance, is written on the hearts of the people of Madurai in two ways. First, it is celebrated, and therefore reaffirmed, every year in a remarkably large and festive ten-day occasion. The annual Cittirai Marriage Festival re-enacts Mīṇāṭci's coronation and, more important, her marriage and queenly dominion over the city. Second, the covenant is renewed every time devotees read, hear, or remember the episodes that follow the marriage in *The Story of the Sacred Games*. In particular, those episodes that recount events taking place during later generations of Pāṇṭiya rulers remind devotees of Śiva's and Mīṇāṭci's gracious vigilance over the kingdom.

*The Queen's Power and the King's Authority*

An important matter for many devotees is Mīṇāṭci's relationship to her husband Śiva. He, too, is worshipped in the Madurai temple. Mīṇāṭci is clearly regarded as the more important of the pair among those who know the city first hand, but it is not obvious to someone who reads *The Story of the Sacred Games*. Quite the contrary: In the text Mīṇāṭci is clearly subordinated to Śiva. It is he who defeats her, dominates her, and bestows his grace by marrying her. In fact, in the text twice he condescends to marry her (TVP I.5.s7ff., and III.57.60-64).

After the grand marriage of chapter 5, Mīṇāṭci becomes a mere appendage to Śiva, little more than a foil for the comedy Śiva unfolds for us all. For example, after the marriage, Mīṇāṭci comes to Śiva playing the role of the dizzy housewife, distraught about the fact that there is just so much food left over from the wedding celebrations and she does not know what to do with it. In his infinite wisdom, power, and condescension, Śiva plays a trick on her by having one of his famous dwarf-servants with an incredible appetite devour everything in sight, much to the stunned amazement of the whole town. From chapter 6 through chapter 64, the pattern changes little. Śiva is always in control, always able to produce edifying miracles.

But in terms of the actual ritual life of the temple, and of the way most devotees talk about this royal-divine pair, Mīṇāṭci takes clear precedence. N. Subramanian calls attention to this striking contrast between the mythology and the ritual and concludes that Mīṇāṭci was a local Dravidian figure, originally unrelated to the northern, male, Sanskritic import, Śiva. He believes that the redactors of *The Story of the Sacred Games* tried, but unsuccessfully, to subordinate her to Śiva by means of ritually and mythically marrying her to him (Subramanian 1974, 215). Jan Gonda believes that Mīṇāṭci's marriage to Śiva was simply a way to incorporate a powerful, locally important Dravidian goddess into the Brahmin, Saiva, Hindu pantheon (Gonda 1962, 2.9; see also Diehl 1956, 177 n.4).

Temple guidebooks are explicit about Mīṇāṭci's ritual precedence (Pañcanatam Pillai 1970, 55, 149; Paḷaniyappaṇ. 1963, 147). She is always to be worshipped first. Although the imposing Eastern Gate stands directly before Śiva's shrine, pilgrims are instructed to, and almost always do, enter through the Hall of the Eight Goddesses, which leads into the goddess shrine. One branch of the tradition, embarrassed by Mīṇāṭci's dominance in a decidedly androcentric cultural context, strains to explain this by suggesting that pilgrims should enter by way of the Mīṇāṭci shrine because of Indra's initial experience (narrated in the first chapter of *The Story of the Sacred Games*) in first discovering the image of Śiva in Madurai. It was at the gate of Śiva's shrine that the sin that afflicted Indra left him. Thus, by

this clever interpretation, the gate is termed "the leaving doorway" (*viṭṭa vācal*): One enters via the Mīṇāṭci shrine and leaves via the Śiva shrine (Centil Turavi 1970, 204). Another tradition says that entry through the main Eastern Gateway is inauspicious ever since a temple servant committed suicide by jumping off it to protest "palace misdeeds" (Jeyechandran 1974,374).

Even *The Story of the Sacred Games* is self-conscious about the apparent contradiction. In the earliest chapters, Śiva is clearly the pre-existent, sacred presence at the spot that later becomes Madurai. But according to the fifth, Queen Mīṇāṭci does not encounter Śiva until she marches with her warriors to Mount Kailāsa to meet him in battle. As soon as she sees him, she becomes submissive and listens demurely to his instructions:

From the moment you started out  
intending to triumph over the eight directions,  
From that moment we and our forces also left Madurai,  
accompanying you all the way here.  
On the coming Monday I will marry you at the auspicious hour,  
and as prescribed in the Four Vedas.  
Go, then, back to your city!" he said. (TVP 1.5.45)

Though these verses explain how Śiva can both be at Madurai before Mīṇāṭci's departure and yet meet her at Mount Kailāsa, textual ambiguity remains as to whose city it really is. But temple ritual practices are quite unambiguous. The temple is primarily the abode of the goddess/ queen Mīṇāṭci and only secondarily that of Śiva.<sup>8</sup> This fact is underlined by the practice in the Mīṇāṭci temple/palace of offering each of the four daily worship (*pūjā*) ceremonies first to the goddess (Pañcanatam Pillai 1970, 18). Of the twelve major temple festivals, four are celebrated in exclusive honor of Mīṇāṭci but none is celebrated in exclusive honor of Śiva/ Cuntarecuvarar. The remaining eight are celebrated in honor of the divine couple together (Fuller 1980, 346).

Mīṇāṭci's ritual dominance over the city is dramatically represented in two of the Wedding Festival's ritual processions. The first, on the eighth day of the festival, immediately follows her coronation. The exclusive attention she receives as the city's newly crowned monarch is suggestive of, indeed a re-enactment of, the traditional procession made by the Hindu monarch after the grand coronation. The processional path around the four concentric Māci streets is significant. These streets once formed the outer limits of the ancient city. Her procession marks off the outer boundaries of her domain. She is the newly crowned monarch of the territory her path circumscribes. On the following day the queen/goddess again is taken alone in procession

---

<sup>8</sup> Shulman (1980, 139) notes the common repetition of this pattern in other Tamil place-history texts: The god is "drawn to the site by the goddess and ... rooted there by marriage to her."

around the four Māci streets in her ritual conquest of the deities of the eight directions. In so doing, she is securing the geographic space she has claimed as her own.

Although the marriage of Mīṇāṭci is the occasion for the celebration, much more than a marriage is being celebrated. Deities from temples in outlying areas are brought in procession to do homage to the newly married queen/goddess. Rural people arrive as pilgrims, more than doubling the population of the city, in order to pay respects to Mīṇāṭci.

It is indicative of Mīṇāṭci's primacy that Indian immigrants to the Houston, Texas, area have built a rather impressive five-acre temple complex, which they call the Mīṇāṭci Temple. Although the temple is dedicated to the triad of Śiva (addressed there as Cuntarēcuvarar), Mīṇāṭci, and Viṣṇu (in his form as Venkatēsvara), devotees have established an extended congregation in the Houston area that they call simply the Mīṇāṭci Temple Society.<sup>9</sup> In his book on the priests of the Madurai Temple, a book that, significantly, he entitled *Servants of the Goddess*, Fuller (1984, 8) explains the devotees' relationship with Śiva and Mīṇāṭci:

[Śiva] is the supreme lord whose paramount concern is for the order of the world, not for the petty difficulties of individual human beings. Only a minority of devotees, usually theologically sophisticated, speak of their devotion for ... Śiva. For the majority, that sentiment is mainly commanded by the goddess.

Perceived as "a local girl," this goddess/queen is closer to the people. Several works praising her concentrate on her childhood, emphasizing her role as a daughter of Madurai. Śiva came as an outsider, from a distant place, to take up his residence and to rule with her. In the temple as well as in *The Story of the Sacred Games*, she is addressed as goddess, mother, and queen, whereas Śiva is approached more formally as lord (*nāyakan*). Vasudha Narayanan (1982, 225-226) points out that in the Indian family a mother is likely to be more accessible to her children, to mediate between them and their father, for she is less concerned with the demands of hierarchy, order, justice, and society. She represents qualities of nurturance, compassion, mercy, affection, and accessibility in a way that the father does not. Little wonder that Mīṇāṭci is seen as the mediator, as the one to whom devotees would more readily turn.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Paul Younger (1982, 253) notes a similar dynamic at the temple near Tirucirapaḷḷi, India: "While outsiders refer to Tiruvāṇaikkā as 'a Śiva temple,' most of the worshippers who come to the temple today come primarily to worship the Goddess, Akilāṇṭēśvarī."

<sup>10</sup> Frédérique Marglin (1985, 46-89) supports this view in her description of the kinship dynamics in the city of Puri. She notes that it is through the male line that children inherit their rank and social identity. Women do not confer such rank, but are more concerned with nurturing the lineage: its unborn fetuses, its living children, and its deceased

*Reflections on Mīṇāṭci's Mythic History*

What devotees know of Mīṇāṭci's unique history is primarily what they know of her as an unmarried queen. Before her marriage she is unique: a fierce, independent, triple-breasted, ambiguously gendered, world-conquering warrior-monarch. But the texts tell us that once she marries, she loses her distinctiveness and, in a sense, her history. Like any Hindu woman whose marriage is properly arranged, when she marries she becomes her husband's "half-body," subordinated to him, assimilated in many senses to his family "substance." He becomes her primary deity. In marrying Śiva, Mīṇāṭci becomes an anomalous monarch and a king's daughter. She becomes a wife of Śiva, a domesticated, unthreatening queen whose gender is no longer ambiguous, a sweet and gracious goddess, and therefore less subject to the contingent vagaries of the historical world: in short, 'no more distinctive and no more unique. Humans, royal or otherwise, function in a world of unpredictable and uncontrollable historically conditioned ambiguity, a world full of hazards. In the Hindu context, this is a world often described as "illusory" (*māyā*)<sup>11</sup> because it is liable to, and frequently does, depart from proper divine patterns, or *dharma*. Once the queen becomes a goddess, however, hers becomes an eternal, dharmic existence, properly ordered, without the intrusions of accident-prone history. She loses her distinctiveness, her identity, and her contingency, and that, strangely enough, is what constitutes her final triumph. True, her rule still has a topographically contingent, ritually geographic component. It includes Madurai and, more recently, Pearland, Texas. But the significant locus of her power is in the hopes and imaginations of her devotees and subjects, wherever they reside. In the stories the faithful tell about her and in the trust they give her, devotees understand themselves to be participating in a flawless divine perfection that is universal and eternal.

One remaining but unanswerable question is whether this female Pāṇṭiya monarch was ever a reigning human queen. Was there ever such a person on whom these legends and stories have been based? Quite likely we shall never know, partly because the same fluidity that characterizes distinctions between humans and deities also characterizes distinctions we Westerners prefer to make between myth and history. Even accounts earlier understood to be historically descriptive thereby become suspect. For example, we do have reports from Megasthenes, a fourth-century BCE Greek envoy to northern India, who discusses a Pāṇṭiya princess wedding a god (Dessigane, Pattabiramin, and Filliozat 1960, xii-xiii; 'Kārāvēlane 1956, 7).

---

ancestors, who receive food offerings cooked by women. That women remain pure and chaste is important because they must be ritually fit to perform this nurturing function.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Keyes' comment that, "The Indian tradition of sacred biography, a tradition that includes the biographies of Krishna and the Buddha, appears to have been ... far less constrained by historical events in the lives of biographical subjects than has almost any other tradition of sacred biography known" (1982, 15).

That story, as told by Megasthenes, describes a deity venerated in "Methora." The deity's only female child was given a large army to rule the territory over which she governed, and from which she derived her name, Pandia. Unable to find an appropriate spouse for her, the god, though her father, finally married her himself. The argument presented by Dessigane, Pattabiramin, and Filliozat (1960) is intriguing:

The Pāṇṭiya kingdom and its pearl fisheries were known in northern India, where Megasthenes collected his information, at the end of the fourth century B.C.E. A legend associated with the god of the Sūrasenas of Mathura had, by then, been localized in the southern country of the Pāṇṭiyas among whom it has been preserved until today, along with much more recent legend, and among whom the capital is Madurai. (xiii, trans. Harman)<sup>12</sup>

If these conclusions are true, significant amounts of the basic plot of *The Story of the Sacred Games* were current in the oral traditions of northern India by the fourth-century BCE. Thus, certain elements of the document's plot appear to precede even the earliest known examples of Tamil literature.

But perhaps more relevant in understanding Mīṇāṭci's relationship to her devotees today is the fact that for them historically verifiable facts matter only secondarily. Karl Potter aptly notes in his analysis of the hagiographic tradition that consistently misrepresented historical facts about the famous Hindu Śaṅkarācārya:

The actual philosopher is entirely lost in the myth .... In India persons are regularly subordinated in retrospect, perhaps out of a sense of the overwhelming and impersonal (or divine) ordering of cosmic history ... and thus the details of a particular life are of no great importance, unless they serve some profound didactic function. (1982, 114)

In the Hindu tradition, enduring value accrues to what always is and always has been. Truth is divine and therefore eternal. It is never discovered for the first time; it is only rediscovered. If something is really true, it cannot be new; it has occurred or been said before. If it has not occurred before or has not been said before, it is obviously not of value. Uniqueness and originality are thus intrusive and illusory.

---

<sup>12</sup> Mathurā of northern India was the capital of the royal Sūrasena dynasty, and it has often been associated with Madurai of southern India. Indeed, the southern Madurai is sometimes called Tēn Maturai (Southern Madurai) in order to distinguish it from the northern city associated with the deity Krishna.

One of the better illustrations of the difference between the Hindu and Western attitudes toward history is reflected in the autobiography of Lesslie Newbigin, a Christian missionary to India in the early 1900s. He speaks of one experience in the Tamil city of Kanchipuram, where he studied Hinduism with a local group.

I well remember how I astonished the Swami by saying that if it could be shown that Jesus had never lived and died and risen again I would have no alternative but to become a Hindu. He thought that only a lunatic would allow his ultimate destiny to hang upon a questionable fact of history which—even if it could be proved—belonged to the world of *maya* [illusion] (1985, 157).

Similar problems appear when we ask the question about whether Mīṇāṭci was ever a human. The author of the text does not really worry about the issue. Mīṇāṭci is *both* the daughter of King Malayadhvaja Pāṇṭiya *and* the incarnation of Parvatī, the divine consort of Śiva. The position is clear, for example, in the "Praise of Deities" section:

She assumed a form identical to Śiva,  
a form even Brahma cannot comprehend.  
She, who gives birth to all things  
in innumerable worlds here and afar,  
who has firm breasts,  
and black hair adorned with honey-like flowers  
is the queen with eyes like a fish,  
is the one who assumed the form of princess and  
daughter to the Pāṇṭiya dynasty,  
is the one whose flower-like feet  
you must cherish forever in your heart.  
(1. Kaṭvuḷ Vāḷttu 8, "Aṅkayarkaṇṇamai")

The writer of our text, of course, has the advantage of viewing the issue retrospectively: The queen and goddess, who is Mīṇāṭci was also Taṭātakai, the royal and human daughter. And, if forced to take a position, he would have to insist on her divinity. She is, after all, praised in the "Praise of Deities" section of the work. But forcing the tradition into an "either/or" position would do it violence, at least on this issue.

Mīṇāṭci, as child-princess, victorious human queen, eternally reigning goddess, derives much of her power precisely because she can cross boundaries so easily and so naturally: male/female, human/goddess, princess and queen. Her immaculate birth from fire signals her special status at the very beginning, but her life story moves her from being an embarrassment to her father to becoming supreme queen and goddess.

Finally, in the portrayals of her as a young princess, a formidable queen, a shy and passive bride, a proper wife, and a reigning goddess—with none of these identities excluding any of the others; indeed, with each including all the others the tradition makes her accessible to Madurai devotees. Because devotees can identify with her, they too are able to move beyond the temporary contingencies of time and place. The extent to which her sacred biography is historically accurate has little to do with mere and supposed fact. To work, it must fit the prevailing notions of what constitutes the sacred, and to work well, to make the divine truly accessible, it must reflect a sense of an "accessible" divine. Because there is much less a radical discontinuity between the human and the divine in Hinduism, and because doing one's inherent social duty (*dharma*) is a quintessential religious act, we find that most hagiographies in Hinduism are likely to present "imitate-able" models. By and large the subjects of Hindu hagiography fit the expectations tradition has precast for them.

*Conclusion: Will the Real, Historical Mīṇāṭci Please Sit Down?*

As the life history of Mīṇāṭci demonstrates, Hindu tradition tends to devalue historical uniqueness in favor of perceived divine, eternal patterns. If events in human history are simply footnotes to an eternally repeated divine pattern, and if all humans are simply working their way toward that universal, transcendent, and inherent divinity in us all, known as *mokṣa*, there can be no hard-and-fast lines between the historical and the eternal, between the human and the divine. The hard-and-fast lines, rather, come in the realm of proper human behavior. Hindus must be more concerned with orthopraxy than with orthodoxy: What they believe may change, but what they do either is or is not in accord with the divine pattern mapped out for us all. What Hindus do matters, but it incurs censure only if it makes them stand out. To be a distinct, unique individual is to set oneself not simply apart but against the prevailing divine pattern. This is why this extraordinary figure of Mīṇāṭci relinquished her uniqueness as she became absorbed into—or perhaps we should say, "married into"—the larger Hindu pantheon.

*References*

*European Language Materials*

- Babb, Lawrence A. 1970. "Marriage and Malevolence: The Uses of Sexual Opposition in a Hindu Pantheon." *Ethnology* 9 (2): 137-148.
- Brown, W. Norman. 1947. "The Name of the Goddess Mīṇāṭci 'Fish-Eye.'" *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 67: 209-214.

- Daniel, Sheryl B. 1980. "Marriage in Tamil Culture: The Problem of Conflicting 'Models.'" pp. 61-92 in *The Powers of Tamil Women*, ed. Susan S. Wadley. [Foreign and Comparative Studies: South Asian Series, No.6.] Syracuse: Syracuse University.
- Dessigane, R., P. Z. Pattabiramin, and J. Filliozat. 1960. *La Ugende des jeux de Civa Ii Madurai d'apres les textes et les peintures* (2 vols.). Pondicherry: Institut Francais d'indologie.
- Diehl, Carl Gustav. 1956. *Instrument and Purpose: Studies on Rites and Rituals in South India*. Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup.
- Fuller, C. J. 1980. "The Divine Couple's Relationship in a South Indian Temple: Mīṇāṭci and Sundaesvara at Madurai." *History of Religions* 19 (May): 321-348.
- Fuller, C. J. 1984. *Servants of the Goddess: 'The Priests of a South Indian Temple*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gonda, Jan. 1962. *Les Religions de L'Inde* (3 vols.), trans. L. Jospin. Paris: Payot.
- Harman, William. 1987a. "Two Versions of a Tamil Text and the Contexts in which They Were Written." *Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies* 5 (September): 1-18.
- Harman, William. 1987. "The Authority of Sanskrit in Tamil Literature: A Case Study in Tracing a Text to its Sources." *Mankind Quarterly* 27 (Spring): 296-316.
- Harman, William. 1987b. "The Hindu Marriage as Soteriological Event." *International journal of Sociology of the Family* 17/2: 169-182.
- Harman, William. 1989. *The Sacred Marriage of a Hindu Goddess*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Harman, William. 1995. "Kingship." In *The Harper Dictionary of Religions*, ed. J. Z. Smith and W. S. Green. New York: Harper.
- Hudson, Dennis. 1971. "Two Citra Festivals in Madurai." pp. 191-222 in *Asian Religions*, ed. Bardwell Smith. Chambersburg: The American Academy of Religion.
- Jeyechandran, A. V. 1974. "The Madurai Temple Gopuras." pp. 367-375 in *Maturait Tirukkōyil: Tirukkuṭa Nāṇṇirāṭṭuppa Peruvilā Malar*, ed. Jeyechandran. Maturai: Aruḷmiku Mīṇāṭci Cuntarēcuvarar Tirukkōyil.
- Kārāvēlane, K., trans. and ed. 1956. *Kāreikkālammeiyār: Oeuvres Éditées et Traduites*. Pondicherry: Institut Francais d'Indologie.
- Keyes, Charles F. 1982. "Charisma: From Social Life to Sacred Biography." pp. 1-22 in *Charisma and Sacred Biography*, ed. Michael A. Williams. Chico: Scholars Press.
- Marglin, Frédérique Apffel. 1985. *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Marriott, McKim. 1976a. "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism." pp. 109-142 in *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior*, ed. Bruce Kapferer. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- Marriott, McKim. 1976b. "Interpreting Indian Society: A Monistic Alternative to Dumont's Dualism." *Journal of Asian Studies* 36/1: 189-195.
- McDaniel, June. 1987. *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meena, V. n.d. *Madurai*. Cape Comorin: Harikumari Arts.
- Narayanan, Vasudha. 1982. "The Goddess Sri: The Blossoming Lotus and Breast Jewel of Viṣṇu." pp. 224-237 in *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff. Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. 1985. *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. 1973. *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva*. London: Oxford University Press.
- O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. 1976. *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Opie, J. Lindsay. 1974. "Remember Taṭātagai." pp. 217-220 in *Maturait Tirukkōyil: Tirukkuṭa Nāṇṇirāṭṭuppa Peruviḷā Malar*, ed. A. V. Jeyechandran. Madurai: Aruḷmiku Mīṇāṭṭi Cuntarēcuvarar Tirukkōyil.
- Potter, Karl H. 1982. Saṃkarācārya: The Myth and the Man." pp. 111-126 in *Charisma and Sacred Biography*, ed. Michael A. Williams. Chico: Scholars Press.
- Rajagopalan, T. R. n.d. *Welcome to Madurai*. Madurai: Sri Karthikeiya Publication.
- Ramanujan, A. K., trans. 1972. *Speaking of Śiva*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- Shulman, David Dean. 1980. *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Shulman, David Dean. 1976. "The Murderous Bride: Tamil Versions of the Myth of Dēvi and the Buffalo Demon." *History of Religions* 16/2: 120-147.
- Spratt, Philip. 1966. *Hindu Culture and Personality: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Bombay: n.p.
- Subramanian, N. 1974. "The Sports of Śiva and the Lady of the City." pp. 214-217 in *Maturait Tirukkōyil: Nāṇṇirāṭṭuppa Peruviḷā Malar*, ed. Jeyechandran. Madurai: Aruḷmiku Mīṇāṭṭi Cuntarēcuvarar Tirukkōyil.
- Waghorne, Joanne Punzo. 1994. *The Raja's Magic Clothes: Re-Visioning Kingship and Divinity in England's India*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Younger, Paul. 1982. "The Family of Śiva in a South Indian Grove." *Sciences Religieuses/ Studies in Religion* II (Summer): 245-263.

*Tamil and Sanskrit Language Materials*

- Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Trans. J. M. Sanyal. 1930-1934. Calcutta: n. p.
- Centil Turavi (pseud.). 1970. *Aimperu Viḷakkaḷ*. Cennai: Cāṣṭa Patippakam.
- Kirupā (pseud.). 1978. *Maturai Mīṇāṭci Pāṇṭiya Makaḷānatu ēṇ.?* Maturai: Vivēkānantā Accakam.
- Perumāḷ Ayyar, Caravaṇa. ed. 1860. *Maturai Aṅkayarkaṇṇammai. allatu Mīṇāṭciayammai Piḷḷaitamiḷ*. by Kumarakurupara Tampirāṇ. Rev. K. V. Aṟumaka Mutaliyār. n.p.
- Maturai Mīṇāṭciayammaṇ Tiruvaruḷperra Poṇṇalakareṇṇum Kaḷḷaḷakar Ammāṇai*. 1974. n.a. Cennai: Ar. Ji. Pati Kampeṇi.
- Mīṇāṭciayammai Piḷḷait Tamil of Kumarakuruparacuvāmikal* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). 1902. Cennai: Kalāratnākara Accuk Kūṭam.
- Paḷaniyappaṇ. Ki. 1963. *Kōyil Mānakaḷ: Maturai Mīṇāṭci Cuntarar Tirukkōyil Varalāru*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Maturai: Tiruppaṇikkulu Mīṇāṭci Tirukkōyil.
- Pañcanatam Pillai, R. 1970. *Sri Mīṇāṭci Cuntarēcuvavarar Kōyil Varalāru* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Maturai: Maturai Srī Mīṇāṭci Cuntarēcuvavarar Alaya Veḷiyiṭu.
- Tiruvilaiyāṭarpurāṇam of Parañcōtimuṇivar* (TVP). [1927] 1965. With commentary by Na. Mu. Vēṅkaṭacāmi Nāṭṭār (3 vols.). Cennai: Tenṇintiya Caiva Cittāṇṭa Nūrpatippu Kaḷakam.

## **Ganga: The Benevolent Purifier under Siege**

Sya Burya Kedzior  
Assistant Professor, Department of Geography and Environmental Planning  
Towson University  
skedzior@towson.edu

### *Abstract*

The goddess Ganga is widely revered for her power to purify souls from sin and evil, and to cleanse the body of illness and disease. She is a deity materialized in the earthly form of the River Ganga (Ganges), which feeds the plains of north India. Drinking *ganga jal* or even reciting her name facilitates the cycle of reincarnation and the liberation of *moksha*. Each year, millions of Hindus worship Ganga at sacred sites all along the river, where ritual bathing, drinking river water, and water collection for use in *puja* are common practices. In recent years, increasing attention to river water quality has highlighted tensions between state-run efforts to improve water quality and the ideological associations between the river, the goddess, and her purificatory powers. In this paper, I draw on interviews with water users and worshippers, religious leaders, NGO members, and government officials conducted in the three central basin cities of Kanpur, Allahabad, and Varanasi to explore how water users and river worshippers are renegotiating belief in the sacred power of Ganga to purify and questioning the beneficent power of the goddess.

*Keywords: Ganga, Goddess, Pilgrimage, Environment, Mela, Pollution*

Perhaps no goddess is as widely revered for her beneficence as Ganga. A gift from the gods for the benefit of humanity, the river goddess bears the power to purify both physical and spiritual ills. She is credited with bringing life to the plains of India, where her waters irrigate some of the most fertile land in South Asia, and where the great empires featured in ancient epics flourished on her shores. Stories of the river and goddess Ganga are intertwined with those of the greatest Hindu gods and kings<sup>1</sup>. The Ganges

---

<sup>1</sup> In the *Ramayana*, *Ganga* is associated with the god-king *Rama*. He lives in Ayodhya, along a Ganges tributary, and is sent to the confluence of the *Ganga* and *Yamuna* at Allahabad to pay his respects to the river goddess. Ram's wife, Sita, prays to the river for

River Basin (GRB) has long been identified as the cultural and political hearth of the nation. Her significance to the national vision was recently codified by the Indian National Congress and administration of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who declared the Ganges to be the "National River" of India (Indian National Congress 2009).

As with other great rivers, Ganga is feminized and portrayed as a great mother whose waters are "perceived to be nurturing... feeding, nourishing, quenching, and when angered flooding the earth" (Narayanan 2001: 193-194). Supreme amongst her nurturing powers is Ganga's ability to purify all that touches her sacred waters. Physical illness is healed and spiritual sin abolished by bathing in the river:

As cotton, when it comes into contact with fire, is burnt off without a remnant, even so the sins of the person that has bathed in Ganga become consumed without a trace (*Mahabharata*, quoted in Kishore 2008: 27).

Drinking her water, *ganga jal*, and even reciting her name hasten the soul's liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. These divine powers augment the belief that the river goddess purifies any material, including human waste, sewage, and industrial effluent that is introduced to her waters. The purificatory goddess cannot be contaminated.

Scholars theorize that belief in the goddess' power leads worshippers to participate in activities that produce water pollution, to expose themselves to the risks associated with bathing in and ingesting river water, and to not support pollution abatement efforts. Working in Varanasi, Kelly D. Alley (2002) found that Hindu religious beliefs often countermand direct experience with the polluted river. She argues that Hindu interpretations of waste, filth, and cleanliness conflate religious impurity with chemical contamination, preventing the possibility of widespread popular awareness of the problem of pollution in the Ganges. Alley argues that worshippers cannot reconcile evidence associated with pollution in the Ganges with their belief in the river as a supreme goddess. Supporting or participating in a campaign to save the Ganga would require too drastic a shift in how people view the power of gods relative to their own. Speaking on Yamuna, Ganga's sister river goddess, David Haberman (2006) argues that changing the way that people understand pollution could result in the abandonment of ritual river worship, the disassociation of physical rivers with their mythical and often deified counterparts, or the formation of a mass movement that

---

protection and is later revived by water from the Ganga and gives birth to her twin sons in the river (Pandey 1984).

employs religious notions of purity and pollution to challenge water use practices and approaches to pollution abatement (177-179).

As evidence of pollution in the Ganges River mounts, and as anti-pollution politics and pollution abatement schemes draw regional and national attention, devotees are increasingly questioning the relationship between the material river and the spiritual goddess. Water users and worshippers increasingly see sewage, urban surface runoff, and industrial effluent pour from the *nalas*, or drains, that line the riverbank. The effects of this pollution are felt on the skin and in the bodies of those who bathe in and drink from the river. State agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are actively engaged in educational schemes that seek to interpret these observations and to raise the popular awareness of the challenges associated with river water pollution.

But, how are these programs challenging or reinterpreting ideas associated with Ganga's purificatory power? How are water users and river worshippers reconciling evidence of pollution with faith in the goddess? Do devotees doubt her powers, or are they decoupling belief in the goddess from the physical river? In the following pages, I explore these questions by drawing upon data gathered during fieldwork in three urban centers of the central river basin (Kanpur, Allahabad and Varanasi) in 2008 and 2009. This discussion is informed by interviews with water users and worshippers, religious leaders, NGO members, and government officials<sup>2</sup>.

### *Ganga as Purifier: The River as Goddess*

Ganga has a distinctive materiality for a deity, as she is both a river and a goddess. Among all of the sacred rivers, Ganga is the holiest, sent to earth for the benefit of humankind. There are various creation myths associated with her formation, materialization from goddess to river, and descent to earth. In most of these, Ganga originates in the heavens, and various gods and mythical figures are credited with the work done to bring her to earth. In the *Puranas*, the river Ganga "issues from the foot of Vishnu above, washes the lunar orb and falls [to the city of Brahma] from the sky, encircles the city and then divides into four mighty rivers flowing [in the four cardinal directions]" (Chapman 1995: 15). In another Puranic tale, the feet of *Vamana*, the rays of the sun, scratch a hole in the matter that encapsulates this world, releasing Ganga and Yamuna from limitless space

---

<sup>2</sup> This research project also involved a survey of 121 water users across the three study sites. The findings of that survey have been published elsewhere (Kedzior 2013), although follow-up interviews with select water users are included in the present discussion.

down onto earth. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, it is Vishnu's large toe that scratches a hole in the cosmic egg, releasing Ganga. The river washes the dirt from Vishnu's foot<sup>3</sup> before descending to earth, where she then washes away the sins of humanity and purifies the entire world (Alley 2002: 60).

References to the Ganga are found in all major Hindu texts. In the *Rig Veda*, both the Ganga and the Yamuna are given priority over other rivers and described as divine (ibid.). The *Mahabharata* explains that goddess Ganga was expelled from the realm of the gods along with Mahabhisa, after the two fell in love and angered Brahma. After Mahabhisa was reincarnated as Santanu, the two were reunited and married. But, Ganga would drown any son she bore. When Santanu stops her from throwing their eighth son into the river, she reveals her identity and leaves the earth. But, her son Bhimsa stays and plays a significant role in the remainder of the epic. The *Valmiki Ramayana* includes an account of the birth of the Ganga:

Thus urged the sage recounted both  
The birth of Ganga and her growth;  
The mighty hill which metals stored  
Himalaya is the mountain lord:  
The father of a lovely pair  
Of daughters fairest of the fair  
Their mother offspring of the will  
Of Meru everlasting hill  
Mena Himalaya's darling agreed  
With beauty of her dainty waist  
Ganga was elder born: then came  
The fair one known by Uma's name  
The all the gods of heaven in need  
Of Ganga's help their vow to speed  
To great Himalaya came and prayed  
The mountain king to yield the maid  
He not regardless of the weal  
Of the three world with holy zeal  
His daughters to the immortals gave  
Ganga whose waters cleanse and save  
Who roams at pleasure fair and free  
Purging all sinners to the sea  
The three-pathed Ganga thus obtained  
The gods their heavenly homes regained  
...

---

<sup>3</sup> In her many creation myths, Ganga is associated most with the god Vishnu, especially his toes and feet, granting her the alternate name of Vishnupadi, meaning "originating from Vishnu's feet" (Gupta 1993: 107).

Thus Ganga King Himalaya's child  
The heavenly river undefiled  
Rose bearing with her to the sky  
Her waves that bless and purify (Ramayana I, translated by Ralph  
T.H. Griffith from the original Sanskrit 1870-1874, as quoted in Pant  
1987: 3-4).

Ganga is connected to other major Hindu gods, especially Vishnu, Shiva and Krishna, who are often credited with reigning in the river goddess' mighty power. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna reveals, 'In rivers, I am the Ganga' (Pant 1987: 1). In the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Krishna's consort Radha drinks the river goddess in a fit of jealousy. Ganga takes shelter from her at Krishna's feet, removing all water from the world. After the gods pray to Krishna for her release, he ruptures his toenail and frees her (Gupta 1993). But, the river is too powerful and, if released directly upon the world, threatens to crack or flood the earth. Only the dreadlocks of Shiva (interpreted by some as the Himalayas) are strong enough to catch the flow of the river and release her safely onto land. In another tale, Ganga is one of the three wives of Vishnu. During an argument with another of his wives, Saraswati, the two women curse each other to become rivers and descend to the earth (Gupta 1993: 108).

But the most popular legend associated with the descent of Ganga is that of King Sagara and Bhagiratha found in the *Ramayana*. The 60,001 sons of King Sagara, an ancestor of Ram, went to attack the great sage Kapila because they thought stole the horse being used by their father for *yajna* or *ashvamedha*, a territory-claiming ritual involving the sacrifice of a horse. Kapila burned the sons before they could strike him, leaving their ashes scattered across the north Indian plain. The descendents of Sagara appealed to Ganga to come to earth and release the sons from their earthly bondage. Bhagiratha, the great-grandson of Sagara, lived an ascetic life in the Himalayas and eventually convinced Brahma to release Ganga (or, in some versions of the story, convinced Ganga herself to descend). But, Ganga warned that her descent must be contained by Shiva, lest the force of her fall break the world apart. Convinced by Bhagiratha to cooperate, Shiva stood at the top of the Himalayas, captured Ganga in his hair and eventually set her free across the plains, where she cleansed and released the souls of Sagara's many sons (Pandey 1984, Alley 2002). It is this tale that best conveys the beneficent power of the river goddess, whose ability to purify bodies, ashes, and souls is a gift from the gods for the welfare of humanity.

*Ganga Jal: The Containerized Goddess*

In major Hindu texts, Ganga is repeatedly referenced as the most sacred river, revered for her purity, sanctity, and emancipatory power (Pandey 1984). To wade on her banks, swim in her streams, or even to take a drink of containerized river water, is to be cleansed of material dirt (*gandagi*) and ritual pollution or contamination (*apavitra*). In the Mahabharata, water from the Ganges, or *ganga jal*, is described: "As Amrita [the gods' nectar of immortality] to the gods... even so is Ganga water to human beings"(XIII, translated and quoted in Darian 1978: 125). Ritual use of *ganga jal* is emphasized in the Ramayana, where river water is credited with the ability to remove all sins and to ensure "attainment of heaven" of the dead whose relics are immersed in the river (Pandey 1984: 21). Placing ashes or uncremated remains of loved ones into the river assists their release from the cycle of rebirth and allows devotees to attain *suddhata*, or religious purity.

There are many rituals and methods of religious practice into which *ganga jal* is incorporated. The water can be drunk or splashed as an element of *puja*, or worship. A vial or jug of *ganga jal* can be kept in the home as a blessing or for future use if a family member falls ill. In the Mahabharata, we are told that those who die on the banks of the river Ganga are equal to gods, those who bathe in the river and drink her waters are purified for seven generations, and that one can wash away sin by just speaking her name (Darian 1978). But, above all else, bathing in the Ganga is the most favorable act for a Hindu devotee. In an excerpt from the *Mahabharata*, a sage explains the sanctity of the Ganga and her waters:

That end which a creature is capable of attaining by penances, by practicing celibacy, by sacrifice or by practicing renunciation, one is sure to attain by only living by the side of the Ganga and bathing in its sacred waters. Those creatures whose bodies have been sprinkled with the sacred waters of Bhagirathi [Ganga] or whose bones have been laid in the channel of that sacred stream, have not to fall away from the heaven at any time. Those men, who use the waters of the Ganga in all their acts, surely ascend to heaven after departing this world. Even those men who, having committed diverse kinds of sinful deeds in the first part of their life, betake themselves in their after years to residing by the side of the River Ganga, succeed in attaining a superior end. Hundreds of sacrifices cannot produce that merit which men of restrained souls are capable of acquiring by bathing in the sacred waters of the Ganga (quoted in Kishore 2008: 26-27).

While bathing in the Ganga at any time is surely beneficial, certain dates and hours are considered more auspicious than others. At sunrise and sunset each day, an *aarti* is performed for the Ganga at numerous sites on the river. In most of these, an *aarti* lamp is circulated during the recitation of prayers and then waved, while facing the river, in a circular pattern, to indicate that the Ganga is the goddess around whom all life and activity circulate (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: At an evening *aarti* in Rishikesh, Uttaranchal, a tourist waves the *aarti* lamp in a circular pattern while facing the river, to indicate that the Ganga is the goddess around whom all life and activity circulate (photo by author)

After the performance of the *aarti*, individual worshippers light candles suspended in a boat made of leaves (often lotus leaves) and filled with flowers, incense and other symbolic offerings. The boats are then placed in the river with a prayer and make their way downstream, presumably to the river delta and the ocean (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Typical *Aarti* offering, flowers and a candle in a leaf bowl (photo by author)

Pilgrimage to the Ganga, and especially circumambulation along her shores, is an important practice for many Hindus. The greatest number of *tirthas*, or pilgrimage sites, in India are located in the Ganges River Basin, with significant clustering of these at the upper reaches of the river and in eastern Uttar Pradesh, around the *prayaga* at Allahabad (Bhardwaj 1983). Mass pilgrimage fairs are held regularly along the Ganges. While a yearly event, the *Magh Mela*, is held at the *triveni Sangam* (confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati rivers) in Allahabad, the *Kumbh Mela*<sup>4</sup> is far more momentous and draw record-breaking crowds. The rare *Maha Kumbh Mela* is held only after 12 full Kumbh celebrations, or every 144 years. Within these celebrations there are specific days and times during which bathing is particularly rewarding. At these times, millions of

---

<sup>4</sup> *Kumbh* refers to the 'pitcher' or 'urn' that contains *Amrit*, or the nectar of the gods and of life. According to the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas*, the gods and demons fought over the pitcher of *Amrit* in a war that lasted 12 years. Garuda captured the *kumbh* of amrit and flew it across the plains of north India, spilling four drops of the nectar at *prayaga* (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik. The Kumbh Mela is celebrated at these sites every three years, the *Ardh* (half) *Kumbh Mela* is held every six years at Allahabad and Haridwar, and the *Purna Kumbh*, or full Kumbh, takes place every 12 years.

pilgrims participate in ritual bathing simultaneously. The *Purna Kumbh Mela*, held in Haridwar between January and April 2010, was attended by tens of millions of people, with about 10 million of those bathing on April 14<sup>th</sup> (Yardley and Kumar 2010). Chapman (1995) reports that of the estimated 30 million pilgrims at the 1989 Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 15 million bathed at daybreak on 6<sup>th</sup> of February. During the 2007 Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, approximately 50 million people were present (Kishore 2008). These celebrations represent the largest gathering of people in the world and draw crowds so large that they can be viewed from space (BBC News 2001, see Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Sangam at Allahabad during Mela bathing (BBC 2001)

### *Pollution in the holy river*

The waters of the Ganges River rank among the most polluted in the world (Ministry of Environment and Forests 2005). Pollution of this sacred river

has become a national embarrassment and is a top priority of the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). Although there is a significant seasonal fluctuation in both the quality and quantity of water in the river, water quality tends to decline gradually after the Ganges reaches the plains, and becomes markedly worse in the stretch of the river from Kannauj to Varanasi (Fig. 4).

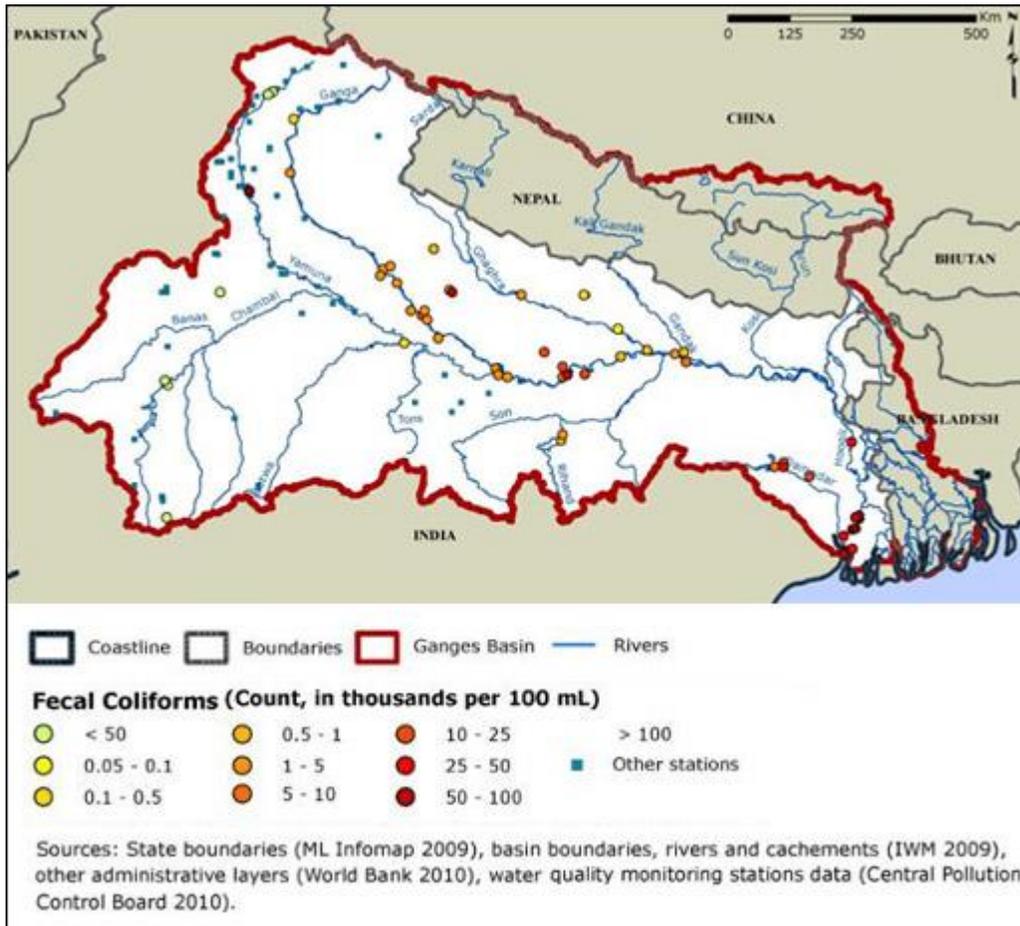


Figure 4: Map showing the fecal coliform count from water quality monitoring data on the Ganges River and its main tributaries (World Bank)

After Varanasi, water quality improves due to inputs from tributaries in the lower courses of the river. Water quality is best during the late monsoon and post-monsoon months of August and September and worst during the winter and spring months of January, February and March. It is also during these months that the largest festivals and mass bathings occur in the central GRB.

While the river is targeted under the MoEF's Best Use Designation scheme to be 'Class B', or safe for organized bathing, the Ganges does not meet

this standard at most testing sites. Most stretches are designated 'Class D', indicating that the river is safe enough only for the propagation of wildlife and fisheries, and not human contact or consumption<sup>5</sup> (MoEF 2009). Key sources of pollution include untreated (or undertreated) sewage, industrial effluent, and agricultural runoff, all of which represent health risks to people who come into direct contact with river water, through bathing, drinking or other practices. Chromium, fluoride, ammonia, lead, cadmium, zinc, and copper count among the known chemical contaminants found in the river, yet organic pollution poses the greatest immediate risk to human health. While accurate data is unavailable, estimates by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) indicate that cities in the basin produce more twelve billion liters of raw sewage each day<sup>6</sup>, of which about 24% is treated before being released into the river (Sharma 1997, Maria 2003). The presence of raw sewage contributes to high dysentery rates in the basin, where diarrheal diseases cause an average of one death every minute (Sampat 1996). Toxic chemicals further increase the risk of cancer, endocrine disorders, cataracts, and kidney and liver disease among water users (Maria 2003). Other health effects include rashes and yellowed patches of skin, eyesight problems and heavy metal poisoning (Sengupta 2006, World Health Organization 2004).

Concerns about the quality of water in the Ganges River were first documented during the colonial period. Pre-colonial descriptions of the river found in religious and medicinal texts "are unanimous in their description of the Ganges as wholesome, clear, sweet, tasty, and digestive" (Markandya and Murty 2000: 222), and tales abound of warriors and kings who travelled far and brought themselves praise for collecting the perpetually cool and sweet *ganga jal* (Alley 2002). Maclean (2008) documents British colonial concerns about river health and ritual bathing, noting that the 1859 Mela festivities at Allahabad were nearly cancelled by local authorities concerned about the possibility that a cholera outbreak was caused by the conditions at the Sangam<sup>7</sup>. Foreign travelers shared warnings about water

---

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that Indian water quality standards and river classification systems were developed by the Bureau of Indian Standards and are not in line with international guidelines recommended by the World Health Organization. For example, the World Health Organization recommends no more than 0-2 total coliform counts per 100 mL of sampled water (0-2/100 mL) in all treated or untreated drinking water and no more 126/100 mL for freshwater recreation and full-contact bathing. The CPCB and BIS allow for up to 50/100 mL total coliform in untreated disinfected drinking water and allow up to 500/100 mL in Class B bathing sources (MoEF 2009)

<sup>6</sup> These estimates did not account for pollution produced in smaller cities and towns or from non-point sources.

<sup>7</sup> Concerns about the relationship between poor water quality and the outbreak of disease inspired the creation of Sanitation Police and later a office of North-Western Provinces

quality in the Ganges, paying particular attention to sightings of floating corpses in the river near Varanasi, which Mark Twain in 1896 described as “nasty” (McNeill 2000). But poor water quality did not capture the attention of central government officials until the 1970s, when the Government of India (GoI) prepared its first comprehensive State of the Environment report. Findings that over 600km of the river’s course “were effectively dead from an ecological point of view, and posed a considerable public health threat to the thousands of religious bathers using the river every day” contributed to the development of India’s first water quality regulations (Markandya and Murty 2000: 1).

In recent years, official efforts to improve water quality have centered on implementation of the Ganga Action Plan (GAP). Phase I, launched in 1984, involved 261 pollution abatement projects in the 25 towns and cities, including the installation of sewage treatment plants and pumping stations, crematoriums, small-scale sanitation facilities, and other solid waste management programs. Critics of the GAP found that water quality worsened during the implementation period (Mallikarjun 2003), pollution levels remained largely the same (Kant 2000), and that the more than 9 billion rupees budget for the project had, at the very least, not been used appropriately (Sengupta 2006). Launched in 2000, GAP-Phase II, which later morphed into the National River Conservation Directorate (NRCD), aims to address sources of industrial pollution, rather than focusing exclusively on domestic sewage, through the provision of training, monitoring equipment, and funding industrial effluent treatment facilities. In 2009, the GoI accepted a new \$1 billion loan from the World Bank in order to fund the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA), which aims to end the discharge of untreated waste into the Ganges by 2020 (BBC News 2009). Despite continual funding of these and other abatement programs for the past 25 years, water quality in the Ganges River continues to fall far short of national and international standards for consumption and use.

In explaining the failure of abatement programs, government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and many scholars point to a perceived incommensurability between official “scientific” abatement approaches and popular, “traditional” Hindu views of the river as sacred and eternally pure (McNeill 2000: 131). Alley (1998) credits Rajiv Gandhi with attempting to reconcile these two seemingly binary views in his 1986 speech inaugurating GAP-I, in which he drew a distinction between ritual filth and material pollution, but argued that they are intertwined in order to

---

Sanitary Commissions who were, on many occasions, charged with dispersing crowds, controlling mass bathing in the river, and even breaking up festivities during annual Mela celebrations (Maclean 2008).

emphasize that measures to reduce *both* types of pollution would be necessary to make the waters of the Ganges “clean” again. Gandhi declared that the sacred purity of the Ganges was unquestionable, but that pollution of its waters was undeniable. Debates over pollution in the river and its relation to belief the goddess’ power to cleanse and purify have appeared frequently in media and garnered attention in state and national politics. Government officials argue that environmental legislation will continue to prove ineffectual until popular awareness of the hazards of water pollution improves (Chandramohan 2006) and anti-pollution NGOs encourage people to abandon, or at least reinterpret their views of the Ganges as inviolate, in the hope of improving public support for pollution abatement measures.

*The Purifier under Siege:  
Shifting Notions of the River-Goddess’ Purificatory Power*

For public officials involved in the multi-scalar efforts to improve water quality in the GRB, popular perception of the river as goddess is seen as a major obstacle to abatement efforts. As an official with the Uttar Pradesh state Pollution Control Board (UP-PCB) explained, “one thing... is required [for success]: religion has to be separated from all these issues. Unless religion is separated from these issues, things will not change” (Interview 2009). He further argued that pollution abatement could not be achieved without a broad scale shift in the way people view and worship the river as a goddess: “Nobody can change. The few of us [working] here in the office... submitting reports, monitoring, we can’t make people change. It won’t happen until, unless the psychology [about river worship] changes” (ibid.). Another officer with a local government authority echoed these sentiments, saying that the only problem with implementing pollution abatement efforts is the “difference of opinion” when it comes to the sacred nature of the river (Interview 2009). Yet, *how* to encourage a shift in public opinion and practice and *whether* it is possible or practicable to challenge Hindu religious interpretations of the river as an unadulterable goddess of purification is not universally agreed upon. Answers to these questions vary between agencies and organizations.

During the 2013 Kumbh Mela at Allahabad, a massive awareness-raising campaign was organized by the National Mission Clean Ganga (NMCG), the implementing arm of the NGRBA, in partnership with an Indian marketing company and the Communications Center at Johns’ Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health. Billboards, posters and other promotional materials were displayed in the city of Allahabad, along roads to the *sangam*, and at the Mela grounds (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: A *mela* billboard advising worshippers to “Bathe in Ganga, but not with soap” (CCP 2013, translation by author)

These materials were designed to convey three sets of messages: “messages that established and reiterated the grandeur of the Ganges River; messages that highlighted simple actions that pollute the river; and messages that depicted individuals pledging not to pollute the Ganges” (CCP 2013). Seen as a whole, the NMGCD campaign was careful not to question the purity of the river itself or to draw attention to possible health risks associated with bathing in or drinking from a Class D river, but rather to emphasize the potential negative impacts of worshipper’s activities on the quality of river water.

This Mela campaign was affiliated with another organized by the group Ganga Action Parivar. This NGO conducted a march and other educational activities “to send a message that together, we can clean up the Ganga, just as She cleanses us.” (Parivar founder P.S.C. Saraswati, quoted in OneIndia News, 2013). Through these efforts, the group aimed to “spread awareness... about the importance of restoring and protecting Mother Ganga... and motivating festivals-goers [sic] from all over the world to become stewards of the environment” (Ganga Action Parivar 2013). The NGO was far more assertive in suggesting that the Ganges is polluted than

was the Ministry-sponsored campaign. Yet, neither questioned the sacred power of the river goddess, and instead either emphasized only potential impacts of festival-goers' activities, or entreated worshippers to invert their relationship with the mother goddess and think of themselves as her caretakers.

While these "awareness-raising" efforts at the Kumbh-Mela are unique, event-based efforts, such partnerships between Ministry officials, community members and NGOs are increasingly common. Emphasis on state-NGO partnerships became quite strong following the adoption of sustainable development approaches and the renewed emphasis on people's participation in the past two decades. NGOs and "voluntary organizations" are designated as an organizational branch of the GAP/NRCP (Fig. 6), charged with scheme preparation, execution and maintenance, as well as organizing public participation. State officials see their partner NGOs as public liaisons, administering participation initiatives and running awareness programs. An official with the UP-PCB explained that the PCBs work with NGOs because they are believed to possess the resources necessary for public outreach and are viewed by the public as less threatening than government officials (Interview 2009).

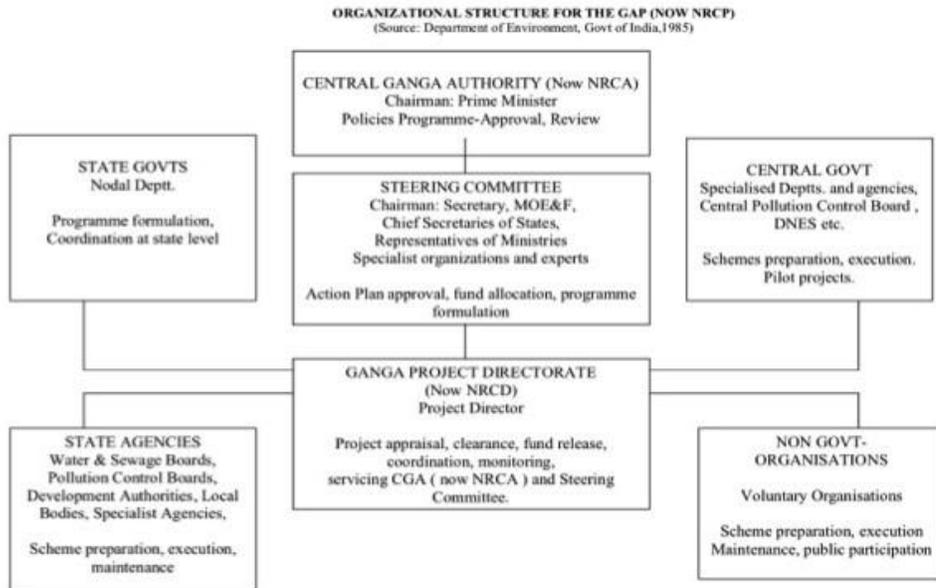


Figure 6: Organizational structure for the GAP/NRCP (Department of Environment. 1985)

Two of the largest and most active anti-pollution NGOs in the central GRB are the Sankat Mochan Foundation (SMF), based in the holy city of Varanasi, and the Kanpur Eco-Friends (KEF), from the industrial city of Kanpur. In their educational efforts, both of these organizations entreat worshippers and water users to reformulate their ideas about the river as goddess, the nature of the goddess-devotee relationship, and the water use practices that these beliefs reflect. Larger and better known, the SMF has long received accolades for their awareness-raising efforts. SMF founder Dr. Veer Bhadra Mishra is *mahant* of the local Sankat Mochan Temple and former Professor of Civil Engineering at Banaras Hindu University. He has received many accolades for his efforts to clean the river, including recognition on the United Nations Environmental Program's 1992 Global 500 Forum Roll of Honour (UNEP 2010) and in Time Magazine's 1999 list of "Heroes of the Planet" (Ganguly 1999).

Alongside an ongoing legal battle with the local government over their alternative sewage treatment proposal, one of the SMF's key campaigns is the Swatcha Ganga Abhiyan (SGA, or Clean Ganges Campaign), an educational program that focuses on raising public awareness in Varanasi about the causes of non-point pollution, especially "open defecation, laundering activities (*dhobi ghats*) and removal of corpses and carcasses from the waterway" (Clean Ganga). Through conferences, community workshops, children's cultural activities and *ghat* clean-up events, the SMF promotes "culturally sensitive" education that aims to improve the awareness of local people who use Ganges river water in their daily activities. The goal of the SGA is to encourage people to alter their water use activities and other actions related to the river in order to protect water users from the health risks posed by bathing in or ingesting contaminated water, and to protect the river from contaminants.

SMF community awareness and educational activities do not ask water users to reject Hindu faith-based interpretations of the river and its relationship to the country or its people, but rather seeks to change how people understand their role in that relationship and act on the basis of that knowledge. In Foundation discourse, the river remains *Ma Ganga*, the mother of Hindus, the nation and the world. In one organizational flyer, titled '*The holy river Ganga (Ganges) is divine goddess for one billion believers the world over –She isn't feeling well*' (Clean Ganga), the SMF asserts, "The problem is, Ganga Ma (Mother Ganges) isn't feeling well", and then reassures, "She can be cured" in very large text (inside cover). While her devotees are still encouraged to think of themselves as her children, they are asked to shift from thinking of themselves as protected *by* Ganga, to thinking of themselves as protectors *of* Ganga. Mishra explains that Hindu pilgrims to the Ganges:

want to touch the water, rub their bodies in the water, sip the water... If you tell them 'the Ganga is polluted,' they say, 'we don't want to hear that.' But if you take them to the places where open sewers are giving the river the night soil of the whole city, they say, 'this is disrespect done to our mother, and it must be stopped' (Hammer 2007: 81).

By appealing to the significance of these religious practices, the Foundation claims that they are able to overcome the resistance that is posed by long-sustained religious beliefs about the nature of the river as goddess. The SMF doesn't try to force devotees to change how they think of the river, only how they think of themselves in their relationship to the river.

In the northern city of Kanpur, the Eco-Friends (KEF) engage in a similar struggle to clean the Ganges, albeit one with a very different approach. Like the SMF, educational and awareness-raising programs constitute a significant segment of the KEF's activities, along with public interest litigation, media advocacy, and *ghat*- and street-adoption and watchdog programs. But rather than drawing on Hindu religious beliefs in order to encourage caring attitudes toward the river, the KEF appeals to local people to abandon their view of the river as goddess, along with associated water use activities. Specifically, the KEF campaigns against the practice of ritual bathing in the river, arguing that people are polluting and harming the very river they worship through these ritualistic activities:

When we attempt to reconcile the significance of the sacred river in the past to its present reality, a most tragic paradox is encountered. Ganga today is being worshipped and defiled simultaneously. In fact, at most times, the process of worship itself has a polluting influence... The coexistence of worship and defilement of the Ganga defies logic and reason and leaves most observers confused (Jaiswal 2007: 47).

In KEF discourse then, bathing and river worship are described both as causing pollution, by contributing waste and contaminants to the water, and as preventing people from taking action against pollution, by convincing them that the river is a great purifier and unable to be polluted. While the organization engages in a variety of activities, it is their struggle to end the practice of bathing and the belief in the holiness of the Ganges that is granted discursive priority. This aspect of the organization's work is also the most controversial.

In organizational literature, practices of river worship are referred to as “ancient traditions” and “superstitions” that shaped “Indian civilization”, but seem nonetheless outdated. KEF founder Rakesh Jaiswal describes river worship as a “polluting social practice” that started in ancient times and became perverted over the years:

“At least 800 millions Hindus worship this river. And they have tremendous faith... its not just a river, but its a deity or goddess for Hindus. They have a lot of faith [in] that, and this belief that river is a deity, Ganga is a goddess, and if you put anything into it, it will clean it. *That river Ganges is a cleanser par excellence, this belief has done the damage most.* Because this belief got distorted over the years. Like, people having this kind of belief started dumping dead bodies into the river. They also worship the river and put a lot of worship materials. And also anything, they simply put into it believing that the river will clean it. So, this religious belief has also done the damage” (Interview 2009, emphasis added).

In order to achieve their goal to end bathing practices associated with worship of the Ganga, KEF members believe that Hindu devotees must abandon their religious beliefs and adopt a scientific or ecological perspective, or at least concede that the river is no longer a goddess: “The Ganga devotees who consider the river as a cleanser par excellence and treat Ganga as a deity who gives salvation *need to be taught that Ganga has lost its divine role, Ganga has lost its cleansing properties*” (Jaiswal 2007: 48). The specific programs associated with this aspect of the organization’s work include school activities that emphasize scientific interpretations of the pollution issue, community workshops that stress the negative impacts of bathing and river worship, and a community burial program in which corpses are removed from the river and people are encouraged to bury (rather than cremate) the recently departed.

There exists significant doubt about the practicability of an anti-bathing and anti-worship campaign when people come to the river by the tens of millions each year to bathe and worship. But Jaiswal believes that it is possible to change these practices, given enough time:

“Practices take a lot of time in evolving... If it took hundreds or thousands of years getting evolved, it would also take years, maybe some decades, in getting eradicated. But now people realize- there is some awareness. Now, there are some good practices... Eco-Friends have been carrying out these kinds of campaign[s] over the years: That we should not pollute the river... We should not throw even the worship materials. That also causes pollution... and maybe if this

campaign is carried out, maybe in a decade or two this can be eliminated completely, this kind of practice" (Interview 2009).

*The Purifier Reinterpreted: Examining Shifting Views of the Goddess' Power*

Interviews with water users in the central basin cities of Kanpur, Allahabad and Varanasi reveal that ideas about the presence of pollution in the Ganges River, its effect of human health, and the appropriateness of direct water use activities are indeed changing. While saying that there is pollution in the Ganges River is continues to be unthinkable for some, water users frequently reference the idea that the existence of pollution in the river is now beyond question: "The river is too polluted... pollution is common knowledge, so no one bathes in the river" (activist, Kanpur 2009). Indeed, it seems that, for many water users, the existence of pollution in the river is not longer plausibly deniable: water users cite the visual evidence of drains emptying black sludge directly into the river and the physical evidence of rashes and other negative health effects that follow a dip in the holy waters.

"Yes, every people know [about pollution]. Because when they take a bath in Ganga, they see dead bodies float in the Ganga and the polluted items on the top [of the water]... But Gangaji is Gangaji" (Activist, Varanasi 2009).

It is this experience with pollution and contamination in the river that is leading people to question the ability of a sacred river to become defiled. Experiencing rashes and illness associated with river bath or water ingestion leads people to wonder whether the waters that are believed to heal and purify may pose a risk to human health. In interviews, many water users referenced this contradiction:

"Previously one could drink, but now..." [shakes head to indicate no] (Businessman, Allahabad 2008).

"We don't want to drink, but we drink out of faith... Religious [tradition] says we should [drink *ganga jal*], but it isn't safe." (Retired Priest, Varanasi 2009)

"I am a very religious person, so I must say this [that it is safe to drink water directly from the river]. But, ... if it is consumed in its natural form without being treated, then it is not safe [to drink]" (Driver, Allahabad 2008).

Across the basin, water users reported that while they may still believe in the goddess and her powers to purify, they are adjusting their practices of worship out of concern over river water quality. Especially in Kanpur, many worshippers no longer bathe in the river, but rather travel upstream where the waters are clearer, or modify their practices significantly. I met one lawyer from the city while he was performing his morning *puja* near Sirsaya *ghat* in Kanpur. He dipped the tips of his fingers into the river water, touched his hands to his forehead, recited a prayer, and produced a bottle of water from his satchel that was then used to wash the *ganga jal* from his hands and face. When I inquired why he was washing the *ganga jal* away, he explained that he wanted to remove the dirt and chemicals from the water residue. I asked whether he would bathe in the river at that site, and his response was an emphatic, "Never" (Interview 2009). Modified practices such as these were reported to me across the basin, where devotees claimed that they now prefer *darshan* over direct worship, that they limit ritual bathing to only the most auspicious of days, or that they control the timing and exposure of their bodies to water during bathing. While most people, whether locals or pilgrims, continue to participate in some manner in the practice of ritual bathing in the *Ganga*, it is clear that ideas about the goddess and her ability to purify are being challenged and renegotiated.

Ideas about pollution, or more specifically the ability of the river and its waters to *be polluted* or *exist in a state of pollution* are quite complex. Drawing this distinction between pollution as a material object and pollution as a state or condition of existence allows water users to explain how pollution can be introduced to the river with her becoming contaminated. For many local water users, the river may carry pollution, and its waters may even threaten human health, but that does not mean that *Ganga*, is polluted or contaminated:

"There is pollution, but the river doesn't get contaminated" (Worker, Allahabad 2009).

"Ganga can't be contaminated" (Teacher, Allahabad 2009).

In order to account for the seeming contradiction of these interpretations, some water users have developed unique explanations for the existence of pollution in the river, describing the power of the river as having a "limit" or "ceiling" that has been surpassed, or as being diminished by the placement of dams on the river and the subsequent reduction of water levels and flow rates. Others argue that the sacredness of the Ganga, her purificatory powers, were meant only for the Hindu religious practices performed on her shores, and that it is through the introduction of alternative forms of water use (for irrigation, sewage disposal and industry) that the goddess' power

to purify has been overloaded. In other words, the river *does* continue to purify waste from ritual bathing and idol disposal, for example, but not from factory effluent, as she is a river sent to cleanse the bodies and souls of people, and not of industries. In this view, industries should cease their dumping and dams should be removed from the river's course, so that the full power of the goddess might be unleashed and she might once again cleanse herself and her devotees.

*Sacred Power and the Struggle to Redefine a Goddess*

The debate over pollution in the Ganges River informs, and is informed by, a concomitant debate regarding the power of the Goddess Ganga to purify the bodies and souls with whom she comes in contact. While belief in the goddess is not in doubt across a broad spectrum of Hindu society, local water users and river worshippers in the urban centers of the river basin cite evidence of pollution to challenge the idea that Ganga remains the great purifier: "[The Ganga was] a pure river, but no longer. Its spiritual power is no more" (serviceman, Allahabad 2009). People living in these urban centers who wish to bathe in the river (and who have the resources to do) frequently leave the cities and go upstream, to the river's headwaters. As one respondent explained, "*there is no space for a sacred river* in a city where nothing is holy anymore" (Activist, Kanpur 2009, emphasis added).

Both the evidence of pollution in the Ganga and the broader debates surrounding its abatement have effects on belief in the goddess Ganga and her purificatory powers that are not inconsequential. State and NGO perspectives on the capacity of local people to acknowledge pollution in their river, along with the public's willingness to tolerate challenges to Hindu religious ideology, structure awareness-raising campaigns, as described above. They also influence both approaches to pollution abatement undertaken by the government and championed by NGOs, and their incorporation of public participation into the overall decision-making processes surrounding pollution abatement.

Moreover, these issues raise the important question of how belief in the power of a goddess is challenged and renegotiated. Here, we see that, in the face of pollution evidence, Ganga's purificatory powers are being called into question. Not only does this evidence suggest to some that that her divinity should be questioned, or perhaps that her purificatory powers are waning, but that her gift to humanity, her healing waters, now carry the maleficent threat of illness and disease. The accounts reported here indicate a transition in process. People are observing, questioning and

reexamining their faith in the face of mounting evidence of pollution and an abundance of new information from media and educational campaigns. For water users and worshippers in these locales, this renegotiation is likely to continue for some time, and not be resolved by 2020, the government's deadline for stopping flow of sewage into the river.

### References

- Alley, Kelly D. (1998) 'Images of waste and purification on the banks of the Ganga', in *City and Society*. Vo. 10, No. 1: 167-182.
- . (2002) *On the Banks of the Ganga: When Wastewater Meets a Sacred River*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- BBC News. (2001) "Kumbh Mela pictured from space" in *BBC News* [online], available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1137833.stm>.
- . (2009) "World Bank loans India \$1bn for Ganges river clean up" in *BBC News* [online], available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8392118.stm>.
- Bhardwaj, Surinder Mohan. (1983) *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- CCP – Center for Communications Programs. (2013). "When Water is Both Holy and Polluted" in *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health* [online], available: [http://www.jhuccp.org/news/success\\_stories/when-water-both-holy-and-polluted](http://www.jhuccp.org/news/success_stories/when-water-both-holy-and-polluted).
- Chandramohan, C.K. (2006) "Dump the Mindset to Save Water" in *The Hindu* [online], 7 November. Available: <http://www.thehindu.com/2006/07/11/stories/2006071113790500.htm>.
- Chapman, Graham P. (1995) 'Introduction: The Ganges-Brahmaputra Basin', pp. 3-24, in *Water and the Quest for Sustainable Development in the Ganges Valley*, edited by Graham P. Chapman and Michael Thompson. London: Mansell Publishing.
- Clean Ganga (n.d.) "*The holy river Ganga (Ganges) is divine goddess for one billion believers the world over*". Varanasi, India: Sankat Mochan Foundation.
- Darian, Steven G. (1978) *The Ganges in myth and history*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii.
- Department of Environment. (1985) *An Action Plan for prevention of pollution of the Ganga*. New Delhi: Government of India.
- Ganga Action Parivar. (2013) "Eco-Friendly Green Initiative Kumbh Mela", available: <http://www.gangaaction.org/actions/green-kumbh/>.

- Ganguly, Meenakshi. (1999) "Holy War for 'My Mother'", in *Time Magazine* [online]. Available: <http://www.time.com/time/reports/environment/heroes/heroesgallery/0,2967,mishra,00.html>.
- Gupta, Jayoti. (1993) 'Land, dowry, labour: Women in the changing economy of Midnapur', in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, Nos. 9-11: 74-90.
- Haberman, David L. (2006) *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: the Yumuna River of Northern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hammer, Joshua. (2007) 'A Prayer for the Ganges', in *Smithsonian*. Vol. 38, No. 8: 74-82.
- Indian National Congress. (2009) *Lok Sabha Elections 2009 Manifesto*.
- Jaiswal, Rakesh. (2007) "Ganga Action Plan: A Critical Analysis". Kanpur, India: Kanpur ECOFriends, available: <http://www.ecofriends.org/main/eganga/images/Critical%20analysis%20of%20GAP.pdf>
- Kant, S. (2000) "The Ganges: Troubled Waters" in *BBC News* [online], 27 June, available: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/south\\_asia/683566.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/south_asia/683566.stm).
- Kedzior, S. (2013) 'Is environmental awareness the key to changing resource use and political activity? Exploring failed efforts to clean India's Ganges River', in *The Pennsylvania Geographer*. Vol. 51, No. 1: 42-72.
- Kishore, Kaushal. (2008) *The Holy Ganga*. Calcutta: Rupa & Co.
- Maclean, Kama. (2008) *Pilgrimage and power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765-1954*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mallikarjun, Y. (2003). "Pollution Levels in Ganga Alarming", in *The Hindu* [online] 14 September, available: <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2003/09/15/stories/2003091502161300.htm>
- Maria, A. (2003) "Costs of Water Pollution in India". Paris: CERNA, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Paris [Online], available: [http://www.cerna.ensmp.fr/cerna\\_globalisation/Documents/maria-delhi.pdf](http://www.cerna.ensmp.fr/cerna_globalisation/Documents/maria-delhi.pdf)
- Markandya, Anil and Maddipati Narasimha Murty. (2000) *Cleaning Up the Ganges: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Ganga Action Plan*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- McNeill, John Robert. (2000) *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
- Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). (2005) "Water Quality" in *Annual Report, 2004-2005*, available: <http://www.cpcb.nic.in/annualreport04-05/ar2004-ch5.htm>.

- Narayanan, Vasudha. (2001) 'Water, Wood, and Wisdom: Ecological Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions', in *Daedalus*. Vol. 130, No. 40: 179-206.
- OneIndia News. (2013) "'Green' parade in Allahabad" Call for pollution-free Ganga" in *OneIndia News* [online], available: <http://news.oneindia.in/2013/01/27/kumbh-mela-activists-call-for-pollution-free-ganga-1137953.html>.
- Pandey, Sudhakar. (1984) *Ganga and Yamuna in Indian art and literature*. Chandigarh, India: Prakashan.
- Pant, Pushpesh. (1987) *Ganga: Origin and descent of the river eternal*. New Delhi: Frank Bros. & Co.
- Sampat, Payal. (1996) 'The River Ganges' Long Decline', in *World Watch*. Vol. 9, No. 14: 24-32.
- Sengupta, R. (2006) 'The Tragedy of the Ganges', in *TerraGreen* [online]. Vol. 121, available: [http://www.teriin.org/terragreen/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=367&Itemid=3](http://www.teriin.org/terragreen/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=367&Itemid=3)
- Sharma, Y. (1997) 'Case Study I: The Ganga, India', n.p., in *Water Pollution Control: A Guide to the Use of Water Quality Management Principles*, edited by Richard Helmer and Ivanildo Hespanhol. United Nations Environment Programme.
- UNEP - United Nations Environment Programme. (2010) "Roll of Honor/Laureates" in *Global 500 Forum*, available: <http://www.global500.org/rollofhonour.html>
- World Bank. (n.d.) "*National Ganga River Basin Project*", available: <http://go.worldbank.org/IRXPY17270>
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2004) "*The Environment: Where's the Risk, and Where are Children Safe?*", WHO Press Release [online], 22 June. Available: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2004/pr43/en/>
- Yardley, Jim and Hari Kumar. (2010). "Taking a sacred plunge: one wave of humanity at a time" in *New York Times*, 14 April. Available: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/15/world/asia/15india.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/15/world/asia/15india.html?_r=1)

## **Fearsome Goddess Seetala and the Faithful Community**

Nupurnima Yadav  
Jawaharlal Nehru University,  
New Delhi  
Email: nupurnima.yadav@gmail.com

### *Abstract*

In this paper my primary intention is to grapple with the questions that emanate from my escalating interest with assortments of: What makes a god/goddess fearsome? How fear of a particular god/goddess regulates our faith and behaviour towards them? And finally, is there a causal relationship between faith and fear? The paramount focus in this paper will be on the Seetala goddess, commonly addressed as goddess of chicken and smallpox in North India. Previously, there have been predominantly ethno-medical studies on the goddesses which fail to address her social impact. In order to have a better understanding of the cult, certain field visits to the temple of Seetala Mata in Gurgaon district of Haryana were conducted.

*Keywords: Seetala, Goddess, Shakti, Smallpox, Faith*

### *Introduction*

*"Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge. By his God thou knowest man, and by the man his God; the two are identical." (Feuerbach Ludwig: The Essence of Christianity, 1957, p 12).*

Feuerbach in his work argued that religious object of worship is society, but then many people would argue that why society needs god/goddesses? The idea that religion is not something instituted by God, but rather is man-made, can be traced back to ancient Greece. Max Weber in his book "The Sociology of Religion" has briefly described the concept of religion, necessitated by the existence of gods in some societies. He argued that the ineradicable basis of popular religions, particularly in India is the religious behaviour of not "worshipping the god" but rather "coercing the god," and invocation is not prayer but some magical formulae. Weber in his work argued that "Gods," too, were originally conceived as "human-like" beings (1920).

While Christianity has divided Creation between a perfectly good God and an absolutely evil Satan, Hindu universe is a little more crowded. Hindus worship these beings as greater beings than themselves, and they maintain a subjective attitude towards them. Though Hinduism is one of the world's major religious traditions, it is actually a medley of religious traditions, all

originating in India. As a singular world religion, then, Hinduism requires a footnote—it is not a monolithic entity but rather a conglomerate of religions that share certain traits in common. These religions go by the names *Vaishnavism*, *Shaivism*, *Shaktism*, and many others alongside mainstream Hinduism. Several historical precedents and contemporary resurgence of new cults shape the current perception of Hinduism.

### *Shakti: The Goddess*

The word *shakti* comes from the root "*shak*," "to be able, to have power". Shaktas believe everything, any activity, has power; if the power is not visible, it may be latent. This is known as *Adya-Shakti*, Primordial Energy, or the force that emanates from everything. Shakti is the kinetic quality of Brahman, the inexpressible Reality/Being. Hinduism believes everything to be in a state of ceaseless activity and perpetual movement.

The word *shakti* always bears many meanings *shakti* means "power" and in the highest causal sense is God as Mother; in another aspect, it implies the limitless universes that emanate ceaselessly from the Eternal Being. In her static transcendent aspect the Mother or *Shakti* is of the same nature as Shiva. Philosophically speaking, Shiva is the unchanging consciousness and Shakti is its changing power appearing in mind as well as matter. Shiva-Shakti is therefore consciousness-power.

The early Hindu tradition spoke of discrete goddesses as *Parvati*, *Lakshmi*, *Seeta* and so on. A particular goddess, such as *Parvati* or *Lakshmi* is affirmed as the highest deity as she is the consort or the *shakti* of the highest deity, and all the other goddesses were taken as fractions or manifestations of her. There was no "one great goddess", in the Vedic literature and also the emergence of the *Mahadevi* appears only in the medieval period in Hinduism. Another important feature of *Mahadevi* mythology is the insistence that she assumes both "benign" and "hostile" forms. The devi through the manifestations of goddesses like *Sati*, *Parvati*, *Lakshmi* and others display positive roles of fertility, protection, cultural creativity, wifely duty and material abundance. She is the granter of wisdom and learning, the embodiment of beauty and desire and has an important role to play as a source of food and nourishment. Although the benevolent forms of *Devi* tend to dominate, but sometimes her fierce and destructive aspect appears often in the context of her fundamental protective roles as a cosmic guardian. Many fearsome goddesses prevail including the *Mahadevi's* central role but are known to be parts of her being.

These bands of goddesses are known as *Matrkas* or "mothers", these goddesses are only mentioned as a group. "Early references to the *Matrkas* date to around the first century A.D, but rarely specify their number; the implication in some passages is that they are innumerable" (Kinsley 1988, 151). The inauspicious qualities of *Matrkas* have been described as dangerous. Their names became more standardised during the medieval

period, they are usually seven in number although some texts mention them to be eight or sixteen in number. The early references to these goddesses were made in the Mahabharata. Their physical descriptions emphasize their fearsome natures and their behaviour is said to be violent. The *Matrkas* are mostly attracted to children, goddesses who are hostile to children are found elsewhere too in the Indian religious traditions. However some of the Goddesses in the Hindu Pantheon are believed to sustain the cosmic order and also shield their believers from any threat (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/matrikas>).

The most important aspect which emerges from the Vedic literature is that though there are evidences of prevalence of various popular goddesses but none of them rivals the great male gods in the texts. The male deities dominate the Vedic revelation of the divine. This aspect is discussed later in the paper

### *The Fearsome Seetala Mata*

Most of the Indian population dwells in villages, and every village believes in some or the other deity who is often regarded as the village god/goddess. These village deities have their specialized functions, with some of them being popular throughout the entire region. The goddesses Mariyamman in South India and *Mansa* in North India are examples of regional popularity. Continuous themes observed in the myths, cult and worship of village goddesses are their being rooted in particular, local villages. The village is the special place for the deity; she is mother or the protector of the village. She, in return of her worship, ensures fertility, good harvest and protection. But the relationship among village and the village goddesses often gets ambiguous as she is also associated with spreading diseases amongst her followers, that often makes them as a destructive force to reckon with. Some of these goddesses are at times referred to as angry deities and need appeasing.

One such goddess is *Seetala Mata*, who is also known as Pox goddess throughout the country. The image of mother goddess seems paradoxical and contrary to the normal perception: paradoxical because she is worshipped with awe and devotion on the one hand, and portrayed as repulsive on the other. Contrarily, because according to general perception whosoever is worshipped should essentially be loveable and kind.

The cult of the goddess of smallpox is widespread throughout India, however, there prevails a noticeable diversity in her names. In northern India, the dreaded Seetala Mata is called *Seetala Devi*. In northern Karnataka, the village deities *Dyāmvva* and *Durgavva* are responsible for epidemics. Their sister Yellamma is responsible for eczema, swellings, ulcers, mumps, venereal diseases, and leprosy. The Muslims of Attari tribe of Madhya Pradesh worship her as "*Malta*" and in Gurgaon she is known as "*Masani Mata*" as the shrine is constructed on a *shmashan bhoomi* (graveyard).

The cult seems to belong to prehistoric times; its linkages can be traced back to the Harappan civilisation. This cult is particularly associated with smallpox, euphemistically referred to as Mata. It is believed that pustules appear on the body of a child as a symbol of the displeasure of the goddess (Mata). She is worshipped and appeased to save the child from this fatal disease. *Seetala* has six other sisters who are associated with other ailments affecting children, mainly postulate diseases. These sisters reside on the trees of *neem* (*Azdirachta indica*), *kikar* (*Acacia Arabica*) or *jand* (*prosopis speciger*). These trees are also worshipped to appease Mata and her sisters. She is also believed to stay around and on the banks of village ponds, and perhaps her name is derived from this association with water because Seetala means "the cool one". *Seetala* cult is mainly associated with the well-being of children and women, men do not actively participate in the process of worship.

### *The Shrine of Seetala*

The smallpox goddess is worshipped all across the country and also in some places in the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Pakistan under several different names. The shrines of Seetala are a cluster of small structures made out of few bricks signifying the shrines of seven sisters. There are several shrines of her in south India where she is referred to as Mariamma. These shrines are also found almost in every village of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. At some places there are important shrines of *Seetala* which have influence over a larger area. Annual fairs are held and numerous people worship the Mata at such shrines.

The phenomenon goddess has encompassed various people of distant regions. She is worshipped as Bon Bibi in Bengal Mary in Kerala, also despite ,being a Hindu Goddess, she is worshipped without any religious distinctions, by both Muslims and Hindus. As in the case of other folk deities the sectarian distinctions are ignored or transcended. The power of the deity is considered as elemental, natural which tend to defy cultural distinctions. Thus, the deity is believed to have control over the lives of all human beings irrespective of caste and creed. However, during the field visit to the glorified temple of *Seetala Mata* in Gurgaon I came to know about the existence of the temple of another goddess in the village, besides *Seetala Mata ka Mandir*, she is called *Choganan Mata* on account of her temple being located near the main crossing (*chogan*) of the village. It is believed by some people that she is the younger sister of the goddess Masani. This temple is stated to have been built by the sweepers of the village when they were not allowed access to the temple of *Masani Mata*. Such a fact rejects the wider claims of goddess being accessible to all. It is, however, now visited by all shades of visitors without any distinction of caste or creed.

Also, I obtrusively observed a few different facets about the goddess and her shrine, quite unlike as discussed by other scholars. The features of *Seetala mata* of Gurgaon vary conspicuously. As mentioned above, the

condition of *Seetala* shrine is usually poor and substandard, the Gurgaon temple of the goddess is grand and well fortified; this refutes the claim of her shrines being poorly constructed. The *Seetala Devi* Temple is located near a pond at Gurgaon village, a suburb of *Guru Dronacharya's* birth place, in the state of Haryana. The temple continues to be thronged by devotees in large numbers throughout the year. It has now conferred the status of one of the '*Shakti Cults*'. Thousands of pilgrims visit the temple during the Hindu month of *Chet* corresponding with the months of March and April. There is an intense rush of pilgrims especially on Mondays of this month. Situated near a pond, this temple witnesses a horde of pilgrims throughout the year, except during the month of *Shravana* (July-August). People also come to this temple to conduct the '*mundan*' (shaving off the heads) ceremony of their children.

The inhabitants of Gurgaon also refer to the goddess, as '*Bhagat Lalita Ma*' and '*Masani Ma*'. During the visit to the temple I noticed that the figurine of the goddess in the temple was made of gold; her *face appears to be peaceful* not disordered, with eyes shut as opposed to wide open and huge. The reason for these apparent differences stem from the folklore associated with the cult. Such a representation of the goddess is because she is in the state of *Samaadhi* which explains her tranquil projection. The goddess thus sheds the devouring and repelling aspect, and becomes more approachable by the people. The closed eyes also are a sign of innocuity i.e. the goddess will not destroy anybody through her gaze; rather acts as guardian to protect all 'her' children. She is widely referred to as '*Mata*' thus all the *bhagats* irrespective of any difference are like her children.

Another prominent characteristic is that here the goddess is depicted as holding a gold lotus which represents prosperity and wellbeing, unlike the other representations which are symbolic only of destruction. This is due to the fact that the goddess through her eternal vow decided to forsake her life for the welfare of others. Thus the repelling perception of goddess undergoes a transformation due to her changed and serene features. This reveals how fear originates through socialization and experiences and further perpetuated by communication. Since childhood we have been frightful of things or objects which are obscure, not orderly or primarily dreadful and develop a perception to avoid them or to keep distance from them.

*Seetala* is usually presented as hideous, ugly and ill-tempered and invokes instant fear and awe. Sometimes she is represented through insignificant images or headless or faceless statues. Even in the legends associated with her she is never portrayed as beautiful or benevolent. The image which emerges from various, descriptions, invokes instant fear and repulsion. There is hardly anything or any feature which seems adorable or invokes devotion. On the contrary her repulsive, ugly and dreadful features are highlighted. Then why do people worship her at all? Is it just out of fear? Or it is just a euphemism to please and dodge her.

It appears that she is inherently associated with ugliness, pollution and repulsion. She makes a beautiful child ugly, she repels and frightens. During an attack no offerings are made, and if the epidemic has seized upon a village all worship is discounted till the disease has disappeared. Her temples are very ordinary and small. The overall impression which emerges from various aspects of her shrines is that of neglect and wilful indifference. The shrines are usually without much sign of cleanliness.

But this insignificance is not due to neglect; it is due to some other reasons. This ambivalence of attitude is most pronounced in the conceptualisation of the goddess which has been vividly described by Bhati in his book *'Folk Religion: Change and Continuity'*. Bhati has intensely described the physical attributes of the goddess,

The image of mother goddess has a wide spectrum, ranging from most benevolent *Laksmi* or most aesthetic *Sarswati* to the most terrible *Kali*. It is believed that mother goddess represents both aspects of a creator and at the same time she is possessive which makes her terrible and devouring. This aspect of the cult of Seetala goddess makes her hideous because of her association with a miserable disease. She represents the negative aspect of the mother which can take back health and beauty. So she herself is presented as ugly and hideous (Bhati, 2000: 171).

The other feature of the terrible image of mother goddess is her projecting teeth. Orderly teeth are usually a sign of beauty and health and disorderly projecting teeth represent malevolence, ugliness and evil. Teeth represent the taste and the delight of food. If teeth are lost the taste is gone. The metaphoric usage of tooth represents power, particularly the power of destruction or damage. When someone is powerless, that person is often referred to as toothless. There is also an association between teeth and destructive female which is observed by ethnographers. The destructive side of the feminine, the destructive and deathly womb, appears most frequently in the archetypal form of a mouth bristling with teeth.

Also, "eyes" usually signify beauty and spiritual power. In the case of female these are mainly associated with beauty. Deities and gods/goddesses are always believed to have beautiful luminous eyes. Opposed to this, eyes which are wide open wild, staring and red eyes of demons, ghosts or other evil spirits which represent their malevolent nature. The look which is commonly referred to as *nazar*, this *nazar* of the propitiated, favourably inclined god or deity is considered a boon in itself, while that of an enraged God can destroy everything. In the case of goddess *Seetala*, her huge eyes symbolise the essential nature of the cult. She represents the ugly side of femininity. She looks with starved eyes towards her victims. Her eyes invoke dread and awe which is transformed into respect and devotion. Through humility and devotion she is propitiated particularly in the season of an outbreak of the smallpox (Bhati, 2000:173.).

Commonly across all cultures, death is represented through the open mouth due to its devouring nature. An open mouth shows non-discriminatory aspect of a deity. But a wide open mouth is representative of many aspects; first of all it is opposite to an ordered and an enlightened face. Its wildness conveys hunger, hostility and aggression. *Seetala* with her wide open mouth shows her terrible and devouring side, since she is associated with smallpox.

In Hindu mythology, it is common that deities have various animals as their vehicles: for instance, lord Shiva has Nandi bull as his vehicle, and lord Vishnu has Garuda. *Durga* has lion as her vehicle. However in the case of *Seetala*, the selection of an ass, as a vehicle is unique and surprising. It's a symbol of dullness and idiocy. It is notorious for its laziness, obstinacy and its sexual abnormality. But *Seetala* is depicted in various pictures to ride on an ass. Ass in this context represents neither sexuality nor disrespect; here it represents the opposite of an ox. It represents destruction, devastation and complete infertility. It is because in the cult of *Seetala* the common religious symbols are inverted. According to the structuralists perspective, symbols acquire their meanings only through myths, folklores and rituals in a social context. In her terrible form; she can completely devour vegetation and life. Thus she rides on an ass, which is an unique symbol of negative animality.

Further *Seetala* carries a huge broom in her hand. The broom is referred to as *jharu*. The term *jharu* also has etymological affinity with *jharra* which means exorcism. The broom has a different significance of cleansing and sweeping away evil effects from the mind and soul. At the same time, *jharu ferna* means complete destruction or elimination. Thus it represents both cleanliness and destruction. *Jharu ferna* is not just cleaning of the floors but at various levels it symbolises the elimination of pollution and restoration of order.

### *Deconstructing the Duality*

Seetala is well known for her dual qualities of malevolence and benevolence. The goddess's primary association has been with the smallpox, yet she is occasionally given other roles and powers, as the protector of children and the provider of good fortune.

The classifications—such as true or false, good or bad, ugly or beautiful, legal or criminal, sane or mad – also are definitions of personhood, hierarchies of value, and forms for power. Put slightly differently, certain traits and not others are invested with social significance and attributed to or claimed by persons whose group identity is thereby constituted. In this way, a set of logical distinctions becomes homologous to a hierarchy of social distinctions. This hierarchy is not only a system of signification, but also a structure of domination (Kress, 1979). These processes of christening by which persons form images of themselves as members of a certain group are reciprocal, collective and discursive. They are reciprocal in the

sense that, in characterizing others as different, one also characterizes one's own group as different from it. "This is equivalent to placing the two groups in relations to each other or defining their positions vis-a-vis each other" (Blumer, 1988: 198).

These aforementioned features call upon instant repulsion and aversion. The construction and reconstruction of such images creates a division of the society on the basis of "to be" and "not to be". Everyday life, experience, practice are attempts to mediate between structure and the individual, between objectivity and subjectivity, or, if you wish, between determinism and free will. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) through his concept of "habitus" stated how the dominant structures and ideas are reproduced, daily and infinitely. An important part of habitus is 'embodied', in the sense that one's every day, nondiscursive actions are a part of habitus, but also in the sense that one's body represents one's place in society. Like the goddess and her features is an embodiment of society's beliefs which have been experienced, it is not direct and unmediated; it is produced and reproduced over time. In our society once cast into a category, people are conventionally regarded as being governed not by experiential possibilities, but by truism of conduct inherent in the categories themselves.

#### *Yearly Reverence and Rituals*

Almost all features of the figure of *Seetala* emphasise her terrible nature, which invokes awe and devotion but she also has facets of forgiveness and sustenance to her form. She combines both birth and death. And when positively propitiated she can be forgiving and protective.

Even when the thought of the mother goddess invokes awe and fear among her followers it still doesn't deter them from worshipping her with faith and conviction. *Seetala* may be worshipped any time throughout the year or whenever she reminds people of her presence through her displeasure. The period of annual worship in her shrines is the month of March-April or *chet*. Though particular days of worship may vary according to local traditions, the common pattern is that she is worshipped early in the morning, usually on the first three days of the week, namely, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. During annual ceremonies a variety of things are presented at the shrines of goddess *Seetala*. The most common and conspicuous among them are *bassarian* and *broohd.*, that is offering of stale food.

The offering of stale food is reversal of well established tradition of offering deities whatever is considered valuable and prized. Freshness of food is associated with positive and sacred, while stale is always considered negative and polluting. Bhati (2000) in his work pointed out that even the word *bassarey* is etymologically associated with the term *bassi* which means foul and stale. But the question is why is stale food offered to mother goddess? The answer which emerged from the discussions with the women was that the *Seetala* goddess is only worshipped with food cooked

on previous night. The reason for this prohibition was that the hot food enrages the goddess. Thus, the devotees rather than enraging her through the freshly cooked, hot food, should instead cool her by offering stale food. The same is later consumed by the devotees as the form of prasād. *Seetala*, though literally meaning the 'cool one', being agitated, became heated, and with her heat destroyed others-- by burning and attacking them with the dreaded pox. Also the stale food is incongruous with Brhmanical tradition. In this case, the offering of stale food indicates an inversion of cultural transformation and is often considered to be polluting or not being pure.

The word *chechak* is avoided. It is perceived to be the kindness or grace of the goddess. Thus, expressions like by the grace of the goddess' or *Mata aae hai*. The concept of health is that one should be in complete harmony with his surroundings and nature. Nature here is represented by various deities. The disease occurs due to imbalance created by man, consciously or unconsciously. Thus, the detection and diagnosis of the source is of prime importance in folk medicine. The first step is the identification of the ailment. The common or seasonal ailments are seen as manifestation of these deities. Thus, it is always of prime importance to know which deity is offended.

During the possession of the victim, he/she becomes ambiguous and liminal. Because they fall in between the sacred and profane, they belong to both the domains—of humans as well as deities. Thus, the attitude towards the victim is marked by ambiguity. He / she is isolated from others, revered and avoided at the same time. The complete or partial suspension of normal social activity during the rituals of cure shows that the whole period is a liminal phase, in which through various symbolic processes the boundaries between sacred and profane, culture and nature and between individual and society, are recognised and redefined. On analysing this it appears that the Goddess is the representative of the primal unity of creation and destruction.

The rituals of cure in this context are aimed at restoring the balance and order. The individual victim becomes a mediating link between the group and the deity. It is in this context that all the routine activities are suspended.

Also the following precautions are taken: 1. Frying is avoided. 2. Meat and eggs are prohibited. 3. Liquor is prohibited. 4. The entry of Brahmins is prohibited in some areas of Punjab and Haryana. 5. The entry of menstruating women is avoided. 6. Sexual intercourse is prohibited. 7. The use of soaps, oils and brushing of teeth is prohibited. .

As mentioned earlier also, the worship seems to be more women-centered. Thus the mother and child sleep on the earth in utter humility, and thus seek the protection of mother earth. The coolest food, rice is cooked and given as alms. Young girls commonly referred to as *kanjak* are treated as

the personifications of mother goddess. They are worshipped and cooked rice is presented to them.

As argued by Victor Turner, religious festivals often serve the important purpose of allowing a society, culture, or village to cross the limits of normality so that one can experience or experiment with redemption. Festivals and rituals provide a space for liminal dimension of reality as discussed by Turner, the dimension that remains outside social norms and expectations but that is capable of enlivening and nourishing the realm of social order and normality (Turner, 1974: 231-270). The abandonment of regular or mundane activities during the disease and through the performance of these rituals there is an attempt to salvage from the profanity and inching towards the domains of sacred.

### *Patronizing Faith*

The goddesses in Hindu society are not worshipped in isolation with the main divinity or pantheon; rather they are often worshipped exclusively for the different purposes they fulfill and services they offer. The cult of Seetala seems to be associated with agriculture. Through a gradual process of socio-cultural changes particularly due to dominance of patrilineal ideology, the cults of mother goddess were dislocated by the male deities. Most of their positive attributes were usurped by male deities. It is also believed that a single cult of mother goddess may have been fragmented into various minor cults. The single cult of deity may have gone through a number of transformations. As mentioned above *Seetala mata* is also considered to have her source as a fertility cult, however with the supremacy of male opinion, fertility came to be associated with the male seed. For instance in Hindu belief, Lord Shiva in the form of phallus, "*shivaling*" is most accepted as the epitome of fertility. Thus the goddess cult may have got fragmented since the most elementary aspect was seized (figuratively) by male gods. The cults were displaced and came to be associated with well-being or various ailments. This is how they became protective deities of children (Bhati, 2000:149).

In patrilineal society, where the most valuable representative of luminous male seed, is the male infant, the dark power of the goddess becomes most fearsome, terrible and protective. Among all innumerable local or village goddesses, there exist an opposed duality between her unmarried and married forms: characteristically the former are malevolent and destructive goddesses while the latter are benevolent and protective, (Babb, 1975: 215-317). *Seetala mata* usually falls under the former category. This duality has been interpreted as expressing Hindu ideological conceptions of female sexuality as vitally powerful and potentially dangerous but controlled through subordination by males. The dualism seen in manifestations of the goddess also replicates a pervasive contrast in Hinduism between ascetic and erotic, represented respectively in the unmarried and married forms of the deity. In the social realm similarly, there exists a contrast in the purity

power and auspiciousness of virgin daughters with the subordination and relative impurity of wives.

Lambert in her work in Rajasthan (1992: 94) has argued duality has been interpreted as expressing Hindu ideological conceptions of female sexuality as vitally powerful and potentially dangerous but controllable though subordination to males. The dualism seen in manifestations of the goddess also replicates a pervasive contrast in Hinduism between the ascetic and the erotic, represented respectively in the unmarried (and necessarily virgin) and the married forms of the deity. Thus, some have seen the dangerous aspect of the goddess as expressing the potential threat to the patriline of affinal women's putatively indiscriminate sexuality – the dark side of their reproductive ability to perpetuate the lineage (Bennett, 1983).

For instance in Rajasthan, a different type of contrast between the two aspects of the goddesses becomes apparent. These contrasts are related to the characteristic circumstances of women's life within the patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system of northern India. Through examining local characterizations of the composite goddess in her social context, a shift in perspective is gained in which the usual focus on both women and goddess as either unmarried (daughters) or married (wives), is replaced by a female-centred, more empirically appropriate recognition of women's dual identities as both sisters (and daughters) and mother (and wives) (Lambert, 1983).

### *Local Myths*

The defining characteristic of myths is its dreamlike quality of fantasy; myths are occupied with unlikely characters such as talking animals and monsters. The claim of such fantastic descriptions is often intended literally. The language is used non-cognitively, or it is symbolic, or both. The claim that myths are intended as explanations, in some cases, must overcome the objection that myths are too much like dreams or fantasies for anyone to believe that they describe the real world. Lévi-Strauss, for example, points out that primitive people have naturalistic explanations for weather, heavenly bodies, and agriculture, which they make use of in their pragmatic activities. There are myths that claim to account for the creation of things and which have accompanied ceremonies of a religious nature might be associated with several experiences. Lévi-Strauss sees a basic paradox in the study of myth. On the one hand, mythical stories are fantastic and unpredictable: the content of myth seems completely arbitrary. On the other hand, the myths of different cultures are surprisingly similar (Lévi-Strauss, 1958: 208).

If these experiences are taken by their subjects to be revelations, they may be the basis for the semantic interpretation of myths. The Indian culture has amassed rich and diverse compilation of myths which is transmitted through folklores across all the cultures.

Legend says that *Rishi Sharadwan* had two children. Thinking that the two would disturb him in his worship he leaves them in the jungle. *Bheeshma's* father, King *Shantanu*, comes across the two children and recognises them as Rishi children as they possess deer skin and bow. The king takes them with him and looks after them. On hearing this, Rishi Sharadwan comes and collects the children from the king. As the children grew under the kindness (*krupa*) of king Shantanu, the daughter was named as *Krupi* and the son as *Krupacharya*. *Krupi* was married to *Guru Dronacharya* and she stayed on the banks of the pond at Gurgaon and got into the phase of deep meditation, while the Guru was training *the Kauravas and Pandavas*. *Krupi* due to her sacrifice became a mother-like figure to all. Later *Krupi* became *Mata Seetala Devi* (*Mahabharata 1:130, Ganguli translation*).

In the Temple, in Gurgaon, the idol of the goddess is carved out of an alloy and it is gold polished so that it gives a dazzling effect to the idol. The infrastructure of the temple really is worth mentioning. The facilities available in the temple of the *Seetala Devi* are numerous. The *Satsang Bhawan* is a hall inside the temple premises where religious programmes, meditation and Yoga programmes are held.

Correspondingly, the temple is maintained through an organized *mandir* board which is responsible for laying down regulations to uphold the sanctity and smooth functioning of the cult. The chairman of the *mandir* board is the Chief Minister of Haryana followed by several other members which includes commoners as well. The board came into existence in the year 1992. Prior to the formation of the board the cult was sustained by the dwellers of the Gurgaon village. The distribution of the offerings before 1992 was divided among the inhabitants of the Gurgaon village on the basis of their land ownership. The larger the area of land possessed by a person the larger would be his share in the treasury of the *mandir*. The temple is believed to have gain its prominence firstly due to its historical origin and secondly due to emergence of Gurgaon as the new millenium city, which enabled the temple to gain popularity among the people residing beyond the territories of Haryana, Rajasthan and Panjab. There are Local Guides who are available all the time near the temple to give an insight into the various myths and beliefs. These guides are usually the inhabitants of village around the temple.

During the several interactions with the devotees it becomes clear that the cult is deeply embedded in the minds of people. Though various types of legends are prevalent about the power of the Mata, for devotees or victims of smallpox, the existence of cult does not require any mythical record about its origin. At the cult, grand fairs are held on Wednesdays in Chet; every Wednesday a lamp is lit in the temple. Every year during the month of chet there is a large crowd of believers who travel across from neighbouring villages and distant states to come to the temple. In the year 2012 the approximate number of *bhagats/ shradhalu* (believers) is a whopping number of nearly 1,800,000 (or 1.8 million). The figure itself

demonstrates a strong and interminable faith in the goddess. And it is believed that if this deity is invoked with faith, she dispels the disease. During the annual festival there is strong police force placed in and around the vicinity of the temple for the smooth functioning. There are long queues of *shradhalus* who line up from midnight to get the *darshan* of the goddess. Among the other visitors are the married couples that come to invoke the blessings of the goddess for a happy married life.

The worship of local deities continues to remain central to both Haryana and Punjab. The tremendous urban influence did not cause removal of religious structures or religious practices. Ann Gold (1988) is able to demonstrate how local deities play an important role in amplification of "we-feeling" during the pilgrimage process and she tries to place pilgrimage within the social context of village life. This occurs at the shrine of the local goddess, a chapter on "Dealing with Deities" chronicles journeys to nearby shrines to petition for health, well-being, and fertility and to appease the lingering spirits of the dead; on these short- range pilgrimages, villagers not only implore but also negotiate with local shrine deities, making vows and fulfilling promises in exchange for specific boons. Gold's (1988) work highlights the reasons for fear among individuals is uncertainty, illness, suffering and mortality, and in order to ward off this fear, or to avert the suffering people, undertake pilgrimage.

The other peculiar feature of the temple is the recently constructed dispensary near the main hall of the temple. The dispensary is known to have doctors but only during stipulated hours, and this depicts a co-existence of modern medicine with the traditional beliefs and rituals. The urbanization and modernization of Gurgaon did not lead to clearance of the old beliefs and religious practices. However, these beliefs and practice of rituals underwent a process of revision and variations. The tradition was merged with modernity in order to suit the current conditions. These effects of modernization are visible in the vicinity of temple where now they have an inbuilt dispensary to cure ailments along with the regular rituals, which are performed. The place, which was founded on theodicy and was a center of exorcists and "jhara karne wale baba", now relies on the potency of medical science. The old practices and rituals of healing have not perished under new technological regimes, rather has changed its form.

But what was striking was that the education failed to have any real difference in the opinion of women. They followed the rituals not even being aware of the reasons behind them. It made me get back to the concept of Group Psychology by Freud, according to which people blindly imitate the mass ideologies and fail to develop their reasons rather neglect it. They become deeply entrenched in it and fail to question but due to habitualisation continue to follow it. They believe that questioning is disrespectful and to question the beliefs one will defy the goddess which would bring bad luck. All of them however reasserted that the powers of the goddess are panacea to all the evils and negativity of society. The

description of *mata* as a mother and a destroyer again highlighted the paradox; she is perceived both as inflicting the disease and as protecting the village from them. Her role vis-a-vis disease is ambivalent. This reflects that religious effects are not necessarily personal or restricted to individual psyche rather it is located within the realm of the social group.

### *The Interplay of Faith and Fear in Seetala Mata Case*

The primordial image of the mother goddess is primarily associated with earth, water and vegetation. Thus, essentially mother goddess is a fertility goddess. In her initial stage she combines all opposites like birth and death, nourishment and decay, protection and terror. She transcends these dualities and thus becomes an all-encompassing life force and impersonal power. Seetala being the goddess of agriculture and vegetation on one hand is also viewed as the energy for destruction through the deadly disease. The most fundamental opposition is between the symbols of water and fire which can be mirrored in the concept of faith and fear. The fire being repulsive to the goddess is also being feared by her devotees and whereas water which has a cooling impact makes it an object of symbol of faith. Goddess dislikes fire, cooking, anger and disturbance of thunder and lightning. Water represents fertility, vegetation, nature and feminine principle while fire represents transformation of nature into culture, anger, passion and masculine principle. Both these elements symbolise different and varied meanings and are juxtaposed with each other yet dissecting each other's symbols often.

### *Conclusion*

Individual's faith provides them with a sense of coherence. This sense of coherence is something that appears somewhat difficult to define, but contains elements of trust in God, of being able to accept what is happening without needing to understand everything, of reduction in both anxiety and feelings of helplessness in the face of unpredictable circumstances. Perhaps the clearest illustrations emerge from fear--fear of uncertainty, illness, and death. This fear sometimes is of the same God whom at one point of time an individual considers being the creator but also the destroyer who when neglected may have fearsome implications, for instance as discussed above in the case of *Seetala Mata*. She is both the cause of the disease and the cure; an arrival and a departure; the threat *and* the succour. If one followed the rules, if one did not violate any rules of etiquette, then *Seetala* could be safely solicited. Disease in itself is a cause for big fear and anxiety as it has the potential to take away the life of an individual which is very precious. It happens that when one falls ill that person's vital energy and body's 'normal' day-to-day functioning gets affected. To avoid this and to get back the original state of being, individuals tend to rely on certain entities which are endowed with super human power and those entities are within the reach of human beings through certain rituals and customs. By observing these rituals an individual

with the help of others can seek his/ her normal state of being. It would be important to note here that there are two conceptions of disease: firstly, disease is treated as an living being, which takes hold of you, possess you and eventually kill you. This is the vision of magic. Magic believes that nothing good is expected out of nature. Another view of disease is that nature is benign and benevolent. Disease is a spontaneous sign of struggle. Disease is a sign of struggle of the organism to reach equilibrium.

In society at large of both of these views, the first view is more innocuously present in human psyche. So in the time of crisis, the subconscious mind of a person forces an individual to draw analogies and linkages between, disease, which is something to be feared, and its source, that is god, as people need to be sure of the source of the disease so that there is certainty as uncertainty is feared by human mind.

### *References*

- Babb, Lawrence A. *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India*. New York Columbia University, 1975.
- Bennett, Lynn. *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal*, New York: Columbia University Press. 1983
- Bhati, H.S. *Folk Religion: Change and Continuity*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2000.
- Blumer, Herbert. *Symbolic Interaction*, volume 11, Issue 1, Spring 1988, pp. 13- 21,
- Bourdieu, P. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary forms of the Religious Life*. London: Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1957.
- Durkheim, Emile. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. London: Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1919.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Corporation, 1893.
- Fuller, C.J. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1981.
- Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Transaction Publisher , New Brunswick, New Jersey Books, 1967
- Gold, Ann. *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthan Pilgrim*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1988.
- Kinsley, David. *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1988.
- Kolnai, Aurel. "The Standard Mode of Aversion: Fear, Disgust and Hatred." In *Mind*, New Series 107, no. 427 (July 1998): 581-595.
- Kress, Gunther, and Hodge, Robert. *Language as Ideology*. Routledge &

- Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth". *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 68, No. 270, Myth: A Symposium (Oct.-Dec.,1955), pp. 428-444.
- Lambert, Helen. "The Cultural Logic of Indian Medicine: prognosis and etiology in Rajasthani popular therapeutics." *Elsevier Journal*, 1992: 123-145.
- Lambert, Helen. "The Homeless Goddess: Cosmology, Sickness and Women's Identity in Rajasthan" Oxford.UK. /ICSAJASO 25/1 (1994) 21-30
- Lynch, Owen. *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Naraindas, Harish. "Of Therapeutics and Prophylactics: The Exegesis of an Eighteenth Century Tract on Smallpox." In *Disease and Medicine in India: A Historical Overview*, by Deepak Kumar, New Delhi: Tulika, 2001.
- Naraindas, Harish. "Preparing for the Pox: A Theory of Smallpox in Bengal and Britain." *Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol 31, Number 2, 2003: 81-103.
- Northop, Frye. "Three Meanings of Symbolism." Yale University Press. Number 9, 1952: 11-19.
- Oberoi, Harjot. *Popular Saints, Goddesses, and Village Sacred Sites: Rereading Sikh Experience in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Olson, Daniel V.A. "Religious Pluralism and US Church Membership: A Reassessment". In *Sociology of Religion* (1999) 60 (2): 149-173.
- O'Flaherty, W. *The origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass publication, 1980.
- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. 1974.
- Wadley, Susan. "Sitala: The Cool One." In *Asian Folklore Studies* 39, no. 1 (1980): 33-62.
- Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion*. Transl. E Fischhoff. Boston: Beacon Press. 1993.

**Forging a Gujarati Hindu Identity in South Africa**  
**A History of Gujarati Hindu Organisations in South Africa**  
**1900-1983**

Kalpana Hiralal  
Department of History  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
South Africa

*Abstract*

This article traces the history of collective organisation amongst Gujarati-speaking Hindus in South Africa and the roles played by these organisations in forging a collective Gujarati identity on the one hand and assimilation into apartheid South Africa on the other. Gujarati-speaking Hindus arrived in South Africa at the turn of the century. Many of these immigrants and their descendants established caste based (gnat) associations through which they sought to preserve their cultural, linguistic and religious heritage. However, these associations created sectionalism and division amongst the Gujarati Hindus and hindered the development of a united organisation. During the 1970s there was an earnest attempt to establish a single, united Gujarati organisation. Thus this article traces the history of collective organisation amongst Gujarati Hindus in South Africa in their endeavours not only to nurture their ethnic cultural identity but also to establish a cohesive united Gujarati Hindu organisation with particular reference to the South African Maha Parishad (SAGMP) and the Natal Gujarati Parishad (NGP). Given their small numbers, their strong desire to preserve their cultural identity forced many Gujaratis to re-think notions of caste identities and their sense of belonging in apartheid South Africa; hence the need to establish a single, cohesive unified and homogenous Gujarati organisation. In tracing the early history of collective organisation amongst the Gujarati Hindu community, this article argues that institutional mechanisms can play an important role not only in identity preservation and assimilation, but also, to some extent, in unifying diverse ethnic groups in the diaspora. The article will add to current debates on identity, and collective organisation amongst ethnic communities in the diaspora.

*Keywords: Identity, Gujarat, Diaspora, Migration, Caste, Jati*

*Introduction*

Gujarat is a state in western India that is home to approximately 50 million Gujarati-speaking people. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many Gujarati-speaking Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Parsees migrated to East Africa, Mauritius and South Africa in the wake of indentured Indians (Mukadam, Introduction, 2012:2-4). In South Africa, Gujarati Hindu migration began at the turn of the century and was largely male-centered. Family migration only began to gain momentum in the 1930s. Given their small numbers and the racial and discriminatory prejudices against "Asiatics" in South Africa, many immigrants formed ethnic based associations which not only served as a buffer against the harsh political and socio-economic climate but also nurtured their cultural identity. The histories of the Gujarati Hindus in the context of cultural identity and ethnic organisations share similar trajectories of migrant communities in the diaspora.

Bhardwaj and Rao (1990), Williams (1992) and Vertovec's (2000) studies have shown how immigrant communities undergo "successive stages" of "fusion and fission" determined by caste, linguistic, regional and class status (Vertovec 2000:14). David Bowen's (1987) study on Gujarati Hindus in Bradford in the United Kingdom, notes the various collective organisational phases amongst immigrant communities. For example, the establishment of devotional congregations was influenced by demographic factors and caste-based organisations are established by immigrants seeking homogeneity based on ancestral, village, kin and occupation ties (Vertovec 2000: 14). Min and Kim (2006) have shown that ethnic organisations and network building amongst Chinese immigrants in the United States can be a "source of strength as well as a liability. We have found that immigrants are empowered by their ethnic organisations to the extent that they maintain a strong sense of 'Chineseness' and ethnic pride yet remain vulnerable to ethnic stereotypes and prejudice of the mainstream society because of their heightened ethnic and lack of intimate contact with non-co-ethnic members" (Min and Kim 2006:252).

Interdisciplinary scholarship over the past two decades on notions of ethnic identities has provided new theoretical frameworks in understanding minorities within nationalist and diasporic spheres. Barth (1969), Alba, (1990), Nagel (1994), Sanders (2002), Hall (2003), and Wimmer (2008) have argued that ethnic identities are fluid and situational, a product of

social processes, negotiated and defined through cross-group interaction. Cultural and behavioral traits are merely partial components of a group's identity; it is "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (Sanders 2002). According to Schopflin (2001), there is both individual and collective identity, and "collectivity will seek to secure its own existence over time and, therefore, engages in cultural reproduction using a variety of instruments to secure its future" (Schopflin 2001: 1). He adds that "Collective identity, furthermore, provides a sense of security for its members by making the world meaningful, permitting intra collectivity communication and constructing collective forms of knowledge..." (Schopflin 2001: 3). Nagel identifies two basic building blocks of ethnicity, identity and culture. Through the construction of these two blocks, "individuals and groups attempt to address the problematics of ethnic boundaries and meaning" (Nagel 1994). She adds that the "construction of ethnic identity and culture is the result of structures and agency – a dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society" (Nagel 1994). Nagel (1994) also highlights the role of "cultural construction techniques" in the construction of ethnic identities, which involves the "*reconstruction* of historical culture, and the *construction* of new culture". These techniques include the creation of cultural centres, the revival of ethnic languages and cultural traditions, history and educational programmes. They "aid in the construction of community and they serve as mechanisms of collective mobilization" (Nagel 1994; cited in Hiralal 2013: 106-107).

The histories and narratives of the Gujarati Hindu community in the context of ethnicity, diaspora and identity have yet to be fully explored in South African historiography. Desai's (1997) study serves as a good entry point for scholars seeking to understand language preservation and shifts amongst Gujarati Hindus in South Africa. Desai argues that "The ethnic nature of the community has enabled it to safeguard its language and culture and religion. The minority status and its implications in a multilingual community has motivated it to efficiently organise itself into community associations" (Desai 1997:66). More recent studies have sought to add to our understanding of the Gujarati Hindus (Bhana and Bhoola 2011; Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2012; Hiralal 2013a, and Hiralal 2013b). Bhana and Bhoola (2011) have illustrated how the Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj negotiated their identities to develop a broader regional identity in the creation of the Gujarati Sanskruti Kendra. Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2012) and Hiralal's (2013) study of the Mochi (shoe-makers) community in Cape Town and Rajput community in Natal, respectively, have shown that caste consciousness amongst these groups has declined largely through the

secularisation of the youth and a move towards a broader South African identity.

The Gujarati community share similar trajectories of identity construction in the context of language, culture and belonging with the Chinese, Armenians, Africans and Jews in the diaspora. This article traces the history of collective organisation amongst Gujarati Hindus in South Africa in their endeavours not only to nurture their ethnic cultural identity but also to establish a cohesive united Gujarati Hindu organisation with particular reference to the South African Maha Parishad (SAGMP) and the Natal Gujarati Parishad (NGP). The SAGMP sought to facilitate national unity amongst the Gujarati Hindus, whilst the NGP aimed to promote regional unity in Natal. The Gujarati-speaking Hindus were heterogeneous, divided along caste, regional and social lines. Many Gujarati Hindu immigrants and their descendants established caste based (*jati*) associations through which they sought to preserve their cultural, linguistic and religious heritage. However, these associations created sectionalism and division amongst the community and hindered the development of a united Gujarati Hindu organisation. During the 1970s, there was an earnest attempt to establishing a single Gujarati organisation in the form of the SAGMP. Given their minority status, their strong desire to preserve their cultural identity forced many Gujaratis to re-think notions of caste identities and their sense of belonging in apartheid South Africa. Hence the need to establish a single, cohesive, unified Gujarati organisation, both nationally and regionally. In tracing the early history of collective organisation amongst the Gujarati Hindu community, this article argues that institutional mechanisms can play an important role not only in identity preservation and assimilation, but also in unifying diverse ethnic groups in the diaspora, albeit temporarily. It also highlights how the Gujarati identity was negotiated and re-negotiated at different historical epochs. The article will add to current debates on identity, assimilation and ethnic collectivism in the diaspora.

### *Collective Organisations amongst Hindus in South Africa*

From the time of the arrival of the indentured labourers in South Africa in 1860, there was a strong sense amongst immigrants of the need to nurture their religious and cultural identity. The diversity of the Indian population in terms of religion, caste, language and region played an important role in the development and establishment of Hindu organisations in South Africa, both at provincial and national levels. The Hindus comprised of four groups: Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati and Hindi. They were heterogeneous in their beliefs and ritual practices. However, in 1912, largely through the efforts of Swami

Shankaranand, a missionary and learned priest, the South African Maha Sabha (SAMS) was established to unite all Hindus under one umbrella body (Gopalan 2013:41-42). Nonetheless, the various ethnic groups formed regional organisations to preserve their cultural identity and language. For example, numerous Tamil cultural organisations formed the South African Tamil Federation in 1959, which became the official mouthpiece of the Tamil community in the country. Given their minority status within the larger South African population, each linguistic group zealously sought to sustain their cultural and linguistic heritage. It is against this background of religious, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity that collective organisation amongst Gujarati Hindus should be viewed.

### *Historical Background of the Gujarati Hindus in South Africa*

The Gujaratis Hindus arrived in Natal at the turn of the century. They were referred to as “passenger” Indians because, like their Muslim counterparts, they paid their own fares, were unencumbered by contractual labour obligations and arrived under normal immigration laws. They primarily came from the region presently known as Gujarat, from places such as Kathiawad, Porbander and Surat. Their reasons for coming to South Africa were varied, ranging from economic uncertainties at home to seeking a better livelihood in Africa. They comprised overwhelmingly of men, many of whom were married, but whose wives and children were left behind in India. Their families only joined them much later when they became more settled. Some men arrived with their sons, whilst others came with friends from the same “gaam” or village or were of the same caste groups (Bhana and Brain 1990:6; Desai 1997:17). On arrival, life was challenging; they cohabited, shared accommodation, and engaged in domestic chores such as cooking, washing and ironing. They took to diverse economic activities; some worked as semi-skilled or skilled artisans in jewellery making and carpentry, or as tailors and shoe-makers, while others were employed as shop assistants or hawked fresh fruit and vegetables and some “packed bananas and vegetables and railed them to customers in the Transvaal and Cape Provinces” (Desai 1997:17). Many eked out a living by working as cooks in hotels and as apprentices in shops. The less fortunate even sold newspapers to survive. Hardly anyone had sufficient capital to open a store immediately on arrival in Natal (Shri Natal Mandhata Hitvardhak Mandal 1916-1991:17).

However, the presence of “passenger” Indians in Natal, in particular, proved to be irksome to many colonial traders. During the 1880s, the increase in the free Indian population in Natal, and the monopolisation of

trade by "Arab" or "passenger" traders, led to a wave of anti-Indian sentiment. The Free Indian population totalled approximately 5,000 in 1872; 20 877 in 1886; 23,793 in 1890; and 26,312 in 1893 (Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission 1885-1887: 69; Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission (Clayton) 1909:6). Anti-Indian agitation led to adoption of discriminatory trade, immigration and political legislation. Indians were denied the vote by the Franchise Amendment Bill of 1894 and the General Dealers' Licensing Act of 1897 limited trade licenses to Indian traders and restricted Indian trade to specific locations away from the main commercial centre. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1897 and its subsequent amendments in 1903, called for specific conditions to regulate and monitor free immigration (Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal, vol. xxii, 1894: 577; Swan 1985:45; Joshi 1942:58). New immigrants were required to pass a literacy test, the age of majority was 16 for children seeking to join their parents and domicile status was acquired after three years of residence in Natal. In the Transvaal, the Transvaal Immigration Restriction Bill of 1907 made provision for education tests to be imposed on all immigrants to the Transvaal. As in Natal, resident Indians' wives were deemed non-prohibited immigrants if they were the legal wives of a lawfully domiciled Indian (KCM File 5 99/53/5; *Indian Opinion* 10 February 1911).

By the turn of the century, South Africa had shed the colonial yolk and instituted racial and discriminatory policies against its non-white population. South Africa became a Union in 1910, uniting the two former British colonies of Natal and the Cape and the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. In the post-1910 period, immigration laws were centralised and became primarily the concern of the "Union" Government. A "closed-door" policy was followed with regard to Free Indian migration. The Immigrants Regulation Act of 1913 of the Union of South Africa consolidated the existing immigration laws of the pre-Union colonies (*Indian Opinion* 28 June 1913). In 1927, minor children seeking to enter the Union had to be accompanied by their mothers within three years of birth. The apartheid government passed the Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act 43 of 1953 which amended the Immigrants Regulation Act 1913 that put an end to the entry of Indian foreign brides to South Africa (Joshi 1942:138-145; SAIRR 1892-1974:5). These immigration laws particularly affected the mobility of "passenger" Indians between India and South Africa and to a very large extent hindered family migration.

Faced with successive waves of political, economic and social marginalisation, the pioneer Gujarati Hindu immigrants established

institutional mechanisms to assimilate and adapt to their hostile environment. This led to the formation of caste-based organisations, which not only provided solidarity and mutual support to early immigrants but also provided a platform to sustain an individual cultural identity. According to Cohen (1997:149), "Whether a *strong identity* is derived from internal clannishness, external rejection or a combination of the two, a definite ethnic or religious identity engenders a distance from the larger society, which can be used for creative and productive purposes". The early Gujarati Hindu immigrants were imbued with a "strong identity" of ethnic communalism, sharing a certain mind set and belief system based on collective history and common identity. They had strong ties with India and were keen on sustaining them whilst in Africa.

### *Caste Organisations*

The development of caste based organisations is merely one phase in the history of Gujarati collective organisation in South Africa. Given their small numbers it would have been more conducive to form of a single Gujarati Hindu organisation. However, the heterogeneity of the Gujarati Hindu community along hierarchical social groups and differential regional affiliation (Surat and Kathiawad) created the "Great Gujarati Divide". As one commentator stated, "In those days, class caste and ethnic concerns were so entrenched that building a Mandir (temple) for all was hardly given a thought." (Kendra Samachar 2013:1). The immigrants represented several caste groups reflecting most of the castes of a typical Gujarati village. These included Sonis (gold and silversmiths), Khatri (weavers), Kanbis, Rajputs, Patidars, Kolis, and Kachhias (agricultural groups), Navs (barbers), and Mochis (shoe-makers) (Bhana and Brain 1990: 6, The South African Indian Who's Who 1936–1937, 92–93, 107–109). The caste-conscious Gujarati immigrants established individual caste based associations which promoted sectionalism by seeking to preserve their sub-ethnic identity (Desai 1997:54). These associations provided a social space for communal interaction; they protected and advanced members' commercial and financial interests, created employment opportunities and credit facilities for new ventures and sealed marriage ties. According to Kuper (1960:80), "these associations proliferate not only along the usual lines of interest in specific activities – economic, religious, political, welfare or recreational – but also along lines of racial tribal and cultural cleavages".

Several caste associations emerged in the first quarter of the twentieth century. One of the pioneer communities was the Surat Hindu Association (SHA) established in August 1907 by Gujarati Hindus immigrants from the

district of Surat. In 1908 the Kathiawad Arya Mandal (KAM) was established whose members hailed from the district of Kathiawad. The KAM ceased to exist with the establishment of the Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj (KHSS) on 26 December 1943. The Sonis who came from Kathiawad were divided into two groups: the Patani and Girnara. They were initially very conservative and steadfastly adhered to caste principles by prohibiting inter-marriage and socialising with other groups. The Kathiawad Patni Soni Association was established in 1925, followed by the Sri Girnana Soni Hitvardhak Mandal in 1932. In 1911, the Natal Rajput Association was established to serve the needs of the Rajput community and the Kori or Kolis community established the Shri Natal Mandhata Hitvardhak Mandal in 1916. In the Transvaal, one of the earliest associations was formed by the "Patel" community, the Transvaal United Patidar Society in 1912. In the Cape, the Kshatriya Mitra Mandal was established in 1922 but changed its name in 1996 to the Cape Town Hindu Seva Samaj (Desai 1997:54-55). These various caste based associations sought to cater to the educational, cultural and religious needs of their members, which was achieved through communal solidarity, investment in real estate and the construction of temples and community halls.

The establishment of these caste associations is indicative of the disunity and sectarianism that characterised the Gujarati Hindus in South Africa. According to Bhana and Bhoola (2011), both the SHA and the KHSS, two prominent associations at this time, had "much to gain by working closely" but failed to create a united Gujarati organisation, as

"Strong caste and regional forms of identification prevented a merger in the 1940s. Besides, SHA had developed deeply entrenched vested interest and was not ready then to share resources with another body. The association had created institutions around the cultural and religious needs of Gujarati Hindus who came from Surat and surrounding areas. It invested in properties, built a hall, and created schools. It imported Gujarati teachers from India for its vernacular school, ran a library, a cricket club and established the Surat Hindu Government-Aided School in 1951. It observed separately cultural and religious festivals. It did, however, combine occasionally with the Samaj in the 1940s and the 1950s to host cultural and religious events...." (Bhana and Bhoola 2011:20)

Given this scenario, establishing an umbrella Gujarati body was undoubtedly a herculean task. However during the 1970s, socio-economic political factors forced the Gujarati community to re-think notions of caste in favour of Gujarati unity.

*Factors leading to the formation of the South African Gujarati Maha Parishad (SAGMP)*

The formation of a national Gujarat Hindu organisation which would promote unity and preserve Gujarati culture and language was influenced by several factors. Firstly, the *socio-economic and political situation during the colonial, post-colonial and apartheid period* played a pivotal role. The immigration laws alluded to earlier hindered family migration. However, the Cape Town Agreement of 1927, which required a minor child who sought entry to be accompanied by his/her mother led to an increase in the settlement of Gujarat Hindu families in the Union, as many sought to legalise their Indian born children in South Africa. This inevitably created a need to provide both vernacular and English education for their children. The lack of educational facilities forced communities to build schools and raise funds so that their children could acquire a good secondary and tertiary education. During the apartheid era, the segregationist policies of the Nationalist Party did little to alleviate the hardships of the Gujaratis. The Group Areas Act of 1950 not only introduced residential segregation but further divided racial communities along education, economic and social lines. Moreover, the state did little to promote or enhance the vernacular languages, or provide quality education to non-whites. The Group Areas Act also resulted in a shift of Gujarati families from the city centre (where most resided) to the suburbs, loosening their ties with Mandal organisations.

Secondly, the Gujarati community were "*a minority within a minority group*". In the 1990s the Indian population constituted less than a million, approximately 863,874 of the total South African population and the Gujaratis constituted approximately 3% (Desai 1997: 39-38). Moreover the apartheid state sought to propagate Christian principles; hence the need to protect and nurture the Gujarati cultural identity and religion became of utmost importance. According to Desai (1997), the Gujaratis were a close-knit community and religion and culture have remained the "two stabilising forces" for this group. Thirdly, there also existed a *cultural vacuum*, largely instituted by immigration laws and political sanctions. The Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act 43 of 1953, which amended the Immigrants Regulation Act 1913, stipulated that no wife of a marriage contracted after 10 February 1954 or a child from such marriage was entitled to enter South Africa (SAIRR 1892-1974:5). This ban on foreign brides had serious implications for endogamous marriages for Gujarati Hindus, many of whom sought partners in India. Indian brides were not only traditional but were

seen as important agents to nurture and perpetuate their culture and language. Moreover, the decline in Indo-South African diplomatic relations further disadvantaged the community. It became increasingly difficult to procure Indian books and music directly from India at reasonable cost. The recruitment of religious leaders, mother-tongue teachers and priests was also restricted (Desai 1997: 48). Fourthly, during the 1970s, there was a *strong conviction* amongst community members of the need to affiliate the plethora of caste associations into one umbrella body and create Gujarati unity. At the time, there was no single body that Gujaratis could pay allegiance to. These *gnati* organisations supported inter-caste marriage, and held individual cultural eisteddfods and religious festivals. In Natal, attempts to unite the Gujarati community led to the formation of the Gujarati Cultural Centre in the late 1950s. Fifthly, there was a strong desire to *forge a national alliance with other Gujaratis* living throughout South Africa. The Gujarati community was scattered throughout the Union in Natal, the Cape, and the Transvaal. Restrictions on travel between Natal and the Transvaal hampered contact and communication between the various Gujarati organisations and did little to build collective unity. Finally, there were a few *enlightened men*, amongst them Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, who foresaw the need to forge a collective and unified Gujarati organisation (Samarpan 1988:37).

Hence in June 1974, a preliminary gathering of 40 Gujarati community leaders met in Durban to deliberate on the formation of a national Gujarati Hindu organisation. In 1975 a South African Gujarati Convention was held in Durban and a historic resolution, adopted by 300 members, was passed to form a South African Gujarati Maha Parishad (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad SD File 547/122-130).

#### *Aims and Objectives of the SAGMP*

One of the main aims of the SAGMP was to unify all Gujarati Hindu organisations under one umbrella body. It also sought to promote and sustain the Gujarati cultural identity, through language preservation and offering its members guidance on social, cultural, religious and educational issues. These aims were to be achieved through institutional mechanisms and human resources through building schools, community halls, temples, libraries and art galleries, print media, magazines, pamphlets and periodicals, and the recruitment of foreign teachers and academics. Religion was promoted through the celebration of festivals, lectures, debates and the recruitment of foreign priests, whilst education was supported by creating and granting scholarships, bursaries and educational loans, cultural

eisteddfods, dance and music. The structure of the SAGMP encouraged national representation. The Transvaal, Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape were represented. Officials were elected at the biennial conference and comprised a President and a senior vice-president; the four chairmen of the affiliated member units who automatically became vice-presidents of the Maha Parishad, and a General Secretary assisted by four assistant secretaries (one from each of the provincial units), two treasurers and an auditor (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad: Secretarial Report, SD File 547/126).

*Triumphs and Failures, 1975-1983*

Annual conventions were a regular feature of the SAGMP to promote unity amongst the Gujarati Hindu community. The first meeting was held on 30 April 1975 at Gandhi Hall in Durban and two more conventions were held in Lenasia in the Transvaal in 1977 and 1979. Owing to unforeseen circumstances the Eastern Cape was unable to convene the 4<sup>th</sup> Convention in 1981 and a biennial meeting was held in Durban. The 4<sup>th</sup> convention was held in Durban during the Easter holidays in 1983 (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad: Secretarial Report, SD File 547/126).

Scholarly work on ethnic communities in the diaspora has shown that language preservation was essential to the preservation of ethnic identity. According to Desai (1997), "Language tends to become the focus of feelings of ethnic identity". She adds that, "It is through their mother tongue that they maintain their ethnic boundaries. Maintenance of the Gujarati language has been important to preserve the identity and maintain solidarity, culture and religion in the Gujarati community" (Desai 1997:41). Msindo's (2005) study of language and ethnicity in Mataberland, Zimbabwe has shown that the Ndebele and Kalanga communities "have developed and expressed their ethnic identities through language, since language differences provides an anchor for ethnic identity". Thomson (1995) has shown that the French language in Quebec is "both the distinguishing characteristic of ethnic identity and the principal vehicle of ethnic assertiveness". Desai (1997) argues that the Gujarati community of South Africa "offers a good opportunity for the study of the patterns of language use of an immigrant minority community....the ethnic nature of the community has enabled it to safeguard its language and culture and religion" (Desai 1997: 66).

Language preservation was important to the Gujarati community in South Africa. It was a mechanism to protect and maintain their distinct identity, a

way of revitalising, developing and transmitting to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, and literatures. The Gujarati language thus became a powerful symbol of Gujarati identity and a necessary instrument for enculturation into Gujarati identity. According to Desai (1997), the Gujarat community in South Africa displayed "language loyalty" (1997: 82), as they "...spent more money for their mother tongue education compared to other language groups of the Indian community even when others could afford it" (Desai 1997:82). She adds that, "Maintenance of the Gujarati language has been important to preserve the identity and maintain solidarity, culture and religion in the Gujarati community" (Desai 1997:41). The early Gujarati pioneers were guided by this fact in their endeavours to sustain their language. A brief history of early Gujarati education is necessary to illuminate the ways in which the early immigrants sought to preserve their language and sustain their ethnic identity.

The pioneer Gujarati immigrants took responsibility to build their own schools for the propagation of their mother-tongue and religion. Gujarati classes began in make-shift spaces such as temples, garages or the veranda of a house. Both private and Anglo-vernacular schools were established. The first Anglo-vernacular school was spearheaded by a Gujarati immigrant, V.N. Naik in 1910. He served both as a teacher and administrator of the school. The school was cosmopolitan in terms of its religious and ethnic component as it enrolled students from Parsee, Muslim and Hindu communities. It had a structured programme. Gujarati sessions ran five days a week, with three-hour sessions every afternoon and a nominal fee of five shillings was charged. Students from poor economic backgrounds were exempted from paying fees and were given free books. The curriculum included not only the teaching of the Gujarati language but English. Given the bi-lingual medium of instruction, these schools were known as Anglo-vernacular schools. Other subjects were mathematics, bookkeeping, history and geography. The school was in existence until 1916 (Desai 1997: 116-117). In 1917, the Anglo Gujarati Educational Society was established to "provide parallel education in English and Gujarati mediums" (Desai 1997:117). This was motivated by both social and economic needs, as many Gujarati Hindus needed to communicate in English in their daily interactions with the locals. The curriculum also sought to provide a more holistic education by teaching subjects such as history, geography, mathematics and bookkeeping. It is interesting that the structure and curriculum of the school was modelled on the "middle schools" in Gujarat which sought to prepare children who made intermittent trips to India with their parents for entry into schools overseas without disrupting their education. According to Desai (1997),

In Gujarati at that time many schools introduced English in standard four and the primary school offered education up to standard seven levels. The purpose of such a unique system was to facilitate the entry of the Gujarati child into the subsequent standard in Gujarat on his return to India.....Therefore when a Gujarati visited his family in India his child's education was secured as he had the opportunity to study Gujarati and English in Natal and continue with his education in the subsequent standard upon returning to Gujarat. This would not have been possible if the syllabi were not compatible. The examinations were also conducted on a similar basis so that in changing schools a year would not be wasted... (Desai 1997:117-118).

Private Gujarati schools were largely spearheaded by N.B. Desai and his son N.N. Desai of Durban. Their school was established in 1917 and ran until 1957. Classes were home-based and parents paid a nominal fee. Other private schools soon followed. In Ladysmith, the Vithal Lalla School catered for both the Gujarati and Hindi languages and was in existence between 1922 and 1972. In Durban, the first community orientated Gujarati school was established under the supervision of Sheik Mehtab, a well-known poet and Gujarati teacher (Desai 1997: 119-120). In the Transvaal, Cape Province, Port Elizabeth and East London, private Gujarati tuition was conducted from home. In Johannesburg the popular Hindi Vidyamandir school conducted lessons in both Hindi and Gujarati, and ran a nursery school from 1947 until its closure in 1990 (Desai 1997: 119).

However, by the 1930s, the number of Gujarati Hindu families had increased and become more settled in the Union. Poor state educational facilities and the need to provide vernacular and religious education led to the establishment of further schools. In 1933, the SHA purchased a site in central Durban to build a vernacular school and Hindu temple. In 1934 a sister organisation, the Surat Hindu Educational Society was formed and was vested with the administrative control of all matters relating to vernacular education, including enrolment, staffing, the syllabus, examinations and certification. During the 1940s and 1950s, the Indian community in general faced an acute shortage of English education; hence the Society launched a "Private English School". In 1945 the KHSS established the Kathiawad Gujarati School in Lorne Street, Durban, mainly to service its members. In May 1947, the Gujarati school moved to the Kathiawad Hindu Government Aided Indian School in Lorne Street (Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj Golden Jubilee 1994, 44; Silver Jubilee, Surat Hindoo State Aided Primary School 1979:9). In the Transvaal the Pretoria

Hindu Gujarati School was established in 1932 and the Shree Gandhi Bharat Vidyalaya School was established in Johannesburg in 1935, followed by the Shree Bharat Sharda Mandir in Fordsburg in 1936. Student enrolment at most Gujarati schools peaked during this period to "one thousand in each school". Between 1932 and 1960 "90% of the school-going children in the Gujarati community were receiving mother tongue education" (Desai 1997:120-123). Despite the relatively low number of Gujarati settlers in the Eastern Cape, vernacular education flourished. For example, in 1931, the Port Elizabeth Hindu Gujarati School was established, followed by the East London Gujarati School in 1948 (Desai 1997: 123).

However, from the 1950s onwards, the Group Areas Act had serious repercussions for mother-tongue schools. The Act forcibly uprooted settled communities and many were relocated in new townships away from the city centre, their places of employment, and cultural institutions. Many Gujaratis whose businesses, temples and schools were in the city centre were forced to relocate to the suburbs, imposing a financial burden on the community in building new schools and temples. For example, in Johannesburg the Shree Gandhi Bharat Vidyalaya School was forced to relocate and experienced problems finding a new venue. Moreover, "two buses were required to transport the pupils to and from the various extensions of Lenasia" (Desai 1997:122). The forcible relocation of Indians from central Johannesburg to the Indian township of Lenasia had an impact on student enrolment at Gujarati schools. There were 1,100 pupils at the Gandhi Bharat Gujarati School in Johannesburg in 1960; by 1973, this had dropped to 100 (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad: Secretarial Report, SD File 547/126).

In the 1970s the SAGMP sought to build on earlier efforts to sustain the Gujarati language. All the major centres of Gujarati settlement had their own Gujarati schools. However, they functioned and were administered independently and co-ordination and a structure were needed to promote the language. In 1975, the SAGMP set up the Gujarati Educational Society. This body was responsible for the administration of the Gujarati syllabus and teaching throughout the country. Pandit Nardev Vedalankar was at its helm for 12 years. He conducted teacher training classes in 1980 at the Surat Hindu School. Many community members fluent in Gujarati volunteered to assist. Vedalankar also taught Gujarati courses at the former University of Durban-Westville in the 1980s (Desai 1997:127-129). However, the Parishad was not very successful in this venture as the Gujarati Educational Society was more of a theory than a practice. From the outset the body experienced many problems, mainly financial. Others included dispirited members and a decline in Gujarati schools. Pandit

Vedalankar was approached by leading members of the Gujarati community to address the situation. He was willing to assist but urged the Gujarati community to be more united in its outlook and approach. He stated, "First Surtis and Kathiawadis must work together and secondly, caste must play no part in determining who does what" (Samarpan, Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, November, 1988:37).

Subsequently, the SAGMP established a Gujarati National Eisteddfod. The National Eisteddfod was huge success between 1975 and 1983. It encouraged both old and young members to participate. The aim was to nurture the Gujarati language and its cultural identity. This took several forms: songs, classical and folk dancing, choral recitals, recital of Vedic mantras, (Vedic hymns), and shlokas (prayer hymns) from the Gita and the singing of couplets from the Ramayana. Exhibitions were also part of the National Eisteddfod. From 1975 to 1983 exhibitions were held in Durban and Lenasia of Rangoli (designs), flower arrangements, knitting and embroidery, paintings, handicrafts, photography, stamp collections and wood carving. In April 1983 the SAGMP held its fourth National Convention in Durban. The convention deliberated on issues relating to vernacular education and the role of caste organisations. Academic papers were presented by leading members of the community, amongst them R.S. Naidoo. S. Rambharos and Pandit Vedalankar. The convention highlighted the challenges of vernacular education at primary schools and the urgent need for them to be incorporated in the primary school curriculum. This plea met with a positive response and Indian languages were implemented in Indian schools from 1984 (Desai 1997:134; Fiat Lux 1983:30, Samachar 1980: 6; South African Gujarati Maha Parishad, SD File 547/122).

However, the vibrancy and enthusiasm of the SAGMP and its activities were short-lived. This was largely attributed to personality clashes between caste groups and dispirited members who preferred to pay allegiance to their caste organisations; financial difficulties also posed a challenge to some members who found inter-provincial travel for meetings and cultural eisteddfods expensive. In 1981, the Eastern Cape wing of the SAGMP was unable to convene the 4<sup>th</sup> Convention because it could not provide adequate accommodation for the participants from Natal, the Transvaal and the Western Cape.

#### *The Natal Gujarati Parishad (NGP)*

Prior to the formation of the SAGMP, the Gujarati Cultural Centre which ran for approximately 23 years changed its name to the Gujarati Cultural

Society. With the formation of the SAGMP in 1975, it changed its name to the NGP. This body later became the Natal wing of the SAGMP. The NGP had similar aims to the SAMP, but sought to facilitate regional unity amongst the Gujarati community in Natal. It also sought to promote the cultural, educational and religious interests of the Gujarati community in the province. Membership of the NGP was open to all Gujarati Hindu societies in Natal, with an annual payment of R10.00. The various Gujarat groups were entitled to nominate three representatives to serve on the NGP's Management Committee. The NGP officials comprised a president, three vice-presidents, three joint honorary secretaries and an honorary treasurer. Several Gujarati Hindu societies were affiliated to the NGP: from Durban, Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj, Natal Rajput Association, Kathiawad Hindu Youth Organisation, Surat Hindu Association, Surat Hindu Educational Society, Surat Arya Bhajan Mandal (Durban), Gujarati Seva Mandal (Estcourt), Gujarati Vedic Society (Pietermaritzburg), Ladysmith Gujarati Mandal and the Stanger Bhajan Mandal (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad, SD File 547/122).

#### *Cultural Activities*

One of the NGP's aims was to nurture Gujarati cultural identity. This was achieved by hosting annual cultural eisteddfods. Under the auspices of the Surat Hindu Association, and the Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj cultural eisteddfods became an annual event on the Gujarati cultural calendar between 1975 and 1983. Various Gujarati cultural organisations throughout Natal participated in this event at the community built Bharat Hall in Prince Edward Street, Durban. The eisteddfods became an important platform to showcase Gujarati culture and identity. The competition was open to all ages, and divided into juniors, seniors and adults. The items rendered included classical dancing (solo), folk dancers, poetry recitation, and religious and modern Indian songs. Various Gujarati caste groups participated in this popular annual event. The NGP's 1977 Annual Report noted that due to the overwhelming response of the community, larger halls like the Durban City Hall had to be booked to accommodate the audience (Desai 1997: 97).

#### *Upliftment of Women*

Studies have shown that gender roles in the diaspora undergo considerable transformation (Crewe and Kothari 1998; Hole 2005; Hiralal 2013a, Hiralal 2013c). According to Vertovec (2000), "In many cases more significant and decisive functions of women arise in religious community associations and

affairs: women often take the lead in the organisation and management of collective religious activities...the key role women play in reproducing religious practice .....Particularly by undertaking domestic religious practice...." (Vertovec 2000:15).

The NGP also sought to uplift women. However, prior to the formation of the SAGMP and the NGP the various *gnati* organisations were largely male-dominated. This was largely due to the patriarchal nature of Gujarati households. This did not prevent women from establishing their own organisation. As early as 1930, 12 women pioneered the formation of a *Mahila Mandal* or Gujarati Women's Club in Durban. Amongst its early members were Mrs Zaverbhen Patel, Mrs Sushila Gandhi, Mrs Navelbhen Duplelia and Mrs Savitabhen Naik. The aims of the Club were to uplift women, to promote the Gujarati language through the establishment of a Gujarati School, and to organise handicraft classes and adult education classes in Gujarati, Hindi and English. The first president of the organisation was Mrs Javerben Patel. The Club was formalised in 1950 when a proper constitution was adopted under the guidance of Pandit Vedalankar.

In 1959 the GMM established a nursery school, or *Bal Mandir*. The school started with eight children and by 1964 had an enrolment of 64. By 1989, there were approximately 70 students with 25 on the waiting list. In the late 1970s, the GMM became affiliated with the SAGP and the NGP. The GMM hosted annual cultural shows and eisteddfods and Rangoli (Indian folk art) exhibitions. In 1987 the GMM introduced Gujarati lessons for youths and adults (Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes, 1988-1997). The GMM also played an important role in community upliftment, supporting various charities and assisting with flood relief. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s the women distributed food hampers at the Friends of the Sick Association (FOSA), the Aryan Benevolent Home (for the aged) and several orphanages. Ties with India were also pursued through political and humanitarian aid. They assisted several charities, national and political movements, and paid tribute to India's statesmen, poets, intellectuals and activists (*Indian Opinion*, 14 November 1930). Whilst the NGP was male dominated in terms of its gender composition, women such as Mrs. J. Mackanjee, Mrs Shantabhen Narsai, Mrs Ramabhen Devshi, and Mrs Ushabhen Desai, played an important role within the Parishad (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad, SD File 547/122).

*Religion*

In diaspora studies on religion, terms such as "Hindu diaspora" (Vertovec 2000) and "diaspora religion" (John Hinnells 1997: 686) or "traveling cultures", (Clifford 1992) have sought to highlight the complexities and challenges of religion in the diaspora. According to Vertovec, (2000) "the social organization and practice of religion is usually modified...by a variety of factors involved in movement and resettlement in a new context" (Vertovec 2000:13). He adds that among the "factors" are "organization and mobilization", and "ethnic and religious pluralism". For the Gujarati Hindus, being a minority group created "heightened awareness" of their faith. For example, for the Gujaratis in Britain, religion played a pivotal role, as "many adults reported that they had become more aware of their religion in Britain, as a result of belonging to a minority in a predominantly irreligious society. They could no longer take their religion and their children's assumption of it for granted" (Vertovec 2000:16). The Gujarati Hindu community shares similar trajectories of ethnic and religious solidarity with their counterparts in Britain. Both the SAGMP and the NGP were important institutional mechanisms and spaces which helped the Gujaratis Hindus recreate, revive, disseminate and sustain their religion, culture and identity in the diaspora.

The NGP was an important vehicle which sought to promote religious unity amongst the Gujarati Hindus. This was achieved through the establishment of Bhanjan (Sangeet) groups, cultural events, invitations to local and international religious leaders and providing religious instruction at Gujarati schools. The NGP worked with the Surat Arya Bhajan Mandal to promote religious unity. The Mandal was established in 1956, and later became an affiliate of the NGP. During the 1960s the Mandal invited prominent religious leaders such as Sri Pranahshankar V. Koshi and K. Trivedi to further enlighten the community on religion and culture. The Mandal also established the Saptah Mandir (temple) which, under the guidance of Pandit R Joshi, made major contributions to spiritual awakening in the community. It held saptahs (week-long non-stop singing of bhanjans (religious groups)) to mark auspicious days on the Hindu religious calendar, such as Krishna Astami (birth of Krishna), Holi, Diwali (festival of lights), Ram Naumi (birth of Rama), Shivaratri, Ganesh Chaturthi and Navarathri, amongst others. Every year a Rath Yatra (Chariot festival) takes place during the fasting month of Shravan. It is accompanied by bhajans and folk dances and the GMM largely spearheads this event. The NGP worked in close liaison with the SHA and the KHSS in celebrating Diwali and the Gujarati New Year, and they jointly hosted foreign dignitaries, artists, and

religious leaders who toured South Africa. Amongst them were Uma Bharati who opened the third Convention of the SAGMP in 1979; Haribhai Popat who delivered discourses on "Bhakta Charitra", and Reverend Father Valles from Ahmedabad Gujarat who gave religious and cultural talks in Gujarati (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad SD File 547/122).

### *Formation of Yuvak Mandals (Youth Clubs)*

To promote youth awareness, clubs were established around South Africa in the Eastern Cape (East London Gujarati Yuvak Mandal); Transvaal (Shree Brits Yuvak Mandal, Hindu Youth Organisation, and Shree Yuvak Mitra Mandal); and Natal (Kathiawad Youth Organisation, Gujarati Yuvak Mandal, Durban Rajput Yuvak Mandal and the Surya Kala Niketan (1974)). The Natal based youth organisations were affiliated to the NGP and jointly promoted the interests of the youth. The need for the establishment of youth clubs became increasingly acute as they played an important role in perpetuating religious awakening and reinforcing cultural identity. One of the earliest clubs was the Bharat Cricket Club, formed in 1926. Sports, tennis, squash, and cricket were organised by the Club for over 60 years. It also had a social club and regular social gatherings. In the 1920s, the Rajput Chouhan Yuvak Mandal was established; it was replaced by the Durban Rajput Yuvak Mandal in 1951. The Kathiawad Hindu Youth Organisation was established on 25 March 1956. Its aims were purely cultural and educational and it was devoted to the advancement of the youth. The Surya Kala Niketan actively engaged in cultural activities. They encouraged Bhajans, Kirtans, Grabas, and dances in the mother-tongue language and staged colourful annual cultural shows (South African Gujarati Maha Parishad SD File 547/122; Adarsh 1983 50-51; Desai 1997:60-62; Hiralal and Rawjee 2011).

### *Conclusion*

Early attempts at collective organisation amongst the Gujarati Hindus were largely characterised by caste and regional affiliations. Various *jati* organisations, the SAGMP and the NGP were important institutional mechanisms and spaces which helped the Gujarati Hindus to recreate, revive, disseminate and sustain their religion, culture and identity in the diaspora as well as maintain links with the homeland. In the 1980s, given the political climate in South Africa and their minority status, the community began to rethink the notion of caste identities and sought a broader unity at the national and regional levels. This led to the formation of the SAGP and the NGP. However, the SAGMP and the NGP only achieved temporary unity

as by the late 1980s, they had virtually disintegrated. This vacuum gave rise to the formation of the Gujarati Sanskruti Kendra or Kendra in the 1990s to unite the Gujarati community. Like its predecessors, this current organisation has been plagued by disunity attributed to stubborn caste thinking prevalent among some segments of Gujarati Hindus. A plethora of caste based organisations still exist throughout the country. The existence of these *jati* organisations is indicative that some members of the Gujarati community still seek to embrace their individual identities (*jati*) rather than their collective identity (*Gujarati*). This provides them with a sense of identity, their lineage and sense of belonging in terms of *jati*. Equally important, given the hierarchical nature of the caste system, many still seek to cling to their “superior” and “different” status so as to warrant importance and status in society. The complexities and political dynamics of ethnic collective organisations provide an important lens to understand identity construction and assimilation in the diaspora. Bhana and Bhoola (2011) aptly note, “In the last 25 years, uncertainties in South Africa have produced organizations based on narrow ethnic and religious forms of identification. Such developments should be examined against the backdrop of shifts in identity among Indians. Changes measured against the original sets of defined goals will reflect why and how they occurred. We will learn a great deal about the evolving multi-cultural setting in a democratic South Africa” (Bhana and Bhoola 2011: 31). This is an important call to scholars seeking to address the issues of identity and collective organisation amongst ethnic communities in the diaspora.

### *References*

- Adarsh*, Vol. 8, November 1983 .
- Alba, R.D. (1990). *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Bhana, S. and Bhoola, K.K. (2011). The Dynamics of Preserving Cultural Heritage: the Case of Durban’s Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj, 1943-1960 and Beyond, *South Asian Diaspora*, 3 (3), 15-36.
- Bhana, S. and Brain, J. (1990). *Setting Down Roots: Indian Migrants in South Africa 1860- 1911*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Bhardwaj, Surinder M. & N. Madhusudana Rao. (1990). Asian Indians in the United States: A geographic appraisal. In C. Clarke, C. Peach and S. Vertovec (eds), *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity*, 197-217. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bowen, David G. (1987). The evolution of Gujarati Hindu organizations in Bradford. In R. Burghart (ed.), *Hinduism in Great Britain*, 15-31. London: Tavistock.
- Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Boston, Little Brown.
- Cohen, Robin. (1997). *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Crewe, E. and Kothari, U. (1998). Gujarati migrants' search for modernity in Britain, *Gender and Development* 6 (1):13-20.
- Clifford, James. (1992). Traveling cultures. In L. Grossberg, C Nelson and P.A. Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, 96-116. New York: Routledge.
- Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal, vol. xxii, 1894: 577
- Desai, Usha. (1997). "An Investigation of Factors Influencing Maintenance and Shift of the Gujarati Language in South Africa". Ph. D. Thesis, Unpublished. Durban: University of Durban-Westville.
- Dhupelia-Mesthrie, U. (2012). Gujarati Shoemakers in Twentieth Century Cape Town: Family Gender, Caste and Community, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38, (1), 168-82.
- Fiat Lux*, May vol, 8, no. 4, 1983, 30
- Gopalan, Karthigasen Gopalan. (2013). South African Hindu Maha Sabha: (Re) Making Hinduism in South Africa, 1912-1960, *J Sociology Soc Anth*, 4(1-2): 41-52
- Gujarati Mahila Mandal Minutes, 1988-1997
- Hall, S. (2003). Cultural identity and diaspora. In: Jana Evans Braziel, Anita Mannur (eds): *Theorizing Diaspora*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 233-246.
- Hinnells, John R. (1997). The study of diaspora religion. In J.R. Hinnells (ed.), *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, 682-90. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hiralal, K. (2013a) (2013). 'Immigrant Sisters Organising for Change': The Gujarati Mahila Mandal, 1930-2010, *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 4(1-2), 2013, 105-15.
- Hiralal, K. (2013b). Caste in the diaspora: A Case study of the Natal Rajput Association in Durban, *Journal Man In India*, 93 (4):591-606.
- Hiralal, K. (2014c). Women and migration in South Africa: historical and literary perspectives, *South Asian Diaspora*, vol. 6. 1, 2014; 63-75.
- Hiralal, K.S. and V.P. Rawjee. (2011). *Tracing Our Roots: The Natal Rajput Association 1911-2011*. Durban: Atlas Printers.
- Hole, E.S. (2005). "Neither here – nor there –An anthropological study of Gujarati Hindu women in the diaspora". PhD, Uppsala University.
- Indian Opinion* 10 February 1911.
- Indian Opinion* 28 June 1913.
- Indian Opinion*, 14 November 1930.
- Joshi, P.S. (1942). *The Tyranny of Colour – A Study of the Indian problem in South Africa* (Durban, EP & Commercial Printing Company Ltd).
- Killie Campbell Africana Library (KCAL), IIAB, Sayed Alli, Special Case –Natal Supreme Court, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1914, KCM File 5 99/53/5.

- Kuper, K. (1960). *Indian people in Natal*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj, Golden Jubilee 1994.
- Kendra Samachar*, vol. 21, April 2013.
- Mawani, Sharmina and Mukadam, Anjoom (eds). (2012). Introduction, *Gujarati Communities Across the Globe: Memory, Identity and Continuity*. Stoke-on-Trent, England: Trentham Books.
- Min, Z. and Kim, Rebecca Y. (2006). The Paradox of Ethnicization and Assimilation: The Development of Ethnic Organizations in the Chinese Immigrant Community in the United States in Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce and Evelen Hu-Dehart (eds). *Voluntary Organisations in the Chinese Diaspora*. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 231-252.
- Msindo, Enocent. (2005). Language and Ethnicity in Matabeleland: Ndebele-Kalanga Relations in Southern Zimbabwe, 1930-1960, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1:79-103.
- Nagel, J. (1994). Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture, *Social Problems*, 41(1): 152-176.
- Natal Government Gazette, 1884-1908.
- Natal Witness*, 8 April 1886.
- Report of the Trade Commission 1885-86.
- Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission 1885-1887.
- Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission (Clayton) 1909.
- Sanders, J.M. (2002). Ethnic boundaries and identity in plural societies, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28: 327-357.
- Samachar, June-July, Vol. 3, 1980.
- Samarpan Pandit Vedalankar, 1988.
- Schöpflin, G. (2001). *The construction of identity*. ÖSTERREICHISCHER WISSENSCHAFTSTAG 2001, pp. 1-10
- Shri Natal Mandhata Hitvardhak Mandal, 1916-1991.
- Silver Jubilee, Surat Hindoo State Aided Primary School 1979.
- South African Gujarati Maha Parishad SD File 547/122-130
- South African Gujarati Maha Parishad: Secretarial Report, SD File 547/126
- South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) 1892-1974, Legal Disabilities of Indians, 1962, AD 1715, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Historical Papers.
- The South African Indian Who's Who* 1936-1937.
- Swan, M. (1985). *Gandhi – The South African Experience*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Thomson, D (1996). Language, Identity, and the Nationalist Impulse: Quebec, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 538: 69-82.
- Times of Natal*, 2 January 1907.
- Williams, Raymond B. (1992). Sacred threads of several textures. In R.B. Williams (ed.), *A Sacred Thread: Modern Transmission of Hindu Traditions in India and Abroad*, 228-57.

- Wimmer, Andreas. (2008). The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory. *AJS*, 113(4): 970-1022.
- Vertovec, S. (2000). Religion and Diaspora, Paper presented at the conference on "New Landscapes of Religion in the West", School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, 27-29 September, 2000,1-45.

## **Indian Settlers on the Natal South Coast 1874-1910: Work, Trade and the Rise of a Racial Order**

Duncan Du Bois  
University of KwaZulu Natal  
dubois@axxess.co.za

### *Abstract*

The South Coast as a region is significant in the history of Indians in Natal as it was the only area where they were given grants of Crown land. However, there is a distinct absence of comprehensive studies of regions such as the South Coast of which no specific study existed before the completion in 2013 of my dissertation entitled 'Sugar and Settlers: the colonisation of the Natal South Coast 1850-1910.'<sup>1</sup> Whilst a wealth of research and literature exists concerning the experience of Indians as indentured labourers in Natal,<sup>2</sup> the purpose of this paper is to provide a perspective on Indians as settlers in a particular region, namely, the South Coast, during the white-dominated colonial dispensation.

*Keywords: Indenture, Indians, Natal, African, Arab Trader, Land*

According to James Belich, an emigrant joins someone else's society whereas a settler remakes his own.<sup>3</sup> As will be seen, the 'Anglo-centricity' of white colonists<sup>4</sup> and their inherent ethnocentrism<sup>5</sup> resulted in treatment of Indians as 'exogenous others,' as Lorenzo Veracini has termed such a

---

<sup>1</sup> D.L. Du Bois, D.Phil. thesis, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2013, Unpublished.

<sup>2</sup> For example: L.M. Thompson, 'Indian immigration into Natal 1860-1872,' (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1938, Unpublished); Mabel Palmer, *The History of Indians in Natal*, (OUP, Cape Town, 1957); S. Bhana and J. Brain, *Setting down roots: Indian migrants in South Africa 1860-1911*, (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1990); S. Bhana, *Essays on indentured Indians in Natal*, (Peepal Tree Press, Leeds, 1990); K. Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, (Madiba Publications, Durban, 1991); D. Govinden, *Sister Outsiders – the representation of identity and difference in selected writings by South African Indian women*, (UNISA Press, Pretoria, 2008); A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture – A South African Story*, (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2010) ; D. L. Du Bois, *Labourer or Settler? Colonial Natal's Indian Dilemma 1860-1897*, (Just Done Productions, Durban, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> J.Belich, 'The rise of the Angloworld: settlement in Australasia and North America 1784-1918,' in P.A. Buckner and R.D. Francis, (eds.), *Rediscovering the British World*, (University of Calgary Press, Calgary, 2005), 53.

<sup>4</sup> A. Burton, *Empire in Question*, (Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2011), 29.

<sup>5</sup> T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the origins of racial order*, (David Philip, Cape Town, 1996), 281.

relationship.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as settlers, Indians were socially and culturally separated and insulated from white settler society. Seen as essential to the success of the sugar enterprise,<sup>7</sup> the presence of Indians as labourers was welcomed but not reciprocated when the erstwhile labourer became a settler or immigrated to Natal as a trader. Yet in 1875 the Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Salisbury, had declared that once indentured labourers had completed their contracts, their rights and privileges were to be the same as 'any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies.'<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, despite the social ostracism and discrimination to which they were subjected, of the 152,184 Indians who immigrated to Natal between 1860 and 1911, only some 23 percent returned to the land of their birth.<sup>9</sup>

Within a few years of the introduction of sugar planting on the Natal coast, planters complained of labour deficiencies in terms of the availability and reliability of local African labour. After much debate and the submission of several petitions, the Natal Legislative Council passed legislation in 1859 to secure indentured Indian immigration. Intended only as 'an experiment on a small scale,'<sup>10</sup> the arrival of the first indentured Indians in November 1860 added a new dimension to Natal's demographic character which had significant socio-economic and political consequences in the decades which followed.<sup>11</sup>

The Indian presence on the South Coast was initially limited to the Isipingo area. However, indentured labour accompanied the spread of the sugar enterprise south of the Mkomanziriver once grants of Crown land were made to settlers from 1858 so that by 1866 the Indian population stood at 381 as opposed to 364 white settlers.<sup>12</sup> Ten years later, the Indian population had increased to 1,149 while the white population stood at only 514.<sup>13</sup> The resumption of indentured immigration in 1874 after an eight year suspension accelerated the growth of the Indian population.<sup>14</sup> But the

---

<sup>6</sup> L. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, (Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2010), 18.

<sup>7</sup> An editorial in the *Natal Mercury* on 24 November 1870 stated: 'Coolie labour is costly to the planters....but we fear it is....essential to the progress of tropical agriculture.'

<sup>8</sup> Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1877, 5.

<sup>9</sup> S. Bhana, 'Indentured Indians in Natal 1860-1902: a study based on ships 'lists,' (University of Durban-Westville, 1987), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), GH 1212, Despatch No. 51, Scott to Lytton 28 June 1859.

<sup>11</sup> See: D.L. Du Bois, 'Sir John Robinson, the *Mercury* and the Indian Question,' (MA thesis, University of Natal, 1989, Unpublished).

<sup>12</sup> PAR, CSO 264, No. 43, Resident Magistrate's Report for 1866, 28 February 1867.

<sup>13</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1876, V4.

<sup>14</sup> Indentured immigration ceased in 1866 as a result of economic hardship in Natal. Its resumption in the 1874 followed an enquiry known as the Coolie Commission into the treatment of indentured labourers.

passage of time also added a new dimension to the Indian presence – that of the free Indian settler of which there were two types: the labourer whose contract had expired and those who immigrated to Natal of their own accord and were known as ‘passenger’ Indians while those of the Muslim faith were referred to as ‘Arabs.’<sup>15</sup> Although given the choice of returning to India, in increasing numbers, erstwhile labourers became settlers. In 1879 the ranks of free Indians swelled when 3,000 obtained discharge certificates.<sup>16</sup> In 1883 not a single Indian re-indentured out of 4,548 who obtained discharge certificates that year.<sup>17</sup>

### *Land Grants*

In terms of section 51 of Law 2 of 1870, Indians who had completed ten years of indentured labour were entitled to a piece of land in exchange for a free return passage to India. In 1874, two such Indians, Goodoo and Cassim Saib, made inquiries about land in the Umzinto area. The reply they received avoided any mention of locality and confined itself to their eligibility in terms of land value. They were told they would qualify for land worth no more than £8 or £9, the cost of a return passage to India.<sup>18</sup> The Saibs were amongst the few fortunate ones to be granted 50 acres of land each.<sup>19</sup> But for other applicants, it was a case of bureaucratic procrastination and indecision. The degree of confusion that prevailed was illustrated by a query submitted by Alexandra County Resident Magistrate, Gould Arthur Lucas who stated that Indian applicants with whom he had consulted felt the land grant should apply to all who were eligible to claim a free return trip to India. By implication, that would have included wives and children. But Attorney-General Gallwey ruled that only men qualified.<sup>20</sup>

There was also uncertainty as to where the land grants should be made. Acting Protector of Indian Immigrants, Louis Mason, asked the Surveyor-General, Dr P.C. Sutherland, to survey land between the Mtwalumi and Mzimkulu rivers as he thought that area would be suitable. Sutherland rightly pointed out that he doubted the Indians would accept grants there

---

<sup>15</sup> D. Du Bois, *Labourer or Settler?* 62; S. Bhana, ‘Indian trade and trader,’ in B. Guest and J.M. Sellers (eds.), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1985), 235-240.

<sup>16</sup> Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1879, *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1839, 17 August 1880.

<sup>17</sup> Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1883, *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1883, FF47.

<sup>18</sup> PAR CSO 495, No. 3577, 23 October 1874; No. 3578, 5 November 1874. Crown land generally sold for four shillings per acre. £9 would have purchased a plot of about 50 acres.

<sup>19</sup> PAR CSO 854, No. 1665, 2 May 1882; PAR CSO 904, No. 1546, 6 September 1882.

<sup>20</sup> PAR CSO 854, No. 1665, 25 April 1882.

because of the great distance from the nearest market and the poor quality of the soil.<sup>21</sup> Yet in July 1875, during the administration of Sir Garnet Wolseley, in anticipation of land grants for Indians, Colonial Secretary Napier Broome requested the Surveyor-General 'to furnish the Immigration Department....with a rough sketch map showing the position of such lands and the available quantity.' Land to the east of the Mzintoriver was identified.<sup>22</sup> In 1879, Sutherland himself had recommended lands to the south of Umzinto as being suitable. In what appeared to be a lottery of options, Colonial Secretary C.B.H. Mitchell proposed that the allotments be made in Alfred County.<sup>23</sup> The size of the grants was also in dispute. Magistrate Lucas indicated that the offer of fifteen acres per family had been rejected as inadequate by the nineteen contract-expired Indians who had consulted with him in Umzinto.<sup>24</sup> Yet Protector of Indian Immigrants Shaftow Graves endorsed the provision of fifteen acres per family.<sup>25</sup>

This unseemly inability to apply the provisions of section 51 of Law 2 of 1870 resulted in Acting Protector Louis Mason stating in 1882 that the lists of land grant recipients were four years out of date and that many of the applicants had moved on.<sup>26</sup> Already the Assistant Colonial Secretary, F.S. Haden, had expressed disappointment over the delay in finalising the land grants. In typical bureaucratic fashion, the Surveyor-General blamed lack of funds for the delay.<sup>27</sup> Notwithstanding such excuses, the Protector indicated in his report for 1882 that Crown land in the Braemar district, north-west of Umzinto in Alexandra County, was allocated to Indians who had indentured between 1860 and 1866 but that only 41 of the original applicants had taken possession of their grants. A total of 52 Indians eventually took up the land grants.<sup>28</sup> The 53 lots of land were each fifteen acres in extent.

---

<sup>21</sup> PAR CSO 877, No. 3987 and 3369, 17 October 1882; 5 May 1880.

<sup>22</sup> PAR CSO 904, No. 3669, Minute 17/8/1875, 6 July 1875.

<sup>23</sup> PAR CSO 904, No. 3369, 9 December 1879. There were only eight Indians in Alfred County in 1880. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1880, V4.

<sup>24</sup> PAR CSO 904, No. 1546, 17 February 1880.

<sup>25</sup> PAR CSO 904, No. 3669, 20 February 1880.

<sup>26</sup> PAR CSO 904, No. 1546, 6 September 1882.

<sup>27</sup> PAR CSO 904, No. 3669, 1 and 5 April 1881.

<sup>28</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1882, FF36; J.B. Brain, 'Natal's Indians, 1860-1910,' in Duminy and Guest, (eds.), *Natal and Zululand from earliest times to 1910: A new History*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1989), 251. The option to exchange a free return passage to India for land in Natal was scrapped in 1874 and did not apply to Indians indenturing after that time. The contractual conditions applied to Indians indenturing to Natal were very different from those applied to the importation of Melanesian labourers to Queensland, Australia, between 1864 and 1904. Whereas the Natal Government subsidized indentured immigration to the extent of £2 and ten shillings per labourer, Queensland employers of Melanesian labour bore the entire cost themselves. Contracts were for three years only as opposed to five years in Natal; wages were only £6 per year (indentured Indians in Natal earned just over £12 per year). Melanesians were encouraged to re-indenture failing which they were sent home. This was in line with the ideology of a 'white Queensland' which,

Valued at ten shillings per acre, at £7 ten shillings, each lot was equivalent to the cost of a return fare to India.<sup>29</sup> Apart from those grants, in 1889 three grants of land, each of 50 acres in extent, were made to Indians in Alexandra County.<sup>30</sup> No further grants are recorded. In any event, as noted, land grants were discontinued for those indenturing from 1874.

### *Education and Culture*

Desai and Vahed note that initially Indian immigrants were seen merely as transients for whom no educational arrangements were made. But with the passage of time many saw education as a means of escape for their children from a life of plantation labour.<sup>31</sup> As colonial writer Lawrence Neame observed, many of the children of indentured labourers who were born in Natal aspired to higher forms of employment than those of their parents.<sup>32</sup> In that regard, educational opportunities for Indians were pioneered by Christians.<sup>33</sup>

The remoteness, isolation and scattered nature of Indian settlement posed great difficulties for the provision of schooling in a context where white settlers wanted separate facilities for Indians and would not allow them to attend schools established for whites.<sup>34</sup> The earliest reference to education for Indians in Alexandra County occurred in 1865 when Reverend Joseph Barker, an Anglican, opened a school in Umzinto for the children of 'coloured labourers.' But he noted that the Indians were not keen 'to join natives in a place of instruction' so he had to provide a separate facility.<sup>35</sup> In 1872 the Reverend Ralph Scott took the initiative to attempt to train some Indians as teachers for the Indian school on Craigie Burn estate. But his prospective educators were lured away from the South Coast by the prospect of better paid jobs elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, in 1874 that school for Indians was listed, for the first time, to receive a grant in aid.<sup>37</sup> This was

---

after the establishment of the Australian Commonwealth in 1901, became the 'white Australia' policy. By 1906 all Melanesians were expatriated. See: L. Megarrity, ' "White Queensland:" The Queensland Government's ideological position on the use of Pacific island labourers in the sugar sector 1880-1901,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2006, 2;12.

<sup>29</sup> Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXXIV, 1883, 324.

<sup>30</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1889, 22.

<sup>31</sup> A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture*, 188.

<sup>32</sup> L.E. Neame, *The Asiatic Danger in the Colonies*, (George Routledge & Sons, London, 1907), 24.

<sup>33</sup> A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture*, 189.

<sup>34</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1881, Education Report, U11.

<sup>35</sup> J.B. Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal 1860-1911*, (OUP, Cape Town, 1983), 212.

<sup>36</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1872, T20.

<sup>37</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1874, C16.

a consequence of a Commission for Education which, in 1874, recommended, *inter alia*, that the Government should provide 'liberal assistance' to large employers of Indian labour to build schools on their sugar estates.<sup>38</sup>

It is of note, however, that legally there was no requirement that schools had to be racially segregated. The Protector commented in his report of 1877 that government schools were open to Indian children as they were to all others of Her Majesty's subjects. Eight Indian pupils were enrolled at Durban Primary in 1877.<sup>39</sup> Although at the insistence of the Secretary of State for Colonies, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, legislation was passed to promote education amongst the children of the Indian immigrant population,<sup>40</sup> the effects of Law 20 of 1878 were never far-reaching. In his report for 1879 the Protector remarked that not only was there great difficulty in obtaining suitable teachers from India, but that estate owners were 'indifferent and passive' in the face of Government appeals to establish schools on their estates. Some even claimed that education would prove 'hurtful' to Indian children. He found that only three estates were prepared to provide what he called 'a rough schoolroom and master's quarters.'<sup>41</sup>

A state-aided school for Indians was only established in Umzinto in 1882. Ironically, education opportunities for white children were also few and far between, as a report in the *Mercury* stated.<sup>42</sup> The school for whites in Umzinto was closed in 1878 by the Council of Education on account of low attendance and unsatisfactory performances.<sup>43</sup> At that time the only other school for white pupils was in Umkomaas which had an enrolment of 29.<sup>44</sup> By 1884 there was also a school for Indians at Equeefa which the Inspector of Indian Schools, Frank Colepeper, reported as making good progress.<sup>45</sup> Both Indian schools, Umzinto and Equeefa, received annual grants of £40 each. In 1885 their enrolments were 63 and 85 respectively but the average attendance was poor at only 36 and 24 pupils.<sup>46</sup> Whilst there may have been domestic reasons for poor attendance, which will be discussed

---

<sup>38</sup> *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1491, 22 September 1874.

<sup>39</sup> Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1877, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XXX, No. 1739, 26 November 1878. The *Mercury* (9 August 1878) welcomed the Bill: 'The want of such a provision, indeed, should have had attention before....The rising generation of Indian settlers must be educated.'

<sup>41</sup> *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1839, 17 August 1880.

<sup>42</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 22 July 1882.

<sup>43</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1879, W8.

<sup>44</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1880, W9.

<sup>45</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1884, U52. In 1884 there were 1,371 Indian pupils at schools in Natal. *Ibid.*, U50.

<sup>46</sup> PAR CSO 1072, Report on Indian Schools for 1885, 6-7.

shortly, the grants for those schools were inadequate in that they did not allow for the employment of more than one teacher. As the Report for Indian Education in 1886 stated: 'No man who respects himself will accept the post of teacher for less than £2 per month.'<sup>47</sup> As such the situation was not sustainable. By 1888 the Indian school at Umzinto was in trouble. 'The teacher (Mr P. Jemadian) has reached the limits of his powers,' lamented the official report which noted that very little progress had been made.<sup>48</sup> But the following year, under a white female teacher, Miss Trenor, attendance and academic results apparently improved.<sup>49</sup>

However, for a population which had reached 10,000 on the South Coast by 1909,<sup>50</sup> the provision of schooling for Indian children was abysmal. In 1905 there was only one state-aided school for Indians. It was in Umzinto and had an enrolment of just 75 pupils. The nearest alternative school was in Isipingo, over 70 kilometres distant.<sup>51</sup> The only local alternative facility was a small private Anglican school for Indians in Umzinto run by the Paul and Perumal families.<sup>52</sup> Overall, the total expenditure of £5,453 in 1909 on Indian schooling in Natal<sup>53</sup> speaks for itself as an indicator of the low priority the colonial government placed on the issue.

The erection of shrines and temples was, as Desai and Vahed point out, an important primary step in establishment of cultural roots. The first one on the South Coast was completed at Isipingo in 1870. Investment in culture came from the humble contributions of indentured workers and those who were starting out in private business.<sup>54</sup> Despite being socially marginalized by colonial society, Indians were proactive in the inception of civic bodies, the Umzinto Indian Society being a case in point.<sup>55</sup> The relative isolation of the South Coast from the rest of Natal and the limited financial means of many Indians did not prevent the pursuit of sporting ties with Indian communities elsewhere in the Colony. In September 1907, for instance the

---

<sup>47</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1886, U92. The situation was no different for white teachers. Superintendent of Education Robert Russell stated in 1886: 'It is difficult to see how....struggling country schools.... can be efficiently maintained on the remuneration at present given to the teachers.' *Ibid.*, U4.

<sup>48</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1888, U61, 66. Circumstances were no better at the Umzinto school for whites: the failure rate was double that of 1887 and nine of the 27 pupils had been absent for six months. *Ibid.*, U25. There was a private school for white pupils at Umzinto which had an enrolment of 17. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1885, U16.

<sup>49</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1889, U83. Her salary of £39 was nearly double that paid to Mr Jemadian.

<sup>50</sup> *Colony of Natal, Statistical Year Book*, 1909, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Report of the Superintendent of Education, year ended 30 June 1905, 31.

<sup>52</sup> J.B. Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal*, 218; 234.

<sup>53</sup> *Colony of Natal, Statistical Year Book*, 1909, 298.

<sup>54</sup> A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture*, 242-243.

<sup>55</sup> A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture*, 325.

Umkomaas Indian Football Club played a home game against the Durban Stella side.<sup>56</sup>

### *Indian Commercial Presence*

Initiative and enterprise were the hallmarks of Indian settlers. Once freed from their indenture commitments, many turned to farming as a means of earning a living. Renting scattered plots and holdings, by 1877 some 3,000 acres of land in the coastal counties of Victoria, Durban and Alexandra was being worked by Indians. Their commercial efforts in market gardening were such that by 1877 they dominated the fish, fruit and vegetable market.<sup>57</sup> In 1877 it was reported that a group of contract-expired Indians were making a living from fishing at the mouth of the Mkomanzi by supplying the local market. The report also noted that the distance from Durban and the difficulties posed to travel and transport by the absence of bridges and the cost of wagon carriage prevented their enterprise from being 'a profitable occupation.'<sup>58</sup>

In Alexandra County, B.C. Rambachan was only 14 years of age when he came to Umzinto as an indentured labourer. After serving a ten year contract, he was employed as a blacksmith near Umkomaas. Having accumulated enough capital, he rented over 400 acres of land near the Mkomanzi river on which he grew sugar cane and tobacco.<sup>59</sup> After completing a five year indentured contract with J.J. Crookes in 1870, Dasrath Maharajh later rented land from Rambachan and engaged in market gardening.<sup>60</sup>

The Indian commercial presence manifested itself in the form of itinerant traders known as *dukawallahs*. These hawkers travelled on foot through districts in all parts of the Colony, often going where no white person would try to do business, selling items of clothing and food.<sup>61</sup> A letter dated 18 March 1880 from William Hawksworth of Equeefa to the Colonial Secretary, appears to be earliest instance of settler concern at this form of trade in Alexandra County. Hawksworth inquired whether the licences of two 'Arab' hawkers were valid in Alexandra even though they had been issued by

---

<sup>56</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 4 September 1907. The Stella side won 1-0.

<sup>57</sup> Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1877, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Natal Witness*, 6 February 1877.

<sup>59</sup> Umkomaas Area Annals compiled by Averil Warner, 1980. Killie Campbell Collection, KCM 55070, 40.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>61</sup> V. Padayachee and R. Morrell, 'Indian merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal economy 1875-1914,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Mar., 1991), pp. 71-102. The authors drew a distinction between merchants and dukawallahs. The latter were defined as pedlars and hawkers.

Durban Borough. Attorney-General Gallwey pointed out that such licences were valid only within the boundaries of the local authority which issued them. Colonial Secretary Mitchell felt that local authorities should be encouraged to issue such licences as they were a 'good source from which to derive revenue.'<sup>62</sup>

Whilst the likes of Hawksworth were wary of this mode of trade, the stance of the Government appeared to be one of indifference. This may be gauged from the response provided to a resident of Mid-Illovo who, in 1883 expressed concern at the number of hawkers trading without licences. The Colonial Secretary replied that the Government 'does not consider this matter of sufficient importance to justify legislation.'<sup>63</sup> At grass roots level, African trade passed into Indian hands, resulting in Indians being better placed in relation to Africans although constrained in relation to white settlers.<sup>64</sup> Indians who made the Colony their home, aspired to higher forms of employment and occupations. This was particularly true of the children of indentured labourers who were born in Natal but were not content with forms of labour that were the lot of their parents.<sup>65</sup> Indicative of that trend was the fact that by 1880 two of the constables in Umzinto were Indians. Their annual remuneration of £24 each was twice that paid to African constables.<sup>66</sup>

The Indian commercial presence was particularly conspicuous where store-keeping was concerned. Hitherto an exclusive white settler domain, by 1883 nine of the fifteen stores in Alexandra County were Indian-owned. That figure increased to twelve stores by 1885 and saw the Resident Magistrate remarking that Indians were underselling white traders and cornering the African and Indian market.<sup>67</sup> By 1894, of the 32 stores in Alexandra County, twenty were Indian-owned.<sup>68</sup> Resentment at this "intrusion" also manifested concerning Sunday trade. The 'Alexandra Letter' in the *Mercury* on 23 January 1884 complained that 'Arab' and 'Coolie' stores were open all day on Sundays despite the provisions of Law 24 of 1878 which permitted trade on certain items only between 9am and 4pm.

---

<sup>62</sup> PAR CSO 746, No. 1191, 18-26 March 1880.

<sup>63</sup> PAR CSO 901, No. 1269, 23 March and 14 May 1883.

<sup>64</sup> G. Vahed, 'Passengers, partnerships and promissory notes: Gujerati traders in Colonial Natal, 1870-1920,' *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2005, 478.

<sup>65</sup> L. E. Neame, *The Asiatic Danger in the Colonies*, 24.

<sup>66</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1880, C76. The annual salary of the white constable, J.C. Whitwell, was £84. An Indian by name of Ramasammy was appointed ferryman on the Lovu river in Durban County in 1880 at a salary of £12 per annum. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1887, C27.

<sup>67</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1883, GG45; *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1885, B62.

<sup>68</sup> *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1893-94, B53.

The article also complained about the lack of enforcement which was proving detrimental to white storekeepers. The Indian commercial presence in Alfred County was slower but by 1888, the Resident Magistrate reported that the "Arab invasion" had reached the area with the opening of three stores and that Indians had secured the African trade.<sup>69</sup>

In the 1870s and 1880s the food economy of Alexandra and Alfred Counties was dominated by Africans. This was especially apparent as regards the cultivation and production of maize. In Alexandra County, Africans cultivated 4,300 acres of maize in 1875 and realised a harvest of 15,500 muids. White farmers cultivated only 483 acres and produced 2,477 muids. In Alfred County, Africans produced 52,000 muids of maize while settlers produced only 456 muids.<sup>70</sup> The ready market for their produce meant that few Africans were dependent on cash wages by toiling in the fields of white settlers.<sup>71</sup> But that situation began to change by the late 1880s when Africans were increasingly drawn to the Public Works Department to labour on railway construction or developments in Durban harbour where wages were much higher than those offered by white farmers. In 1889, AH Bisset of Lower Umzimkulu complained that his district was being 'denuded of its African labour chiefly onto the railway extension and harbour works.'<sup>72</sup> In the mid-1890s the locust and rinderpest plagues drastically reversed flourishing African agriculture and contributed to the process of labour migration.<sup>73</sup> From the 1880s, in terms of cash crops in Alexandra County, contract-expired or free Indians played a significant role in the cultivation of beans, rice, maize and tobacco.<sup>74</sup> This was also true of cultivation by Indians in the Victoria and Durban Counties.<sup>75</sup>

### *The Bite of Discrimination*

A battery of anti-Indian legislation was enacted by the Natal Legislature in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The Acts included denial of the

---

<sup>69</sup> *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1888, B18.

<sup>70</sup> *Natal Blue Books*, 1875, X2-7; 1878, AA4-AA7; 1884, pp.X2-X7. A muid was equivalent to a large sack in capacity.

<sup>71</sup> C. Bundy, *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry*, (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988), 112.

<sup>72</sup> PAR SNA 1/1/120 No. 1207, 7 and 11 November 1889; SNA 1/1/121, No. 1260, 18 and 22 November 1889.

<sup>73</sup> J. Lambert, *Betrayed Trust: Africans and the state in Colonial Natal*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1995), p. 18; p. 159; C. Bundy, *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry*, p.184.

<sup>74</sup> *Supplements to the Blue Books of the Colony of Natal*: 1886, B12; 1888, B9.

<sup>75</sup> *Natal Blue Book*, 1882, FF35.

franchise, a punitive residential tax of £3 on Indians who elected to remain as settlers after the expiry of their terms of indenture and the promulgation of the Dealers' Licence Act. The latter statute not only tightened up the granting of trading licences to Indians but also denied them any right of appeal in the event that a licence application was refused.<sup>76</sup>

R.H. Beachcroft, the Resident Magistrate for Lower Umzimkulu, reflected the increasingly prejudiced and prescriptive attitude of the ruling colonial minority in applying the letter of the law. Regina Abboo, a contract-free Indian, was fined £2 by Beachcroft for absenting himself from his employer's premises. In correspondence with the Attorney -General's office, Beachcroft deprecated the removal by section 109 of Law 25 of 1891 of a magistrate's right, under Ordinance 2 of 1850, to impose imprisonment as an alternative to a fine. Beachcroft feared the emergence of a 'vagrant class' as a result of inadequate punitive means to deal with offenders who absconded from their employers. But in his correspondence he betrayed his inner, ethnocentric feelings when he stated that increasingly estates were employing 'a large number of free Indians.' He saw their influx into Lower Umzimkulu as giving cause for concern.<sup>77</sup> Essentially, however, Beachcroft's motives were premised on a mindset which disdained the recognition of Indians as settlers.

His successor, P. Hugo, was no different. In a ten page exchange of correspondence with the colonial government, Hugo claimed that an Indian storekeeper, Moosa Hoosen, was conducting a retail business in Marburg without a licence. In his defence, Hoosen stated that he had merely relocated his business to new premises 100 yards from where it was previously situated. In response, Hugo asserted that a licence could not be transferred and that there was not sufficient trade to 'warrant the erection of any more stores.' But Hugo's assertions were overruled by the Hime Ministry which condemned the Magistrate's intention to withhold a licence as 'an injustice' and sanctioned the renewal of Hoosen's licence for a further year.<sup>78</sup>

The aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War saw Natal afflicted by a severe economic recession. Sustaining payment of the annual £3 tax as required by Act 17 of 1895 became impossible for many Indian settlers. As Fatima Meer has noted: 'The government knew full well that this was beyond the means of the average ex-indentured Indian and had passed the law.....to

---

<sup>76</sup> See: D. Du Bois, *Labourer or Settler?* 150-175.

<sup>77</sup> Durban Archives Repository (DAR), Lower Umzimkulu (LU), 179/99, Vol. 3/2/8, Minute 22/3/1899.

<sup>78</sup> DAR, LU, 825C, Vol. 3/2/10: LU 526, 16 August, 2 October, 9 October, 24 November, 29 December 1902.

enforce repatriation of Indians.<sup>79</sup> The records of the Umzinto magistracy for the years 1905-1907 show that more than 100 Indians were charged under section 6 of Act 17 of 1895 for failing to pay the annual £3 tax. Of the 23 cases heard between 24 October and 19 December 1905, several individuals were found to be three years in arrears. Thirteen of the 40 section 6 cases before the magistrate in September 1906 were females. In 1907 the magistrate had 61 cases where Indians had failed to pay the £3 tax.<sup>80</sup>

The plight of Poonamah Ponusamy of Port Shepstone illustrates the additional burden many ex-indentured Indians faced as a result of the £3 tax. Having completed her indenture with the Umzimkulu Sugar Company in 1903, she had great difficulty in sustaining an independent existence. By 1906 she was £6 in arrears on the tax. Following an exchange of correspondence between the Protector of Indian Immigrants and the magistrate for Lower Umzimkulu, it was agreed that because of Ponusamy's indigent state she should be returned to India. At the age of 26, with nothing to show for her five years of indenture in Natal, Poonamah Ponusamy was sent back to India.<sup>81</sup> Her experience underlined the official view of Indians: they were welcome as labourers but not as settlers. Nonetheless, as Betty Govinden has noted, there was a groundswell of protest against the £3 tax. Among the petitions directed to the Natal Legislative Assembly was one from the Indian Women's Association. Formed in 1908, the Women's Association petition was entitled 'Domestic Unhappiness.' It listed the suffering and the burden which the tax imposed on Indian families.<sup>82</sup>

Settler prejudice towards Indians was not confined to the colonial era. Just weeks into the Union dispensation, a petition was launched against the issuing of further trading licences to Indian traders in Umkomaas. 'Great indignation was expressed locally' when a trading licence was transferred from a European to an Indian whose premises were situated within half a mile of local white storekeepers in Umkomaas.<sup>83</sup> The reaction of white settlers in Umkomaas was typical of the colonial era. As Bhana and Brain have stated, 'the increasingly anti-Indian sentiment in the whole of South Africa after the end of the South African War led to the introduction of

---

<sup>79</sup> F. Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans*, (Avon House, Durban, 1969), 26.

<sup>80</sup> DAR, LU, 1/UZO 2/5/3/1, 1-11; 15-17; 18-43.

<sup>81</sup> A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture*, 359-360.

<sup>82</sup> D. Govinden, *Sister Outsiders*, 95-96. The existence of the Women's Association is significant given Kalpana Hiralal's observation in 'Trends in South African historiography,' (1996:24) that 'women were relegated to the domestic realm with little or no influence in political organizations or movements.' Quoted by D. Govinden, *Sister Outsiders*, 65-66.

<sup>83</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 25 June 1910.

immigration restrictions in all states. This overall sentiment was carried into the Union period<sup>84</sup> and beyond.

### *Public Representatives and Indians*

General John Jarvis Bisset, the South Coast's sole representative in the Legislative Council in 1886, made it quite clear in his election manifesto that he favoured the return of all Indian labourers to India upon completion of ten years of indenture.<sup>85</sup> In other words, he did not welcome their permanent settlement in the Colony. A year later, in a lengthy letter announcing his resignation as the South Coast's representative, Bisset was more emphatic: 'No more coolies should be brought from India,' he stated.<sup>86</sup> As an employer of indentured labour in the agricultural sector and having experience of the vagaries of the African labour market, Bisset's opinion on indentured immigration was disingenuous. Robert M. Archibald, who became Alexandra County's representative in 1890, had a more realistic view on the issue of indentured labour. In a typical hand-wringing speech on 'the much-veiled question of coolie immigration,' he noted that the ending of indentured immigration would 'accentuate the difficulties' of both coastal and up-country farmers in obtaining labour.<sup>87</sup>

As already noted, the 1890s saw the passage of more discriminatory legislation against Indians than in the entire colonial period. The Robinson Ministry passed four major pieces of legislation<sup>88</sup> to which the Escombe Ministry added a further four.<sup>89</sup> The spate of discriminatory legislation stemmed from a steadily mounting concern amongst the white settler

---

<sup>84</sup> S. Bhana and J.B. Brain, *Setting down roots: Indian immigrants in South Africa 1860-1911*, (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1990), 193.

<sup>85</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 12 August 1886.

<sup>86</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 14 May 1887.

<sup>87</sup> *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. XXI, 16. In 1890, the South Coast's political representation was increased when Alexandra and Alfred Counties were each represented by an elected Member of the Legislative Council.

<sup>88</sup> Anti-Indian legislation passed by the Robinson Ministry comprised: Act 22 of 1894, which extended the powers of municipalities in regulating sanitary conditions, was aimed at inhibiting the granting of trade licences to Indians on health grounds; Act 37 of 1894 ended state subsidisation of indentured immigration; Act 25 of 1894 denied Indians the franchise. The British Government refused to accept this Act but assented to a refined version of it in the form of Act 8 of 1896. Act 17 of 1895 imposed an annual tax of £3 on Indians who failed to re-indenture or did not return to India. See: D. Du Bois, *Labourer or Settler?* 127-148.

<sup>89</sup> Act 1 of 1897 attempted to place restrictions of Indian immigration; Act 2 of 1897 tightened requirements relating to quarantine; Act 18 of 1897 aimed at curbing the granting of trading licences to Indians; Act 28 of 1897 required contract-expired Indians and those who had immigrated to Natal of their own free will, to carry a pass certifying their status and thereby avoiding arrest on the grounds of absconding from their employers. See: D. Du Bois, *Labourer or Settler?* 171-179.

community that Natal was being inundated by Indians. That mindset began evolving in the early 1880s as a result of the 278 percent increase in the Indian population between 1876 and 1886.<sup>90</sup> Fears for the future of white settlement in Natal gave rise to the appointment of the Wragg Commission of Inquiry into Indian Immigration in 1885. The Commission failed to produce concrete solutions to colonists' fears. As the *Natal Almanac and Yearly Register* stated in its 1894 edition: 'It is doubtful policy to crowd the country with an inferior race and so prevent any possibility of increasing our European population.'

Part of the motivation in urging acceptance of the dispensation of responsible government was that it would facilitate decisive action on what was called the Indian question. As the *Natal Mercury* stated in an editorial: 'Our conviction is that the Asiatic question will never be effectively dealt with until the government of the Colony is in the hands of its own responsible representatives.'<sup>91</sup> But discriminatory legislative measures under the various ministries which held office during the responsible government dispensation from 1894 failed to abate the rate of Indian immigration to Natal. As a result, colonists' animosity towards Indians persisted. In July 1899, in a debate on a motion in the Legislative Assembly which sought to prevent indentured Indians from settling in Natal by requiring them to end their contracts in India, Robert Archibald, the senior member for Alexandra County, laid the blame for the proliferation of Indian traders in the towns and villages on 'the working men who daily live out of the baskets brought round by the Indians. They encourage them in every possible way,' he claimed.

Totally ignoring the enterprise and initiative of contract-expired Indians in making a living from market gardening and the like, Archibald, who owned stores in Umzinto, Highflats and Ixopo and several farms, and who at that very time was employing ten indentured Indians,<sup>92</sup> also expressed opposition to the employment of Indians in 'positions which ought to be filled by the sons of Europeans.' His solution to that was to discourage Indians from being educated. 'Let us bring from home European servants,' he opined. The motion was rejected.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Wragg Commission Report in Y.S. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour, Natal, 1851-1917*, (Institute for Black Research, Durban, 1980), 309. The Indian population increased from 10,626 to 29,589. The white population was 36,701 in 1885.

<sup>91</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 7 June 1890.

<sup>92</sup> R.E. Gordon, *Honour without Riches: the story of an Archibald family*, (T.W. Griggs, Durban, 1978), 244, 254. *The South African Who's Who*, (SA Who's Who Publishing Co., Durban, 1908), 9; Indians owned 25 of the 35 stores in Alexandra County in 1899. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1899, Departmental Reports, B91.

<sup>93</sup> *Debates of the Legislative Assembly*, Vol.28, 1899, 553-554.

Notwithstanding the failure of legislative efforts to discourage settlement in Natal by Indians,<sup>94</sup> the likes of Archibald continued to hold contradictory views on their presence and role. At a public meeting in Umzinto in 1908 he stated that he looked forward to the termination of trading by Indians. At the same time, he expressed opposition to the proposal to end indentured immigration after 1911, citing the dependence of large vested interests on indentured labour. (In evidence to the Clayton Commission in 1909, Archibald stated that 'stoppage of indenture would mean absolute ruin' and that the 'success of the sugar industry is entirely due to the employment of Indians').<sup>95</sup> A view expressed by Archibald's fellow Alexandra County representative, Equeefa sugar planter John Kirkman MLA, at that same meeting in Umzinto, illustrated the extent to which some colonists suffered from delusion. Despite the fact that the Indian population had increased from 79,857 in 1903 to 115,807 in 1907 and exceeded the white population of 92,485 by more than 23,000, Kirkman claimed that the £3 tax on Indians was compelling them to return to India.<sup>96</sup> Kirkman's naïve, anti-Indian views were already a matter of record in the *Debates of the Legislative Assembly*. Speaking on a Bill concerning Asiatic traders in July 1907, he stated that 'if we joined in a bond as Europeans not to buy a single thing from any Asian trader, it would have good results.'<sup>97</sup>

As noted earlier, the commercial role and presence of Indians provoked the most critical and emotional settler response. John Rethman, one of Alfred County's representatives in the Legislative Assembly, enquired of the Attorney-General in 1900 whether it was policy to issue trading licences 'indiscriminately' to 'Arab' traders. 'No effort appears to be made to lessen this evil, but on the other hand they have increased,' wrote Rethman. His claim, however, was greatly exaggerated. Only one fresh licence was issued in 1900 to an 'Arab' trader who had complied with all the provisions of the Act (18 of 1897) while the other licences issued were all renewals.<sup>98</sup> Speaking on a trading licences Bill in the Legislative Council in August 1908, Alexandra County's representative, Thomas Kirkman complained that 'Arab' traders 'did not come to the Colony at our asking.' Referring to them as 'uninvited visitants,' he stated that colonists were 'heartily sick' of them. William Arthur Hutchinson, who represented Alfred County in the Legislative Council, referred to the 'Arab' traders as 'profit-makers' and pointed out that they were 'not men who make citizens; they do not take up duties as

---

<sup>94</sup> The Indian population in Natal in 1900 stood at 70,369. The white population was 64,951. *Statistical Year Book*, 1900, 3.

<sup>95</sup> PAR CSO 1878, No. 5276, 1909, 59-60.

<sup>96</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 23 June 1908; *Statistical Year Book, 1907, Colony of Natal*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Debates of the Legislative Assembly*, Vol. 42, 1907, 407.

<sup>98</sup> PAR CSO 1666, No. 16, 29 December 1900; 9 January 1901.

we do in the matter of defence or the discharge of civic or municipal responsibilities. Indeed, they are little but a burden to the country.<sup>99</sup>

### *Concluding Remarks*

The presence of Indians on the South Coast was almost entirely a consequence of the sugar industry. But although by 1909 there were some 10,000 residing in Alexandra and Alfred Counties, fewer than 2,000 were employed on the sugar estates.<sup>100</sup> This meant that the vast majority of Indians were settlers engaged in various commercial enterprises ranging from crop cultivation to store keeping. Although their presence obviously added to the racial composition of the region, their interaction with indigenous Africans appears to have been peaceful and commercially rewarding.<sup>101</sup>

Despite their marginalized and controversial presence and status, there were occasions when Indians put colonial society to shame. In April 1902 'an enthusiastic and enjoyable function took place at the Plough Hotel, Umzinto,' when Indians of Alexandra County made a presentation to Sergeant E.P. Blake of the Natal Police on the eve of his transfer from Umzinto to Harding. With the local Indian interpreter, Somasundram presiding as chairman, the Indian schoolmaster, Paul, presented Blake with a dressing case. In his speech Paul expressed gratitude to Blake 'for the several acts of kindness shown to us during your stay in Umzinto....in which you have always blended justice with mercy.'<sup>102</sup>

If there was one white settler on the South Coast who had a realistic view of Indians, it was Edwin Camp, a Port Shepstone resident who was Secretary in the Lower Umzimkulu Chamber of Commerce. He also had a regular column in the *Natal Mercury* titled 'Ideas from Port Shepstone.' In his column published on 11 July 1900 he stated: 'I confess I see no help for this but by accepting the coolie as a citizen and giving him the help of that position. One thing is certain, whether we like it or not, he is, and will become even more so an important factor in our population.'

However, the mindset of most white settlers towards Indians, whether free or indentured, was a product of their time. In observing that settlers remained staunch in their 'sense of identification with the mother country' and maintained 'Europe as their myth of origin and as a signifier of

---

<sup>99</sup> *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. XVIII, 1908, 71, 75.

<sup>100</sup> *Colony of Natal Statistical Year Book*, 1909, 13.

<sup>101</sup> Magistrates' reports routinely noted an absence of racial disquiet. This was also the case despite the fears triggered by the unrest related to Bhambatha in 1906.

<sup>102</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 17 April 1902.

superiority,' Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis<sup>103</sup> highlight one of the factors that made it virtually impossible for Indians to be recognised and accepted by whites as co-settlers. Earlier notions of trusteeship and paternalism<sup>104</sup> gave way to the embrace of white supremacy by the 1880s which found aggressive expression in the prosecution of the Anglo-Zulu War. As Veracini has observed, 'settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production.'<sup>105</sup> Undoubtedly, the enduring historical reality of the period is that the vast majority of Indians were undeterred by the battery of discriminatory legislation to which they were subjected and remained in Natal.<sup>106</sup>

### References

- Bhana, S. 'Indentured Indians in Natal 1860-1902: a study based on ships' lists,' (University of Durban-Westville, 1987, Unpublished).
- Bhana, S. and Brain, J. *Setting down roots: Indian migrants in South Africa 1860-1911*, (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1990).
- Bhana, S. *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*, (Peepal Tree Press, Leeds, 1990).
- Bradlow, E. 'Indentured Indians in Natal and the £3 tax,' *SA Historical Journal*, 2, November 1970.
- Brain, J.B. *Christian Indians in Natal 1860-1911*, (OUP, Cape Town, 1983).
- Buckner, P.A. and Francis, R.D. (eds.), *Rediscovering the British World*, (University of Calgary Press, Calgary 2005).
- Bundy, C. *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry*, (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988).
- Burton, A. *Empire in Question*, (Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2011).

---

<sup>103</sup> D. Stasiulis and N. Yuval-Davis, (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, (Sage, London, 1995), 20.

<sup>104</sup> S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-1908 Disturbances in Natal*, (OUP, Oxford, 1970), 5; J. Lambert, *Betrayed Trust*, 12-13.

<sup>105</sup> L. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 14. By 1909 the white population of the South Coast had grown to only 2,021. *Statistical Year Book*, 1909, 12.

<sup>106</sup> The Protector of Indian Immigrants once remarked that Indians found Natal to be 'a perfect paradise.' *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1890/91, A93. In a Confidential Despatch in April 1903, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, pointed out that the £3 tax imposed by the Natal Government (Act 17 of 1895) on contract-expired Indians in an attempt to discourage settlement in the Colony had 'not succeeded in its object.' GH 1594, No. 692, 25 April 1903. The Solomon Commission of 1913 confirmed as much. See: E. Bradlow, 'Indentured Indians in Natal and the £3 tax,' *SA Historical Journal*, 2, November 1970, 42; 44. The Indian population continued to grow. In 1900 it stood at 70,369. By 1907 it had reached 115,807. *Colony of Natal Statistical Year Book*, 1907, 3.

- Desai, A. and Vahed, G. *Inside Indian Indenture – A South African Story*, (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2010).
- Du Bois, D. L. 'Sir John Robinson, the *Mercury* and the Indian Question in Natal 1860-1897,' (MA thesis, University of Natal, 1989, Unpublished).
- Du Bois, D. L. 'Sugar and Settlers: the colonisation of the Natal South Coast 1850-1910, (D.Phil. thesis, University of KwaZulu Natal, 2013, Unpublished).
- Du Bois, D. L. *Labourer or Settler? Colonial Natal's Indian Dilemma*, (Just Done Productions, Durban, 2011).
- Duminy, A. and Guest, B. *Natal and Zululand – From Earliest Times to 1910*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1989).
- Goonam, K. *Coolie Doctor*, (Madiba Publications, Durban, 1991).
- Gordon, R.E. *Honour without Riches: the story of an Archibald family*, (T. W. Griggs, Durban, 1978).
- Govinden, D. *Sister Outsiders – the representation of identity and difference in selected writings by South African Indian women*, (UNISA Press, Pretoria, 2008).
- Guest, B. and Sellers, J.M. (eds.), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1985).
- Lambert, J. *Betrayed Trust: Africans and the state in Colonial Natal*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1995).
- Marks, S. *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-1908 Disturbances in Natal*, (OUP, Oxford, 1970).
- Meer, F. *Portrait of Indian South Africans*, (Avon House, Durban, 1969).
- Meer, Y.S. *Documents of Indentured Labour, Natal, 1851-1917*, (Institute for Black Research, Durban, 1980).
- Megarrity, L. "'White Queensland: The Queensland Government's ideological position on the use of Pacific island labourers in the sugar sector 1880-1901,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2006.
- Neame, L.E. *The Asiatic Danger in the Colonies* (George Routledge & Sons, London, 1907).
- Padayachee, V. and Morrell, R. 'Indian merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal economy 1875-1914,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Mar., 1991), pp. 71-102.
- Palmer, M. *The History of Indians in Natal*, (OUP, Cape Town, 1957).
- Stasiulis, D. and Yuval-Davis, N. (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, (Sage, London, 1995).
- Thompson, L.M. 'Indian immigration into Natal 1860-1872,' (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1938, Unpublished).
- Vahed, G. 'Passengers, partnerships and promissory notes: Gujerati traders in Colonial Natal, 1870-1920,' *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2005.

Nidān, Vol. 26, No. 2, December 2014, pp. 83-101.

Veracini, L. *Settler Colonialism*, (Palgrave McMillan, Basingstoke, 2011).

### *Manuscripts*

Umkomaas Area Annals compiled by Averil Warner, 1980, (Killie Campbell Collection).

### *Archival Sources*

CSO and SNA files in Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository [PAR].  
Records of the Resident Magistrate of Lower Umzimkulu [LU] 1889-1906 in the Durban Archives Repository [DAR].

### *Published Government Sources*

Natal Government Gazette; Natal Blue Books.  
Statistical Year Books.  
Debates of the Legislative Council 1880-1893.  
Debates of the Legislative Assembly 1894-1910.  
Reports of the Protector of Indian Immigrants.  
Resident Magistrates' Reports.

### *Newspapers*

Natal Mercury.  
Natal Witness.

## **The Indian Community of Plessislaer, 1940-1960**

Shorba Harkhu  
University of KwaZulu Natal  
Harkhus@ukzn.ac.za

### *Abstract*

The Group Areas Act (GAA) of 1950 enacted by the National Party ratified residential segregation throughout the country. During the 1950s and 1960s, large-scale removals of Africans, Indians, and Coloureds were carried out to implement this Act. Plessislaer, a peri-urban area eight kilometres outside of Pietermaritzburg, was one such area that was affected. The area was once a multi-racial district comprising a large proportion of Indians. As a result of the GAA, this region was demarcated an African area and Indians had to relocate to racially zoned areas. This article focuses on the settlement of the Indian community of Plessislaer, and examines their lives, struggles and achievements prior to them being forcibly removed. The period under study was characterised by increasing racial segregation both nationally as well as locally and it is against this backdrop that this article will be examined.

*Keywords: Indian, Natal, Indenture, Family, Arya Samaj*

Although there is a significant body of literature on Indians in Natal, very little research has focussed on Indians in the Pietermaritzburg and surrounding areas. Goolam Vahed has, in recent years, contributed much to the historical understanding of Indians in Natal in the early twentieth century, but has limited his focus to Durban.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this piece of research is to begin to fill this gap by capturing the forgotten voices and histories of the Indians who lived in Pietermaritzburg, specifically in the Plessislaer area.

This study is largely based on oral history. I have also made use of written sources to provide a more holistic understanding of the study. While there have been criticisms levelled against oral history, most notably the lack of

---

<sup>1</sup> Goolam Vahed 'The making of Indianness: Indian politics in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s' in *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 7, 1997; Goolam Vahed 'Control and repression: the plight of Indian hawkers and flower sellers in Durban, 1910-1948' in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32 ( 1), 1999; Goolam Vahed 'Race or class? : community and conflict amongst Indian municipal employees in Durban, 1914-1949' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27 (1), 2001; Desai, Ashwin and Vahed, Goolam 'Chatsworth : the making of a South African township' UKZN Press, Scottsville, 2013.

objectivity and chronology, it remains an important methodology for historical research. Edwards (1989: 4) points out that "oral history has particular limitations, just as does any other source material, but correct dismissal of oral history's larger political and methodological pretensions must not lead to a derision of this vital source of evidence." Participants are recalling events that took place about sixty or seventy years ago, and because of the timespan, people may forget or romanticise certain events. To counteract this, Bozzoli (2003: 148) advises that "testimonies need to be read with a critical eye and with enough knowledge of the context to make it possible to sift the true evidence from the bulk of ideology, poor memory, and wilful misleading that occurs." This research is further guided by Thompson (2003: 22) who explains that oral history "can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry ... it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place." In this article, oral history gives voice to the hidden, voiceless groups in society, something which written sources fail to do.

My interest in documenting the histories of Indians in Plessislaer stems from my own personal experiences. I was born in Plessislaer, and my family and other relatives were forced to relocate to Northdale, a suburb demarcated for Indians, about twenty kilometres away. At family and social gatherings there was always a lively discussion amongst the older generation about the lives they had led in Plessislaer. The desire to know more gave rise to this article. Oral interviews were undertaken with family and relatives from Pietermaritzburg, starting from 2010. Some preferred to write their thoughts on paper, in which case a questionnaire was handed to them.

In this article, the past is recalled through the vivid recollections of the following former residents of Plessislaer:

Dasarath Bundhoo<sup>2</sup> (b. 1921-d. 2013), a retired trade unionist, whose grandfather, Rachaya arrived in Natal from India in 1880 and was contracted to work at Masons Mill in Pietermaritzburg. After his term of indenture he returned to India but came back to Natal as a passenger migrant and settled in Plessislaer in the early 1900s.

Lakapathie Nohar<sup>3</sup> (b. 1923), a housewife originally from Durban, who moved to Plessislaer in the 1930's after she married.

Devraj Seebran<sup>4</sup> (b. 1924-d. 2014), a retired NCD Dairies worker born in Plessislaer.

Athmanand Sookraj<sup>5</sup> (b. 1937), a retired Hulacon worker, whose grandfather Dookhun Byjoo arrived in Natal from India in 1880 and was

---

<sup>2</sup> Interviewed on the 20 October 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed on the 31 July 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Interviewed on the 13 June 2014.

assigned to the Virginia Estate in Durban. After his indentureship he moved to Plessislaer in 1890 where he bought a piece of land.

Rughbeer Harkhu<sup>6</sup> (b. 1938), a retired headmaster. His grandfather Jagai Gunpath arrived in Natal from India in 1895 and worked for the Reynolds Brothers Sugar Estate in Durban. Gunpath's son, Harkhu moved to Plessislaer in 1935 where he purchased a plot of land for 45 pounds.

Jugdeesh Chedie<sup>7</sup> (b. 1943), a retired leather worker born in Plessislaer.

Nirmala Nagasar<sup>8</sup> (b. 1951), a retired school teacher born in Plessislaer.

### *Setting the Scene*

Between 1860 and 1911, some 152 184 Indians arrived from India in Natal as indentured labourers bound for work on sugar plantations. Their contracts specified that they were to work for five years for the employer to whom they were assigned; thereafter they could either re-indenture or seek work elsewhere in Natal. Another group consisted of free immigrants who arrived as traders and were called "passenger" Indians as they paid for their own passages. Although Indians were entitled to a free return passage after ten years, almost 58 percent remained in the Colony (Vahed 1999: 19). The Indians who had completed their contracts of indenture and had entered various trades and occupations were called the "free Indians".

Indians had begun to arrive in Pietermaritzburg from the early 1860s. They were attracted to the large irrigated tracts of land available in the city. A town census in 1863 revealed a total population of 4991 (3118 white, 1795 Black and 78 Indian) (Meineke & Summers 1983: 32). Some Indians were contracted to work for employers such as the Pietermaritzburg Corporation, the Natal Government Railways and Greys Hospital (Bhana & Brain 1990: 53). Some were employed as domestic workers and waiters while others grew and sold fruit and vegetables.

According to Bhana and Brain (1990:42) Pietermaritzburg was one of the more popular cities of settlement for most passenger Indians. Some settled along Church and Longmarket Streets while others used market garden plots often along streams or along the banks of the Umsindusi on which to

---

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed on the 13 June 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewed on the 29 June 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewed on the 13 June 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Interviewed on the 16 June 2014.

erect their homes (Merrett 2009: 97; Wills 1988: 39). The areas along streams and river banks were suitable for market gardening to take place. These areas were New Scotland, Pentrich and Camps Drift (Merrett 2009: 97). These were by no means habitable spaces as they often lacked running water or refuse removal facilities and were served by pit privies (Merrett 2009: 97). The early decades were characterised by virulent racist attacks against Indians. Indians were often castigated as diseased and described as living in hovels (Hiltonian 1929: 32). Maylam (1995: 25) points out that these segregationist impulses "couched in the discourse of sanitation and disease, had an underlying source which was often resentment of Indian commercial competition." This is evident in the 1930s when municipal by-laws excluded Indian hawkers of fruit from the Pietermaritzburg city centre as they were felt to be a nuisance (Merrett 2009: 98).

In the period 1910-48, Pietermaritzburg, as with other towns in South Africa, came to be increasingly segregated along racial lines (Wills 1991: 92). The 1940s were marked by heightened white agitation against alleged Indian "penetration" of predominantly white residential areas, which culminated in the passing of the "Pegging" and "Ghetto" Acts (Christopher 1992: 571). The irony is that only 16 cases of penetration were found in Pietermaritzburg as compared to 512 in Durban (Wills 1988: 39). This period was also marked by several incidents in Pietermaritzburg of assault and other discriminatory attacks on Indians by whites (Merrett 2009: 135). Jain (1999: 40) refers to these incidents as "a continuing white invective and incitement of whites against Indians."

Thus by 1950, when the GAA was first promulgated, Pietermaritzburg was already a racially divided city. White suburbs had spread out north-west and south-east from the central area, while the bulk of the African population lived outside the borough, along the Umsindusi River (Wills 1991: 93). The Indian and coloured populations were concentrated in the central area, as well as in areas such as Raisethorpe and Plessislaer (Wills 1988: 41). Within the central area, tight-knit Indian communities had evolved with a distinctive landscape of temples, schools and homes in close proximity (Wills 1991: 93). This was to be the case in Plessislaer as well, when it too developed into a townscape of its own.

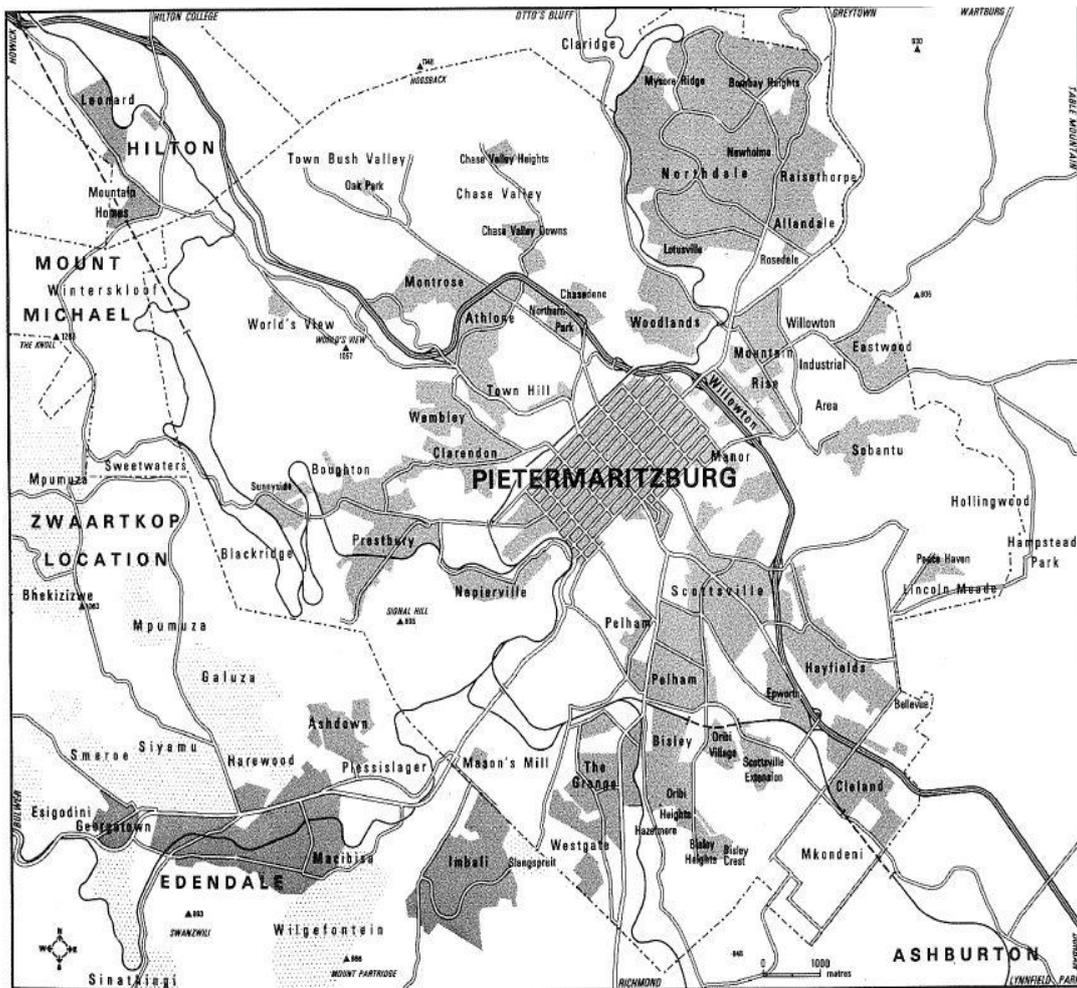


Figure 1: Pietermaritzburg and environs  
Source: Wills 1991: 91

### *Situating the Indian Community of Plessislaer*

Founded by Jan du Plessis in January 1839, Plessislaer was the name given to a valley of the Umsindusi River, about 8km outside the city of Pietermaritzburg. Plessislaer was a small district consisting of around 1478 acres (University of Natal 1951: 11). During the period under study Plessislaer fell under the control of the Local Health Commission (LHC). The LHC was established as a form of local government control over peri-urban areas and its main function was to manage, regulate and control matters affecting public health. It grew out of a need to control the overcrowding, slum and sanitary conditions prevailing in Edendale, an area adjacent to Plessislaer. Its powers were not only confined to matters of health and sanitation, as it became the local authority of Edendale and other local areas placed under its control (University of Natal 1951: 17). The LHC had certain duties in respect of providing piped water, roads, electric light facilities and housing loans (Nuttall 1984: 32). Edendale and the neighbouring districts of Plessislaer, Mount Partridge and a portion of Slangspruit came under the jurisdiction of the LHC with effect from 1 April

1942 and were proclaimed as the Edendale and District Public Health Area (EDPHA). Population wise, this area became the third largest local authority in Natal after Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

The following table illustrates the population size of EDPHA.

RACE	1936	1946
Whites	277	304
Coloureds	119	205
Indians	1283	1420
Africans	7011	12121
Total	8690	14050

Table 1: Population of EDPHA  
Source: University of Natal 1951: 31

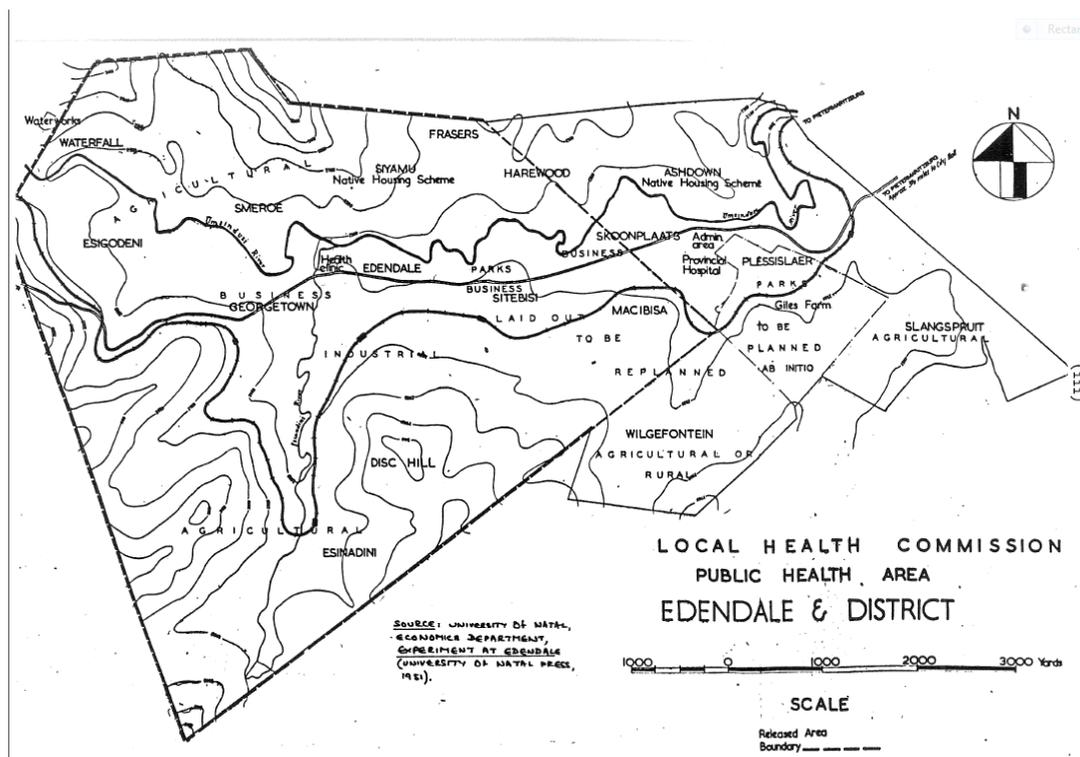


Figure 2: Edendale and District Public Health Area  
Source: University of Natal 1951

Of the urbanised districts in the EDPHA, Plessislaer contained a large proportion of Indians (University of Natal 1951: 31). According to Harkhu there were other race groups living in Plessislaer, but it was predominantly an Indian settlement. Much of the land was owned by Indians, and was rented out to other race groups. Next door to the Harkhu family lived a German man and his African wife. Residents recall Plessislaer as a place of

harmony, neighbourliness, and peaceful relations among the diverse residents. Families lived along the Willowfontein, Singh, Edendale and School Roads. These roads were not gazetted roads, but according to Harkhu the LHC put up signboards indicating road names. Singh Road was named after a prominent landowner, Hardev Singh and School Road was named as such as it was located near the Sutherlands Government- Aided Indian School (SGAIS). Nagasar remembers that there were a lot of little street lanes. One such lane was called 'Lipstick Lane' as the women living along this lane used to wear red lipstick.

The Indian community of Plessislaer was largely a Hindi-speaking one. Harkhu recalls a Moslem family – the Cassimjees, two Tamil-speaking families, and two Christian families – the Savarys and Seethals also living in Plessislaer. Residents recall that it was a close-knit group of people where everybody knew each other very well. Friends and family lived in close proximity to one another. The extended family system was a common feature. Harkhu lived with his parents, three married brothers, their wives and children. Similarly, Sookraj was initially part of an extended family of eleven adults and seventeen children. His third eldest brother, Inderjeeth, eventually moved out with his family and built himself a home in Singh Road. Seebran's family lived in two separate houses, but on the same property. The married sons and their families lived in one house, while the unmarried sons, together with their parents, lived in another.

#### *Housing, Water and Sanitation*

Parnell (1993: 473) points out that in the first half of the twentieth century both health and housing legislation were used to secure the racial division of urban space. Christopher (1992: 569) further states that there was widespread use of racially restrictive clauses in title and transfer deeds in the sale of private houses that further segregated groups. As far back as 1898, the Pietermaritzburg City Council had inserted anti-Asiatic clauses in title deeds (Maylam 1995: 27). There is evidence that between 1927 and 1941, the Pietermaritzburg City Council sold 202 sites to whites to erect houses, but only one site was sold to an Indian (Indian Penetration Commission 1941: 56). This demonstrates that well before the introduction of any racially restrictive measures, Pietermaritzburg was clearly divided along racial lines. Another blow was dealt when the implementation of the GAA further affected the acquisition of property. Giles' Farm (372 acres) in Plessislaer was acquired for the purpose of establishing an Indian housing scheme (Local Health Commission 1946: 20). However, a definite allocation of this land could not be made until the Act was implemented (University of Natal 1951: 48).

In 1941, the Natal Indian Association and the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) raised the question of the Pietermaritzburg City Council's neglect of housing

and amenities in Indian areas with the Broome Commission (Indian Penetration Commission 1941: 55) Broome visited Pietermaritzburg in February and March 1941 and acknowledged the deplorable standards of living and lack of socio-economic provision for Indians in the city (Indian Penetration Commission 1941: 55).

Most residents found the early years living in Plessislaer quite challenging due to the lack of proper housing, electricity, sanitation and water supply. All the residents initially lived in wood and iron houses. Harkhu recalls the wood and iron house that his family lived in:

There were no ceilings in the house, only the *verandah* and sitting room had cement floors while the rest of the house had mud floors which were smeared with cow dung. Food was prepared on an open fire on the floor. The kitchen, bathroom and toilet (pit system) were built outside. Some houses had water tanks as there was no running water.

Loans were made available by the LHC to individuals who wished to construct their own permanent houses. However, these loans were granted on a "hire-purchase" system and the buyer did not become an owner of his property until the transfer had taken place (University of Natal 1951: 50). This system was beset with problems from the start and proved to be a failure. Firstly, a suitable contractor could not be found by the LHC to undertake the building of houses according to approved plans (University of Natal: 1951: 50). Secondly, in 1947 there was a shortage of cement and galvanized iron products and this became so acute that housing construction came to a practical standstill (Local Health Commission 1947: 111). It is not surprising that in 1950 the LHC reported that "no non-Europeans" had been able to benefit from the scheme (Local Health Commission 1950: 4).

None of the residents' families took advantage of these loans. Those who worked in the leather industry managed to secure loans at nominal interest rates. In 1960, one of Harkhu's elder brothers, Bharath acquired a leather workers loan which he used to build a brick and tile house. According to Harkhu this was "a well-constructed, solid house and the first of its kind to be built in Plessislaer." Sookraj's uncle, Suparsad Dookran, who owned a trading store and was the principal of Mount Partridge Government-Aided Indian School (MPGAIS), offered the Sookraj family a piece of land on which to build a brick house. A leather worker's loan was also obtained by Sookraj's brother, Amirchand.

For the most part of their lives in Plessislaer, respondents' families did not have access to clean, drinkable water. Nohar recalls that her sons used to go down to the Umsindusi River and fill water in carts pulled by donkeys. The Chedie and Sookraj families used tanks to store water which was used for household chores. Chedie remembers that residents had to stand in

queues to gain access to clean running water which was via a community tap.

The washing of clothes was done in the Umsinduzi River. Harkhu recalls his families' experiences:

Twice a week were washing clothes days. My sisters together with other village girls carried their bundles of dirty laundry to the Umsinduzi River about 3 km away. Here they spent the whole day washing and drying the clothes.

Lack of clean water supplies prompted members of the community to become innovative and enterprising. Harkhu gives an account of this:

We had a large tank to collect rain water. Whenever our tanks ran dry we had clean water pumped into them. Hardev Singh was a landowner who owned large tracts of land. He pumped water from the Umsinduzi River 3 km away. He had water pipes across the Edendale Road under the railway line and up the hill to his reservoirs on his smallholding. He charged for the service...

According to Harkhu there were also some families like the Dukwahs and Lungats who sold water per drum to residents. Seebran recalls that they used to charge a shilling per drum.

A survey carried out by the University of Natal in 1948 reported that two out of three Indian households obtained water from wells; the remainder used river water (University of Natal 1951: 108). Construction of a water purification works began in 1945 and was only completed in 1948 due to the lack of cement and wartime shortages of material (University of Natal 1951: 53).

Water piping was laid along the main road from Georgetown to Plessislaer. The LHC set about establishing standpipes for communities to improve the water supply and 35 were erected in 1950 with five miles of piping, then a further 15 the following year (Dyer 2012: 114). But this appears to have been ineffective in meeting the demands of the whole population (University of Natal 1951: 53). In a letter to the Natal Witness a resident complained about the manner in which the LHC was trying to solve the water issue:

The Health Commission has, no doubt laid pipes along the Edendale Road. When taking into consideration the vast population of the Edendale Health area (16,000, I presume) one would have to scratch his head to make one believe that a six-inch water main is to meet the requirements of such a vast area!<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Natal Witness, 21 February 1949

The Harkhu family however benefitted from this as the main pipe passed along the border of their land and they were the first ones to get water.

Approximately 60 percent of dwellings in the EDPHA lacked suitable sanitary facilities (Local Health Commission 1946: 86). The pit privy type of sanitation, which was the only type in use, was considered unsatisfactory for several parts of the area because of the danger of polluted water and also because of "underground seepage which caused the pits to become flooded" (University of Natal 1951: 19). Bundhoo remembers that his family had their own septic tank built. Nagasar recalls that the pit system "was very unhygienic and definitely not suitable for women."

There was no electricity supply to Plessislaer. According to Harkhu, one had to pay Eskom for electricity poles, and only well-to-do families had electricity. Use was made of paraffin lamps which came with its own safety hazards. Seebran recalls a particularly sad event:

On Friday, shops closed late because people got paid, my second eldest brother was pumping a petrol lamp and it exploded, he was seriously burnt, and passed away the same day when World War II started.

Roads in the area were generally in a neglected state. When the LHC became the local authority for the EDPHA, the aptly named Main Road was the only all-weather road (University of Natal 1951: 19). Others were earth and gravel roads. Harkhu recalls that the roads needed grading quite often, and "in winter the roads were very dusty, and the dust was about 10cm thick." As the roads were liable to heavy erosion during storms, residents had a method of "clamping" their cars to prevent them from sliding. Harkhu reminisces:

We used to tie a chain around the wheels of the cars especially when it rained heavily. It also helped to pull the cars in case they got bogged down by the mud.

### *Economic Activities*

Residents recall living in a village type of settlement, where all the basic amenities were within walking distance from their homes. Plessislaer together with Macibise, Edendale and Georgetown were the main shopping areas in the Edendale and District area (University of Natal 1951: 86). Residents recall that there were several trading stores owned by Indians namely N. Bhoola and Co., Cassim's Trading Store, Maniraj's and J.B. Singh's Trading Store. Bhoola also owned a garage, and there was a canteen owned by the Seebrans. There was also a fish and chips shop and a takeaway. Residents recall that all their groceries, clothing and school text-books were purchased from these stores; therefore there was no need

to go into the city for supplies. Sookraj recalls that Du Plooy's Butchery sold such delicacies as sheep's head, tripe and trotters at very reasonable prices.

The main industries in the EDPHA were basket-making, wicker works and tanning. Sutherlands Tannery, which was situated in Plessislaer, was the largest in the country and produced one fifth of the country's leather output (University of Natal 1951: 80). Indians constituted more than one third of the labour force (University of Natal 1951: 81). Most of the workers were from Plessislaer and members of the Seebran, Chedie, Harkhu and Sookraj families all worked at the Sutherlands Tannery. According to Bundhoo the tannery took on more Indian workers when it was contracted to supply leather for military boots during World War II.

Many free Indians took to hawking in various parts of Natal after the termination of their indentureship (Bhana & Brain 1990: 42). Brain points out that as early as 1866, Indians had begun purchasing small plots of land in Durban and Pietermaritzburg and were very successful in supplying the local markets with fruit and vegetables (Brain 1994: 200). For some families the hawking of fruit and vegetables was the sole source of income. Harkhu's mother supported her family of ten in this manner. He recalls:

After school I used to help my mother carry her fruit and vegetables from house to house. The owner of Du Plooy's Butchery allowed her to sell her fruit and vegetables from their *verandah*, and they also stored her vegetables. She was known as "Mary Jane" by the whites and had standing orders with many white families. She also had African customers who worked at the Sutherlands Tannery.

The growing of fruit and vegetables was not solely intended for the purposes of hawking. Bundhoo recalls that their "homes were surrounded by fertile open spaces which were used for the growing of fruit and vegetables." The residents' families took advantage of the fertile soil by cultivating fruit and vegetables for their own consumption. Some even owned large farms. The Seebrans cultivated rice and maize and kept donkeys, horses, cows, rabbits and goats on their farm. Gardens were intensely worked on as Chedie remembers:

Before we went to school we had to water the gardens ... we had to take water from the nearby well... again after Hindi school we had to work in the gardens.

Others supplemented their income in various ways. Bundhoo's father sold second-hand grain bags. Seebran's mother engaged in midwifery practices. As the Edendale Hospital was a distance away, she used to help with the delivery of babies at the homes of the mothers-to-be. These nursing care practices differed from western style ones, as the women applied home remedies and used traditional bathing and massaging techniques on new-born babies.

### *Recreation*

The overall picture of the state of recreational facilities for Indians in Pietermaritzburg was one of neglect and a struggle to acquire the most basic of facilities (Merrett 2006: 162). Moreover, there was a serious lack of and disregard for civic amenities in locations where Indians resided (Indian Penetration Commission 1941: 45). When recreational facilities were provided, it was only as a temporary measure and it lacked sanitary amenities. An example of this was the African recreation ground at Masons Mill which Indians had access to, and which was close to Esther Payne Smith School (EPS). This ground lacked toilets and shelter, and water was only available from a disused connection at the school, and no effort was made to maintain it (Merrett 2006: 161).

Plessislaer lacked any form of recreational facility. Fitzsimmons Sports Ground (FSG) and the grounds of the SGAIS were used for cricket and soccer matches. Residents tried to recreate their lives in various ways. The male residents played soccer and cricket in their spare time. Durga Bundhoo, wife of Dasarath started a sewing club for women. Harkhu's brother, Ramanand founded a sporting and social club and he recalls the many activities organised by the club. Meetings and events were held weekly at the SGAIS. Some of the indoor games played were carom board, *thunee* (a card game) and table tennis. The club also held debating and quiz games and engaged in physical exercise, hiking and marathons. Marathons were run from Richmond to Pietermaritzburg as well as from Thornville to Pietermaritzburg. This youth club also fielded a strong cricket team and played league matches at the Fitzsimmons Sports Ground on Saturdays.

The failure of the local authorities to maintain and provide facilities meant that it was left to local Indians, especially the wealthy to finance projects for the benefit of working class Indians. Maintenance of the grounds at FSG was carried out by the Maritzburg Indian Sports Association (MISA) and funding was provided by the Indian merchant class (Merrett 2009: 187). White clubs on the other hand received regular and modest grants-in-aid from the local authorities to maintain facilities (Merrett 2006: 105).

The GAA had a profound effect on sport and recreation as it put a halt to any new sporting facilities or grounds requested by Indians. Because of its large membership, MISA requested for an alternate ground. This was granted but about twenty kilometres away from Plessislaer in the suburb of Northdale, which was already being demarcated for Indians.

### *Education*

There were three types of schools in Natal: government schools which were entirely provided for and controlled by the Natal Education Department;

aided schools under local committees and farm schools managed by a grantee (Hellmann & Abrahams 1949: 356). Most of the schools were run by Christian missionaries and were government-aided (Local Health Commission 1946: 65). For white children, education had been compulsory since 1910 and for Coloureds since 1942 (Burrows 1961: 39). According to Brain (1994: 210) the Indian community had to struggle long and hard to obtain a government-aided education. Education for Indians was neither compulsory nor free. Indian parents had to pay school fees and purchase books so that their children could pursue their education at government-aided schools (Kuppusamy 1987: 54).

There were only two schools catering for the general education of Indian pupils in the EDPHA. Both were government-aided. One was EPS in Pentrich, which started out as a chapel, and which catered for Indian children living in Edendale, Plessislaer and Mount Partridge. The other was the SGAIS which was founded in 1907 by missionaries and located in Plessislaer. The former was an infant's school admitting children for sub-standards and Standard I only while the latter was a primary school admitting pupils up to Standard VI. The government-aided schools were very basic but they served the purpose for which they were constructed. The SGAIS was constructed of wood and iron. Nagasar recalls that there was no water and electricity and the pit toilets left little to be desired.

Although most parents were poor and uneducated, they felt a strong desire to provide their children with an education. All the residents and some of their parents attended the SGAIS. Residents recall that they were taught subjects such as Arithmetic, Reading, Right Living and Hygiene. There were no high schools catering for Indians in Plessislaer. The Higher Grade Indian High School (HGIHS), which was situated in the lower end of Church Street, and the Pietermaritzburg Indian Girls' High School were the only high school for Indians in the greater Pietermaritzburg area. Pupils had to take public buses to reach these schools. However, scholars were given coupons which entitled them to a reduced fare.

According to Harkhu, SGAIS was renowned for its high standards of education, sport and concerts. On completion of high school, there were limited facilities to cater for university education for Indians in Natal. However, some of the children did further their education at a considerable financial sacrifice by their parents. Two of the Harkhu sons went on to become educators after completing their diplomas at the Springfield Training College in Durban. Rughbeer Harkhu went on to become a headmaster and Harilal Harkhu, an inspector of education. Nirmala Nagasar obtained a teacher's diploma from the Fordsburg Teacher Training College. The Dookran family also produced two educators: Rajkumar and Suparsad. Rajkumar was the headmaster of EPS. Suparsad Dookran was the headmaster of MPGAIS. A more affluent family, the Bhoolas, sent their children abroad to further their studies.

### *Religion*

The Indian community of Plessislaer comprised mainly Hindi-speaking Hindus. Most of the early Hindus who arrived in Natal were from the lower castes, and the form of Hinduism practiced in Natal was known as Sanathanist Hinduism, which was based on traditional beliefs and practices (Vahed 1997a: 4). As Indians had left India in the 1850s and 1860s at a time of a severe economic, social and political void, Natal's Hindus remained untouched by the various reformist movements making their mark in India since the 1870s (Vahed 1997a: 4). There were, however, a few religious leaders who visited South Africa in the early twentieth century who established various organizations to consolidate Hinduism in Natal. One of these establishments was the neo-reformist Hindu movement known as the Arya Samaj, a movement founded in India in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. A subsidiary of this society - the Plessislaer Arya Samaj was established in Plessislaer on the 30 June 1924.

Many families were ardent followers of the Arya Samaj movement, while others remained staunch Sanathanists. The main objectives of the Samaj were to propagate the Hindi language and to promote Vedic culture and to assist the poor and needy. Residents recall that religious activities were carried out at the SGAIS and on premises made freely available by certain families. According to Harkhu the Samaj held Hindi classes and weekly *satsangs* (spiritual discourses), and all the religious festivals were observed. Later a proper place of worship, the Arya Samaj Hall was built from funds raised by the community, and the Hall was officially opened on the 20 May 1950. But ten years later the GAA put an end to the efforts of this community, as the Hall had to be sold and a new location had to be found.

According to Harkhu, Christian families like the Savarys and the Seethals attended churches in the city, as there were no proper places of worship for them in Plessislaer. Harkhu remembers that one of the earlier requirements for non-Christians heading a missionary school was to convert to Christianity. Rajkumar Dookran had to change his first name to an English one but remained a staunch Hindu. The Savary and Seethal families found themselves in the same predicament. However, they remained Christian.

### *Politics*

Segregationist and apartheid legislation acted as a catalyst for residents to become politically affiliated. The NIC was active in Pietermaritzburg and drew to it several members from Plessislaer, including members of the Dookran family and Ramanand Harkhu. According to Harkhu, Ramanand's home was used as a make-shift office by Nelson Mandela and other members of the African National Congress, during the All-In Africa Conference in 1961. In the 1950s there was also a vigorous opposition campaign against the GAA in the city, and the NIC and Group Areas

Resistance Committee led by M. M. Motala were two of the many organisations that opposed the Act (Brown1988: 211; Mkhize 1998: 32).

Apartheid legislation may have divided the residents of Plessislaer by race but residents recall that the different race groups generally lived in harmony with one another. However, the 1949 Durban riots caused some racial tension between Africans and Indians. According to Vahed (1997b: 33) the riots had a significant impact on Indian consciousness and the scare and horror stories in the media increased fear and hatred. Although the residents of Plessislaer were not directly affected by any form of violence, their families undertook certain precautionary measures. The Harkhu's packed their dishes and clothes and hid them in the bushes nearby. The Sookraj's were housed in the home of a local white family for a few days. Chedie was six years old at that time, and he remembers his family being housed at the SGAIS.

After 1948 the intensification of racial discrimination in the wider society seeped into the life of this settlement. Apartheid legislation had an effect on every aspect of life. Seebran remembers:

Railway stations and butcheries had separate entrances. We couldn't enter where whites entered, whites entered through the front, we entered through the side.

Harkhu had this to say about public transport:

In buses the first 10 seats were reserved for whites, even if seats were unoccupied we had to stand.

In his autobiography *Whisperings of a Gandhi follower* Bundhoo (2006: 25) recalls an incident when he offered a white female passenger his seat on a public bus:

She looked around for a seat in the reserved area but found all full. None of the young whites obliged. So I got up and asked her to take my seat, obviously next to my wife. She refused. She demanded that my wife also vacate her seat as she could not sit next to a non-white.

### *Conclusion*

This article focused on the settlement of the Indian community of Plessislaer prior to them being forcibly removed by the GAA. It has examined the lives, struggles and achievements of this community through the voices of seven former residents. Through their voices, we see a vibrant and close-knit community bound by family, religious and cultural ties. Despite the lack of basic services and facilities and in the face of increasing racial segregation this article has shown the many endeavours made by individuals and families to rise above these challenges.

The GAA destroyed this once resilient community. For Nagasar and Chedie, the loss of the sense of community and the fragmentation of the extended family was unfathomable. Bundhoo (2006: 84) described the GAA as "the worst form of cruelty." Indian families started moving out of Plessislaer from the late 1960s. Of the relocation of Indians, the local council simply stated "it appears inevitable that this will cause much inconvenience, in the case of the Indians it appears that there will be inadequate housing to rehabilitate them in Indian areas within the specified period." (Pietermaritzburg Corporation Yearbook 1960: 50). This was just one of the many hardships that awaited these families in their new locations.

### *References*

- Bhana, S. and Brain, J. B. 1990. Setting down roots: Indian migrants in South Africa, 1860- 1911. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Bozzoli, B. 2003. The voice of the past: oral history. In: *Interviewing the women of Phokeng*. eds. Perks, R. and Thomson, A. London: Routledge, 145-156.
- Brain, J. 1994. An economic transformation: the Indian community in Natal. In: *Receded tides of empire: aspects of the economic and social history of Natal and Zululand since 1910*. eds. Guest, B. and Sellers, J. M. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 199-216.
- Broome, F. 1941. Report of the Indian Penetration Commission. Pietermaritzburg: Government Printer.
- Brown, P. and Aitchison, J. 1988. Opposing apartheid in the Pietermaritzburg region. In: *Pietermaritzburg 1838-1988: a new portrait of an African city*. eds. Laband, J. and Haswell, R. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 209-212.
- Bundhoo, D. 2006. Whisperings of a Gandhi follower. La Lucia Ridge: Carver Publishing.
- Burrows, R. 1961. Indian life and labour in Natal. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.
- Christopher, A. J. 1992. Segregation levels in South African cities, 1911-1985. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 25, 561-582.
- City of Pietermaritzburg. 1961. Pietermaritzburg Corporation Yearbook 1960/61. Pietermaritzburg: Pietermaritzburg City Council.
- Dyer, J. 2012. Health in Pietermaritzburg (1838-2008): a history of urbanisation and disease in an African city. Pietermaritzburg: Trustees of the Natal Society Foundation.
- Edwards, I. L. 1989. Mkhumbane our home: African shantytown society in Cato Manor Farm, 1946-1960. Unpublished thesis (PhD.). University of Natal.
- Hellmann, E. and Abrahams, L. eds. 1949. Handbook on race relations in South Africa. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

- Jain, P. C. 1999. *Indians in South Africa: political economy of race relations*. Delhi: Kalinga.
- Kuppusamy, C. 1987. *Pioneer footprints: growth of Indian education in South Africa, 1860-1977*. Johannesburg: Nasou.
- Maylam, P. 1995. Explaining the apartheid city: 20 years of South African urban historiography. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 19-38.
- Meineke, E. N. and Summers, G. M. 1983. *Municipal engineering in Pietermaritzburg: the first hundred years*. Pietermaritzburg: City Engineer's Department.
- Merrett, C. 2006. *Sport, space and segregation: Pietermaritzburg, 1900-1980*. Unpublished thesis (PhD.). University of Cape Town.
- Merrett, C. 2009. *Sport, space and segregation: politics and society in Pietermaritzburg*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Mkhize, S. M. 1998. *Contexts, resistance crowds and mass mobilisation: a comparative analysis of anti-apartheid politics in Pietermaritzburg during the 1950s and the 1980s*. Unpublished thesis (M.A.). University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Nuttal, T. A. 1984. *Collaboration and conflicting interests in a black community: responses to the introduction of urban local government in Edendale, Natal, 1941- 1944*. Unpublished thesis (B.A.). University of Oxford.
- Parnell, S. 1993. *Creating racial privilege: the origins of South African public health and town planning legislation*. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 471-488.
- The Hiltonian. 1929. Hilton: Hilton College.
- The Natal Witness, "Water supply at Plessislaer", 21 February 1949.
- Thomson, A. 2003. The voice of the past: oral history. In: *The oral history reader*. eds. Perks, R. and Thomson, A. London: Routledge, 21-28.
- University of Natal. Department of Economics. 1951. *Experiment at Edendale: a study of a non-European settlement with special reference to food expenditure and nutrition*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Vahed, G. 1997a. Swami Shankeranand and the consolidation of Hinduism in Natal, 1908-1913. *Journal for the Study of Religion*. 10(2), 3-33.
- Vahed, G. 1997b. The making of "Indianness": Indian politics in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s. *Journal of Natal and Zulu history*. 17, 1-36.
- Vahed, G. 1999. Control and repression: the plight of Indian hawkers and flower sellers in Durban, 1910-1948, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32 (1), 19-48.
- Wills, T. 1988. The segregated city. In: *Pietermaritzburg 1838-1988: a new portrait of an African city*. eds. Laband, J. and Haswell, R. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 33-46.
- Wills, T. 1991. Pietermaritzburg. In: *Homes apart: South Africa's segregated cities*. ed. Lemon, A. Cape Town: David Philip, 90-103.

*Reports*

Annual report of the Local Health Commission for the year 1946.  
Annual report of the Local Health Commission for the year 1947.  
Annual report of the Local Health Commission for the year 1950.

*Interviews*

Bundhoo, D. 20 October 2011.  
Chedie, J. 13 June 2014.  
Harkhu, R. 29 June 2014.  
Nagasar, N. 16 June 2014.  
Nohar, L. 31 July 2010.  
Seebran, D. 13 June 2014.  
Sookraj, A. 13 June 2014.