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**SOUTH ASIANS AND THE PROBLEM OF THE COLOR LINE:  
MIGRATION, RACE AND IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICA  
AND THE UNITED STATES**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

South Asians and the Problem of the Color Line:

Migration, Race and Identity in South Africa and the United States

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Professor Briavel Holcomb

Modern migration has resulted in the unsettlement of the identities of migrants who live, work, and struggle – for rights, opportunities, and recognition – with other populations in new national contexts. This dissertation considers the identities of South Asian migrants to South Africa and the United States, two nation-states that have been involved deeply in the creation of ideologies of race as well as regimes of racial practice. Focusing on the late 19th century to the late 20th century, I show how South Asian migrants were historically positioned within the racial hierarchies of these two societies, and how they constructed their identities in relation to racial others. I analyze contact, conflict, and cooperation between South Asians and other racial subjects in a comparative, cross-national perspective, and consider the transnational exchange of ideas that led to particular strategies of resistance. I argue that South Asian struggles in South Africa and the United States for rights and recognition resulted in a transnational

articulation of modern social movements for national liberation, civil rights, and democracy.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
CERD	Commission of Enquiry into Riots in Durban
CORE	Congress on Racial Equality
CRM	Civil Rights Movement
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FOR	Fellowship of Reconciliation
IAA	American Association
IC	Indian Committee
IMGA	International Mahatma Gandhi Association
IMPACT	Indian American Political Action Club of Hudson County
INC	Indian National Congress
IRA	Immigration Reform Act
IYAR	Indian Youth Against Racism
LA	Los Angeles
LAPD	Los Angeles Police Department
MASALA	Movement Advocating South Asian Links in America
MOWM	March on Washington Movement
MSA	Metropolitan Statistical Area
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NIC	Natal Indian Congress
NIO	Natal Indian Organization
NODIA	National Organization for the Defense of the Indian American
NOI	Nation of Islam
NP	National Party
PATH	Port Authority Trans-Hudson (Train service between New York City and New Jersey)
SAANC	South African Native National Congress
SAIC	South African Indian Congress
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
TBIA	Transvaal British Indian Association
TIC	Transvaal Indian Congress
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UIAA	United Indian American Association

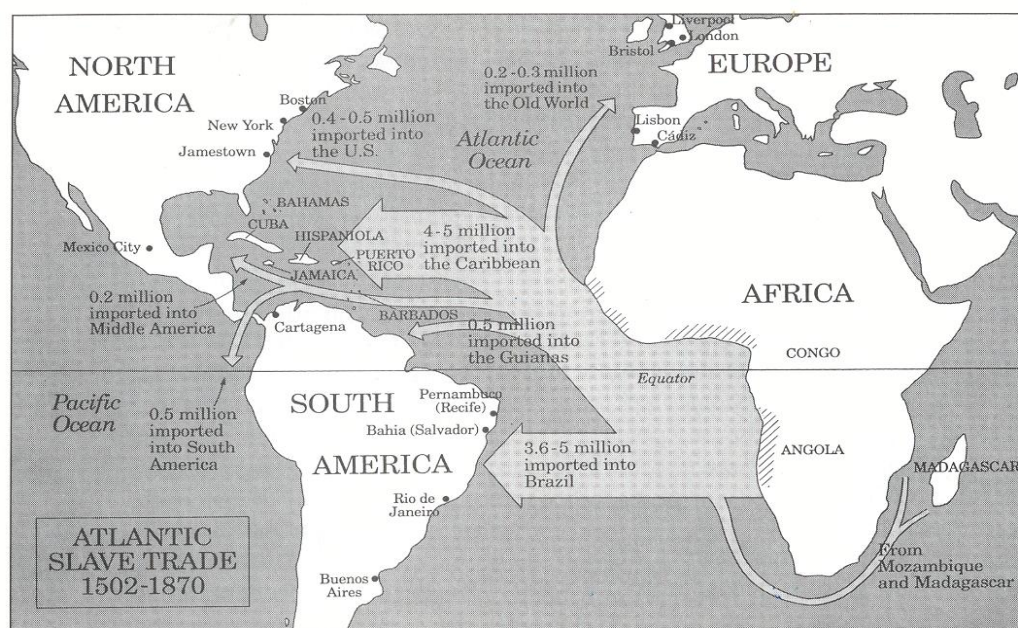
UNIA	United Negro Improvement Association
URC	Universal Races Congress
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YAR	Youth Against Racism
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The modern period is characterized by the collision of two major, possibly contradictory, forces. On one hand, the world economy was constructed by integrating vast regions, resources, and peoples into a single international division of labor since the 1500s (Wallerstein, 1991). On the other hand, this period witnessed the concurrent rise and consolidation of the nation-state (Greenfeld 1992). One of the consequences of these two developments has been the movement and resettlement of millions of people from their homelands to different parts of the world in order to meet the labor needs of capitalist production. For example, the Atlantic slave trade, the largest forced migration in history, began in the early 1500s and lasted nearly four centuries (Kelley and Lewis 2004; Franklin and Moss Jr. 1998; Conniff and Davis 1994). (See Figure 1.1) Meanwhile, various European groups settled different parts of the world in search of political freedom and economic opportunity, and in the service of empires. It was in this context that later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hundreds of thousands of South Asians migrated to colonial tea and sugarcane plantations around the world as indentured servants.

The global migration of labor not only continues into the present, but has increased so much that 1 in 35 people in the world today is an international migrant (United Nations, 2005). In her classic study on the reasons for the mobility of labor and capital, Sassen (1988:26) observes that “the use of foreign labor, whether slaves or immigrants, has been a basic tendency in the development of industrial economies ...



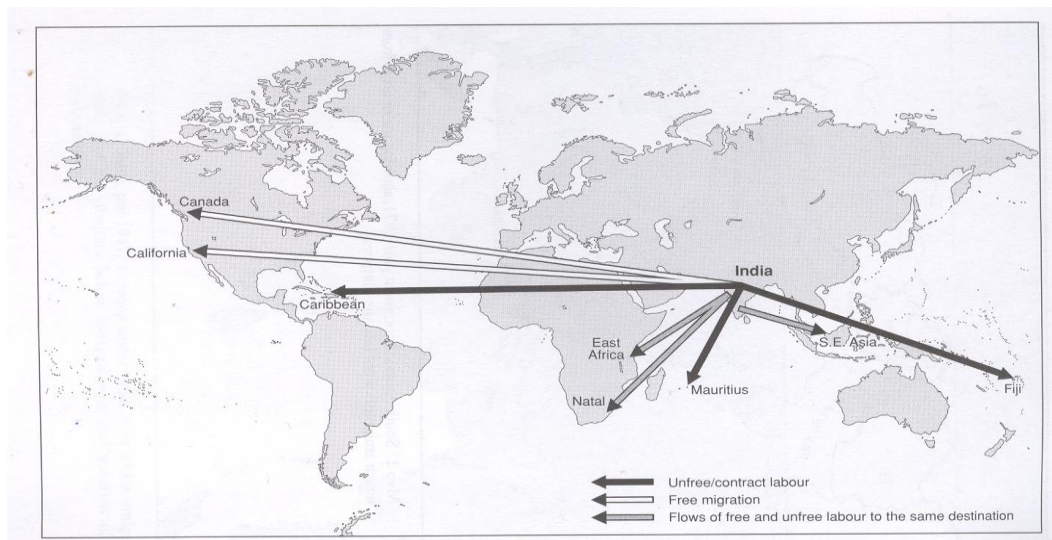


**Figure 1.1: The Atlantic Slave Trade**  
**Source:** Kelley and Lewis (2004: 22)

A central precondition for the realization of the surplus-generating possibilities of a geographic location is the formation of a politically and economically suitable labor supply.” Yet, the global migration of labor is not characterized entirely by free flows between locations; it is negotiated within and mediated by an international system of states bound by national sovereignty as well as territorial boundaries. Nation-states historically have established and enforced the legal and cultural criteria for citizenship. These criteria are under duress as nation-states experience the impact of unprecedented levels of international migration in response to labor demands resulting from globalization. One consequence of intensified migration has been the unsettlement of the identities of migrants, which are called into question as migrants live, work, and struggle for rights, opportunities, and recognition with other populations in new national contexts.

In these times of mobility and flux, nation-states, citizens, migrants, and capital are jostling for the power to arrest the meanings and limits of sovereignty, identity, and citizenship, and space.

Global South Asian migration during the modern period has occurred in two distinct phases and different historical contexts. The first phase was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the colonial period, in which large numbers of South Asians, mostly from areas that are now part of India, were recruited to work as indentured laborers on sugar and tea plantations in mainly British colonies around the world. A small number of South Asians also migrated to those colonies in search of opportunity as petty traders (Bates, 2001; Singh 1987). (See Figure 1.2)

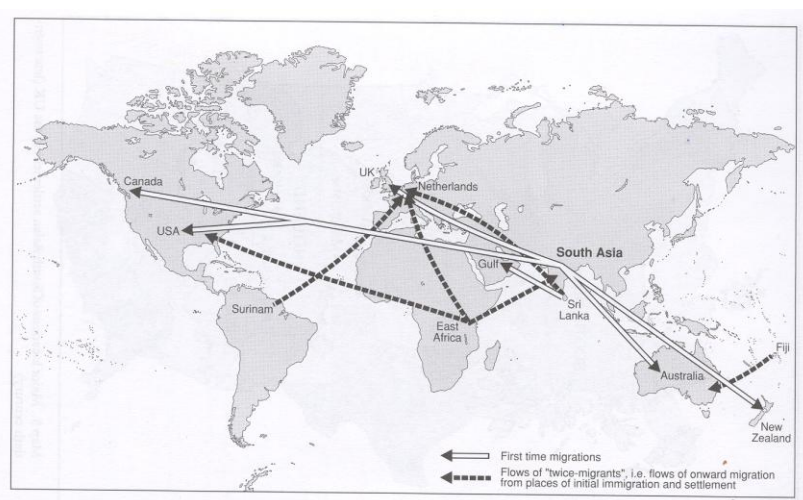


**Figure 1.2:** Flows of Migrants from India before 1947

**Source:** Brown 2006: xii

The second phase of South Asian migration began in 1947 after Indian independence. Millions of South Asians voluntarily migrated to the West and the Middle East to work in a variety of occupations, ranging from domestic labor (especially in the Middle East) to

highly skilled professionals (in the West) (Abella, 1995; Pradhan1996; Appleyard 2001; Lal et al 2006). (See Figure 1.3).



**Figure 1.3:** Flows of South Asian first-time migrants and twice-migrants after 1947  
**Source:** Brown 2006: xiii

These flows of people from the South Asian subcontinent have created a large diaspora, estimated at around 30 million, that has settled on every continent. Although this number is smaller than other diasporas (for example, the Chinese diaspora is estimated at 40 million and the African diaspora numbers 140 million in the Western hemisphere alone) the South Asian diaspora is characterized by great socio-cultural and economic diversity. Drawing from all nations of South Asia, it represents over half a dozen religions, and at least twenty-five linguistic communities. It is also characterized by great inequality, with some of the wealthiest and poorest people in the world (Clarke et al 1990, Parekh 1993; Rai and Reeves 2008).

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Historically, the United States and South Africa have been two major destinations in global South Asian migration. Until the mid-1980s, South Africa's 1.3 million people of South Asian descent constituted the largest population to settle overseas from the South Asian subcontinent. This count is now surpassed by the number of South Asians in the United States. States have played a central role in shaping the migration and settlement process, as well as the identities of emerging diasporas after settlement. In both South Africa and the United States, states have been involved deeply in the creation of ideologies of race as well as regimes of racial practice through various modes of social engineering. In both societies, the fact that the state has constructed, manipulated, and enforced structural patterns of racial thought and practice, have resulted in projects such as slavery, segregation, and domination, for instance. The historian George Frederickson (1982: xi-xii) notes that:

More than the other multi-racial societies resulting from the 'expansion of Europe' that took place between the sixteenth century and the twentieth, South Africa and the United States (most obviously the southern United States during the era of slavery and segregation) have manifested over long periods of time a tendency to push the principle of differentiation by race to its logical outcome – a kind of *Herrenvolk* society in which people of color, however numerous or acculturated they may be, are treated as permanent aliens or outsiders.

The similarities between the South African and the American experiences of racism and white supremacy have generated a large body of scholarship (Rivers 2008; Cock and Bernstein 2002; Marx 1998; Frederickson 1995; Cell 1989). However, these studies have

focused almost exclusively on the black-white axis of race relations. As a consequence, the South Asian presence in these two societies, although much researched, has been approached mostly as a subject in and of itself, and seldom considered in relation to other groups. When it is situated within a racial discourse, the South Asian presence is usually studied in one of three ways: in relation to white society as the primary reference point; within and in terms of existing black-white relations as an instance or a subset of those relations; or regarded as marginal to the black-white racial binary.

For example, in South Africa, there are a number of historical studies on South African “Indians” (as people of South Asian origin are called in South Africa, and call themselves) which focus on their conditions of employment and economic position their new homeland (Pachai 1971; Meer 1969; Kuper 1960). There is some scholarship dedicated to the cultural and religious life of Indians in South Africa, which is concerned with family organizations, kinship structures, religious beliefs, and struggles for cultural recognition (Pillay 1983; Pachai 1971; Klass 1961; Benedict 1961). There is also a series of works on the political behavior of Indians in South Africa (Hansen 2012; Meer 1970). Within the geographic literature, Anthony Lemon’s (2008; 1990; 1987; 1976) meticulous research on Indian settlement patterns in South Africa, and as well as the challenges facing the Indian community in the sphere of education, is an indispensable resource. Brij Maharaj’s (1997; 1996; 1994; 1992) ground-breaking research shows how the Group Areas Act, one of the pillars of grand apartheid, was based on segregation policies aimed at Indians as a “race” at the urban scale in Durban. Maharaj’s work is comparable to that of John Western (1996) on the impact of the Group Areas Act on people of mixed racial ancestry in Cape Town. However, with the exception of these and a few other works

(Desai 2002; Ebr-Vally 2001), nearly all studies of South Asians in South Africa are couched in terms of and predicated on the primacy of black-white race relations in that society.

Work on South Asian migration to and settlement in the US has followed a pattern similar to that of scholarship on South African Indians. The majority of this literature concentrates either on the internal affairs of the South Asian community and/or its interactions with white society. Joan Jensen's *Passage From India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (1988), for example, offers a comprehensive analysis of South Asian migration to the US at the turn of the twentieth century, with a focus on the immigrants' struggle to find a political and cultural space in their new country. In the epilogue of the book, Jensen briefly comments on the increase in South Asian migration to the US following the passage of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, but does not engage in analysis of the post-1965 period. Also, neither South Asian interactions with other racial minorities, nor the process of their own racialization in relation to these groups are explored in the work.

In the humanities, the volume *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (1996) brought together several first and second generation South Asian writers who used a multiplicity of genres such as essays, interviews, poetry, photographs, and short fiction to question the idea of a stable, monolithic "South Asian" identity. However, the term is fundamentally undefined in the work and is critiqued only nominally. The authors do not interrogate the historic and political processes that resulted in the creation of the term "South Asian"; nor do they offer another term in its place,

thereby leaving South Asians curiously “unmapped” in North American geographies. Sandhya Shukla’s book, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Post-War America and England* (2003) explores the relationship between India and its diasporas in the United States and England, respectively. Looking at two Indian communities in Southall, London, and Jackson Heights, New York, respectively, Shukla combines ethnography with an analysis of movies, cultural festivals and various print media to understand the culture and politics of Indian diasporas. However, except for brief mention of the “Dotbuster” violence in Jersey City, Shukla’s work concentrates mostly on internal cultural issues within the respective diasporas, and their transnational linkages to India.

In sum, the existing scholarship on South Asian migration to the US and South Africa may be grouped under five categories: It 1) interrogates South Asian identity; 2) examines cultural and political issues within South Asian communities; 3) enumerates South Asian immigrants’ contributions to their adopted homelands; 4) traces transnational linkages between diasporas and countries of origin; or 5) describes South Asian relations with dominant white society. One significant gap in the literature is the fact that seldom have inquiries been made into how South Asians have interacted with racial subjects other than white in societies characterized by racial hierarchies and white dominance. Specifically, there is little understanding of how the “South Asian” identity and presence is itself constituted and represented in relation to the powerful black-white racial axis in such societies, except for a few works since the 1990s that have tried to move the discourse on South Asians toward such inquiry. Karen Leonard’s *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (1992) traces the life courses of male Punjabi laborers to California after their arrival in the US at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. Many of these men married Mexican-American women, creating a new hybrid identity in parts of California. In *Raising Up a Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi* (1992), Sudarshan Kapur offers a perspective on how African-Americans, through Martin Luther King, Jr., entered into and participated in a transnational discourse of resistance with Gandhi, but the work focuses nearly exclusively on these two individuals. As a result, the book presents a chronological view of this interaction which, while useful, provides little analysis of the transnationalism that spanned the decades between Gandhi's activism and that of King. On the other hand, Vijay Prashad, another noted author who has written on the exchange between African Americans and South Asians, identifies numerous connections between the two groups. In his books, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000) and *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting* (2001), Prashad is careful to tease out a few key themes rather than follow a timeline. His wide focus, however, does not afford closer inspection of some of the key exchanges and interactions that shape identity or political choice. Similarly, Gerald Horne's *The End of Empires* (2008) chronicles the many encounters between African Americans and South Asians, and breaks new ground in identifying the breadth of influences on African American thought, history, and activism. However, Horne concentrates on conversations between anti-imperialism and anti-racism in the period before Indian independence in 1947. In *Colored Cosmopolitanisms: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (2012), Nico Slate expands on Horne's analysis and examines instances of solidarity and convergence between the struggles against colonialism in India and racial oppression in the United States. However, neither Slate nor Horne consider the process of racialization or the period after the 1965 immigration reforms.



This dissertation aims to address these gaps by extending these inquiries in the following ways: 1) It investigates two national contexts, the United States and South Africa. As far as I am aware, this dissertation is the first manuscript-length treatment to offer this perspective. 2) Whereas scholars such as Horne and Slate identify instances of solidarity between South Asians and African Americans, they do not interrogate how those respective identities are racialized in the first place. For example, “South Asian” identity is unexplained in these works, or collapsed under the ubiquitous signifier “Indian.” Similarly, the meanings of “African,” “African-American,” and “Black” are taken to be understood. As a consequence, contemporary scholars have not questioned how a racialized South Asian identity is constructed and mobilized within particular national contexts as part of struggles for citizenship, rights, and resources, on one hand, and vis-à-vis other subjects, who are themselves racialized. My work aims to fill this lacuna. 3) Furthermore, existing works focus on the period from the early 1900s to the 1960s. While these decades are important to understanding the relationships being formed between South Asians and other racial subjects, in South Africa and in the United States, I believe that a discussion of more recent events would offer a more longitudinal perspective and possibly enrich our understanding of these relationships. For example, existing scholarship offers scant analysis of large-scale South Asian migration to the US following the 1965 immigration reforms, or their subsequent relations with communities other than white. This study extends the analysis into the remainder of the twentieth century. 4) Existing works do not probe into conflict between South Asians and other racial subjects. This dissertation offers a view into two instances of conflict in two national contexts – the 1949 Riots in Natal, South Africa, and the “Dotbuster” violence of

the 1980s in Jersey City in the United States – in which South Asians were victimized.

The implications of this conflict for our understanding of race, and the relations that stem from race, are pondered in this study.

In light of these lacunae in the literature, my research questions are framed as follows:

- 1) How did South Asian migrants become racialized within two national contexts, South Africa and the United States? How did they construct and negotiate their identities and politics in relation to other racialized subjects within these societies?
  
- 2) What dialogues, exchange of ideas, and forms of cooperation have precipitated from South Asians' interactions with other racialized subjects, within these two national contexts, and transnationally? How have South Asian struggles for rights and recognition articulated with movements for rights and citizenship in general, in the United States and South Africa?
  
- 3) What conflict has there been between South Asians and other racialized subjects, in South Africa and the United States, and what were the causes of the conflict?

This dissertation is part of an emerging literature that seeks to investigate South Asians' relations with other racial and ethnic minorities in societies that have been shaped by white hegemony. I extend the existing scholarship in a previously unexamined manner, by inquiring into how racial regimes based on white dominance have racialized different groups and have yielded bilateral power relations between whites and non-

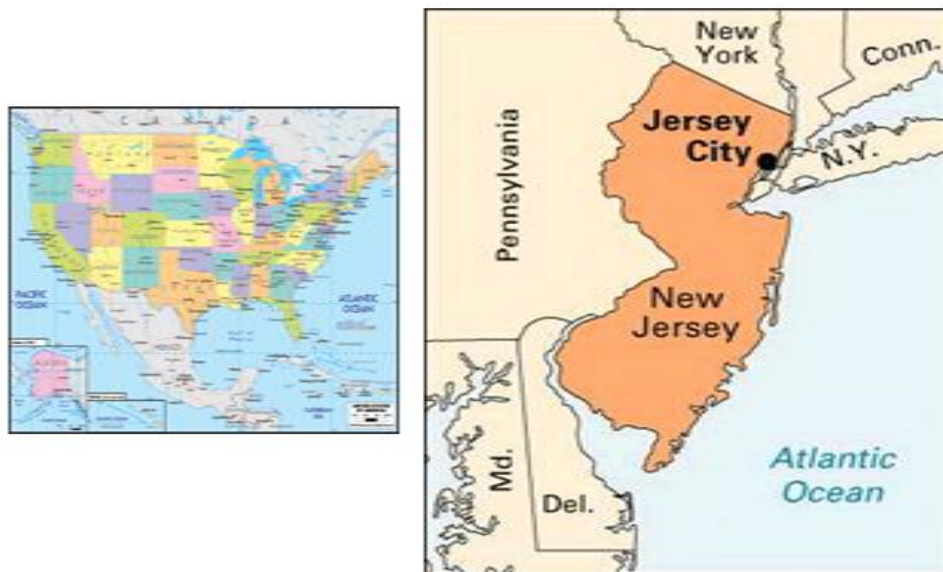
whites, on one hand, and multilateral power relations among subordinate groups. These power relations have also shaped a discourse, which informs those relations in a dialectical fashion. Historically, as the balance of power has shifted between bilateral and multilateral relations between groups, the positionalities of racialized subjects have also shifted in relation to one another. This study explores these shifting relations and positionalities as they pertain to South Asians and other racialized subjects in South Africa and the United States. Specifically, the dissertation will argue that the identities of and interactions between South Asians and other racialized subjects in South Africa and the United States derive from their shifting positionalities with respect to each other and white society. These positionalities themselves, I argue, result from the dialectical process of racialization, on one hand, and the balance of power between bilateral and multilateral forms of relations vis-à-vis dominant elites in these societies. I find that these dynamics have yielded dialogue and cooperation between subordinate groups at times, but also conflict as the balance of power shifts. As the pendulum shifts away from multilateral modes of racial interaction and toward bilateral modes, subordinate groups tend to adopt dominant representations of other subordinate groups in order to strengthen their own bilateral relations with ruling elites. On the other hand, ruling elites may uphold and/or manipulate their bi-lateral relations with subordinate groups in order to weaken and dissolve any multi-lateral relations that may disrupt the existing order. The dissertation will show that in South Africa and in the United States, the assertion of the black-white racial binary, a dominant bilateral mode of interaction in these two societies, resulted in the representation of South Asians as a “menace” or “middle-men,” followed by their exclusion from the binary. Such exclusions have served to position South Asians

in a triangular relationship with respect to the poles of the binary. The fact that South Asians are differently racialized, and perceive themselves as such, reinforces this position, which further informs political choices at all three points of the triangle. In South Africa and the United States, the disturbance of the binary by triangulation has led to conflict at times, as seen in the two cases studied in this dissertation. The dissertation concludes that not only are racial binaries inadequate for understanding the South Asian experience in multi-racial contexts, but also that racial binaries, as a form of bilateral relations, can serve to undermine multilateral alliances that may be based on common interests.

The two instances of violent conflict between South Asians and other racial groups explored in this study took place in Durban, South Africa, and Jersey City, USA, respectively. Durban (see Figure 1.4) is a city of the global South. Historically an outpost of the British colonial economy in South Africa, the city is currently home to two-thirds of South Africa's 1.3 million "Indians" (South Asians). Until recently, Durban had the largest concentration of South Asians outside of the Subcontinent, but that number is surpassed now by the New York metropolitan area. An important site of resistance to white supremacy since colonial times, Durban was where Mohandas Gandhi first tested *satyagraha*, his strategy of non-violent resistance to imperial and racial domination. It is also where the apartheid government first tested and implemented its systematic racial segregation policy. Durban was the site of the 1949 riots, a major episode of conflict



**Figure 1.4:** Location of Durban  
 Source: <http://world-guides.com>



**Figure 1.5:** Location of Jersey City.  
 Source: <http://www.britannica.com>

between Indians and Africans in South Africa's history. On the other hand, Jersey City (see Figure 1.5) has long been a "gateway" for immigrants in the greater New York area, and is New Jersey's second most populous city. Starting with the Dutch in the 1600s, Jersey City has been populated by successive waves of immigrants from western Europe, followed by Catholics and Jews from the 1900s onwards. However as immigrants from the developing world, South Asians among them, began to settle in Jersey City after 1965, racial tensions began to surface, and were directed at Asian Americans. South Asians were targeted for vandalism, harassment and violent attacks in Jersey City and neighboring areas during the 1980s as part of that trend. In sum, through an analysis of both conflict as well as cooperation, the dissertation seeks to problematize the dominant racial binaries that inform current literature on South Asian relations with other racialized groups.

## NOTE ON SOURCES

I consulted an eclectic array of sources in this study, such as newspapers, government documents, legal proceedings, oral histories and memoirs, documentaries, as well as works of literature. I make extensive use of a variety of newspapers that offered different perspectives. For South Africa, I drew heavily on Gandhi's circular, *Indian Opinion*, to understand the challenges faced by the South African Indians at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Indian Opinion*, launched on June 4, 1903, is often identified as the first

Indian newspaper in South Africa, but it is in fact preceded by *Indian World*, a short-lived publication established by the Indian journalist, P.S. Aiyar. *Indian World* was in print from 1898 to 1901. I also draw on a few newspapers dedicated to different African communities, some of which also preceded *Indian Opinion*. For example, John Dube, the founding president of the African National Congress and a contemporary of Gandhi, established *Ilanga Lhase Natal*, a Zulu community newspaper, in April 1903. The *Ilanga Lhase Natal* periodically carried reports on Indian-African interactions in the province of Natal, where the majority of Indians lived.

Other newspapers I consult operated from elsewhere in South Africa. *Imvozaba*, founded by John Tengo Jabavu, and *Izwi La Bantu*, both aimed at African audiences, and circulated in the Eastern Cape. In addition, I searched newspapers with predominantly white readerships in South Africa, which also covered issues pertaining to Indians, from another perspective. *The Natal Witness*, which was first published in February 1846 and is South Africa's oldest continuously published newspaper, and *The Natal Mercury*, founded in 1852, are two newspapers serving white audiences. Both newspapers reported on Indian immigration, indentured labor, and Gandhi's activism. I also consulted *The London Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* for international news coverage on Indian affairs in South Africa. *The Leader*, *Indian Views*, and *The Passive Register* were established after *Indian Opinion* and served various sections of the Indian community.

Similarly, the United States portion of this dissertation required the consultation of a variety of sources. In researching the question pertaining to dialogue and cooperation

between South Asians and other racial groups, I made extensive use of African American newspapers such as *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, and *The Amsterdam News*, among others, which enjoyed widespread circulation and appeal, and dedicated a number of articles to international issues in Asia and Africa. With respect to the conflict in Jersey City, I used Ethnic Newswatch, Lexis Nexis, and other online indices to get as comprehensive a picture as possible of South Asian migration to New Jersey as well as the violence experienced by South Asians in the 1980s and 1990s. *The Jersey Journal*, published six days a week, (Monday to Saturday) and serving the greater Jersey City area, offered extensive coverage of the attacks on South Asians in the region. However, since the publication was not indexed for the period that I was researching, I combed through each issue on microfilm, manually, for a twenty-year period, in order to understand long-term changes in the Jersey City area and to situate the attacks against South Asians. I also perused alternative, community-based publications, such as *India Abroad*, in order to gain further insight into my research questions. Finally, in addition to print media, I consulted websites and blogs, viewed TV programs which covered South Asian issues and interests, and talked to individuals who had first-hand knowledge of the events in Jersey City and Durban.

I also made wide use of government and legal documents in this study. In the South African context, I searched ship records, petitions to own property, and indenture forms in order to construct a composite socio-cultural and political profile of Indians and their relationships with other groups. Furthermore, the colonial governments of South Africa and India had established a number of commissions to examine the indentured labor system and investigate the complaints of exploitation and mistreatment experienced



by Indian indentured laborers in Natal. Although I am aware of their limitations as official narratives – as Foucault (1979) cautions, official accounts are vehicles for dominant truths – I nevertheless consulted the reports of these commissions, and found them useful, particularly because they contained transcripts of testimonies (for example, the report on the 1949 Riots, analyzed in chapter 5). I consulted these first-person accounts in conjunction with other sources in order to gain an understanding of the issues under investigation. In my analysis, I compare and contrast the conclusions of the commissions with the testimonies themselves, and cross-examine official narratives against newspaper accounts.

Government reports also informed my analysis of the United States case. As migration to the United States increased after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, Asians in general, including South Asians, were subjected to bigotry and violence (discussed in chapters 6 and 7). In response, various levels of government, from the municipal to the federal, conducted hearings and issued reports on the civil rights violations against Asian-Americans in the 1980s. In November 1987, the House of Representatives Sub-Committee on Civil and Constitutional Rights held a hearing on anti-Asian violence in the aftermath of Vincent Chin's killing in Detroit (discussed in chapter 7). In 1992, the United States Commission on Civil Rights released a report on civil rights issues facing Asian-Americans in the decade ahead. I drew upon these and a number of other government publications in order to contextualize and analyze the violence against South Asians. I also made extensive use of legal documents such as court transcripts, judgments, law suits, legal filings, police reports, affidavits, as well as legal analysis, in order to understand what transpired during the "Dotbuster" violence in

Jersey City. In addition to the above-mentioned material, I researched online indices such as *HeinOnline* and *Westlaw*, which enabled me to get a sense of the legal debates surrounding the violence.

The New York Public Library was a valuable resource for many of the sources described above, as was the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research unit of The New York Public Library containing a wealth of materials documenting the life, history, and culture of peoples of African descent. Sources pertaining to South Asians in the United States are housed at Rutgers University Libraries and at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The remainder of the material discussed above, especially information pertaining to Gandhi and Indian-African relations in South Africa was obtained from the Gandhi-Luthuli Center of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa. Previously known as the Documentation Center of the University of Durban-Westville, the Center was originally established under apartheid as an archive of the history and culture of the South African Indian community. It was attached to the University of Durban-Westville, a segregated institution of higher education for Indians. The Center subsequently changed its name to the Gandhi-Luthuli Center as an expression of the Indian Community's outreach and solidarity with Africans against apartheid and an expansion of its original mission by documenting Indian and African unity in the Kwa-Zulu Natal region.

In my analysis, I examine the structured circumstances within which interactions between South Asians and other groups occur, and seek to grasp the lived experiences of the communities within that context. Edward Schatz (2009) notes that

there are two ways of understanding lived experience: 1) one can be “neck-deep” in the subject matter of the area/issue under investigation; or, 2) one can have an “ethnographic sensibility,” in which lived experience is seen as inseparable from political and economic issues. In this work, I take the second approach to understanding the South Asian experience with other groups. I have tried to be attentive to the micro-politics of the lived experience in the areas under study by drawing on oral history archives, memoirs, and biographical writings.

Additionally, literature gave me a “feel” for the life histories and cultures that shaped the events and concerns explored in this dissertation. Through literature, I got a glimpse into the ideas and concerns of the communities under study, as imagined and represented by themselves; literature contains observations, real or imaginary, about life, and conveys emotions, memories or impressions pertaining to people, places, things, or ideas. As such, notes literary critic Edward W. Said in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), literature is worldly, and is the product of specific temporal, spatial, and political moments in peoples’ lives as they struggle, with each other as well as themselves, over meanings, possessions, and memories. The same may be said for the films I viewed for this study. Metaphor and materiality are inseparable, as Neil Smith (1992:7) has noted; there is “a very complex involvement of both real and imagined geographies in questions relating to identity.” In *The City and the Country* (1973), Raymond Williams explores the relationship between the text and the lived experience of “place.” The contested nature of place, for Williams, have to do with struggles over belonging, shaping and naming. Furthermore, for Williams, that fact that “place” functions in the text as the setting for economic production and reproduction, cannot be overlooked; it is part of the social and

imagined geographies of human beings as they seek to define themselves, their contexts, and themselves within those contexts. Tilley (1994:33) offers the corollary that places themselves may be “read” as texts:

Places, like persons, have biographies in as much as they are formed, used, and transformed in relation to practice...stories acquire part of their mythic value and historical relevance if they are rooted in the concrete details of locales in the landscape, acquiring material reference points that can be visited, seen and touched.

The stories that we tell and hear, and the manner in which we do so are bound up with how and where we live. The same could be said for the images we produce and consume. Questions of text and context, identity and place, representation and meaning, have been major preoccupations of the geographic imagination. I have kept them in mind in this exploration of where South Asians “belong” in relation to others.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

Following this introduction, which is Chapter One, Chapter Two overviews the major theories of migration, identity formation, and social relations that inform this work.

Chapter Three examines the circumstances that led to the introduction of South Asian (Indian) indentured labor in the British colony of Natal, South Africa, and their incorporation into that society’s emerging racial hierarchy and system of segregation. The chapter overviews the critical role played by Indian indentured labor in the development of Natal and describes the challenges faced by Indians upon their arrival, given the

nascent politics of racial identity in that colony. Early instances of the triangulation of Indians, Africans, and Whites, are identified.

Chapter Four traces how Indians in South Africa tried to survive economically as they transitioned from indenture to free labor. The chapter also follows their politics during this period of transition, focusing on how they reacted to and fought against discriminatory policies directed at them by the colonial legislature. Particular attention is paid to the formative role played by Mohandas Gandhi in shaping the community's political activism in a deeply hostile environment. Finally, the chapter considers the positionalities of Indians, who found themselves situated between a militarily, politically, and economically powerful White settler minority, on one hand, and a numerically powerful African majority on the other hand.

Chapter Five examines the socio-economic and political developments that impacted Indian-African relations after Gandhi's departure from South Africa. It describes how pressures from urbanization, access to land and housing, and struggles over transportation as mediated by the White government, all affected interactions between Indians and Africans from the 1920s onwards, sometimes resulting in cooperation across the racial divide. I trace how tensions emanating from these pressures finally erupted into riots between Indians and Africans in the Cato Manor area of Durban in 1949. The chapter will show that the riots were neither isolated, nor simply orchestrated by the white government. They were neither expressions of "inborn" antagonisms between Indians and Africans, as the government claimed, nor a spontaneous and inexplicable disruption of their otherwise harmonious co-existence.

Instead, the chapter argues, the riots resulted from the differential racialization and incorporation of Indians and Africans into the South African social formation, and fueled by anti-Indianism among both Whites and Africans that aimed to prevent Indians from laying claim to a “South African” identity, citizenship, and resources.

Chapter Six discusses the racialization of South Asians in the United States, and how their presence problematizes the dominant Black-White binary through which race relations in the US has traditionally been understood. Beginning with a discussion of South Asian migration to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the chapter traces how entitlement to citizenship emerged as a terrain of struggle for South Asians in the United States as official racial categorization based on an existing racial binary became the basis for their exclusion. Although a series of discriminatory laws dramatically reduced the number of South Asians entering the US from 1920 to 1965, they were nevertheless part of a vibrant transnational discourse among activists worldwide who were fighting for civil rights, racial equality, and independence from colonialism. The chapter then turns to the South Asian influence on American social movements, particularly through transnational exchanges, activism, political ideas, and methods of resistance used to destabilize bilateral relationships stemming from racism and imperialism. Key intellectual and political figures, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Mohandas Gandhi, and Marcus Garvey are considered, alongside the impact of the Indian independence struggle on African-American mobilizations for civil rights in the United States. The third and final section of Chapter Six examines the racialization and positioning of South Asians as “middlemen” and “model minorities” in the US racial hierarchy after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. This legislation had the effect of

slowing the national momentum for social change that had been set in motion by (a) the forces of transnational solidarity, (b) the Civil Rights movement, and (c) urban unrest discussed earlier in the chapter. Successive re-positionings of South Asians, the chapter argues, are signaled by their shifting racialized representations – initially as villains and subversives, subsequently as heroes after 1965, and once again as villains, within such stereotypes as the “Yellow Peril,” “Hindoo Menace,” “middleman,” and “model minority,” all of which fulfill Orientalist tropes of South Asians as an “other” in American society and serve to locate them outside the racial binary they seek to contest.

Chapter Seven offers a closer examination of the post-1965 period in the United States, focusing on racial violence against South Asians during the 1980s in and around Jersey City as a culmination of the process of “othering” and “exclusion” described in the previous chapter. The chapter considers the escalating sentiment of anti-Asianism and bigotry after 1965 in relation to the demographic and economic restructuring of Jersey City during this period. These two developments set the stage for violence against South Asians in the Jersey City area in the 1980s. After describing the attacks against South Asians, the chapter tracks South Asian mobilization for protection and representation under the law, which could not determine that they had been attacked on the basis of their “race.” The violence revealed not only the social and political inertia experienced by South Asians in obtaining protection, representation, and justice under the American law for their civil rights violations; it underscored their externalized political positioning in American society with respect to the dominant racial binary.

Chapter Eight offers some concluding remarks.

## **CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUALIZING SOUTH ASIAN MIGRATION AND IDENTITY – SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A defining feature of modernity, according to historian Eric Hobsbawm (1987), is the creation of a single global economy progressively reaching into the most remote corners of the world. During the modern period, a dense network emerged that not only linked countries and people together in unprecedented ways, but made them more interdependent than ever before. Concomitant with deepening economic relations and communications under the globalization of capitalism is the massive dislocation of populations across the globe, such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, European migration to colonial outposts, and the indenture labor system whereby South Asians and others were dispersed to various parts of the world in large numbers. Migration has often been prompted by the search for better economic opportunities, but also by persecution or displacement due to conflict. In other cases, populations were made to move involuntarily in order to meet capitalist production's increasing demand for cheap labor.

This chapter examines some major theories that explain migration in the late modern period. First, some classic theories are overviewed. The second part of the chapter critiques classical theories by arguing that while they explain migration, they do not deal with how migrants are incorporated into their host societies. This section pays particular attention to the politics of exclusion and racial identity formation that have accompanied migration and settlement. South Africa and the United States are briefly



introduced as national contexts in which South Asians have interacted with other racialized communities. The third and final section explores how the discourses of transnationalism and diaspora have impacted scholarship on migration more recently. Other themes that inform this study are also highlighted.

## **TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF MIGRATION**

International migration traditionally has been explained in terms of “push” and “pull” factors as theorists have emphasized the role of “macro” and “micro” economic forces in stimulating migration. “Macro-level” theorists stress factors such as differences in wages and levels of economic development that “push” people from places of lower economic potential to more developed areas. “Micro-level” theorists however, regard migrants as rational actors who are “pulled” toward economic opportunity (Lee 1966; Demko 1970; Du Toit and Safa 1973; Willis 1974; Lewis 1982; Clark 1986; Fawcett 1989). By the 1960s, the push/pull framework was criticized as simplistic. In an important article, Thistlewaite (1964:84) wrote, “Although it is a truism that 19<sup>th</sup> century emigration was predominantly economic in motivation, in the older conceptual framework the actual economic determinants were very vaguely formulated. One was presented with a laundry list of push/pull factors.” Thistlewaite called for increased attention to the country of origin and emphasized the interconnectedness of regional systems, such as the Atlantic, in explaining migration to the Americas, for example.

Similarly, John and Beatrice MacDonald (1964:82) argued that “migration is patently more complex than that merely mechanical reshuffling of heads which is assumed by crude economic push-pull models.” The MacDonalds emphasized “chain migration” instead, and the ways in which “prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relations with previous migrants.” Such criticisms precede some of the current research on migration, which emphasize transnational linkages and social networks.

Around the late 1960s and early 1970s, theorists began to view migration in relation to structural imbalances between developing and developed countries. Two major views to emerge from this shift in perspective are segmented labor market theory and the dependency/world systems approach. Piore’s (1979) work, influential within segmented labor market explanations of migration, argued that certain intrinsic characteristics of capitalist economies, such as structural inflation, constraints on workers’ economic mobility, and economic duality, generate opportunities for low-skilled workers primarily in the informal labor markets of receiving countries. Glaser (1978) examined the migration of highly skilled migrants from developing to developed countries by combining the segmented labor market approach with dependency theory. He argued that unequal patterns of population movement exacerbated developing countries’ dependency upon the developed. Both perspectives emphasized that structural economic inequality caused migration to areas of economic opportunity.

More recent scholarship on migration (Bodemann and Yurdakul 2006; Benmayor and Skotnes 2005; Faist 2000; Massey et al 1998) has drawn on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital to explain how migration is perpetuated even when there are no apparent push or pull factors. Massey et al (1998), for example, show that each new migrant adds to a web of interpersonal ties, or "migrant networks," both at home and in host countries, which facilitate and mediate migration by providing social capital in the form of information to potential migrants. Thus, once started, migration becomes an independent, diffused, and continuous process that is independent of the influence of its initial triggers. In this way, Massey et al argue, a "culture of migration" emerges. Also pursuing a link between social capital and migration, Faist (2000:100-101) argues that "migrants' social and symbolic ties and the exchange of social capital through transnational social spaces" need to be explored. "Transnational social spaces," for Faist (212), consist of "a combination of ties and their contents, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations in at least two geographic locations," with "doors" and "bridges" between transnational social spaces. The "doors" act as both barriers and facilitators of migration, while "bridges" attract people across borders by building cross national linkages. "Social ties," on one hand, are "a continuing series of interpersonal transactions to which participants attach shared interests, obligations, expectations and norms." "Symbolic ties," on the other hand, are not necessarily a continuing set of transactions. They can be evoked and mobilized even in the absence of earlier contacts.

## **MIGRATION, RACE, AND THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION**

The theories of migration identified above examine how and why people move, and how they construct and participate in their own networks. These theories, however, do not discuss how migrants are received by groups in the host society, nor how migrants position themselves in response to those groups. In recent years, massive transnational migration has contributed to the rapid cultural, ethnic, and racial diversification of national cultures within receiving countries, spawning major debates on multiculturalism, citizenship, rights, and governance that range from public to “expert” opinion on whether and how these new groups ought to be accommodated, legally and culturally (Young, 2000; Gutmann 2003; Kymlicka 1995). Traditional approaches have focused on “assimilation,” which can be defined as the process by which migrants are incorporated into the existing cultural, political, and economic structures of receiving societies (Gordon 1964; Alba 2003). In the early 1920s, the Chicago School of Urban Sociology pioneered the study of immigrant settlement in an urban context. Conceptualizing the city as an organism, the Chicago School observed that immigrants from poor economic backgrounds seemed to concentrate “naturally” in impoverished inner city areas when they first arrived. Once they obtained better employment and achieved upward mobility, immigrants were likely to leave the inner city for working class zones, and eventually disperse into the suburbs. After one group of immigrants left the city, a new group arrived and took the former’s place as part of the process of “invasion and succession” (Park 1950). Park went on to propose a four-stage model of how newcomers are

incorporated into the host society. At first, immigrants come into “contact” with one another, which leads to “conflict”. Different groups then try to “accommodate” one another and eventually there is “assimilation”. This model was an early description of race relations, particularly in the United States. Warner and Srole (1945:245)’s theory of “straight-line assimilation” also predicted that ethnic groups eventually will be absorbed into mainstream society as they gradually unlearn their own cultures and master “the new way of life.” In due course, wrote Warner and Srole, immigrant groups will gain full acceptance in the host society.

Traditional models, however, paid little attention to the politics of difference, especially race, in explaining patterns of exclusion and inclusion with respect to migrants in host societies. In the American case, the Chicago School, and assimilationist models in general, did not account for enduring differences in the incorporation of racial minorities/newcomers, as compared to European ethnic groups (Steinberg 1995). These models offered little or no insight into the ways in which racial structures and the process of racialization prevent non-white immigrants from following trajectories taken by European immigrants. One of the most influential critiques of straight-line assimilation to emerge was the theory of “segmented assimilation,” as developed by Portes and Zhou (1993). Instead of a single, common path to integration into mainstream society, Portes and Zhou note three: the first follows the traditional assimilationist perspective of growing acculturation, integration, and upward mobility into the white middle class; the second leads in the opposite direction – downward mobility into poverty and assimilation into the underclass; and the third entails rapid economic advancement while preserving immigrant communities’ cultural values and social networks.

Historically, racial identity has been a key factor in the politics of inclusion, exclusion, and assimilation in societies defined by race, such as the United States and South Africa. In the United States, race became “the lynchpin of American democracy” upon the enslavement of people of African ancestry (West 1994:156; Morgan 1975). The presence of a “black” other in American society enabled the consolidation of a mainstream “white” identity that subordinated class, ethnic, and gender differences within and between various European groups as they sought to assimilate, leading African American novelist Toni Morrison (1992) to argue in her provocative essay, *Playing in the Dark*, that race is *the* central metaphor in the construction of American identity, the ultimate arbiter of everyday affairs as class recedes into the background. Gilmore (2002:20, 21) notes that “relatively early universal extension of suffrage to Euro-American males established government as their milieu and state power as their instrument. The development of the US ‘*herrenvolk* democracy’ or ‘dictatorship of white men’ both depended on and fostered a connection between and among masculinity, state power, and national belongingness, with everyone else thus characterized as to some degree alien.” Liu (2000:169) has observed that in the contemporary period, “geographical studies that examine the processes and effects of immigration and immigration policy, while useful, are not always clearly linked to questions of race and racial inequality.” This dissertation is an attempt to ponder that link. I explore how racial signifiers such as “Black” and “White” have come to constitute what I shall call “meta-identities” in societies such as the United States and South Africa, and serve as poles in a binary axis around which other identities, such as Asians, for example, rotate as they search for their “place” in multi-racial societies. South Asian migrants, in spite of their

presence in South Africa and the United States since the 1800s, challenge assimilationist models and complicate the black-white dichotomy within which race relations are traditionally conceptualized in both societies.

## **POSITIONING SOUTH ASIANS**

Rita Sethi (1995:89), a South Asian American academic, recalls that when she began her first job, an African-American activist asked her, meaningfully, “So, how do you feel being Black?” When Sethi answered that she was not Black, she received the patronizing reply that “in America, if you are not white, you’re Black.” This exchange illustrates two common underlying assumptions regarding race relations in white-dominant societies such as the United States and South Africa, namely the primacy of the black-white binary, and blackness as the universal measure of racial otherness. When Sethi’s answer did not meet the activist’s expectation, she found herself being placed back into the black-white box as if she could not exist outside of it and still experience racial exclusion.

In response to the challenge to the racial binary posed by South Asians and other groups, who are neither black nor white, some scholars have developed theories of the “middleman” minority, based on the common characterization of certain minorities, such as Jews and Asians, as interlopers and traffickers between established and stable identities such as “Black” and “White.” Blalock (1967), a leading proponent of the

middleman minority approach, notes that certain groups are made to serve as buffers or even scapegoats for economic and political elites, on one hand, and the disfranchised masses, on the other hand. Such minorities, according to Blalock (1967:83), serve as “a shock absorber in preserving the stability of the system in times of stress.” The “triadic relationship” between the middleman minority, and the main binary, writes Blalock, “can be considerably more stable than the dyadic” and “may help to explain why racial and cultural minorities are often found in this role.” Middleman minorities, for Blalock, are foreign migrants, primarily traders who shuttle back and forth between native groups to ply their wares.

In her seminal article, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” Edna Bonacich (1973) expands Blalock’s observations into a thesis on middleman minorities. Writing from a historical materialist perspective, Bonacich argues that middleman minorities occupy a petit bourgeois position in capitalist societies and perform many roles besides that of small traders. They may be entrepreneurs or owners of property, for example, even professionals, but share in common the feature of ethnic solidarity and/or ethnic self-help as the primary means of competition. Bonacich (1980: 214) further contends that “They do not engage in the kind of activity that epitomizes industrial capitalism, namely, the hiring of contracted wage labor from which profits are extracted. Instead, they tend to work as a single unit in which the distinction between owner and employee is blurred. Their shops depend on the use of ethnic and familial ties, not on impersonal contracts.” In addition to such economic characteristics, according to Turner and Bonacich (1980:146), middleman minorities display



- (a) the clear tendency to be migrants to a recipient society;
- (b) the propensity to form and maintain a separate community or district in the recipient society;
- (c) the desire to maintain distinct cultural traits, such as language, values, and religious beliefs;
- (d) the propensity to cultivate high degrees of internal solidarity through extended kinship ties, school and religious organizations, and preference for endogamy; and
- (e) the tendency to avoid politics, except when directly related to their interests

A key argument of the middleman minority thesis is that immigrant groups with a high degree of solidarity concentrate in or dominate certain economic niches, creating hostility and resentment from groups above and below them on the socio-economic ladder. This makes middleman minorities vulnerable, argues Bonacich (1994: 405-406):

Rather than having the colonizer or the colonized play the role of shopkeepers and small-scale employers, that role is handed over to a third party, an outsider group... Having a middleman group play this role is of use to the oppressors. First, the antagonism of the oppressed gets redirected from the primary target, in this case the white corporate establishment, to the middleman group. In other words, the middleman group serves as a scapegoat for the injustices of the system that they did not create. Second, because the middleman group is an outsider group, they can be easily dispensed with. The oppressors have no particular loyalty to them, and so they can be served up as targets for oppressed anger.

The middleman minority approach is an important contribution to models of race relations in that it acknowledges a third position in addition to the two poles of the black-white racial dichotomy. Claire Kim (1999) has built on Blalock's "triadic relationship" to

propose that Asian Americans experience “racial triangulation” in American society with respect to Blacks and Whites. Beginning with “a field of racial positions” through which the relative status of Blacks, Whites, and Asians may be viewed, Kim describes the “third” position occupied by Asians relative to Blacks and Whites. This “field” lies between the vertical superior/inferior axis and the horizontal “insider/foreigner” axis. Hence, the triangulation of Asians consists of their racial positioning somewhere between blacks and whites within the field, but always closer to the vertical axis than the other two groups in the binary, which are already in vertical alignment. Like the middleman minority thesis, Kim’s model shows how Asians have been characterized by American society as successful, but outsiders nevertheless, never quite as privileged as whites, and still struggling for civic acceptance like Blacks. This positioning simultaneously valorizes and ostracizes Asians, according to Kim, as they labor between the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” stereotypes. At any given point in time, Asians’ position in this racial field “profoundly shapes the opportunities, constraints and possibilities with which subordinate groups must contend, ultimately serving to reinforce white dominance and privilege” (Kim 1999: 107).

The middleman minority and triangulation approaches provide useful starting points in describing the socio-economic location of South Asians in deeply racialized societies such as the United States and South Africa, and I draw upon their insights in my analysis. However, I am also aware of their limitations. First, both models conceptualize socio-economic hierarchies as rigid, unchanging, and consisting of permanent positions which are occupied by distinct and stable groups, in that they accept, *a priori*, the idea of internally undifferentiated groups within unchanging hierarchies. Second, by taking a

static view of identities as stratified categories on one hand, and their functions as given, the middleman minority and triangulation theses overlook the *process* by which structural locations are themselves created and occupied, as well as the historical and spatial dimensions of that process. Third, such assumptions cast a deterministic shadow on the arguments and conclusions that follow by predicting the political behavior of middleman or triangulated groups in collective terms based on their categorical identities and positions relative to others in the hierarchy. For example, by placing a particular group, such as “Asians” collectively in a separate tier, somewhere between or just outside of the binary, the middleman minority and triangulation approaches still draw attention to the group itself, rather than the shifting relations and positional politics that exclude Asians in the first place. Thus, ironically, these approaches inadvertently reinforce the very stereotypes they take as starting points in their critiques, and leave little room for contingencies, such as the capacity of ideologies, social movements, and politics to ignite human agency toward social transformation, or social conflict for that matter. I have kept these shortcomings in mind even as I acknowledge the triangulated position of South Asians as middlemen in both the United States and South Africa.

I turn to racial formation theory, as advanced by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), which I feel offers a more dynamic approach to understanding the socio-historical processes by which racial categories are created, lived in, and destroyed. Writing from a historical materialist perspective that draws on the observations and arguments of Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci, Omi and Winant demonstrate how race is constructed through “racial projects,” historically specific strategies that articulate with hegemonic forms of rule that become possible within particular racial

formations, such as the United States or South Africa. Racial subjects are incorporated hegemonically into the racial formation through consent as well as coercion.

## **SOUTH ASIANS IN THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH AFRICA**

Omi and Winant (1994) recognize that the nation-state is a major actor in policing borders and shaping the identities of its subjects. South Asians first entered the American racial formation in the late 1800s, and have alternately experienced racism, differential incorporation, and marginalization ever since. The first wave of South Asian migration to the United States, which lasted through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a period of systematic “exclusion,” or “policies and institutional arrangements by which immigrants are variably incorporated into the host country. Exclusion involves the participation of migrants only in selected or marked off sectors of the host society. Migrants are denied access to other areas, mainly through legal mechanisms” (Tambiah (2000:166; Koshy 1998; Leonard 1997; Lal 2008). South Asians also were denied citizenship until the 1950s. Although African-Americans were afforded limited citizenship rights after the Civil War, South Asians were refused, nevertheless, on grounds of race. In the convoluted case of *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind* of 1923 the United States Supreme Court ruled that Mr. Thind, a South Asian, was ineligible for American citizenship because he belonged to neither the “white” nor the “black” prerequisite races, and because “Hindus” (as South Asians were called then) were regarded as “undesirable” and “unfit for association with the American people” (California State Board of Control, 1922: 115-116). Arguments such as these led

to the systematic disfranchisement of South Asians, as discussed in Chapter 6. The California Alien Land Law, for example, prohibited South Asians from owning or leasing land in California (Ngai 2004).

However, a tremendous change occurred in 1965 when American immigration laws were virtually overhauled following the condemnation of racist US immigration policies in the United Nations, on one hand, and the success of the Civil Rights Movement in demonstrating the fact of racial discrimination in domestic law and social policy, on the other hand. As a consequence, the American government repealed or amended laws that severely restricted Asian immigration, and by 1970, there were approximately 75,000 South Asians in the US, mostly of Indian origin. They were assigned the dubious racial category of “White-Other” and thrust into a national arena in which they were perceived by fellow Americans as racial anomalies. Furthermore, as most of the South Asians immigrating just after 1965 were skilled professionals, their arrival apparently directly into the American middle-class confounded the historic correlations between race and class in the United States (Ngai 2004; Steinberg 1989). By 1980, South Asians from India successfully contested the category of “White-Other” and became re-classified as “Asian Indians” and a “minority” in the United States Census. South Asians in low-income, unskilled work hoped that “minority” status would afford greater prospects for upward mobility through affirmative action in employment. However, when they applied for affirmative action, they were categorically denied by administrators who told them that unlike other minorities, such as African-Americans, South Asians were “over-represented” in the middle class, and hence did not qualify for the same social programs and opportunities (Anderson and Lee 2005). On the other hand,

some upper income professionals, such as doctors, whose jobs were not at risk, questioned the benefit of “minority” status, which they felt may threaten acceptance by other American professionals, on whom they depended to some extent for upward mobility.

The presence of South Asians in the United States has prompted racist representations as well as physical attacks against them. South Asians have been portrayed by the media and popular culture as a different sort of threat to American society as compared to other groups, such as African-Americans. For example, the stereotype of the “criminal,” who supposedly prefers the idle life of crime to honest employment, is commonly deployed against Black men, whereas South Asians are often depicted in the media and popular culture as a threat to employment opportunity itself. As “foreign” “gas station owners” and “computer programmers,” South Asians are thought to undermine both American capital and labor. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, South Asians have been portrayed as part of an undifferentiated collective of brown, bearded, turbaned “terrorists.” Since their arrival in the US, South Asians have also been periodically subjected to racial violence, from other racial minorities as well as whites, but as Sethi (1995) notes, the attacks have a tendency to be downplayed as “cultural misunderstandings” by the media whereas similar assaults on whites are denounced in the media as “crime,” and attacks on Blacks by others are condemned as “racist” (Sethi 1995).

South Africa is the second national context in which the dissertation explores the experiences of South Asians with respect to migration, identity, and the politics of

inclusion and citizenship. As White power became entrenched in South Africa by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, non-whites found themselves increasingly politically marginalized, economically exploited, culturally maligned, and territorially displaced and dispossessed. “Indians”, as South Asians in South Africa are called and call themselves, arrived as indentured laborers and minor merchants into a hostile, racialized British colony in response to the needs of agricultural capital in the mid-1800s. Although slavery was being abolished throughout the British Empire after 1834, there was nevertheless a need for cheap labor in the colonies that were dependent on agricultural commodities, particularly sugar. The indentured labor system, often characterized as a “new system of slavery” (Tinker 1974), was introduced to meet this need. Indentured servitude, under the guise of contracted wage-labor, allowed exploitative labor practices to continue, unabated, while ennobling British and other traders to avoid the moral opprobrium of slavery. After the institutionalization of South Asian indentured servitude in Mauritius and the Caribbean in the 1830s, South Africa followed suit in 1860. A second wave of South Asian migrants known as “passengers” (because they were mostly merchants who paid for their own overseas passage) arrived in the 1870s and constituted about 10 percent of South Asian migrants to South Africa. However, owing to a more balanced sex ratio as compared to the indentured migrants, this merchant class eventually comprised 30 percent of South Asians in South Africa (Lemon 1990; Landy, Maharaj & Mainet-Valleix 2004).

Although ethnic and caste boundaries between indentured laborers and passengers have eroded over time, class barriers have persisted between the two types of migrants. The racial hierarchy in South African society led the population to see themselves

increasingly as “Indians,” aggregated and collectively creolized, rather than in terms of the religious, caste, ethnic, or linguistic identities with which they hailed from the Subcontinent. In other words, in South Africa, the category “Indian” subsumed internal differences and became what I shall call a “meta-identity,” owing to the fact that the population was differentiated from other meta-identities – Europeans (whites) and Africans (Blacks) – by racial phenotype and foreign origins. “Indian” meta-identity has evolved in response to three major forces, as discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. These are Zulu nationalism, which sometimes lapses into anti-Indian rhetoric; the apartheid state’s enforcement of racial segregation, which has now given way to *de-facto* economic segregation; and the severance of kinship and other ties to India upon migration to South Africa. For South African Indians today, “India” serves as an important cultural referent in dress, food, and religion, for example, but it is mostly a symbol of their shared origin and collective self-identification under hostile circumstances, rather than a place of extant roots.

## **RACE AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY**

Identity, in scholarly as well as lay understanding, is usually assumed to be a given, fixed, and static category. Stuart Hall (1994:392), however, suggests that “perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, ... we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and



always constituted within, not outside, representation.” In knowing who we *are*, we also know who we *are not*, which makes all identities relational (Hall 1990; Massey 2004: 5). Individual and collective identities are thus understood with reference to both ‘me’ and ‘you,’ or ‘us’ and ‘them’. In an inherently political process that privileges certain identities and locates boundaries where expedient, dominant constructions of identity constantly seek to impose separations between “us” and “them” in order to fix meanings to the advantage of dominant groups.

Just as “I” or “we” cannot be understood without “you” or “they,” identity itself cannot be understood without its counterpart, alterity. If identity refers to the Self, alterity refers to the relationship of the Self to the Other. Alterity, as a condition of modernity, is important to our understanding of identity in the contemporary period. The experience of alterity in culture is heightened in the global modern period because of revolutions in transportation, communications, and technology. Alterity is central to Edward Said’s conceptualization of identity, as developed in his classic works *Orientalism* (1983) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), and has been useful for interpreting the political forces unleashed by modernity. Imperialism for example, as well as cultural modes of producing “otherness” such as exoticization, reification, feminization, and domestication, are all processes that employ alterity. More importantly, alterity is the means by which the cultural becomes political for Said. As a consequence, Hall (1996c:4-5) observes, all identities contain within themselves an element of risk in the form of alterity, which is “the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks... that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its identity – can be constructed.”

Upheavals and change in the “age of migration” (Castles and Miller 2003) have made questions of identity even more complicated. In this era of flux, everyday encounters with the “other” have intensified; increased mobility and greater contact between people under globalization has further problematized the notion of identity as a stable and unified whole, and yielded hybrid subjectivities. People today increasingly “belong to more than one world, speak more than one language (literally and metaphorically), inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home”... They have learned to “negotiate and translate between cultures” and to “live with, and indeed to speak from, difference” (Hall 1995: 206).

Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, mainstream social theory interpreted groupings of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, or race, as fixed and stable categories. With the advent of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, identity increasingly has been seen as relative and unstable. Language and representation came to be regarded as major factors in the formation of identities, as interpreted by poststructuralism and deconstruction. In psychoanalysis, particularly after Lacan, notes Hall (2000), “identities are constructed through, not outside difference.” Foucault’s concept of “discourse” as a framework within which identity is produced and operates, has been influential from the late twentieth century onward. Each individual occupies multiple and at times even contradictory identities, according to Foucault, which interact with each other and present different possibilities for agency. Derrida (1988) goes further to question the stability of the very contexts within which discourses, identities, meanings, and histories are produced. Deconstructionist critics following Derrida reject the premise that all phenomena have an assumed ontological center; instead, they attempt

to uncover the ambiguities and multiple meanings of phenomena, to show that there is no universal “truth” behind them. Behind “official” meanings and narratives, for deconstructionists, there exist alternative, “subversive” readings. The capacity of language, then, to produce multiple meanings within already unstable contexts is its “performativity.” In other words, all phenomena, including identities, contain the possibility of being something other than what they seem, or for that matter, failing to be or do what they claim. Judith Butler (1990), for example, finds that there is no prediscursive identity; instead, for Butler, identity is a product of performativity in discourse. Identity “constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express,” argues Butler, and that even biological sex is a product of discourse (Butler 1998: 725). Thus Butler challenges the very idea of the “subject,” as if to suggest that identity can be anything it wants to be.

In spite of efforts by theorists to demonstrate the social constructedness and performativity of identity, the persistence of conventional categories testifies to the power of taxonomies of difference. The problem of “race,” an aspect of identity, is a case in point. Nineteenth century anthropology, obsessed with categorization, employed a tripartite classification of humankind into Negroid, Mongoloid, and Caucasoid “races,” each with particular sets of physical and behavioral attributes (Tilghman 2010; Gould, 1981). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, genetic research revealed that such racial classifications are unscientific, as phenotypic traits *ipso facto* do not correlate with cognitive ability or moral values, as had been assumed. As a consequence of intellectual debate and social movements, activists for racial justice were able to argue that “race” is better understood

politically, as a visually representative category through which the value judgments, ideological biases, and class interests of those in power may be articulated.

As a category of identity, “race” has been implicated in numerous misanthropic and exploitative projects, such as slavery, genocide, and indentured servitude. By attempting to demonstrate the social constructedness of “race,” cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall point to and emphasize the unequal power relations contained within the category itself, as well as the practices that ensure its survival as a category. For Hall (1973), understanding race as a social construct means realizing that it is subject to context-specific “encodings” and “decodings.” ‘Encoding,’ for Hall, refers to the generative process whereby signs, such as “race” are endowed with meaning and structured into codes in the course of history. “Decoding,” then, involves the interpretation of the meaning of “race” through politics. From a Gramscian perspective, Hall (1986) argues that contemporary societies are witnessing an ever-increasing multiplicity and fluidity of identifications, subject positions and social experiences, which cannot be explained in terms of fixed identity categories.

More recently, ‘Critical Race Theory’ (CRT) has attempted to “focus on the discursive relations between race, racism, and power, and seek to dismantle those relations” (Allatson 2007). Critical reflection on identity is deepened in the context of feminist thinking on the gendered nature of identity. Issues of identity have been central to feminist theorizing and politics, which itself is diverse. For theorists like Yuval-Davis and Werbner (1998:8), on one hand, feminist emancipatory politics as a whole is “antithetical to the suppression of particularity and difference.” Others, like Parmar

(1990:106), who identifies herself as a British South Asian radical feminist, have pointed out that feminism does indeed have its own exclusionary practices:

Being cast into the role of the other, marginalized, discriminated against and too often invisible, not only within everyday discourses of affirmation but also with the 'grand narratives' of European thought, black women in particular have fought to assert privately and publicly our sense of self: a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages. Black feminism has provided a space and a framework for the articulation of our diverse identities as black women, different ethnicities, classes and sexualities, even though at times that space had to be fought for and negotiated.

Butler (1990) rejoins that the very "differences" cited by some feminists of color may have been uncritically essentialized into categories. Given that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of 'gender,'" warns Butler, "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990: 25). Agency, for Butler, is to be found in the iterability of the gender performances we are forced to repeat; that is, it is only within the discourse of cultural norms that the destabilization of those norms even becomes possible.

The "nation" is another problematic but powerful construct of collective identity that connects "who we are" to "where we belong". The culture of a nation and the nationalism that it fosters come together to produce the mythology necessary to inspire a sense of belonging (Anderson 1991). Nationalism is the ideology that mobilizes nations, cultivates their loyalty to the state, and garners their support for the state's various projects, including its territorial ambitions. Nationalism is also largely responsible for the formation of nation-states in the first place. In order to be effective, however, nationalism must overcome internal boundaries separating "us" from "them" within the nation itself. These internal divisions are the manifestations of unequal positions and power relations

among individuals and groups within the nation and, as such, offer differential access to material resources and representation. National identity, then, may be seen as an outcome of the leadership of hegemonic groups within the nation to formulate a nationalism capable of overriding other internal divisions within the nation. This is usually a violent process.

The success of nationalism depends on the fusion of the symbolic, emotional, and political elements of the nation into a single collective identity; it inspires personal identification with the constitutive elements of the nation such that its members believe that they *are* the nation. Once this belief has been instilled, the people who identify with the nation undertake to defend it at all costs, because to do so, in their minds, is to defend themselves. This imperative is especially strong in communal constructions of the nation (as opposed to civic), which view the nation as an extension of family or kin networks (Penrose 2002). In communally constituted nations, defending national boundaries is tantamount to defending oneself.

The continuous process of nation-building and its insistence on identification with the nation often eclipses the ways in which different interests, as defined by other categories of identity, such as race or gender, can position people very differently within the nation, with respect to the state, and other nation-states. Typically, nationalism based on a singular national identity is viewed from two perspectives: that of the beneficiary and that of the casualty. On one hand, nationalism can serve the interests of those who have the power to direct it and benefit from it. On the other hand, it can marginalize, exclude, and isolate those who do not share in the power of the nation or have rights to its

resources. Also, until very recently, the hegemonic national group was constituted almost exclusively by men, particularly those who possessed wealth, property, and/or particular social status. In the “founding” of America, for example, white men of property, calling themselves “citizens,” secured their positions of dominance by constructing the nation in their own image. In the same stroke, the nation became a means of enforcing white women’s and non-white peoples’ marginality. Such an arbitrary yet powerful construction of the nation presented a conflict of interest for women, for example. By consenting to and identifying with the nation, as given, they became implicated in their own marginalization (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997; Hall 1999). African-Americans were faced with a similar predicament when dealing with white, male nationalism (Franklin 2013; Foner 1988; DuBois 1976). Racial immigrants such as Asians have also had to negotiate their rights within a national context, and with other groups who have attained varying degrees of membership in a racially constituted nation.

Politically, marginalized groups within the nation strike compromises with dominant nationals by accepting certain disadvantages in exchange for membership privileges within the nation. For example, many women worldwide accept gender inequality for an unequal share of the nation’s resources, on one hand, and a chance to participate in processes that reify the nation and its symbols, on the other hand. Likewise, racial minorities strike similar compromises with respect to hegemonic national identities. In this manner, unequal positioning within the nation, both spatially and socially, produces different experiences for different identities, different meanings of what the national identity entails, as well as varying consequences. Legal immigrants, as Parekh (1999) notes, may eventually attain formal citizenship in the nation-state but may

still be denied membership in the nation. Issues of identity, equality, and representation become even more complex for refugees and irregular migrants who are denied both citizenship and national membership within the host society.

As migration has increased, existing constructs of the “nation” have been experiencing duress from within and without, as both migrants and host populations question its function, albeit from different perspectives. Hegemonic attempts to define the nation, membership and citizenship have entailed the modification of the boundaries of the nation. Violent options exercised by nation-states involve the denial of diversity and the imposition of homogeneity upon the population. A demand of rigid conformity to dominant norms by nation-states can lead to the civic death of marginal groups, or even genocide. However, nation-states risk losing legitimacy over the long term in pursuing such options. The other option is to periodically manipulate what is meant by “the nation.” However, great political inertia must be overcome before this option is exercised. One reason why the inertia persists, aside from the reluctance of hegemonic nationals to share their power or wealth, is that national “culture” has enormous value to members of the nation. Although nation-states may portray themselves as multicultural, the power of hegemonic nations within those nation-states may remain unaltered. Many nation-states that call themselves multicultural often do acknowledge their internal diversity and often exhibit the desire to develop tolerance, if not acceptance, of difference, and this may even result in some modification of the hegemonic nation’s self-description (eg. the adoption of curry as the official British “national dish”). However, this does not amount to a rejection of the nation as the basis of self-identification and



political legitimacy, or giving up claims to privileges, power, and resources that are based upon membership in the dominant nation (Ignatieff 1994).

Identity, thus, serves as a key means of regulating access to resources and representation and, therefore, constitutes a basis for politics. Identity politics, then, refers to any political activity mobilized around issues relevant to a specific identity group in relation to the nation. Examples include racial, ethnic, or religious movements, women's movements, and the gay pride movement, for example. Identity politics are often equated with the struggles of marginalized social groups for equal treatment, but may arguably include hegemonic expressions such as nativism. However, one of the differences between national cultures and nativism, on one hand, and cultural nationalist movements as a variant of identity politics, on the other hand, is that national cultures depend very much on the subordination of others, whereas the priority of cultural nationalist movements is self-empowerment (Appadurai 1996). This is an important distinction for Appadurai because it is cultural nationalism that has been the source of new subjectivities, not national cultures. For example, the Civil Rights Movement was bolstered by the new subjectivities produced by the "Black is Beautiful" movement.

The "moment," or the particular spatio-temporal articulation of cultural nationalism is important in political struggles, according to Appadurai. Spivak (1993) refers to this moment often in her calls for "strategic essentialism," whereby she argues that there is an "us" and "them" because there is something to struggle around. Hall (1994), however, cautions that the moment when one strikes a strategic position against another position can itself become essentialized, especially when it gets prolonged, and

present politics becomes a repetition of the particular positionalities of the past. Thus, positionalities risk becoming anachronistic regardless of how strategic they may have been at the original moment. For example, when a positionality defined in terms of a single criterion, such as race, becomes essentialized, its moment gets prolonged and hence, in spite of the fact that it may have been repositioned by other structuring and restructuring, it ends up becoming ossified, upholding and reinforcing certain categorical forms of identity. It becomes what Hall (1994:16-17) calls a “closed ethnicity,” unable to anticipate or negotiate new questions posed to it, even with respect to the very criterion that define it. Instead, Hall opts for “positional politics,” after Gramsci’s “war of position,” which is a self-conscious, critical, and reflexive politics that understands its own evolving positionality, as well as the spatially and temporally shifting positionalities of others within hegemonic national contexts. However, positional politics is critically and precisely aware that conjunctures will shift, positionalities will change, and that today’s enemies might be the friends of tomorrow. In other words, it acknowledges what Gramsci terms the “continual shifting of the relations of forces.”

The political terrain itself shifts, according to Hall, when positionalities shift, and vice versa. Appreciating some of the insights of poststructuralism and deconstruction, Hall notes that these shifts occur because of the discursivity of culture and the perpetual sliding of meaning. However, for Hall, certain actions are vitally important as instances of constitutive power and agency, lest we slide away helplessly into meaninglessness and disorientation. For example, the construction of a sentence in speech has the power to temporarily arrest meanings relative to other meanings, although meaning itself does not stop. This momentary pause, however arbitrary, constitutes an opportunity for positional

politics, which understands its own arbitrariness. It does not assume that it is the natural effect of some law of capital, or logic of history, although these forces may be inscribed into the positions taken. Instead, positional politics understands that one has to always cut into and temporarily arrest the infinite sliding of meaning, whether it is to utter something, define an issue, or mobilize an identity.

In addition to being vulnerable to essentialism, much discourse on identity politics, like identity politics itself, is strangely silent on the issue of class in spite of the fact that contemporary social theory owes much of its relational, as opposed to categorical, understanding of identity to Marx's original conceptualization of the class relation under capitalism. Smith (2000), for example, notes that class has "fallen out of favor as a lens for viewing the social construction of space, place, and nature," partly because of the rise of alternative political perspectives focusing exclusively on cultural aspects of identity, as if capitalism did not exist or matter, and partly because of the general ineffectiveness of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxism in addressing this oversight. However, Smith is also aware of powerful state and capitalist reaction to the social justice movements, from the 1960s to the anti-globalization movements of today. While cultural politics, "for very good reasons have occupied the political foreground in recent years," writes Smith (2000), multiculturalism in its present forms is but a hollow "apology for capitalist 'diversity'" when class, a crucial dimension of social inequality, is ignored. He finds it ironic that we now find ourselves without a class-based critique or politics precisely at the moment when class is reasserting itself like never before, globally.

## A NOTE ON IDENTIFIERS USED

Neither the experiences of nor the differences and interactions between South Asians and other groups, such as Africans, in the proposed areas of study, can be explained effectively without an understanding of race and racialization as hegemonic functions in multiracial nations. From a racial formation perspective, “race” is a social construct that collapses the range of complexions and features found on human bodies in the entire global population into four colors. By reducing the diversity of humanity to the crude visual labels “Black,” “White,” “Brown,” or “Yellow,” race translates apparently “biological” differences into social meanings, such as stigma, liability, or privilege according to a historically constituted but continually shifting scheme within national politics. As a principle of social control, race, like gender, regulates the representation, discipline, manipulation, and positioning of the self by inscribing its rules upon the human body. Thus, regimes of visual/corporeal ideology and social practice yield arbitrary but nevertheless real social identities which, in turn, may be inhabited and performed by racial subjects. However, race is a strategy of resistance as well as a tool of oppression, depending on how it is deployed. As a result, the histories of racial identities and relations are always multiple, often shared, and sometimes conflicting.

In interrogating “race” as a category derived from the power-laden act of naming and classifying human beings according to the dominant gaze, I face the challenge of selecting appropriate terms for the populations under study, because of the risks inherent in the act of representation, such as misidentifying or excluding certain identities while

privileging others. For example, the tendency among Indian South Asians and non-South Asians alike to conflate diverse South Asian nationalities and address them all as “Indian,” to the great consternation of Pakistanis, or Bangladeshis, for example, is problematic. Thus, I use the more inclusive terms “South Asian” and “African” in the dissertation with the awareness of the arbitrary and contested nature of these referents. “South Asian,” as an alternative to “Indian,” refers to a Subcontinental regional origin and emphasizes shared attributes and experiences without invoking specific nationalities. I use the term “Indian” when referring to that nation, and in the case of South Africans of South Asian origin who identify themselves as “Indian” (see Chapters 4 and 5). In the United States, although a few cultural, political, and community organizations have begun to use the broader term “South Asian,” national identifiers self-identifiers such as “Pakistani” and “Bangladeshi” remain popular. On the other hand, ethnic shops and businesses frequently advertise themselves as “Desi” (which means “from the homeland”) or “Indo-Pak-Bangla” in order to attract a diverse array of customers. Each of these terms embodies, in its own way, the limitations of labels acquired in the diaspora. However, the fact that the host nation has homogenized these identities into a single “Indian” identity in order to set it apart from other racial identities within the nation, has led to an emerging awareness among people of South Asian origin of the shared predicament of being thus *racialized*. Thus, “Indian,” in a diasporan context, is more than a national identity or a self-selected identifier; it is an ascribed racial signifier with particular constructed meanings superimposed upon the origin and affiliation of the racialized subject.

Likewise, the terms “African” and “Asian” refer to the diversity of the dispersed peoples of Africa and Asia, respectively, their multiple nationalities, and diasporas. However, the transmutation of “African” into “Black” signals the process of racialization at work within racially constituted societies. In addition to being a racial signifier, the term “Black” has been used politically by subjects who choose to call themselves “Black” in order to raise awareness of racial inequality and the process of racialization. The “Black Consciousness” movement in South Africa is an example of such an appropriation. While “Black” has “no meaning outside of a system of race-conscious people and practices” (West 1993: 39), racial thought identifies “Black” not only as a “color”, but also as the visual marker of particular social and cultural “others.” Therefore, “Black” is simultaneously a White supremacist sign of racial inequality and a state of political consciousness. As with the term “Indian”, I shall use “Black” when referring to racialized identities or racialization itself.

Racial identifiers, when adopted consciously by racial subjects, are a kind of defiant posturing as well as a strategy for protection and mobilization in racialized environments. They can offer psychic shelter by referring to and affirming certain shared group characteristics, on one hand, or signal identification with broader regional or political identities, on the other hand. Struggles over names have been about seeking recognition, securing privilege, and forming associations, but also about belonging. Examining the politics of nomenclature and taxonomy as it pertains to South Asians, in both South Africa and United States, offers some insight into the process of identity construction, and where a particular identity “belongs.” A group’s choice to use certain terms over others may also shed light on the sorts of associations they wish to form, their

awareness of and identification with the struggles of other racial subjects, and their ability to build coalitions to confront problems collectively (Western 1992).

## **DIASPORA AND TRANSNATIONALISM**

More recent work on migration, settlement, and identity formation has turned to the concept of “diaspora” as a way of recording how populations of common origin have dispersed geographically, narrating their migration experiences, as well as describing some of the consequences of migration (Brickell *et al* 2011; Blunt 2007; Brubaker 2005; Shuval 2000; Sheffer 1986). Sheffer (1986:3) defines diasporas as “ethnic minority groups residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin.” Travel, identity, and hybridity are at the heart of diasporan discourse, which is reviewed below. While the South Asians in different countries are the products of different types of displacement at different times, there are many similarities, trajectories, and moments of convergence that warrant their consideration as diasporas. As colonial and post-colonial subjects from the margins of empire, South Asian now find themselves dislocated and within the center itself. In the process, both center and margin have been transformed, having had to interrogate their own internal constitutions. Sometimes South Asian diasporas have communicated with other diasporas, with or without the center as interlocutor, and yielded new hybridities, as in the case of their transnational encounters with the African diaspora. At other times, South Asians have been at odds with other groups in the margins, contributing further to

the center's differential marginalization of both. "Diaspora" references the themes of "home," "travel" and "resettlement" as groups struggle -- together, separately, or against each other -- to belong, to their ancestral homelands and to their adopted "hostlands" simultaneously, with the center mediating the process.

Migrants, exiles, and refugees defy the common sense attempt to locate culture within a particular place. Unproblematized, static notions of "origin" and "essence" in cultural essentialism are inadequate for narrating the experiences of displaced peoples in the country of resettlement. As diasporan identity is neither primordial nor imaginary, both assumptions must be interrogated. However, essentialism is often invoked in order to police the boundary between "us" and "them" despite the indeterminacy of "essence," and whether it is indeed a given property of an identity. The fact that essence can be conceptualized only through culturally mediated ways of knowing suggests that essence itself is a social construction, as noted earlier. What is perceived as "essence," is actually a moment in the political struggle for subjectivity in which a particular construction of identity is performed and asserted in representation and practice. This construction is then retrospectively termed "essence" and posited as a natural and inherent property of the identity in question. On the other hand, a critique of essence and essentialism does not imply that identities are mere fictions, simply conjured up at will. Instead, diasporan identity is perhaps better understood as a dialectic of origin and conjecture, performed positionally and relationally within particular historical and national contexts. Diasporan identities exist in a state of displacement and dislocation having traversed the territorial boundaries of their homelands, but remaining outside the cultural boundaries that separate "us" and "them" in the hostland. Furthermore, their ancestral homelands may



deny their cultural "authenticity," even as hostlands may insist upon their essential "otherness" in order to deny them rights and citizenship.

However, while transnational migration involves crossing borders, resettlement involves erecting new ones. Borders and boundaries are lines of separation, meeting, conflict, and change. The "borderland," a term coined by Anzaldua (1987), refers to a unique zone that embodies aspects of the entities it intends to differentiate. It is the site of creative cultural creolizations forged out of seemingly separate and homogeneous identities. However, borderlands are not necessarily locations of happy interminglings and exotic hybridities to be celebrated. For South Asians straddling its invisible yet real fences, life in the borderland has involved exclusion and violence, as seen during the Dotbuster attacks of the 1980s in Jersey City in the United States and the 1949 Riots in Durban, South Africa. As a consequence, the locales of such conflict became sites of new strategies of resistance, to alienation and marginalization on one hand, but also to homogenization and conformity on the other hand.

Diasporan identity is constituted in and reproduces hybridity, which now exists squarely at the heart of the center itself as a result of the movements, flows, and interminglings of populations and cultures. The "Native," first introduced in colonial discourses as discovered in exotic habitats, is now within the center itself, in the form of the twice-migrated South African Indian settled in New Jersey or London, for example. Such dislocations present an epistemological crisis for the center and margin alike, in that the demarcation between the traditional subject-knower (center) and the object of knowledge (the Native, the margin) is no longer clear. An identity crisis emerges as the

ontological boundary between “self” and “other” is perforated and penetrated. Discourses of ethnicity based on primordial notions of culture and place are ill-equipped to explain these new ironies because they are too deterministic. As noted earlier, they reify and freeze “difference” as pre-ordained and permanent in an attempt to secure meaning according to dominant interests (Sen 2006; Appiah 2006, Hall 1994).

In conceptualizing diasporan identity and the politics of resettlement, the role of the imperial center in shaping and collapsing identity globally cannot be ignored, given the fact that the center has produced and controlled the margins through the global political economy. Under globalization, entities such as core multinational corporations, supranational organizations, and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have gained hegemonic power through a global restructuring process that transcends the nation-state (Harvey 2005; Smith 2005). By shifting to "information technologies" and "flexible specialization" over the past few decades, capital has overcome both spatial-territorial and socio-cultural boundaries. The unevenness of these processes, however, is producing new spaces that political actors, from community based organizations (CBOs) to states, are in competition to control (Castells, 1998; Swyngedouw 1997, Lefebvre 1991). Old identities are ruptured and redefined as capital and labor have attained unprecedented levels of mobility across apparently dissolving national boundaries while class inequality deepens (Smith 2005; Smith 2000; Harvey 1996).

The scholarship on diasporas stresses the declining role and authority of the nation-state in order to focus on transnationalism (Shuval 2000). Vertovec (1999:449) observes that “the dispersed diasporas of old have become today’s transnational

communities, sustained by a range of modes of social organization, mobility, and community.” Advances in communications technology have allowed migrant communities to maintain transnational connections and networks, according to Vertovec (1999, 2000). In today’s global world, political activities, religious movements, and cultural products have become so transnational as to make national territorial boundaries seem insignificant, and prompt a bias in research toward transnationalism. This bias, however, has served to shift attention away prematurely from the fact that the nation-state is still the chief arbiter and guarantor of citizenship in spite of the growing influence of emergent alternatives, such as the global human rights regime. As a consequence of this bias, the diaspora literature is silent about the role of the nation-state in diasporan politics. The nation-state is hardly a “spent force” in history, as some theorists have argued (Friedman 2007; Ohmae 1990); it can still exercise violence with legitimacy and enforce territorial, cultural, or class boundaries. It is also the largest provider of social services to populations (Lake 2002; Glassman and Samatar 1997). Instead of “withering away,” states are themselves “transnationalizing” in order to articulate better with corporate and other forms of global power, and respond to emerging transnational political, religious, and social movements.

In addition to the transnationalism of South Asian migrants themselves, part of my work deals with how ideas pertaining to rights, recognition, and resistance originating in the non-Western periphery crossed national borders and impacted civil rights struggles in a core country, the United States. For example, Gandhi’s strategy of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance developed in South Africa and diffused to the United States via India, as discussed in Chapter 6. *Satyagraha*, as Gandhi’s movement was called, was

embraced and adopted by many liberation movements worldwide as they struggled for freedom and independence. Geographer James Blaut's work on spatial diffusion is important for understanding how ideas and political movements transcend national boundaries.

Spatial diffusion has long been a concern of geographers. Torsten Hägerstrand (1957, 1967) of the Lund School of Human Geography, for example, researched how innovation diffused across space. Partly influenced by Hagerstrand's work but working within a historical materialist perspective, James Blaut (1993; 1987b; 1977) made a number of observations regarding "diffusionism," a Eurocentric perspective on spatial diffusion and development. Diffusionism, according to Blaut, assumes that: (1) innovation and progress originate in the Western "core" and diffuse into the non-Western "periphery" of the global system; (2) the periphery is steeped in stagnation and traditionalism; (3) Western progress and advancement are due to the inherent rationality and cultural superiority of Europeans; 4) non-Western societies can develop only if ideas and practices from the European core diffuse toward the periphery. While recognizing the importance of the diffusion concept, Blaut's critique of diffusionism as an ideology entails a rejection of Europe as a natural core, and the concomitant belief that the most significant scientific, political, economic, and philosophical advances of humanity occurred in Europe and then diffused elsewhere. Instead, Blaut sought to explore how the periphery affected and impacted the core, and contributed to the core's development.

A much cited work in diaspora studies that deals with the transnational flows of cultural phenomena, in addition to the movement of people, is Paul Gilroy's (1993) *The*

*Black Atlantic*, which posits that Black identity formation and politics in Europe and America is an ongoing process of travel and exchange across the Atlantic Ocean. Like Blaut, Gilroy questions the idea of a singular, uniform modernity originating in Europe, and argues instead that transnational exchanges lie at the heart of Black modernity. However, conspicuously absent in Gilroy's otherwise rich analysis is any mention of the indentured labor system, South Asians, South Africa, or Gandhi, all of which profoundly shaped the transnational Black Atlantic discourse (discussed in Chapter 6). The indentured labor system was a major trans-oceanic economic and racial project of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. First introduced on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius using South Asian labor, indentured labor was exported across the Atlantic Ocean to British colonies in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas, via the Natal and Cape provinces of South Africa. South Africa, located strategically at the southern tip of the African continent, emerged as a strategic political and economic node in Atlantic and Indian Ocean geographies, as noted by oceanic systems scholars (see Hofmeyr 2007; Kaarsholm 2012; Hofmeyr and Williams 2011). Yet, Gilroy's work does not venture anywhere near South Africa or the regional systems it connects. South Asians are central to this transnational narrative, not only as indentured laborers, but also as traders and merchants who settled in South Africa, as Chapter 3 shows. South Asian resistance to racism in South Africa, particularly the efforts of Gandhi, dovetailed the South Asian migration and resettlement experiences in that country. Gandhi's enormous influence on the major African and African American liberation movements of the twentieth century are a vital part of not only Black Atlantic studies, but any transnational discourse. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I show that Gandhi and the transnational conversations between

South Africa, India, and the United States were crucial in articulating a response to racism and imperialism in these countries and elsewhere in modern times. The diffusion of strategies of resistance through transnational channels between South Asians, Africans, and African Americans made possible an alternative vision of modernity, as imagined by diverse racialized imperial subjects in solidarity.

## CONCLUSION

The process of internationalization that gave rise to modern migrations did not eradicate borders; rather, it occurred with and through the consolidation of the nation-state, which continues to evolve and adapt to the political and economic transformations brought about by globalization, leading us to appreciate anew the observation by Neil Smith (1994: 492) that “nation-states are, by definition, geographical solutions to political problems.” Migrants then, by definition, are political “problems” that disturb the apparently stable geographical “solutions” called nation-states.

This chapter overviewed some of the major theoretical debates on migration and racial identity formation that inform my study in the context of migration as described above. Although elites within nation-states promote the idea of national unity, they have also developed elaborate economic, political, and cultural schemes for excluding the masses under their rule from enjoying the benefits and entitlements of citizenship. Cornel West (1993:163) notes that marginalized groups rally around cultural, racial, and political identities as a way of demanding recognition, association, protection, and resources. In

South Africa and the United States, two national contexts explored in this study, physical appearance emerged as a major criterion in determining inclusion and exclusion within the nation. Drawing on the ideas of Hall, Said, Omi and Winant, Butler, Blaut, and others, I have tried to show in this chapter that racial identities, as social constructions, are neither static nor permanent, but nevertheless have real and material consequences. Crafted under specific political and economic circumstances, racial identities and racial rules are constantly rewritten by subjects, societies, and states as part of the historic process by which membership in the nation is arbitrated by those in power. In sum, I conceptualize race as one unequal, constructed relation among many others that are part of ongoing historical, hegemonic processes by which nation-states are organized and ruled. In subsequent chapters, I explore how South Asian migrants have inhabited and constructed their identities alongside, and at times against, other racialized groups in a struggle for recognition, rights, and resources within two nation-states, South Africa and the United States.

## CHAPTER THREE: EARLY RACE RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

### INTRODUCTION

“Globalization” is not a new phenomenon. Advances in communication and computer technology may have intensified the scope and scale of globalization since the 1990s; nevertheless, the world economy has been expanding and integrating at least since the 1500s. European imperialist expansion, international trade, and the worldwide movement of people are all aspects of a protracted process that has been changing the face of the Earth as well as relations amongst human beings for half a millennium. The ephemerality, transience, and dynamism of this process is presciently captured by Marx and Engels (1906: 17-18) with great clarity in the following celebrated passage from *The Communist Manifesto*:

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with his sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind. The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.... It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

One aspect of the growth of capitalism during the age of European colonial and imperial expansion is the establishment of commercial agricultural estates and other related ventures in many parts of the world by European settlers. Agricultural goods, especially coffee, tea, tobacco, and sugar, were among the most important commodities driving the international economy during the 1700s and 1800s, owing to enormous



demand. For example, in the United Kingdom, sugar consumption increased from 19.08lb per year in 1830 to 71.09lb per year in 1890 (Hobsbawm 1975: 205-207; Martineau, 1917). A common feature of these enterprises was that they needed vast reserves of cheap labor to facilitate quick and profitable production. The trans-Atlantic slave trade to the Americas and other destinations intensified as a result. However, the abolition of slavery in the early 1800s led to a severe shortage of labor, especially in the tea and sugar estates of the Caribbean, and a frantic search for alternative sources of labor ensued. British and other colonial authorities eventually turned to the importation of indentured labor from India to continue with production as before.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the circumstances that led to the introduction of Indian indentured labor in Natal (South Africa) and to explore how these laborers became incorporated into that society's emerging system of racial segregation. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part offers an overview of indentured servitude and the incorporation of Indians into a global system of labor. The second part discusses the critical role played by Indian indentured labor in the development of the British colony of Natal in southern Africa and describes the challenges faced by Indians upon their arrival. The third section introduces the nascent politics of racial identity in South Africa involving a triangulation of Indians, Africans, and whites dating back to the years of Indian indenture in Natal.

## THE EVOLUTION OF INDIAN INDENTURED LABOR

The system of indentured labor developed in the British colonies in response to the abolition of slavery in the early 1800s. Given their new found freedom, former slaves refused to work on plantations, leaving plantation owners and colonial authorities to struggle for alternative sources of labor if production was to return to previous levels. The labor shortage was particularly severe in the sugar estates as freed slaves refused to return to the backbreaking work of cutting sugar cane. For example, on the island of Mauritius, nearly all former slaves had left the cane fields by the mid 1840s for other work, usually in the city (Allen, 2008; Carter 2008). During the same period, cane rotted in the fields as slaves abandoned plantations in Jamaica. Initially, plantation owners responded with attempts to recruit labor from parts of Europe. Some 4000 workers from England, Scotland, Germany, and Ireland were transported to various plantations in the Caribbean on three to five year contracts (Tinker, 1974). However, the recruitment of European labor proved to be unsuccessful due to the high mortality rates as European workers could not readily acclimatize to daily toil under the tropical sun. Furthermore, as opportunities for upward mobility in other sectors of the economy presented themselves, European laborers proved increasingly transient. This problem is noted by Marx in *Capital*, Volume I (1976: 932-933), in which he narrates the situation of one Mr. Peel, a colonial entrepreneur:

Mr. Peel took with him from England to Swan River, West Australia means of subsistence and of production to the amount of £50,000. Mr. Peel had the foresight to bring with him besides 3,000 persons of the working class, men,

women, and children. Once arrived at this destination, Mr. Peel was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water from the river. Unhappy Mr. Peel, who provided for everything except the export of the English modes of production to Swan River.

The case described by Marx illustrates that when public land was available to White workers in a colonial context, they readily acquired it and moved beyond the status of laborers, and out of the reach and control of fellow Europeans. It was for the reason of limited social and spatial mobility that European plantation owners had originally resorted to racialized slavery, and for that same reason, they turned to racialized indentured servitude upon the abolition of slavery. As the problem of securing a dependable source of cheap labor became paramount, the indenture of a racial other increasingly appeared to be a viable solution.

The indentured labor system was thought to grow out of the death of slavery, but in reality amounted to the continuation of slavery by other means (Tinker 1974). In order to distance themselves from the moral opprobrium surrounding the institution of slavery, colonial authorities were careful to represent the indentured labor system as “free”. They took great pains to signal a break from the “forced” labor of the past by stressing that indentured laborers would be “paid a salary” and would be able to “enter voluntarily into a signed contract.” The appearance of the willing consent and participation of the indentured servant in his/her employment was important. Such carefully worded language also proved useful during recruitment drives. While indentured laborers initially came from various places, including Europe, eventually India became the most plentiful source. From 1834 to 1917, approximately 1.5 million people from India resettled in

other parts of the world under this system, with the largest number going to Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Natal (South Africa) (See Table 3.1 below).

<b>Major Colonies Importing Indian Indentured Labor</b>		
	<b>Period of Migration</b>	<b>Number of emigrants</b>
<b>Mauritius</b>	1834-1900	453,063
<b>British Guiana</b>	1838-1916	238,909
<b>Malaya</b>	1844-1910	250,000
<b>Trinidad</b>	1845-1916	143,939
<b>Jamaica</b>	1845-1913	36,412
<b>Grenada</b>	1856-1885	3,200
<b>St. Lucia</b>	1858-1895	4,350
<b>Natal</b>	1860-1911	152,184
<b>St. Kitts</b>	1860-1861	337
<b>St. Vincent</b>	1860-1880	2,472
<b>Reunion</b>	1861-1863	26,507
<b>Surinam</b>	1873-1916	34,304
<b>Fiji</b>	1879-1916	60,965
<b>East Africa</b>	1896-1921	39,282
<b>Seychelles</b>	1904-1916	6,315

**Table 3.1** Major Colonies Importing Indian Indentured Labor  
**Source:** Based on Lal (1983)

Without the indentured labor system, planters would have had to accede to the wage demands of emancipated slaves and other free laborers. Thus, “indentured workers were forced into becoming the international scabs of the nineteenth century” (Meer 1985:46). In fact, from the planters’ perspective, indentured labor was cheaper than slavery. The price of an enslaved person, at the time of emancipation in the Caribbean, was between £200 - £250 for an average life span of ten years. An indentured servant, on the other hand, cost the planter approximately £55 for ten years including wages and passage. Observing that “their cost is not half that of slaves” (cited in Tinker 1974: 5/78), planters were thrilled about the new system.

The “new” system bore a striking likeness to the old. Both relied on local agents to capture (in the case of slavery) or “recruit” (in the case of indentured labor) people into the respective systems. Slaves and indentured laborers were frequently marched in chain gangs to ports of departure. Since both were considered “commodities,” they were locked up and guarded until boarding time. Slaves were branded before leaving for their new destinations. Indentured servants, on the other hand, were required to wear a tin ticket around their necks in order to signal a departure from branding. Kidnapping and luring were not uncommon “recruitment” methods of indenture. In a testimony before the Wragg Commission<sup>1</sup> Aboobaker, an indentured servant, testified that

the coolies are recruited under false pretences, in very many instances; for example I know an Indian woman, a Brahmin, she belonged to Lucknow; through a quarrel with her mother she made a pilgrimage to Allahabad; when there she met a man who told her that if she would work, she would be able to get twenty-five rupees a month in a European family, by taking care of the baby of a lady who lived about six hours sea journey from Calcutta; she went on board and,

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<sup>1</sup> The Wragg Commission was one of many established to investigate the abuses of indenture.

instead of taking her to the place proposed she was brought to Natal. I know of many similar cases.

A committee established in the late 1830s to investigate the conditions of indentured labor highlighted some of the problems of the system. The committee's report, submitted on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1840, stated that it was

proved beyond dispute that "the coolies and other natives exported to Mauritius and elsewhere were (generally speaking) induced ...[and that] ... the parties were really incapable of understanding the nature of the contracts they were said to have entered into, even when an opportunity had been afforded apparently sufficient for the purpose.

The report went on to point out that

kidnappings prevailed to a considerable extent. ... An impression was successfully created and maintained that they would be liable to penal consequences if they expressed dissatisfaction at being sent on board ships. ... The legislative enactments and regulations of police made and passed for the prevention of abuses (in India) were of very little effect."<sup>2</sup>

Debt was often used to ensnare recruits, who were told that their only escape was through indenture or re-indenture. Testimony before the Wragg Commission mentions that there was "this feeling that a man who lends money to a pauper obtains a right over his person..." The indentured labor system proved to be a reliable, economical supply of labor for the plantations, without access to which the owners would have had to resort to using Europeans or indigenous labor, or former slaves, at much higher cost and increased

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<sup>2</sup> Report of the Committee appointed to inquire into the abuses alleged to exist in exporting from Bengal Hill Coolies and Indian Labourers. , Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons) 1841 Vol. XVI, no 45, "Correspondence Between the Government of India and Court of Directors Relating to the Hill Coolies," p.4

liability. The fact that India was part of the British Empire helped facilitate the recruitment of Indians as a stable workforce for colonial plantations.

The gender imbalance within the indentured labor system was stark, with men accounting for 70 % and women 30 %. With respect to religion, about 90% were of Hindu origin and 10% were Muslim. With the exception of indentured servants who settled in Natal (South Africa), who mainly came from southern India (Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh), the majority originated from the northern provinces (Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) (Sahoo, 2006; Metcalf, 2002; Bhana, 1991).

### **Mauritius and the Innovation of Indenture**

In *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*, V.S. Naipaul (2002:119) writes about the island of Mauritius as a vacuous space of disaster: "... an agricultural colony, created by empire in an empty island and always meant to be part of something larger, now given a thing called independence and set adrift, an abandoned imperial barracoon, incapable of economic or cultural autonomy." Yet, in spite of Naipaul's diffusionist views<sup>3</sup> this little island, seemingly "lost" in the Indian Ocean, is of pivotal importance in the study of Indian indentured servitude in the era of European capitalist expansion (See Figure 3.1). Obscure and irrelevant as they may appear to some, the

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<sup>3</sup> Diffusionism is a Eurocentric worldview which holds that crucial events in human civilization either happened in Europe, or happened because of some impetus from Europe. Inventive ability is assumed to be extremely rare, if non-existent in other parts of the world. Hence, innovations, goods, and technology were believed to spread from Europe to the 'periphery' (Blaut 1993, 1977).

fortunes of Mauritius proved to be crucial in deciding the economic and political future of empire under capitalism. This “isolated speck” was an important crucible of the capitalist world economy’s transition out of slavery and an epicenter of emerging labor practices in the British Empire in the mid-1800s.<sup>4</sup> It was the Mauritian experiment with Indian indentured labor that led to the globalization of the system.

Originating on the sugar plantations of the British Empire, indentured labor might be understood as a vital innovation in the labor practices of global capitalism. Historical accounts offer two main narratives of labor migration to this Indian Ocean island, i.e.



**Figure 3.1:** Map of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean

**Source:** <http://www.adventuremoon.com> last accessed on May 18, 2013

from the African “slave” and Indian “indentured laborer” perspectives, respectively.

However, this bifurcation obscures a more complex reality. For example, a recent study

<sup>4</sup> In addition to its historical inaccuracies, Naipaul’s characterization of Mauritius does not adequately describe contemporary realities as well. Francoise Lionnet (1993) describes Mauritius as a “model post-colonial state, one that is even being hailed as a superb example of successful mediations of the uncertain relationship between nationhood and ethnic or cultural identity.”



on slavery in Mauritius concentrates almost exclusively on the African experience (Vaughan 2005), overlooking the centuries long Indian Ocean slave trade of Indians.

Indian slavery remains an under-researched topic. Carter (2008) interrogates the above dichotomy and shows that the French had brought Indians as slaves and artisans to Mauritius when they began colonizing the Island in 1712, importing them directly from French settlements in India, especially Pondicherry, from the 1720s onward. Thus, there has been a continuous Indian presence in Mauritius since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, owing first to slavery and only later to indentured servitude. Furthermore, the Indian experience on the island puts into perspective the common view that slavery is exclusively an African experience.

By the end of the 18th century, Mauritius emerged as an important center of French commercial activity in the Indian Ocean. The capture of Mauritius by the British in December 1810 led to fundamental changes in its society and its economy. The British conquest resulted in the further importation of Indian convict labor as well as Indian traders to the island. Sugar production came to dominate the island's economy, accounting for 85% to 90% of Mauritius's annual exports earnings by the 1830s. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Mauritius accounted for 7% of the world's sugar production as Britain's key sugar colony in the Indian Ocean (Allen 2008).

As the call for the abolition of slavery gained momentum, plantation owners in Mauritius and the Caribbean were anxious about whether emancipated slaves would continue to work on the plantations and whether agricultural enterprises would survive without a supply of labor (Kale 1998). With this concern in mind, planters in Mauritius

began preparing to import indentured labor almost immediately following the emancipation Act of 1833. On August 1, 1834 the day emancipation went into effect throughout the British Empire, the first 39 indentured Indians boarded the ship *S.S. Sarah*<sup>5</sup> for Mauritius. The island began to receive indentured contract laborers in record numbers. In fact, it received the largest number of Indian migrants during the period of indenture. Other colonies of the British Empire followed suit. John Gladstone (father of the British Prime Minister William Gladstone), for example, began to recruit indentured laborers soon thereafter for his plantations in British Guiana, after learning of their successful implementation in Mauritius.

### **Indians and Indenture**

Indenture emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the chief reason for Indian migration from India and catapulted “Indian” identity onto the global stage. Indian indentured laborers left their ancestral homeland to work in far off places for a variety of reasons. Many came from India’s lower castes and wanted to escape discrimination, poverty and landlessness. They also aspired to a better life abroad as promised by recruiters. As noted earlier, potential migrants were lured into the system by agents employing questionable hiring methods.

Since the onset of the indentured labor system dovetailed so closely the abolition of slavery, plantation owners treated indentured laborers as if “there was little difference

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<sup>5</sup> See Petition to the Queen from Planters, Traders and Other Inhabitants of Mauritius, 18 May 1839, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 1840 Vol.XXXVII, no. 58, “Correspondence Respecting Employment of Indian Labourers in Mauritius,” p.7.

between their new charges and their former slaves” (Thomas 1985: 2). Evidence from a variety of sources (court cases, official reports, personal narratives of indenture, etc) points to harsh and oppressive conditions under indenture leading some scholars, such as Tinker (1974), characterizing the system as nothing more than a new form of slavery. Lai (1993, xi) echoes Tinker that in the experience of indenture, “the phenomenon of labor coercion, far from dying out, assumed new and diverse forms.”

The horrors of the Trans-Atlantic slave voyages are well known. The journeys of the Indian indentured laborers to their new countries, by comparison, may not have been as harsh, but nevertheless, were ordeals to be endured by the travelers. Outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, small pox, dysentery, measles and whooping cough were common. In 1859, 82 indentured servants died en-route to Guiana due to a cholera outbreak and in 1863, another ship to the same destination lost 124 passengers. One of the worst cases occurred en-route to Mauritius when more than 400 passengers of the ship *Shah Allam* lost their lives when the vessel caught fire (Shlomowitz and McDonald 1990).

In all, the experience of indenture was oppressive. Pay was minimal and accommodation was unsanitary and unsafe, with little privacy for couples or families. Death rates were very high as a consequence of disease, accidents, murder and suicide. Suicide rates were particularly high in Fiji and Natal (South Africa), at 7.3. and 6.3 percent, respectively, suggesting a sense of helplessness and despair amongst the workers (Lal, 2000; Meer 1976). Interestingly, in spite of the harsh conditions, the majority of these laborers chose not to return to India after their period of indenture was over. Most chose to remain in the new countries owing to their memory of a worse life in India, the

fact that they had lost touch with their homeland, and the reality of having new family and socio-cultural ties where they were now. For better or worse, they cast their lot with their new homeland.

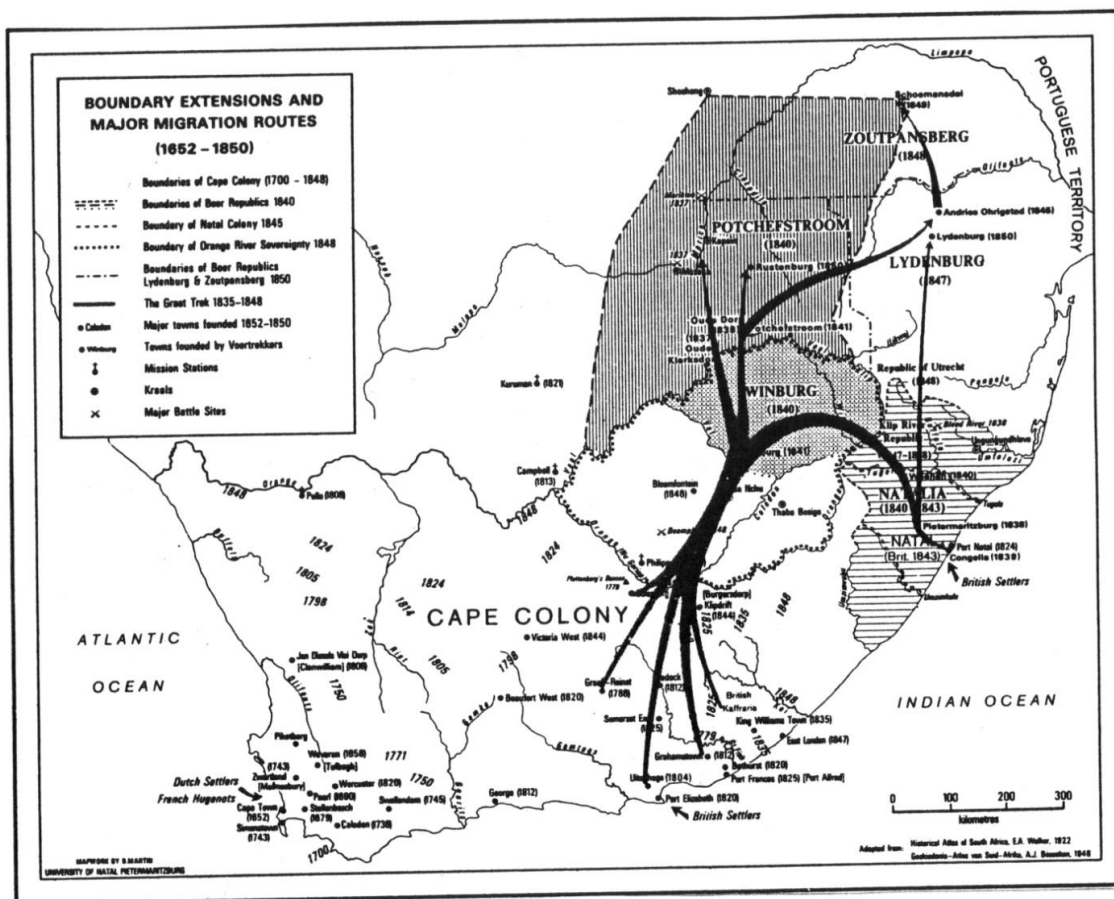
### **“THE COOLIES ARE HERE”<sup>6</sup>: INDENTURED INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

South Africa was a major destination for Indian indentured labor. Not yet a unified political entity when the first Indian indentured servants arrived in 1860, South Africa consisted of the Cape, a self-governing British colony with Cecil John Rhodes as its premier, and Natal, a Crown Colony, situated on the east coast. The interior territories of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were Boer (Afrikaner) republics that were established by Dutch and French Huguenot settlers who had migrated inland from the Cape during what has been termed the “Great Trek” (See Figure 3.2).

Until the early 1800s, the Dutch settlers in the Cape relied on slaves from Asia and parts of Africa to meet their labor needs in the colony. In fact the first Indians to be brought to South Africa were not indentured servants, as commonly assumed, but slaves, transported by the Dutch East India Company during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Taken from Bengal, the Coromandel and Malabar Coasts, as well as the Indonesian islands, they became part of a slave population of 40,000 in the Cape Colony. These Indians

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<sup>6</sup> Headline from *The Natal Mercury*, a South African newspaper, November 1860.



**Figure 3.2:** The Boer Republics and British colonies; routes taken during the Great Trek  
**Source:** A. Lemon (1987:25)

eventually integrated into the mixed-race Asiatic “Cape Malay” population, as well as the indigenous African communities, and subsequently lost their “Indian” identity. An analysis of this fascinating history is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is important to note that although the arrival of Indian indentured servants in 1860 (discussed in this chapter) is used commonly as a benchmark in the history of Indians in South Africa (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:10), the Indian presence in the region has been continuous since 1652, when the first Dutch arrived at the Cape of Good Hope (Reddy, 1991).

The slave trade to the Cape ended in 1807 and enslaved persons on the Cape colony were emancipated in 1834, as slavery was abolished throughout the empire. As a consequence, settlers in British colonies around the world turned to other systems of labor exploitation. In Australia, for example, convict labor was used extensively to meet labor needs. This option was not pursued in South Africa because of a turn in the political history of the settlers. According to Freund (1995:2), “the origins of parliamentary democracy at the Cape in 1853 are closely linked to the popular movement which successfully aimed at preventing its becoming a penal settlement”. Thus, it was indigenous Africans and indentured Indian labor, rather than European labor, that fulfilled most labor needs in the South Africa.

### **The Natal Sugar Industry**

The Indian presence in South Africa is linked closely to developments in the colony of Natal at the time. The first Europeans to settle in Natal were British traders who arrived in 1824 to trade ivory with indigenous Africans in the Port of Natal. However, these settlers did not move into the interior of the province with their families (Hattersley 1949); the first Europeans to do so were those of Dutch ancestry, in 1837. The mid-1800s saw an increase in European migration to the Natal colony. Like European colonial settlers elsewhere in the world, the settlers of Natal searched for commodities that would be lucrative in the international markets. There was some unsuccessful experimentation with cotton and other tropical crops in the 1840s and 1850s, but by the 1860s, sugar soon became the commodity of choice in colonial Natal.

The burgeoning sugar industry was in desperate need of labor, both for harvesting the crops and for clearing arable land for cultivation. Britain formally annexed Natal in 1844 and conferred upon it the status of a separate Crown colony in 1856. At this point, some 6000 British settlers tried to assert their dominance over about 100,000 indigenous Africans. In doing so, the new settler regime faced the dual challenge of keeping the colony economically viable while simultaneously gaining political control over the indigenous population (Maylam 1986; Morrell, et al. 1996). Indians were introduced into this milieu as a labor force for sugar production, but soon found themselves caught in the power struggle between the white settlers and the indigenous population. Plantation owners often claimed that Indians were recruited to work on the sugar plantations because Africans were lazy and refused to do manual work (see Munsamy 1997), but the reality had more to do with colonial governance strategies than the work ethic of indigenous Africans. The challenges facing the colony, as perceived by the Natal Native Commission, are outlined below, followed by the Commission's recommendations on how the colony ought to be administered:

The natives' own laws are superseded; the restraints which they furnish are removed. The government of their own chiefs is at an end; and, although it is a fact that the British rule and law have been substituted in their stead, it is not less true that they are almost as inoperative as if they had not been proclaimed, from a want of the necessary representatives and agents to carry them out. The danger of such a state of things scarcely needs our pointing out (cited from Mamdani, 1996: 62-3).

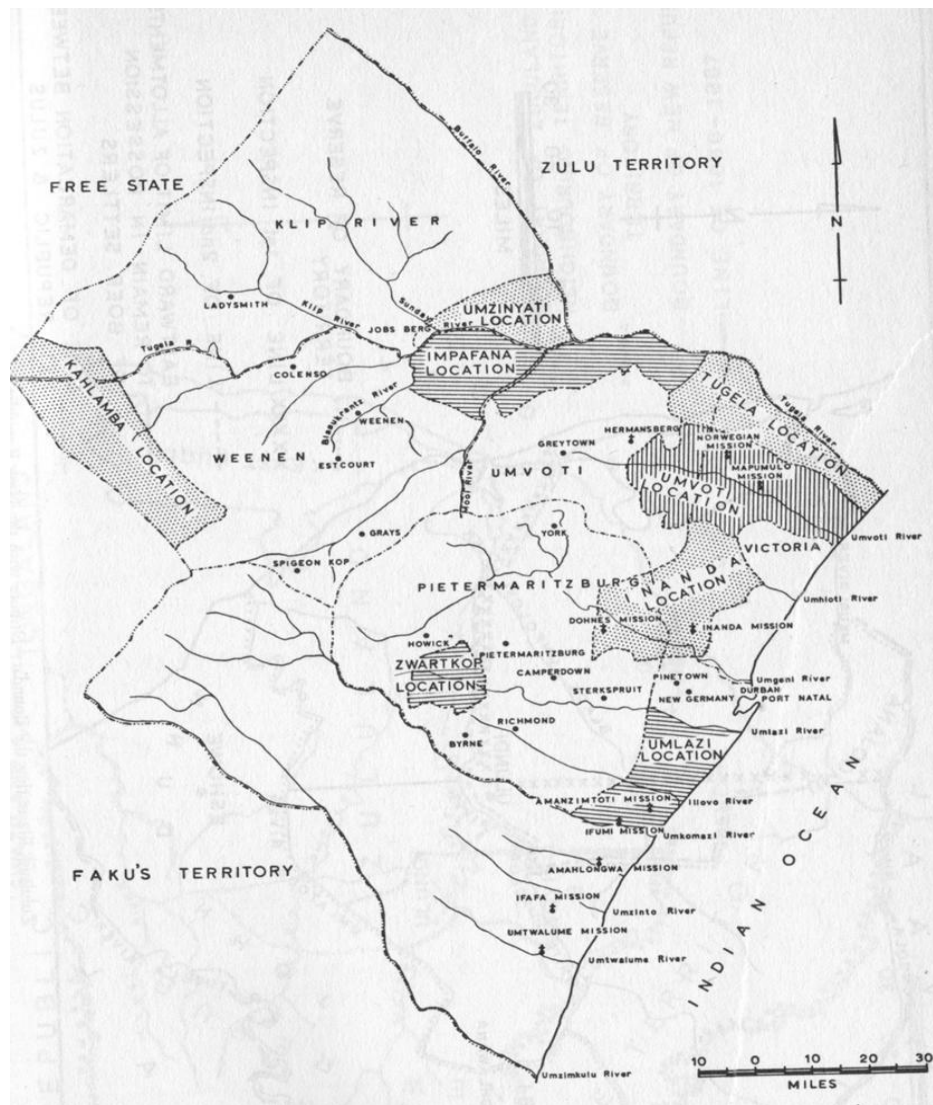
Sir Theophilus Shepstone headed the colonial efforts to deal with the indigenous peoples of Natal, serving first as Diplomatic Agent to the Native Tribes and later as Secretary for Native Affairs. As the colonial government did not have the means or desire

to directly incorporate the African population into its administrative structures, Sir Theophilus was instrumental in developing what subsequently became known as the “Shepstone System,” a classic example of the British method of indirect rule. It was “a dual system, one for the colonizers, the other for the natives, one modern, the other customary” (cited from Mamdani 1996:62 ), that rested on two core principles. First, specific geographic areas were demarcated and reserved for the indigenous population. Eight locations, each approximately one-sixth of the total Natal land area, were identified for African settlement and tens of thousands of Africans were resettled into these areas (See Figure 3.3).

It was Shepstone’s view that this system “protected” the African population against settler colonial abuse and provide educational opportunities for the native population. The Natal Native Commission report called for the establishment of a vocational school in each location where “the useful arts should be taught and practically illustrated” (cited from Brookes and Hurwitz, 1957: 12). The reality, however, did not live up to this claim. The African reserves received very little government aid and virtually no support for education. Missionaries provided the little formal education that was available in the African reserves.

Second, Shepstone instituted a system of governance known as “native administration,” in which the colonial authorities recognized “customary law” and gave local chiefs (*inkosi*) limited judicial powers over the native areas and population. The *inkosi*, in turn were overseen by the white colonial authorities. Thus the system not only

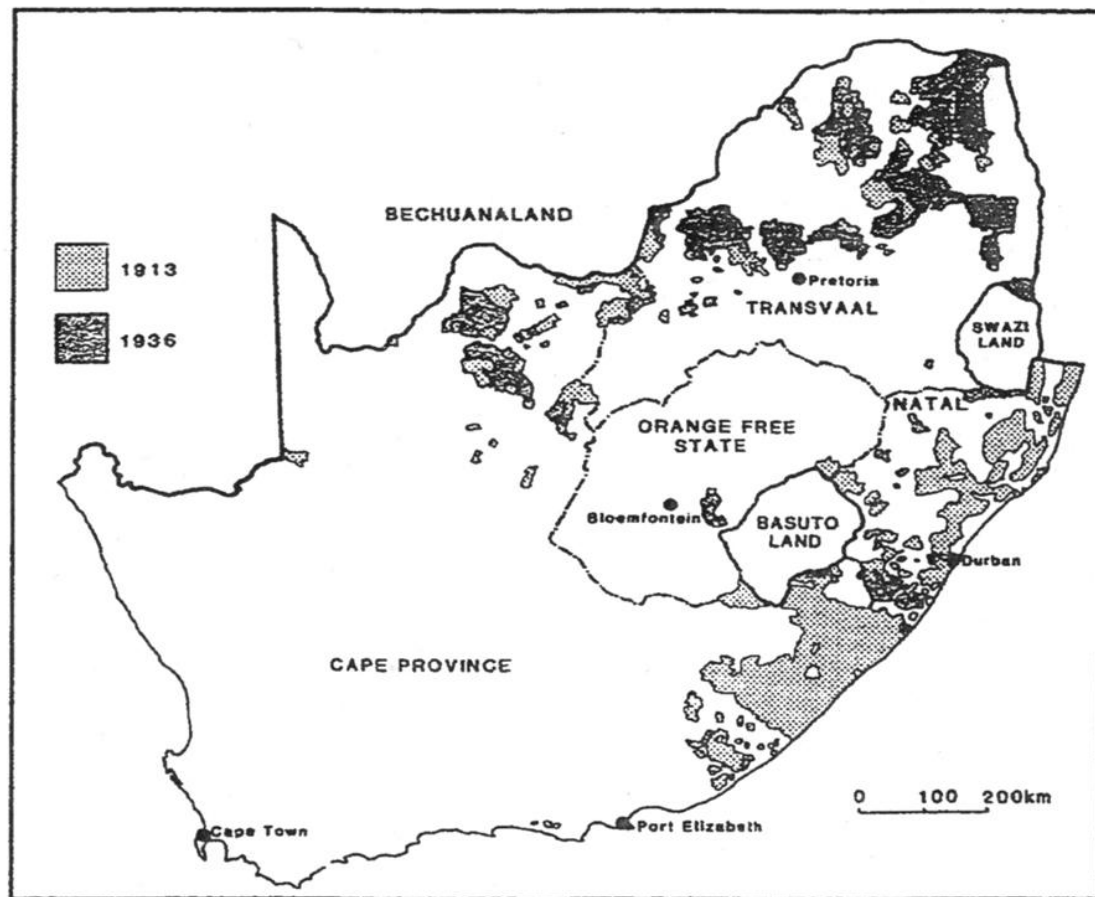




**Figure 3.3:** Areas Covered by the Shepstone System

**Source:** Brooks and Webb, 1965: p.301

drew a rigid distinction between “subject” and “citizen”, but also between Native and European spaces. These territorial and administrative distinctions served as the basis for the 1913 and 1939 Land Acts, and eventually the Bantustan policy of the apartheid regime from the 1950s onward (See Figure 3.4).



**Figure 3.4:** The 1913 and 1939 Land Acts

**Source:** Christopher, 1994: p. 33

The Shepstone System drew upon prevailing social-Darwinistic conceptions of race and evolution to construct a “civilizational” hierarchy between the European settler and the African native. For example, the British writer H. Rider Haggard (1886:96) claimed that Africans in Natal were savages and that “in the struggle between them and civilization, it is possible that they may be conquered, but I do not believe that they

will be converted. The Zulu Kafir is incompatible with civilization.” The system designed by Shepstone was a spatial/territorial manifestation of this common colonial trope where the reserve areas functioned as “anachronistic space”, within which was inscribed the Europeans’ perceptions of evolutionary differences between themselves and their Other. ... (McClintock 1995:41). Africa was commonly regarded within colonial paradigms as a land perpetually out of step with modernity, lost and historically ignored. Although the Shepstone system ultimately led to the displacement of Africans from their ancestral lands, it initially offered Africans a limited opportunity to escape the encroachment of European settlement by assigning them to their “native” spaces.

However, a contradiction emerged as long as Africans remained in their reserved areas: European planters experienced great difficulty recruiting Africans as laborers on the sugar cane plantations because the Africans were part of a vibrant peasantry with a subsistence economy of their own. This enabled them to resist being forced into working in the colonial capitalist agricultural sector well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Richardson, 1982). Although Natal’s climate was ideal for sugar cane farming, the enterprise itself got off to a slow start primarily due to the Europeans’ lack of access to a permanent workforce. Sugar planters frequently lamented the difficulty of securing African labor, so abundant in their eyes, yet beyond their reach. For example, Robert Babbs, owner of the Umlaas Plantation, complained that the Zulus could not be subjected to agricultural work on the sugar cane fields, which often required up to 12 to 14 hour work days, especially during the harvest season<sup>7</sup>: “It is generally known that the Kafir looks to the

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<sup>7</sup> Sugar production has its own particularities that requires inflexible labor practices especially during the harvest season. The raw cane juice must be extracted before oxidation and fermentation alter the chemical

sun to regulate his hours of labor. It is difficult either to induce or compel him to work either before or after those periods of the day which have received his arbitrary definitions of sunrise and sunset” (Atkins, 1993: 84-85).

In addition to the exceeding demands of the cane fields, the norms and practices of Zulu culture also proscribed African men from engaging in agricultural work. Within the gendered division of labor in Zulu peasant/subsistence economic systems, women were expected to cultivate the soil whilst men engaged in hunting and managing the livestock. As long as this gendered system remained intact and viable, Europeans found it difficult to recruit Africans for commercial or agricultural work for profit on the Natal coast. The Europeans observed that African men shunned cultivation altogether, whilst African women mostly remained in their communal lands. Men and women seldom ventured out to seek employment on European plantations on the coast, and when they did, they were able to do so on their own terms (Thompson, 1990; Roberts, 1974). According to Shepstone, “only semi-starvation would have driven the Natal tribesman to work in the cane fields, and once the conditions improved he would have left” (cited from Brookes and Webb, 1965: 81).

Such observations and complaints aside, when seen in perspective, Africans workers were in fact already working in the commercial capitalistic sectors at this time. In fact, they were increasingly performing a number of tasks in colonial Natal by the mid-1800s due to the scarcity of ancestral land and the taxes that they were increasingly forced to pay. The imposition of taxes gradually drew Africans out of their communal

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content. Turnaround time from harvesting to processing must be very quick. The crop requires constant care during the harvest period to ensure that it does not rot.

lands and forced them to work in the capitalist sector in order to earn the wages needed to pay the taxes. In a testimony before the Native Affairs Commission in 1852, a local magistrate observed the following regarding tasks performed by African workers during this period: "On a farm he [the African worker] does almost everything - he herds the cattle, milks the cows, churns the butter, loads it on the wagons, the oxen of which he inspan and leads. He cuts wood, and thatch, digs sluits, and makes bricks and reaps the harvest, and in the house, invariably cooks. There is little that I ever saw a farmer do, but ride about the country. In the town, there are some familiar cases in which *kaffir* labor is employed to a ridiculous extent: for in what quarter of the globe would male adults be found performing the offices of nurses to infants and children or as laundresses of female apparel" (cited from Meer, 1980: 5).

Thus, the problem was not simply the lack of African labor *per se* or a faulty African work ethic, as sugar cane planters often portrayed it, but the fact that an African subsistence economy continued to thrive in Natal despite European efforts to tax and lure potential workers. This suggests that Africans had alternatives to seeking employment in the white-owned capitalist agricultural sector. As Marks (1986:26) points out, "colonialists were forced to come to terms with the strength of precapitalist social formations and then attempt to utilize elements within them for their own purposes of extraction and control (Marks 1986:26). During this period, Africans still had access to land and cattle and could negotiate the terms of their labor. Thus, the colonial administration faced increasing pressure to address the labor shortage on the plantations.

By the 1850s, planters had great difficulty processing the crops. For example, many estates could not procure sufficient labor to harvest their cane, according to *The Natal Mercury*, the leading newspaper of the colony.<sup>8</sup> In 1859, the newspaper sounded an alarm: “The fate of the colony hangs on a thread and that thread is labor. Many hundreds of acres of land of splendid cane [would] rot if adequate labor were not secured.”<sup>9</sup> The planters lamented in a petition to the Natal Legislative Council that they were “suffering from a want of Kaffir labor and this want was paralyzing the enterprise of the Colony and retarding its prosperity.”<sup>10</sup> At first, the Natal planters tried to address the problem by importing Chinese laborers from Java, who were offered pay of 10 shillings per month. However, this experiment was not successful as the Chinese demanded higher wages and did not want to work the long hours on sugar cane plantations (Yap and Man, 1996). There were also unsuccessful attempts to import Portuguese workers from the Madeira Islands and “Creoles” from Reunion (Chattopadhyaya 1970).

As noted earlier, the European settlers themselves did not want to work as laborers on sugar plantations and instead preferred to become traders and land owners. This fact is also evinced in a letter addressed to the Secretary of Government in India by Rawson W. Rawson, the Colonial Secretary of the Cape: “... as all the immigrants of that class [Europeans] arrive with the desire of becoming employers of labour and as they soon become proprietors of land and unwilling to work for hire to others, it is in vain, at least for some years, to look in this direction for relief to the present wants of the

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<sup>8</sup> June 27, 1855.

<sup>9</sup> *The Natal Mercury* (editorial), April 28, 1859.

<sup>10</sup> Document 14 “Petitions by White Planters to Natal Legislative Council for Indian Labour” April 4, 1859. Cited from Y.S. Meer (ed). (1980) *Documents of Indenture: Natal 1851-1917*.

colony.”<sup>11</sup> The Colonial government, which had been considering the importation of Indian indentured labor into the region as early as 1851, convened a meeting to evaluate this possibility. The colonial authorities saw the advantages as follows: “The rates of wages of these men would be low and the cost of their keep very little. Besides which they would form a most formidable barrier to any inroads of the Kaffirs and they (Indians) might be entrusted with firearms .... (and the coolie could not) depress white wages as he could not compete with them.”<sup>12</sup>

The Natal Colonial Administration initiated negotiations with the Indian authorities in 1856 to bring indentured labor into the colony. In the previous year, the Durban municipal authority, in support of the local sugar planters, called for indentured Indian labor by submitting a memorandum to Sir George Grey, the High Commissioner over British Territories in Southern Africa:

We believe Your Excellency will find occasion to sanction the introduction of a limited number of Coolies or other labourers from the East, in aid of the new enterprises on the coast lands, to the success of which, sufficient and reliable labourers are absolutely essential; for the fact cannot be too strongly borne in mind, that on the success or failure of these rising enterprises, depends the advancement of the colony, or its certain and rapid decline. Experimental cultivation has abundantly demonstrated that the issue depends solely on the constant supply of labor.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rawson W. Rawson, Letter to Secretary of Government of India dated November 17, 1855, on the importation of Coolies to Natal

<sup>12</sup> Y.S. Meer *Documents of Indenture* op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> *The Natal Mercury*, July 25, 1855

Negotiations were concluded in 1859 and a Coolie Immigration Department was established in 1859 to oversee the creation of an indentured labor system in the Natal colony (Huttenback 1966).<sup>14</sup> The first Indian indentured workers arrived in Natal in 1860. As mentioned previously, Indians were motivated to leave their homeland, India, and participate in the global indenture labor system as a consequence of push and pull forces generated by emerging capitalist economies. As the regions from which Indians were recruited were stricken by droughts, floods and famine, emigration appeared to offer these individuals a way “to obtain relief from a situation which was no longer tolerable” (Tinker 1974:118).

From 1860 to 1911 Natal’s colonial authorities imported over 150,000 Indian indentured laborers to work on sugar and tea estates.<sup>15</sup> The *S.S. Truro* sailing from Madras, and the *S.S. Belvedere* sailing from Calcutta were the first two carriers that brought Indian indentured labor to Natal. A headline in *The Natal Mercury* proclaimed that “the coolies are here” as the *Truro* docked in Durban harbor on November 16, 1860, and the first contingent of Indian indentured laborers (342 in all) disembarked on South African soil. Ten days later, the *S.S. Belvedere* arrived from Calcutta with 351 Indians. Five thousand Indian indentured servants had arrived in Natal by the mid-1860s and “coolie” labor proved utterly indispensable to the economic growth of the colony. (See Table 3.2). As *The Natal Mercury* proclaimed,

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<sup>14</sup> The Coolie Immigration Department was responsible for registering Indian immigrants and assigning them to employers. It was also responsible for collecting monies from employers who were to pay three-fifths of the cost of Indian immigration.

<sup>15</sup> While Indian indentured laborers initially came to work on sugar and tea plantations in Natal, they also moved into other sectors of the economy. Indentured labor was used in the coal mines of northern Natal, as well as in the construction industry and in the colonial railways. After the period of indenture expired, many Indians moved to the Afrikaner republic of the Transvaal before the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.



Coolie immigration, after several years' experience of it is deemed more essential to our prosperity than ever. It is the vitalizing principle. It may be tested by its results. Had it not been for coolie labour, we should certainly not have had it to say that our sugar export increased from £26,000 in 1863 to £100,000 in 1864 and has prospects of greater increase before it. Had it not been for coolie labour we should not hear of coffee plantations springing up on all hands and of the prosperity of older ones being sustained through the agency of East Indian men. ... We do not think that the white laboring population ... need be alarmed about the fancied effects of East Indian competition. ... His presence will rather be a benefit to European mechanics and workmen, in as much as the enlarged production and increased prosperity he will create must give wider scope for the employment of our own skilled countrymen."

Year	Sugar Exports From Natal
1857	£2,009
1859	£3,860
1863	£26,000
1864	£100,000

**Table 3.2:** Annual Sugar Exports From Natal  
(Source: Based on C.G. Henning (1993))

### **The Indian Experience of Indenture in Natal**

Indian indentured laborers came to Natal on five year contracts. After their period of indenture expired, they were free to receive a state-sponsored trip back to India or remain in the colony. If they agreed to renew their contracts for an additional five years they could, at the discretion of colonial authorities, receive a piece of land in lieu of the

return fare to India<sup>16</sup> (Swanson 1983; Kuper 1960). The colonial authorities depicted and treated “coolies” condescendingly as a homogenous group without regard to the marked ethnic and linguistic differences amongst them. The majority of the indentured agricultural servants in Natal came from the Tamil and Telugu speaking regions of India, and from the lower castes of the Hindu faith. The second largest group came from Uttar Pradesh in northern India. Most of these workers were employed by sugar and tea estates. The rest were hired by the Durban and Pietermaritzburg municipal authorities to work on railway coaches or serve as cooks, waiters, or clerks. A new “coolie” identity was reinforced by legislation that was specifically directed at Indian indentured laborers (Bhana 1991).

In addition to the indentured laborers, a smaller number of merchants or traders arrived soon thereafter. They were referred to as “passenger” Indians because they paid for their own passage to Natal in order to set up small businesses. These individuals enjoyed considerable economic success in the new colony and soon incurred the resentment of white businesses who pressed for legislation to curtail the economic opportunities available to passenger Indians. This issue will be explored in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

The living and working conditions of indentured workers in Natal were harsh. Overworked on the plantations and living in squalor, workers were challenged to maintain families under such conditions. The small, crowded barracks that housed indentured servants afforded little privacy and the movement of the workers was severely

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<sup>16</sup> Only 53 such land grants were actually made during the period of indenture although 52% of the indentured population chose to stay on in South Africa and never used their return passage (See Beall 1990).

restricted. Given their temporary status in South Africa, these workers were in a vulnerable position politically and organized protest was difficult. Their muted protest activity during the early periods of indenture was compounded by the fact that most indentured servants were illiterate, spoke very little English, and were themselves divided by regional, language, and caste barriers. During the early years of indenture, “resistance was largely expressed in forms that included malingering, absenteeism, petty larceny, destruction of employers’ property and desertion” (Swan, 1985: 26-7).

Women experienced particular hardships under the indentured labor system. The Indian women who came to South Africa (comparatively fewer than men, as noted earlier) were attempting to escape untenable personal and socio-cultural oppression in India. Very often, these women “fell easy prey to the *kanganis* [recruiters] if they were escaping a domestic or legal situation, or even if they were simply looking for work (Sam 1989:3). However, the sugar barons preferred male labor and resented the presence of women on the plantations. As only Christian marriages were recognized during the early periods of indenture, women married through Hindu or Muslim rites found themselves in an ambiguous legal status. The disproportionate number of men to women left many women vulnerable to sexual abuse by their employers as well as male indentured servants.

Indentured Indian women worked mainly on the tea estates in the Stanger district of the north coast of Natal, as they were considered particularly well-suited for this kind of labor owing to their “small, nimble fingers.” Reminiscing about her grandmother, Govinden (2008:75) writes that

Indian women worked very hard. My grandmother worked in the Hulett tea plantations in Kearsney from the time she arrived up to her marriage. ... My grandmother worked for a shilling a month. When she moved to work in the nearby mill, her work included scaling and packing the tea that was brought in by ox-wagon from the outlying fields. The bags were hoisted up to the second floor of the mill, where they were spread out to dry. My grandmother's job involved turning the leaves on the shelves lined with hessian and then packing them for transportation by train to Durban via Stanger; ships then took this cargo to India. In India the leaves were processed and blended with 'Ceylon tea' and exported to different parts of the world.

The difficulty of protest for Indian indentured laborers does not imply that they were passive, docile and resigned to their predicament. In examining slavery in the United States, for instance, it was common for historians such as Elkins to assume that there was no sustained, organized resistance to slavery by enslaved persons. McGary and Lawson (1992), however, point out that such views are perpetuated by an understanding of resistance that is frequently and mistakenly limited to overtly violent acts of rebellion, or sustained, organized political campaigns. McGary and Lawson show that resistance, in fact, took a variety of other forms, along a continuum, from day-to-day work slowdowns to major slave rebellions. In her novel *Beloved*, Morrison depicts infanticide as an act of resistance to slavery in the United States. Another example involves Jewish dissidents who, in opposition to Roman rule in Judea, committed mass suicide on Masada, a mountain in the Judean desert, rather than submit to Roman authority. These cases suggest that oppressed and marginalized groups have used different strategies ranging from accommodation to violent conflict to create spaces of meaning and hope for themselves, on one hand, or to end their suffering, on the other hand. Indentured laborers struggled to maintain their dignity and sanity under grueling conditions that drove some

to suicide. As noted earlier, suicide rates among Indian indentured servants in Natal were the highest in the world (Meer, 1976).

Indentured labor was temporarily halted between 1866 and 1874 as Indians returning to India after their period of indenture complained of ill treatment and harsh working conditions in colonial Natal. On February 12, 1871, 387 indentured laborers who completed 10 years of indentured labor in South Africa chose to return to India. The Protector of Immigrants, who met the *S.S. Red Riding Hood* when it docked in Madras on April 10, 1871, noted that the returning indentured laborers were “loud in their complaints of the manner in which they had been treated on the estates in Natal.”<sup>17</sup> These laborers had been subjected to frequent sadistic punishments, fined high amounts for minor offenses, denied wages without adequate reason, received inadequate medical treatment, endured long working days (beyond the nine hours stipulated in the contract), and received poor food rations.

For example, an indentured worker named Balakistna Doorasamy who was part of the first contingent to go to South Africa in 1860, complained that workers on the Lister Sugar Estate were frequently flogged and then bathed in salt water. Another worker, Moonesamy Chinyamma, who also arrived in 1860, described Lister as a “very bad gentleman” who often tied a rope around his neck and beat him if the cattle in his charge ever strayed to the coffee plantation. Buaboo Ilyallo, who worked on the Clement Crozier Estates of Natal, recounted that he was paid irregularly and was owed almost a year’s salary. He noted that some thirty other laborers still on that estate faced a similar predicament. Even worse, conditions there were so severe “that four men hanged

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<sup>17</sup> Report from the Protector of Emigrants, Calcutta in Y.S.Meer (1980) pp156-157.

themselves to escape the annoyance of being compelled to work when sick and being beaten” (Desai and Vahed 2007:77).

The Natal authorities and employers denied these accusations and refused to acknowledge that indentured laborers were subject to abuse. The complaints, nevertheless, led the Indian government to stop the authorization of emigration to Natal temporarily until an investigation was conducted. Furthermore, as a consequence of the global economic depression of 1866, Natal farmers found it economically difficult to employ indentured labor from abroad (Meer, 1985).

The colonial government in Natal were eager to restart of indentured labor system as the economy improved, but Sir Clinton Murdock of the Indian Immigration Board informed Natal authorities that “without further information on the subject, the renewal of emigration from India to Natal should not be sanctioned.”<sup>18</sup> The Government of India also issued a statement on indentured labor migration to South Africa on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1872: “The Governor-in-Council has seriously considered the propriety of prohibiting emigration from this Presidency to Natal in these unsatisfactory circumstances; but, as the whole matter has been submitted by the Governor-General in Council to her Majesty’s Government, he will defer taking steps in that direction.”<sup>19</sup>

The Natal Government reluctantly appointed a “Coolie Commission” in 1872 to “enquire into the condition of the Indian Immigrants in the Colony of Natal; the mode in which they are employed; and also to enquire into the complaints made by return immigrants to the Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta.” (Report of the Coolie Commission

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<sup>18</sup> Letter, Sir T.W.C Murdock to R.G.W. Herbert, March 7, 1872 in Report of Coolie Commission, 1872, p.62.

<sup>19</sup> Reported as Proceedings of the Government in Report of Coolie Commission, 1872, p.65.

1872:56). This commission was one of many instituted to investigate problems and abuses associated with the indentured labor system.<sup>20</sup> These commissions were useful in highlighting certain instances of ill treatment faced by indentured laborers and the recommendations of the commissions did lead, in limited cases, to the implementation of policies that improved the quality of life for indentured laborers. However, the colonial authorities frequently used these official commissions as a convenient way to defuse, deflect and dilute the claims of the injured parties, in particular, and oppressed groups in general (Ashcroft 1990).

Thus, although commissions have been used extensively in South Africa (most recently the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – TRC – headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to probe abuses under apartheid) since the period of indenture to give voice to the grievances of those who are denied formal representation in the political process, they ended up as a sort of political theater in which complaints are officially and objectively evaluated by experts who then “recommend” (commissions don’t have the legal authority to change laws or to enforce them) a set of actions. In reality, such commissions reflect and uphold the interests of the ruling classes who not only define the parameters of the investigation, but also select the experts to serve. Except for minor modifications the *status quo* is maintained, as was the case with indentured labor in South Africa.

The sixty-seven-page report published by the Coolie Commission was the first investigation of its kind into the socio-economic conditions of Indian migrants in Natal.

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<sup>20</sup> Other Commissions included The Wragg Commission (1885-1887); The Reynolds Commission (1906), The Indian Commission 1907 and The Solomon Commission 1914). They were also other small inquiries by magistrates, the Protector of Immigrants and other officials.

Thirty-six witnesses testified before the Coolie Commission, but thirty of them were employers. Another three were public officials and only three were Indian. No attempt was made to obtain testimony of the laborers who returned to India, who initially complained about the harsh treatment they had received in Natal. The testimony of an indentured laborer named Rangasamy, who arrived in Natal in 1863, verifies some the complaints of the group returning to India:

I heard from the coolies that some masters treat them badly. Mr. Anderson beats them; not only does he beat the coolies himself, but he gets the magistrate to beat them. There are four coolies; they are on the estate now. If a coolie demands a pass, he refuses to give the pass and gives them a kick. Anderson uses whatever comes to hand; stones, sticks, *sjambok* [whip]. He treats a coolie like a bull buffalo. The only man I hear who does not pay regularly is Captain Smerdon; he only pays twice a year and then keeps a month's wages in hand. The coolies are deducted one shilling for absent days<sup>21</sup>.

In response to complaints of abuse and violence against him, plantation owner William Lister tried to demean the character of the returnees who complained against him:

Balakistna used to cause every sort of mischief. He was one of the only men of my gang who could speak English. I don't care to take coolies at fifteen shillings per month, when I can get kafirs who are superior field hands for eleven shillings. Kafir food is also cheaper... Under (the) law, a coolie absenting himself, if brought before a magistrate, should for every day he was absent, forfeit two days pay, and I generally forfeited the wages myself... Towards the latter end – say 1864 or 1865 – we used not to forfeit wages, but agreed with the coolie to work for two days without receiving any wages for absence. As regards sending a man with a rope around his neck to the police station, the man had committed a crime; and the police station was distant.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Appendix to the Report of the Coolie Commission, June 14, 1872.

<sup>22</sup> Appendix to the Report of the Coolie Commission, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1872



Lister's rationalizations of abuse clearly reflected his ethnocentric and racist attitude toward the Indian laborers. Balakistna's only crime was that he spoke English and voiced the concerns of fellow laborers. Yet, the Commission's report concluded that Indian indentured laborers

have not and have never been the subject of any systematic ill-treatment or oppression by their employers. Isolated and individual cases have doubtless occurred, but under the revised system of supervision we have recommended, even these, it is hoped will disappear ... Men of steady and industrial habits have the chance of acquiring property and accumulating wealth, and it is probable that as the prosperity of the Colony advances, so in proportion will the fair prospects of these classes.<sup>23</sup>

The report conceded that there were a few cases of mistreatment of indentured laborers and that some poor administrative policies may require revision. The Commission found certain complaints against Mr. Lister to be valid and recommended a £6 fine for flogging four of his employees. However the Commission maintained that the Lister case was an isolated instance. Similarly, with respect to the other complaints, the Commission concluded that while some laborers may have been unfairly treated, their treatment did not warrant being termed abuse, and certainly was not widespread. The following recommendations were made by the Commission:<sup>24</sup>

- ◆ All employers should henceforth be required to keep a wages book, for indentured as well as "free" Indians.
- ◆ The Coolie Agent should regularly visit and inspect estates, report on all assigned Coolies, "inform himself as far as possible of the location and employment of all

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<sup>23</sup> Appendix to the Report of the Coolie Commission, June 14<sup>th</sup> 1872

<sup>24</sup> Report of the Coolie Commission 1872:11

Coolies in the Colony, and bring to the notice of the Government anything that may come to his knowledge affecting their condition or interests.”

- ◆ A permanent official should be appointed to act as head of an important department concerning the welfare of all Indian immigrants, and he should be called “the Protector of Indian Immigrants,” and he should be an officer who has had some experience in India and is able to speak an Indian language.
- ◆ The official should be able to settle petty disputes between master and servant and between the Indians themselves.
- ◆ There should be registration of all Asiatic citizens, and births, deaths, and marriages should be recorded.
- ◆ The number of women immigrants should be increased.
- ◆ The Government should provide education for Indian children.
- ◆ The Government should be responsible for the medical services of immigrant Indians, and a fund should be established for this purpose towards which employers must contribute.
- ◆ Grants of between eight or ten acres of land outside Durban should be made to ex-indentured Indians, in lieu of a return passage.

Keen to pacify the Indian authorities in order to restart the flow of indentured laborers, the Natal authorities passed a series of legislations based on the Commissions recommendations:

- ◆ To appoint a “Protector of Indian Immigrants” a position which replaced the “Coolie Agent.”
- ◆ The Protector of Immigrants had to keep a register of all immigrants in the colony.
- ◆ The Protector of Indian Immigrants could hear and determine any complaints of Indian immigrants against their masters or masters against the immigrants.
- ◆ All employers had to keep wage books.

- ◆ The colonial government would appoint a medical practitioner to attend to the medical needs of Indian immigrants on various estates.
- ◆ Estate owners would have to pay a sixpence tax to the Natal treasury for the medical care of immigrants.
- ◆ Employers were required to send monthly medical reports to the Protector of Immigrants.
- ◆ Any immigrant “who unlawfully absented himself from work”, in addition to losing all claim to wages and allowances during such absence, forfeited a sum equal to one half penny for each shilling of his monthly wages for each days absence.
- ◆ The term “coolie” be replaced with the term “Indian Immigrant”
- ◆ Indian marriages performed under Hindu rites be registered

Furthermore, in order to improve its image with the Indian authorities, the Natal government produced and circulated a notice describing the positive qualities of Natal for future indentured laborers (see Figure 3.5).

## NOTICE.—IMMIGRATION DEPARTMENT.

**T**HE Acting Protector of Immigrants, in continuation of a previous Notice, now has the honour to publish, for the information of Planters and whom it may concern, the exact terms upon which Indian Immigrants have been enlisted for service in Natal.

F. ELTON, Acting Protector of Immigrants.

Immigration Department, August 17, 1874.

### NOTICE TO COOLIES INTENDING TO EMIGRATE TO NATAL.

You will be taken free of expense to Calcutta, and, while there, will be well fed and properly lodged until the ship sails; and should you be ill, the greatest care will be taken of you.

When the ship is ready, you will be supplied with good clothing; the finest ships are selected, and the voyage takes about five or six weeks. The food, medicines, and other appliances on board are of good quality, and your health, comfort, and safety, will be most carefully attended to. The Indian Government has appointed officers, who are most strict and vigilant in securing for you all these advantages.

On and after your arrival in Natal, there is a Protector of Immigrants ready to advise you at all times during your residence there. You will be located on an estate where a medical man is employed.

Your religion will in no way be interfered with, and both Hindoos and Mahomedans are alike protected.

You will find over 5,000 of your countrymen settled there.

You will have a house rent free to live in, with plenty of garden ground to cultivate at your leisure, and care is taken not to separate families and relatives.

The climate is remarkably healthy, and there is an abundance of good water, fruits, and vegetables. If you are ill, medical attendance, medicines, and nourishment, are provided free of charge.

You will be required to cultivate sugar-cane and to make sugar, rum, and molasses. Great varieties of work, either for strong men or for women and children, are available.

You will have to work for five years, six days in the week, for nine hours, between sunrise and sunset—all Sundays and holidays excepted.

Besides rations the men receive for the first year, Rs. 5 monthly; for the second year, Rs. 5½ monthly; for the third year, Rs. 6 monthly; for the fourth year, Rs. 6½ monthly; for the fifth year, Rs. seven monthly. The women are paid half wages, and the children in proportion.

After five years you may return to India at your own expense, and after ten years you will be entitled to a passage back.

You will receive rations as follows:—

1½ lbs. of rice daily, or for three days in the week in lieu of rice 2 lbs of			
Dholl	...	2	lbs. per month.
Salt Fish	...	2	" "
Ghee or oil	...	1	" "
Salt	...	1	" "

H. A. FIRTH, Emigration Agent for NATAL

8, Garden Reach, Calcutta, 21st March, 1874.

**Figure 3.5:** Immigration Department Notice Describing Natal to Indentured Laborers  
Source: Henning, 1993: p. 49

During the economic upturn of the 1870s in the Natal colony, planters once again pressured the colonial authorities to recruit more indentured workers. In response, the Lieutenant Governor of Natal appealed to the Secretary of State for the Colonies: “In some instances positive ruin was threatened and ...(that)... everywhere improvement was at a standstill in consequence of the impossibility of procuring, at any price, the labor requisite...”(cited from Chattopadhyaya, 1970:39). Soon thereafter, the Indian government approved Lieutenant Governor’s request, apparently satisfied with the measures taken by the Natal authorities to protect Indian migrant workers. Besides, it so happened that a famine in India in 1874 had led to widespread starvation. The reintroduction of indentured labor to the Natal colony that year seemed to be a mutually satisfactory arrangement for both the Natal and Indian governments. The system continued until 1911.

## **THE NASCENT POLITICS OF RACIAL IDENTITY IN NATAL**

Indians migrated to South Africa during a time of major political and economic transformation. There were tremendous, mutually reinforcing changes in several realms at once: politics and everyday life, transitioning from pre-capitalist to capitalist relations of production, African disfranchisement from a state of political independence to one of subjugation, shifts from rural to urban forms of social and spatial organization, and from white co-existence with indigenous and other non-white peoples to white supremacy through a new, racially ordered state. In this period of flux, the indentured labor system offered three major advantages to the colonial authorities and sugar planters in Natal: (i)

it provided planters with a very cheap work force; (ii) it afforded colonial authorities and planters tight control of the workforce and, (iii) it provided a buffer between whites and their disfranchised African subjects, advancing the divide and rule strategy of the British in colonial Natal. Thus, the debate during this period was not simply limited to who would provide a source of cheap labor to the sugar and tea estates of the colony; the solution to the labor question also had to provide settlers with maximum leverage in the socio-political, economic, and spatial dispensation mentioned above. In this light, Indian indenture appears to be an intimate part of a racial strategy to secure political and economic advantages for white settler capital in colonial Natal.

Within the emerging racial hierarchies of colonial Natal, the diverse, complex, and specific identities of the Indian and African populations were reduced to the simplistic, functional categories of “Indian” and “African”, according to how they were perceived *en masse* by whites. In the early 1800s, Zulus tended to emphasize their local clan identities, given that they were already all Zulus to each other. However, by the late 1800s, these clan members themselves began to adopt and conform to the emerging, more general “Zulu” identity, not only as a result of settler colonial policies, but also because of a rising Zulu cultural nationalism that sought to unite Zulus regardless of their clan identifications. Similarly, with respect to the Indian population, the development of an overarching “Indian” identity may be traced not only to the segregationist policies that targeted “Indians” as a homogeneous group, but also to the communities’ own attempts to organize politically under one banner, across linguistic, ethnic, religious, and caste lines in order to protect themselves from being targeted as “Indians,” by whites, and increasingly, Africans.

### **Initial Encounters: Indians and Africans**

The historical record of the political and social relations between Indians and Africans during the early period of indenture is sparse. The British authorities followed the old Roman maxim *divide et impera* – divide and rule – in colonial Natal and exploited the Indian presence in the province toward this strategy. Meer (1985:54) argues that the Indian presence weakened the negotiating power of the Zulus in dealing with the white settlers. “Whatever the African perception of Indian indentured workers was in 1860, included in it must have been the suspicion, if not the knowledge, that they had been brought in to be used against them in ways perhaps not immediately understood.” This view is echoed by Sam (1989:10), who argues that

illiterate Indian peasants were introduced into a political situation of which they were wholly ignorant. Transporting people from India to work on the plantations effectively frustrated the Zulus’ attempt to bring about the failure of the sugar cane economy. Yet, from another perspective, the introduction of indentured labourers from India is testament to the victory of Africans who refused to labor for the plantations owners in Natal.

The plantation owners did their best to divide, exploit and manipulate divisions between Indians and Africans, to great advantage. As one sugar estate owner, James Morton, testified before the Wragg Commission, [he would] “prefer to have a mixture of kafirs and coolies because they cannot combine against me and delay work. The coolies get up very early in the morning, and that leads the kafirs to do the same.”<sup>25</sup>

In such a political climate, stereotypes abounded and antagonisms between Indians and Africans developed almost immediately. Commenting on the encounter

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<sup>25</sup> Report of the Indian Immigrants Commission 1885-7, p.410

between these two groups within a few days of the arrival of Indian laborers, *The Natal Mercury* observed that “Our poor Zulus hardly know what to make of these nondescript newcomers ... there is evidently no love lost between the two races ....”<sup>26</sup> The initial contact between Indians and Africans took place in Natal’s cane fields. By the 1870s, Indians comprised close to 50% of labor on the plantations and reached a high of 87% by 1907. The Acting Secretary for Native Affairs described Indian-African relations as follows before the Natal Native Commission in 1881-2 (109):

They [Africans] have become reconciled to them [Indians] in late years, but at first they despised them. They seem to fraternize now. They [Africans] look upon the introduction of the Coolie [Indian] with some apprehension at first, but they now understand it was owing to the scarcity of labour.

An African living near the Indian settlement of Verulam testified before the Commission that “We get on well with coolies, they stay at our *kraals* [villages]” (Report of the Natal Native Commission 1881-2:384)

With respect to interpersonal relationships, there was probably some degree of miscegenation between Indians and Africans given the skewed gender ratios noted earlier.<sup>27</sup> There are a few recorded cases of relationships between Indian men and African women. For example, in one such case, an indentured laborer named Abdullah Kulla requested a separate house from his employer (Alice Dykes) because “he has for a sweetheart a *kolwa* [Christian] *kafir* [black] girl who often comes to visit and stay with

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<sup>26</sup> Reported in *The Natal Mercury*, November 22, 1860.

<sup>27</sup> The traditional literature on Indian women in colonial Natal does not consider miscegenation as a possibility with respect to Indian-African relationships (See Beall 1990, Kuper 1969). This corpus of work suggests that cultural differences between Indian and Africans were too vast to be bridged. However, it should be noted that the Indians brought to South Africa earlier, in the 1600s and 1700s as slaves, mixed with the Malay and African groups in the Cape region.



him” (cited from Desai and Vahed, 2007: 180). Ship records indicate that Mr. Kulla arrived from Mooradadbad only two years earlier in June 1882. It is impossible to discern whether the relationship was motivated by love or by the shortage of women in the indentured system.

In another example of Indian-African interaction, the wife of a male indentured laborer had died and the worker, Mr. Chadakhari, preferred that an African woman look after his four year old son rather than an Indian woman on the estate that he considered to be of lower caste. The African woman was paid four shillings a month to look after the child at her *kraal* and six shillings when she came to take care of the child in his home Desai and Vahed (2007). In this case, an African woman was more acceptable to Chadakari because he could not locate her on his caste map.

There were also a number of interactions between Indians and Africans involving the exchange of knowledge and resources, as in the realms of traditional medicine and personal finance, for example. Flint (2006:367) shows that African and Indian traditional healers exchanged knowledge and frequently worked together “leading to the appropriation of each other’s ailments, remedies, and healers.” Some Indians borrowed money from Africans. An indentured laborer, Narainsamy Soobroyulu, who arrived in Natal in August 1880 was charged by his employers as having “a bad character” and giving his employers “a great deal of trouble including desertion, theft, neglect of duty and borrowing from Africans.” Mr. Soobroyulu had his wages garnered and had to pay five shillings a month until his debt of £6.10 to an unnamed African was paid in full (cited from Desai and Vahed 2007: 179).

There is also some evidence of Africans using Indian labor in some cases.

Records from the office of the Protector of Immigrants show that an African Mission Station in 1884 employed sixteen Indians. When a local African chief had contacted the Protector of Immigrants in 1907 requesting that an indentured laborer named Mottai be allowed to re-indenture with the chief, one Dr. H.W. Jones commented that “things are coming to a pretty pass in this colony if Kafirs are to have coolies assigned to them”.<sup>28</sup> A small number of Indians also lived in African communities to escape the indentured labor system (Desai and Vahed, 2007).

The evolution of “Fanagalo,” a linguistic mixture of Zulu, English, some Indian languages, and Afrikaans (language derived from Dutch), also points to a degree social interaction between Indian and Africans. Originating in the cane fields of Natal (Adendorff 2002), this pidgin language is still used on the gold and diamond mines of South Africa to facilitate communication among linguistically diverse groups. Many Indian indentured laborers spoke little or no English when they migrated to South Africa in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and may have learned Fanagalo before speaking English. In addition to enabling conversation with Zulu speakers, many Indians learned Fanagalo as a means of communicating with Indians of different language groups. While Fanagalo did enable Indians and Africans to communicate with one another, most Zulus were offended by the use of Fanagalo and felt that Indians confused it with true Zulu. The linguistic divide also contributed to alienation and tension between the Indians and African communities (Mesthrie 1996).

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<sup>28</sup> Report of the Protector of Immigrants, 1884.

Finally, there were also points of conflict between Indians and Africans during the early days of indenture, especially on plantations where Indians and Africans worked together. These tensions were exacerbated when employers placed Africans as overseers over Indian indentured labor, thereby creating structural conditions for racial tensions. As early as 1862, *The Natal Mercury* reported a case of an African being used by an employer to punish an Indian laborer who was tied to a tree. By placing one group above of another, the white employers and ruling classes were able to exploit the resentment that resulted. Another indentured laborer who worked in a hotel recalled to the Protector of Immigrants that he was throttled by his employer and was warned that the next time, the employer would “tell the Kafir to beat me.”<sup>29</sup>

A number of Indians complained in a testimony before the Wragg Commission (1885-1887) that Indians were intimidated and harassed by African policemen. A storekeeper by the name of Telucksing complained to the Commission that “The kafir constables here treat the Indians like dogs and sometimes arrest us for doing nothing wrong at all, saying that we have been drinking; they tyrannise us in every way imaginable.” A group of traders and storekeepers who had migrated to South Africa from Mauritius and other colonies had petitioned the Viceroy on July 14, 1884 complaining that they were arrested by “kafir constables, who treat them with great cruelty using unnecessary and undue violence.”<sup>30</sup> The petition, which was written by one Doorasamy Pillay (on behalf of the traders and shopkeepers), requested that in future Indian interaction with law enforcement officers should be mediated by “European or Indian

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<sup>29</sup> Report to the Protector of Immigrants, 1902.

<sup>30</sup> Petition to the Viceroy of India, cited from Pachai and Bhana (1984) *Documentary History of Indian South Africans*, pp. 10-12.

constables, who do not use harsh measures but treat all alike.”<sup>31</sup> A white Durban resident wrote to the Inspector of Police on February 28, 1902 describing the following incident that he witnessed:

At 9:30 am on 26 February, I heard excessive screaming of such a peculiar nature that it was evident somebody was being choked. On running out I found the neighbors on both sides of me already there, and found a native police dragging a helpless half-witted Indian named Ramlal along the ground... taking him by each arm... I found the peculiar shrieking was caused by one of the police trying to stop the Indian’s yells by throttling him... At the police station I found the police natives dusting down the Indian so as to obliterate the marks of having dragged him on the road. All this rough usage was quite uncalled for as either of them could have picked the wretched Indian up and slung him over their shoulder. The Indian is an old resident here – known to be half daft.” (cited from Desai and Vahed, 2007: 181-182).

Sexual violence at the hands of African men was often used by white employers to intimidate female Indian laborers. For example, an Indian woman worker named Ruthere filed a complaint in January 1888 that her employer, J. McIntosh of the Gillits Tea Estate, permitted two African male “supervisors” to “take hold of my breasts and take out their private parts ... Both of them have asked me to go to the bush with them”<sup>32</sup> There were other complaints from the same estate of harsh treatment at the hands of these two African supervisors. The estate owner, Miss McIntosh, was frequently away and left the two supervisors in charge of the Indian workers. According to the account, the Africans maintained order with the use of a *panga* (knife).<sup>33</sup>

In 1890, a factional fight erupted in a railway barracks near Umsindusi between Indian and African railway workers. A local newspaper described the incident as follows:

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Report of the Wragg Commission, 1885-1888.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Both the coolies and the kafirs had been drinking during the afternoon, and towards evening became quarrelsome. Words developed into blows, which eventually ended in a free fight, the coolies taking one side and the kafirs the other. Both sides armed themselves with sticks, and some of the natives possessed themselves of assegais, and blows were showered for upwards of half-an-hour, blood floweing freely on either side. One native received a heavy blow on the head, which fractured his skull and gave him quietus. A coolie child, who ran out into the thick of the fight, was also killed, while a coolie man received a blow which is expected to terminate fatally. A large number of combatants were more or less seriously injured, the majority sustaining fractures of the skull. After the fight had been in progress for some time the railway police appeared upon the scene and the combatants were separated, the injured men, together with the native who was killed, being sent to the hospital. By yesterday thirty-three arrests were made.”<sup>34</sup>

A report in *The Indian Opinion* (the newspaper founded by Gandhi in South Africa) commented on this situation: “It is common knowledge that the native, an excellent servant, once promoted to some authority becomes a tyrant over those he has under.”<sup>35</sup> Indian fear and social distance from Africans date back to such interactions with Africans during the early period of indenture. Given the divide and rule tactics of the colonial authorities, it was inevitable that conflict should erupt between Indians and Africans.

### **Increasing White Resentment and Anti-Indian Legislation**

In 1870, ten years after the first indentured laborers arrived in South Africa, only 400 of the approximately 6000 Indians decided to return to India. As the status of Indians changed from indentured to free labor, so did the attitude of whites towards Indians in South Africa. Indian indentured labor, welcomed initially as the answer to the Natal sugar

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<sup>34</sup> Reported in *The Natal Mercury*, September 23, 1890.

<sup>35</sup> April 15, 1905.

industry's problems, were decried as the "Asiatic Menace" by the 1880s. As Indians gained their freedom and urbanized, and as the "passenger" Indians began to open small businesses, a new white attitude began to emerge. Fear and resentment of Indian economic competition increased among whites to the point that Indians were seen as a threat to white interests in the colony (Bhana and Brain, 1990).

This transformation in white attitudes toward Indians is not unusual when compared to the experiences of other subject populations in colonial contexts elsewhere. In the United States for example, slaves were initially said to exhibit the "Sambo" personality. They were presumed to be "docile and content ... reduced to a state of infantile dependency" and accepting of their slave status (Elkins 1976:12). The Southern planter class used the "Sambo" caricature to rationalize that slaves were happy in their condition of servitude. However, as the institution of slavery collapsed in the United States and former slaves began to migrate out of the plantations after the Civil War in search of economic opportunities, the Southern planter class attempted to cope by identifying other "docile" groups. In advocating for the importation of Chinese contract labor to the South to do work previously done by the slaves, the South's leading economic journal *DeBow's Review* boasted that "We can drive the niggers out and import coolies that will work better at less expense and relieve us from the cursed nigger impudence" (cited from Steinberg, 1981:184). Like the "sambo" in the US, the "coolie" of Natal was once seen as docile and essential to the progress of the colony, but eventually began to be characterized as a menace by whites who were trying to cope with changing economic and political circumstances.

White resentment increased sharply as Indians, especially the merchant class, began to enter the colonial economy and show a degree of economic success. White merchants began to pressure their government to ship Indians back to India and pass legislation to protect white economic interests. This sentiment was expressed by the Prime Minister of Natal, Harry Escombe (Henderson 1903:200):

... unless an arrestation was put upon the introduction of Indian emigrants, the whole of the social polity of this country would be disturbed... Having regard to the character of the people who were coming into the country (deck-passengers as a rule, who paid only 2 pounds or so for their passage and who were therefore seemingly in no flourishing condition of life) it was easy for the whole population of this country to be, as it were, submerged by the new arrivals, entailing a competition which was simply impossible as far as the Europeans were concerned, whether in trade or agriculture, on account of the different habits of life."

In an attempt to deal with the "Indian menace," Natal authorities imposed a £3 tax on indentured laborers as well as ex-indentured Indians in 1895. In 1903, the tax was revised to include girls over the age of 13 and boys over the age of 16. The primary intention of the tax was either to force laborers to re-indenture or repatriate to India, given that most Indians did not earn enough to pay the tax. By the end of 1913, only 935 out of 10,805 Indians liable to pay the tax did so (Bhana and Brain, 1990). In 1911, the Natal authorities had proposed changing the terms of indenture so that after 10 years of indenture, laborers would be compelled to return to India. The Indian government's refusal to accept these new terms contributed to the demise of the indentured labor system that year. Furthermore, when South Africa united under the political structure of the "Union of South Africa" in 1910 the Natal government faced pressure from other

provinces to design and implement a South Africa-wide moratorium on Indian immigration (Swan 1987, 1985).

Early organized political activity by Indians in South Africa to resist anti-Indian legislation was largely spearheaded by the merchant class. As “free passengers,” this group was not subjected to the annual £3 tax mentioned above. In addition, male passenger Indians were able to vote until 1897 under Natal’s franchise rules.<sup>36</sup> However, since the late 1800s, a series of measures were being taken by the Natal authorities to target the entire Indian population, with an eye on the merchant class in particular. As a result, laws enacted against Indians in the Transvaal province became a rallying point for Indian political protest and agitation. At the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, there were approximately 15,000 Indians in the Transvaal. By 1885, the Transvaal passed a series of measures against Indians in the province including restricting the movement of Indians to clearly defined territorial spaces and limiting their rights to own property. Indians faced further discrimination after the war. Such anti-Indian legislation in the Transvaal served as the political grist for Gandhi’s *satyagraha* movement.

## **Gandhi**

Gandhi played an important role in spearheading organized political activism against the racist policies directed at Indians in South Africa. He arrived in South Africa in 1893 as a London-educated barrister. Save for his black turban, the only Indian

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<sup>36</sup> Until 1897 “every man over the age of 21 who either owned immovable property to the value of £50 or rented property to the value of £10 pounds per annum was entitled to the parliamentary franchise.” Indians as a group were excluded from voting after 1897. See Pachai 1971, pp.2/11.



element in his attire, Gandhi was dressed like the other well-to-do English gentlemen of his day, in a dapper frock coat and striped trousers, tailored to fit. A watch and chain were among the fine accoutrements that adorned his outfit. As he would later reflect about that day, “I was dressed according to my lights and landed in Durban with a sense of my importance (1928: XX).” Gandhi was invited to work in South Africa by the Muslim trading firm, Dada Abdullah and Company, on a legal dispute between Dada Abdulla and his relative Tyeb Sheth, who lived and worked in the Transvaal.

Shortly after arriving in Durban, Gandhi set out by train to Pretoria, where Mr. Tyeb lived, to see if the matter might be settled out of court. En route to Pretoria, however, Gandhi had an unsettling experience. When the train stopped at Pietermaritzburg, a white passenger noticed that Gandhi was seated in the first class coach, which was for whites only, and complained to the guard. The train officials confronted Gandhi, who refused to shift to the “coolie coach.” Gandhi was promptly thrown off the train and on to the platform. This humbling experience proved to be pivotal in Gandhi’s life, leading him to make the decision to remain in South Africa to launch a campaign against racism. He stayed for twenty years. Gandhi’s actions in South Africa and their impact on Indian-African relations there will be explored in the next chapter.

## CONCLUSION

The chapter attempted to show that Indian migration to South Africa was part of an international labor flow that transported people of Indian origin to agricultural plantations in diverse global destinations, such as Mauritius, Guiana, Trinidad, Surinam,

Malaysia, Jamaica, and Fiji, among other areas, upon the demise of slavery. This transnational migration of indentured laborers from India altered the demographic makeup of the world in profound ways. In his novel, *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul (1969:32) suspects that “a deep disorder” has resulted from such population movements within and between European empires:

It is my hope ... to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organization, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfillment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors. It was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about. The empires of our time were short-lived, but they have altered the world forever.

The introduction of Indian indentured labor to Natal added to the social complexity of the colony and complicated South Africa’s Black-White racial binary. Indians, indentured laborers or not, increasingly became entangled in a triangular relationship between the European settlers and the indigenous Africans. In spite of the oppressive conditions in South Africa, the majority of indentured laborers chose not to return to India. Their decision to remain in South Africa meant that they had to simultaneously come to terms with their dislocation from India, on one hand, while negotiating their position in a new, hostile racial landscape, on the other hand.

As South Africans of Indian ancestry began to carve out their own cultural, economic and political spaces, they found themselves increasingly sandwiched between an economically and politically powerful European minority and a dispossessed, disgruntled African majority. Thus, Indian identity politics in South Africa unfolded on

two fronts. There was, “on the one hand, the consolidation and assertion of an Indian identity and culture, and, on the other hand, the desire to cut across ethnic boundaries and form alliances with other population groups” (Naidoo 1997: 30). Both found expression in the Indian community. In his book *India: A Million Munities Now*, Naipaul (1991:7) observes that dislocation from one’s ancestral homeland creates a reified sense of one’s identity in emigrant groups:

These overseas groups were mixed. They were miniature Indians, with Hindus and Muslims, and people of different castes. They were disadvantaged, without representation, and without a political tradition. They were isolated by language and culture from the people they found themselves among; they were isolated, too, from India itself ... In these special circumstances they developed something they would have never known in India: a sense of belonging to an Indian community. This feeling could override religion and caste.

The emerging system of racial segregation, which was later institutionalized under the system of apartheid in the 1950s, was based on the principle of racial compartmentalization, where the racial classification and the territorial segregation of whites, Indians, Africans, and Coloreds was central to maintaining white hegemony in South Africa. However, since racial identity was already a core organizing precept of life since the early days of indenture, it proved to be a firm foundation for later policies of racial segregation and social segmentation that formalized the social, political, and cultural distance between Indians and Africans. For example, the forced separation of the races resulted in homogeneous communities of Indian laborers on the plantations during the period of indenture, making way for apartheid in future decades. It is in this highly charged, racialized climate that a pan-Indian identity and politics emerges, in response to

the twin challenges of white supremacy and growing African resentment. This issue will be explored in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: SOUTH AFRICAN INDIANS - A DIASPORA OF INDIA OR NOT?

### INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter illustrated that the migration and settlement of Indian indentured laborers in various parts of the British Empire increased as the abolition of slavery gained momentum. European planters and settlers needed access to cheap labor following the demise of slavery. The indentured labor system was first developed in Mauritius in the 1830s and then introduced to other parts of the British Empire to meet labor needs. With particular reference to the South African case, the previous chapter showed that sugarcane growers in the colony of Natal pressured colonial authorities in the 1850s to recruit Indian indentured labor to work their plantations. A tripartite agreement between the governments of India, Natal, and Great Britain led to the importation of Indian indentured labor into Natal in 1860. This immigration was followed by the arrival of Indians traders and merchants, known as “passengers”, who engaged in a variety of small-scale commercial activities in the colony.

Indians in Natal faced the difficult task of carving out cultural, economic, and political spaces for themselves in a hostile environment. For example, the anxieties common to Indian indentured laborers are evident in the case of Trinidadian Indians in the 1930s. Economically and politically marginalized in their new homelands, many Indians in Trinidad found themselves destitute and homeless upon the end of their indenture. In 1931, the colonial government of Trinidad gave Indians the option of returning to India. More than one thousand former indentured laborers boarded the *S.S Ganges* to return to India. Seven weeks later, when the ship reached Calcutta, the *Ganges*

was stormed by previously repatriated Indians who were desperate to return to Trinidad because of the alienation and poverty they were experiencing in India. Considering this incident, Trinidadian writer and Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul (1984:35) remarked that “India for these people had been a dream of home, a dream of continuity after the illusion of Trinidad. All the India they found was the area around the Calcutta docks.” Upon their journey back to their “homeland” India, Trinidadian Indians learned that they were as out of place in India as they were in Trinidad.

Similarly, reflecting on his own experience of dislocation, the African-American author James Baldwin (1955:6/7) notes:

I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my reactions, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time, I had no other heritage, which I could possibly hope to use... I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine – I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme – otherwise I would have no place in any scheme.

It was observed in Chapter Two that one of the shortcomings in the existing literature on transnationalism and diasporan communities is the inadequate understanding of the role of the state with respect to the struggles of immigrant communities for cultural, political, and economic inclusion in their countries of settlement. This issue was highlighted in the deliberations of a 2003 conference sponsored by the government of India and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry in New Delhi. Billed as the largest gathering of the Indian diaspora in India since Indian independence in 1947, the

conference brought together “people of Indian origin” from 63 countries in order to facilitate interaction and exchange among different segments of the diaspora, and to discuss contributions that the diaspora could potentially make to India’s own development.

Fatima Meer, an important South African intellectual and veteran anti-apartheid activist of Indian origin, attended the conference but was not wholly in agreement with its message. Upholding her reservations about the transnational affiliations and loyalties inherent in the term “Indian diaspora,” Meer argued that it obscured the particular national contexts in which Indians had to struggle for recognition and rights: “We Indian South Africans had to struggle hard to claim our South Africanness, and that is something we guard jealously. We are not a diaspora of India.”<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were about 100,000 Indians in South Africa, with more than half of this number residing in the province of Natal. A series of laws designed to disfranchise Indians placed the community in a precarious position in the colony. With no place in India, the Indians of South Africa had to mobilize themselves to stake out not only political, economic, and cultural claims in South Africa, but also an existential one.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, it provides an overview of how Indians tried to carve out an economic niche as they transitioned from indenture to free labor. Second, the chapter examines how they tried to gain a political voice during this period of transition, in response to discriminatory policies directed against them by the colonial legislature. I specifically examine the pivotal role played by Mohandas Gandhi in shaping

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in the *New York Times* (January 12, 2003) India Harvests Fruits of a Diaspora, available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D00E3DC1731F931A25752C0A9659C8B63> , last accessed December 27, 2010

Indian activism in South Africa during his twenty-one year (1893-1914) stay there, as well as his relations with indigenous Africans.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section examines attempts by formerly indentured laborers to eke out a livelihood in Natal. Many Africans resented the presence of the Indian population in South Africa, as they found themselves directly in competition with Indians for jobs and land. The second part focuses on how Indians tried to construct a politics within a deeply alienating space, sandwiched as they were between a militarily, politically, and economically powerful White settler minority, on one hand, and a numerically powerful African majority, on the other hand. The third section critically assesses Gandhi's politics in a historical context. Gandhi's legacy has come under attack recently prompted by accusations ranging from being a Victorian apologist to a racist and a segregationist. (see Lelyveld 2011; Singh and Watson 2009). As the new democratic South Africa tries to construct a unifying narrative to overcome its deeply fractured past, the memory of Gandhi has emerged as a flashpoint of debate and the cause of a schism between segments of the Indian and African populations. The fourth section explores these issues. The chapter then concludes with a glimpse of the changing political scene among Indians and Africans in South Africa after Gandhi's return to India.

### **A SPACE OF ONE'S OWN: EARLY INDIAN COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY IN NATAL**

Indians fell into one of three categories in South African society in the late 1800s. The majority consisted of indentured laborers under contract. Others were formerly indentured laborers who chose to remain in South Africa after their contracts had expired.



The remaining group was the “passenger” Indians, who consisted of merchants and traders who immigrated to South Africa voluntarily in search of opportunity, businesses prospects, and the possibility of settling there. As their contracts expired, the majority of indentured Indians remained in Natal while a few went to work in the gold fields of the Transvaal. Unjustifiably but not surprisingly, the colonial government reneged on its promise to give indentured laborers a parcel of land in lieu of a return passage to India.<sup>2</sup> The Indian population in Natal increased from 10,336 in 1876 to 30,355 in 1889.<sup>3</sup> Free Indians generally sought employment in urban areas or engaged in small-scale commercial farming on land they rented from Whites. Indian mobility was restricted in most provinces and they were prohibited entry into the Orange Free State altogether.

As Indians moved out of indenture, they tried to find an economic niche and political voice in South African society. In doing so, they incurred the wrath of the White population, who increasingly feared Indians’ transition out of indentured servitude and into the role of economic competitors. White resentment extended not only toward the Indian merchant class, but also the poor Indian farmer, whose thrift and industry threatened to undermine White economic domination. As pointed out in the previous chapter, Indian labor was initially heralded by the White agricultural sector as the remedy for the ailing Natal economy. However, as Indians transitioned out of indenture, White attitudes grew more hostile. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indians were regarded as a “menace” and a “threat” to White interests in the region. As Indians gained an economic foothold in South Africa, whites began to propose a series of anti-Indian laws. The

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<sup>2</sup> Only 50 of over 13000 applications were approved for a parcel of land. See Henning (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Reported in Asiatic Enquiry Commission (Cape Town, Cape Times, U.G. – 4/1921), p. 2

sentiments of many Whites were captured by Harry Escombe, then Attorney-General of Natal (and later colonial Prime-Minister of the province):

... We understand generally that it was the wish of the Colony that, if the Indians are brought here for the purposes of supplying labor which is essential for the development of local industries and enterprises, they are not to form part and parcel of the South African nation... (emphasis added)... The Indians are to come here appreciated as laborers but are not welcome here as settlers and competitors...<sup>4</sup>

In this unwelcome environment, a few indentured laborers managed to find urban employment after their period of indenture had expired. Most engaged in small-scale agriculture on small parcels of land that they rented from White landlords, as they could not afford to buy their own land at first.

Antagonism between Indians and Africans, on the other hand, is rooted in the conflict over access to land in Natal's urban areas. African and Indian farmers, each having experienced particular forms of displacement owing to their encounters with the colonists, sought to make a living in urban Natal by establishing their own niches in small-scale agricultural production. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, small Indian farmers emerged as leaders in the fresh produce market of Natal. This trend coincided with African urbanization, which followed in the wake of the destruction of the Zulu peasantry by extensive White colonial incursions into the hinterland. Interestingly, a number of local African leaders in the Durban metropolitan area identified Indians as the cause of this large-scale African displacement, and launched complaints with White authorities about the Indians' foothold on urban farming in Durban. A Zulu chief in the Inanda area applied to the colonial administration for "assistance" in dealing with the Indians, and

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<sup>4</sup> Cited from J. T. Henderson, *The Speeches of the Honorable Harry Escombe*, (Pietermaritzburg, 1903). Pp. 292-293.

requested that his homestead be relocated to Zululand because “this place is overrun by *coolies*\*.”<sup>5</sup> Another Zulu leader inquired, “how was it that the Indians, who were comparatively new arrivals, had been well-provided with land, and the natives, who were the aboriginals of the country, had been turned off?”<sup>6</sup> Zulu resentment of Indians only increased when White landlords appeared to overtly favor Indian tenants. Landlords cited Indians’ ability to pay rent in cash, Indians’ apparently greater understanding of and easier access to credit, and their preference for engaging almost exclusively in gardening, as opposed to Africans’ preferred practices of grazing cattle or brewing beer on rented urban land.

Free Indians initially rented land close to markets in order to sell their produce, which consisted mainly of maize, rice, fruits, and vegetables. As staples of the Indian diet, these crops were originally intended for Indian consumers, but soon such produce found its way into the White markets as well. As a consequence, the number of White consumers of Indian produce increased. Newly freed indentured servants increasingly began to regard land as a “guarantee” of economic and political independence under the oppressive conditions of political disfranchisement and uncertainty. The enterprise of small-scale urban farming seemed within their reach, given their meager incomes, as did the rents on small plots, if they pooled their resources within their families. However, as they made inroads into commercial farming, they faced the resentment of the newly urbanizing African population, who were themselves in search of ways to continue their traditional practices in the city, such as cattle grazing.

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\**Coolie* – derogatory term for Indians.

<sup>5</sup> Case of Matyonovana, August 1889, in ‘Applications from Natives for permission of Supreme Chief to remove from Division of Inanda’, Verulam Magistrate’s Papers, KwaZulu-Natal.

<sup>6</sup> Statements by *induna* and others, *Evidence Taken before the Natal Native Affairs Commission 1906-1907*, pp. 835, 840-1.

Indian farmers soon became the chief suppliers of produce for Durban and the surrounding coastal areas, causing a local White magistrate to take note: Indians were “the real agriculturalists of this division. ... But for them, maize would be at famine price and vegetables would be strangers to our tables.”<sup>7</sup> The Governor of Natal, Sir Henry McCallem, echoed that Indian small-scale farmers are “the keystone of South Coast industries.”<sup>8</sup> Observing the productivity of Indians farmers on small plots of land, White land owners began to favor Indian tenants over Africans. “I can get my rent from a *coolie*,” remarked one White landowner in Inanda, “whereas I find great difficulty in getting it from a native.”<sup>9</sup> According to Hughes (2007:159), about 90 percent of civil law suits in the Inanda Magistrate’s Court in the 1890s had to do with White landlords trying to recover defaults on rent from African tenants, which illustrates to Hughes “the extent to which they [Africans] were losing the struggle to maintain a foothold on private land.”

Indian success in urban farming, in comparison to Africans, can be attributed to a number of factors. First, Indians turned to the only resources to which they had unrestricted access: their own labor and each other. Most of the laborers on the Indian farm worked late into the night and were from within the family. Although profit margins were minuscule, the use of in-house labor enabled Indian farmers to sell their produce at relatively low prices and secure a market niche. White farmers on the other hand, refused to work under such conditions and were soon outpaced by Indian producers. Secondly, in sharp contrast to the Africans, Indian farmers did not possess any cattle and therefore could use all available urban land for gardening instead of grazing.

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<sup>7</sup> Report of Inanda magistrate, *Blue Book*, 1876.

<sup>8</sup> Reported in *Indian Opinion*, April 24, 1908.

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of T. Rathbone, *Minutes of Evidence to the South African Native Affairs Commission* Volume 3, p. 905.

Thirdly, the existing rent payment structure for land advantaged Indians over Africans, as follows: In Natal, Indians were required to pay rent per acre of land. Regardless of the number of people occupying a single house or cultivating the acre of land, Indians were charged a fixed amount of rent, because of the single house on the land. In the case of Africans, more people on the land required the building of more huts, as per African custom regarding households (Freund 1995). Therefore, Africans were charged rent per dwelling on the property (Hughes 2007). This difference in the rent structure enabled Indian farmers to eventually purchase and attain small pockets of land whereas it was more difficult for Africans to do so, having to pay rents for multiple dwellings. Thus, security of tenure over land became paramount to Indians, particularly to the laborers; without land, they could not envision their survival in Natal, given their lack of political rights or representation. Fourth, a few formerly indentured laborers were able to obtain loans from the independently Indian merchant class, which had access to financial capital. On the other hand, most Africans participated in agrarian, peasant economies that were not monetary. An African merchant class barely existed in Natal. They could not yet support African enterprise.

African resentment of Indians grew in light of such sharp differences. As early as 1881, Zulus complained that urban land costs were escalating, and that they could not rent land because “the country was full of *coolies*”<sup>10</sup> Antagonism toward Indians was acute in some parts of Natal, particularly in Inanda, where about 14,000 Indians rented on White farmland. John Dube, the first President-General of the African National Congress (ANC) and prominent Zulu leader, complained in 1912 that “people like *coolies* have

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<sup>10</sup> Cited from F.N.Ginwala (1974), p. 73

come to our land and lord it over us, as though we, who belong to the country were mere nonentities” (cited from Bhana and Vahed, 2005:30). Thus, Indians were resented by the Whites for their productivity, on one hand, and by the Africans for their access to land and markets, on the other hand. This in-between positioning of Indians vis-à-vis Whites and Africans was paramount in shaping Indian politics in South Africa at the time.

### **“INDIANS” MOBILIZE**

The primary socio-economic distinction among Indians in the late 1800s was between indentured/formerly indentured workers and the merchant class. Within these groups there existed significant cultural, linguistic, and economic differences (Ebr.-Vally 2001). The indentured laborers were mostly south-Indians of Tamil and Telugu origin, but also included some north-central Indians. The majority of the laborers belonged to the Hindu religion. The merchant class, on the other hand, was mostly Urdu or Gujarati-speaking Muslims or Gujarati-speaking Hindus. This class of Indians was highly insular, internationally networked, had independent means, and a history of family involvement in business, which enabled them to experience a degree of economic success in Natal. For example, the number of Gujarati-owned shops in Natal between 1870 and 1885 increased from 1 to 40 (Reported by the Wragg Commission). Initially, wealthy Indians tried to distance their identities from those of the indentured or formerly indentured laborers; some even represented themselves as “Arab” rather than Indian in order to preserve their higher social status. Meer (1985:51) remarks that “had the White colonialists accepted them as such, the Gujaratis may have well become co-opted into the White class; but, far

from considering this, the Whites saw them, above all, as the main threat to White domination.”

However, in spite of their class differences, Indians were being subjected to discrimination collectively, as “Indians, by the 1890s. In the early decades of the Indian presence in Natal, some formerly indentured laborers and passenger Indians qualified for a limited franchise. However, in April 1894, the Natal Colonial legislature introduced a bill which stated that “no person belonging to Asiatic races not accustomed to the exercise of franchise rights under parliamentary institutions could in future qualify for the vote.” By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indians as a group were facing legislation that would disfranchise them all, as well as decrease their number in the colony. It was during this transient period that Mohandas K. Gandhi, an attorney at law, happened to come to South Africa.

Early political activity among Indians took the form of individual legal actions to challenge their second class status in South African society. Members of the merchant class tried to use the courts to appeal discriminatory laws. Workers, on the other hand, tried to resist by slowing down or stopping work (Freund, 1995; Moodley 1975). When organized political action emerged among Indians in South Africa at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was initially dominated by the small, commercial elite of the Indian community. Kuper (1960:45) notes that:

The indentured Indian was desired as a laborer and fitted into the status patterns ascribed to non-Europeans: that of menial and inferior with limited opportunities. The passenger Indians on the other hand by entering into trade, challenged White privilege and were first to be affected by the anti-Indian legislation. As a result, merchants who were mainly Moslems, took the lead in organizing legal defense against attacks on the trading rights.

The first major Indian political organizations – the India Committee (founded in Durban in 1890), the Natal Indian Congress (1894), the Transvaal British Indian Association (1904, changing its name to the Transvaal Indian Congress in 1926) and the South African Indian Congress (1919) – were all founded and controlled by the Indian elite, as were the issues taken up by these organizations. However, as pointed out in the previous chapter, all Indians in South Africa, regardless of their class, ethnic, religious, or linguistic backgrounds, were collectively subjected to a series of legislative maneuvers designed to curtail their freedoms in South African society. Freed indentured laborers were subjected to a £3 tax by the colonial administration if they refused to re-indenture or return to India. Most of these laborers could not afford the tax and were thus forced to re-indenture. The trading class, on the other hand, faced a number of measures that restricted their ability to engage in business activities. Gandhi arrived in South Africa on May 23, 1893 in order to litigate a case for an Indian firm, within the milieu just described.

Gandhi's sojourn in South Africa is well chronicled (Gandhi, 1928; Swan, 1985; Bhana and Vahed 2005). However, the existing scholarship on his years in South Africa has four major shortcomings. First, many accounts are only part of larger, magisterial biographies of Gandhi's entire life and political career (Gandhi 2008; Chadha 1997; Payne 1969). Although these works provide descriptions of Gandhi's experience in South Africa, they do not adequately analyze his activism in relation to broader political dynamics in South Africa at the time. Nor do they adequately examine the political calculations behind Gandhi's decisions.



Second, there is little analysis on Gandhi's actual relationship with the African community in South Africa, owing to the allegation that he was a racist. The reason for such an assumption rests partly with Gandhi himself. Although he wrote extensively about his experiences in South Africa and editorialized it in his newspaper, *The Indian Opinion*, he wrote very little about his interactions with African leaders or the African community in general. In 1939, more than twenty-five years after leaving South Africa, Gandhi states, "I yield to no one in my regard for the Zulus, the Bantus and the other races of South Africa. I used to enjoy intimate relations with many of them. I had the privilege of often advising them."<sup>11</sup> Yet there is no mention, in neither his prolific writings nor in the historical record, of the identities of the African leaders whom he advised or the nature of this advice. One scholar of Gandhi, Enuga Reddy (2006:i) postulates that it was possible that Gandhi did not write about his interactions with African leaders in South Africa because "he was concerned that the racist rulers would use any publicity of those discussions to allege a conspiracy against the racist order." On the other hand, observers like Lelyveld (2011), seize upon this silence as evidence of racism on Gandhi's part. Lelyveld goes on to suggest that even seemingly benign statements about Africans made by Gandhi, later in life, are nothing but contrived, retroactive attempts to "tidy up" his own image after having made prejudiced statements in his youth. Furthermore, the fact that Gandhi focused his activism on Indian grievances for logistical reasons is interpreted by some as his refusal to collaborate with Africans in the struggle against White supremacy (Lelyveld 2011; Swan 1985). Third, Gandhi's willingness to negotiate and reach compromises with political adversaries has been

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *The Harijan* (July 1, 1939)

construed by some critics to mean that he was a collaborator in their racist, imperialist designs. I shall examine the issues pertaining to Gandhi's political tactics and his relations with Africans later in the chapter.

Fourth, some of the literature on Gandhi presumes that he promoted the interests of the Indian merchant class at the expense of indentured Indians and Africans. The major work on Gandhi's South African experience is Maureen Swan's (1985) book *Gandhi: the South African Experience*. In her detailed historical analysis, Swan argues that class stratification among Indians in South Africa determined Indian political activism in that country. She begins with the premise that Indian merchants and traders dominated Indian politics and activism, through which they tried to promote their own class interests: "Their politics, far from unifying the Indian community, ... were directed specifically toward attaining White recognition of the fundamental differences between the two major social groups in the community, merchants and workers" (1985:44). For Swan, Gandhi's leadership is overly romanticized when his politics were actually dedicated to protecting the interests of the Indian merchant class. Swan then incorrectly extrapolates that by not forming alliances with other oppressed groups, such as Africans, "Gandhi facilitated the implementation of diverse segregationist policies which help ease the task of White minority rule in South Africa".

Swan is correct to reject the view of Gandhi as a messianic figure who single-handedly launched Indian political activism in South Africa. In fact, there were several political movements afoot among Indians long before Gandhi's arrival in South Africa. Judith Brown (2003:4), the celebrated biographer of Jawaharlal Nehru, observes that "professional historians are properly skeptical of works on individuals which portray

them as shakers and movers of history. Most significant historical changes and developments are the result of long-term trends and influences rather than individual ambitions and interventions.” However, Brown also notes that “at particular historical junctures, individuals can be of considerable importance because of their skills, their particular role in a political system, or at times through sheer chance.” This observation certainly applies to Gandhi who was, in the words of Max Weber, one of the “switchmen” of South African history who played a pivotal role in struggles for rights and representation during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His political strategies, tactics, and methods were forged in the South African crucible during his twenty-one year stay there. In the decades that followed, his philosophy of *Satyagraha* inspired resistance movements in South Africa and around the world. Thus, it is incorrect to argue that Gandhi’s political activism was held hostage by the Indian merchant classes. His early years in South Africa were certainly dedicated to the concerns of the traders who employed him as their attorney. However, his political reasoning evolved over time to embrace and promote a “pan-Indian” activism, drawing him in other directions – politically toward the grievances of the poor, personally toward a mendicant lifestyle that shunned materialism, and spiritually toward a way of life that eschewed hypermasculinity and violence in his search for truth. Swan’s economically deterministic reading of Gandhi’s experience in South Africa fails to consider not only the political exigencies that Gandhi constantly dealt with on behalf of his constituency, but also his principled choices, which often led to arrest and abuse. More importantly, such interpretations leave little room for examining Gandhi’s nuanced agency in relation to the changing political geographies of struggle against White supremacy in South Africa. With these critical

reflections in mind, the chapter will now turn to an overview of Gandhi's political evolution in South Africa.

## **FROM PETITIONS TO PROTEST: GANDHI'S POLITICAL METAMORPHOSIS**

The conceited and arrogant twenty-four-year-old Mohandas Gandhi who arrived in South Africa in 1893 was no mahatma. Highly conscious of his privileged, upper-caste Gujarati background, Gandhi had additionally adopted the Anglophilic attitude common among the British-educated Indian professionals of his day, and was full of the airs that came with such sensibilities. However, by the time he left South Africa, more than two decades later, Gandhi bore no resemblance to the young man described above. He was greatly transformed, as V.S. Naipaul notes: "Gandhi came to South Africa as a Gujarati and left as an Indian." This section will examine Gandhi's early politics in South Africa as a prelude to his political transformation, in relation to the struggles of Indians in South Africa for rights and representation.

Gandhi was aware of some of the challenges faced by Indians when he arrived in South Africa. He recollects his experience of landing in South Africa for the first time:

"As the ship arrived at the quay and I watched the people coming on board to meet their friends, I observed that the Indians were not held in much respect. I could not fail to notice a sort of snobbishness about the manner in which those who knew Abdullah Sheth behaved towards him, and it stung me" (Gandhi, 1957: 105).

Gandhi himself experienced a number of humiliations during his first week in South Africa, such as being thrown off a train for riding in a Whites-only compartment, and being ordered by a magistrate to remove his turban when attending court in Durban.

On one occasion, he was forced to sit atop a stagecoach because he was Indian, as only Whites could ride inside. On another occasion, he was assaulted by a stagecoach official for refusing to comply with orders and was then refused accommodation at the Grand National Hotel in Pretoria where he was to stay. Gandhi (1957:112) reflects in his autobiography that these events left a major impression on him:

I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India, or should I go onto Pretoria without minding the insults, and return to India after finishing the case? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship which I was subjected was superficial – only a symptom of the deep disease of color prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. Redress for the wrongs I should seek only to the extent that would be necessary for the removal of color prejudice.

Gandhi spent most of the next year in the Transvaal, where he honed his legal skills and became acquainted with the grievances of the Indian population. The Indian community in the Transvaal at this time were mostly skilled petty-businessmen who were barely literate in English. Gandhi's elite education, his legal training, and excellent command of English enabled him to emerge as a leader among this small group in Pretoria. He organized community meetings in which he taught English classes, urged people to take control of public health by improving their sanitary practices, and engaged in dialogue with some local Christians on the meaning of Christianity.

When he settled the case that originally brought him to South Africa, Gandhi prepared to leave for India. However, at a farewell party held in his honor in Durban, Gandhi came across a newspaper report that the Natal colonial legislature was sponsoring a bill that would disfranchise the small number of Indians who could vote. Gandhi explained to those gathered, many of them members of an Indian merchant organization

called the Durban Committee, that the proposed legislation “struck at the root of Indians’ self respect” (cited from Gandhi, 1957: 205-8). These merchants had been aware of impending anti-Indian legislation wending through the legislature, but were uncertain about the extent to which it could undermine Indian business interests in South Africa. They saw in Gandhi a shrewd, British educated lawyer, fluent in Gujarati and English, who possessed the skills necessary to negotiate with Whites and, if necessary, challenge the new legislation in Natal. They persuaded Gandhi to remain in South Africa and fight the bill.

### **Gandhi’s Early Politics**

Initially for Gandhi, the problem of Indians’ rights in South Africa was a matter of conceptual clarification within the law. Thus, his strategy in fighting for Indians’ permanent resident status in South Africa, and ultimately citizenship rights, was to evoke an 1884 Royal Proclamation in which Indians were regarded as subjects of the British Empire, and therefore entitled to rights and privileges as such. The Proclamation stated that:

All persons other than natives... (a) will have full liberty ... to enter, travel or reside in any part of the South African Republic; (b) they will be entitled to hire or possess houses, manufacturing warehouses, shops and premises; (c) they may carry on their commerce in person... (d) they will not be subject in respect of their persons or property or ... commerce or industry to any taxes... other than those which are or may be imposed upon Burghers of the said Republic.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cited from *Centenary of Indians, 1860-1960*, Cavalier Publishers, Durban, 1961, p. 63.

Gandhi argued that the Proclamation entitled Indians to certain rights and privileges, and that owing to their small number, Indians did not pose a threat to Whites if those rights were to be granted. The first step in dismantling the color bar, in Gandhi's view, was to unite the disparate groups within the Indian community and mobilize them to demand their rights as British subjects. Gandhi reflects in his autobiography on the class/caste divide among South African Indians at the time:

Free Indians and especially the Mussalman traders undertook to resist the wrongs detailed above, but no direct attempt was made to seek the cooperation of the indentured and ex-indentured labor. Probably it did not occur to anyone to enlist their support; if the idea did suggest itself to some, there was, in their opinion, the risk of making matters worse by allowing them to join the movement (cited from Gandhi 1928:41).

In 1894, Gandhi was instrumental in founding the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), which was the first pan-Indian movement in South Africa. The NIC aimed to influence Indian opinion and give Indians a unified political voice in South Africa. Its objectives were outlined as follows (cited from *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1970:131-133):

- 1) To promote concord and harmony between Indians and Europeans residing in the Colony.
- 2) To inform people in India of the plight and treatment of South African Indians by writing to newspapers and publishing pamphlets and delivering lectures.
- 3) To induce Indians- particularly Colonial-born Indians – to study Indian history and literature.
- 4) To inquire into the conditions of Indians and to take proper steps to alleviate their suffering.
- 5) To do such work as would tend to improve the moral and political condition of Indians.

During the first decade of its existence, the NIC concerned itself with the narrow interests of Indian merchants, who feared that any alliance with indentured laborers would be detrimental to their own economic interests (Prashad 2009). Initially, Gandhi took this position himself and did not overtly encourage the merchant class to find common cause with laborers. As Swan (1985) and others point out, Gandhi was employed by merchants and his early politics were guided by the need to protect their interests. It was they who paid him, after all.

However, in a meticulously researched book, Britten (1999) demonstrates, through a detailed analysis of the law cases taken by Gandhi during his first four years in South Africa, that his advocacy extended well beyond the needs of the Indian merchant class. Far from being a hired hand of the wealthy, as Swan argues, Britten shows that Gandhi was involved in fighting legal battles on behalf of indentured and free laborers. He also tried to promote the NIC among laborers as early as 1895, just one year after the establishment of the organization. During that year, Gandhi led a party of NIC members on a tour of agricultural estates where indentured Indians worked and encouraged the workers to support the NIC. Some white landowners were hostile to Gandhi's tour. "He [Gandhi] will cause some trouble I have no doubt," one landlord commented, "but he is not the man to lead a big movement. He has a weak face. He will certainly tamper with any funds he has a handling of. Such at any rate is my impression of the man – judging from his face" (cited from Britten 1999:437). Even then, Gandhi did not directly seek to include indentured or ex-indentured laborers in the organizational activities of the NIC, and his attitude toward this class was still paternalistic. For example, in 1896, he



commented that “The lot of the indentured Indian cannot be very unhappy; and Natal is a very good place for such Indians to earn their livelihood.” (cited from Swan 1985:64).

However, later that year, the NIC expanded its agenda at Gandhi’s urging to include issues important to the laborers. It sought to challenge discriminatory legislation aimed at all Indians, such as (1) the disenfranchisement of Indians; (2) restrictions on Indian trade and residence; (3) the requirement that Indians must carry their passes at all times; (4) the £3 tax for Indians who did not re-indenture; and (5) the non-recognition of Indian marriages. One of the first acts of the NIC under Gandhi’s direction was to obtain some 10,000 signatures for a petition against the disfranchisement of Indians, and to publicize the situation to audiences in India and England.

During a brief trip to India that year, Gandhi tried to garner the support of Indian nationalists in India, such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale, for the NIC and the Indian struggle in South Africa. Gandhi published two pamphlets in India, titled *The Indian Franchise* and *The Grievances of British Indians in South Africa: An Appeal to the Indian Public*, respectively, in order to draw attention to the challenges faced by South African Indians. He traveled widely in India, speaking at large gatherings in Poona, Madras, and Bombay on the plight of South African Indians.

Gandhi’s legal strategy in contesting the disfranchisement bill aimed at South African Indians was transnational in scope. First, bypassing the Natal colonial legislature entirely, Gandhi decided to appeal directly to the Secretary of the Colonies in London. Second, he made full use of the contemporary international media, particularly the press, sending reports of the plight of Indians in Natal and Transvaal to newspapers in London and India. Third, by helping to launch the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), he was able not

only to represent the interests of Indians in Natal, but to connect them to Indians in India, London, and elsewhere in the world. Finally, Gandhi's burgeoning activism in South Africa also coincided with major advances in transportation and communication. He saw the potential of these innovations immediately and impressed upon his associates to incorporate them into their political campaigns. As a result, he was able to draw international attention to the plight of Indians in South Africa.

Gandhi's most astute insight during his early political phase was into the administrative ambiguity and overlap between the Indian Colonial Office in London and the Viceroy of India, with respect to which body ultimately governed Indians abroad in the British colonies. He noticed that just as the Viceroy's office in India claimed to be in charge of overseas Indians, such as those in Natal, so did the Colonial Office in London, only the latter had the added mandate of being the Protector of White settlers' interests. Through a series of legal petitions, Gandhi attempted to pit the Viceregal administration against the Colonial Office for control over Indian affairs and play on conflicts of interest between local settler colonials and the greater interest of the imperial center (Hyslop 2011a: 37-38).

Whites in Natal were deeply angered by Gandhi's defiant statements and maneuverings in South Africa and in India. An angry mob greeted him when he returned to Natal. They nearly beat him to death, in front of the police, before the wife of the Durban police superintendent finally decided to intervene, thus saving his life (Hyslop 2011a). In the years since Indian arrival in Natal, Whites had been steadily mobilizing to check the economic advance of Indians, particularly those of the Indian merchant class. The colonial legislature passed the Natal Act in 1897, which imposed a literacy test on

immigrants in the colony. The Act was specifically designed to prevent free Indian laborers and members of the Indian trading class from gaining citizenship rights in Natal. As the exclusion was based on “literacy tests” and not on “race” *per se*, colonial authorities were able to portray the act as race-neutral. A few parallels may be drawn here between the laws of the post-Reconstruction South of the United States and those of colonial Natal. Both polities had utilized disingenuous measures such as poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and literacy tests to prevent subject populations (African-Americans and Indians, respectively) from exercising their franchise but without explicitly mentioning their racial identity. The Natal laws did not actually mention Indians specifically. Their deliberate ambiguity allowed colonial authorities in London to maintain that these exclusionary measures were put in place for the purpose of better governance and were not intended to target the Indian population *per se*, even when unjust outcomes owing to these measures appeared to affect Indians exclusively.

### **The Anglo-Boer War**

In 1899, the Anglo-Boer war erupted between the British Empire and the Afrikaner republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Africans in the annexed territory of Zululand participated in and threw their support behind the British in the war. Dinuzulu, the ruler of the Zulus, established a regiment and engaged in various scouting missions for the British in the northern part of Zululand and the eastern Transvaal (Lambert 1989). According to Redding (2000:38), “Zulu assistance to the British army and hostility to the Boer guerrillas were critical in the final defeat of the Boer forces.”

The Zulus' position during this period, with respect to the British, was that of loyal subjects of the British Empire during the Anglo-Boer War.

Indians also supported the British at this time, as British subjects. Gandhi, in supporting the British campaign, followed a reasoning similar to that of the African-American intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois, who a few years later, would called on African-Americans to set aside their grievances with White Americans and demonstrate their patriotism by fighting in World War I within a segregated regiment of the U.S. army.<sup>13</sup> DuBois argued that African-Americans might articulate their claim on rights as American citizens based on duties performed, such as service to the country. Gandhi, likewise, argued that Indians ought to demonstrate their loyalty as British subjects by supporting the British in the Anglo-Boer War if they expected their claims to be heeded by the British:

Our existence in South Africa is only in our capacity as British subjects. In every memorial we have presented, we have asserted our rights as such. Our rulers profess to safeguard our rights because we are British subjects and what little rights we still retain, we retain because we are British subjects (Gandhi 1928:53).

Gandhi reasoned that “in a war, subjects had a moral obligation to demonstrate their loyalty to the Crown if they were to enjoy the benefits of its protection” (Hyslop 2011a:39). To this end, Gandhi organized and led an Indian Ambulance Corps.

At this time, there began to develop in Gandhi a revision of the “complex politics of masculinity,” which originally informed his decision to join the British war effort. He would support the war, but on his own terms: “Given the rampant British tendency to stereotype Hindus as weak and cowardly, it was important to demonstrate courage and

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<sup>13</sup> “Closing Ranks,” in *Crisis Magazine* (July 1918). *Crisis Magazine* was the mouthpiece of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the United States.

fortitude, important in the Victorian discourse of manliness in which Gandhi was steeped” (Hyslop 2011a:39). However, as it was also important to Gandhi and his followers to prove their masculinity without succumbing to violence, the Ambulance Corps appeared to be the ideal vehicle for their political mission at the time. The Corps performed their duty admirably and received high commendations from British authorities for their efforts. However, Indians’ expectations were let down as their loyal service to the Crown did not result in anything more than a few medals and pats on the head. The British refused to support Indian citizenship rights in South Africa.

Gandhi went back to India in 1901, before the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902, but the Indian community in South Africa requested that he return to represent them at a meeting with the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain. Gandhi agreed. He opened up a law office in Johannesburg and maintained links with Natal, as both Natal and Transvaal were now under British control. His law practice thrived during the next five years and he still entertained the possibility that Indians might gain some benefit by appealing to colonial authorities as Imperial citizens (Banerjee 2010).

### **Gandhi’s Radicalization**

1906 was a decisive year in South African politics when the new Liberal Government in Britain began a policy of appeasement toward the Afrikaners in South Africa whom they had vanquished in the Anglo-Boer War. They began to make overtures toward their former Boer enemies in the interest of colonial stability, and because of this preoccupation, the British government did very little to advance the causes of non-White

peoples during this period. As South Africa moved toward political autonomy, it became increasingly clear to Africans, Indians, and Coloureds that the proposed “Union of South Africa” was going to be based on exclusionary racist policies, whereby Whites would enjoy the benefits of citizenship, even supremacy, and non-Whites would be treated as inferiors (Magubane 1996; Welsh 2009; Davenport 1991; Giliomee 2003).

If these developments were being considered by all non-White peoples in South Africa, they were foremost on Gandhi’s mind. One particular event during South Africa’s transition to Unionhood, however, had such a profound effect on Gandhi that it may be said to mark the beginning of his political radicalization. The Bambatha Rebellion of 1906 and the brutal manner in which it was quelled foreshadowed the racial order that was to come under the proposed “Union of South Africa.” To understand the Rebellion and its impact on Gandhi’s radicalization, it is first necessary to outline the context in which the rebellion took place.

The decade leading up to 1906 was a period of tremendous economic, political, and cultural flux in South Africa, particularly in Natal. Political and cultural identities amongst Indians, Africans, “Coloureds,” and Whites in South Africa were being negotiated within rapidly changing domestic and international environments. British colonial rule resulted in severe socio-economic hardships and political repression for the African community in Natal. Colonial incursions into African territories had far-reaching effects including, but not limited to, a shortage of land, the destruction of the viability of African peasant economic systems, the undermining of traditional African structures of governance, and the lack of representation in the colonial political order. Africans in Natal had a number of material grievances against colonial rule. By the first few years of

the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zulus, the predominant African ethnic group in Natal, had lost some of their best land, the number of cattle owned by the community was dwindling,<sup>14</sup> and their crops were ravaged by locusts and disease. Christianity was denouncing the customs and cultures of the Zulus, and the migration of young men toward the mines and other capitalistic enterprises in search of work eroded Zulu peasant economies. These developments also upset the traditional authority of Zulu chiefs and elders.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, the colonial authorities in Natal had instituted a system of indirect rule. Zulu rulers were able to retain their titles with some degree of local autonomy if they cooperated with colonial authorities. The chiefs also received a small stipend which was funded through a system of taxation known as the “hut tax” (Mamdani, 1996). African men had to pay a tax of 7 shillings per year, per wife, who was traditionally housed in her own hut with her children. Theophilus Shepstone, a key architect of this system of indirect rule, promised the African population that the tax would not be increased after it was instituted. However, like other colonial promises made to native populations, it was not kept. By 1897, the Natal colonial administration had annexed the quasi-autonomous Zulu territory, taking over ultimate responsibility for its governance. In January of 1906, the White government imposed a new “head tax” for unmarried Zulu men in the province because they were not subject to the required hut tax. A number of Zulu leaders protested the imposition of these taxes to the colonial authorities.

Tax collection commenced in the Empangeni district of Natal in spite of the protest. Some 1500 Zulu men, including some leaders, refused to pay the tax. A colonial

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<sup>14</sup> Cattle were important to Zulus as a form of wealth.

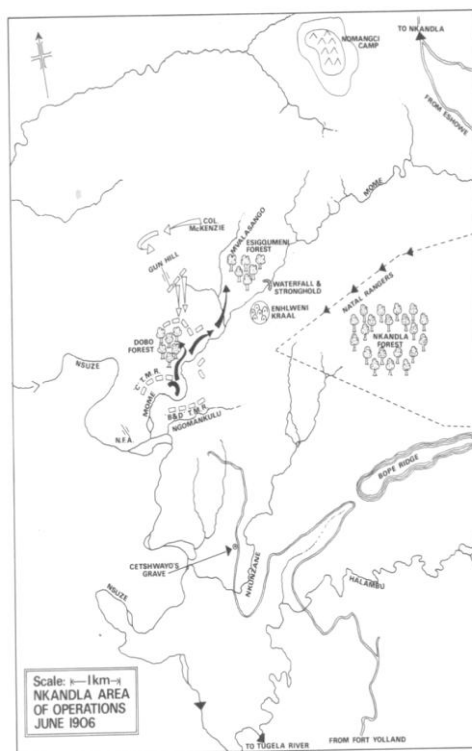
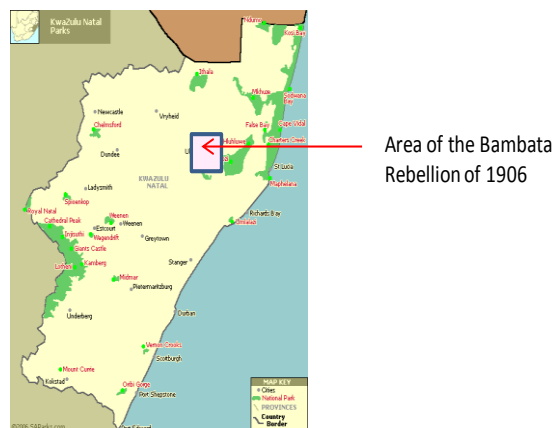
police officer reported that the local Africans were “exceedingly insolent and disrespectful to the Magistrate and when remonstrated with they shouted their war cry ‘Usutu’ twice in defiance of Magistrate and Court officials” (cited from Redding 2000:31). The refusal to pay the tax spread to various Zulu settlements in Natal. The colonial authorities tried to arrest a local leader they perceived to be the instigator of the tax protests. A deadly conflict erupted as the police tried to carry out the arrest, resulting in the deaths of two arresting officers and one African protestor.

The colonial authorities resorted to a variety of repressive measures to quell the conflict and seek retribution for the White policemen’s deaths. By the end of March 1906, there was a period of lull and Natal officials mistakenly presumed that they had suppressed the revolt. Around the same time, a local White magistrate attempted to remove a Zulu chief, Bambatha, from leadership in the Umvoti district of Natal. Chief Bambatha then attempted to assassinate the magistrate and subsequently went into hiding. Bambatha recruited a small group of fighters and waged a small-scale guerilla campaign against colonial authorities from the Nkandla Mountains of Natal. The Bambatha Rebellion of 1906-1907 is one of the most famous revolts against colonial taxation in Southern Africa. Figure 4.1 depicts the area in which the Rebellion took place.

The Bambatha Rebellion is also remembered for the disproportionate use of force by the colonial authorities against subject populations. Thousands of troops were mobilized to suppress the uprising and extremely brutal methods were used. Twelve Zulus accused of participating in the uprising were blown from the muzzle of a canon in front of their leaders in an effort to intimidate the Zulu community. By the end of 1907, when the uprising was finally crushed, some 4000 Africans and 300 whites had been



killed. While the Bambatha Rebellion was supposedly ignited by the imposition of a tax, the underlying causes were the marginalization and powerlessness that Africans felt as their traditional way of life was being destroyed. Africans were dispossessed of their land and displaced by large scale commercial agriculture and burgeoning industrialization in the region. On the other hand, the Bambatha Rebellion also reflects the insecurity of the White minority in the face of a numerically powerful and increasingly defiant African majority. Marks (1986:351) observes that the rebellion “was the last armed resistance to



**Figure 4.1:** Area of the Bambatha Rebellion in Natal  
Source: <http://www.sahistory.org> last accessed May 19, 2013

proletarianisation by Africans, and a crucial moment in the consolidation and restructuring of colonial domination and settler accumulation in twentieth-century South Africa.” The spontaneity of the rebellion placed other African leaders, like John Dube, in an awkward position. Dube had initially denounced the military action of the colonial authorities against the Zulu population. However, when the Governor summoned Dube and reprimanded him for his criticisms, Dube recanted, fearing that his White financiers might withdraw their support of his Ohlange Institute.<sup>15</sup> Apologizing to the White authorities, Dube wrote, “There are grievances to be dealt with, but I can fully realize that at a time like this we should refrain from discussing them, and assist the Government in suppressing the rebellion.”<sup>16</sup>

As noted earlier, Gandhi had his own reasons for siding with the British against the rebellion. Once again, he volunteered the services of his ambulance corps as a way of demonstrating Indian patriotic commitment to the Empire, but in a manner that was conscionable to him. In his newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi asked:

What is our duty in these calamitous times in the colony? It is not for us to say whether the revolt is justified or not. We are in Natal by virtue of the British power. Our very existence depends upon it. It is therefore our duty to render whatever help we can.<sup>17</sup>

This time, however, things turned out very differently. Gandhi and his ambulance corps were active for about four weeks, but those weeks proved to be decisive in Gandhi’s political metamorphosis. What he saw on the battlefield sorely tested his most deeply held beliefs about good and evil, leading him to condemn the British

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<sup>15</sup> The Ohlange Institute was a vocational school for Africans modeled after the Tuskegee Institute, established by Booker T. Washington, an African-American leader whom Dube admired.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Andre Odendaal in *Vukani Bantu*, 1984, p.70

<sup>17</sup> Quoted from the *Indian Opinion*, April 14, 1906, 5, 179.

campaign against the rebellion, and his role in it. He witnessed firsthand the particular viciousness of the colonial army's tactics in quelling the uprising. He writes in his autobiography (1957:314) that "this was no war but a man-hunt. ... To hear every morning reports of soldiers' rifles exploding like crackers in innocent hamlets, and to live in the midst of them was a trial." Deviating from their original mission, and risking being fired upon themselves, Gandhi and his Ambulance Corps decided to tend to the Zulu fighters who had been felled on the battlefield and left to die by the British. The Corps provided emergency care for hundreds of Zulus who had been flogged, beaten, and otherwise abused by the colonial forces. "... I swallowed the bitter draught, especially as the work of my Corps consisted only in nursing the wounded Zulus. I could see that but for us the Zulus would have been uncared for. This work, therefore, eased my conscience." (*ibid*: 316). Gandhi's aid did not go unnoticed by the wounded Zulus; segments of the Zulu community appreciated his assistance and came forth to express their gratitude to him (Reddy 1995).

Shaken to the core by this experience, Gandhi undertook spiritual vows to embrace pacifism and practice *brahmacharya* (celibacy). In analyzing the effect of the horrors of the Bambatha Rebellion on Gandhi, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1969:194) argues that "the experience of witnessing the outrages perpetrated on black bodies by white men aroused in Gandhi both a deeper identification with the maltreated and a stronger aversion against all forms of male sadism." After the rebellion, Gandhi had deepened his mental association of male sexuality with war which, to him, was the manifestation of an unbridled and extreme masculinity. Hence, in his mind, a vow of celibacy was necessary to preserve his moral stance against war. He took an additional

vow of poverty in order to remain focused on the people he now served, the marginalized and the poor. As practiced by the clerics of many faiths, spiritual vows of sexual abstinence and poverty are usually accompanied by a withdrawal from worldly affairs, especially political engagement. Gandhi, however, in seeking absolute mastery over his body and its desires, did not withdraw into an inner spiritual world. To the contrary, he proceeded boldly in the opposite direction, deeper into the world of politics and struggle. “His vows had freed him not from, but for action” (Schell 2003: 114-115). A few months after the Bambatha Rebellion, Gandhi launched his first *satyagraha*, a mass non-violent defiance campaign against Jan Smuts’ new anti-Indian legislation.

The Bambatha Rebellion destroyed Gandhi’s admiration for and faith in the British Empire. Reflecting on it when the African National Congress’ Reverend S.S. Tema visited him in 1939, Gandhi recounted:

I witnessed some of the horrors that were perpetrated on the Zulus during the Zulu Rebellion. Because one man, Bambatta, their chief, had refused to pay his tax, the whole race was made to suffer. I was in charge of an ambulance corps. I shall never forget the lacerated backs of Zulus who had received stripes and were brought to us for nursing because no white nurse was prepared to look after them. And yet those who perpetrated all those cruelties called themselves Christians. They were ‘educated’, better dressed than the Zulus, but not their moral superiors. (quoted from Gandhi’s *Collected Works*, Vol 68, pp. 273 – 274)

Observing the unintended consequences of the Bambatha Rebellion and the life-changing effect it had on Gandhi, Meer (1995: 48-49) notes that,

He soon realized that he was on the wrong side, that this was no rebellion but stark repression, that justice was on the side of the Zulus who were treated with inhumanity for doing no more than resisting a poll tax similar to that imposed on Indians. The Indian stretcher-bearers redeemed themselves by nursing the Zulu prisoners of war abandoned by the British. For Gandhi, the brutality against the Zulus roused his soul against violence as nothing had been done to them; he

sought answers and found them in his traditional scriptures. He returned from the war determined to give himself wholly to serving the people.

We often “wish that our heroes would have been consistently heroic throughout their lives,<sup>18</sup>” as Hunt (1990) surmises, but Gandhi, like all human beings, was imperfect. He was certainly no hero when he arrived in South Africa in 1893, trying to jumpstart a legal career that was going nowhere in India. As a Victorian Indian, he exhibited a conceited attitude and initially engaged in accommodationist politics to further the interests of the Indian merchant class that had hired him. However, those who would discredit Gandhi do so by ignoring the fact that by the time he left South Africa, Gandhi had become not only a crusader for the poor and downtrodden, but also one of the world’s most influential anti-colonial intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Having quelled the rebellion, the English joined forces with their former adversaries, the Afrikaners, and dedicated themselves to building a nation exclusively for Whites, White settlers now had greater autonomy from Britain over their own affairs and they, in turn, not only passed legislation protecting their own interests as “Whites,” but actively sought to suppress non-Whites. One of these measures, known as the Black Act and promoted by the Afrikaner leader Jan Smuts, required all Indians in the Transvaal to register, be fingerprinted, carry and present their registration documents at all times like criminals, under threat of imprisonment and deportation. Indians were outraged, and to Gandhi, the Black Act was the “beginning of further attempts to strike at the very root of our existence in South Africa with the view to hound us out of this country” (cited from Gandhi 1928:159). In response, he organized a resistance campaign in January 1908 in

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted from James D. Hunt (1990) *Gandhi and the Black People of South Africa*, at <http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/jamesdhunt.htm> (last accessed, August 8th, 2011)

which he and numerous protestors refused to register. As a consequence, they were put in prison. The protest campaign was covered by the international media and the Transvaal government was embarrassed by the negative publicity. Smuts summoned Gandhi to the capital, Pretoria, to settle the crisis and they agreed on a solution: if the protesters who had been jailed are released from prison, the Indian community will agree to register, but voluntarily and not compulsorily. To Gandhi, the settlement was a necessary tactical retreat at the time, but some of Gandhi's supporters, however, were outraged by what they viewed as a ridiculous and unacceptable compromise. Gandhi was beaten to an inch of his life by a disillusioned supporter, who had no patience for gentlemen's agreements (Chaddha 1997). A further insult to Gandhi, Smuts went ahead with the compulsory registration of Indians, as opposed to voluntary registration. Gandhi, however, contrary to Smuts' expectations, reignited his campaign of mass action and redoubled his effort to defy the legislation. For this insolence, Gandhi and his supporters were jailed again by Smuts, from October to December 1908, and again from February to May 1909.

Upon their release from prison, Gandhi and his followers took a sacred oath to defy all unjust legislation henceforth. The oath marks a critical moment in Gandhi's political evolution and in South African Indian politics generally. It was the beginning of Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha*. The idea is often referred to as "passive resistance" in English, but Gandhi was unhappy with this translation because he felt that it did not adequately capture the level of self-mastery that was required to control and channel one's energy into constructive and "active" resistance. Strategically, *satyagraha* aimed to morally embarrass the oppressor in front of an observing world audience into recognizing the error of his ways and impel him to change his course. Tactically anything but passive,

*satyagraha* adopted the course of non-violence at all times, even when provoked with violence. The purpose of non-violent disobedience, for Gandhi, was to expose the illegitimacy of unjust laws and the brutality that was required to enforce them, thereby exposing the governments that upheld them as fraudulent. *Satyagraha*'s methods entailed deliberate defiance of unjust practices, conducting mass meetings, engaging in sit-ins, going on strike, marching, boycotting, and performing other acts of non-violent non-cooperation. Established laws, customs, and norms that were unjust had to be disobeyed in order to effect change. Gains came slowly to the *satyagrahi*, and often at great personal cost, but Gandhi worried more about the perpetuality of moral debts incurred in seizing power more quickly through violence.

The White government ignored the *satyagraha* movement, focusing instead on building the White nation. The *satyagrahis* made some modest gains; for example in the social realm, non-Christian marriages were finally recognized after much protest. Politically, however, Indians gained no new ground. The unification of the British and Afrikaner territories would only lead to the intensification of segregation of non-Whites. Concluding that "for them [Indians] there is no South African citizenship,"<sup>19</sup> Gandhi condemned Smuts' actions as "a declaration of war against the Indians. In a final attempt to make an appeal, Gandhi led a delegation to London in 1909 on behalf of the Indian community, where the meeting to finalize South Africa's Union status was going to be held. There, he hoped to lobby British authorities to protect the rights and interests of the Indian community within the new political dispensation. In the end, however, White men conspired among themselves to create a racially-defined nation that would elevate Whites

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<sup>19</sup> Cited from *Indian Opinion*, October 6, 1906



to supremacy. The British, feeling guilty, on one hand, about the suffering they had inflicted upon the Afrikaners in the Boer War, but mostly preoccupied with preserving the Empire, on the other hand, conceded to the demand for a Union (Hyslop 2011b). And, in a devastating blow to the non-Whites, the British simultaneously abandoned the “Indian Question” and the “Native Question” in South Africa. Reflecting on these developments and their implications on the trip back from London, Gandhi was moved to write *Hind Swaraj*, a wide-ranging and powerful treatise on anti-colonialism, nationalism, independence, and self-determination.<sup>20</sup>

The formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 gave White settlers increased powers to entrench the spatial segregation of non-Whites. The Indian population, which was small, found its movement restricted to certain provinces. Finally, Union status thwarted Gandhi’s strategy of playing different sections of the colonial bureaucracy off against each other in order to advance the Indian struggle in South Africa. Thus, the Bambatha Rebellion, the formation of the Union, and the betrayal of non-White trust on the part of the British government together sparked Gandhi’s radicalization and his subsequent condemnation of the British Empire. Increasingly, circumstances pushed Gandhi to take his struggle to the street.

In 1912, Gandhi hosted his mentor, the Indian nationalist leader and intellectual Gopal Krishna Gokhale, on his visit to South Africa. Gokhale, who had an audience with Union leaders Smuts and Botha, appealed to them to address the grievances of the Indian community, particularly to repeal the Black Act. When the White government refused to accede to these demands, Gandhi initiated a new *satyagraha* campaign in

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<sup>20</sup> See the journal *Public Culture* (2011), vol 23 (2) for an excellent collection of essays commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the publication of *Hind Swaraj*.

which women were at the forefront (Hiralal 2010). ‘Satyagrahas,’ as the campaigns were also called, were pan-Indian social movements that cut across class, linguistic, ethnic, and caste lines to unite all Indians in South Africa. Thousands of indentured laborers participated in the march to the Transvaal border of Natal in defiance of the injunction prohibiting Indians from moving freely to other provinces. The government did not take action immediately against the protestors; they were allowed to cross the border from Natal into the Transvaal without incident. However, midway en-route to Johannesburg, Gandhi and the marchers were detained by police. The police action against the marchers, in turn, ignited a strike by Indian coal miners indentured in the Newcastle area of Natal. Upon his release, Gandhi travelled to Newcastle to support the striking mine workers and organized members of the merchant class to provide food for the strikers and their families. The labor unrest also spread to the Natal sugar cane plantations.

Smuts forestalled dealing with the crisis by proposing to establish a commission to examine Indian grievances. Gandhi and his fellow activists, who were not satisfied with the offer, continued their civil disobedience. However, at the time, the South African government was facing a series of labor strikes by White mine workers in addition to Indian mass action. As the White strikes escalated, Smuts declared martial law on the country. Hoping that Smuts would be more amenable now to resolving the “Indian Question,” considering the multiple political pressures now confronting him, including White unrest, Gandhi travelled again to Pretoria. The meeting led to the Smuts-Gandhi Agreement of 1914, in which the £3 tax was abolished and marriages performed under Hindu and Muslim rites were finally fully recognized. However, as part of the bargain, Gandhi had to agree that there would be no more large-scale Indian immigration from

India, that laws restricting Indian movement across South Africa's provincial lines would remain, and that the franchise would not be extended to Indians. As noted earlier, for Gandhi, *satyagraha* meant embracing the idea of compromise, but his followers could not always abide by his reasoning, especially after having paid so dearly to achieve what seemed to them like too little. Thus, the Smuts-Gandhi Agreement was a bitter fruit for many Indians after years of struggle. Still, they realized that *satyagraha* gave them, a small and vulnerable racial minority, a way to make gains without losing their dignity.

In sum, Gandhi's legal work and political activism were initially in the service of the Indian traders who employed him. However, as Indians began to face discrimination collectively, regardless of their differences, a common-interest politics developed around being "Indian," which Gandhi was able to organize and mobilize. Although he did not always succeed in attaining his goals, Gandhi's efforts to mobilize Indians into peaceful, nonviolent, non-militant action for just causes drew international attention to the plight of Indians, both in South Africa and in India. For example, Gandhi's campaigns in South Africa were covered extensively in *The Times* of London, and the Indian National Congress was so impressed by his success in uniting the diverse South African Indian community under a single umbrella that they adopted his methods in directing their own campaign for independence.

While in South Africa, Gandhi tried to articulate a politics of empowerment for the South African Indian community based on the new "meta-identity" of "Indian," which would anchor them in the sea of dislocation upon which they were adrift. The experience of collective disfranchisement at the hands of Whites, who had no regard for Indians' particular differences, actually drew Indians together in struggle. However,

Indians were also being driven together from another direction: the growing suspicion among Africans of the “coloured” newcomers who appeared to be making deals with the Whites.

Historically, it was a time when White settlers in various African colonies, including South Africa, were trying to consolidate their advantage through legislation that empowered them as “White” in relation to various racial others. It was also a time when an “African” identity was being distilled out of diverse ethnicities in South Africa, as elsewhere in Africa. These developments are important to bear in mind when examining Gandhi’s relations with Africans in South Africa, which the chapter will now explore.

## **GANDHI’S RELATIONS WITH AFRICANS**

As noted earlier in this chapter, Gandhi’s interactions with the indigenous African population during his sojourn in South Africa are poorly understood. Questions and contentions abound. Did Gandhi utter ethnocentric statements toward Africans? While in South Africa, why did Gandhi support the British in their wars? What happened to Gandhi during the Bambatha Rebellion? What was the nature of Gandhi’s contact with Africans in South Africa? Why did he not form alliances with Africans in his struggle against the colonial authorities? The chapter will now turn to some of the questions that emerge when considering Gandhi and Africans in South Africa.

## Ethnocentrism and Prejudice

As noted earlier, Gandhi was twenty-four years old and politically inexperienced when he arrived in South Africa. Hired by an Indian merchant firm, his involvement in political affairs did not, at first, extend beyond fulfilling his obligation to them as their employee. His view of Africans during this period was patently ethnocentric. Like other “cultivated” Indian Anglophiles of his day, who believed themselves to be British in addition to being privileged and upper caste, the young Gandhi mimicked the existing racial prejudice of Europeans toward Africans.<sup>21</sup> He regarded such an attitude as normal, and lacked the awareness that it was problematic, at least initially. This attitude is evident when Gandhi enters the nascent political scene developing among Indians. For example, during a trip to India, soon after arriving in South Africa, Gandhi related to his audiences that Indians in colonial Natal were being “reduced” by Whites to the status of “the raw *kaffir*, whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a number of cattle to buy a wife with and, then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness” (Gandhi, 1970:74). Steeped in ignorance, Gandhi did not at first examine his superior attitude or his pejorative statements. Thus, in light of this prejudice, his later political and spiritual transformation is all the more striking and ironic. Gandhi willed himself to embrace and embody the very image of nakedness he had mocked earlier when describing Africans. Having decided that European clothing was a marker of false pride and economic oppression, Gandhi deliberately avoided it, choosing instead to don a simple loincloth of

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<sup>21</sup> There is a long tradition in mainstream Western intellectual discourse of dismissing African culture and history. For example, the German philosopher and political theorist Friedrich Hegel claimed that “Africa proper, as far as history goes back, remained, for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world, shut up. ... It is a land of childhood ... enveloped in the dark mantle of the night. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state.” Like Hegel, many Western travel writers and explorers, echoed the view that Africa had made no significant contribution to human civilization.

homespun cotton in order to identify with the poor, whose dignity, he came to realize, comes from a source other than their outward appearance. However, that was the later Gandhi. The younger man, securely ensconced in his privilege, might have even scorned the older man, if they had been able to meet.

Earlier, during his days as a filer of petitions, Gandhi believed that Indian settlers in South Africa were part of the British Empire, and therefore entitled to certain rights as British subjects, under British law. His activism from 1894 to about 1906 was based on this thinking. He was determined to enable Indians to attain the same rights as the White settler minority in South Africa. Placing a great deal of faith in the Empire during this time, Gandhi emphasized displaying loyalty to the British, and exhorted his fellow Indians to do so as well. Looking back at this time, however, he writes wistfully in his autobiography, “hardly ever have I known anybody to cherish such loyalty as I did to the British Constitution” (cited from Gandhi, 1957:212-213). For example, when Gandhi returned briefly to India in 1896, he served on a committee there to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. He thought it reasonable and compelling for Indians to demonstrate their loyalty by creating an Indian “Ambulance Corps” during the Anglo-Boer war. Sergeant Major Gandhi and his phalanx of stretcher bearers worked tirelessly to retrieve wounded and dead British soldiers from the battlefield. As noted earlier, Gandhi saw this service as an opportunity for Indians to test their masculinity by being part of the war effort, but in a manner that did not require the taking of life.

Gandhi’s statements and actions during this phase of his life have been the subject of much scrutiny. His derogatory remarks toward Africans are cited by some as proof that he was a lifelong racist. Some commentators, like Lelyveld (2011), extrapolate from

these remarks that he was a “repressor” of Africans who is held in unnecessarily high regard. While critics of Gandhi’s ethnocentrism are correct to note his prejudiced remarks about Africans, they tend to view him only within the frame of his early years in South Africa, during which these remarks were made, as if time as well as his legacy had frozen at that point. Such critics detach the young, ignorant Gandhi from the social and political context which influenced his beliefs, and portray him as a bigot bearing ill-will toward Africans. Sensationalists like Lelyveld ignore Gandhi’s spiritual and political transformation after the Bambatha Rebellion. Such biographers seize upon a part of the subject’s life in order to generalize upon the whole, disregarding ways in which the person might have grown or transcended. Having done so, Lelyveld then casually wonders whether the honorific “mahatma” bestowed upon was truly deserved. However, Gandhi’s legacy cannot be dismissed so easily.

Such attempts to “re-size” Gandhi have contributed to tensions between Indians and Africans in South Africa. In 2003, some of Gandhi’s detractors lobbied against the unveiling of a statue of Gandhi in Johannesburg, where his office once stood, on the grounds that he was an imperialist. However, the vitriol with which they oppose the statue begs the question of why they have not paid attention to existing statues of actual imperialists, such as Cecil John Rhodes, who still stands in Cape Town, facing north, with a view to conquering Africa “from Cape to Cairo” (see Figure 4.2). Yet it is Gandhi, who contributed so much more to the aspirations of colonized peoples worldwide, who



**Figure 4.2:** Clockwise: Cartoon depicting Rhodes as a colossus with a stride spanning from “Cape to Cairo”; Statue of Gandhi in Johannesburg. Statue of Rhodes looking north at the Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town;

**Source:** <http://www.sahistory.org> last accessed February 23, 2013



offends these commentators. The contradiction between these critics' condemnation of Gandhi, on one hand, and their exoneration of European oppressors reveals the extent to which they have themselves internalized Eurocentrism.

### **Gandhi's Evolving Thought**

In actuality, Gandhi's attitudes and politics evolved over time, as he continually exercised the habit of re-examining the basis of his own beliefs. After 1906, Gandhi began to lose faith in the British Empire when it failed to accede to what he believed were the reasonable demands and expectations of a people who had demonstrated their loyalty and worthiness beyond a doubt. The beginnings of this disillusionment and subsequent shift in his politics may be traced to his experiences during the Bambatha Rebellion and the formation of the Union of South Africa, respectively, as noted earlier. Gandhi began to move away from safe, bureaucratic methods, such as petitions, toward riskier, vocal, and public forms of protest as inspired by satyagraha, his own brand of non-violent civil disobedience. In this respect, unlike other intellectuals of anti-colonial movements, who drew upon Western thought and political traditions such as Marxism or Christianity to inform their resistance, Gandhi is unique in developing his own homegrown approach, satyagraha, which was based on "the indigenous philosophical vocabulary of his own country" (Parekh 1989:3). Consistent with his realization that mimicry of the master's ideas and methods cannot lead to true liberation, satyagraha, for Gandhi, was at once a rejection of Eurocentric thought and a strategy of political resistance rooted in Indian philosophy and practice.

Thus, in 1939, when African National Congress (ANC) leader S.S. Tema traveled to India to see what the ANC might learn from the Indian struggle against British rule, he was received by a very different Gandhi from the one who first arrived in South Africa, who by this time, was actively denouncing and resisting the British, and had symbolically shed his Western clothes and accoutrements for a homespun loincloth. Gandhi instructed Tema that the Western-oriented leadership of the ANC ought to proudly identify with the African masses: “You must not be afraid of being ‘Bantuized’ or feel ashamed to carry an assegai or of going about with only a tiny clout around your loins. You must become African again (cited in Fredrickson 1995, p. 230).” This Gandhi no longer felt superior to the “raw *kaffir*”; in fact, his attitude toward Africans during Tema’s visit is even at variance with that of many African leaders themselves at the time, who were searching for a political voice of their own, but were struggling with Eurocentric views of themselves. For example, when asked by reporters if Africans could participate in the sort of campaigns waged by Indians, John Dube, then President-General of the ANC, remarked that “the Africans would retaliate when provoked because nobody [could] control their violent nature” (cited from Reddy, 1995: 25). Therefore, singling out Gandhi for particular condemnation when he, like his counterparts, reflected the ignorant and misguided worldviews of his time, denies Gandhi credit for re-examining his own beliefs and transcending them, and distorts the memory of his immense contribution to national liberation struggles worldwide.

Once again, a parallel between Gandhi and the eminent African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois comes to mind. Du Bois, often regarded as the father of modern pan-Africanism, like Gandhi, made a number of pejorative remarks about Africa

and Africans early in his political career. His early writings and statements reflect a paternalistic and condescending attitude toward lower class African-Americans, whom he clearly regarded as beneath himself. In his celebrated work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1961:132) writes

I should be the last one to deny the patent weakness and shortcomings of the Negro people... I freely acknowledge that it is possible, and sometimes best, that a partially undeveloped people should be ruled by the best of their stronger neighbors for their own good until such time they can start and fight the world's battles alone.

In earlier writings, DuBois referred to Africans as a “semi-civilized” people. In fact, as the African- American philosopher and cultural critic Cornel West (1989) points out, DuBois’ work is replete with ethnocentric and elite references: “as a highly educated Western Black intellectual, DuBois himself often scorns the barbarisms (sometimes confused with Africanisms) shot through African American culture. In fact, I count 18 allusions to the backwardness of Black folk” (1989:143).

However, as DuBois witnessed the growing violence against Blacks in the South, particularly after rigid segregationist laws were implemented, he lost faith in appealing to Whites on the basis of reason. The turning point for DuBois was the lynching of Black servicemen who, at his own urging, had fought in World War I. These men proved their patriotism toward the United States and to Whites by fighting in World War I, only to be viciously lynched by White mobs upon their return solely on the basis of their race. DuBois later questioned his own assumptions about “America,” and being a person of African descent in it. As Gandhi had done, he too reflected on his own earlier attitude: “the Negro problem was, to my mind, a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent

understanding. The world was thinking wrongly about race because it did not know that the ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation” (DuBois, 1940:58). Just as Gandhi had attempted to analyze and re-interpret the reasoning contained in British law in order to find a way to empower Indians, Du Bois had felt certain that the Western Enlightenment, particularly its rationalist tradition, held the key to addressing the race problem in American society. For example, this thinking deeply influenced his seminal work in urban sociology, *The Philadelphia Negro*, which took him door to door to painstakingly gather empirical data on the socio-economic conditions of Blacks in Philadelphia. He attempted to report his findings in a “politically neutral” and “scientifically objective” manner, and hoped that his data would enlighten American Whites about the condition of urban Blacks, so that they would feel compelled to address the problem. Consistent with the training he received at Harvard and Berlin Universities, DuBois placed his faith in the ideas of Western thinkers such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, as the tools with which to dismantle the color line in American society. Although he was a Black man himself, DuBois’ early views were shaped by the fact that he was a Northerner who was educated in elite institutions. He had visited the South, where violence against Blacks was rampant, but still retained his belief in White institutions, much as Gandhi had initially believed in the capacity of British institutions to correct themselves when presented with the illogic of injustice. The early DuBois believed that Black liberation could be won through the leadership of the “talented tenth,” an elite caste of Blacks who would use their extraordinary gifts to uplift their “backward” brethren and disprove the “error” of racism among Whites. As the Bambatha Rebellion had done for Gandhi, the lynching of

Black servicemen introduced into DuBois' mind a conflict that would induce him to realize that he could not remain a "calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved" (DuBois, 1940:222).

The young Gandhi, as a British-trained lawyer, had deep admiration for his adopted culture, particularly its traditions of law and order, common sense, and decorum, which he held in high regard. He had believed in the idea of Imperial citizenship and trusted British legal institutions to eventually address the problem of Indian rights in South Africa which to his mind seemed a temporary problem. In time, however, Gandhi came to realize that his faith in the British and their empire was misplaced. As colonial authorities refused to respond to his appeals for incremental change, Gandhi embraced a politics of protest, from about 1906 onward, based on a philosophy drawn largely from Hinduism but also from righteous and loving teachings present in the other religions that he had studied, such as Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and Buddhism.

It is well chronicled that DuBois abandoned his faith in rationalism and positivism as a means of addressing the racial divide in American society. As his thought evolved, however, he too modified the elitist views he initially held. It would be intellectually disingenuous to conclude that DuBois was a self-hating racist, an ethnocentric supporter of slavery, or an apologist for Whites, after citing only his earlier statements about African-Americans and Africa. DuBois' views and political positions had matured through self-examination in response to changing political circumstances, over the span of his life. Fortunately, there exists no sustained popular campaign to discredit DuBois politically or to efface his legacy from history. Similarly, Gandhi, who had also substantially modified his politics, thought, and indeed even himself, such that

that he bore little resemblance to his former self, ought to be given due consideration by history.

According to Reddy (1995:33), Gandhi's contact with the ANC leader John Dube "led to a rejection of any feeling of racial superiority and increased his respect for the African people." Addressing Whites at a meeting of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Johannesburg in 1908, Gandhi remarked that the African people "are entitled to justice, a fair field and no favour. Immediately give that to them, you will find no difficulty." (cited from *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1970:245). He went on to speak of a multicultural future for South Africa: "If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen." (*ibid*:246). However, it became painfully clear to Gandhi that the democratic aspirations of non-Whites would be forsaken as the colonial authorities who were negotiating the Union of South Africa with White settlers (English and Afrikaner) made no gesture of extending rights to non-Whites. Gandhi addressed the *Transvaal Union Society* in Johannesburg on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1908:

The people who had settled in South Africa had laid down certain conditions under which the nation that was now forming had to live. ... They had never taken into consideration what the feelings of the Asiatics or of the Natives themselves might be. What would they have to say to any solution that was suggested for their acceptance? Was it suggested that the Asiatic or the Coloured races must perforce accept any solution which was found for their treatment by the predominant race – the European race. ... It was impossible to conceive that those races would ever allow the predominant race to dispose of them as they chose.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> (The *Transvaal Leader*, August 21, 1908, CW, Volume 8, p.466.).

Gandhi no longer used the term “*kaffir*” to refer to Africans, calling them “native peoples” instead. Furthermore, it is clear that Gandhi believed that a new political order cannot be established in South Africa without giving a political voice to non-Whites as a whole. In fact, this speech foresaw the problem of imposing an undemocratic segregationist order in South Africa as one that would haunt the country for decades to come. Here, Gandhi is no longer an advocate of upper class/caste Indians. He had transformed into the leader of a mass political movement that united Indians across class, caste, and ethnic lines and embraced other non-White races in struggle against discrimination in South Africa. Ignoring these transitions in Gandhi’s thought is historically inaccurate at best, but racist if done in deliberate disregard of the consequences of doing so.

### **Alliances with Africans**

During his time in South Africa, Gandhi did not form any alliances with the African population in fighting discrimination or segregation.<sup>23</sup> There are several reasons why Gandhi’s politics and activism revolved almost exclusively around Indian concerns. First, Gandhi reasoned that since Indians and Africans were a foreign minority and a native majority, respectively, they were fighting for different political ends, and that it was not in their mutual best interest to fight together for different causes. Africans, according to Gandhi, were “children of the soil,” whose politics were defined in terms of

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<sup>23</sup> Gandhi briefly collaborated with the Coloured (mixed race) population because he believed that Indians had much in common with this other numerically small and vulnerable minority in South Africa. He saw them as being in a similar position to Indians, and could strategically join Indians in a fight to protect their rights. However, linguistic and geographic differences made sustained collaboration difficult

claiming their rights as a dispossessed, indigenous majority. Indians, on the other hand, were a small, immigrant minority who were not claiming an inheritance in South Africa, but were nevertheless entitled to rights and privileges based on their status as subjects of the British empire. In referring to the African struggle, Gandhi claimed that “yours is a bigger issue. It ought not to be mixed up with that of Indians.”<sup>24</sup> To Gandhi’s legal mind, there was no clear basis for joining the Indian and African political movements at the time, given their divergent goals, because their particular issues would become blurred and cause a confusion that Whites could exploit. Here Gandhi distinguishes politically between “principles” and “interests”. While he believed that the African and Indian struggles were the same in *principle*, he believed that Indian *interests* were different from that of Africans. For example, when Howard Thurman<sup>25</sup>, the Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University, visited Gandhi in India in 1936 and asked him specifically, “did the South African Negroes take part in your movement?” Gandhi replied, “No, I purposely did not invite them. It would have endangered their cause” (cited from Gandhi, 1995:207).

Such reasoning led Gandhi to dedicate his intellectual energy to fostering political and cultural unity amongst disparate groups within the Indian community, each of whose divisions was a gulf in itself. In one of his first speeches in South Africa, Gandhi stressed the practical need for Indian unity, pointing out the “necessity of forgetting all distinctions such as Hindus, Musalman, Parsis, Christians, Gujaratis, Madrasis, Punjabis, Sindhis, Kachchis, Surtis, and so on” in the struggle for rights (cited from Gandhi

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<sup>24</sup> Cited from *Indian Opinion*, March 3, 1939.

<sup>25</sup> One of the first individuals responsible for transmitting Gandhi’s ideas to the US. This issue is explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.



1957:158). By the time he wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, Gandhi had developed the thesis that the people of the Indian subcontinent constituted a *praja*, or nation. He argued that migrant Indians, who had settled outside of India were, by this logic, also Indian.

Gandhi was well aware that the White population felt threatened by Indians, especially the merchant class, who were seen as economic competitors. He was also aware that the African population, on the other hand, resented Indian indentured labor as well as free Indian labor; as noted in the previous chapter, Indian workers were often intimidated by African workers with violence (Gandhi 1957). Given the situation, it made sense to Gandhi that his community would wish to rally together as “Indians” to protect themselves, when they were already being treated as such by others. Thus, Gandhi devoted himself to developing tactics for the Indian population, which found itself in a political dispensation that sandwiched them between two groups, the Whites and the Africans, who were themselves vying for power. “Indian” identity, for Gandhi, was the vehicle with which to maneuver out of the particular oppression that Indians faced in South Africa. Undesirable as their presence was to both Whites and Africans, “Indians,” Gandhi realized, had to position themselves ideologically in relation to a steadily consolidating White supremacy, on one hand, and a nascent African nationalism on the other hand, neither of which had an equitable vision of where Indians belonged.

Authors like Swan (1985) have criticized Gandhi for failing to forge “proletarian” alliances with the African population or to form a “united front” with them against White colonial rule. As desirable as such coalitions might have been, Swan’s criticism does not consider certain obvious historic realities and political contingencies of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indian and African activists at this time were fragmented; they were

developing their own, separate responses to the White power that differentially controlled them within a plantation and mining economy. As pointed out in the previous chapter, White power structures constructed and manipulated Indian and African identities in order to augment and protect their own “White” interests. Indian identity was just beginning to be organized and mobilized into a mass political movement. African nationalism, on the other hand, was still in its infancy, yet to be wrought and articulated. Furthermore, most Indians and Africans were geographically separated by the urban-rural divide, respectively.

When the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, uniting the former Boer republics and English colonies into a single geographic unit, not one non-White representative was invited. Nor was there any discussion of the rights of South Africa’s non-Whites. Intrigued by Gandhi’s success with the idea of a “pan-Indian” politics, and in response to their own national aspirations, a few elite Africans, from different ethnicities, gathered in the town of Bloemfontein to form an “African front” to protest the formation of the Union of South Africa (Davies *et al* 1984). The Natal Indian Congress, the first non-White resistance organization in South Africa, served as the inspiration for the creation of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in 1912. The SANNC was re-named in 1923 as the African National Congress (ANC) after being influenced by Marcus Garvey’s brand of pan-Africanism. The impetus to form the ANC came from a group of Christian, mission-educated African lawyers, traditional leaders, clergy, and small businessmen who wanted to create an organization that would unify Africans and protect their rights against the discriminatory practices of the Union government. Pixley Ka Seme, a founding member of the ANC, explained the

organization's purpose at its launch: "in the land of our birth, Africans are treated as hewers of wood and drawers of water. .... we have no voice in the making of laws and no part in their administration." The formation of the ANC, according to Seme, served the dual purpose of "creating national unity and defending our rights and privileges" (McClintock 1995).

As the NIC had done with Indians, the ANC called for the subordination of local and traditional "native" identities under a common, national, "African" identity, which would later articulate with emerging global "pan-African" identities. A conservative organization in its early years, the ANC dedicated itself to issue of land dispossession; segregation was considered only after Africans began to urbanize. For a period, the ANC was also a hierarchical and exclusivist organization, comprised mainly of African, Christian mission-educated, urban professionals and small businessmen. Women were denied membership in the organization during its first 30 years of existence. Indians and Coloureds were excluded until 1969, when they were permitted to apply for partial membership and privileges. Only in 1985 did non-Africans gain full access, including membership in its National Executive Committee. Swan's criticism that Gandhi did not form alliances with the African population fails to note the fact that until 1912, there were no national African organizations in existence to serve the needs of the African population, let alone with which to form alliances. This lack made large-scale political cooperation between Indians and Africans logistically unfeasible, in addition to the other reasons cited above. As such, organized and sustained inter-racial alliances were not possible at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the conclusions of Swan, Lelyveld, and others that Gandhi was a self-segregating racist, are premature, facile, and unfounded

because they ignore the historical realities of the period. Indian-African alliances would develop, but later, under different circumstances, long after Gandhi had returned to India. In the meantime, however, Indian-African cooperation remained at the individual and personal level, to the extent that convenience and expediency would allow, given the ascent of White supremacy.

### **Strategy, Leadership, and Common Goals**

While Gandhi's *satyagraha* strategy eventually gained popular appeal beyond Indian communities, it was, as Fredrickson (1995:227) observes, "rooted in Hindu religious ideals and practices that were associated with the strictest kind of virtue, specifically the doctrine of *ahimsa* – the refusal to do any harm to any living thing." *Satyagraha*, for Gandhi, was not just a political strategy but a way of life. It governed every choice made by an individual. According to Gandhi, a true and dedicated *satyagrahi* must give up eating meat, resist retaliating when physically attacked, pursue celibacy, and follow various other ascetic practices in order to build up the determination required to resist the pull of the masculinist, materialist, and corporeal forms of desire that sought not only to rule the body and the mind, but led one to comply with the logic of domination. Furthermore, according to Gandhi, religious tolerance and an ecumenical outlook were absolutely required of the *satyagrahi*. This requirement grew out of his belief that all of the world religions shared certain common moral principles that can serve as the basis for joint political action. For example, in his study of the Christian Bible, Gandhi derived great inspiration from Christ's "Sermon on the Mount." Thus, the

practices of “turning the other cheek” and “loving one’s enemy” found their way into his ‘arsenal’ of non-violence. Gandhi’s passionate advocacy of religious pluralism gave *satyagraha* its international currency and inspired resistance movements among various cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial groups in South Africa, India, the United States, and beyond. As a political strategy, its goal was to transform, not destroy, an adversary.

When asked about whether Africans were politically and culturally prepared to engage in *satyagraha*, given the requirements just outlined, Gandhi initially expressed doubt: “They did not understand the technique of our struggle, nor could they have seen the purpose or utility of non-violence” (Gandhi 1957:176). Africans themselves were unsure when asked about it. For example, John Dube, the first President-General of the African National Congress, expressed doubt about whether Africans could model their campaigns against segregation after Indians. According to his colleague, the Reverend Pearson, “he [Dube] did not think they [Africans] could. For one thing, the Africans did not possess the divine power the Indians had, and for another, the Africans would retaliate when provoked because nobody [could] control their violent nature” (cited from Reddy 1995:23). Such stereotypical statements alone, as made by these leaders, would make it appear that Indians and Africans could not find common ground or agree on strategy, tactics, or methods. However, practical realities more likely preoccupied the respective constituencies and their leaders, leading them in apparently divergent directions. For example, Gandhi eventually became disillusioned with the conservative and legalistic petition politics that had initially captivated him; after the formation of the Union of South Africa, Gandhi had decidedly abandoned petitions and moved on to *satyagraha*, his own homegrown form of radical protest. On the other hand, the newly

formed African National Congress (ANC), as late as 1912, was only just beginning to explore petitions. Thus, conservatism in African political thought also played a significant role in the absence of Indian-African collaboration during Gandhi's time in South Africa. It would be some years before any convergence could be seen.

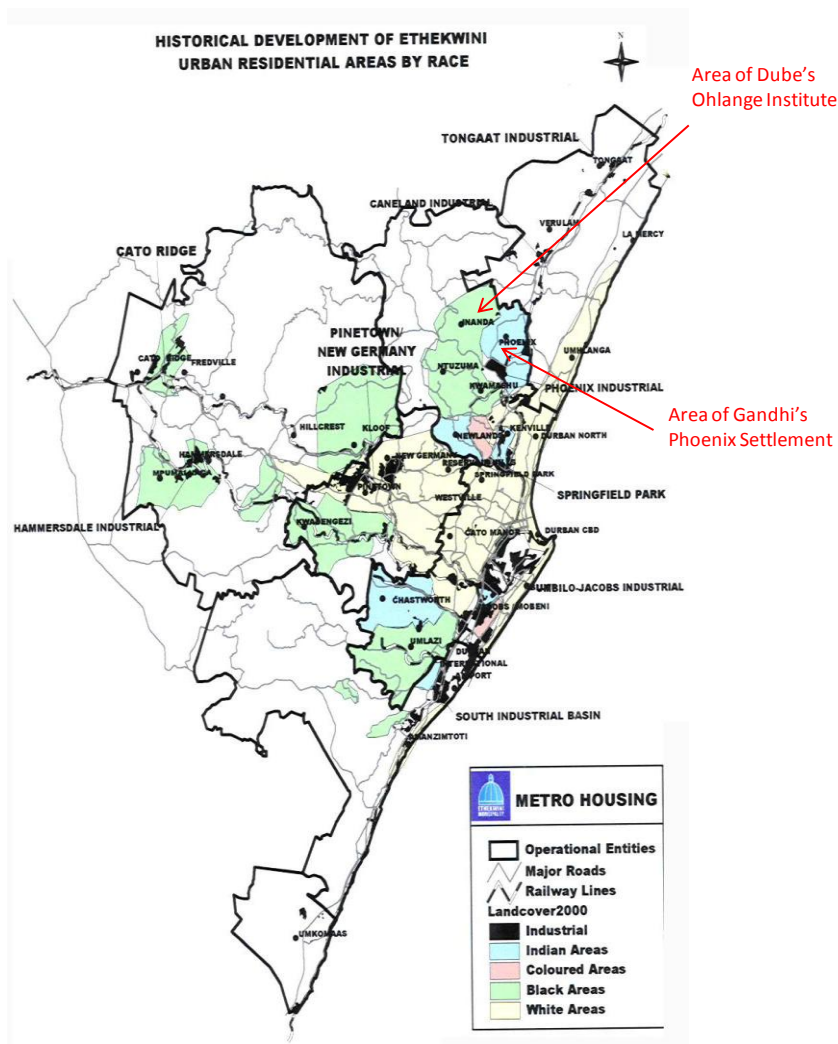
Gandhi was aware of African leaders and their causes, and periodically wrote about them in his newspaper. He was also acquainted with ANC President John Dube. Dube had studied at Oberlin College in the United States between 1887 and 1891 and returned to South Africa as a passionate admirer of Booker T. Washington, the conservative African-American thinker known for his accommodationism toward Southern Whites in America. In 1892, Dube established an industrial-vocational school for Africans in Natal, called the Ohlange Institute, which was modeled after Washington's Tuskegee Institute. Dube also launched a newspaper for Africans, the *Ilanga Lase Natal*, which sought to reach the African population using the print medium. The publication took African political thought beyond oral tradition and opened up the possibility for mutual understanding, greater dialogue, and strategizing amongst different groups. The *Ilanga Lase Natal* was initially run off the *Indian Opinion*'s press, before acquiring its own.

The historical record indicates that Gandhi and Dube met at least once at the residence of sugar magnate Marshall Campbell in August of 1905. Campbell was hosting a reception for the British Association for the Advancement of Science, at which Dube spoke. Dube's speech criticized the colonial authorities for depriving Africans of their land and imposing unfair and harsh taxes on them. The Association was impressed by Dube's efforts to uplift Africans and donated a small sum of money to his school. Gandhi

subsequently wrote about Dube in the *Indian Opinion* on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1905, speaking highly of him and remarking that he is a “man one should know.” Dube, in turn, remarked to his colleague, an English clergyman, the Reverend W.W.Pearson, that he was acquainted with Gandhi and had “studied in depth the struggle fought by Indians under his leadership, and had nothing but respect for them” (cited from Reddy 1995:23).

It is likely that Gandhi accompanied his mentor G.K. Gokhale when he visited Ohlange as part of the itinerary Gandhi had prepared for him, as Gandhi’s Phoenix Ashram was nearby (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4). It is recorded that Gokhale spent some time with Dube at his Institute, and that the Institute’s students sang Zulu songs in Gokhale’s honor. However, the lack of specific mention in the historical record of Gandhi’s visits to either Ohlange or Dube in general, has been magnified by some writers (Lelyveld 2011) as additional evidence of Gandhi’s antagonism toward Africans. According to Lelyveld, Gandhi’s “failure” to visit Dube, cannot be a coincidence, but rather, “proves” that Gandhi was a racist who deliberately avoided Dube, given the close proximity of their establishments. In Lelyveld’s account, spurious notions are linked by imagined possibilities to stand for actual events, resulting in a distortion of the significance of Gandhi’s actual contributions to worldwide struggles for national liberation. Lelyveld’s claims, however, are contradicted by Gandhi’s own words, which show his recognition of the importance of mutual support and solidarity between Africans and Indians:

Indians have too much in common with Africans to think of isolating themselves from them. They cannot exist in South Africa for any length of time without the sympathy and friendship of the Africans. I am not aware of the general body of



**Figure 4.3:** Locations of Dube's Ohlane Institute and Gandhi's Phoenix Ashram.  
**Source:** Marx and Charlton (2003:11)





**Figure 4.4:** Gandhi's Phoenix Settlement in Durban, South Africa. Clockwise from top left: The headquarters of *The Indian Opinion*, the newspaper founded by Gandhi for Indians in South Africa. The printing press from which *The Indian Opinion* was published. Bust of Gandhi at the Phoenix Settlement. Pictured with Gandhi is Professor Herby Govinden, former Dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of Durban-Westville, an apartheid-era segregated institution of higher learning for Indians. Professor Govinden is the first Indian to earn a doctorate in the sciences in South Africa. **Source:** Kavitha Ramsamy

Indians having ever adopted an air of superiority toward their African brethren, and it would be a tragedy if any such movement were to gain ground among the Indian settlers of South Africa.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, given the fact that Indians and Africans were dealing with different political realities at the time, Gandhi felt that each group could achieve more if they organized and represented their own interests through separate movements. This view was shared by the African leadership of the ANC in the early the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Gandhi in a Time of Memory**

The memory of Gandhi's political activism in South Africa has emerged in recent years as a contested issue in contemporary South African politics. In his autobiography *Living to Tell the Tale* the celebrated Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez (2003:iii) remarked that "Life is not what one lived but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it". As South Africa transitioned from the apartheid system to a democratic order, one century after Gandhi's arrival, the country was seized by a new politics of recounting the past. Govinden (2008:9) observes that "South Africa at the present moment is living through a time of memory. It is a time when we are considering the past histories of individuals, families, institutions, events, and periods. In this project we are reconstructing past images of places and spaces, birthed by the logic of apartheid, but also signifying resistance to apartheid." The historical tensions between

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Reddy (1995:138). The quotation originally appeared in *Young India* on April 5, 1928.

Indians and Africans, as experienced over the past 100 years, are resurrected now as South Africa lives through this “time of memory.”

The memory of Gandhi’s life and activism during his sojourn in South Africa has been accorded great historic and symbolic importance by the ANC-ruled government in South Africa. Remembering the significance of Gandhi’s vital achievements in the struggle against White supremacy in South Africa, Nelson Mandela (1999:124) wrote in support of his nomination of Gandhi for Person of the Twentieth Century:

India is Gandhi’s country of birth; South Africa his country of adoption. He is both an Indian and a South African citizen. Both countries contributed to his intellectual and moral genius, and he shaped the liberatory movements in both colonial theaters...He is the archetypal anti-colonial revolutionary. His strategy of non-cooperation, his assertion that we can be dominated only if we cooperate with our dominators and his nonviolent resistance inspired anti-colonial and antiracist movements internationally in our century.

In 2003, a number of events were sponsored throughout South Africa to celebrate Gandhi’s legacy. As noted earlier, a statue of Gandhi was unveiled in central Johannesburg near where his law office once stood. It soon became clear that the accolades and recognition bestowed upon Gandhi by Mandela were not universally embraced by South Africa’s African population. At the time of the statue’s unveiling, a number of editorial and opinion pieces appeared in African newspapers opposing the commemoration of Gandhi’s legacy. One article (Hlongwane, 2003) dismissed him as an Imperial loyalist and “racist who failed to see Africans as human beings [and] supported separatist and racist policies of the apartheid government [*sic*],”<sup>27</sup> (the author apparently did not realize that Gandhi left South Africa long before apartheid was instituted). The fact that Gandhi bore no likeness to the European colonists who had the political and

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that the apartheid government did not exist during Gandhi’s time in South Africa.

military might to enforce their racial views to their own advantage, was lost on these critics, as was the fact that Gandhi undertook a spiritual and political metamorphosis in which he shed his prior beliefs and dedicated himself wholly to the marginalized and poor people he represented.

Yet, the “controversy” around Gandhi’s “racism” is resurrected from time to time, such that it impacts contemporary Indian-African relations in South Africa. Most recently, Joseph Lelyveld’s (2011) biography, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, questioned whether Gandhi truly deserves the title of “Mahatma” and proceeds to dissect Gandhi’s character. Lelyveld levies three charges against Gandhi that he hopes will cast the “Mahatma” in a dubious light: “racism,” “repression,” and “homosexuality”. In order to demonstrate Gandhi’s racism, Lelyveld focuses on Gandhi’s early ethnocentric remarks about Africans and goes on to speculate that Gandhi deliberately avoided contact with Africans. In accusing Gandhi of racism, Lelyveld overlooks the significant difference between prejudice, which the early Gandhi certainly exhibited, and racism, which Gandhi did not, if racism entails using power to oppress others on the basis of race. It is well documented that Gandhi denounced his earlier beliefs, and did not act in a manner that disadvantaged Africans. Lelyveld, however, is more interested in introducing doubt in the reader’s mind than in adhering to facts. He disingenuously claims that Gandhi “repressed” the Zulus in 1906, during the Bambatha Rebellion, an allegation that is certainly false; in fact, the opposite is true: as discussed earlier in this chapter, Gandhi neither bore arms, nor did he exercise violence upon Africans or undertake measures that were injurious to them. He risked gunfire to

nurse Zulus on the battlefield, an episode that shattered his worldviews and prompted his radicalization.

Lelyveld then teases the reader to consider whether a man who may have had sexual relations with another man can be regarded as a ‘mahatma’. Alleging that Gandhi may have shared physical intimacy with Herman Kallenbach, his principal benefactor in South Africa, Lelyveld tries to “out” Gandhi in his scandalous “exposé”. In sum, the book has sparked widespread controversy because it claims to pull back the curtain of misinformation surrounding the “would-be” Mahatma. It is interesting to note that while Lelyveld insinuates the charge of racism more directly, he is less willing to draw conclusions about homosexuality beyond the mere mention of it. Lelyveld is more interested in testing Gandhi’s supporters: Can they overcome their own heterosexism to continue holding Gandhi in high esteem if such allegations were true, or would they join Gandhi’s detractors in rejecting a figure who has been “exposed” by Lelyveld to be a common racist, “deviant,” and possibly a fraud?

The prose and tone of the book are arranged and modulated to read like a series of indirect suggestions, doubts, insinuations, and innuendos, as if to draw the reader into the author’s mind rather than to make clear pronouncements. The author often muses to himself, and then hides behind a tentative tone, seeking to defray any allegations that his observations might be spurious. Lelyveld periodically requests the reader to look to her own feelings if she is uncomfortable with where his speculations lead. The reader is thereby directed by Lelyveld toward the conclusions he had intended to draw based on a series of “incidents” he recounts to himself and ventures to connect in his own fashion. He takes care to reassure the reader that he is not in the business of disrespecting anyone,

certainly not “mahatmas,” as if to deflect away from himself any accusations that he might have been racist and heterosexist in his “interpretations.” Instead, these charges are deftly channeled toward Gandhi, inciting the indignation of different segments of his audience: (a) Africans who have now taken offense at the Gandhi’s well-known, prejudiced remarks as if they had been made today; (b) virulently homophobic Gandhi supporters who cannot conceive that “their” Gandhi might have had a gay encounter with another man; and (c) Gandhi’s opponents looking for further reasons to discredit him.

However, the main charge against Gandhi in the book is that of racism toward Africans, with secondary allegations about his sexuality. The controversy spawned by the book pits Gandhi’s supporters against his detractors, and calls for nothing less than a revision of the magnitude of Gandhi’s legacy. Predictably, the book exploded in the manner that potboilers often do, and resulted in a cascade of events, such as exacerbating calls by some Africans for Gandhi’s redaction from South African history altogether (Hlongwane 2003). In the meantime, Gandhi supporters in India have called for a ban of the book, for fear of conflict in India and elsewhere.

Some observers, such as Gandhi’s grandson and biographer, Rajmohan Gandhi, who lives in South Africa, have denounced the ban, citing the democratic spirit in which Gandhi himself would have allowed the book to circulate, in spite of the seeming attack against him.<sup>28</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi and others have appealed to the public, as well as the Indian and South African governments to consider whether these sensationalist allegations truly have the power to detract from Gandhi’s extraordinary personal metamorphosis and monumental contribution to humanity. Such high-minded appeals,

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<sup>28</sup> Interview on National Public Radio, July 2011.

however, have yet to resonate with the jury of public opinion worldwide, particularly that of Indians and Africans, who have taken sides emotionally in this controversy. On one hand, is the insult perceived by Africans in Gandhi's statements, and on the other hand is the value of an icon who not only inspired the peoples of many nations, but who also happens to represent the contribution of South African Indians towards the struggle against White supremacy in that country. A detailed examination of these issues is beyond the scope of this chapter, but they were considered here briefly because of their relevance to contemporary Indian-African relations, in this "time of memory" in South Africa.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter examined how Indians began to carve out an economic space for themselves and assert a political voice in South Africa at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Indian "community" was by no means unified or homogeneous during this time. They were deeply divided along class, caste, ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines. Faced with brutality, political insecurity, and the constant threat of deportation, Indians had to develop a strategy that took the positions of Whites and Africans, respectively, into consideration. Caught between a politically, economically, and militarily dominant White settler minority and a numerically powerful indigenous African majority, Indians rallied around their collective meta-identity as "Indians" in their struggle for rights and

recognition. Mohandas Gandhi emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the pivotal figure in the Indian struggle for political rights in South Africa.

Gandhi's early politics in South Africa relied on petitions to government officials as well as letters and articles to newspapers to publicize the Indian plight in South Africa. It was, at first, a conservative politics of appeal and accommodation. The Natal Indian Congress (NIC), the organization from which many of these campaigns were launched, was co-founded by Gandhi, and initially an elite entity. Upon Gandhi's urging, the NIC broadened its base to include indentured servants and free laborers. Until 1906, Gandhi's beliefs and actions were based on his faith that Indians would be granted rights and benefits as Imperial subjects if they remained loyal and could logically demonstrate their entitlements under British law. However, when these anticipated results did not materialize, Gandhi's disillusionment increased. The brutality of the British repression of the Bambatha rebellion, in particular, accelerated his radicalization. From 1907 until his return to India in 1914, Gandhi's politics of resistance entailed greater risk in the form of mass action, but it also tested the self-discipline required for a radicalism predicated on non-violence.

In the twenty years he spent in South Africa, Gandhi achieved the following: He instilled a sense of unity among South African Indians, used mass mobilization as a political tool, and honed his strategy of *satyagraha*. He was able to pressure the White government to rescind the £3 annual tax charged to formerly indentured laborers, and brought about the recognition of marriages performed under Indian cultural rites. Although these victories were small in light of the continued disfranchisement of Indians and their ban from free travel, these incremental gains inspired and laid the foundation



for further struggle against White supremacy and segregation in South Africa. Gandhi's crowning achievement, however, was the development of a scaled politics around "Indian" identity in the form of *satyagraha*, which was developed and tested in South Africa, but eventually bore fruit in another colonial context, India. The genius of *satyagraha* lay in its unique combination of moral idealism, cultural idiom, astute strategy, and pragmatism. Upon his return to India, Gandhi became intimately involved in the Indian independence movement but remained in contact with South African leaders, Indian and African, who often traveled to India to visit him and seek his advice.

Back in South Africa, it became absolutely clear to all non-Whites by the 1940s that the Whites settlers had no intention of acknowledging the social and political equality of other groups. By this time, a new generation of Indian leaders had emerged in South Africa, who were born in the country, had adopted it as their own, had become disconnected from India, and were committed to remaining in South Africa. Although they were inspired by Gandhi, this generation sought to expand his strategy by incorporating other ideas. Yusuf M. Dadoo, a medical doctor from the Transvaal, emerged in the 1930s as one of this new crop of Indian leaders. Dadoo deeply admired Gandhi, whom he regarded as a touchstone, but was also influenced by the political philosophy of Marxism. Dadoo was instrumental in forming the Non-European United Front in South Africa in 1938, an organization which would later influence the ANC to look beyond narrow nationalism toward non-racialism. Along with another emerging Indian leader, G.M. (Monty) Naicker, a physician like himself, Dadoo advocated that circumstances were ripe for Indians to make common cause with Africans through joint political movements in South Africa.

Having become “Indian” thanks to Gandhi, the task before South African Indians now was to demonstrate that they were “African.” India was the land of their ancestors, but South Africa was the only home they knew. Under Dadoo’s and Naicker’s leadership, Indian organizations such as the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) made much progress in forming alliances with African leaders. However, agreements at the executive level did not immediately or always translate into mutual trust and cooperation among the rank and file of the Indian and African populations. On one hand, many Africans continued to harbor suspicions about Indians because of their ambiguous status as a “middleman” minority in South Africa’s racial hierarchy. In spite of widespread and visible Indian poverty, Africans regarded all Indians as a “foreign” race of traders who in South Africa to exploit Africans. On the other hand, Indians retreated further into the psychic refuge of their own cultures and nurtured ethnocentric views of Africans. The mounting tensions between Indians and Africans form the subject matter of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: INDIANS, AFRICANS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR URBAN SPACE – INTERPRETING THE 1949 RIOTS

### INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter focused on how Indians, especially former indentured laborers who chose to remain in South Africa after their period of indenture had expired, tried to carve out an economic niche by engaging in small scale agriculture and finding employment in the burgeoning industries around Durban. The chapter also surveyed the political struggles of Indians to find a collective voice and secure their right to be equal members of South African society, paying particular attention to the activism of Mohandas Gandhi during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chapter traced how Gandhi's politics grew more radical, shifting from a moderate, petition-based strategy to non-violent militant mass action, following a rigid self-examination of attitudes toward wealth, duty, and society. During his twenty-year sojourn in South Africa, Gandhi made five specific contributions to the Indian struggle for rights and recognition: 1) He helped to form the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) to represent Indians and organize them politically; 2) He established a newspaper, *The Indian Opinion*, which became a powerful forum to debate political and cultural developments that affected the Indian community; 3) he helped to nurture a sense of unity and collective identity, and common political interests among the disparate linguistic, religious, and class factions that divided South Africa's Indians at the time; 4) he developed *satyagraha*, a method of political action involving militant but non-violent mass action, which shaped political struggles in

South Africa and elsewhere in the world throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and; 5) he demonstrated the need to combine non-violent mass action with tactical short-term compromise in order to achieve long-term political goals.

Subsequent Indian activists, especially those born in South Africa, increasingly argued that the struggle for Indian rights would be advanced best by developing strategic alliances with the numerically powerful African majority, since neither the London nor the Indian colonial authorities were interested in undertaking any special measures to protect Indians abroad, in South Africa or elsewhere. Therefore, emerging South African Indian leaders saw an urgent need to articulate their demands within the realities of their specific national context, South Africa. However, while the leaders of the major Indian and African organizations recognized the ideological and practical need for joint struggle, they had great trouble fostering a spirit of cooperation at the grassroots amongst their respective constituents. The difficulties they encountered, as the present chapter will show, included the divide-and- rule tactics of the White government, the position of Indians as a “middleman” minority in South African society, parochial African nationalisms, and the growing African regard of Indians as proxies for the powerful but inaccessible Whites.

The aim of the present chapter is to examine the socio-economic and political developments that impacted Indian-African relations after Gandhi’s departure from South Africa. The chapter will show that pressures from urbanization, access to land and housing, and struggles over transportation shaped interactions between Indians and Africans from the 1920s onwards. Tensions emanating from these pressures finally erupted in 1949 into what became known as the “1949 Riots” between Indians and

Africans in the Cato Manor area of Durban. The riots mark a key episode in Indian-African relations in South Africa. They remain a persistent memory in the South African Indian experience and continue to shape discussion on Indian-African relations in the country. The chapter will argue that the 1949 Riots were neither isolated, stemming from inherent antagonisms between Indians and Africans, nor simply a state-orchestrated maneuver to foil otherwise harmonious relations between Indians and Africans. Instead, as the chapter will show, the riots were the result of the differential incorporation of Indians and Africans into the South African social formation, fueled in particular by an anti-Indianism that was symptomatic of attempts by both Whites and Africans to prevent Indians from laying claim to a “South African” identity.

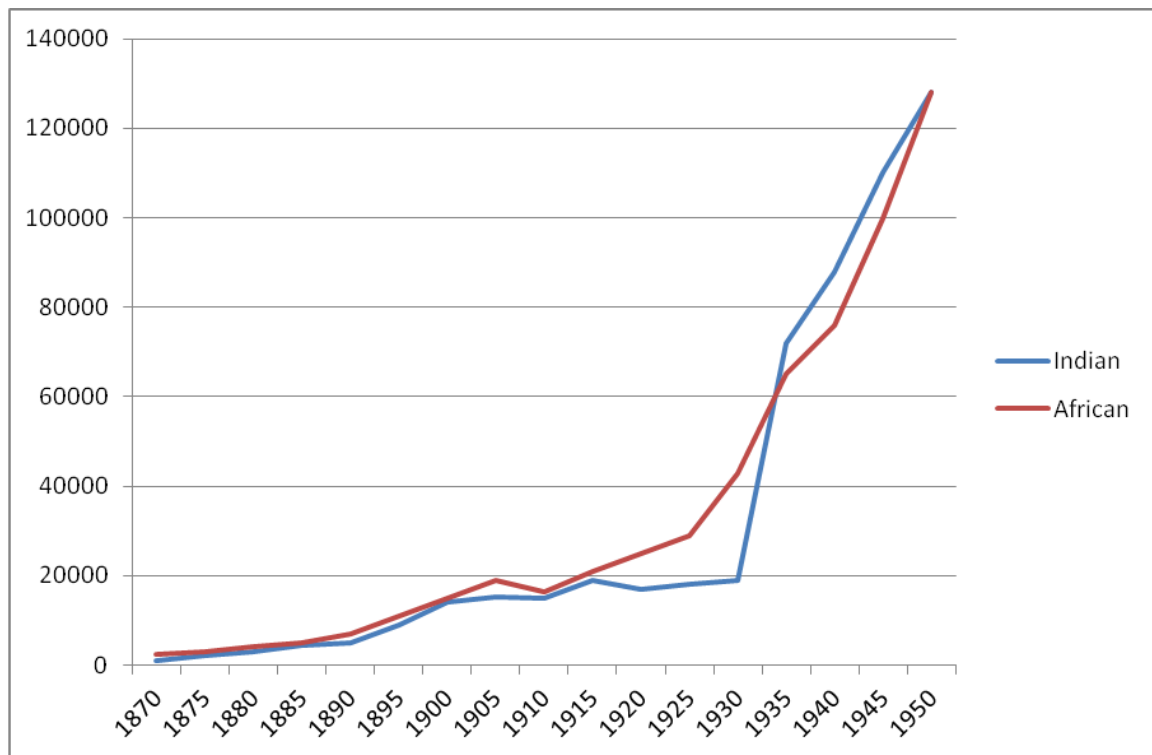
The chapter is divided into five parts. As Indians urbanized after indenture, there were increased calls from Whites to intensify segregation and protect White spaces in the city. On the other hand, the destruction of Zulu peasant economies by White encroachment forced Africans to urbanize and seek wage labor in large numbers. Pressures resulting from the parallel urbanization of Indians and Africans in Durban from the 1920s through the 1940s are examined in the first part of the chapter. The second part looks at how the respective Indian and African attempts to carve out economic niches for themselves converged in the city. The African cooperative movement to make inroads into business and trade in the city is discussed here. The third section examines the efforts by the leaders of Indian and African political organizations to build multiracial coalitions in light of the joint urbanization of Indians and Africans in Durban, and their common disfranchisement. However, in spite of and perhaps largely apart from these efforts, riots erupted in 1949 in Cato Manor, Durban. They are discussed in the fourth part of the

chapter. The conclusion comments on the impact of the 1949 Riots on Indian-African relations.

## **INDIAN AND AFRICAN URBANIZATION**

The 1930s and 1940s were decades of major transformation in Durban. The city's population doubled from about a quarter million in 1936 to over half a million in 1951. The number of Indians increased from 80,000 in 1936 to 162,000 in 1951 while the African population in the city increased from 71,000 to 151,000 during this period. The White population in the city grew from 79,000 to 151,000 during the same period (Burrows 1959). (See Figure 5.1).

A small number of Indians who possessed their own capital, mainly from the merchant class, were able to buy property in the city center of Durban. However, by the late 1930s, White residents began to express alarm over the supposed encroachment of Indians into the city. The Durban municipality's policy with respect to Indians was to limit their access to land in the city. A commission on "Indian Penetration" was established by the national government to determine the extent to which Indians owned land in the city. The Commission released a report in 1942 in which Indian motivations for owning land were summarized as follows: "In the economy of Indians of this class land occupies much the same position as cattle among natives. It is the outward visible sign of the inward grace of growth. So we find Indians of all classes buying land whenever opportunity offers, the wealthier class in the form of dwelling houses, blocks of



**Figure 5.1:** Indian and African Urbanization rates in Durban, 1870-1950.

**Source:** Based on Swanson (1983); Marx and Charlton (2003)

flats and other rent producing properties in the towns, the less wealthy class in the form of market gardening plots in the suburbs” (Indian Penetration Commission 1942:74).

In their effort to claim a more permanent space in Durban, many well-to-do Indians settled just outside the White central business district in an area that became known as the “Coolie Location” (Freund, 1985). Located near a mosque on a major artery, Grey Street, Coolie Location soon housed a thriving Indian market where a number of wealthy Indian merchants and petty traders established retail shops and small stalls to serve mainly Indian and African workers.

Formerly indentured Indians who could not afford to locate in the city center attempted to settle in the periphery. Freund (1995:33) describes these areas as follows:

Away from the center, Durban had the appearance of a string of colonial commercial and residential islands set in a sea of cultivated shacklands. Here Indian families lived in low-slung, wood-and-iron houses, normally outside the municipal borders of the city, in a poorly supervised and defined zone that allowed a multiplicity of economic activity.

Railway Barracks and Magazine Barracks were two prominent Indian shantytowns in the periphery of Durban in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the original colonial vision, Indians were to stay in South Africa temporarily, limited in their occupations to the service of Whites, and meant to be repatriated to India when deemed no longer useful to Whites. Thus, indentured Indians who remained in South Africa and urbanized for their own reasons were viewed as a threat to European supremacy. They were regarded with suspicion, an alien ‘other’ to be kept apart from the modern European.

In his work, *Orientalism*, noted cultural critic Edward Said (1978:211) demonstrates that the Orient was a proprietary space for the West that could be “penetrated, worked over, taken hold of.” A similar worldview was attached to Natal, which was regarded by White settlers as a realm in their possession. Indian indentured workers, as imported Oriental subjects, were regarded as “docile laborers who could be exploited and subsequently repatriated when they had served their usefulness” (Rajah 1981: 25). However, in Natal, Whites complained about Indian “penetration,” in an apparent reversal of their characterization of Indians as feminine Orientals.

Durban’s White residents vehemently objected to the Indian presence as a “menace,” as Indians, both indentured servants and merchants, began to seek a permanent



place in the city. Indians were regarded as “culturally alien with social traditions and practices that Victorian colonials found repugnant” (Swanson, 1983:404). The impoverished barracks, shacks, and other makeshift dwellings of the Indian poor were frequently represented as festering sores that could not be beheld. “I admit that... their presence among us as laborers is a blessing,” a local police superintendent, R.C. Alexander, remarked, “but as neighbors their filthy habits have made them a curse” (Swanson 1983:412). In fact, as discussed in the previous chapter, White city officials had called for measures to segregate and contain Indians as early as 1860, when Indian indentured laborers began to arrive in large numbers. A statement by the mayor in 1875 called for comprehensive action: “Legislation will doubtless have to be resorted to, to prevent these people from thus locating themselves in our very midst, their habits and customs being, as is well known, so totally at variance with and repugnant to those of Europeans” (quoted in Kuper et al. 1958:32).

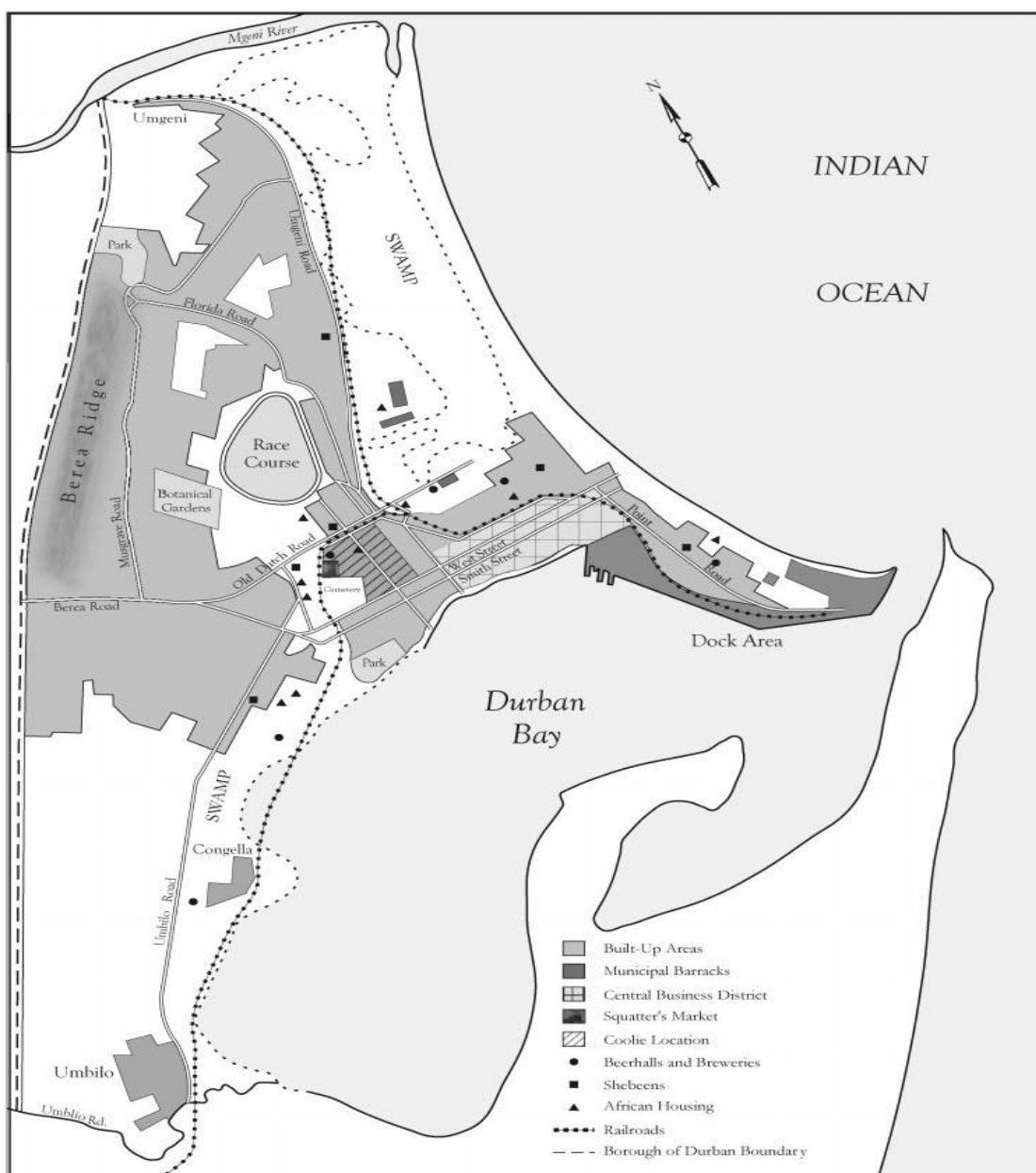
The deeper anxiety for Whites, however, lay with Indian economic competition, which they perceived as advancing on two fronts. In the decades since the first Indians arrived, European traders increasingly began to feel undermined and outpaced by the astute entrepreneurship of the Indian merchant class. On the other hand, Europeans also feared the encroachment of formerly indentured Indians who had gained access to small plots of urban land and worked relentlessly to secure a commercial niche in market gardening. As Swanson (1983:404) points out, “[while] Whites perceived the Africans as a passive threat and affected a paternal regard for their allegedly natural subordination... they saw in the Indians a sophisticated and active menace to their own position in colonial society, competing for space, place, trade, and political influence with the

imperial authority.” Indians were described as “parasites” and as “the real cancer that is eating into the very vitals of the community” (cited from Maharaj 1995b:33). These fears resulted in increasing calls from the White population for the segregation of Indians. Thus, the containment of Indians and their exclusion from democratic participation were not only responses to complaints about Indians’ alleged outlandishness and seemingly inborn traits of thrift and cunning, but part of a sustained strategy to disfranchise and remove a formidable and persistent threat to White economic power. In 1943, at the urging of the Durban city council, the national government passed the “Pegging Act” which made it illegal for Indians to acquire property until the government found a viable solution to the problem of “Indian penetration”. The national government also passed “the Ghetto Act,” in 1946, which gave local municipalities authorization to acquire or set aside specific geographic areas for ownership and occupation by Whites only (Maharaj, 1996; 1992; 1997).

On the other hand, the city government of Durban did not accept permanent African residents within city limits. Africans were excluded from the White city because they were deemed to be on an entirely different civilizational plane from Europeans. Whites sought to limit through “Influx Control” the presence of Africans, whom they regarded as primitive and savage. However, as the forced proletarianization of African peasants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century increased the number of Africans in the city, Europeans pushed for racial zoning and other segregationist policies. African urbanization was managed through a migrant labor policy that permitted Africans to work in the city and reside there temporarily in single-sex hostels (see Figure 5.2). Africans who were not employed in the city were to remain within their ethnic reservations in the rural

hinterlands. A handful of Africans, who were traders or professionals, were able to obtain special permission from the colonial government to own land in the city, but overall, Africans owned less than 0.1% of property in Durban (Kuper et al. 1958).

The African population in early 20th century Durban was hardly homogeneous. It was stratified by not only ethnicity, but also by class. Although there was a small group of educated Africans, the majority of the Africans in the city were uneducated, recently urbanized migrants, some of whom had found work as wage laborers. Within this working class, there were monthly-paid domestic and industrial workers, daily-paid dock workers, and casual laborers. Most Africans coming into Durban tended to find employment as monthly-paid contract workers (either as domestic workers or industrial shop workers). Others found work as rickshaw pullers or as day laborers. Intra-class tensions amongst these various groups soon became palpable as they competed for resources and opportunity (Freund and Padayachee, 2002; Laband, 2009). There was a severe shortage of housing in the city to accommodate the migrants. Durban city officials tried unsuccessfully to restrict African monthly contract laborers to a small number of municipal barracks and made no attempt to provide additional housing for them. Nor did the White private sector provide accommodation for the workers in their employ. Not surprisingly, the barracks became overcrowded and the migrants soon began to feel controlled and supervised. Increasingly, they found informal housing in backyard shacks and rooms rented by Indians dwelling in the periphery of the city, as well as by a few working class White landlords. The African housing problem reached a crisis point by



**Figure 5.2:** Location of African Housing in Durban, early 1900s  
**Source:** Popke (2003:257)

the first decade of the twentieth century and Durban's municipal authorities were pressured to act (Maylam, 1985).

The “solution” came in the form of the Native Beer Act of 1908. Through this Act, the Natal government aimed to address the African housing crisis in Durban by tapping into a common cultural practice among Africans, namely the brewing of beer. Durban’s municipal authorities were now authorized to seize control of the brewing of alcoholic beverages and tax their consumption by Africans. Proceeds from alcohol sales to Africans would become part of a municipal “Native administration fund” which then would be used to finance more African hostels. Dubbed as the “Durban System<sup>1</sup>,” this paternalistic and sinister policy ultimately intended to restrict Africans to barracks and camps with great efficiency (Swanson 1976:174).

Although White authorities preferred to have Africans as temporary sojourners in the city, the escalating need for cheap African labor in White industries inevitably led to a permanent African presence in Durban and other South African cities. The manager of Durban’s municipal administration department, F.C. Layman, acknowledged this reality in 1923: “those natives who wish to maintain touch with their [rural] homes should receive every possible encouragement to do so, and the permanent settlement of native families in urban areas should only be assented to as an unavoidable evil” (quoted in Torr 1987:34). In dealing with this “unavoidable evil,” Layman warned, “it would be better... to confine ourselves to provide only for those natives whose services are required for the business and welfare of the town, in the form of locations over which we have complete and absolute control” (quoted in Torr 1987:43). However, as Durban’s economy expanded, the Durban System proved inadequate to generate the necessary financial

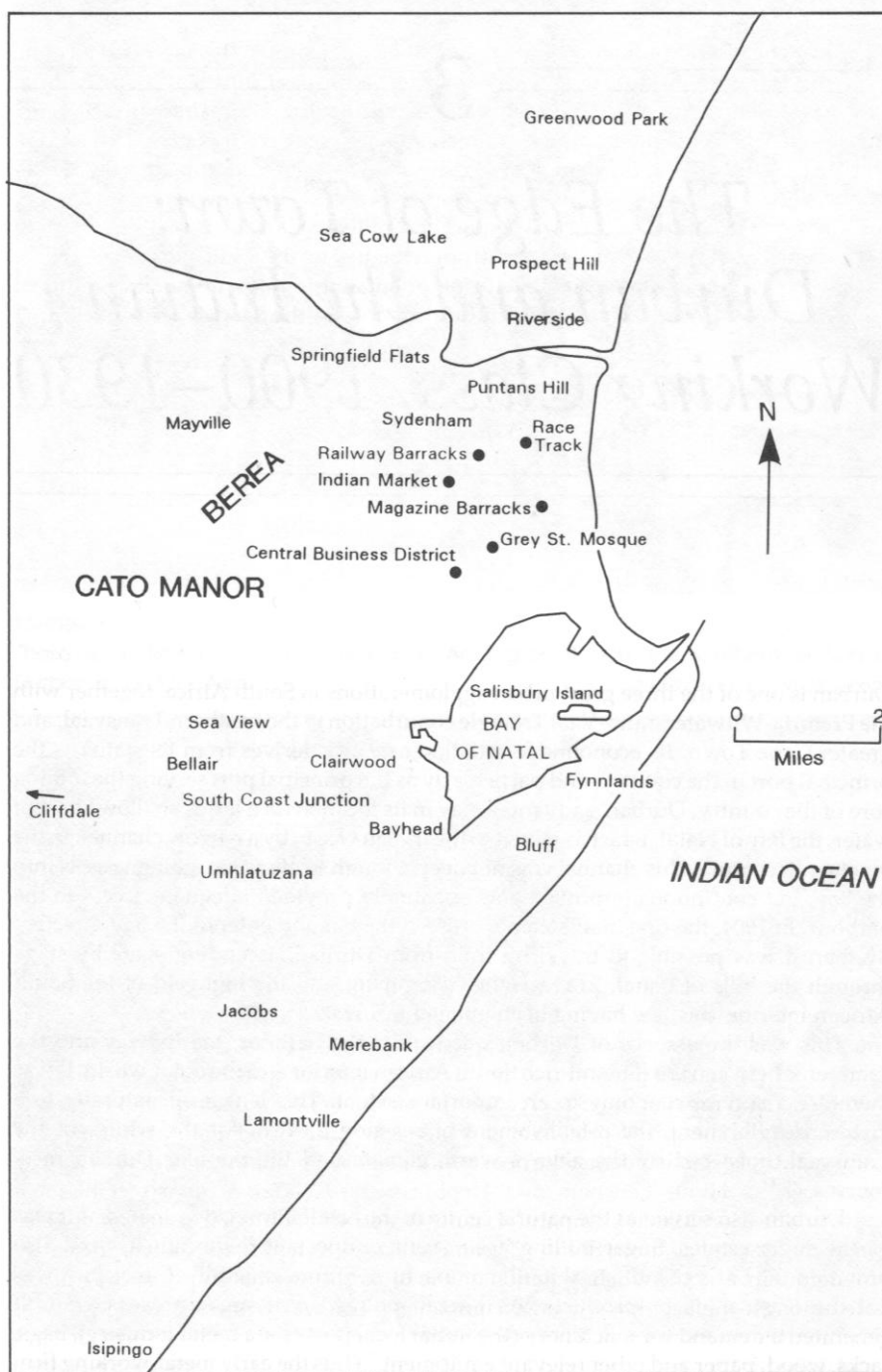
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<sup>1</sup> The Durban System emerged as a highly successful (from the perspective of White authorities) system of control over the African population. It was replicated in other South African cities as well as other parts of Africa. See Maylam 1996 and 1990 for further analysis of this issue.

resources to provide housing and other material resources to contain the growing population of Africans within restricted areas of the city. Furthermore, African workers began to complain about municipal beer halls, that municipal beer was expensive, and not as tasty as the home brew that was sold (illegally) in “shebeens” (unlicensed backyard breweries). In 1929, African laborers boycotted municipal beer sales for about six months which, according to LaHausse (1996) “severely undermined the economic basis of the Durban System and presaged the significant erosion of the autonomy of urban control in Durban” (LaHausse 1996:57).

### **Shack Settlements in Cato Manor**

In an attempt to claim spaces for survival, Africans increasingly sought shelter in the peripheral areas of the city that lay beyond the regulatory reach of the White municipal authorities. One such area was the predominantly Indian settlement of Cato Manor, located about 7km west of the city center of Durban (see Figure 5.3). Named after Durban’s first mayor, George Cato, who originally owned the land, Cato Manor was eventually subdivided into a number of small farms that were let to formerly indentured Indians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for market gardening (see Chapter 3). In time, some Indians, among the merchant class and a few former indentured servants, were able to purchase land in Cato Manor. Wealthier Indians built wooden houses and the less wealthy built corrugated iron shacks, respectively, on the plots. Most of the land was owned by a small number of landlords who were relatively wealthy, but was occupied mostly by poor Indian tenants who engaged in market gardening (Maharaj, 1994).



**Figure 5.3:** Location of Cato Manor in Durban  
**Source:** Freund (1995:30)

Cato Manor emerged as an important community space for poor Indians in the Durban area. These Indian tenants were later joined by African migrants who sought to escape the over-crowded same-sex hostels and barracks run by the Durban municipality. The industrial expansion of Durban during the 1930s resulted in even more African migration into the city, with many Africans settling on Indian-owned property in Cato Manor. In spite of the local government's policy of severely restricting a permanent African presence in Durban, the destruction of African peasant economies and their subsequent pull into White industries caused Africans to flock to Durban in large numbers. Without access to formal municipal housing, rural African migrants increasingly resorted to renting shacks in the peripheral areas of the city. Soon, a major concentration of African shack-dwellers began to develop in the Indian-owned area of Cato Manor (Maylam, 1983).

Tenants, both Indian and African, subdivided the plots they were living on and became tenant landlords to other newly urbanizing African laborers. This, in turn, increased the number of shack settlements in the area. Some Indian tenant landlords discovered that subdividing and renting plots to African shack-dwellers was more lucrative than selling fresh produce from market gardening. African tenant landlords also found it profitable to sublet their shacks, but in addition, they sought the opportunity to gain favor and influence among fellow African tenants. The population of Cato Manor grew rapidly in the 1940s. At the end of the 1930s, there were approximately 500 shacks in Cato Manor. By 1943, this number had jumped to 1,500 and by 1948, there were close to 3,000 shacks in the area (Maylam 1983 and Maharaj B. 1996b). In spite of this growth,



however, the physical condition of Cato Manor was very poor. Sewers and adequate water were lacking, leaving the area prone to disease.

While living conditions were difficult and far from ideal, for a time, both Indian and African shack dwellers were able to eke out a living together, and create spaces where both could belong. Maylam (1983:419) observes that “the settlements were areas where Africans could escape from excessive control by police and officials, where they had more opportunities for earning their subsistence, and where they could more easily shape their own lives.” As Edwards (1989:81) notes,

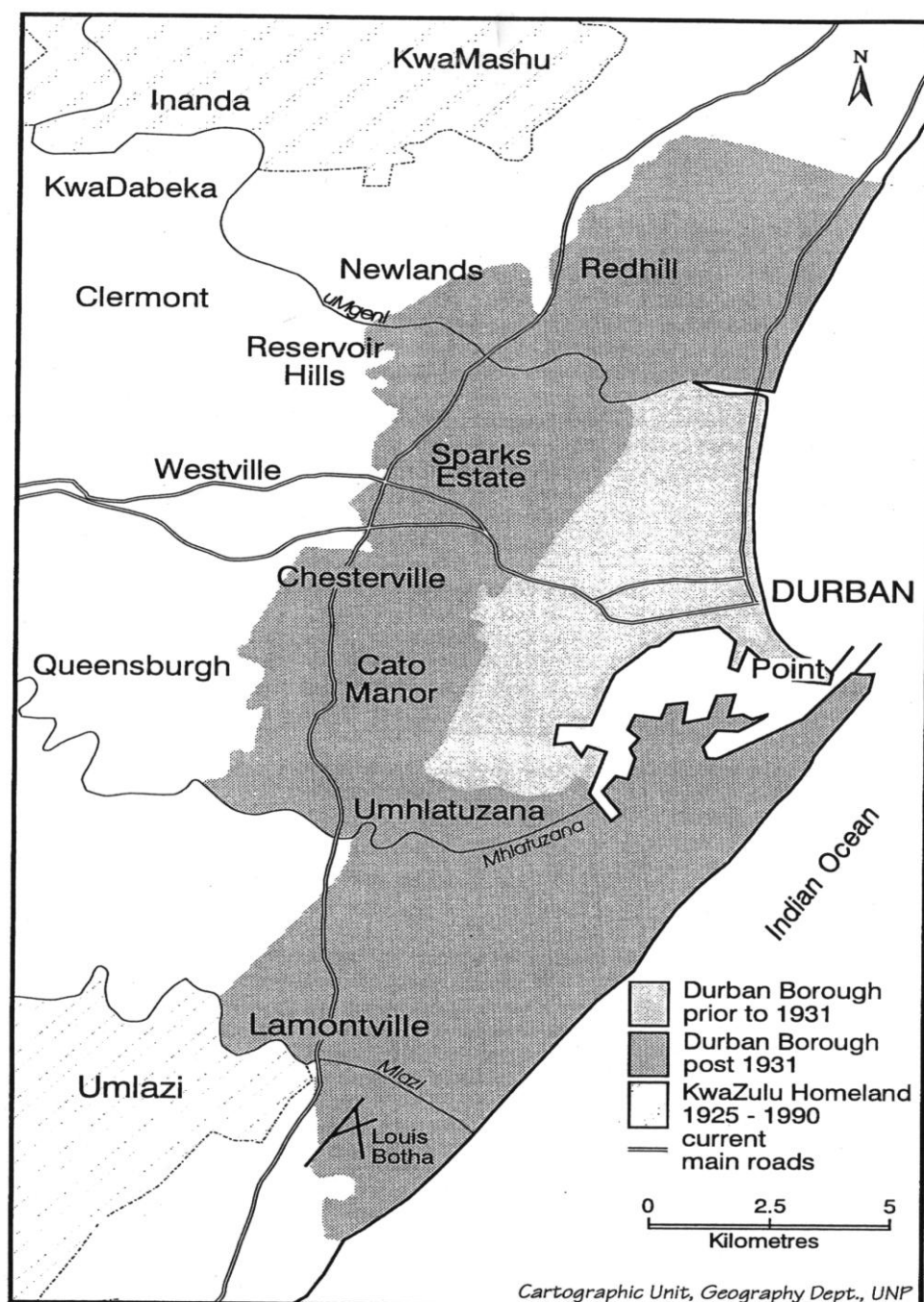
Among Africans, Cato Manor soon developed a reputation as a place in which a hybrid culture had developed, and within the shantytowns of [Cato Manor] ... whose population almost doubled at weekends when visitors and revellers flooded into the area, the range and assortment of activities was far more diverse than in any other area within the city.

According to Natal ANC leader A.W. G. Champion, Cato Manor was “the place in Durban where families can breathe an air of freedom” (quoted in Maylam, 1996:19). Cato Manor soon became an important base in the African struggle for land and rights to the city. A section of Cato Manor, called “Mkhumbane,” even came to be dubbed by African politicians as the “Promised Land” (Edwards and Nuttall, 1990).

The Durban municipality initially ignored the existence of informal settlements such as Cato Manor in the periphery of the city and adopted a hands-off approach with respect to meeting their basic needs. However, as Cato Manor grew, local authorities became increasingly wary that it was eclipsing their vision of social order and thwarting their efforts to segment urban space racially. As early as the 1930s, Durban municipal authorities began to express concern about the fact that they could extend neither governance nor order to areas such as Cato Manor that lay outside city limits. In 1930,

the Durban municipality appointed a “boundary commission” to re-map the city to include peripheral settlements. Upon the commission’s recommendation, the city extended its boundaries in 1931 to include Cato Manor and other surrounding areas as part of the City of Durban (see Figure 5.4). Some 20,000 Africans and 50,000 Indians were officially added to the city’s urban population. Subsequently, under the aegis of influx control legislation, Durban authorities were once again able to limit the number of non-Whites permitted to live in the city. The legislation allowed the municipality to expel individual “idle,” “non-productive” Africans back to rural areas. Indians, on the other hand, were made to constantly fear deportation to India.

Whites harbored a contradictory attitude toward African squatters in Cato Manor. On one hand, the authorities wanted to maintain the city as an exclusively White space. On the other hand, White industry needed cheap labor and tolerated the African presence in the city. Authorities frequently raided squatter settlements, which were now officially within city limits, especially if migrants had constructed shacks on municipally-owned land. However, shacks constructed illegally on Indian-owned land, especially dwellings in the Mkhumbane area of Cato Manor, were left undisturbed. By the mid-1940s, the Durban municipality mandated owners of land on which squatters were present to provide tapped water and pit latrines at the owners’ own expense. Fines were imposed from 1947 onward upon landowners who failed to comply with these policies. The municipality itself, however, made no improvements to infrastructure in the area, even on municipally-owned land. Subsequently, the attempt by some Indian landowners to evict



**Figure 5.4:** Expansion of Durban city boundaries, 1931

Source: Maylam and Edwards (1996:1)

squatters was met with resistance and took on a racial dimension where African squatters were involved (Durban, 1945).

African squatters living in the Mkhumbane shack settlement were part of a complex web of ownership and tenancy relationships. Shack clusters were often owned by a number of people, both Indian and African. Some African owners chose to live in the shacks they let. Sub-letting was common. There was considerable competition for land and resources in the area. African “shacklords” also tried to establish a political presence in the area by staking out their turf and developing spheres of influence. Indian land owners came to be viewed by shacklords as impediments to the power they might otherwise exercise over tenants, if only the land could be owned as well. These shacklords soon found common cause with segments of the African elite, who adopted a segregationist and anti-Indian stance as an expression of their loyalty to the cause of African nationalism. In one telling example, some African politicians looking for popular support willfully overlooked the source of the 1946 zoning legislation and deliberately misrepresented it to their constituents as a scheme by Indians to divide the city up between themselves and the Whites, leaving the Africans with nothing. In actuality, the zoning policies of the 1940s reinforced racial boundaries, as defined by the state (McCarthy and Smit, 1984); Whites, not Indians, defined the spaces to be inhabited by the different races. In turn, multiple material and ideological divisions, as well as similarities, amongst Indians and Africans were re-cast in narrowly racial terms by the White government, which increasingly sought control over its subjects through legislation and repression. As a consequence, Indians and Africans were positioned in antagonistic terms with respect to each other.

## FINDING AN ECONOMIC NICHE IN THE CITY

The local state in Durban expediently maintained a working relationship with Indian business while simultaneously structuring the 1946 racial zoning proposal for the city. Deploying explicitly anti-Indian rhetoric, White politicians proposed measures to marginalize, exclude, and deny Indian political rights in South African society. They also routinely stoked the terror of Indians with threats of deportation and other violations without due process under the law. In 1947, the mayor of Durban and his allies renewed the call for the repatriation of Indians, “foreigners” who should be given “boats, not votes”<sup>2</sup>. As the Afrikaner-based National Party (NP) gained momentum on the national stage, White anti-Indianism rose to fever pitch. Feeling threatened by Indian merchants who held considerable commercial power in the city, White businesses called for wide-ranging restrictions on Indian commercial activity in the city (Maharaj, 1995b). “*Die kaffir in sy plek en die coolie uit die land*” (“the kaffir [African] in his place and the coolie [Indian] out of the land”) was a popular NP electioneering slogan that also became the basis of an Afrikaner-led boycott of Indian-owned stores in the Transvaal (cited from Kathrada 2001:98). As the NP rose in power, the economic and political marginalization of Indians led to their eventual spatial segregation to assigned areas.

The vulnerabilities of Indians, stemming from their sandwiched position between Africans and Whites, were noted by Africans, who were largely restricted to the role of consumers and unskilled laborers in the Durban economy. African politicians, in particular, were observing the unfolding scenario with keen interest. In fact, the measures

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<sup>2</sup> Reported in *The Guardian*, May 13, 1948.

taken by the White authorities against Indians served as an inspiration for some parochial African leaders to rally their constituents around populist causes involving land, housing, and small-scale commercial trade that called for ousting Indians. Powerless to direct their anger and discontent against the White government or to press for meaningful change at the national level, these African leaders sought popularity and unity by isolating Indians as a group, because they were within reach. Indian occupation of land in Durban and their small-scale commercial activities, such as market gardening, were alternatively denounced for preventing African progress and praised as ventures worthy of emulation by Africans seeking advancement. Local African political activism in the 1940s emphasized the need to mimic the “Indian strategy,” i.e., what Africans perceived to be a coherent and collectively orchestrated effort by all Indians not only to thrive, but to attain economic dominance over Africans (Edwards and Nuttall, 1990). Thus, Africans stressed the need to own land, real estate, and businesses. They expressed a wish to drive buses, as they had seen Indians do. They sought to sell candy, bread, and other provisions, to open up shops of all kinds. African financial empires could be built if Africans sold to other Africans exclusively. They hoped that if they were successful in these efforts, they might even own factories one day, like the Whites. From there, Africans hoped to uplift their own communities and rise to national and global prominence.

African nationalists took careful note of the English and the Afrikaner assertion of a collective “White” identity in Durban. The umbrella of “White” allowed all Whites, even recent immigrants from southern Europe, to lay claim to White privilege. As South African citizen, newly arrived Europeans could carve out a viable economic niche in Durban, especially with the aid of anti-Indian legislation aimed at marginalizing Indian

business. Upon observing this move by Whites and the resulting blow to Indian businesses, conservative African politicians were confident that not only could Africans make similar inroads into commercial activities, but also displace Indians and achieve a collective African solidarity in the process, just as Whites had done before (Edwards, 1994; Lambert and Morrell, 1996).

African residents tried to start a “cooperative” movement to overcome their marginal position in the city. The plan was to circulate money exclusively within African communities, which was seen as necessary for launching independent African businesses. Central to their vision of African upliftment was a boycott of businesses owned by Indians, but not necessarily those of Whites. The rhetoric of Zulu nationalism was frequently drawn upon to emphasize that in order to be pro-African, one first had to be anti-Indian. Sympathizers of the cooperative movement evoked the slogan, “*Mazibuye Emasisweni*” which means “let our cattle and our wealth come back from foreigners” referring to Indians, since Whites were far removed, spatially and socially (Hemson 1978). The cooperative movement in Cato Manor drew inspiration from the conservative African-American leader Booker T. Washington and his advocacy for Black empowerment in the United States. Washington urged American Blacks to avoid challenging White authority and to court White paternalism instead, without which, he felt, Black enterprise would not succeed. Concentrating on economic empowerment, Washington reasoned, would eventually enable Blacks to address their second class status in American society. A leader in the Durban cooperative movement expounded on this outlook as follows: “As an oppressed group there is a tendency... to place too much accent on politics... There are other powerful forces at work besides the vote, one of

them being economic power. The man who wields a financial whip is often the master, the ruler, the law. We therefore congratulate the growth of the Cooperative Movement in Durban” (Edwards 1989:93).

Indian shopkeepers had made inroads into small-scale commercial activities that catered to non-Whites, a sector in which Whites had no interest initially. White businesses were concentrated in the large-scale industrial and municipal sectors. Indian traders, being more numerous and established were, by law, geographically restricted to the Victoria/Grey Street areas of central Durban and the peripheral areas of the city, such as Cato Manor, which were occupied by Indian and African shack-dwellers. The fact that the main African commuter bus depot was municipally zoned to the Indian area, Victoria Street, in an effort to avoid locating it in White Durban, turned out to be a boon to Indian businesses. With a predominance of Indian shops and a large number of Africans traveling through it daily, this area inadvertently became a hotbed of commercial activity among non-Whites in Durban, much to the consternation of Whites, who had not anticipated this development but also to the dismay of African entrepreneurs who, as relative latecomers to commerce in Durban, found most lucrative niches occupied by Whites and Indians (Swanson, 1968; Padayachee and Morrell, 1991). The African businesses that did exist were largely limited to beer sales in the city. Given such an arrangement, Africans and Indians were thrust into frequent if not daily contact, and were often locked into the relations of consumers and traders, respectively, during the 1930s and 1940s.

Largely excluded and marginalized from mainstream/formal commercial economic activity in Durban, urban African entrepreneurs increasingly saw economic



cooperatives not only as a way to obtain a position in Durban's political economy, but also as a nationalist duty to their own communities. The movement was active in the shantytowns of the Durban periphery, beyond the reach of municipal governance, where increasing numbers of Africans had settled in order to avoid confrontation with the law. Educated members of the Natal Bantu Cooperative, such as William Mseleku, conducted classes for fellow Africans, who were mostly illiterate (Edwards and Nuttall 1990). In Durban, the cooperative movement was a narrowly African initiative organized around Zulu identity in order to advance Zulu economic interests. One of the most ambitious schemes in this vein, launched by Victor Mallie in 1946, envisioned that individual African entrepreneurial activities could potentially arise from the cooperatives. Mallie wanted to focus on manufacturing, which lay beyond the scope of most cooperative schemes. Toward that end, he planned an industrial school to train African artisans, given the lack of opportunities for training elsewhere. Reasoning that African workers trained by Africans will be able to work in the soon-to-be-established African factories, Mallie advocated boycotting non-African commercial activities that did not hire sufficient Africans or were perceived to mistreat Africans.<sup>3</sup> It was a small step from there for Mallie and other African nationalists to single out Indian businesses for special contempt.

Thus tapping into an existing reservoir of resentment of Indians among segments of the African population, and mimicking the blatant anti-Indianism of Whites, African populists often employed rhetoric that portrayed Indians as inhibitors of African advancement. Indians were accused of exploiting Africans, taking better paid jobs away from Africans, or otherwise thwarting African aspirations. The African cooperative

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<sup>3</sup> See *Ilanga Lase Natal*, January 26, 1946; September 14, 1946 (cited from Soske, 2009).

movement's emphasis on redirecting African purchasing power away from Indians was not only an "explicitly anti-Indian sentiment," as noted by Edwards and Nuttall (1990:13), but also an outgrowth of the popular belief among Africans that Indian economic power obstructed African economic advancement toward parity with Whites.

### **The Politics of Bus Ownership**

One particular arena of contestation between Indians and Africans that emerged in Durban involved public transportation, specifically bus ownership. The Durban municipality had historically neglected to provide for the transportation needs of Africans, although the very reason that African workers were in the city was due to the labor demands of White industry. Municipal buses were intended mainly for White use; Non-Whites, when permitted, could sit only in racially designated seats. Once their allocated seats were filled, non-Whites were not permitted to board the bus even if the remaining seats on the bus were unoccupied. Some privately-owned White buses permitted African domestic servants to travel if they had written authorization from their White employers. The quality of existing transportation for Durban's non-white population was very poor. The Victoria Street bus depot, which was the main bus terminal, was described by Durban's Transportation Commission as following:

All the non-European bus services in Durban have one starting point – the Victoria Street Extension Bus Rank – from where 116 operators are expected to operate 177 certificated vehicles to various termini. This bus rank is in an uneven patch of ground without any facilities for passengers or buses. There are, in fact, periods during the day when there is nothing like sufficient standing room for either buses or passengers, and the crowds of waiting passengers are forced to surge into adjacent streets, where buses also have to stand owing to lack of room

or order. There are no loading platforms where buses could be ranged along-side according to their various routes. There is no shelter whatsoever provided for the passengers... These passengers often, during the rainy season, have to stand in pouring rain for 30 minutes and more. There are no public conveniences and the lighting is extremely poor. (Annual Report of the Local Road Transportation Board for the period April 1, 1945 to March 31, 1946).

Riders were frustrated by arbitrary fees, overcrowding, and unreliable service. As late as the 1920s, the Durban municipality did not provide bus service to the peripheral areas of the city such as Cato Manor, where Indian and African shack settlements were located. Indian entrepreneurs quickly recognized an economic niche in transportation. They acquired a fleet of buses to serve non-Whites in outlying areas who needed to commute to and from Durban. Soon, privately-owned Indian buses became the sole means of transportation between the city center and Cato Manor (Meer, 1960; Edwards and Nuttall 1990).

During the 1940s, a few Africans tried to make inroads into the bus business. In 1945, they acquired a small fleet of buses and obtained “African only” licenses from the local Durban municipal licensing agency, hoping to control certain bus routes into the African-zoned areas of the city. This “victory” raised hopes among African businessmen that they may be able to break into the “Indian dominated” urban economy. Often employing racialized rhetoric in expressing their aspirations to own businesses, populist African leaders and businessmen appealed to the White municipal transportation board that the city should not allow “foreigners” (referring to Indians) to operate buses; and that licenses permitting Indian bus owners to operate in African areas ought to be revoked by the authorities and transferred to Africans.

However, the paternalistic White local transportation board, which had issued the licenses, was interested neither in expanded African bus ownership, nor encouraging further non-White economic competition in Durban. The primary aim of the local municipality was to exclude Africans altogether from city routes, which were now dominated by White operators, as enabled by the new zoning laws. No further effort was made toward expanding African bus ownership, which dwindled as Indian and White operators provided nearly all service. By 1949, 33 Indian-owned buses and 7 municipally-owned buses operated between the Durban city center and Cato Manor.<sup>4</sup> Indian owned buses did not segregate on racial lines, as compared with White-owned buses, but there were a number of complaints regarding overcrowding and infrequency of service. There was no protest against Indian owned buses on the part of African commuters before 1949 but an undercurrent of resentment remained, particularly among aspiring African entrepreneurs (Meer 1960).

In spite of popular sentiment stemming from lived experience, the major Indian and African political organizations took a broader view of race relations in South Africa. If Indian-African relations were fraught with tensions at the grassroots, they were explored with less acrimony, even enthusiasm, for a time by the leadership of the respective communities, as described in the next section.

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<sup>4</sup> Durban Transportation Board hearing, February 25, 1949.

## EFFORTS TO BUILD MULTI-RACIAL COALITIONS IN THE 1930s AND 1940s

The leadership of the major African and Indian political organizations, respectively, were becoming increasingly frustrated during the 1930s and 1940s that the moderate petition politics they had adopted so far did not sufficiently challenge the ever-intensifying segregationist policies of the White government. Indian political activism had settled into a lull after Gandhi left South Africa. The Natal Indian Congress (NIC) continued its petition politics and did not concern itself with the causes of the Indian working class. An Indian activist, Dr. Goonam, observes in her autobiography that the merchant class engaged in a conservative politics that protected their own interests. "...This class had accumulated some property and some privileges within the segregatory framework and their main concern was to protect those privileges, and preserve what the 'community' had accumulated rather than protest race laws on principle" (Goonam, 1991:99).

Some Indians joined the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA),<sup>5</sup> an inter-racial organization, and began organizing Indian and African workers in the sugar and textile industries. The NIC and the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) also took a radical turn in 1945/1946, when a group of younger activists took over their leadership and began to steer them in a more militant direction. Jawaharlal Nehru, in a series of communications with South African Indian leaders, encouraged them to develop alliances with the African community (Bhana 1997). One of the first actions by the new radical

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<sup>5</sup> Inter-racial coalitions had a setback when the anti-communist National Party (NP) came into power. The NP vowed to "destroy" Communism, beginning with the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, which outlawed the Party. The executive committee of the CPSA decided to disband the organization in June 1950. The Party was reconstituted underground in 1953 as the South African Communist Party.

leaders of the NIC and TIC was to launch a passive resistance campaign against the Asiatic Land Tenure and Penetration Act of 1946, a law which restricted Indian land ownership. For two years, thousands of Indians engaged in Gandhi-style passive resistance against this anti-Indian legislation.<sup>6</sup>

Among the Africans, a group of students within the African National Congress (ANC), including Nelson Mandela, who had been inspired by India's anti-colonial struggle, called for similar mass action in South Africa. They formed the ANC Youth League in 1943, which called for more militant campaigns against White supremacy. These African political activists responded enthusiastically to the passive resistance launched by the NIC and TIC. In a supportive statement, the ANC's Youth League declared that "it is time we emulated the excellent example of the freedom-loving Indian people in rejecting segregation. Our answer to the inevitable UNO (United Nations Organization) condemnation of the Union's Policy of racial oppression should be a full-scale mobilization of the African people."<sup>7</sup> The African press lauded the campaign. An editorial in *Ilanga Lase Natal* even described the new leadership of the NIC as "virile".<sup>8</sup> The ANC's Z.K. Matthews extolled the Indian passive resistance campaign "the immediate inspiration" for the ANC's Defiance Campaign. For Nelson Mandela (1994:104),

The Indian campaign became a model for the type of protest that we in the Youth League were calling for. It instilled a spirit of defiance and radicalism among the people, broke the fear of prison, . . . [t]hey reminded us that the freedom struggle was not merely a question of making speeches, holding meetings, passing resolutions, . . . but of meticulous organization, militant mass action and, above

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<sup>6</sup> The Passive Resistance Campaign started in Durban on June 13, 1946. By the end of the campaign, more than 2000 activists were arrested. See Fredrickson (1995); Bhana and Mesthrie (1984) for further analysis.

<sup>7</sup> *African National Congress Youth League Bulletin*, no. 1, (see [www.anc.org](http://www.anc.org) and [www.sahistory.org](http://www.sahistory.org))

<sup>8</sup> "Intellectuals and Congress," *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 2 November 1946.

all the willingness to suffer and sacrifice. The Indian campaign hearkened back to the 1913 passive resistance campaign in which Mahatma Gandhi led a tumultuous procession of Indians crossing illegally from Natal to the Transvaal. That was history; this campaign was taking place before my own eyes.

The Indian passive resistance campaign also received support from India in 1946 when India filed a complaint at the United Nations against the discriminatory practices faced by Indians in South Africa. A South African delegation comprising of H.A. Naidoo, Sorabjee Rustomjee, and Dr. A.B. Xuma, traveled to New York to consult with the Indian delegation. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Prime Minister Nehru's sister, presented a resolution to the General Assembly to condemn South Africa's racist policies. The resolution passed in December 1946. The fact that South Africa's racist policies were condemned on the world stage was an embarrassment to South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts' government, particularly given the fact that Smuts was not only one of the founders of the United Nations, but had helped to draft the preamble of its charter. Smuts had to endure the humiliation of his government being condemned before the body. Ms. Nehru and Dr. Xuma subsequently appeared together at a rally in New York City in which they emphasized the need for multi-racial coalitions against racism.<sup>9</sup>

African leaders in South Africa applauded the Indian effort at the United Nations. On returning to South Africa, Xuma spoke at a series of rallies organized by the NIC, praising India's efforts before the General Assembly. NIC President, G.M. Naicker, added that India's action at the UN demonstrated that there was unity between the Africans and the Indians.<sup>10</sup> However, after all the cheer had died down, the passive

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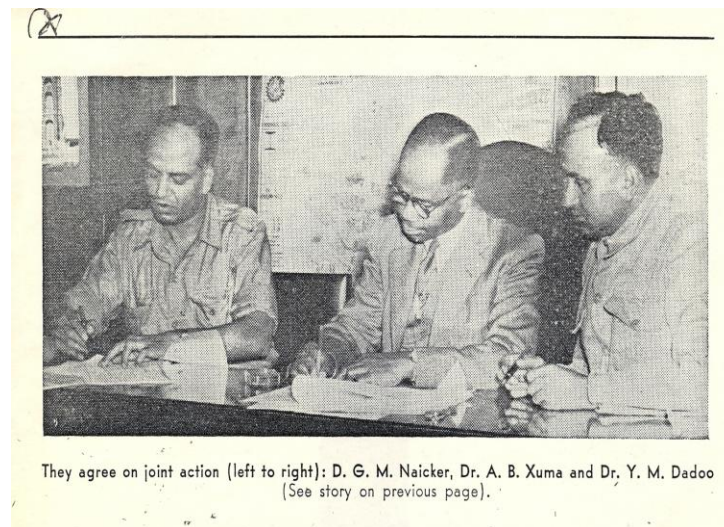
<sup>9</sup> See "Mrs. Pandit, Dr. Xuma Address Meeting Honoring S. African Mine Workers," *New Africa* (Council on African Affairs Monthly Bulletin), vol. 5, no. 11 (December 1946).

<sup>10</sup> "Dr. A.B. Xuma in Durban," *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 13 February 1947 (cited from Soske, 2009).

resistance campaign was far from successful in challenging the Asiatic Land Tenure and Penetration Act. Indian protesters became disillusioned when there were no concessions from the government. The campaign was abandoned in 1948 when the NP came into power with the vow to comprehensively segregate all non-Whites (Fredrickson 1995). Furthermore, wealthy members of the Indian merchant class who were highly dissatisfied with the NIC and the radical turn in Indian politics (which they blamed for the failure of the government to respond), formed a conservative organization of their own called the Natal Indian Organization in May 1947 (Bhana 1997). After two years of unsuccessful collective activism, Indian popular energy had waned.

While the Indian passive resistance campaign was underway, the ANC held a series of meetings on how to respond to it as well as the efforts afoot to form multi-racial alliances among non-White groups (Lodge, 1983). There was much skepticism amongst many Africans about joining together politically with other groups. The Natal branch of the ANC, for one, expressed grave reservations about forming cross-racial alliances. However, Xuma and the leadership of the Transvaal branch of the ANC were able to quell this dissent temporarily and establish a working committee to pursue cooperation with other racial groups. On March 9, 1947, the leaders of the ANC, TIC, and NIC, Drs. A.B.Xuma, Yusuf Dadoo, and G.M.Naicker (all medical doctors), respectively, issued a joint statement that African and Indian political movements would cooperate to fight segregation in South African society (see Figure 5.5).





**Figure 5.5:** G.M.Naicker, A.B. Xuma, and Y.M. Dadoo sign the “Doctors’ Pact” dedicating themselves to Indian-African unity  
Source: *New Africa*, April 1947, E.S. Reddy Collection

The statement, which subsequently became known as “the Doctors’ Pact,” called for a multi-racial alliance among oppressed non-White peoples in South Africa. The Doctors’ Pact also aimed to establish closer relations between the ANC and Indian political organizations. The agreement that was signed stated,

This Joint Meeting between the representatives of the African National Congress and the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses, having fully realized the urgency of cooperation between non-European peoples and other democratic forces for the attainment of basic democratic rights and full citizenship for all sections of the South African working people, has resolved that a Joint Declaration of cooperation is imperative for the working out of a practical basis of cooperation between the National Organizations of the non-European peoples.<sup>11</sup>

The Pact made moderate demands, such as calling for universal franchise, removal of land and ownership restrictions, removal of laws restricting movement, free education,

<sup>11</sup> A copy of the Pact is available at <http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/HIST/dadooxuma/pact.htm>. Last accessed on February 15, 2012.

and the elimination of discriminatory legislation. However, it did not outline any specific strategy for attaining these goals.

While the national leadership of the ANC and the radicalized NIC tried to promote a politics of cooperation amongst Indians and Africans, this view was not embraced by the African National Congress at all levels. The ANC Youth League's admiration for India's anti-colonial struggle, for example, did not readily translate into support for inter-racial coalition politics within South Africa. Even the young Nelson Mandela was a narrow nationalist who did not agree to joint struggle. Mandela, for a time, admired the African nationalist leader Anton Lembede, who eschewed multicultural alliances: "non-European unity is a fantastic dream that has no foundation in reality."<sup>12</sup>

The ANC in Natal leaned heavily toward a politics based on Zulu identity. The lack of nationwide support for the Doctors' Pact is evident in the fact that the agreement was signed in the Transvaal, and not in Natal, where the majority of Indians lived. No member of the executive branch of the Natal ANC was present at the signing ceremony. Nor was the Doctors' Pact received with ringing enthusiasm in the Zulu press in Durban. In fact, letters to the *Ilanga Lase Natal* expressed great dissatisfaction with the accord: "I say it with full confidence that public opinion especially in Natal, a people who know something about the psychology of the Indian, is much averse to cooperation in any form [*sic*]."<sup>13</sup> The Natal leadership of the ANC complained that since the NIC and TIC were regionally-based organizations, the ANC provincial organizations ought to have entered into agreements and not the national organization itself. In voicing his opposition

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<sup>12</sup> A.M. Lembede, "Policy of the Congress Youth League," *Inkundla ya Bantu*, May 1946. Reprinted in *Freedom in Our Lifetime: The Collected Writings of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede*, ed. Robert R. Edgar and Luyanda ka Msumza (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), 92.

<sup>13</sup> Heb. M. Ngcobo, "A Political Blunder," *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 5 April 1947.

to the Doctors' Pact, local ANC leader H. Shelby Msimang cautioned that "before an agreement could be reached with the Indians therefore, very important and vital issues involving political, economic and social differences would have to be examined and determined in the light of the very strained relations between Indians and Africans in this province."<sup>14</sup> The ANC's Youth League also had an ambivalent attitude toward the Doctors' Pact. Espousing an African nationalist perspective after Lembede, the Youth League argued against forming political alliances with other groups: "Some foreigners Asiatic or European who pose as African leaders must be categorically denounced and rejected."<sup>15</sup> Lembede articulated the common belief that non-Africans have no loyalty to the African continent. Indians, according to Lembede, were not to be trusted because they "are fighting only for their rights to trade and extract as much wealth as possible from Africa."<sup>16</sup> In addition to his anti-Indianism,<sup>17</sup> Lembede was also virulently anti-Communist. The fact that Yusuf Dadoo, the president of the NIC, was a radical Indian activist and a member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) made Lembede doubly suspicious of Indian political figures as well as coalitions with them (Raman, 2004).

### **The Communist Party of South Africa and "Popular Socialism"**

The final years of WWII brought with them a shortage of food and other essentials. Food prices rose drastically during this period and some traders stockpiled

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<sup>14</sup> H. Selby Msimang to James A. Calacta, 30 June 1947. A.W.G. Champion Papers (see [www.anc.org](http://www.anc.org) and [www.sahistory.org](http://www.sahistory.org))

<sup>15</sup> Anton Lembede, "Policy of the Congress Youth League," *Inkundla ya Bantu*, May 1946. Reproduced in *Freedom in Our Lifetime*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> A.M. Lembede, "Fallacy of the Non-European Unity Movement, *Bantu World*, 11 August 1945. Reproduced in *Freedom in Our Lifetime*, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Benson (1966) traces Lembede's ethnocentrism to his job as a domestic servant at an Indian home, where he worked in order to earn money for his school fees. Lembede's political speeches and writings reduce the Indian population to the character of the merchant figure exploiting the African.

goods in order to drive prices up even further. In addition to organizing Indian and African workers into unions, the local branch of the CPSA formed a People's Food Committee in 1944 to rally workers around this issue (Padayachee, Vawda, Tichmann 1985). At first, the campaign tried to mobilize all poor non-Whites around the issue of food shortages and tried to pressurize the state to distribute food more equitably. The campaign was slow to get off the ground but gained momentum in 1946 as food shortages persisted and ration lines got longer. Frustrated by the state's delayed response to the crisis, activists raided an Indian-owned store in the Duffs area of Durban North. The local branch of the CPSA came out in support of the action and portrayed the incident as a citizen's rightful response to the black-marketeering of food. The food campaign, while still demanding action by the state, now had shifted to a new target: Indian shopkeepers. While White traders were also in possession of the much needed foodstuffs, the food campaign quickly turned into a raid exclusively on Indian stores for three reasons, according to Edwards and Nuttall (1990:11): (1) The state was more likely to get involved if White shops were targeted. The widespread anti-Indianism among Durban Whites actually provided cover for the campaign in that police were less likely to suppress it or intervene on behalf of Indian shops. (2) Given White segregationist policies that excluded Africans from White areas, African customers mainly conducted business in Indian areas. Therefore they shopped mainly in Indian-owned stores and dealt mostly with Indian traders and shopkeepers. Thus the organizers of the food campaign focused their efforts on Indian stores, which were visible and familiar targets. (3) In a show of support for the campaign, "radical" individuals from of the Natal Indian Congress, such as Billy Nair, who belonged to the CPSA, directed mobs toward particular Indian traders

whom they identified as “reactionaries.”<sup>18</sup> However, the distinction ceased to matter as Indian shops became synonymous with “black-market shops” and therefore especially vulnerable to raids.

At first, a number of rallies consisting of thousands of people, both Indian and African, were held in Durban to protest state apathy and unjust policies that ignored the poor. Multi-racial crowds marched on Indian stores in a spirit of class solidarity. They seized and subsequently sold the goods through the CPSA at reduced prices. As the protest went on, mobs threatened to use violence and smashed store windows if Indian store owners resisted. The raids were dubbed by the CPSA as an experiment in “popular socialism.” The confiscation of goods from Indian stores was encouraged as a just response to hoarding by Indian traders. The fact that CPSA activists were from all racial groups was seen as lending credibility and legitimacy to the protest, as did endorsement from Billy Nair and other members of the NIC, for what the CPSA regarded as a “class uprising.”<sup>19</sup>

The riots between Indians and Africans in 1949 (discussed in the next section) came as a surprise to many in that they erupted after the CPSA food protests, and just as African and Indian political organizations were in the incipient stages of exploring alliances to oppose racial segregation in South Africa. Well-meaning pacts among gentlemen were not enough to quell the long-suppressed feelings of frustration among ordinary people. Nor could radical calls for revolution stem the rising tide of parochial African nationalisms that threatened to undermine the joint struggle for collective rights.

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<sup>18</sup> Billy Nair was an anti-apartheid activist of Indian origin who was imprisoned on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela. See oral interview with Billy Nair conducted by the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Center at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for an in-depth reflection on his participation in the food protests. Available at <http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/Audio/VOR/NairBilly/NairBillytranscript1.htm>. Last accessed February 15, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Some activists, like Fatima Meer (1971: 132), were not sure if Africans and Indians were politically ready for alliances:

African nationalism became confused with racialism and African leaders were prematurely pushed by non-African democrats into making a choice between ... international humanism and ... parochial nationalism based on the idea that each group has its own permanently distinct historical tradition... The new generation [of African] leaders were never given an opportunity to work out their own intermediate nationalism and through it to reach out to ... other groups... There was a premature insistence on international, inter-racial cooperation - a superficial sharing of platforms and a disproportionate representation of non-African democrats on bodies which planned essentially African political action... at a stage when many real and very large chasms existed between the life chances of Africans and those of the other 'races' to whom Africans were expected to extend equality in the future.

In trying to stay ahead of pedestrian chauvinisms, “progressive” leaders appeared quaintly out of touch with the groundswell of popular sentiment, which eventually moved in an entirely different direction than they had intended.

## **THE 1949 RIOTS**

The riots began on Thursday January 13, 1949. They were ignited by an altercation between an Indian shopkeeper, Harilal Basanth, and an African teenager, George Madondo, who was accused of stealing from the shop. Fisticuffs soon followed, in which Basanth dealt a blow that resulted in a gash on Madondo's head. While the wound proved to be not serious, nearby witnesses who saw the boy bleeding thought otherwise and jumped in to avenge him. Soon, shop windows were shattered, and Indian shopkeepers were dragged out and assaulted while their stores were looted. Indians who

escaped retreated into buildings and threw various objects down from balconies upon the African rioters on the street below (Commission of Enquiry into Riots in Durban, 1949, hereafter referred to as CERD).

The state police were late to arrive and were not equipped for riot control. The few police who did venture into the scene were armed with batons and could not control the situation. Looting continued until about 11pm that night. There were isolated incidents of violence in other parts of the city. Forty-eight Indians and four Africans were hospitalized for riot-related injuries that night. By midnight, the streets were relatively quiet as rioters disappeared into the night. White residents of Durban were largely unaware of the riots; most learned about it in the papers the following morning. Madondo himself was treated and released from the hospital. However, accounts of his assault took on a life of their own. They continued to circulate rapidly in the African hostels and shack settlements, and soon became grossly exaggerated. According to one extreme version, Madondo's decapitated head was taken to a mosque where evil rites were performed upon it by Indians. This rumor, along with other urban legends that alcohol sold by Indians caused tuberculosis amongst Africans, and that Indian men were spreading sexually transmitted diseases amongst African women, were the sole topics of discussion that night, according to a manager at an African hostel who observed that he had never before observed such intense hatred toward Indians.<sup>20</sup> Anger simmered in the hostels and shack settlements as some participants in the disturbance earlier in the day discussed how African honor could be redeemed the following day. The rioters continued

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<sup>20</sup> Reported in *The Leader*, January 27, 1989 "Forty Years Since the Riots".

the attacks because they had taken note of the limited police intervention during the fighting.

On the following day, Friday, about 2000 Africans, mostly from the hostels and shacks in and around Durban, converged in the Jacobs hotel area around noon and began vandalizing and looting Indian stores. Indians in the shops were dragged out and beaten. Indian pedestrians on the pavement were attacked and robbed of their Friday pay. Nearby White stores, however, were unscathed. White bystanders were not attacked; they took shelter but otherwise did nothing to intervene. By the afternoon, rioters began streaming into other parts of Durban, following the Umgeni River, South Coast roads, and the Berea Road. Participants now included not only Amalaita gangs of new rural migrants, but also African wage-workers, hawkers, and small traders. African domestic servants in their maid and butler uniforms were also seen participating in the riots.<sup>21</sup>

Around 4pm, a crowd of about 1000 Africans from the Somtseu Road hostel marched toward the city center of Durban, specifically to Magazine Barracks, a poor Indian community located on the banks of the Umgeni River. There, they began stoning Indian residents, killing some. At this point, the White municipal authorities became concerned that the riots could spread into the city center, i.e. White Durban, which was nearby. A cordon of armed police met the rioters at the edge of the Indian shopping area of central Durban. They ordered the crowd to disperse and fired warning shots. Live ammunition was subsequently fired into the crowd, killing 4 people. This show of force

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<sup>21</sup> Reported in *The Natal Witness*, January 14, 1989 "Riots that Shocked KZN."



by the police re-directed the conflict from the city center to the periphery. It was at this point that the riots spread to Cato Manor.<sup>22</sup>

That evening, the overcrowded buses going to Mkhumbane in Cato Manor were transporting not only residents of the area, but also the African migrants, workers, and gang members who were involved in the violence earlier in the day. Mkhumbane shacklords and residents joined the arriving rioters in chanting that Mkhumbane belonged to Africans and that Indians ought to be expelled. Violence ensued immediately and escalated into the night, no longer confined to looting, destruction of property, and assault as seen on Victoria Street in Durban that afternoon. Murder and rape continued all night along with the burning of Indian homes and property.<sup>23</sup> Many Indian residents of the area ran into nearby bushes to escape the violence. A few victims were rescued by local police and taken to the nearby Cato Manor police station. The police, having great difficulty quelling the violence, requested military assistance. About 500 troops with machine guns and shoot-to-kill orders were deployed in Cato Manor on Saturday. It was not until more soldiers arrived the next day that the violence slowly subsided. Violence finally abated by Sunday afternoon but angry African mobs marched past military vehicles defiantly punching their fists into the air. The rioters had not only looted and burnt Indian shops and homes, or attacked and killed Indians; through their spontaneous but collective effort, they had forced Indians to flee from Cato Manor. Some 25,000 Indians became refugees overnight.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See *Natal Mercury*, 15-18 January 1949; *Natal Daily News*, 15-18 January 1949.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Leader*, 27 January 1989, "40 Years Since Durban Riots."

<sup>24</sup> See *Natal Mercury*, January 17, 1949 and CERD Report.

## Interpreting the Riots

Government reports recorded the casualties of the Cato Manor riots as follows:

137 DEAD	
	1 European
	53 Indians
	83 Africans
1883 INJURED	
	30 Europeans
	768 Indians
	1085 Africans

**Table 5.1:** Casualties of the 1949 Riots, by race.

**Source:** Commission of Enquiry into Riots in Durban (CERD)

In addition, they noted that 1,532 dwellings, 710 stores, and 3 factories were damaged or destroyed as a consequence of the riots. The Indian and African communities, on the other hand, maintain that the official tally grossly underestimated the number of deaths, injuries, and property damage that occurred as a consequence of the riots.

The locale and time of the altercation that supposedly ignited the riots are important for understanding and contextualizing how the conflict unfolded. The altercation happened near the Central Bus Depot on Victoria Street, near the city center, on a Thursday afternoon. Thousands of Indian and African commuters were waiting to

board buses home. The location was also in the Indian market, a place where thousands of the city's African hostel dwellers gathered to buy food and drink after work. Close to all this activity was Durban's largest African beer hall, where a number of domestic workers were present, as Thursday was their day off. The presence of a large number of domestic workers in the area also provides a clue to understanding how the violence escalated. Domestic servants were almost always drawn from the population of new, young rural African migrants. The fact that many were key members of gangs in the city portended trouble, as they often participated in street violence at night.<sup>25</sup> These gang members were among the first to respond to the assault on Madondo. Victoria Street was the first locale of the violence. By the next day, the rioting had spread elsewhere, following the main arteries of the city.

The fact that White stores were not attacked reveals that some vital lessons were learned from the earlier food protests organized by the Communist Party of South Africa. According to Edwards and Nuttall (1990: 11), the food protests showed that direct action can bypass or overturn legal obstacles, such as property rights, to obtaining desired goods. In other words, store owners had to hand over their possessions when threatened, because they no longer owned anything. Second, the state did not suppress unlawful actions by Africans if they were directed at Indians. When the non-response of the municipality was confirmed again by the events of the previous day, rioters felt confident that the state will not deploy its full strength to deal with the conflict unless Whites themselves are adversely affected in some way. Thus, the "revolutionary tactic" of targeting Indian stores during the food protests had established a precedent for attacking

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<sup>25</sup> See Paul La Hausse (1990) "The Cows Of Nongoloza, Youth Crime, and the Amalaita Gangs in Durban, *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Vol 16, 1) March.

Indians. The difference in 1949 was that, based on accounts of the riots, many African participants were not at all motivated by revolutionary zeal. For the CPSA, and activists like Billy Nair, targeting Indian stores had been a way of highlighting exploitative commercial practices and a means of redistributing goods to the poor, but the genie of anti-Indian violence, released during the food protests, would not go back into its bottle. In 1949, rich and poor Indians alike were attacked by Africans, because Indians were collectively equated with wealth and regarded as anti-African in the minds of their attackers.

The riots also showed that Africans feared White authority enough to avoid provoking it. Instead, they selectively chose to attack Indians, whom they held in contempt but did not fear. Indians were a safe target onto which African frustration with White law, the White economy, and the White military, all of which were beyond the reach of Africans, could be displaced without fear of consequence. For Africans, the conflict was a spontaneous expression of defiance of their marginal status in the city, but not through a direct assault on the source, White power. Instead they projected their anger onto a numerically small, racially defined, proximate “other.” The riots not only highlighted the precarious position of Indians as a whole in South Africa, but underscored the particular vulnerability of the Indian poor who bore the brunt of African resentment, for the sole reason that they were Indian. The anti-Indian violence of 1949 was pent up African hostility toward the Indian community made manifest. This observation led Edwards and Nuttall to conclude that “the killings and burnings in Cato Manor amounted to a pogrom: the organized extermination and expulsion of all Indians.” (Edwards and Nuttall, 1990: 27). Anti-Indianism afforded further political opportunity for Africans: to

unite around a specific issue, define themselves in relation to an “other,” and transcend their own parochial ethnic, regional, and territorial divisions in order to become “African.”

As noted earlier, efforts by the leaders of the respective communities to unite Indians and Africans in joint local struggle were short lived. In reality, African labor was largely confined to unskilled positions during this period. Most of the skilled labor was monopolized by White workers with Indians and Coloreds competing for semi-skilled positions. In the Durban area, many Indians and Africans were competing for low-paying jobs. The 1949 Riots Commission found that “competition for jobs joined other social processes which had the potential effect of defining ethnic boundaries between Africans and Indians. A widespread view amongst Africans during the late 1940s was that Indians had far better prospects of moving into higher-paid semi-skilled jobs.”

A number of important contrasts in the socio-cultural milieu of Indian migrants to Durban, as compared to Africans, that provide further context for the riots. First of all, the fact that a few Indians were able to purchase land for residential and commercial purposes while Africans could not was significant. Second, the Indian merchant class often underwrote the financing of a number of civic, community, and religious centers for Indians, including temples, churches, mosques, and school sporting facilities. Africans, on the other hand, looked to White capital for social spaces in the city. These mostly consisted of overcrowded migrant hostels, government-sponsored beer halls and “illegal” African-owned breweries called ‘shebeens’. Third, family networks, which were central to Indian strategies for coping with random political and economic upheavals in South African society, were largely intact in spite of anti-Indian government policies. Freund

(1995:75) observes that the Indians lived in “networks of community linked together through dense human contacts that tied into family relationships and a myriad of economic connections. As pointed out in the previous chapter, indentured Indians relied heavily on these networks to obtain livelihoods in the Durban area after their contracts expired. Family networks were crucial to Indian survival under the constant threat of deportation and the arbitrary curtailment of civil rights (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2009).

Urban Africans residents, on the other hand, had a different experience of disfranchisement and social control under White rule. Their population consisted mainly of African men due to influx control legislation that prevented African women and families from settling in urban areas.<sup>26</sup> As life in the hostels was strictly controlled by White authorities, feelings of alienation and powerless prevailed among African migrants to Durban. Urban social life consequently took to the street and revolved around the activities of single men, who frequently organized themselves into gangs. Known as the “*amalaita*,” gang members often practiced “*isihabhaba*,” (cross-dressing and gender play) during gang activity as a way of expressing their frustrations. There was no formal structure through which Africans could report abuse in the hostels of Durban, or in the shacks of Cato Manor. Furthermore, since their presence in shacks was mostly illegal, shack-dwellers in Cato Manor could not complain against shacklords or poor living conditions. Subjected to repeated raids by the municipal authorities when occupying municipal lands, there was growing resentment among African squatters. A delegation of squatters informed the police in early 1948 that police action was causing “intense hatred

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<sup>26</sup> The 1923 Native Urban Areas Act prevented Africans from residing in areas demarcated for White residence.

in the African people.”<sup>27</sup> Such oppressive conditions partly set the stage for an explosion in 1949.

In sum, the experiences of Africans as squatters, often on Indian-owned land, as consumers patronizing Indian shops, as passengers on Indian-owned buses, their perceived slights in business, coupled with the White state’s differential policies towards Indians and Africans, all served to create and reinforce a sense of distrust in Africans of Indians, which often expressed itself as anti-Indianism in the African population. By 1949, these factors had become an incendiary mixture in the city of Durban, an important crucible of Indian-African relations in South Africa.

### **The Official Position**

The City of Durban attempted to create an official account of the riots in the immediate aftermath. Its first step in this direction was to establish a “Commission of Enquiry into Riots in Durban” (CERD) to investigate the nature and causes of the riots. The findings of the Commission were not without controversy, beginning with its identification of the primary cause of the conflict in the apparently long-standing “antagonisms” between Indians and Africans in the country. The riots, according to the commission, were the result of “accumulated resentment, comparable to a powder-keg waiting only for a spark to go into explosion.” Furthermore, the Commission recorded that African and Indian political organizations helped to fuel the conflict:

Native intellectuals, entirely sequestered from the thoughts and aspirations of their people, quite incapable of independent thought, who merely repeat the

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<sup>27</sup> Reported in *The Guardian*, January 22, 1948.

precepts of their mentors. From all sides it is drummed into the heads of the Natives that they have grievances. It would be surprising if they did not become restive (CERD, 1949:21).

For the White authorities, the fact that the riots had sent a tremor through the racial order they had carefully erected in the city, over many decades, was paramount. Evoking common colonial tropes, the Commission represented Africans as bloodthirsty savages: “The Zulu is by tradition a warrior. The veneer of civilization which has come to him during his urban existence is but a thin covering” (CERD 1949:13). The Report went on to state that “certain racial characteristics... combined with the stage of development to which the Native has attained, induce him to certain habits of mind... it is apparent that urban Natives in the mass are increasingly given to lawlessness and are ready to take the law into their own hands” (CERD 1949:12).

If Africans were represented in the report as inherently violent brutes, Indians were cast in effeminate terms, as was common practice by Europeans. Indians were regarded as passive and deserving of assault, even inviting it. Partly blaming Indians for the violence, the Commission claimed that they “were pathetically passive and allowed themselves to be slaughtered like sheep” (CERD 1949:7). Indian political activism was identified as the key catalyst in the mix:

a certain type of South African Indian began to ride the high horse... in the recent passive resistance movement in Durban the Indians ostentatiously contravened the law of the land, attracting as much attention as they could to the fact that they were flouting authority... in the result the Indians were hoist with their own petard.” (CERD 1949: 13; 12)

The riots served a dual purpose for the White Durban government. First, by representing Africans in barbaric terms, Whites could declare that Africans were unfit to



participate in institutions of civil society. Second, the riots enabled Durban Whites to make the case for Indian expulsion to India with renewed vigor, for the reason that the Indian presence in South Africa apparently generated conflict with the Africans. The official perspective on the source of the riots clung to the notion that there was a deep-seated racial, hereditary antagonism between Indians and Africans. Such “findings” became the basis for the government’s argument that the only way to prevent conflicts such as the 1949 riots in future was to segregate urban space along racial lines. The Commission’s conclusions were also in keeping with the newly-elected national government’s preferred policies of spatial segregation and separate racial development. “Security” became an operating rationale for enforcing segregation and was eventually codified in the Group Areas Act, one of the pillars of apartheid.

The structure and deliberations of the government-appointed Commission permitted neither detailed nor objective exploration of the nature and causes of the 1949 riots. Maurice Webb, Director of the South African Institute of Race Relations, observes that “a substantial part of the evidence presented to the Commission came from large numbers of individual Natives, most of them poor, ignorant, ill-clad, [whose] evidence was tendered in terms so similar as between one witness and the next that the thought that it was prompted in some way could not fail to strike the mind of the hearer...” (Webb, 1949: 7). Additionally, the Commission’s proceedings did not allow for any cross-examination of witnesses, apparently because the Commission was charged essentially with a fact-finding mission. Representatives from the ANC and South African Indian Congress (SAIC) present at the hearings left in frustration over the parody of justice they had just seen.

The claim that “inherent antagonisms” between Indians and Africans were the cause of the 1949 riots was subjected to great interrogation following the hearings as other testimony emerged. Webb (1949: 3) points out that in its haste to draw its own conclusions of convenience, the Commission overlooked “the evidence given by competent observers that the relations between Indians and Natives in Durban were friendly, harmonious, and cordial.” For example, Manilal Gandhi, the son of Mohandas Gandhi, who remained in South Africa after his father left for India, pointed out that “nothing of this nature has ever been heard of in the history of the sub-continent. A sinister hand seems to be moving behind this whole tragic affair.”<sup>28</sup>

There were accusations from other sources that White involvement may have exacerbated the tensions between Indians and Africans. Margaret Ballinger, a White Member of Parliament representing Africans, notes that “the riots were curious because of widespread claims by Africans in justification of their attack on Indians (with whom they lived in close proximity for decades with little or no friction) that when they had dealt with Indians, they would inherit the Indians possessions” (Ramamurthy 1994: 543). Ballinger found it strange that unlike previous incidents of personalized or localized conflict between Indians and Africans, “the January 1949 Riots were spread over several areas of the city and seemed too well organized to have been spontaneous” (ibid: 543). Ballinger further reported hearing National Party candidates promise African rioters the spoils of Indian expulsion, and that “the ANC was officially approached with this proposition” (ibid: 543). A group of Indian repatriates who had lived through the riots claimed on arriving in Madras that “white *goondas* (thugs) [were] supplying arms and

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<sup>28</sup> Press statement of Manilal Gandhi to the Indian High Commission, February 1949.

some even blackened their faces and joined the African gangs.”<sup>29</sup> An African journalist reported in the Zulu publication *Inkundla ya Bantu* that a “European woman driving by assured the rioters that the government was with them while pointing out that the police are not shooting you [*sic*].”

A number of reports in the English press in Natal noted that African rioters were yelling the slogan “get your ships ready for the Indians” during the riots.<sup>30</sup> So enthusiastic were segments of the African population about the NP’s proposition to repatriate Indians that a local Zulu chief, Hlengwa, testified before the investigating Commission that the White authorities ought to “let the Indians return to their country where they have self-rule, and bring to us the Europeans who are in India” (CERD 1949: 12).

As noted earlier, the official report made tensions between Africans and Indians appear natural and long-standing. The conflict, according to the city government, was a clash of fixed and unchanging identities driven by their own inborn weaknesses. Critics, on the other hand, stressed the role of the state in manipulating Africans to attack Indians. While the state’s policy of racial segregation is certainly an important backdrop to the story of the riots, it would be deterministic to attribute the violence simply to orchestration by the state. Such a view denies the agency of those involved in the conflict. The fact that the riots had erupted in the context of rapid urbanization of Indians and Africans, on one hand, and the forced proletarianization of the African population, on the other hand, is significant. However, references to these factors are conspicuously absent in the government’s report. Large sections of both communities were living in

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<sup>29</sup> See interviews of formerly indentured repatriates arriving by ship, *MV Isipingo* in Madras on May 6, 1950 in *Experience of Indenture*, Desai and Vahed.

<sup>30</sup> “A note on the Durban riots” by R.T.Chary, Secretary to the High Commissioner for India, February 1949.

poverty and had much difficulty in meeting their basic needs. Webb (1949:11) observed that “since the Africans were more numerous, the poorer sections among them were larger and more visible than among the Indians who made up a small minority.

Nevertheless, 70 percent of Durban’s Indians live below the poverty datum line in 1949.”

Thus, the causes of the 1949 riots are multiple and complex, stemming from the fact that Indians and Africans were incorporated differently into South Africa’s emerging racist order. African resentment toward the Indian community stemmed from Indians’ status as a “middleman minority,” itself a creation of the other groups’ perceptions of the Indian position in South Africa. Indians earned higher wages and held better paying jobs than Africans, as a consequence of the skewed opportunity structure created by White society. As permitted by White law, Indians could own property in segregated urban spaces and were not subject to rigid influx control legislation as were Africans. Yet, as neither “Native” nor White, Indians could not become citizens of South Africa, and were threatened constantly with deportation until 1961. The “Indian” was set up as an interloper, in-between “African” and “White,” spurned by both as an unequal “other.” The differential treatment of Indians by White society as compared to Africans in turn led Africans to perceive Indians according to those very privileges, further pushing Indians into the positions of “outsiders” and “middleman minority” alternatively. Indians were different things to ordinary Africans at different times. It did not seem to matter, however, that their representations of Indians were contradictory. Indians were seen as raving radicals one day and as bourgeois reactionaries the next. This inconsistent characterization coexisted in the minds of ordinary Africans because they were reconciled by the self-explanatory and unifying attribute of “Indian”. Whites, using the

power of state repression, astutely managed these perceptions of Indians among the Africans and tweaked them as necessary in order to instill terror among Indians, all while maintaining that conflict was the natural manifestation of innate differences between inherently antagonistic groups.

### **Indian and African Leaders on the Riots**

Indian traders became the immediate targets of the rioters because Africans encountered them, along with Indian bus drivers, on a daily basis. These encounters served as constant reminders to Africans of their marginal status. The rioters frequently evoked the stereotype of the Indian as an exploiter who threatened to hijack opportunities for African advancement in Durban and keep Africans at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in South African society. (Webster 1979:30). Thus, as noted by Webster (1979:41) “a belief was widespread at the time of the riots that because of the Indian vulnerable position and the openly hostile attitude take by Europeans to Indians, that the Indians could be attacked with impunity – they had, in effect, become licensed scapegoats”.

The leadership of the major Indian and African political organizations were deeply disturbed by the riots and intervened in order to prevent further violence and conflict. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, Dr. A.B. Xuma, President of the ANC, and GM Naicker, President of the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), together with the visiting Indian diplomat R.T. Chary, traveled to the riot-torn areas of Cato Manor (Desai and Vahed 2010). On February 6, 1949, the ANC, TIC, and NIC issued a joint statement on the riots

in which they expressed regret for the loss of life and claimed that “the fundamental and basic causes of the disturbance are traceable to the political, economic, and social structure of the country, based on differential and discriminatory treatment of the various racial groups and the preaching of racial hatred and intolerance.”<sup>31</sup> The Indian Congresses advanced the theory that a ‘third force’ was behind the riots, undermining the fledgling inter-racial coalitions against White supremacy. NIC President Yusuf Dadoo said that

One cannot escape the conclusion that the outbreak here has the resemblance of organized attack, that it was premeditated, although something went wrong with the timing, that a hidden hand of instigators lurks behind the events, that such events eminently suited the Government in order to weaken the growing opposition to the Government policy, and that it may be used as a weapon to impose further repression on both Indian and African people...<sup>32</sup>

Meer added that “direct blame was apportioned to the Government, the White public, and the local authority in Durban, which had for years waged a vendetta of unrestrained malignancy against the Indian people.”<sup>33</sup> However, this view did not resonate with large segments of the Indian population, who were traumatized by violence at the hands of Africans, not the government. *The Indian Opinion* observed that “the murders committed, the ravages on our women and girls, the burning of our homes and our business premises, makes us wonder whether there is human feeling in some human breasts. The hatred shown and the fury with which our people have been attacked, makes one shudder.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Statement issued by the Joint Meeting of African and Indian Leaders,” 6 February 1949, in Karis and Carter, eds., *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 2, p. 287.

<sup>32</sup> “Press Conference Held by Dr. Y.M.Dadoo, the President of the Transvaal Indian Congress,” 27 January 1949 (see [www.anc.org](http://www.anc.org) and [www.sahistory.org](http://www.sahistory.org))

<sup>33</sup> Fatima Meer, “African and Indian in Durban,” *Africa South in Exile*, vol. 4, no. 4 (July-September 1960), p.30.

<sup>34</sup> “The Racial Disturbances,” *Indian Opinion*, 21 January 1949.

In response to the emerging testimonies, members of the African community complained at the February 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Indian and African Congresses that they were frustrated by the stranglehold small Indian business leaders held over trade and transportation licenses. They also complained that Indians were contemptuous of, and segregated themselves from, Africans. The leadership of Indian political organizations acknowledged these complaints but replied that these problems were not widespread. The following resolutions were unanimously adopted at the meeting. The first resolution placed the causes of the riots at the door of the government's discriminatory treatment of the different racial groups of South Africa. The second urged the South African premier to appoint African and Indian leaders to the Commission of Inquiry being set up to investigate the riots. The third resolution stated that Africans and Indians ought to present a joint case to the government's Commission of their views regarding the causes of the conflict.

The government of India initially took an interest in seeing the easement of tensions between Africans and Indians in South Africa. The Indian diplomat R.T. Chary made a number of return trips to Durban after the riots. He observed "widespread resentment among the common African people" against alleged "contemptuous treatment by the Indians" during normal contacts. He found that "though the greater portion of the Indian population in Durban is also working class... there was little social contact at any stratum," which, according to Chary, perpetuated misunderstanding (Cited from Ramamurthy, p. 545). Chary advised the Indian government to emphasize the "need for Indians in the Union to assist and cooperate in the betterment of Africans," and cautioned that if the Indian government emphasized the welfare of Indians only, it "might estrange

the African leaders” and result in a deterioration of the situation. “The joint effort of African and Indian leaders” was “the sole means of securing future good relations,” in Chary’s view (ibid. p. 544).

Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was sympathetic to Chary’s position. In a message to the South African premier, Nehru expressed his concern regarding “the tragic happenings in Durban, and even more so at the fact that good relations which had hitherto subsisted between the Indian and African sections of the population in South Africa should have been broken in such an unfortunate manner.”<sup>35</sup> The Prime Minister’s statement was followed by another statement by the Indian government that “the immediate task is the restoration of relations of mutual confidence and friendship between the two communities”.<sup>36</sup> These statements were consistent with Nehru’s policy of non-involvement in the affairs of Indian communities outside of India. Nehru encouraged Indians in the diaspora to work through their conflicts in their own national contexts, without seeking the involvement of India. “The government of India’s general policy, not only in South Africa but all over the continent of Africa has been to promote close friendship and cooperation between Indians and Africans,” said Nehru. He carefully added that “while earnestly desiring the security and well-being of Indians abroad, the government do not look with sympathy on the establishment of any vested interests which might retard the advance of the African people in their own homeland. This view has been frequently communicated to our representatives in the continent of Africa.”<sup>37</sup> This apparent distancing of Indians abroad by Nehru was met with disappointment by

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<sup>35</sup> Telegram from Nehru to South African Premier D.F. Malan, January 22, 1949 (in Nehru’s *Collected Works*).

<sup>36</sup> Reported in *Sunday Tribune*, March 13, 1949, “Nehru’s Bad Advice to Union Indians.”

<sup>37</sup> See Nehru’s *Collected Works*.



some South African Indians in the period following the riots, who recalled that they had felt politically abandoned by India once before, when Gandhi had lived in South Africa and had petitioned on their behalf. In this respect, Nehru's position clearly contrasts that of Gandhi, who believed that Indian and British colonial authorities ought to protect Indians as members of the Empire. South African Indian leaders after Gandhi began to espouse the formation of a united front with Africans in order to demand rights. They worked with like-minded African leaders to bring about Indian-African cooperation. The 1949 riots not only disrupted these efforts by Indian leaders in South Africa to build bridges with their African counterparts, but created doubt in the minds of many as to the feasibility of such contact. South African Indians once again looked to their own resources for survival in a hostile land and tried to forge anew their relationships with its peoples.

### **Popular Responses to the Riots**

The major African and Indian political organizations had tried in a number of ways to heal relations between their communities in the aftermath of the conflict. G.M. Naicker of the NIC and A.W.G. Champion (leader of the Natal ANC) issued a joint statement condemning the violence and calling for "calm and understanding".<sup>38</sup> However, such calls hardly resonated with ordinary people. Champion himself was assaulted and forced to flee from a group of Africans who were angered by his appeal. While the national leadership of the ANC and the NIC attempted to mitigate tensions, other African

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<sup>38</sup> See *Natal Mercury*, January 17, 1949.

leaders exploited the riots for populist ends. African traders rapidly set up stalls to sell goods stolen from destroyed Indian shops and informal trading burgeoned. The Zulu Hlanganani Cooperative and Buying Club was established with the specific aim of expelling Indian traders from gaining monopoly over small trade in Mkhumbane. The Cooperative received support from the Afrikaner National Party, which was readily accepted. The NP's intention, however, was to deflect the influence of the ANC in the Zulu community and undermine Indian entrepreneurship, which had taken a blow during the riots (Edwards and Nuttall, 1990).

The *Ilanga Lase Natal* editorialized about Indians just after the 1949 riots that “Africans would be less than human not to feel humiliated, frustrated and outraged to find ... ‘foreigners’ and ‘people who did not conquer us but came here as slaves,’ now lording it over them [*sic*] in the land of their birth.”<sup>39</sup> This view was echoed by a number of witnesses before the CERD who stated that “The Indian was introduced into this country as a laborer. Now we find we have to serve two masters. Our ancestors fought the Europeans and lost. We accept the European as our master – we will not tolerate this other black master (CERD 1949:13).”

The Zulu press in Natal urged readers to refrain from using the word “riot” which implied that the participants were “mad, blind, and unreasoning *impis* (Zulu, group of armed men)”<sup>40</sup> They emphasized the need to protect African dignity by using alternative statements such as “Africans reasserting their agency” and “Africans redressing the humiliation they experienced on a daily basis in South African society” to describe the

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<sup>39</sup> How Long, O Lord! *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 22 January 1949 (cited from Soske, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> “How Long, O Lord!” *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 22 January 1947.

conflict. However, testimony before the Riots Commission, and a series of interviews conducted by the Killie Campbell Africana Library offer a glimpse into some of the psycho-cultural motivations of the attackers. Some participants remarked that the conflict helped to restore their self-respect and dignity *vis-à-vis* Indians: “They learned a great lesson, and to this day you will not hear an Indian say to an African, ‘Voetsak.’ No matter where he is working, if you say ‘Hey!’ there is perfect silence to this day.”<sup>41</sup> Others stated that they wanted to humiliate Indians: “When the men returned and told us about it all, they said tins of oil had been poured out on the floor of Indian stores, making it so slippery that people fell and hurt themselves. They looted whatever they could from the shops whenever they saw an Indian they hit him, and that would be that.”<sup>42</sup> Zulu nationalism motivated other rioters: “We beat them up. We burnt them. Even though I did not join that company, I can say ‘we did it’ because it was done by Zulus.”<sup>43</sup> There was broad support for the rioters from within the Zulu community. *Inkundla Ya Bantu* reported that “almost every African this correspondent asked about the riot had a measure of sympathy with the Indian’s attackers.”<sup>44</sup>

However, despite the widespread anti-Indianism among Africans that would apparently give credence to the government’s claim that Indians and Africans were inherently antagonistic, there are accounts of rioters protecting Indians who were familiar

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<sup>41</sup> The official Riot Commission Report has a transcript of interviews of witnesses to the riots. The Killie Campbell Oral History Project has also done interviews with people who were participants and/or victims of the riots. An unpublished paper by Eddie Webster also features interviews in its appendix. Also see Soske (2009).

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

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> “The Riots and Propaganda” *Inkundla Ya Bantu*, 22 January 1949. See also “Eye-Witness Account of the Riots,” *Inkundla Ya Bantu* 29 January 1949 in Soske (2009).

to them, even in the midst of attacking others. Doctor Goonam, an Indian activist, recounts the following experience during the riots in her autobiography:

I saw a group of burley [*sic*] Africans with stones and bricks. I immediately braked. ‘This is it... the end of me,’ I said to myself. They surrounded my car and were about to take aim when they recognized me and throwing away their missiles shouted in chorus, ‘Aeo Doktela, Aeo Doktela [doctor]’, I explained that I was going to the camel man’s house, his wife was very ill. They listened sympathetically and said, ‘Hamba Kahle, Hamba Kahle’ (go well)... As I was leaving the camel man’s home, one or two of the Africans who stood poised with stones came to ask me how the ‘camel lady’ was feeling. Shaking their head, they showed concern, and called in God’s grace, ‘Nkulunkulu!’”<sup>45</sup>

Dr. Goonam goes on to mention that “All Africans did not attack Indians. Many, in fact, in Cato Manor, Mayville, Second River, Briardene, Sea Cow Lake and Springfield protected their Indian neighbors and sheltered them in their home against attack by Africans.”<sup>46</sup> *Inkundla Ya Bantu* was critical of reports in the White press that demonized all Africans as barbaric and supportive of the rioters, pointing out that “there are hundreds of instances where Africans were beaten up by their own people for giving sanctuary to Indians.”<sup>47</sup> One article pointed to an unnamed African man who was killed while attempting to rescue two Indian children from a burning house. Eulogizing the man for being “like Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln,” the article identified him as “the true representative of the Africa that will endure.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, p.138-9. “Camel man” and “camel lady” were so called because they had a pet camel.

<sup>46</sup> Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, p. 138.

<sup>47</sup> “Eye-Witness Account of the Riots,” *Inkundla Ya Bantu*, 29 January 1949.

<sup>48</sup> “Heroes of the Riots,” *Inkundla Ya Bantu*, 5 February 1949.

## CONCLUSION

The 1949 Riots erupted as African and Indian political leaders were trying to develop alliances. Two days of violence between Indians and Africans deeply impacted relations between these two communities in South African society. I have argued in this chapter that there is no single explanation for this conflict. There were eyewitness accounts of government involvement and police were slow to intervene to quell the violence. Indian political leaders claimed that the riots were instigated by Whites in order to fragment and derail the burgeoning non-European front in South African politics. These factors certainly served as a backdrop to the conflict. However, the intense competition for urban space and the struggle of Africans and Indians to carve out an economic niche and gain a political voice in a climate of rising White supremacy and intensifying segregation undoubtedly played key roles in causing the 1949 riots.

Many of the existing pressures of urbanization were exacerbated in the aftermath of the riots. The politics of housing and transportation, discussed earlier, were no exception. There were still many complaints from Africans regarding the Indian monopoly on licenses for bus transportation. After their visits to the riot-destroyed areas of Durban, Chary and the NIC warned the Indian community that the bus situation remained problematic, and could prove lethal. The local state, itself eager to expand into the lucrative bus routes serving the non-White areas, attempted to escalate the situation by encouraging Africans to boycott Indian-owned buses and to use municipal buses instead. In response, the leadership of the NIC evoked Nehru's call for inter-racial harmony between African and Indian communities and urged Indian businessmen to

begin supporting African interests. However, the Natal branch of the ANC, led by the now skeptical A.W.G Champion, distrusted the NIC as a whole and kept its distance. It was not until Albert Luthuli led the ANC in Natal that the NIC and the ANC developed closer working relations (Lodge 1983).

A boycott of Indian-owned buses did occur after the riots. African commuters, who had previously relied on Indian-owned buses, used African-owned cars and trucks as taxis. The Durban municipality aided the boycott by providing “emergency” bus service for African commuters to Cato Manor.<sup>49</sup> It appeared to the English press in Natal that “Africans will never buy from Indian shops again” and that “Africans will never travel on Indian buses again.”<sup>50</sup> Informal taxi operators and aspiring bus owners appealed to the popular nationalisms of African commuters, but the boycott was ultimately enforced through violence by vigilante groups.<sup>51</sup> The campaign was widely regarded as a success as commuters jeered and stoned Indian-run buses when they arrived at the terminals. When the municipal bus licenses held by Indians were to about to expire at the end of February (the riots had erupted a few weeks earlier), rumors circulated that Africans were organizing to destroy all Indian buses, forcing about 500 Indians to flock to refugee camps. However, the licenses were subsequently renewed, dispelling the rumors.

Violence did not abate completely after those few fateful days in January. There were sporadic minor incidents between Indians and Africans for about four months following the riots. The bus boycott, however, continued into the second half of the year.

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<sup>49</sup> The municipality provided buses to Cato Manor with the initial intention of clearing the city center of Africans as soon as possible. However, the municipality soon provided bus service, through as many as 210 buses, to Cato Manor and other non-White areas after the riots. Indian bus owners sued the municipality for violation of the terms of their licenses. Municipal bus services subsequently were reduced to 30 by the end of February.

<sup>50</sup> Reported in the *Natal Mercury*, January 17, 1949.

<sup>51</sup> Reported in *The Guardian*, February 3, 1949.

The Durban municipality attempted to take over the lucrative bus service to Cato Manor but had to drop the scheme when the central government refused to support it. The NP-led National Transportation Board, playing the benevolent conciliator in an increasingly volatile situation, ruled in May 1949 that emergency municipal buses ought to withdraw from the Cato Manor area. The Board subsequently awarded 11 certificates to African operators, African businessmen welcomed this move and the first African buses began to operate in July (Edwards and Nuttall 1990).

The Durban municipality dedicated itself to planning for the long term implications of the riots, particularly those stemming from its realization that there were, from its perspective, far too many Africans in the city. Influx control was enforced more drastically. There were recommendations that all shacks ought to be demolished and residents removed from the area. Others suggestions included sites-and-services schemes to improve the physical condition of the area such that residents would choose to remain in their areas rather than to enter White Durban.

The future of Cato Manor also preoccupied the African and Indian political organizations that sought to rebuild shattered coalitions. There were many obstacles in their path. African shacklords, for one, wanted to keep the land that they had seized from Indians. One articulated his demand as follows: "The African mass-man agrees with the authorities that the races should be separated. Cato Manor is a predominantly African area these days. The mass-man argues that here the African should live by himself and cater for his own interests...Let Indians and Europeans confine themselves to their own

areas.”<sup>52</sup> The Cato Manor branch of the NIC objected to this demand on behalf of Indian property owners and appealed to the municipality to uphold Indian property rights.

Instead, much to the despair of Indians, the Durban city council responded by offering, in an official capacity, sites to Africans in areas municipally-zoned as Indian, on Indian-owned land, for immediate occupancy. However, in a surprising turn of events, the NIC withdrew its initial objection to African occupancy of Indian sites and instead welcomed the construction of African housing in Cato Manor. It was an effort by the NIC, on behalf of Indians, not only to extend good will to Africans, but also to demonstrate non-White solidarity to the White government, whose willingness to exploit the situation to its own advantage was increasingly transparent. This move by the NIC was not lost on the ANC, which appreciated the gesture and complimented it as an act of “exemplary statesmanship” (Ramamurthy, 1994: 545). Both organizations recognized the potential in Cato Manor for coalition politics based on renewed trust between Indians and Africans, especially given the active and growing menace of the White supremacist state.

However, in spite of such advances by the Indian and African leadership, cooperation between the two communities was tested again in 1953, when Cato Manor was declared a “White area” under the aegis of the Group Areas Act of Apartheid. Indians and Africans alike were evicted and relocated to remote areas far from the center of town.

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<sup>52</sup> Reported in *The Guardian*, July 28, 1949.



## CHAPTER 6: SOUTH ASIANS AND “THE PROBLEM OF THE COLOR LINE” IN THE UNITED STATES

### INTRODUCTION

Robert Kennedy, a United States senator from New York, visited South Africa in 1966. He delivered a speech in Cape Town, a city at the southern tip of the Africa known for its breathtaking natural beauty. Cape Town was established in 1652 as a half-way station by the Dutch East India Company for ships traveling to the East. Speaking to students at the University of Cape Town, Kennedy stated:

I come here this evening because of my deep interest in and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage.

After a pause, Kennedy said, “I refer, of course, to the United States of America.”<sup>1</sup>

Kennedy’s words refer to the similar histories of South Africa and the United States, two countries created by imperial ambition as well as resistance to it. In 1609, on orders from the Dutch East India Company, Henry Hudson sailed up a river in eastern North America

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kennedy, Day of Affirmation Address, Delivered at the University of Cape Town, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1966. (Available at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Day-of-Affirmation-Address-as-delivered.aspx>, last accessed, April 2, 2012.

that would later bear his name. The same company established Cape Town twenty-five years later (Cell, 2003; Massie 1997).

I have pointed out in the introduction and in Chapter 2 that the parallels between South Africa and the United States have generated much scholarly interest. However, most of this work has focused almost exclusively on the Black-White binary. A neglected theme in studies of racism has to do with how people of color, such as South Asians, who are neither Black nor White, have negotiated their positions in societies marked by racial hierarchies as well as in relation to one another. In this chapter, I shall focus on how people of South Asian ancestry, who have a presence in both South Africa and the United States, have contested the Black-White binary in the United States.

In contrast to South Africa, where European settlers were in the minority, Europeans outnumbered non-Europeans relatively early during the American colonial encounter, especially in North America. Howard Zinn (1999:18) points out that when Columbus reached the Americas, the indigenous population in the New World numbered some 75 million, with 25 million living in North America alone. During this time, about 10 million lived north of what is now Mexico. A Dutch traveler to colonial America wrote in 1656 that “the Indians [Native Americans] ... affirm, that before the arrival of the Christians, and before the smallpox broke out amongst them, they were ten times as numerous as they now are, and that their population had been melted down by this disease, whereof nine-tenths of them have died” (cited from Zinn 1998:16). These numbers have been reduced to fewer than 1 million in the contemporary period. By rendering the histories and experiences of the indigenous peoples non-existent or

invisible, the prevailing narrative of the peopling of the United States has become one of immigrants settling and occupying apparently unpopulated and unclaimed empty space (see discussion in Chapter 2).

South Asian migration to the United States can be divided into two phases. The first phase dates from the mid-1800s to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, during which a relatively small stream (in comparison to other Asian groups) arrived. While there were a few merchants and professionals who came during this early phase, the vast majority of South Asian migrants were laborers. This early wave of South Asian migration to the U.S. is often obscured by the larger numbers who arrived during the more recent second phase, which began after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act (IRA). These immigrants initially consisted of mostly college-educated, middle-class professionals (Pradhan, 1996; Lemon 1980; Brown 2006).

The aim of this chapter is two-fold. First, the chapter will examine the migration of South Asians to the United States, with particular reference to how they negotiated the American ethno-racial landscape during the two phases of migration mentioned above. Second, I focus on South Asian influences on American social movements through the lenses of activism, political ideas, and methods of resistance in order to explore how the racial hierarchy of the United States was contested. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part will explore how entitlement to citizenship emerged as a terrain of struggle for South Asians in the United States. By demarcating the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, the American nation-state, like that of South Africa, played a decisive role in creating a sense of nationality among those who belonged to the body

politic, on one hand. On the other hand, it set in motion a protracted conflict over entitlement to rights for those who were excluded from it. This part of the chapter will examine how racial categorization emerged as the basis for the exclusion of South Asians as the state used its coercive and rhetorical powers to define citizenship along racial lines. Some discriminatory laws and exclusionary measures directed against Asian Americans in general, and South Asians in particular, from the mid-1800s to the 1920s will be discussed in this section.

While a series of discriminatory laws dramatically reduced the number of South Asians entering the US from 1920 to 1965, they were nevertheless part of a richly textured transnational discourse among activists fighting for civil rights and equality in the United States. The second part of the chapter examines this interaction and exchange. Drawing on the theoretical insights of James Blaut (discussed in chapter 2), particular attention will be paid to three areas: South Asian student activism in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; the idea of African and Indian solidarity among key intellectual and political figures; and the influence of Mohandas Gandhi as well as the Indian independence struggle on African-American mobilizations for civil rights in the United States.

The third and final section of the chapter will examine South Asian migration to the US following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act (Hart-Cellar Act), which overturned race-based restrictions to immigration. The United States was experiencing a social upheaval during the 1960s as civil rights activists were increasingly challenging the systemic nature of racism. The economic successes of some Asians at the

time began to draw journalistic attention were used opportunistically by conservative scholars and policy makers as cases in point to deny that systemic racism is a feature of American society as claimed by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. If Asians in general, and South Asians in particular, could succeed, the conservatives argued, why not African Americans and others? The evolution and consequences of this argument, which came to be known as the Model Minority Thesis, are explored in this final section. The chapter will conclude with some observations on how South Asians are currently positioned within the US racial hierarchy.

## **SOUTH ASIANS IN THE UNITED STATES: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### **The Politics of Nomenclature and Taxonomy**

W.E.B. Du Bois' (1999:5) famous observation that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” captured the determinant role played by race in shaping modern societies.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2 discussed how the European fixation on racial classification became central to the project of modernity during the age of empire. With respect to this obsession, Cornel West (1982: 55) observes that the emergence of the category of “race” in natural history is central to the ideology of White supremacy. In both the United States and South African contexts, racial classification and hierarchy became instrumental to White ruling class attempts to impose “order.”

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<sup>2</sup> Du Bois first uttered these famous words in his address to the First Pan-African Congress in Paris in 1900. They are also the opening words of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1999).

With respect to South Asians, Western taxonomists have always had trouble with determining their racial identity and hence their classification. In his book, *The People of India* (1908), British ethnologist Sir Herbert Risley comments on the difficulty of this task:

It is a familiar experience that the ordinary untraveled European, on first arriving in India, finds much difficulty in distinguishing one native of the country from another. To his untrained eye all Indians are black... An observant man soon shakes off these illusions and realizes the extraordinary diversity of the types which are met with everywhere in India... But the general impressions thus formed, though accurate enough so far as they go, are wanting in scientific precision... they melt away in the attempt to fix them and leave nothing behind.

Upon their arrival in the US, South Asians continued to elude classification as the state tried to pinpoint their identity within the existing Black-White racial binary and its attendant lexicon. However, the state soon came to realize that it had to fulfill the claims that began to emerge from the identities it bestowed. Thus a peculiar identity politics followed, in which the state, on one hand, employed shifting meanings of race to determine entitlement to citizenship, and South Asians, like other Asians, attempted to manipulate these meanings in order to lay claim to US citizenship (Morning 2001; Spickard 2012). In response, the state attempted to keep South Asian identity unstable by re-naming the group in every census after their arrival, thereby locating South Asians outside of the racial and geographic lexicon of entitlement. Thus, the state has continued to hinder South Asians' claims to rights and resources that are available to other Americans. For example, affirmative action following civil rights legislation was denied to South Asians by labeling them as "White". As Koshy (not dated: 1) observes,

South Asian racial identity has elicited annotation, qualification, casuistry, and reversal in being accommodated within the US racial order. The late appearance of South Asians on the US racial landscape compounded the problem: the categories black, Indian, and white were already occupied, and more importantly, whiteness was invested with privileges and rights that were being strenuously restricted.

The difficulty experienced by South Asians in obtaining a functional, “official” racial identity in the US so that they might exercise the right to vote or the liberty of owning property, highlights not only the inherent absurdity of racial classification, particularly its scientific pretenses, but also the racism institutionalized in the state and its civic structures. For example, immigrants from the subcontinent of “India” were initially classified by the US government as “other” (i.e., neither Black nor White), and therefore ineligible for citizenship. Then they were re-categorized as “Hindoos,” despite the fact that most early South Asian migrants to the US were Sikhs (Jensen 1988).

South Asians were relative latecomers to the US in comparison to other Asian groups. In South Africa, they had a relatively large presence, especially in Natal, from the 1860s onwards. In the United States, South Asians did not register as demographically significant until the 1960s. Nevertheless, the few that were present in the US from the 1890s onwards had to negotiate the ideology and practice of White supremacy. They learned that Whiteness determined eligibility for US citizenship and one’s place in American society (Khare 1997; Immerwahr 2007).

Census Year	Census Classification
1910	Other/Non-White Asiatic/Hindu
1920	Other/Hindu
1930	Hindu
1940	Hindu
1950	Other/Non-White/Asiatic Indian
1960	Other/Non-White/Hindu
1970	Other/White*
1980	Asian Indian
1990	Asian or Pacific Islander/Asian Indian
2000	Asian Indian

**Table 6. 1:** Racial Classification of South Asians in the US Census, 1910-2000.  
**Source:** US Bureau of Census, various dates

As noted above, South Asians were subjected to multiple classifications by the US Census bureau. Table 6.1 shows that they were initially classified as ‘Other/non-White Asiatic’ after their first census count in 1910, with the convoluted explanation that although “pure-blood Hindus belong ethnically to the Caucasian or White race and in several instances have been officially declared to be White by the United States courts in naturalization proceedings,” nevertheless, “in view of the fact that the Hindus, whether pure-blood or not, represent a civilization distinctly different from that of Europe, it was thought proper to classify them non-white Asiatics” (Prewitt 2004). In 1920, they were re-classified as “other” and this time, specifically with a non-white Asiatic designation. In



the 1930 and 1940 censuses, their race was assigned as “Hindu” (although “Hindu” denotes a religion). The number of South Asians in the US dropped significantly in the aftermath of the *Thind v. United States* decision by the Supreme Court in 1923, and other nativist legislation. The 1940 Census also shows that the majority of South Asians were older, illiterate, and worked as laborers.<sup>3</sup> Takaki (1998:314) shows that the Asian Indian educational level in the pre-1940 period was among the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups in America.

Due to their dwindling numbers, South Asians were no longer classified separately as “Hindu” in the 1950 census, but were included in the category of “other Asian groups,” which included Thai, Burmese, Malay, etc. In the next census, counters were instructed to label South Asians as “non-White Asians.” Interestingly, South Asians were classified as ‘White’ by the Census Bureau in 1970, which had the consequence of denying them ‘minority’ status. The designation of ‘White’ made South Asians ineligible for affirmative action and other benefits stemming from just-passed civil rights legislation designed to address race-based disadvantage. South Asians have been classified as ‘Asian Indian’ from the 1980 census onwards<sup>4</sup> (US Department of Commerce, 2012; Morning, 2001).

The politics of racial classification, identification, and social positioning as it involved South Asians from the late 1800s through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is complex and contradictory. The South Asian struggle to gain citizenship rights, and to overcome civic

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of the Asian and South Asian population statistics and classifications, see “The Asian Population 2010: 2010 Census Briefs,” US Department of Commerce: US Census Bureau, March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> An important victory in the struggle for Asian-American recognition was a successful campaign to get the Census Bureau to permit people of Asian ancestry to identify themselves by national origin or subgroup rather than the broad category of Asian.

invisibility and inferiority, is best understood and interpreted in the context of identities imposed by the dominant White society, its attendant White supremacist ideology, as well as the reactions and strategic calculations of other marginalized groups, such as Blacks.

### **The Racialization of South Asians in the United States**

The racialization and disfranchisement of South-Asians in the US has its origins in the politics associated with Chinese migration to the US around the 1850s. According to Menon (2006:63),

not until the arrival of a significant number of Chinese in California in the early 1850s did the specter of the Orient as an inherently subversive realm inhabited by a racially distinct people enter the American popular imagination. Thus, while Europe's race-ing of the Orient coincided with its imperial ambitions, America's iteration of "Asiatic" racial difference emerged from the anxious identification of the Orient, in the figure of the Chinese immigrant, within the American nation.

The Chinese immigrant encounter with American ethno-racial politics has been important in shaping the South Asian experience in the US. Large-scale Chinese migration coincided with massive waves of migration from Europe. As a consequence, images of China in popular culture occupied a space ravaged by the Opium Wars and famine. The Chinese presence in the US also complicated the Black-White binary that the nation had settled into. The dualism of Black and White had defined socio-political, cultural, and economic relations within the US from colonial times to the Civil War (Chan 1991; Wu 2002).

As Chinese immigrants tried to stake out an economic niche and political space for themselves in the US, attacks upon them by Whites mounted, on the grounds that they

were an unassimilable “horde,” a “yellow peril.” The development of ethnic enclaves called “Chinatowns” further reinforced the stereotype of the Chinese as an alien racial group that was culturally distant from White America (Ong and Liu 1994; Palen 1987). In his analysis of a Chinatown in San Francisco, Shah (2001:25) illustrates how municipal authorities assumed that the “entire location had only one racial identity” despite the presence of several groups, such as Japanese, Koreans, etc., in the area. The municipality further perceived these areas to be centers of disease and filth. Antagonism toward the Chinese and hysteria over their increasing numbers led to a racist campaign against their presence in the US, culminating in the enactment of the Asian Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned Chinese immigration to the US.<sup>5</sup> Although there were occasionally some positive representations of the Chinese in the mainstream media, and Chinese merchants were allowed to participate in some cultural festivals in the San Francisco area in the early 1850s,

the Chinese were not seen as prospective Americans who could cultivate an affinity with the Euro-American sensibilities of the nation. Instead, more pertinently, these early images of the Chinese should be located in the discourses of the West that historically have narrated the Orient...Delineating a particular geographic and cultural terrain, American orientalism deployed China as a signifying trope that determined, by the early twentieth century, the undesirability of all Asian immigration (Menon 2006:65-66).

While the Exclusion Act of 1882 attempted to prevent Chinese migration, the demand for cheap labor continued to grow unabated, especially in the railroads, lumber industries, and agriculture. This time, these industries resorted to the recruitment of some 34,000 Japanese workers from Hawaii to the Pacific states at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chan

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<sup>5</sup> Sometimes this Act is referred to as the Chinese, rather than Asian Exclusion Act in the literature.

1991, Takaki 1993). These migrants were initially able to escape the negative repercussions of the “yellow peril” stereotype because their migration coincided with a passing American fascination with Japan, which had just opened up its doors to the outside world. Benfey (2003) shows that when Matthew Perry sailed to Japan in 1854, all things Japanese were in “tremendous vogue” in parts of the country, especially in New England. However, as the number of Japanese workers in the US increased, Whites again became anxious about another “Asian invasion”. The Asiatic Exclusion League was formed in 1905 in response to the influx of Japanese and Koreans in the US. Their vitriolic attacks on the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans were later extended to South Asians: “the brownish races are perhaps even more of a live wire than the yellow.”<sup>6</sup>

South Asians were steadily incorporated into the emerging narrative of the Oriental threat. In light of the history of racism shared by a variety of different Asian groups, analysis of Asian experiences in the US is often conducted under the pan-ethnic category of “Asian”. The term “Asian-American” is frequently used to capture their shared experiences as well as to describe the politics of various Asian groups in order to resist racism. Sau-ling Wong (1993: 5-6), a major proponent of the term, argues that it “expresses a political conviction and agenda,” particularly in showing how people of Asian descent “have been subjected to certain collective experiences that must be acknowledged and resisted.” In addition, at the political level, the category “Asian American” allows sub-groups that are numerically too small to effect changes in isolation, to have a louder collective voice and gain political leverage.

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<sup>6</sup> Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League, January 1908, p. 4.

The entry of immigrants of other races, such as Asians, or even the presence of hybrid identities of mixed race, for that matter, are regarded as anomalies for the “Black vs. White” model of race relations, and subvert the common understanding, scholarship, politics, and policy that have traditionally stemmed from that binary. Nevertheless, despite their inadequacies, old binaries of race are applied to new “others” through a process identified by Omi and Winant (1994) as *racialization*. Racialization extends racial meaning to a previously unclassified group, social practice, relationship, or situation. The effects of this process on Asians is to cast their racial identities, actions, and experiences as shades of “Black” or “White,” depending on the situation, and wedge them into a mediating position between those two dominant races. However, both processes – incorporation and racialization – obscure what Visweswaran (1997) terms “Asianization,” or the ways in which Asian groups become “Asian” as defined against, and in relation to, each other. In fact, racialization also obscures internal differentiation within racially homogenized identities, such as “Black.” The process of racialization has been able to evolve within each historical period, thus transmuting pre-existing concepts and practices into novel contemporary forms. Racialization also refers to the manner in which the visibility of race has become the primary identifier of difference in American society. Because of racialization, visually recognizable phenotypes become more important than other aspects of self-identification as the basis by which groups vie for resources, recognition, power, and social acceptance. As a result, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, etc. are of secondary importance in a society obsessed with racial appearance as the chief determinant of social position and advantage.

As a racialized category, the term “Asian” is ubiquitous although it is useful only in some contexts. While it embraces many identities, it universalizes the experiences of the dominant Asians groups while obscuring the particular differences of subordinate groups. Asians are not a group united by a common race, nationality, language, or religion. Latinos, for example, share the Spanish language, and Jews share a religion. There is no single attribute that unites Asians across internal lines of division. Consequently, the term “Asian” does not correctly identify or describe the groups it intends to name; nor does it lend itself to accurate comparisons with other racial groups who also live with constructed identities, such as Blacks. Nevertheless, regarding “Asians” collectively as a single group has proven both convenient and indispensable to all Americans, including Asians themselves, for a variety of reasons. Such identifiers offer different kinds of political leverage within the United States, depending on the situation. On one hand, they are used as functional categories by all those, including the government, who want a quick, easy grasp of racial identities that are neither White nor Black, for population sorting or resource allocation purposes. On the other hand, in spite of its problems, widespread use of the term “Asian” by non-Asians has led Asians themselves to appropriate the label and transmute it into a focal point of resistance, in much the same way that African Americans have done with “Blackness.” Thus, “Asian” has become an organizing tool that connects the different Asian ethnicities and races who share the common experience of racism and exclusion within the American racial formation. However, as I have argued in Chapter 2, all identity formations, like nationalisms, are historically created and characterized by contradiction.

The category “Asian American” subsumes the identities of at least 25 different national groups under a single category. While this may be necessary for reasons argued above, there has been a tense and uneasy relationship between South Asians and other Asians as they contest the terms of pan-ethnic Asian-American identity. For example, Singh (1993), in the collection *Our Feet Walk the Sky*, argues that South Asians are the least studied people of Asian origin in the US, overlooked by historians and social scientists as well as by scholars of ethnic and women’s studies.<sup>7</sup> One reason for this oversight is the smaller number of South Asians in the US in comparison to other Asian groups, but more importantly, it is also because of disputes over the racial status and classification of “Asian” as discussed above. Thus, while the pan-ethnic label of “Asian-American” may be a useful tool for political mobilization, it sometimes has obscured the peculiarities and contingencies of Asianization, which refers to how different Asian groups have negotiated, amongst themselves, their place in the American racial hierarchy, in the context of competition for resources and power. Thus, the category “South Asian” emerges as an identifier and descriptive tool in response to Asianization. It aims to capture the shared experiences of peoples from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and other parts of the so-called “Indian” diaspora, although it, too, is of a moment. “South Asian,” like “Indian,” embodies the potential and limitations of arbitrarily arrested meanings of human identity, such as obscuring the particularities of constituent groups in order to unite them under one label. The fact that it is used electively by those who wish to foray beyond the narrow, racial, definition imposed by the term “Indian”

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<sup>7</sup> While there have been more works on South Asians in the United States since this anthology was published, the South Asian experience still remains a marginal concern within the disciplines of Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies. For example, the omission of South Asians, except for one short article, is glaring in a recently published critical reader on the state of Asian American studies, titled *Asian-American Studies Now* (2011). The 654 page anthology, containing 31 chapters in all, spans a wide variety topics pertaining to the Asian experience in the US. The piece on South Asians locates them within the discourse of terrorism after 9/11.

endows the identifier “South Asian” with some agency to resist and even intervene into the process of racialization. Nevertheless, “South” Asians are still negotiating the partial inclusion and/or exclusion in the face of Asianization. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of “Indian,” “South Asian,” and “Asian” as racial identifiers.

### **South Asian Exclusion in the United States**

There is a small but growing body of evidence that some South Asians may have been transported to the Americas as part of the Indian Ocean slave trade in the 1600s and 1700s, alongside the importation of South Asian slaves to South Africa (discussed in chapter 3). Ships and merchant seamen, who were part of the Dutch East India Company, traveled to the eastern seaboard of North America with some South Asian slaves who subsequently were absorbed into the African slave population. Lal (2008: 13-14) cites advertisements for runaway slaves in Virginia newspapers from the 1700s that support the presence of a few South Asian slaves in colonial America. For example, an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette of Williamsburg* (August 4, 1768) describes the identity of a runaway slave as an “East Indian... named Thomas Greenwich” (cited from Lal 2008: 13-14). However, much more historical work and evidence is needed on the number of South Asian slaves in colonial America, how they assimilated into existing slave societies, etc. On the other hand, Indian slaves brought to South Africa by the Dutch East India Company had assimilated into the “Malay” and/or “African” population in the Cape region. While this parallel lies beyond the scope of the dissertation, I mention it here to note that there is some historical evidence that South Asians may have been



present in both South Africa and the United States much earlier than commonly supposed.

The South Asian presence in the Americas, as in South Africa, increased dramatically after the institutionalization of the indentured labor system that followed the demise of slavery (Tinker, 1974). However, very few Indians migrated voluntarily to the United States at this time. The United States relied predominantly on African slavery to meet its labor needs and did not participate in the British indentured labor system that brought thousands of Indian indentured laborers to the Caribbean and parts South America. However, the US did turn to Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino labor to meet its labor shortages on the West Coast and in Hawaii, particularly on sugar plantations and the railroads (Takaki 1998).

South Asians were a relatively small presence in the United States up to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In one of the first records of South Asians in colonial North America, William Bentley (1905:228), a Unitarian clergyman from Salem, Massachusetts noted in his diary in 1790 that he:

Had the pleasure of seeing for the first time a native of the Indies from Madras. He is of very dark complexion, long black hair, soft countenance, tall and well proportioned. He is said to be darker than Indians in general of his own cast, being much darker than any native Indians of America. I had no opportunity to judge his abilities, but his countenance was not expressive. He came to Salem with Capt. J. Gibaut, and has been in Europe.

One can surmise from the entry that the “Indian” was most probably a “lascar” (a Portuguese term to denote a South Asian sailor who accompanied his master on a long

sea journey).<sup>8</sup> Gibaut, mentioned in Bentley's entry, was employed as a captain on one of the ships of Elias Hasket Derby, a wealthy merchant from Salem, Massachusetts.

American ships, including ships owned by Derby, were venturing into the Indian Ocean by the late 1700s in order to trade with India and China. The "Indian" recorded by Bentley must have come to the US on one of these ships. The entry, however, offers no insight into the "Indian's" personal circumstances, reasons for his presence in Salem, or other biographical details. There is no historical record of sustained migration of South Asians to Salem or elsewhere in the United States during this time. South Asians were not yet perceived as a threat and there was no known hostility toward their small number in New England at the time. Instead, they were viewed with exotic curiosity. A few South Asian merchants and traders began to appear in the US from the early 1800s onwards (Jensen 1988). India came to be represented as a place of ancient wisdom in the writings of American literary figures, particularly in the works of Transcendentalist authors such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Swami Vivekananda, the renowned Hindu mystic, was invited to lecture on Vedantic philosophy at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago. Vivekananda's visit garnered much enthusiasm amongst theosophists in the United States and Vedanta centers were subsequently established in San Francisco and New York City (Eck, 1993; Advaita Ashrama 1960).

Between 1820 and 1900, about 700 South Asians entered the United States, most of them Punjabi Sikhs. They settled in the west coast and worked as agricultural laborers. Their numbers began to increase at the turn of the century from about 300 between 1899

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<sup>8</sup> Lascars were not exactly enslaved nor indentured as contract laborers. They were sailors who "volunteered" to accompany and work for Europeans on sea voyages.

and 1903, to about 700 between 1904 and 1906. In 1907 and 1908 their numbers increased to just over 1000 per year. Except for a scattering of businessmen, the vast majority of these migrants were unskilled agricultural workers who came from the Punjab, Bengal, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh regions of India (Lal 2006). In spite of their ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, they were all categorized as ‘Hindoo’ or ‘Hindu’ at the time. Chapter 2 (theoretical chapter) noted that a racialized class-consciousness developed among European immigrants in the United States. Their “White” identity and solidarity emerged from and was built upon on the “othering” of Blacks, as Morgan (2003), Steinberg (1991), and others have argued. However, in addition to the Black-White binary, anti-Asian racism was also central to “White” consciousness and working-class politics in the post-Civil War period, especially in the Pacific north-west. Classifying and categorizing South Asians as “Hindoo” in the United States and Canada conjured up Orientalist images among White workers of South Asians as aliens, fixing them outside Western civilizational norms. Most South Asians belonged to religions that lay outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which was a binding cultural tie in the United States. This difference was a further barrier to political and cultural assimilation for South Asians in the United States. They remained outlandish “strangers” who sullied the cultural fabric of the nation and threatened the livelihoods of “Whites.”

Like East-Asians, South Asians experienced multiple forms of discrimination and xenophobia. They were frequently accused of depleting the job market, degrading jobs, and lowering wages. In 1908, they were forced to flee their homes after White residents in the Sacramento valley area of California rioted against the presence of “Hindoos” in the area. The Asiatic Exclusion League clearly stated that Whites found the “Hindoo”

immigrants the least satisfactory: “From every part of the Coast complaints are made of the undesirability of the Hindoos, their lack of cleanliness, disregard of sanitary laws, petty pilfering, especially of chickens, and insolence to women.”<sup>9</sup> The United States Immigration Commission’s report echoed the motivation for increasing hostility toward the “Hindoos,” as expressed by the Asiatic Exclusion League: “The East Indians are regarded as the least desirable of all races. There is a strong local prejudice against them because of their dress, color, filthy habits, taboo of articles of food not prepared by themselves, and the primitive method of living.”<sup>10</sup>

An inhospitable environment in Canada and demand for labor in California served to increase South Asian immigration into the American west coast from 1906 onwards. South Asians began to encounter hostilities similar to those experienced by Chinese and Japanese immigrants (Chang, 2009). One of the first instances of violence against South Asians occurred in the summer of 1907, when they were attacked and driven out of the town of Bellingham, Washington, by White saw-mill workers. A number of South Asians, mainly Punjabi Sikh workers, had migrated from Vancouver, Canada, in search of higher wages as offered by the lumber mills in the Bellingham region. However, White workers in the area grew increasingly resentful of the newcomers, accusing them of depressing wages and appropriating jobs. A local Bellingham newspaper dubbed the area “a Hindu Colony” and warned that

unless drastic measures are soon taken to suppress the Hindu colony of South Bellingham there is danger that the indignant citizens of that portion of the city will rise up and deal with the brown intruders in their own way. The Hindu colony

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<sup>9</sup> Asiatic Exclusion League, *Proceedings*, February 16, 1908, pp. 8-10.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Immigration Commission, *Immigrants in Industry*, II, p.198.

has assumed such proportions as to become a menace, and the people are anxious that something be done to bring about change.”<sup>11</sup>

These antagonisms developed into an attack on September 4, 1907 when a mob of White men beat two Indian workers. Subsequently, four to five hundred White workers began to assault South Asians over two days, driving them from the town. White workers targeted South Asians at the workplace during the day, and White mobs, under the cover of darkness, went to a boarding house where many of the South Asian workers lived, smashed windows, battered the shocked residents, and drove them away from the area. *The New York Times* reported,

Six badly beaten Hindus are in the hospital, 400 frightened and half-naked Sikhs are in jail and in the corridors of the City Hall, guarded by policemen, and somewhere between Bellingham and the British Columbia line are 750 other natives of India, beaten, hungry and half-clothed, making their way along the Great Northern Railway to Canadian territory and the protection of the British flag. The long-expected cry, “Drive out the Hindus,” was heard throughout the city and along the waterfront last night. The police were helpless. All authority was paralyzed, and for five hours a mob of half a thousand white men raided the mills where the foreigners were working, battered down doors of lodging houses, and, dragging the Asiatics from their beds, escorted them to the city limits with orders to keep going.<sup>12</sup>

Although city officials and the local press expressed concern over the violence and the hooliganism that accompanied it, they nevertheless sympathized with the White workers’ concerns over the “unassimilable” migrants entering the workforce. Erika Lee<sup>13</sup> tries to explain the perspective of the White workers coming to Bellingham from the East coast:

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<sup>11</sup> *Bellingham Herald*, September 21, 1907

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, “Mob Drives Out Hindus” Sep 6, 1907, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from *The Bellingham Herald*, “1907 Bellingham Mob Forced East Indian Workers From Town” September 2, 2007. Available at <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2007/09/02/170095/1907-bellingham-mob-forced-east...> last accessed 5/18/2012

they had “felt a sense of privilege coming to the West. This was part of their pioneer journey; they were coming to make it... They were horrified at the idea of these jobs going to unassimilable, really foreign, exotic people.” A local newspaper condemned the violence:

there is but one view to take of the anti-Hindu riots in Bellingham last night. No amount of specious argument will justify the acts of the mobs. They played the part of lawless citizens and should be dealt with accordingly – should have been dealt with accordingly last night and doubtless would have been had the police force been strong enough to rise to the occasion.... Punishment should be sharp and sure...

However, the same editorial went on to state that

The Hindu is not a good citizen. It would require centuries to assimilate him, and this country need not take the trouble. Our racial burdens are already heavy enough to bear. ...Our cloak of brotherly love is not large enough to include him as a member of the body politic. His ways are not our ways; he is not adaptable, and will not in many generations make a good American citizen. Moreover he is not even a good workman...<sup>14</sup>

Within a decade of the Bellingham riots, the United States government passed a series of legal measures that barred all Asians from citizenship and immigration to the US, an action which symbolically reaffirmed the physical violence of Bellingham. Despite the discriminatory practices and restrictions against Asian immigrants at the time, a few hundred Japanese and South Asians did become naturalized in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In 1910, about 1782 Indian migrants came into California, the largest annual total migration from India to date (Bhardwaj and Rao 1990). The popular press reported that

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<sup>14</sup> Editorial, “A Public Disgrace” *Bellingham Herald*, September 5, 1907, p. 4

the area was experiencing a “Hindu invasion” and a “tide of turbans.” H.A. Millis, a chief investigator of the Immigration Commission on the Pacific coast published a report that year stating that the South Asians were the most undesirable of all the Asiatic peoples and called for measures to exclude them (Hess 1969). In response to increased South Asian immigration, the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League changed its name to the Asiatic Exclusion League (Hess 1969; Jensen 1988). *The Overland*, a nativist West-coast publication, warned Americans that they faced an influx of “Hindoos” whose “religious” book, “The Vedas,” apparently compelled “Hindoos” to “cover the Earth.” The Asiatic Exclusion League blamed the “Hindoos” for the Bellingham “riots,” claiming that the Hindoos’ willingness to work for low wages and their “filthy and immodest habits” led to the conflict.<sup>15</sup> The League even initiated a campaign to remove the Immigration Commissioner, Hart H. North of San Francisco, alleging that he was supportive of “Hindu migration,” which allowed South Asians with communicable diseases into the country. As part of their campaign against North, the League made repeated appeals to the General Commissions of Immigration to dismiss North. The League also launched a petition campaign in California, and gathered about 1,800 signatures that were presented to President Taft. North eventually resigned as a consequence of this pressure and the League proudly proclaimed victory in 1911 and boasted that “Hindu immigration had become negligible” thanks to its efforts.<sup>16</sup>

In an attempt to garner support for excluding South Asians, the Asiatic Exclusion League exaggerated the number of South Asians in California. The League purported that

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<sup>15</sup> Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League, September 1908, pp. 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League, January 1910, pp. 5-11.

there were more than 10,000 Hindus in California alone although the total for all of the Pacific states, combined, was less than 6,000. The League demanded action from the federal government to deal with “this menace,” using the same term used by Whites in South Africa to describe the Indian presence in Natal.

California representative Denver S. Church, together with Senator Ellison D. Smith, led an intense and vitriolic campaign to exclude South Asians from the United States by introducing a number of federal legal measures. In August 1914, Church claimed in a statement to the House of Representatives that a “large per-cent” of India’s 350,000,000 people were clamoring to bring their “superstitious and backward” culture to America. Church offered an account of the morally repugnant ways of the “Hindoos” as he saw them:

Heretofore the most terrible of all the Hindu gods was the crocodile and in order to appease the wrath of these scaly and saw-toothed monsters, loving but superstitious mothers cast from the banks of the Ganges their helpless offspring into the crocodile’s mouth.... With these ideals in mind, it is plain the ideals of the Hindu will not fit the notions of the West.<sup>17</sup>

By February 1917, Church had accomplished his goal when Congress passed the Page Law, its most restrictive immigration law to date,<sup>18</sup> over President Woodrow Wilson’s veto. The new law established a “barred zone” which prohibited the immigration of laborers from all of Asia except Japan (Bosniak, 2008; Ngai 2004).

Subsequent racial coding of Asians in the United States followed from a peculiar geography. For example, defining the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” within the 1917

<sup>17</sup> Congressional Record, 63<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> session (1914), Appendix pp. 842-845

<sup>18</sup> The Page Law contained a literacy requirement for admission to the US, modeled after the literacy requirements of the immigration laws of Natal, South Africa (discussed in Chapter3).



Immigration Act necessitated that the boundaries of "Asia" be demarcated in accordance with nativist sentiments against particular Asian groups. The coordinates that set the Barred Zone apart included points as far south as the Red Sea, moving north through the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, across the Black Sea, east through the Caucasus mountains and the Caspian Sea, and finally north along the Ural River and the Ural mountains. This outline coincided roughly with the 160th meridian east of Greenwich, and everything in Asia to the west of it, except Japan, was "barred". This conjured cartography then became the basis by which Asians were denied immigration into the US.

### **The South Asian Struggle to Belong**

South Asians increasingly had to negotiate a complex, racialized, and Asianized environment that imposed various obstacles to migration, citizenship, and rights. Initially, in a strategy mirroring Gandhi's appeal on behalf of South African Indians for rights as subjects of the British empire, South Asians in the US believed that they were eligible for US citizenship under an 1870 reciprocity agreement between Great Britain and the United States, which allowed British citizens to naturalize in the United States. However, Charles Bonaparte, the US attorney general, made eligibility for US citizenship explicitly racial in 1907, stating that "under no construction of the law can natives of British India be regarded as White persons" (cited from Ngai 2004: 41). Thus thwarted, South Asians watched with interest when the Japanese businessman Takao Ozawa filed for citizenship in 1922 on the claim that he had assimilated into American society and culture, and therefore, could be considered "White." Although he was of Japanese descent, Ozawa

claimed, “his skin was whiter than white,”<sup>19</sup> and petitioned the Supreme Court for citizenship on the further grounds of assimilability. He had emigrated to the US from Japan as a child in 1894, graduated from high school in Berkeley, California, and earned a degree from the University of California, Berkeley, he explained, and spoke English fluently. He summarized in his legal brief: “In name, General Benedict Arnold was an American, but at heart he was a traitor. In name, I am not an American, but at heart I am a true American.”<sup>20</sup>

The Supreme Court denied Ozawa’s claim to citizenship by arguing that he was not “White” within the statutory meaning of the term. “White” does not refer merely to skin color but to “Caucasian origins,” proclaimed the Court. Justice Sutherland wrote the majority opinion as follows:

The appellant, in the case now under consideration, however, is clearly of a race which is not Caucasian and therefore belongs entirely outside the zone on the negative side. A large number of the federal and state courts have so decided and we find no reported case definitely to the contrary. These decisions are sustained by numerous scientific authorities, which we do not deem it necessary to review. We think these decisions are right and so hold.<sup>21</sup>

In this ruling, the Court tried to circumscribe the meaning of “Whiteness” by interpreting it geographically as Caucasian, as it had done with “Blackness” by locating it in Africa. The indeterminacy of identity stemming from the pseudo-science of race within anthropology initially lent itself to an ambiguous posturing by the state in dealing with

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<sup>19</sup> Cited from “Race: The Power of an Illusion” episode 3, California Newsreel, transcript available at <http://newsreel.org/transcripts/race3.htm> last accessed on April 14, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Cited from “Race: The Power of an Illusion” episode 3, California Newsreel, Transcript available at <http://newsreel.org/transcripts/race3.htm> last accessed on April 14, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> See *Takao Ozawa v. United States*, 260 US 178 (1922) accessed from <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=260&invol=178> Last accessed on August 30, 2012

South Asian demands for citizenship. However, as South Asians attempted to claim entitlement based on an identity derived from this very pseudo-science, the Supreme Court moved to fix racial meanings geographically and visually, as understood by the “average man,” itself an identity left undefined by the state, but understood to be “White.” This process is described below.

Identifying a gap in the *Ozawa* ruling, a South Asian, Bhagat Singh Thind, petitioned for citizenship on the argument that his “Aryan” and “Caucasian” roots entitled him to it. Citing contemporary studies in anthropology, particularly the sub-field of racial science that was popular at the time, Thind contended that Indians are classified as Caucasians by anthropologists, along with the English and Germans. Indians, he argued, were a “tall, long-headed race with distinct European features, and their color on the average is not as dark as the Portuguese or Spanish and is lighter than the Moor.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Thind tried to demonstrate his allegiance and patriotism to the United States, citing the fact that he had enlisted in the US army and fought in World War I; in fact, he wrote his legal brief for citizenship from Camp Lewis, Washington, where he was serving. The basis of Thind’s appeal, on service rendered to the country or to the empire, is similar to that of Gandhi on behalf of Indians in South Africa, (see chapter 4) and W.E.B. Du Bois on behalf of African Americans during World War I. However, Thind faced the same legal fate as *Ozawa*. This time, the Supreme Court settled the issue of South Asian identity and citizenship in a tautological ruling that fixed the meaning of “White,” not only geographically and visually, but also as apparent to the “average man”:

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<sup>22</sup> Cited from Naturalization Petition File No. 2270-P-250957 Bhagat Singh Thind, accessed from [http://www.bhagatsinghthind.com/Additional\\_NS\\_files/nat09271935\\_petfile.pdf](http://www.bhagatsinghthind.com/Additional_NS_files/nat09271935_petfile.pdf)  
Last accessed August 30, 2012

They [Thind and associates] imply, as we have said, a racial test; but the term 'race' is one which, for the practical purposes of the statute, must be applied to a group of living persons now possessing in common the requisite characteristics, not to groups of persons who are supposed to be or really are descended from some remote, common ancestor, but who, whether they both resemble him to a greater or less extent, have, at any rate, ceased altogether to resemble one another. It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today; and it is not impossible, if that common ancestor could be materialized in the flesh, we should discover that he was himself sufficiently differentiated from both of his descendants to preclude his racial classification with either.<sup>23</sup>

Thind's argument for citizenship based on "Whiteness" has been taken by some observers to represent the collective South Asian view on race. The *Thind* case, for them, stands for South Asians' desire to adopt a "White" identity and hence also their rejection of a "Black" identity, which in turn means a denial of their own status as people of color in the US. For Sucheta Mazumdar (1989) South Asians' claim to Whiteness in citizenship and naturalization cases in the early part of the twentieth century is proof of racist attitudes and prejudices among South Asians, a sign that they subscribe to theories of Aryan racial superiority. "They are themselves acutely color conscious," Mazumdar (1989:25) contends; "they see shades of brown in skin color which to any *casual observer [italics mine]* is black." Upholding the White gaze of the "average man" invoked by the Supreme Court in the *Thind* case, Mazumdar makes further generalizations and comparisons: "Above all, they demonstrate color-prejudice, which has been compared to that of white South Africans." While some South Asians undoubtedly do harbor prejudicial attitudes towards other groups, Mazumdar's casual observations de-contextualize and de-historicize the choices made by various South

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<sup>23</sup> US Supreme Court Decision: *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 US 204 (1923), no. 202. Argued January 11, 12 1923, decided February 19, 1923. Available at <http://www.bhagatsinghind.com/Findlaw.html>  
Last accessed 4/14/2012.

Asians at different times in their struggle for rights, recognition, and citizenship in American society, in the context of their prior exclusion as South Asians, who are neither Black nor White, but who nevertheless had to prove that they could fit into the rigid Black-White racial binary. Mazumdar thus fails to note the significance of *Thind*, a landmark battle over citizenship that resulted in a victory for the racist state, on one hand, and a defeat for South Asians, on the other hand, as the Supreme Court proceeded to legally exclude South Asians on the basis of an apparently “clarified” definition of race while closing other rhetorical routes to American citizenship by upholding an oppressive racial binary.

Koshy (1998: 286) finds Mazumdar’s racial narrative problematic because “South Asians have never been classified as ‘white’ except once in 1970.” When South Asians embraced an Asian-American identity, they “were not claiming a new identity,” according to Koshy, “but reclaiming an old one as Americans of Asian origin” (Koshy 1998: 286). Many immigrant groups (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Hawaiian, etc.) attempted to naturalize as Whites; this legal strategy was not unique to South Asians. Furthermore, no other course was open to them. There was no national policy on immigration before the Civil War. Individual states often changed the language of citizenship to suit their purposes, using terms such as “Christian,” “citizen,” and “White” interchangeably. There was some federal regulation governing the deportation of “dangerous aliens,” but for the most part, individual states could recruit overseas labor and dispense with it as they saw fit, without federal oversight.

With the increase of Chinese immigration, race began to take center stage with respect to immigration and naturalization policies. The Naturalization Law of 1790 restricted citizenship through naturalization to Whites only. The law was amended after the Civil War to include “aliens of African nativity or persons of African descent.” Asians were not permitted to naturalize under this provision because they were neither “Black,” nor did they geographically originate in Africa. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 went further to deny naturalization to the Chinese as Chinese (Ngai 2004). Henry George, reflecting on the Act in his book *Progress and Poverty* (1879), argued that “Blacks when brought to this country were ‘simple barbarians with nothing to unlearn’; they were ‘docile’ and capable of accepting White ways. But the Chinese immigrants could not be ‘assimilated.’ They had ‘habits of thought rendered permanent by being stamped upon countless generations.’...” (cited from Takaki 1989: 109). This left the Chinese and other Asians no recourse for naturalization except to argue that they were “White” in some way, through provisions that existed within individual states that had not yet clearly defined “White” or limited its meaning.

Denied citizenship rights, Asian immigrants were relegated to a marginal civic and political status in American society. While they may not have experienced the civic death of slavery, Asians were condemned to civic invisibility. They were unable to leave or re-enter the United States, unable to purchase or own property as a consequence of various alien land acts. In his study, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Haney-Lopez (1996) demonstrates that petitioners for citizenship and naturalization from the 1800s to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century could only naturalize by proving that they were “White.” Thus, applicants from Syria, Burma, the Philippines, China, or India had no

choice but to pursue the single channel toward citizenship that appeared open. The other possibility within the American racial binary, proving a “Black” and “African” origin, was already closed to them. Proving Whiteness also forced petitioners to disavow their “Asian-ness” and their similarity with other non-white groups (Koshy 1998). The law effectively said that Whites could be citizens because they were White, and Blacks could be citizens because they were Black. Asians, it turned out, could become citizens neither as themselves, nor as Blacks or Whites. Such encounters with American constitutional law not only set the tone for future pan-ethnic politics by people of color, but at times, even thwarted coalitions for joint struggle by upholding the dominant racial binary and locating Asians outside of it.

As noted above, Asians could not pursue the option of contending that they were Black, because Black was geographically defined as African. On the other hand, the term “White” lacked geographic specificity in the law. As Haney-Lopez (1996:52) notes,

the existence of more firmly established racial definitions of who was Black may also have obviated the need for new litigation. The legal definition of Blacks, unlike that of Whites, was already well established at the turn of the century.

Therefore, *Thind* was as catastrophic for South Asians as the *Dred Scott* decision of 1856 was for African-Americans. Both rulings resulted in disfranchisement and had far-reaching legal and social consequences. Applied retroactively, any South Asian who had been naturalized before the *Thind* decision was stripped of his/her citizenship and property and reduced to a *persona non grata* virtually overnight. One South Asian immigrant, Vishno das Bagai, committed suicide leaving a note stating “but now they come and say to me I am no longer an American citizen. What have I made of myself and

my children? We cannot exercise our rights, we cannot leave this country. Humiliation and insults...blockade this way, and bridges burned behind.”<sup>24</sup>

Congress capitalized on the Supreme Court’s rulings in the *Ozawa* and *Thind* cases to arrest Asian immigration with the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which halted the immigration of Chinese, Japanese, Indians and other Asians to the US on the basis that they would not be eligible for naturalization as per the *Ozawa* and *Thind* decisions. Thus, the law formally and officially applied race and ethnicity to immigration policy, placing strict limits on numbers and ranking immigrants explicitly in terms of their racial “desirability” for admission into the US (Ngai 2004; Bosniak 2008). A quota system was instituted, based on race and geographic origin, and overtly favoring northern Europeans. As a consequence, from *Thind* until the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, there was virtually no South Asian migration to the US. The South Asian presence in the United States, however, continued in the form of ideas, exerting influence on American thought, particularly with respect to civil resistance, recognition, rights, and the politics of nationhood. This relationship is explored in the next section.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF AN AMERICAN SATYAGRAHA**

South Asians constituted a small presence in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but ideas and political strategies originating in India and the Indian diaspora had a great impact on the United States. The struggles for Indian independence and social

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<sup>24</sup> Cited from “Race – The Power of an Illusion” episode 3, The House We Live In” available at <http://newsreel.org/transcripts/race3.htm> last accessed 4/12/2012



movements for citizenship among South Asians in the diaspora, particularly in South Africa, informed the Civil Rights Movement in the US. There is a long history of South Asian solidarity with and ideological influence over African Americans' opposition to White supremacy and segregation. Billy O. Wireman<sup>25</sup> recalled meeting Martin Luther King Sr., the father of the civil rights leader, in Atlanta, Georgia in the 1970s. Wireman asked King, Sr., "In his childhood, did you see any evidence that your son, Martin, would achieve such distinction?" King Sr. apparently replied, "Heavens, no. He drifted until he connected Christianity to Gandhi."<sup>26</sup> While King's intellectual and political development as a civil rights leader was surely more complex than his father's humble assessment, the remark, nevertheless, refers to the vital role played by Gandhi on King's transformation and in shaping the ideological foundation of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement's embrace of nonviolent non-cooperation occurred neither accidentally nor in isolation from world events. In reality, the strategy had been steeping in the minds of African-American thinkers for over half a century as they participated in transnational exchanges with South Asian, African, and other activists who were fighting against imperial domination and racism. Thus, while the civil rights movement has a basis in African American political thought and practice, it is also the product of transnational dialogues and influences, as the present section will show.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, South Asians and African Americans had begun to exchange ideas on resistance and learn from each other's struggles for civil rights and

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<sup>25</sup> Billy O. Wireman was the former President of Queens of College (now Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina). He chaired the White House Task Force on Youth for Florida in the 1970s.

<sup>26</sup> Address by Billy O. Wireman (1998) "Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi: God's Co-Workers for Justice" delivered to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration at Belk Chapel, Queens College, Charlotte, NC, January 19, 1998, from *Vital Speeches of the Day*, vol. 64 (10), pp. 316-317.

social justice. The transnational synergy of the period led to mutual cross-examination, the exchange of pledges of sympathy and solidarity in struggle, as well as the personal and mass meetings of activists and intellectuals. A cross-fertilization of ideas and strategies of resistance ensued across national borders as the result of the unprecedented ways in which people, information, and goods were circulating around the globe in modern times. Indian and African cultures were thrown together in different geographical contexts and encountered one another in myriad ways, which has been the theme of this dissertation. These cultures collided at times, creating instances of conflict, as seen in the previous chapter during the 1949 Riots in South Africa, but they also produced spaces of exchange, collaboration, and alliance in dealing with common experiences of oppression.

A belief in internationalism and cooperation among peoples of color worldwide was evident in Black political resistance in the United States from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onward (Von Eschen 1997; Rahier *et al* 2010; West *et al* 2009). In his famous appeal, David Walker<sup>27</sup> identified a need for global solidarity against racism. Gayle Tate (2003, 2006) shows how Black women abolitionists developed transnational networks in their fight against slavery in the US. Emerging transnational solidarity between Blacks and South Asians began to materialize into concrete forms of resistance in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this section, I focus on South Asian influences on African-American social movements through the lenses of activism, political ideas, and methods of resistance. Specifically, the section explores three areas through those lenses: South Asian student activism in the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the idea of

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<sup>27</sup> Walker was an African-American abolitionist. His *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, published in 1829 was a call for a united Black uprising against slavery and self-help. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2931.html> last accessed August 30, 2012

African-Indian solidarity among leading Black political figures W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Martin Luther King, Jr; and the influence of Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian independence movement on African-American movements for civil rights in the United States.

### **Transnational Dialogues**

Some of the early foundations for transnational exchange between South Asian and African-American activists were laid by a South Asian student movement called the Ghadar Party. Har Dayal, a student at the University of California-Berkeley campus, formed the party in 1913, taking its name, *ghadar*, from Punjabi for “mutiny” or “uprising”. Most of Ghadar’s members were middle-class students with family in India. Others were farm workers employed on California’s plantations at the time (see previous section on history of Indian migration), who supported the movement through donations and subscriptions. The Ghadar Party was linked to militant nationalist movements in India that were fighting for independence from British rule. The students of the movement tried to draw parallels between racism in the US and colonialism in India (Jensen 1988). For example, when British colonial authorities attempted to rationalize colonialism in India on paternalistic grounds, that colonialism was necessary to help the apparently backward and superstitious people of India, Har Dayal responded that such statements were similar to the US justification of slavery and other forms of mistreatment of African-Americans. In addition to his involvement with the Ghadar Party, Har Dayal served as secretary of the San Francisco branch of a union called Industrial Workers of

the World which, contrary to the norm of segregated unions at the time, allowed Blacks to join its ranks (Brown, 1975).

Ram Chandra, another leading member of the Ghadar party and editor of *The Hindustan Ghadar*, appealed to Americans for their support of the cause of Indian independence. In an editorial in 1918, Ram Chandra wrote that as it was “Lincoln, the sixteenth President who broke the shackles of the downtrodden race and set the Negro free,” the US ought to be sympathetic to the cause of Indian nationalism. “Does color or mere geographical position act as a barrier to justice?” he demanded (cited from Horne 2008:48). Chandra exhorted various segments of the Indian population to unite against British rule in India, on one hand, and appealed to American workers to set aside their racial differences and oppose their collective exploitation, on the other hand.

As the movement grew in strength, Britain became more concerned about its existence and influence on Indian nationalism. Likewise, US authorities were concerned about emerging alliances between Black and Indian radical movements. A report from the US Office of Naval Intelligence in San Francisco in 1921 claimed that

The racial hatred of the black race against the white is rather universal even though it does get very little chance to express itself; and probably the depression strengthens in a way the tension and scope of the hatred, although presumably only under cover. Furthermore, it communicates with “colored races” other than the black. The Japanese agents are playing an important part of the role, and evidently there are Hindus who are busily engaged in aiding the novel and disastrous propaganda. And, too, the ultra-socialistic doctrine enters into the actual work of the propaganda. The Informant met a certain Mr. Farr in a lunch place run by a Korean in San Francisco on Pacific Street near Kearney. This Farr person was evidently a rather well-educated Negro; he wore a yellow flannel shirt, which seems to suggest that he was in the US Army (many of them now wearing them by mere habit). Though he claimed to be a negro, his manner of talk, which had a little accent – not the Southern accent that is common to all

Negroes, but the accent similar to that of an American-educated Hindu. He is rather small but stout. His facial color and the shape and structure of his face is also more like a Hindu than an American negro. At the meeting, the Informant had a brief conversation with him.<sup>28</sup>

As another Naval Intelligence report from 1922 stated, “both the Hindu and the Negro preach among the Negroes, Hawaiians, Mexicans and Hindus, the doctrine of supposed necessity of the union of all colored races against the whites. And they also preach: ‘[A]ssert yourself, fellow brothers; hit the white man twice if he hits you.’” A detailed analysis of the Ghadar movement is beyond the scope of this thesis (See Brown 1975; Jensen 1988; and Ramnath 2005 for more detailed analysis on the party). However, my specific interest in mentioning Ghadar here is to note how it enabled the South Asian diaspora in the US to develop a political voice and how its anti-imperial stance created a platform for solidarity with other groups in the US, especially African Americans. In time, Ghadar came under the surveillance of the US government, a fate that befell many African-American movements as well, such as Marcus Garvey’s UNIA movement.<sup>29</sup>

Many African American intellectuals were part of the emerging discourse of international racial unity in challenging global White supremacy. A major pioneer of this idea in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois. A pioneer in encouraging global solidarities and networks in fighting racial domination in all its guises, Du Bois worked relentlessly, through numerous writings, speeches, and movements and conferences organized, to increase awareness of the “race problem” that

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<sup>28</sup> Weekly Report of J.J. Hannigan, Commandant, Twelfth Naval District, to the Director, Office of Naval Intelligence, San Francisco, December 3, 1921 in Robert Hill, *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 4, p. 233.

<sup>29</sup> From 1914 to mid-1916, the British government exerted pressure on the United States to suppress the Ghadar movement. Ghadar activists turned to Germany for support of their cause of Indian independence. During World War I, the US augmented its surveillance of Ghadar and suppressed the movement, arresting and deporting some of its leaders.

seemed to hold the world in its iron grip. He especially believed that unity between African Americans and South Asians in their struggles against racism and imperialism, respectively, would lead to the demise of White supremacy. In his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* (1968:47, first published in 1940), he recalls that that as early as 1893, while studying in Berlin, he

began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and the political development of Europe as one. I began to unite my economics and politics; but I still assumed that in these groups of activities and forces, the political realm was dominant.

The idea of racism as a global problem, the need for a pan-African awareness, and the necessity for global solidarity to overcome racism's legacy, lay at the center of Du Bois' vision of racial justice throughout his journey as an intellectual. At every turn in his long life, Du Bois recognized an opportunity for racial unity, even when others saw only futility. For example, he editorialized in *The Crisis* that "Considering the fact that black Africans and brown Indians and yellow Japanese are fighting for France and England it may be that they will come out of this frightful welter of blood with new ideas about the essential equality of all men."<sup>30</sup> World War I, for Du Bois, was a chance for peoples of color to make haste to cooperate amongst themselves to overthrow the Europeans, who were preoccupied with their own conflicts.

Even before World War I, Du Bois played a role in organizing the First Universal Races Congress (URC), which was held in London during the summer of 1910.

Organized by a number of trans-Atlantic pacifist humanitarian activists,<sup>31</sup> the URC was

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<sup>30</sup> "World War and the Color Line," *The Crisis*, vol. 9, no. 1, November 1914, p. 28

<sup>31</sup> The organizers included Felix von Luschen and Julius Ranke of Germany; Giuseppe Serge of Italy; Charles S. Myers, Lionel W. Lyde, and Alfred C. Haddon of England; W.E.B. DuBois, Franz Boas, and Paul Reinsch of the United States; Brajendranath Seal from India; Joao Baptiste de Lacerda from Brazil; Jean Finot from France.

the culmination of early 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to construct an international framework to address racial injustice and promote inter-racial tolerance across the globe. The Congress deliberated on the “problem of the contact of Europeans with other developed types of civilizations” and sought to improve relations “between the peoples of the West and those of the East, between so-called white and so-called colored peoples” for the purpose of achieving “a fuller understanding, the most friendly feelings, and a heartier co-operation.”<sup>32</sup> Although the conference drew participants from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe, DuBois noted the comparative lack of people of color overall, remarking that it was difficult to meet fellow African Americans there (Du Bois 2011). Nevertheless, he welcomed the opportunity to network with like-minded political activists from other parts of the world, and the few people of color who were present, such as the journalist and activist John Tengo Jabavu<sup>33</sup> from South Africa, and the Indian leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale<sup>34</sup>. Most importantly, however, Du Bois saw the conference as an important forum to promote the idea of pan-Africanism and his vision of internationalism as the means to address the racial divide in American society and elsewhere. African and Indian unity was a major part of the conference’s deliberations, and given his own emerging radicalism, Du Bois believed that an Indian-African alliance was the lever with which White supremacy could be toppled. These transnational encounters were important to Du Bois’ own political and intellectual evolution, as they challenged his American biases and

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<sup>32</sup> *First Universal Races Congress, University of London, July 26–29, 1911* (London: Watts, 1910), 16. Edited by G. Spiller

<sup>33</sup> Jabavu was an activist and editor of the newspaper *Isigidimi samaXhosa* (*The Xhosa Messenger*) in the Xhosa language of South Africa and the founder of *Imvo Zabantsundu* (*African Opinion*), another Xhosa newspaper.

<sup>34</sup> Gokhale was one of the founding leaders of the Indian Independence Movement and a mentor of Mohandas Gandhi. He served in a number of legislative bodies during the Raj. He promoted the twin goals of Indian independence and social reform, through non-violence.

parochialisms, and led him to think about racism in more global and radical terms as part of the larger problem of capitalist economic domination (Fletcher 2005).

News of the Universal Races Congress had reached Gandhi in South Africa, who in turn introduced Du Bois to the readership of his own newspaper, *The Indian Opinion*, which called Du Bois “the gifted author of ‘*The Souls of Black Folk*’” and went on to state that “everyone will rejoice that the negroes have so able and far-seeing a representative; his spirit is co-operation and conciliation” (cited from Nauriya 2006: 39). Gandhi impressed upon his readership to consider the similarities between the American and Indian struggles against racism. Likewise, Du Bois increasingly called on African Americans to draw inspiration from India’s struggle against British: “Here are hundreds of millions, ignorant and poverty-stricken almost beyond belief, and yet upheld by fine traditions of family, work and religion, who are seeking to gain control of their own lands and their own souls.”<sup>35</sup> Referring to Gandhi as “an exceptional soul,” in his mouthpiece, *The Crisis*, Du Bois examined for his American audience Gandhi’s strategies in challenging British rule in India, as well as Gandhi’s activism in South Africa.<sup>36</sup>

Du Bois’ passion for fostering transnational solidarity between Africans and Indians even extended into his imaginative works. As a self-identified “race-propagandist,” Du Bois believed in using media such as art and literature to advance the political aims of African-Americans. In order to promote the goal of racial unity among peoples of color, an idea that had been fermenting in his mind for decades, Du Bois wrote

<sup>35</sup> Cited from *The Crisis*, 23, January 1922. Available at [http://books.google.com/books?id=xsARAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA104&dq=%22seeking+to+gain+control+of+their+own+lands+and+the+ir+own+souls%22+and+du+bois&hl=en&sa=X&ei=jilGUq6JN-X\\_4APSGoGoCg&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22seeking%20to%20gain%20control%20of%20their%20own%20lands%20and%20their%20own%20souls%22%20and%20du%20bois&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=xsARAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA104&dq=%22seeking+to+gain+control+of+their+own+lands+and+the+ir+own+souls%22+and+du+bois&hl=en&sa=X&ei=jilGUq6JN-X_4APSGoGoCg&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22seeking%20to%20gain%20control%20of%20their%20own%20lands%20and%20their%20own%20souls%22%20and%20du%20bois&f=false) last accessed September 4, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Cited from “Gandhi and American Negroes” in D.L. Lewis (ed.) 1995, pp. 90-92.



a novel, *Dark Princess*, in 1928. The novel's plot revolves around Matthew Towns, a Black man from Virginia, and Kautilya, a woman from India, in whose hands lay the destiny of all peoples of color worldwide. Educated at the Hampton Institute, Towns is a prospective medical student who is denied admission into the school of his choice because of his race. Resentful of White supremacy, he leaves the US in frustration and goes to Germany, where he feels equally lost. One day, in Berlin, Matthew encounters an Indian woman trying to fend off a White man who was forcing himself upon her. Matthew gallantly comes to her rescue, and they immediately become friends. He learns that the woman, named Kautilya, is really an Indian princess who is secretly in Germany for the subversive purpose of representing a mysterious organization called the "Great Council of the Darker Peoples," which is plotting to overthrow White supremacy everywhere.

Given his own racial frustrations, Matthew's interest is piqued by Kautilya, but when he inquires about the future of his peoples, the Africans, as seen by the Great Council, he is disappointed to learn that there is great doubt within the Council about the ability of Africans to free themselves or to make a worthwhile contribution to the larger struggle. Kautilya, however, has other ideas. She is a radical socialist who believes in internationalism, not just for reasons of inter-racial solidarity, but also for resisting economic domination. She tells Matthew about a rumor circulating in Moscow that an uprising is being planned by some American Blacks against their White rulers. This news gives Matthew a renewed sense of purpose and he goes back to the US to see for himself his people's potential for revolution. Kautilya, on the other hand, feels compelled to

atone for the life of privilege she has led as a royal princess. As if to do penance, she makes her own way to America to perform the hard toil of the proletariat.

Back in New York, Matthew joins a Black radical nationalist group and meets its leader, Miguel Perigua, who strikes Matthew as an unctuous and self-indulgent manipulator of the masses. Unimpressed by Perigua, Matthew takes up work as a sleeping-car porter, a job that sensitizes him to the appalling working conditions of his fellow Black men. Suddenly, he is dragged into the vicissitudes of Black life when one of his co-workers is lynched after being mistaken for Matthew, and for allegedly for making advances toward a White woman. Enraged and confused, Matthew runs away and joins Perigua's plot to blow up a train that is rumored to be transporting a group of White supremacists to a Ku Klux Klan convention in Chicago. Just as Perigua and Towns are about to execute their plan, Kautilya appears unexpectedly to steer Matthew away from violence. Perigua, however, gets killed and the plot is discovered. Matthew, convicted of conspiracy to violence, faces ten years in prison.

However, to his surprise, Matthew gets pardoned almost immediately, thanks to arrangements made by Sammy Scott, a Black ward politician in Chicago. Matthew does not suspect Scott's ulterior motive to take advantage of his willingness to fight for his people, nor is Matthew aware of the real mastermind behind Scott, his wily secretary Sara Andrews. Deftly pulling the strings behind the scenes while demurely appearing to be Sammy's assistant, Sara sees an opportunity to turn Matthew into her own tool for shady business purposes. She gets Matthew, by now all too willing, elected to the Illinois state legislature, from where she can further manipulate him in order to advance her grand and

corrupt schemes. Matthew's relationship with Sara intensifies. They get married, but he is unhappy and has misgivings. Although Sara arranges for him to be nominated for Congress, Matthew is unsatisfied and feels conflicted by the turn his life has taken.

Kautilya suddenly reappears. She is now a union official after having worked many odd and menial jobs and organized fellow workers. Her return causes Matthew to reconsider the path he is on, and they confess their love for each other. The lovers part after their brief affair. Matthew now feels the need to seek atonement for his waywardness, and walks away from Sara and the corrupt political life she has to offer. He hopes to find solace in honest work, but finds that he is now scorned by the people of Chicago, who were once his constituency. He has no political influence left. He attempts to reconcile with Sara, at Kautilya's urging and out of loyalty to the marriage in principle, but he is rejected contemptuously by Sara which then leads to the termination of their marriage.

All the while, Kautilya has been living in Virginia with Matthew's mother from whom, in Matthew's absence, the dark princess receives tutelage in patience and fortitude. Matthew and Kautilya exchange letters, in which they share their views about the ideals of work, truth, beauty, and life. Finally, Matthew receives a call from Kautilya and he returns home, where he learns that he is the father of their newborn son. The infant is proclaimed by Kautilya's subjects in India and the friendly nations of the world as the new Maharajah of Bwodpur and savior of the Colored Peoples. Matthew also discovers that Black America is now represented in the Council of the Darker Races. The novel ends with Matthew and Kautilya marrying in a ceremony that invokes Judeo-

Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, all of which are observed by the Darker Peoples of the World. They live happily ever after.

Du Bois' advocacy for anti-racist propaganda often led him to lock horns with his intellectual contemporaries, most notably Alain Locke, who believed that art and aesthetics played and ought to play a more nuanced role in social transformation (Ramachandran, 2006). When it was published, *Dark Princess* received a lukewarm reception from literary critics, who felt that perhaps Du Bois' talents lay in areas other than in fiction (Rampersad 1990, 1979). Nevertheless, *Dark Princess*, a hopeful allegory of inter-racial romance and resistance, remained Du Bois' own favorite among his works.

Critics aside, Du Bois made no distinction between his art and his politics. His creative works were deeply influenced by political reality as he experienced it. *Dark Princess*, for example, was a direct outgrowth of his interest in India. Du Bois became familiar with the movement for Indian independence through his association with South Asian activists, particularly Lalla Lajpat Rai, an ardent anti-colonialist and opponent of British rule in India. Considered a subversive and accused of undermining British colonial authority in India, Rai was deported to Burma in 1907 without due process. Fearing imprisonment in India, Rai spent time in London and in the US between the years 1915 and 1920 (Hardikar 1966). During his sojourn in the US, Rai forged close relationships with a number of individuals who were advancing the cause of racial justice in the US. He met Morehouse College president John Hope, the Tuskegee scientist George Washington Carver, and Booker T. Washington, with whom he visited various Black communities in the South (Lewis 2000; Hardikar 1966).

Du Bois shared a platform with Rai at a meeting of the Inter-Collegiate Socialist Society, where he and Rai spoke on the connections between the Indian and African-American struggles. Du Bois stressed the global nature of the struggle against racism and empire: “The problem of the Hindu and of the Negro and cognate problems are not local, but world problems” (cited from Ahmad 2002: 788). The race question was also central to Rai, who had published a book, *The United States of America: A Hindu’s Impressions and a Study* (1916), in which he drew parallels between African-Americans and the “untouchables” of India. Both groups, in Rai’s assessment were outsiders in their respective societies. At a farewell dinner held in his honor in 1919, Rai called for solidarity between Indians and African-Americans (Joshi 1996). However, in 1929, less than a year after the publication of *Dark Princess*, L.L. Rai, DuBois’ closest Indian associate, died from wounds incurred from a police beating during a protest in India. DuBois praised Rai in a letter:

It was my good fortune to know Lala Lajpat Rai while he was in exile in America during the great War...I especially admired his restraint and sweet temper. When a man of his sort can be called a Revolutionist and beaten to death by a great civilized government, then indeed revolution becomes a duty to all right thinking men...I hope that the memory of Lala lajpat Rai will be kept green in India, and that out of the blood of his martyrdom very soon a free colored nation will arise.<sup>37</sup>

DuBois’ also took a keen interest in the works of the celebrated Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, whom he met during Tagore’s visit to the US in 1930. “On his last visit to the United States I had the pleasure of meeting Rabindranath Tagore. Ordinarily American Negroes did not meet distinguished strangers and thus our visitors go home

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<sup>37</sup> Letter, DuBois, January 10, 1929, in *The Correspondence of W.E.B.DuBois: Volume I*, edited by H. Aptheker, 1973, p. 386.

filled with what they are told about Negroes by white people, but having seen and known very few...I went to his hotel and talked with him. I was of course impressed by his striking presence and we found much in common to discuss concerning the color line which was growing in world importance.” Like Du Bois, Tagore emphasized the importance of transnational solidarity in fighting the color line, as recorded by Du Bois in his notes: “Negroes and Indians realize that both are fighting the same great battle against the assumption of superiority made so often by the White race.”<sup>38</sup> As India pressed on toward independence, Du Bois’ writings on the race problem in America took on greater urgency. Drawing increasingly on the language of “internal colonialism,”<sup>39</sup> Du Bois observed in the *Amsterdam News* that

The astonishing way in which the American Negro is consciously and unconsciously withholding his power is a matter seldom mentioned. Here is a nation within a nation...we American Negroes are the bound colony of the United States just as India is of England.<sup>40</sup>

One of Du Bois’ contemporaries was Marcus Garvey,<sup>41</sup> a political leader whose nationalist movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was another arena in which Africans encountered Indians. Garvey sought to promote his brand of Black racial unity through his own program, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was based in Harlem. Like Du Bois, Garvey was also a great observer of the Indian independence struggle. He was particularly fascinated by what he regarded as Gandhi’s charismatic,

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<sup>38</sup> These quotations appear in DuBois, *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*, edited by Herbert Aptheker, 1985, pp. 315-316.

<sup>39</sup> See Blaut (1987) *The National Question*, chapters 5 and 6 for further analysis.

<sup>40</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, “As the Crow Flies,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 10, 1943, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> While Garvey commanded significant popular support within the Black community in the US, his politics and programmes were viewed with deep skepticism by a number of Black leaders including A. Phillip Randolph and W.E.B. DuBois. Garvey’s admiration for Mussolini caused DuBois to label him a proto-fascist. Garvey was convicted of mail fraud and subsequently deported to Jamaica. His movement subsequently splintered.

even divine, power over Indians in spite of their many differences. Like Gandhi, Garvey was attracted to the ideas of Booker T. Washington, whose ideas of economic self-sufficiency served as a cornerstone for Garvey's vision of Black capitalism. With branches in South America, Africa, Europe, and as far afield as Australia, the UNIA attempted to build a global network of African peoples for capitalist economic advancement (Stein, 1986). However, in contrast to Du Bois, whose pan-African vision entailed trans-racial solidarity in fighting colonial and racist structures stemming from capitalism, Garvey, who also called himself a pan-Africanist, instead sought to launch Black capitalism through his own charismatic brand of Black nationalism. (Marable 1999; Grant 2010). This "race-first" ideology (Martin, 1976) was central to Garvey's vision of "African for the Africans:"

As the Jew is held together by his RELIGION, the white races by the assumption and the unwritten law of SUPERIORITY, and the Mongolian by the precious tie of BLOOD, so likewise the Negro must be united in ONE GRAND RACIAL HIERARCHY. OUR UNION MUST KNOW NO CLIME, BOUNDARY, OR NATIONALITY. Like the great Church of Rome, Negroes the world over MUST PRACTICE ONE FAITH, that of Confidence in themselves, with One God! One Aim! One Destiny! Let no religious scruples, no political machination divide us, but let us hold together under all climes and in every country, making among ourselves a Racial Empire upon which 'the sun shall never set'.<sup>42</sup>

Frequently referencing the Indian struggle as the start of a global racial awakening against European imperialism, Garvey exhorted his followers to rise up against their White rulers and form their own nation in Africa:

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<sup>42</sup> Robert A. Hill, Editor and Barbara Bair, Associate Editor, *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons, A Centennial Companion to the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), p. 5.

The handwriting is on the wall. You see it as plain as daylight; you see it coming out of India, the tribes of India rising in rebellion against their overlords. You see it coming out of Africa, our dear motherland, Africa; the Moors rising in rebellion against their overlords, and defeating them at every turn. According to the last report flashed to this country from Morocco by the Associated Press, the Moors have again conquered and subdued the Spanish hordes. The same associated Press flashes to us the news that there is a serious uprising in India, and the English people are marshaling their troops to subdue the spirit of liberty, of freedom, which is now permeating India. The news has come to us, and I have a cable in my pocket that comes from Ireland that the Irish are determined to have liberty and nothing less than liberty.<sup>43</sup>

Indian nationalism was the basis for pan-Africanism, in Garvey's eyes: "If it is possible for Hindus and Mohammedans to come together in India, it is possible for Negroes to come together everywhere."<sup>44</sup> On another occasion, Garvey stated, "If you keep organized, as the Hindus are organizing, as the Indians are organizing, as the Egyptians are organizing, as the Irish are organizing, I tell you these heretofore oppressed groups will shake the foundations of the world."<sup>45</sup>

Based on his experiences in his native Jamaica, his knowledge of England during his sojourn in that country, and his general understanding of the reach and power of the British Empire, Garvey articulated his political vision further in his newspaper, *The Negro World*:

There is so much discontent with civil and economic conditions of the British colonies, in the West Indies, in Africa, in Asia, among the natives as to lead to the conclusion that, as far as the natives are concerned, British rule has reached the parting of the ways. In all of the colonies the natives outnumber the white residents so disproportionately as to make them quite negligible except for

<sup>43</sup> Found at <http://www.blackpast.org/1921-marcus-garvey-address-second-unia-convention> last accessed September 21, 2013;

<sup>44</sup> Speech by Marcus Garvey in New York, September 11, 1921 in Robert Hill, *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 4, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Speech by Marcus Garvey, November 1921, In Robert Hill, *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Papers*, vol. 4, p. 184



purposes of office-holding at high salaries which the natives pay... In Africa, not only are the natives, especially in South Africa, crying out lustily against oppressive administration and taxation and restrictions on personal rights which amount to a form of slavery, but white and black workers alike are laboring for a mutual understanding by which they may receive better wages and living conditions... In East India the civil and economic distress of the people is so great that the atmosphere is surcharged with revolutionary possibilities. All the factions, of which that of Gandhi is the most numerous, if not the most aggressive, are moving towards the same point of understanding, driven by common grievances, where the British Government will have to give the people a larger voice in determining their own affairs or face revolution... This rapid survey shows that discontent among British colonials is co-extensive with the British commonwealth of nations, and is based on the same grievances, making a common cause for all those concerned, and a concert of action that would affect in one way and another a very large part of the peoples of the globe... An international convention of these disaffected British colonials is something that may be expected in the future. It is needed.<sup>46</sup>

Any development in the “Jewel” of the British empire would affect Africans, wrote Garvey in a later issue of the paper: “any betterment of their condition which the Indians may be able to get out of the London Conference should ultimately redound to the benefit of the Negro subjects of the Empire in the West Indies and Africa, as their grievances are much the same.”<sup>47</sup>

Garvey had some contact with Indians in the US, including DuBois’ friend Lala Lajpat Rai, as well as a young Gandhian graduate student, Haridas T. Muzumdar. Muzumdar had initiated correspondence with Garvey after learning about the horrors of lynching in the American South. Subsequently, Garvey had invited Muzumdar to deliver a series of lectures at the UNIA chapter in Harlem on India’s struggle against the British. In May 1922, *The Negro World* published an article by Mazumdar titled “Gandhi, the

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<sup>46</sup> “Discontent Among British Colonials” in *The Negro World*, March 29, 1924, p. 4

<sup>47</sup> “Indian Leaders Called to London” in *The Negro World*, April 19, 1924, p. 4

Apostle of Freedom” in which Mazumdar provided a detailed description of Gandhi’s activism in South Africa. “Go where you will, Gandhi and the freedom of India are the absorbing topics of discussion,” wrote Mazumdar.<sup>48</sup>

Garvey and Gandhi themselves exchanged only a few letters and telegrams. Garvey was particularly attracted to Gandhi’s calls for national unity and self-reliance. Although Gandhi did not identify himself as a socialist, he emphasized the need for domestic industry as a foundation for true independence, and stressed, through his “Small is Beautiful” movement, the need for the citizens of a country to participate fully in various aspects of their economies in order to avoid the problems of alienation that plagued the capitalist economies of Europe, on one hand, but also to keep their governments accountable to them (Schumacher 1973). Upon hearing news of Garvey’s activism in India, Sarojini Naidu, the renowned Indian poet, *satyagrahi*, and close confidante of Gandhi, paid a visit to Garvey’s branch of the UNIA in Cape Town as part of her visit to South Africa in May 1924. In her speech to South African UNIA members, she noted the need for unity among peoples of color as well as self-reliance, but connected them once again with the Christian tradition that had inspired Gandhi:

The message I bring to my people is the same message I give to the Negroes...that message that Mahatman Gandhi brought out of Africa; that message that Marcus Garvey is giving to the Negroes of the world; the same message that Jesus preached nearly two thousand years ago. Africans, be not ashamed of your black skin; the black, which is emblematic of ebony, that wood so much prized above all other wood of the forest and which is used for making the thrones of kings...The African must remember the colored Christ. Preachers did not understand Christ until taught by my master, Mahatman Gandhi.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Haridas Muzumdar, “Gandhi the Apostle of Freedom,” *The Negro World*, May 6, 1922, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> “Mrs. Naidu, Noted Indian Poetess, at Great UNIA Mass Meeting in Cape Town, South Africa, Lauds Principles and Leadership of the Association,” in *The Negro World*, May 17, 1924. pp. 2-3

Garvey, however, was not as interested in non-violence or spirituality, as many of the other Black leaders who sought Gandhi's counsel were. He devoted himself to promoting Black capitalism, which he saw as the key to African independence worldwide. To this end, he began numerous business ventures through his Negro Factories Corporation, calling for the Black manufacture of every marketable commodity in every country where Africans lived, whether in the U.S., Central America, the West Indies, or in Africa. He attempted to launch a grocery chain, restaurant, publishing house, and other businesses financed by fundraising among his followers. His most ambitious proposition was the *Black Star Line*, a steamship line he established as part of his Back-to-Africa movement. Garvey's *Black Star Line* ignited the imaginations of many of his followers, giving them a vision of the immanent Black commerce that would lead to economic independence (Martin 1976; Grant 2010; Stein 1986).

Garvey's followers lauded Garvey and Gandhi together as "the world's greatest humanitarians of the colored races."<sup>50</sup> Garveyites, however, were drawn more to Gandhi's economic and political messages than his spiritualism. Hucheshwar G. Mudgal, an Indian who had migrated to Trinidad and eventually settled in the US, joined the UNIA and eventually became the editor of Garvey's newspaper, *The Negro World*. Like Garvey, Mudgal followed Gandhi's politics very closely. However, although he praised Gandhi's struggle, he did not advocate Gandhi's emphasis on spirituality or non-violence, regarding it as ultimately futile. "Judging from the events which have transpired in India recently, Gandhi's policy of non-violence is not going to restrain Young India very much longer," wrote Mudgal in an editorial. "The clash of the government police with the

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<sup>50</sup> "Garveyism Spreading Among the Natives – Growing Disposition to Resent Injustice" in *The Negro World*, May 10, 1924, p. 1

followers of the Mahatma during the past week is sure indication of what is coming. It means that sooner or later, Mahatma Gandhi and his policy of non-violence will have to give way to the more militant aspirations of the surging masses of India.”<sup>51</sup>

Garvey's movement was monitored by intelligence agencies, just as Ghadar had been, because of the growing concern among US and British authorities regarding the alliances forming between Indians and Africans, as noted earlier. Horne (2008:57) notes that UNIA, with chapters on four continents, from New York City to the South, and from the Caribbean to Africa, was proving to be a major nuisance for the British. Like Ghadar, UNIA was very much a product of the British Empire and held London to be its chief adversary. Although Ghadar and UNIA had divergent views on class and economics, both saw themselves as vanguard nationalist forces, which greatly disturbed the US and British governments. The Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence also received a report warning of a conspiracy between Garvey and “Ganti” (Gandhi):

The present Hindu Revolutionary movement has definite connections with the Negro agitation in America. And both of these movements have leaning, at least for political reasons, to Bolshevik Russia. *Ganti* [sic], the leader of the Hindu Revolutionary movement, and *Garvey*, the leader of the American Negro Agitation, were class mates while they were studying in England and in India. Garvey has remained ever since the closest friend, most ardent admirer and the handiest co-worker of *Ganti*, even though they live thousands of miles apart. Both *Garvey* and *Ganti* are strong believers in socialism and the revolutionary methods for realizing it.<sup>52</sup>

Although historically and factually incorrect, the letter reflected the growing concern among American authorities regarding the possible mobilization and partnership of

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<sup>51</sup> “The End of British Imperialism,” *The Negro World*, April 26, 1930, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> “Ganti and Garvey,” Report by J.J. Hannigan to the Director, Office of Naval Intelligence, Feb. 4, 1922 in Robert Hill, *Marcus Garvey and United Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 4, p. 477.

Indians and Africans. Garvey and Gandhi did spend time in England, but there is no evidence that they ever met, in England, India, or elsewhere; nor were they ever classmates. Although both men were outspoken about the economic uplift of the masses, neither formally identified with socialism. In fact, both Garvey and Gandhi were criticized by socialists and communists for their supposedly conservative politics. Gandhi was scorned by the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist Left for his commitment to an alternative, spiritually governed utopia, and Garvey for his unabashed embrace of capitalism, even fascism – indeed, Garvey referred to himself and his movement as the “first fascists” (Lewis, 1997). Although contact between the two men was minimal and limited, the attention of the United States and British governments had been piqued nevertheless.

Sadly, the *Black Star Line* proved to be Garvey’s albatross, as he eventually became embroiled in charges of mail fraud involving the sale of stock in his steamship line. Garvey insisted upon his innocence and protested that he was framed, but was sentenced nevertheless to five years in prison for faulty accounting. Unfortunately, he had begun to lose credibility when he had conferred earlier with the Ku Klux Klan in order to substantiate his claim that it was in the national best interest, as well as in the best interest of African-Americans, for Africans Americans to be repatriated to Africa (Stein 1986). This move by Garvey, particularly when Klan-sponsored lynchings were rife in the American South, was regarded as quixotic by other African-American leaders, particularly W.E.B. Du Bois and A. Philip Randolph, who denounced Garvey publicly as a charlatan who threatened to undermine the struggle for Black civil rights that had been advancing on other fronts. His entrepreneurial ventures may have been "original and promising," argued Du Bois, but "Marcus Garvey is, without doubt, the most dangerous

enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world. He is either a lunatic or a traitor."<sup>53</sup>

President Calvin Coolidge eventually commuted Garvey's sentence and deported him to Jamaica. Like Gandhi, Garvey, remained committed to his vision of economic self-reliance, which he believed to be the basis of any nationhood. He continued to operate out of Jamaica and London, but UNIA's popularity declined steeply following his expulsion from the United States (Stein, 1986; Martin 1976). Nevertheless, Marcus Garvey's vision of Black economic development and pan-Africanism have endured as corollary movements and subsequent generations adopted his ethos.

During the 1920s, a number of Garvey's followers were attracted to Islam, particularly the Ahmadiyya sect originating in India (now Pakistan). South Asian Muslims had an influence on the religious culture and politics of Black Muslims.<sup>54</sup> Michael Gomez (2005) shows that Black nationalist and cultural movements, like the Nation of Islam, were influenced by the Ahmadiyya movement, a reformist, break-away Islamic religious sect that was founded in 1890 by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in the Punjab region of India. The Ahmadiyya were the first to publish an English translation of the Koran in the US. Missionaries from this movement were sent to various parts of the world, including the US in 1920, where they worked mostly among African Americans. Mufti Mohammad Sadiq, an Ahmadiyya missionary, addressed a huge gathering of predominantly African Americans in Detroit Auto Workers Hall on the nature of the

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<sup>53</sup> See Du Bois' essays "Back to Africa" pp. 333 – 339; "A Lunatic or a Traitor" pp. 340-342; and "Marcus Garvey and the NAACP" pp. 343-345 in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, edited by D.L. Lewis (1995).

<sup>54</sup> Islam was not unknown or foreign to African American experience before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the enslaved Africans brought to the New World were Muslims (15 to 20 percent) who struggled to practice their religion in a society that regarded itself as Christian (See *Servants of Allah* by Sylvaine Diouf.) Some Northern and urban Blacks belonged to a variety of Islamic communities, such as the Moorish Science Temple, that existed there before the arrival of the Ahmadiyya movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michael Gomez (2005); Michael Nash (2008); Richard Brent Turner (2003).

Ahmadiyya movement. Sadiq was particularly successful in obtaining converts in the Black working class communities of Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland.

According to Turner (1997: 134-135), by the early 1940s, “the Ahmadiyya movement had almost two million followers worldwide and somewhere between 5000 and 10,000 members in the United States,” with “the majority of its American converts [being] Black.” Ahmadiyya converts included the jazz musicians Ahmad Jamal, Yusuf Lateef, Art Blakey, Dakota Staton, and McCoy Tyner. There was also substantial cooperation between the Ahmadiyya movement and the UNIA (Turner 1997: 139).

A decade later, the Black nationalist religious movement, the Nation of Islam (NOI) was born in Detroit, developing in part by attracting Black Ahmadiyya Muslims into its fold (Horne, 2008). In fact, the parents of W.D. Fard Mohammad, the spiritual founder of the Nation of Islam, originally belonged to the Ahmadiyya movement (Gomez, 2005; Turner 1997). However, it would be far too simplistic to argue that the NOI grew directly out of the Ahmadiyya movement, as the Black Muslim tradition in the US has multiple sources. Islam has a long tradition in West Africa and many of the early enslaved Africans who were brought to the Americas were Muslims (Diouf, 1998). The theology of the Ahmadiyya movement had resonated with African Americans’ sense of alienation in American society, which the Nation of Islam later expanded upon and combined with a program of Black nationalism, drawing mainly from the ideas of Marcus Garvey. However, the Ahmadiyya movement, like the Nation of Islam, is regarded as a heretical sect by traditional/orthodox Muslims (Gomez, 2005).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Islam was more popular among African-Americans than Hinduism, the religion of the majority of Indians. One exception to this trend was the jazz musician John Coltrane, who was deeply influenced by Hindu thought. Coltrane’s wife, Alice, established a

### **African-Americans, *Satyagraha*, and the Civil Rights Movement**

One of the most enduring South Asian influences on African American social movements was M. K. Gandhi. While Gandhi did not physically visit the United States, he took a keen interest in developments in the country. His activism in South Africa (discussed in chapter 4) drew much inspiration from the abolition movement in the United States, and he remained interested in the African American struggle for justice. In an article for the *Indian Opinion* titled “The Duty of Disobeying Laws,”<sup>56</sup> Gandhi expressed a deep and abiding admiration for Henry David Thoreau, the abolitionist and author of the essay, *Civil Disobedience, or Resistance to Civil Government* (1992). Like Thoreau before him, Gandhi came to understand the government as a machine, and believed that when the machine produced injustice, citizens of conscience must present what Thoreau termed a counter-friction to stop the machine. In order to inspire his readers in South Africa to take up defiance of the law, Gandhi reproduced Thoreau’s writings in the *The Indian Opinion*. Holding Thoreau’s transcendentalism (itself inspired by Eastern philosophies and alternative interpretations of Christianity) and abolitionism in high regard, Gandhi instructed his readers in “The Duty of Disobeying Laws” to take heed that Thoreau “considered it a great sin that the Americans held many persons in the bonds of slavery.” Gandhi’s understanding of the abolitionist movement was certainly limited, as seen in his incorrect statement in the article that “the chief cause of the abolition of slavery in America was Thoreau’s imprisonment and the publication by him of the above mentioned book after his release.” His exaltation of Thoreau and other

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Vedantic meditation center in 1975. By the time of her death in 2006, Alice Coltrane had established a 48-acre ashram for meditation and study of the Hindu scriptures.

<sup>56</sup> Duty of Disobeying Laws, *Indian Opinion*, September, 1907, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 7, p. 187



abolitionists, nevertheless, illustrates his search for inspiration in struggles other than his own (Bondurant 1988; Parekh 1989).

Gandhi's own first recorded encounter with an African-American had occurred a few days after he was thrown off a train from Durban to Pretoria for defying White authority (see Chapter 4). After arriving in Pretoria, having endured the ordeal of being evicted from the train, assaulted by a stage coachman, and having been refused accommodation because he was not White, Gandhi (1993:118) recalls in his autobiography, that there was no one to meet him at his destination, and he was at a complete loss as to where to stay for the night. Then "an American Negro who was standing nearby" approached Gandhi and said "I see that you are an utter stranger here, without any friends. If you will come with me, I will take you to a small hotel, of which the proprietor is an American who is very well known to me. I think he will accept you." Gandhi accepted the accommodation gratefully and proceeded to meet his clients the next day. This is the only written account of Gandhi's encounter with a Black American during his twenty-one-year stay in South Africa.

Gandhi was particularly impressed by the works of the African-American leader Booker T. Washington on behalf of his people. He wrote a laudatory article "From Slave to College President" on Washington's rise from slavery to his leadership in building an institute of higher education for the descendents of slaves. Although Washington himself was an apologist for the British empire, an admirer of Christian missionaries in India, and a social and political conservative who was opposed to radically challenging the racial status quo (Harlan, 1975), Gandhi nevertheless appreciated Washington's message of

self-help and self-reliance as universal. He was sympathetic to Washington's endeavor, albeit in a paternalistic manner: "Such is the work done by Mr. Booker T. Washington, singlehanded, in the face of enormous odds, without a glorious past to look back upon as an incentive which more ancient nations can boast of."<sup>57</sup> Gandhi looked upon Washington as one of the great men of the world and the perfect source of ideas for anyone seeking to address caste inequality and uplift in India. He hoped that "Harijans" (the Dalits, also known as the Untouchables in Hindu society) would study the life of Washington and draw their inspiration from it. Referring to the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes established by Washington, Gandhi noted (perhaps with an air of ethnocentrism and *noblesse oblige* common to high class/high caste Indian reformers of his time) that these institutions are "worth studying by all Harijan workers and Harijans."<sup>58</sup>

Gandhi was not alone among Indians in applauding the achievements of Booker T. Washington in promoting self-help. Washington's writings were translated by activists in India into a number of South Asian languages, including Malayalam, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati. K. Paramu Pillai, a school headmaster in Travancore, India, had translated *Up From Slavery* into the Malayalam language and written to Washington, praising the autobiography and informing him that it has been adopted as a required text by his school. "More than 700 boys and girls, between the ages of 12 and 16," Pillai wrote, "are thereby likely to know something of your labors at Tuskegee, for your race, and I hope they will learn some lessons of self-help therefrom, and learn to

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<sup>57</sup> "From Slave to College President," *Indian Opinion*, October, 1903 in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 3, p. 239.

<sup>58</sup> "An Example to Copy" in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 61, page 287.

recognize the dignity of manual labor and training.”<sup>59</sup> In the years that followed, several schools in India adopted the text as a basis of instruction in community uplift (Harlan, 1983). Another Indian admirer of Washington and translator, Mahadev Hari Modak, wrote to Washington praising him as “an ideal example of a practical educationist” and lauding his efforts as “an object lesson in self-help and philanthropy to the youths of every country, at least to those of India and I have, therefore, ventured to hold up your life as a model...”<sup>60</sup> As mentioned in chapter 4, Gandhi’s Phoenix Settlement in South Africa was inspired by Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, as was John Dube’s Ohlange Institute. Washington’s legacy had an enduring impact on Gandhi’s own philosophy, and as well as on Marcus Garvey’s Black capitalism, as noted above. Gandhi, however, gave the ethos of self-reliance and industry a radical re-interpretation by combining it with his strategy of protest and transformation, *satyagraha*, without which he believed true freedom would remain elusive. Washington, Garvey, and Dube, on the other hand, remained conservative in their teachings, avoiding direct engagement with debates on social or political inequality. Although they rhetorically questioned White supremacy over Africans and other races, they did not engage in the outright protest of White authority, demand justice or independence; instead, they sought to work around White supremacy through an advocacy of separate economic development.

Gandhi continued to give thought to the problem of racism in America, and urged his followers to do so. “The Negroes of the United States have accepted Western

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<sup>59</sup> Letter, K. Paramu Pillai to Booker T. Washington, Jan. 24, 1905, April 25, 1906, and June 12, 1908, cited in Harlan, *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, pp. 277-278.

<sup>60</sup> Letter, Mahadev Hari Modak to Booker T. Washington, September 5, 1913, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, L. Harlan and R.W. Smock (eds.), Vol.12, pp. 178-179.

civilization. They have embraced Christianity. But the black pigment of their skin constitutes their crime, and if in the northern states they are socially despised, they are lynched in the southern states on the slightest suspicion of wrongdoing.”<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, a number of African-Americans were also watching Gandhi’s political activism, first in South Africa and then in India. In *The Crisis*, the NAACP’s mouthpiece, Du Bois referred to Gandhi as “the greatest colored man in the world,” who had “toiled very hard in South Africa to remove race prejudice.” At Du Bois’ invitation, Gandhi submitted a note to *The Crisis*, “Message to the American Negro”:

Let not the 12 million Negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of the slaves. There is no dishonor in being slaves. There is dishonor in being slave-owners. But let us not think of honor or dishonor in connection with the past. Let us realize that the future is with those who would be pure, truthful and loving. For as the old wise men have said: Truth ever is, untruth never was. Love alone binds and truth and love accrue only to the truly humble.<sup>62</sup>

In 1928, the poet and activist Sarojini Naidu visited the US to promote the cause of the Indian National Congress and to gain sympathy for India’s struggle against British rule. Writing to Gandhi from Cincinnati, Ohio, Naidu evoked the legacy of Harriet Beecher Stowe, one of the town’s famous daughters and author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “Long ago lived a very noble woman who dedicated her genius to the deliverance of the Negros from their pitiful bondage.” Naidu informed Gandhi that her message to Americans, like Stowe’s was “also a message of deliverance from bondage – another version for another land” and that she had faithfully rendered to the American people “the gospel of the Mystic Spinner [Gandhi] as interpreted by a Wandering Singer [Naidu],”

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<sup>61</sup> Cited from the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol 34, 1926, p. 79.

<sup>62</sup> From “Gandhi and the American Negroes” in *Gandhi Marg*, July 1, 1957, p. 175

which was, “from first to last, from the initial to the ultimate word, the evangel of *self-* deliverance from *every* kind of personal, national, economic, social, intellectual, political, and spiritual bondage” (Naidu’s italics). She then related to Gandhi her poignant if paternalistic introduction to African Americans, “the as yet disinherited Children of America, the Coloured population, ... the helpless, hopeless, silent and patient bitterness and mental suffering of the educated Negroes... They are so cultured, so gifted... and yet, and yet... there is a bar sinister upon their brow... They are the socially and spiritually outcast children of America.”<sup>63</sup> In his article on “Gandhi and American Negroes,” DuBois recalls meeting Sarojini Naidu, to whom he attributes his own interest in the life and activism of Gandhi.<sup>64</sup>

The African American encounter with Gandhi is often narrowly conceptualized in the literature in terms of their embrace of his nonviolent tactics during a particular episode of the Civil Rights Movement (eg. West 1988; Jonas 2007; Egerton 1994; Marable and Mullings 2000). Usually only Martin Luther King, Jr, is discussed, and perhaps also John Lewis or Bayard Rustin, with respect to Gandhi. In reality, many African Americans had been attracted to Gandhi’s thought and politics, for decades, and developed their own interpretations of his efforts as pertinent to the particular movements they were involved in. All, however, were interested in Gandhi’s ability to unite Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in the common cause of Indian nationalism, and prior to that, his experience in uniting diverse Indians in South Africa where they had neither numerical, economic, nor political power. As shown in chapter 4, South Africa was the first crucible

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<sup>63</sup> All of the above quotations by Sarojini Naidu are from “Letter from Sarojini Naidu to Gandhiji, November 19, 1928” available at <http://www.mkgandhi.org/Selected%20Letters/Sarojini/Letter44.htm> last accessed August 15, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Du Bois, “Gandhi and American Negroes,” *Gandhi Marg* (July 1957): p. 175

where *satyagraha* was tested, in which Gandhi was able to persuade Indians to set aside their differences in order to protest Jan Smuts' anti-Indian legislation. Regardless of the apparent failure of that campaign to attain its goals, it seemed to Du Bois, writing in *Crisis* magazine, that its true achievement and purpose had perhaps not yet been fully understood by the imperialists:

Gandhi, however, had already won remarkable results in South Africa by his methods of non-violence” and having “cast in his lot with the ‘coolies’... It is this blameless life of his which has accomplished the incredible – that of bringing together the numerous sects of India. This one phenomenon ought to convey a warning to Great Britain<sup>65</sup>

African-American interest in Gandhi partly grew out of a previous, more general, American foray into Indian religion and philosophy. Long before Gandhi, Americans were involved in the Transcendentalism movement of the 1830s and 1840s, and subsequently, they encountered theosophy, anthroposophy, and Vedanta/yoga, all of which made references to Eastern theories of self-actualization through self-reliance, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Among African-Americans, Booker T. Washington emphasized the American ethos of individualism and prescribed skilled work and industry as the key to self-reliance for a downtrodden people.

Gandhi's popularity as an anti-colonial activist grew during the two decades after World War I, and surged after the historic “Salt March”<sup>66</sup> of 1930. DuBois wrote of the

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<sup>65</sup> “India's Saint,” *The Crisis*, (July 1921): Vol. 22-24, p. 125, as found in Google Books, [http://books.google.com/books?id=KqMTAAAYAAJ&pg=PA125&lpg=PA125&dq=%22bringing+together+numerous+sects+of+india%22+and+du+bois&source=bl&ots=aO1aacHRym&sig=q4ifH41V\\_xpAOqVaMyxWjTjVi0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=EYpFUoG7Dajc4AOJzYGwCg&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=%22bringing%20together%20numerous%20sects%20of%20india%22%20and%20du%20bois&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=KqMTAAAYAAJ&pg=PA125&lpg=PA125&dq=%22bringing+together+numerous+sects+of+india%22+and+du+bois&source=bl&ots=aO1aacHRym&sig=q4ifH41V_xpAOqVaMyxWjTjVi0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=EYpFUoG7Dajc4AOJzYGwCg&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=%22bringing%20together%20numerous%20sects%20of%20india%22%20and%20du%20bois&f=false) last accessed on September 27, 2013.

<sup>66</sup> In the early 1930s, Gandhi and his associates in the Indian National Congress decided to use civil disobedience in order to achieve their goal of independence from British rule. Gandhi decided to challenge the colonial authorities' monopoly on the collection and

Salt March, “And now let the world sit and watch the most astonishing of the battles of peace which it has ever seen: The civil disobedience campaign in India, led by *Gandhi* and *Nehru*.”<sup>67</sup> As awareness of Gandhi’s activism against British rule in India increased, African Americans began to seriously consider the direct applicability of Gandhi’s methods in their demand for civil rights and freedom in the US. There were increasing calls for a “Black Gandhi” in the 1930s, in the words of Mordecai Johnson, the influential theologian, educator, and President of Howard University:

Mahatma Gandhi is conducting today the most significant religious movement in the world, in his endeavor to inject religion into questions of economics and politics. The economic situation of the Negro in America is one of similar import to that of the Indian of the East. It is important that young people of this day and generation study and understand Gandhi perfectly for the Negro is closely related to economics and politics to the people of India...the Gandhi movement is deserving of the Negro’s most careful consideration.<sup>68</sup>

Many African Americans were interested in the spiritual Gandhi, especially his ability to use religion, a potentially divisive force, as an agent for social and political change. They were curious about how Gandhi, in South Africa as well as in India, had captured people’s hearts, not just their minds, in the service a just cause. The view that Gandhi was a “prophet and saint” was echoed by James Weldon Johnson, the executive secretary of the NAACP and a key intellectual of the New Negro Movement.

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production of salt. In one of the famous marches of the Indian nationalist movement, Gandhi walked about 200 miles from his ashram near the Sabarmati River to the coastal town of Dandi where he defied colonial law by collecting salt at the seashore on April 6, 1930. The march captured the world’s attention and ignited a wave of non-violent civil disobedience in India as activists produced and distributed salt in open defiance of the colonial law.

<sup>67</sup> Italics in the original. W.E.B. DuBois, “As the Crow Flies,” *The Crisis*, 37, April 1930, available at <http://books.google.com/books?id=ylcEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA113&dq=%22now+let+the+world+sit+and+watch+the+most+astonishing+battles+for+peace%22+and+du+bois&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Qz9GUuOuA9P-4APkjoHoDg#v=onepage&q=%22now%20let%20the%20world%20sit%20and%20watch%20the%20most%20astonishing%20battles%20for%20peace%22%20and%20du%20bois&f=false> last accessed on September 3, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in George Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 29, 1930, p. 10.

It will be of absorbing interest to know whether the means and methods advocated by Gandhi can be as effective as the methods of violence used by the Irish. If they are, it will mean a new hope for independence and self-determination on the part of those peoples and groups who are prohibited the possession of the implements of force. If non-cooperation brings the British to their knees in Africa, nor is there any reason why it should not bring the white man to his knees in the South.<sup>69</sup>

By the 1930s as India's struggle for independence escalated, *satyagraha* had become a staple topic in Black newspapers (D'Emilio, 2003). *The Pittsburgh Courier*, a major African-American newspaper, editorialized about inspiration from India for the African-American struggle:

The eyes of the entire world are on India. There the great Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi, once an obscure lawyer in South Africa but now the spiritual leader of 300 million dark people, defies the power of the British Empire with his program of civil disobedience... If the Indians do succeed, in spite of their myriad conflicting castes and prejudices in launching a great revolution, it will sound the death knell of the British Empire, the foremost exploiter of black labor in the world... Altogether, the work of Gandhi tends to make the future look rather bright for the dark peoples of the world. To be sure, the British imperialists will not give up an empire without a fierce struggle, but against a united India they cannot prevail...<sup>70</sup>

During the mid-1930s, several prominent African American religious figures and educators traveled to India to familiarize themselves with the country in general, but also to meet Gandhi and seek his counsel if possible. Nearly all the Black Americans who met with Gandhi were closely linked to the Black church and reported that meeting Gandhi had strengthened their own conviction in how religion can become a force for positive social change in American society. Two of these individuals, Howard Thurman and

<sup>69</sup> See "Gandhi a Prisoner," March 25, 1922, in *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson*, pp. 243-244.

<sup>70</sup> Editorial: "An Empire at Stake," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 17, 1930, p. 12.



Benjamin E. Mays, had an important influence on Martin Luther King Jr, the civil rights leader most readily associated with Gandhi's *satyagraha* strategy in the United States.

Howard University theologian Howard Thurman and his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, traveled in 1935 with another couple, the Reverend Edward Carroll and Phenola Carroll, to India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) on a trip sponsored by the YMCA of India and the United States. Thurman was Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University and his wife was a historian and a talented singer. Carroll, also a theologian, had studied at Yale Divinity School, and his wife was a schoolteacher in Virginia. Prior to their visit, Gandhi wrote to Thurman that "I shall be delighted to have your three friends whenever you can come before the end of this year. If ...we cannot provide Western amenities of life, we will be making up for the deficiency by the natural warmth of our affection" (cited from Horne 2008: 97).

Almost a year before Thurman's visit to India, Miriam Slade, an Englishwoman and one of Gandhi's closest associates, had visited the United States. Slade, who lived with Gandhi in his ashram, was invited by Thurman to give a public lecture at Howard University. Thurman hoped that Slade's presentation would increase his students' understanding of India's struggle against imperialism and inspire them to imagine a similar movement in the United States for racial justice. Thurman (1979: 106) remarked in his autobiography, that

...there was little general knowledge of the vast subcontinent of India. Here and there were a few people who knew Indian students or lecturers who had come to this country, but that was all. On the other hand, there was keen interest in the struggle of freedom from colonialism between Gandhi and the British government. There was a stirring in the wind that we recognized.

Thurman was also interested in increasing Gandhi's awareness of the plight of African-Americans. He noted in his autobiography regarding Slade's visit,

...it was important that she should have exposure, in a primary way, to American Negroes, in order that her reaction be shared with the Mahatma. This would be a prelude to our journey and, however limited, it would be equivalent to firsthand information for Gandhi himself....Of course, because of his experience in South Africa, Gandhi was acquainted with African people, but he had no opportunity to know Afro-Americans firsthand (Thurman 1979: 106).

The Thurmans and the Carrolls traveled throughout India and met a number of prominent figures there, such as the poets Sarojini Naidu and Rabindranath Tagore. Sue Bailey Thurman took a particular interest in meeting Tagore, with whom she visited at his school, Santiniketan, in Bengal, and discussed a variety of subjects. As a result, three African-American women students, Marian Martin Banfield, Betty McCree Price, and Margaret Bush Wilson later spent a semester there. Tagore himself took a keen interest in developments in the United States, as he frequently read *The Crisis* (Horne 2008; Slate 2012; Mays 1971) .

In February 1936, the Thurmans and the Carrolls met Gandhi in Bardoli, Gujarat, where they discussed some of the parallels between Hinduism and Christianity. Gandhi likened the concept of *ahimsa* in Hinduism to the Biblical concept of love. Howard Thurman was concerned with training activists in non-violent strategy, and Gandhi recounted his experience in South Africa and developments in India. The Thurmans then posed a number of questions to Gandhi on *satyagraha*. Aware that Gandhi was an

attorney in South Africa, Sue Bailey Thurman interrogated him more pointedly, with reference to the Black predicament in the US, “How am I to act, supposing my own brother was lynched before my very eyes?”<sup>71</sup> Gandhi thought for some time and replied,

There is such a thing as self-immolation. Supposing I was a Negro, and my sister was ravished by a white or lynched by a whole community, what would be my duty? – I ask myself. And the answer comes to me: I must not wish ill to these, but neither must I cooperate with them. It may be that ordinarily I depend on the lynching community for my livelihood. I refuse to co-operate with them, refuse even to touch the food that comes from them, and I refuse to cooperate with even my brother Negroes who tolerate the wrong. That is the self-immolation I mean.<sup>72</sup>

Thurman wrote that after entertaining them and answering their numerous questions graciously as their host, Gandhi had some inquiries of his own, as did many other Indians during the Thurmans’ visit, regarding why African-Americans embraced Christianity when it justified slavery and empire. Thurman responded, to Gandhi’s satisfaction, by drawing a distinction between the “religion of Jesus” and imperial Christianity. As their meeting drew toward an emotional close, Sue Bailey Thurman extended an invitation to Gandhi to visit the United States. “We want you to come to America. We want you not for white America, but for the Negroes; we have many a problem that cries for solution, and we need you badly.” Gandhi demurred gracefully, Howard Thurman noted. “I must make good the message here before I bring it to you,” said Gandhi. His parting words to them seemed prescient to the Thurmans: “It may be

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<sup>71</sup> From “Interview to American Negro Delegation,” February 21, 1936, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 68, p. 237.

<sup>72</sup> From “Interview to American Negro Delegation,” February 21, 1936, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 68, p. 237.

through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world.”<sup>73</sup>

Thurman’s account of his visit to India gave African Americans firsthand information on Gandhi’s strategies in challenging British rule. In 1936, Benjamin E. Mays, a colleague of Thurman and also a prominent theologian at Howard University, traveled to India to attend the 1937 World Conference of the YMCA, and at Thurman’s urging, went to speak with Gandhi about how to address the gap between America’s ideals and its social practices. Mays was accompanied by Channing Tobias, a key member of the YMCA and the NAACP.

Traveling to India aboard the *Queen Mary*, Mays observed the aloofness that British passengers exhibited toward Indians and the few Blacks on the ship. Indians aboard the ship, however, did not seem condescending to him (Mays 1987). Like the Thurmans and Carrolls before them, Mays and Tobias met with a number of prominent Indians, including Jawaharlal Nehru and his sister Vijayalakshmi Pandit. Mays, a life-long mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr., met with Gandhi, with whom he also conversed on the philosophy of *satyagraha* and its applicability to the African-American situation. Mays noted that their conversation revolved around two issues: the meaning of non-violence and the problem of untouchability. Gandhi first corrected Mays that the term “‘passive resistance’ is a misnomer for non-violent resistance. It is much more active than violent resistance.”<sup>74</sup> When questioned further by Mays about the feasibility of non-violent resistance on a mass scale, particularly for an oppressed minority, Gandhi replied

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<sup>73</sup> From “Interview to American Negro Delegation,” February 21, 1936, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 68, p. 237; Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*.

<sup>74</sup> “Interview to Professor Mays,” January 10, 1937, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 70, p. 261.

that African-Americans might note that Indians were a small minority in South Africa when they challenged the ruling Whites, and that the costs may be high. To Gandhi, a *satyagrahi*'s commitment to non-violence in defying unjust laws was the price that had to be paid for justice, which is not freely given. Evoking examples from the Bible, Gandhi told Mays, "When Daniel defied the laws of the Meds and Persians, his action was non-violent."<sup>75</sup> However, the crowning example for Mays, as given by Gandhi, was Jesus himself, who taught non-violence. Mays notes that this insight from Gandhi later enabled him to have a deeper understanding of what motivated Martin Luther King Jr. Speaking with Gandhi convinced Mays of the superiority of non-violence (Mays 1987). He left with a conviction that he would later share with King, that Gandhi

did more than any other man to dispel fear from the Indian mind and more than any other man to make Indians proud to be Indians. That the non-violence campaign was a failure, no one has a right to say. All the evidence is not yet in... The fact that Gandhi and his non-violent campaign has given the Indian masses a new conception of courage, no man can honestly deny. To discipline people to face death, to die, to go to jail for the cause without fear and without resorting to violence is an achievement of the first magnitude. And when an oppressed race ceases to be afraid, it is free. The cardinal principles of non-violence are love and fearlessness.<sup>76</sup>

Mays' co-traveler, Channing Tobias, a future chairman of the NAACP, recounts his mystical encounter with "the Mahatma" on a train. Seated in third-class with a basket of oranges beside him, Gandhi appeared to take no notice of Tobias or his own surroundings, concentrating only on the task of spinning before him. Introducing himself

<sup>75</sup> "Interview to Professor Mays," January 10, 1937, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 70, p. 263.

<sup>76</sup> Cited from R.M. Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement: A Biography*, 2012, available at <http://books.google.com/books?id=nANIDKplGG0C&pg=PT143&lpg=PT143&dq=%22did+more+than+any+other+man+to+dispel+fe+ar+from+the+Indian+mind%22&source=bl&ots=ZPSxeNEqGp&sig=Fg6OFhY27VWzueEYV1srq5D-8Rk&hl=en&sa=X&ei=-uJGUrytDc-w4APax4GQCg#v=onepage&q=%22did%20more%20than%20any%20other%20man%20to%20dispel%20fear%20from%20the%20I+ndian%20mind%22&f=false> last accessed on September 5, 2013.

and settling down, Tobias informed Gandhi that some twelve million African-Americans were struggling for civil rights in the United States. To his surprise, he received no reply from the Mahatma, only a nod of acknowledgment. Tobias came to learn that the Mahatma was abstaining from speech on that particular day, as he was observing a vow of silence and meditation.<sup>77</sup> Tobias then attempted a hand-written note, which, to his relief, was accepted. He inquired of Gandhi, as if consulting an oracle, how African Americans might obtain “freedom from mob violence, unrestricted use of the ballot, and freedom from segregation.” Gandhi deigned to write a reply, “I had to contend against some such thing... on a much smaller scale in South Africa... There is no other way than the way of non-violence, not of the weak and ignorant but of the strong and wise.” Tobias wrote, “What word shall I give my Negro brothers as to the outlook for the future?” Gandhi replied, “With right which is on their side and the choice of non-violence as their only weapon... a bright future is assured.”<sup>78</sup>

Several other African Americans made trips to India to visit Gandhi. A decade later, William Stuart Nelson and his wife Blanche Wright Nelson traveled to India as representatives of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization. Nelson was born in Kentucky in 1895 and had graduated from Howard and Yale Universities. He had also studied at the Sorbonne and the University of Berlin. As Dean of the Howard University School of Religion and a scholar of the concept of non-violence in religion, Nelson’s ideas on the relevance of Gandhi’s *satyagraha* strategy to

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<sup>77</sup> “Gandhi’s Message to the American Negro” Interview with Channing Tobias on his encounter with Gandhi in 1937, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 12, 1942, p. 1

<sup>78</sup> Printed in “Gandhi’s Message to the American Negro” Interview with Channing Tobias on his encounter with Gandhi in 1937, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 12, 1942, p. 1; See also “Interview to Dr. Tobias” January 10, 1937, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 70, p. 269.

the African American struggle influenced Martin Luther King Jr. and played a major role in shaping the modern civil rights movement (Lewis 1978; Roberts 1978; Nelson 1957). Nelson made several trips to India and on one occasion, in Bengal, he met and marched with Gandhi in an effort to heal Hindu-Muslim tensions.<sup>79</sup> In addition to Gandhi, Nelson met other Indian leaders, including Nehru, with whom he discussed furthering contact and exchange between India and African Americans. Nelson was instrumental in initiating a program to invite Indian intellectuals as visiting professors to Howard University (Slate 2012; Horne 2008).

Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian nationalist leader and Gandhi's protégé, and later the first Prime Minister of India, also took a keen interest in race relations in the United States. He recalls encountering the work of W.E.B. DuBois as a college student in England and notes that it left a powerful impression on him. His admiration for Paul Robeson, whom he first met in London in 1938, remained until Nehru's death in 1964. Robeson and Nehru's close friendship also included Robeson's wife, Eslanda (Essie) Robeson, and Nehru maintained long correspondences with both. In 1942, Nehru initiated contact with the Council on African Affairs, an organization headed by Paul Robeson (Ransby 2013; Brown 2003; Nehru 1991). Robeson, in turn, drew sweeping connections in his own speeches, writings, and political activism between the Indian independence struggle, the African American struggle for equality, and different forms of oppression in other parts of the world:

The Negro must view the domestic scene in its relation to the global struggle against fascism because, since we no longer live in isolation, what happens in

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<sup>79</sup> Described at [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc\\_nelson\\_william](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nelson_william) last accessed on September 22, 2013.

other parts of the world also happens here... After the defeat of the fascists and their allies, the United States will have to cope with the fact that the harassed people of India and the British West Indies will be free, and that Africa will occupy a different position in the post-war world. If America is to survive in this new world, she will have to deal with millions of Negroes who will no longer be in bondage.<sup>80</sup>

By the early 1940s, there were further developments on the frontier where African Americans encountered India. A group called “the Fellowship of Reconciliation” (FOR) began to take a keen interest in Gandhi’s methods of non-violent resistance and its relevance to the American context. Bernice Fisher, a member of FOR, recalls that “all of us were afire with the idea of Gandhian non-violence. FOR members studied and dissected Shridharani’s (1962) *War Without Violence*, a description of Gandhi’s philosophy and methods. They tried to adapt Gandhism to their struggle against racism in the United States (Meier and Rudwick 1973). Fisher’s sentiments were echoed by Bayard Rustin, an African American activist associated with FOR, who later played a major role in the Civil Rights Coalition as a founding member of CORE. Rustin appealed to White Americans to join Black Americans in the cause of racial justice, to adopt Gandhi’s attitudes toward the untouchables in dealing with oppressed Blacks, and to become a vital part of the Black community (Meier and Rudwick 1973).

FOR played a key role in the establishment of the Harlem Ashram, a cooperative living community, in 1941. The Harlem Ashram immediately dedicated itself confronting the discriminatory policies of the YMCA, which excluded Blacks from some of its dormitories and facilities. Although the YMCA had a number of prominent African

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<sup>80</sup> Speech, “Democracy’s Voice Speaks,” May 22, 1943. *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974*, Foner (ed.) 1978 p.144.



Americans like Benjamin E. Mays and Channing Tobias among its leadership, the organization was riddled with inconsistencies in everyday practice at its local branches.

Ashram leaders wrote to the “Y,” stating that they

represent a group of Negroes and whites, some of them religious and social workers, who have been studying weekly, for the past few months, such social evils as discrimination. Ours has not been an academic interest. Some of us, having lived since December in this cooperative fellowship in Harlem, have come into close contact with the raw wounds made by race discrimination in the spirits of our Negro brothers, and have been moved, somewhat as Lincoln was when he first saw a slave auction to say, ‘by the grace of God, this evil must go!... In the course of our survey of instances of race discrimination in New York City, we were so frequently told of the practice of the downtown YMCA’s in excluding Negroes from their dormitories and facilities in general, that we felt we must investigate for ourselves... We have been studying the method developed preeminently by Mahatma Gandhi for tackling injustices by means of non-violent direct action, and we are convinced of the great possibilities of this way of campaigning against such plague spots in the body politic.’<sup>81</sup>

They cited the fact that Mr. Homer Nicholas, a recent president of the Harlem Christian Youth Conference, an active member of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and a member of the Harlem Ashram, was refused accommodation at the Sloan House YMCA in New York City,

and was told, in a matter-of-fact way, ‘we send you fellows [emphasis in original] up to the Harlem Y’... Here is a Christian [emphasis in original] association violating the basic tenet of Christian brotherhood. Here is an institution which in these days is joining with the rest of the country in professing devotion to democracy, while denying in its practice the fundamental principle of democracy.’<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Harlem Ashram to members of board of Directors, YMCA, August 12, 1941 *FOR Papers*, The Peace Collection at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

<sup>82</sup> Harlem Ashram to members of board of Directors, YMCA, August 12, 1941 *FOR Papers*, The Peace Collection at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

As noted earlier, Tobias and Mays had attended the 1937 conference of the YMCA in Mysore, India, where they had presented their observations regarding the problem of discrimination within the YMCA, and the contradictory ways in which race is applied to membership in the organization (Mjagkij 1994; Mathews 1937; Mays 1971).

The Ashram's persistent activism in calling attention to such practices in the New York City branches of the YMCA eventually resulted in reforms within the national organization itself. More generally, however, the Harlem Ashram successful demonstration of the power of localized action was crucial to the incorporation of Gandhi's *satyagraha* tactics by the modern Civil Rights Movement. In 1942, the Ashram launched a march from New York City to Washington to call for legislation in Congress against poll taxes and lynching. In Washington, members of the Harlem Ashram who were also with the "Free India Committee" demonstrated in front of the British embassy to demand independence for India. The Ashram included a number of African American clergy in its campaigns, a tactic that would become a key component of the Civil Rights Movement in Martin Luther King Jr.'s time. Furthermore, FOR and the Harlem Ashram were involved in the formation of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), a major organization within the Civil Rights coalition of the 1950s and 1960s (Meier and Rudwick 1973).

Cross national solidarity between Indians and African Americans was strengthened during the "Quit India" Campaign of the 1940s. The Campaign, launched on August 9, 1942, received widespread support from African Americans and coverage in the Black press. On July 8, 1942, Indian nationalists called for widespread civil

disobedience against the British in India, demanding that the British pack up and leave the subcontinent so that Indians might govern themselves. “Quit India” was one of Gandhi’s last major civil disobedience campaigns before Indian independence. Gandhi and Nehru framed this movement as a demand of non-White peoples for the end of imperial domination. Just before the launch of the campaign, Gandhi proclaimed “I do not regard England, or for that matter America, as free countries... They are free after their own fashion, free to hold in bondage the coloured races of the earth.”<sup>83</sup> Nehru (1982: 458-459) echoed Gandhi and pointed out that “There is too much talk of majesty and dignity of the Anglo-Saxon race or the German race or the Italian race. There are other races also in the world and we have had enough of such talks. This racial superiority can no more be tolerated.”

All major American newspapers covered Quit India, but the Black press took a special interest in it. Horace Cayton, a noted African American journalist, captured the sympathy of African Americans for Gandhi’s Quit India Campaign in *The Nation*:

It may seem odd to hear India discussed in poolrooms in South State Street in Chicago, but India and the possibility of the Indians obtaining their freedom from England by any means have captured the imagination of the American Negro. The feeling throughout the colored world is that there is going to be a change in the status of non-white people, and there is little fear that the change could be for the worse. Whereas for years Negroes have felt that their position was isolated and unalterable, some of them are now beginning to feel that dark people throughout the world will soon be on the march.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> “Speech at A.I.C.C. Meeting,” August 7, 1942, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 83, p. 203

<sup>84</sup> Horace Cayton, “Fighting for White Folks?” *The Nation*, September 26, 1942, p. 268.

A similar observation was made by the Black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, after polling its readership on the question, “Do you believe that India should contend for rights and her liberty now?” Nearly 88 percent of 10,000 respondents replied, “Yes.” The paper also found that there was no regional variation amongst African Americans in their support for Indian independence; 87.4 percent of Black respondents in the South supported Indian independence. “Overwhelmingly, from the north and from the south, from male and from female, the sincere belief was the same... India is justified in her contention for freedom – NOW!”<sup>85</sup> The Harlem-based *New York Amsterdam News* featured a front-page article on the Quit India Campaign which stated, “The bonds of unity, brotherhood and common fellowship between the brown and black millions of India and Africa are being drawn closer together.”<sup>86</sup> Two weeks into the Quit India campaign, the *Chicago Defender*, another major Black newspaper, called on its readership to sympathize with and support the campaign:

The sympathy of Negro America pours all-out for India. The demands of India are just. There are no ‘buts,’ nor can there be any. Negro America supports India’s demands. Negro America knows that the independence of India will aid the cause of the United Nations in the fight against Hitler and Hitlerism. It will aid the cause of colonial freedom; the cause of Africa and of black men in these United States. The cause of freedom and democracy is indivisible. We stand with India in order to do honor to our own demands for full and complete equality... Make no mistake about it. India is the victim of British imperialist greed, terror, and rapacity. Negro America is the victim of American imperialism, greed, terror, and rapacity...<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “Courier Poll Shows Overwhelming Support For India’s Fight: India Justified in Freedom Fight, Readers Declare” *Pittsburgh Courier* October 10, 1942, p. 1

<sup>86</sup> Reported in “World Watches India This Week; Gandhi in Challenge” *The Amsterdam News*, August 8, 1942, p. 1

<sup>87</sup> “The Atlantic Charter and India,” in *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1942, p. 14.

Black political activists, especially from the Left, took a keen interest in campaigning on behalf of the Quit India movement. Max Yergan, President of the National Negro Congress and an associate of Paul Robeson on the Council on African Affairs, linked the fate of African Americans to the movement in a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt: “We see etched in blood in India the stake which oppressed people all over the world have in this war of liberation.”<sup>88</sup> In August 1942, the Council on African Affairs organized an “Aid-India Rally,” a mass meeting attended by noted African American leaders including Channing Tobias (Secretary, National YMCA), Michael Quill (President, Transport Workers Union), as well as Kumar Goshal, an Indian lecturer and anti-colonial activist; Paul Robeson was the featured speaker at the event.<sup>89</sup> Scores of prominent African-American individuals, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Benjamin E. Mays, and A. Philip Randolph, and national organizations such as the NAACP and YMCA, signed a petition in 1942 to President Roosevelt urging him to support Indian independence, particularly in order to gain Indian support in the war effort.<sup>90</sup>

Countee Cullen, a major literary figure from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, also voiced his support for India’s independence struggle. Cullen’s poem, *Karenge ya Marengo*,<sup>91</sup> evoked parallels between the Indian and Black American struggles for freedom, taking its title directly from Gandhi’s stirring oration at the launch

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<sup>88</sup> *Quit India: The American Response to the 1942 Struggle*, 1979, p. 295.

<sup>89</sup> “Robeson to Talk at Aid-India Rally” *The New York Amsterdam Star News*, August 29, 1942, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> “FDR Asked to Help India in Battle for Her Freedom” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 17, 1942, p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> Cited from <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171334> last accessed September 1, 2012

of the Quit India movement, in which Gandhi said, *karenge ya marenge*, “we will do or die.”<sup>92</sup> Cullen asks,

Wherein are words sublime or noble? What  
Invests one speech with haloed eminence,  
Makes it the sesame for all doors shut,  
Yet in its like sees but impertinence?  
Is it the hue? Is it the cast of eye,  
The curve of lip or Asiatic breath,  
Which mark a lesser place for Gandhi’s cry  
Than “Give me liberty or give me death!”

Is Indian speech so quaint, so weak, so rude,  
So like its land enslaved, denied, and crude,  
That men who claim they fight for liberty  
Can hear this battle-shout impassively,  
Yet to their arms with high resolve have sprung  
At those same words cried in the English tongue?

By pairing Patrick Henry’s words with Gandhi’s, Cullen draws attention to similarities between the American and Indian struggles for independence.

Like Cullen, the Black poet laureate Langston Hughes recognized that racism was a global problem, as seen in his poem, “Jim Crow’s Last Stand”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Gandhi used the Hindi phrase “*Karenge Ya marenge*,” exhorting *satyagrahis* (participants in *satyagraha*) to “Do or Die,” “to seek and face death,” because “it is only when individuals go out to die that the nation will survive.” The movement called for Britain’s immediate withdrawal from India, and urged Indians to participate in a nation-wide non-violent mass movement ‘on widest possible scale.’ Gandhi’s words, “*Karenge ya marenge*” were inspired by “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” a poem by the British poet Tennyson, and have been subject of some debate. Some critics from post-colonial studies, like Young (2001:324-5), have interpreted “*karenge ya marenge*” to be a “most militant, combative phrase . . . against the British,” tantamount to a call for violence from Gandhi. They cite the fact that Tennyson’s poem referred to the Crimean War, a campaign in which the cavalry’s charge turned out to be a suicidal failure because of miscommunicated orders. Specifically, the lines ‘Theirs not to reason why/Theirs but to do and die’ are seen as the reference Gandhi was making to violence. Other scholars, like Trivedi (2011) argue that Gandhi’s phrase is hardly a call to violence because in his view, Gandhi’s choice of words, “Do OR die” is the direct opposite of “do AND die,” as the soldiers in Tennyson’s poem are called to do. *Karenge ya marenge* polarizes two options: to decide to do something OR to die without any benefit, whereas there is no such option in Tennyson’s poem; the soldiers will die anyway, whether they “do” or not. Trivedi notes that Gandhi follows the call “*karenge ya marenge*” with the statement that ‘Either we will make India free or lay down *our* lives in the attempt to free her.’ Also, in that same message to the country, Gandhi said that “Everyone is free to go the utmost length under *ahimsa*. Complete deadlock by strikes and other non-violent means” (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* vol. 83, p. 208). Gandhi’s words from later that day were, “Let every non-violent soldier of freedom write out the slogan ‘do or die’ on a piece of paper or cloth and stick it on his clothes, so that in case he died in the course of offering *satyagraha*, he might be distinguished by that sign from other elements who do not subscribe to non-violence.” (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 83, p. 208).

<sup>93</sup> Langston Hughes, “Jim Crow’s Last Stand,” in Rampersad (ed.) *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 2, *The Poems*, 1941-1950

December 7, 1941  
 Pearl Harbor put Jim Crow on the run.  
 That Crow can't fight for Democracy  
 And be the same old Crow he used to be –  
 Although right now, even yet today,  
 He still tries to act in the same old way.  
 But India and China and Harlem, too,  
 Have made up their minds Jim Crow is through.  
 Nehru said, before he went to jail,  
 Catch that Jim Crow bird, pull the feathers out his tail!

Hughes also supported the Quit India Movement, evincing its meaning for African American freedom in *the Chicago Defender* in January 1943,

If now is not the time, then there never was a time. Now is when all the conquered nations of Europe are asking for freedom. Now is when the Jews are asking for it. Now is when America is fighting to keep it. Now is when Nehru and Gandhi are sitting in jail silently demanding it for India. All the papers are full of editorials about it. And the radio is loaded down with it as part of our war aims. How anybody can expect American Negroes not to catch the freedom fever, too, is beyond me – unless they think we are deaf, dumb, stupid, and blind.<sup>94</sup>

Reflecting on Gandhi's imprisonment following the launch of the Quit India Campaign, Hughes later penned a poem in recognition of Gandhi's undertaking:

Mighty Britain, tremble!  
 Let your empire's standard sway  
 Lest it break entirely –  
 Mr. Ghandi [*sic*] fasts today.

You may think it foolish –  
 That there's no truth in what I say –  
 That all of Asia's watching  
 As Ghandi fasts today.

All of Asia's watching,  
 And I am watching, too,  
 For I am also jim crowed –

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<sup>94</sup> Langston Hughes, "Here to Yonder," *The Chicago Defender*, Jan 30, 1943, p. 14.

As India is jim crowed by you.

You know quite well, Great Britain,  
That it is not right  
To starve and beat and oppress  
Those who are not white.

Of course, we do it too,  
Here in the USA  
May Ghandi's prayers help us, as well,  
As he fasts today.<sup>95</sup>

Asa Philip Randolph, the preeminent Black labor organizer and founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was an instrumental figure in introducing Gandhi's mass-movement tactics into the Civil Rights Movement. One of the prime movers of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) of the 1940s, Randolph was inspired by Quit India Movement such that he called for an identical and immediate nationwide civil disobedience campaign by African Americans for civil rights. Randolph outlined his idea in a speech to the MOWM, calling on the Black community to "witness the strategy and maneuver of the people of India with mass civil disobedience and non-cooperation and marches to the sea to make salt. It may be said that the Indian people have not won their freedom. This is so, but they will win it." Randolph's reference to "marches to the sea" shows his long time interest in Gandhi's campaigns, such as the Salt March of 1930, as he sought an opportune moment for building a similar movement in the US.<sup>96</sup> By the beginning of 1943, a number of Black newspapers were enthusiastically reporting on Randolph's plan to initiate a Gandhi-style civil disobedience campaign in the United States. The front page of Harlem's *Amsterdam News* declared "Randolph Plans 'Civil

<sup>95</sup> Langston Hughes, "Ghandi is Fasting" in Rampersad (ed.) *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Vol. 3, The Poems, 1951-1960*

<sup>96</sup> A. Philip Randolph, "Excerpts from keynote address to the Policy Conference of the March on Washington Movement, meeting in Detroit, Michigan, September 26, 1942." Available at <http://www.aasd.umd.edu/chateauvert/mowmcall.htm> last accessed on September 2, 2013.



Disobedience' Campaign Patterned After Ghandi's [sic] Resistance to British Regime in India." "Randolph to Adopt Gandhi Technique" proclaimed the *Chicago Defender*, asking African Americans to adopt a number of Gandhian non-violent tactics to challenge racism and segregation in American society. These included defying the norms and laws of segregation, demanding to eat at Whites-Only restaurants, as well as boycotting segregated buses and trams. Blacks should engage in a campaign of civil disobedience, said the newspaper, and "if they are ejected and put out... they should not fight back, but that during that week Negroes should constantly keep up their program of refusing to enter jim-crow cars and waiting rooms in an orderly, peaceful and quiet manner."<sup>97</sup>

Randolph's appeal to African Americans to apply Gandhi's methods was not universally embraced by all Blacks. Several segments of the Black population wondered about whether Gandhi's non-violence would work at all in challenging racism in the US. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, for example, summarized the reservations among its readership about Gandhi's strategies in cultural terms, that "Negroes are Americans, not Orientals," and that *satyagraha* is better suited to "the way of the Oriental mind," "not to the temperament of the American Negro." Other comments reported in the newspaper were:

We are a minority... With all due respect to Ghandi and the problems of the Indian people... the technique would result in stark tragedy for the Negro people here in America... Such actions would motivate greater activity of reactionary forces in this country that keep race prejudice alive... There can be no non-violent civil disobedience campaign for a minority group... We would alienate the sympathy of those thinking Americans who at present have a feeling of good-will toward us and our cause."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> "Randolph Plans 'Civil Disobedience' Campaign Patterned After Ghandi's [sic] Resistance to British Regime in India," *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 9, 1943, p. 1; "Randolph to Adopt Gandhi Technique," *The Chicago Defender*, January 9, 1943, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> "Citizens Repudiate Non-Violence Program: Feel Ghandi's Way is Not Comparable to US Situation," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Apr. 24, 1943, p. 4.

Even W.E.B. Du Bois, an ardent admirer of Gandhi's activism in India, opposed Randolph's strategy, taking the *Pittsburgh Courier's* culturalist argument further: "Fasting, prayer, sacrifice and self-torture, have been bred into the very bone of India for more than three thousand years," he opined. "That is why the fasting to death of a little brown man in India today is world news, and despite every effort to counteract it, it is setting four hundred millions... a-quiver and may yet rock the world." Du Bois, whose politics had by then moved far to the left of his contemporaries, felt certain that such demonstrations in the United States "would be regarded as a joke or a bit of insanity."<sup>99</sup> Interestingly, Du Bois' assessment at the time, of the political feasibility of *satyagraha* by African Americans, echoed that of the young Gandhi in South Africa, decades earlier; Gandhi had felt uncertain then, as did his African contemporary, John Dube,<sup>100</sup> about whether Africans had the "temperament" for *satyagraha*. The later Gandhi, when queried by Thurman and Mays, had averred that *satyagraha* by African Americans might indeed work. However, Du Bois and others on the Left remained skeptical. In addition to their opinion that African Americans had neither the Indians' supposedly "inborn" ability for endurance nor the "self-discipline" for such physical rigors as fasting, these observers felt that the time for requests, petitions, and appeals had long passed. They felt that more radical measures were needed in dealing with the viciousness of American racism and the depth of economic inequality.

Some of Randolph's support came from individuals who were already experimenting with Gandhian ideas at a local scale. Ralph Templin, a founding member

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<sup>99</sup> These statements by W.E.B. Du Bois appear in "As the Crow Flies," *The New York Amsterdam News*, March 13, 1943, p. 10.

<sup>100</sup> Dube was the leader of the African National Congress when Gandhi was in South Africa (see chapter 4 of this dissertation)

of the Harlem Ashram, questioned DuBois' opposition to Gandhi's strategies in a letter to the *Amsterdam News*. "When Dr. W.E.B. DuBois and others doubt Gandhi's plan in its application to people of the West in general and to Negro Americans in particular, they simply show that they do not themselves understand what the plan involves or wherein its achievements lie." Templin pointed out that Gandhi's ideas and activism were in fact inspired by the American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau and his involvement in the abolitionist movement in the United States. To Templin, therefore, there was nothing alien about Gandhi's ideas as far as American culture or African Americans were concerned. Templin argued instead that *satyagraha* could be adapted creatively to the US context.<sup>101</sup>

Randolph rejoined that his call for a civil disobedience campaign was not like Gandhi's Quit India Movement, which called for a transfer of power from the British to Indian nationalists. Instead, he wanted the March on Washington Movement to call on the United States to recognize Blacks as equal citizens, as the early Gandhi had done in South Africa when demanding equal rights for Indians as citizens of the British empire. Randolph repeated that if Blacks wished to enjoy the rights and privileges due to them under the American Constitution, they ought to exercise "Constitutional obedience" or "non-violent good will direct action" as a way of demonstrating African American patriotism as well as their entitlement under the Constitution.<sup>102</sup> Gandhi himself, however, had moved on after realizing the inconsistency and ultimate futility of claiming equality for Indians under unjust British laws, to demand total independence from the

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<sup>101</sup> Templin's statements appear in "Non-Violence Method Called 'All-Sided Sword,'" *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 29, 1943, p. 10.

<sup>102</sup> "Randolph Tells Technique of Civil Disobedience" *The Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1943, p. 13.

British for India. In light of this reality, Randolph, much to own his consternation, appeared conservative, and was met with opposition from the Left, notably from W.E.B. DuBois. Although his opponents among African Americans nominally supported the need for some sort of campaign, they felt that “Constitutional obedience” perhaps contradicted the idea of civil *disobedience*. Returning to the cultural arguments printed in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Randolph retorted that Gandhi’s strategies were no more culturally alien to the US and African Americans than Christianity, and that in rejecting *satyagraha*, “by the same token of reasoning, one could condemn Christianity and reject it as a product of an oriental clime...Jesus Christ, like Gandhi was born in the eastern world.”<sup>103</sup> Randolph elaborated on his understanding of “non-violent, good-will direct action” in his foreword to George H. Houser’s (1945: 7) book, *Erasing the Color Line*, as “applied Christianity” and “applied democracy. It is Christianity and democracy brought out of gilded churches and solemn legislative halls and made to work as a dynamic force in our day-to-day life.”

The MOWM did not gather momentum in the 1940s but it did raise African Americans’ awareness of Gandhi’s strategies and laid some of the groundwork for the civil rights campaigns that unfolded over the next two decades. The MOWM also prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue an Executive Order in 1941 banning discrimination in the defense industries during World War II. Randolph continued to push for a march on Washington, which led President Harry S. Truman to issue another Executive Order in 1948, ending segregation in the armed services (Fredrickson 1995). As a *quid pro quo* for Truman’s action, Randolph called off marches on Washington, just

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<sup>103</sup> “Randolph Tells Technique of Civil Disobedience” in *The Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1943, p. 13.

as the early Gandhi, decades before, had refrained from pressing Jan Smuts in South Africa on the issue of Indian immigration, when Indians had obtained the recognition that they had sought of non-Christian marriages (see Chapter 4).

A “march on Washington” eventually did occur on August 28, 1963, on the morrow of the death of the African American luminary W.E.B. Du Bois, when Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. On that occasion, Bayard Rustin of CORE (Congress on Racial Equality, a constituent organization of the Civil Rights Coalition), remarked that “Gandhi had a more direct influence on the development of civil rights strategy than any other individual, here or abroad” (cited from Chappell 2004: 20-21).

### **The Cold War**

As the Cold War gained momentum, the evolving transnational discourse between South Asian and African Americans was interrupted, punctuated, and redirected. Ideological tensions between the US and USSR mounted during the Cold War, and international solidarity movements became marginalized in the African American struggle for civil rights and freedom. As a consequence, the Cold War had a serious impact on alliances and cooperation between India and Black Americans. The fact that India leaned toward the Soviet sphere of influence caused further anxiety for those activists who conceptualized civil rights as a reward for demonstrating patriotism to the United States. As the Cold War escalated, mainstream civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, began to steer away from left-leaning internationalism as well as its

spokespersons in order to gain concessions from the US government. The organization calculated that overt friendliness toward a Soviet-leaning India would not be in its best interest as it was poised to enter negotiations with US authorities.<sup>104</sup> According to Horne (2008: 180), “the fact remains that the international outlook that characterized Black America in the first half of the twentieth century was barely recognizable afterward.” It was within this tense ideological climate that the earlier civil rights agenda became pared down from its more internationalist stance. For example, an increasingly conservative Black leadership expunged W.E.B. DuBois from the NAACP, the very organization that he had founded. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum during the 1950s and 1960s, the national Black leadership (now mainly consisting of clergy) sought to demonstrate their “constitutional obedience” and sense of national loyalty by sidelining DuBois, Paul Robeson, and others on the Left who emphasized third-worldism and socialism. Under the watchful eye of McCarthyism in the United States, civil rights organizations and their leaders began to embrace conservatism in order to avoid charges of Communist loyalties, as well as to retain their funding. Du Bois and other critics were dismayed.

In the newly independent nation of India, Nehru and other nationalists began to shift gears from protest to rule, and prepared to confront the *realpolitik* of international relations. Six months after gaining independence, Nehru sent a directive to the US Ambassador, “In the USA there is the Negro problem. Our sympathies are entirely with

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<sup>104</sup> While the leadership of the NAACP tried to distance itself from radical internationalism, the organization did, nevertheless, support immigration and citizenship rights for South Asians. In 1946, the NAACP supported legislation to lift immigration restrictions against South Asians and called on the government to enable them to become eligible for full citizenship.

the Negroes. There is no reason to hide this because that is our basic policy.” However, Nehru added: “any conduct which might entangle us or raise difficulties should be avoided.”<sup>105</sup> As he negotiated the complex world of international relations as Prime Minister of India, Nehru moved away from direct involvement in Black American affairs.

Schisms in the internationalist solidarist position were evident in June of 1949, when Nehru’s sister, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, traveled through the United States as the newly appointed Indian Ambassador to the US. Pandit was received warmly by the African American community and given a number of awards and recognitions from Black organizations, including an honorary degree from Howard University.<sup>106</sup> Howard University President Mordecai Johnson praised Pandit for her commitment to combating racism, particularly recognizing her efforts to draw attention to South African racism at the United Nations in 1946, when few had been willing to do so. DuBois, one of her ardent admirers, had once characterized her as “a charming woman in every way; physically beautiful, simple and cordial, and she represents as few people could, nearly 400 million people, and represents them by right of their desire and her personality and not by the will of Great Britain.”<sup>107</sup> In her acceptance speech, Pandit emphasized the inter-connectedness of struggles, “because freedom is indivisible, there can be no lasting freedom for any nation until liberty is assured to all races, peoples, and communities.”<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Cited from *Nehru’s Collected Works*, September 1946 to January 1947, Available at Google Books [http://books.google.com/books?id=j\\_IdAAAAMAAJ&q=%22in+the+USA+there+is+a+negro+problem%22+and+%22any+conduct+which+might+entangle+us+or+raise+difficulties+should+be+avoided%22+and+nehu&dq=%22in+the+USA+there+is+a+negro+problem%22+and+%22any+conduct+which+might+entangle+us+or+raise+difficulties+should+be+avoided%22+and+nehu&hl=en&sa=X&ei=MvpEUvyGPMWp4AOXrYHIDA&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA](http://books.google.com/books?id=j_IdAAAAMAAJ&q=%22in+the+USA+there+is+a+negro+problem%22+and+%22any+conduct+which+might+entangle+us+or+raise+difficulties+should+be+avoided%22+and+nehu&dq=%22in+the+USA+there+is+a+negro+problem%22+and+%22any+conduct+which+might+entangle+us+or+raise+difficulties+should+be+avoided%22+and+nehu&hl=en&sa=X&ei=MvpEUvyGPMWp4AOXrYHIDA&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA)

<sup>106</sup> In addition to Howard University’s degree, awarded in 1949, she was recognized by West Virginia’s Human Rights Commission (1950) and Charleston’s Women’s Improvement League (1950), the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Chicago (1950) and Washington (1951), the United Negro College Fund (1950), among others.

<sup>107</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “DuBois, White Run from Photo With Indian Stooges,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1945, p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> “900 Get Degrees at Howard: Mme Pandit, Bunche Honored,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 1949, p. 2

However, the African American leadership began to grow disappointed as her tour drew to a close. They noticed that she was not as forthcoming in her remarks about the deplorable state of US race relations as they had expected her to be, especially given her previously radical stance as the leader of the Indian delegation to the United Nations three years earlier. Now it seemed to Du Bois and others that Pandit was equivocating, perhaps even deliberately avoiding denouncing American racism in public. Her criticisms seemed toned down now, in contrast to her prior condemnation of South African racism and the bold parallels she had drawn with American racism. Now, as Indian Ambassador to the US, Pandit's remarks were muted. Her prevarication on issues that she had openly professed before was not lost on DuBois, as Pandit tried to adhere to diplomatic protocols as ambassador. He had, by then, become frustrated with the conservative political shifts all around, even among his fellow African Americans, and therefore remained unconvinced. He retorted that as far as he was concerned, the change in Pandit's position had to do with her acute sense of political expediency, having now become "Madame Ambassador":

Mrs. Pandit realized that while it was popular here to defend Indians in South Africa, it was never popular to defend Negroes anywhere. It was not long ago that the head of one of our colored sororities had invited Madame Pandit to a celebration which was beautifully carried out...[They] congratulated Madame Pandit on her defense of Negroes and their cause. Madame Pandit demurred; she said that she had been misunderstood; that she did not go along wholly with what Negroes in America were saying and trying to do; that she advocated patience and waiting, etc. She took the path only too familiar to us. The ladies of the sorority felt insulted and cruelly disillusioned. But all this is perhaps natural and to be expected. Madame Pandit is now ambassador in Washington, that "Jim Crow" city; she is flattered and dined by high officials...All this typifies the long, hard path which lies before India and calls for our sympathy and help, even though we



feel certain unpleasant results. India has a long, hard way; in her climbing the cobbled path she has our sympathy and hope.<sup>109</sup>

Prime Minister Nehru's state visit to the US just three months later was equally disappointing for Du Bois and other African American leaders who had long expressed solidarity with India's anti-colonial struggle. To the chagrin of many who had been anticipating his visit since the euphoria of Indian independence, Nehru's official itinerary did not include any meetings with Black leaders or visits to the Black community. Noting this omission on Nehru's part, poet Langston Hughes editorialized in the *Chicago Defender* on behalf of the Black community that in order

to understand America, Nehru should visit Negro ghettos too. Being colored myself, and having read in the papers that one of the objectives of Nehru's visit is to understand the United States better, I find myself very much wishing that he would come and spend a few days in Harlem.<sup>110</sup>

On the other hand, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, an ideological adversary of Du Bois, who served as editor of *The Crisis* after Du Bois had been expelled, sought to lobby Vijayalakshmi Pandit for a private meeting with Nehru. Nehru reluctantly acquiesced and extended his stay to meet with Black officials after his official state tour, which ended on November 3, 1949. On November 5, Walter White, another conservative adversary of Du Bois in the NAACP, and diplomat Ralph Bunche, convened a meeting with Nehru that included several prominent Black leaders at the Park Avenue home of Mrs. Robert

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<sup>109</sup> Cited in "As the Crow Flies," a column by Du Bois in *The Chicago Globe*, August 12, 1950, as compiled and edited by Herbert Aptheker in *Newspaper Columns by W.E.B. DuBois*, Vol. 2, 1986, p. 1083.

<sup>110</sup> Langston Hughes, "To Understand America, Nehru Should Visit Negro Ghettos Too" *The Chicago Defender*, Nov. 5, 1949, p. 6. See also Trezzvant W. Anderson, "Will Nehru See Everything Here?" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 22, 1949, p. 5.

Lehman, a New York socialite.<sup>111</sup> Nehru met with the assembly, expressed understanding and solidarity with the plight of African Americans, and lamented that his official position as Prime Minister limited his ability to speak out against racial discrimination in the US because diplomatic protocols prevented a foreign head of state from criticizing the country he was visiting. He told the gathering that

while he had talked about equality for racial minorities and the world problems affecting color and race in many of the numerous addresses he had delivered during his rapid but very inclusive visit to the United States, he had deliberately avoided discussing the Negro problem specifically. He said he felt it would have been highly improper for him to come into another country, especially on an official visit and venture to criticize the internal policies of that country.<sup>112</sup>

Nehru attended the meeting of the NAACP the next day, and was presented with a lifetime membership in the organization. Walter White and others at the NAACP congratulated themselves that Nehru's attendance at the NAACP was achieved "without help from the State Department and, in fact, in spite of the State Department."<sup>113</sup> Du Bois, however, was not in the mood for such theater, impressed neither by Nehru's finesse nor the NAACP's apparent coup in obtaining a meeting with him.

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<sup>111</sup> The leaders who met Nehru included Arthur Spingarn, Roy Wilkins, and Louis Wright, all of the NAACP; Robert C. Weaver, a professor at NYU; Mrs. Robert L. Vann, the publisher of the Pittsburgh Courier, and Claude Barnett, director of the Associated Negro Press. Also present were Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of the National Council of Negro Women; Mordecai Johnson, the President of Howard University; William Hastie, the Governor of the Virgin Islands; and Lester Granger, the Director of the National Urban League. See "Prime Minister Nehru Gets First Hand Briefing on Problem; Dr. Bunche, Walter White Serve as Chairmen of Meeting," *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov. 9, 1949, p. 1.

<sup>112</sup> "Prime Minister Nehru Gets First Hand Briefing on Problem; Dr. Bunche, Walter White Serve as Chairmen of Meeting," *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov. 9, 1949, p. 1; "Nehru Presented Life Membership in NAACP," *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov. 11, 1949, p. 2 and "Jawaharlal Nehru Joins the NAACP," *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 12, 1949, p. 1.

<sup>113</sup> "Nehru Presented Life Membership in NAACP," *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov. 11, 1949, p. 2 and "Jawaharlal Nehru Joins the NAACP," *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 12, 1949, p. 1; "Prime Minister Nehru Gets First Hand Briefing on Problem; Dr. Bunche, Walter White Serve as Chairmen of Meeting," *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov. 9, 1949, p. 1; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 219; "Nehru Presented Life Membership in NAACP," *Atlanta Daily World*, Nov. 11, 1949, p. 2 and "Jawaharlal Nehru Joins the NAACP," *New York Amsterdam News*, Nov. 12, 1949, p. 1.

Among African-Americans, civil rights activists either had to accept the realities of the Cold War and temper their radicalism, or face investigation under McCarthyism. As Horne (2008: 194) observes, in the Cold War atmosphere, African American alliances with India shifted from “collaborating for mutual advantage against white supremacy and imperialism... toward collaboration with the US ruling elite against ‘communism’ in India.” For example, one decade into the Cold War, the gifted singer and radical orator Paul Robeson was summoned to appear before the Congressional House Committee on Un-American Activities and interrogated at length about his anti-racist and anti-imperial activism, particularly about a statement he allegedly made at a Paris peace conference. The Committee cross-examined him repeatedly about a remark attributed to him that Blacks would not join the US in a war against the Soviet Union, because they were being lynched by the US. Robeson responded that he was speaking alongside Dr. Yusuf Dadoo of South Africa (discussed in the previous chapter), an outspoken critic of racism, and that the statement was geared toward

students from various parts of the colonial world, students who since then have become very important in their governments, in places like Indonesia and India, and in many parts of Africa, two thousand students asked me and Mr. [Dr. Y.M.] Dadoo, a leader of the Indian people in South Africa, when we addressed this conference, and remember I was speaking to a peace conference, they asked me and Mr. Dadoo to say there that they were struggling for peace, that they did not want war against anybody. Two thousand students who came from populations that would range to six or seven hundred million people.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of US Passports*, 84<sup>th</sup> Congress, Part 3, June 12, 1956; in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, Eric Bentley, ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p.770.

When asked pointedly about whether by stating that he belonged to the “American resistance movement which fights against American imperialism, just as the resistance movement fought against Hitler” he was referring to any disloyalty to the United States on the part of African Americans. Robeson replied emphatically, “You bet your life,” that he was indeed part of an American resistance movement, one that included “Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman” [who] were underground railroaders, and fighting for our freedom.” He maintained that his statement had been a call for global solidarity of people of color against racist and imperial domination: “Four hundred million in India, and millions everywhere, have told you, precisely, that the colored people are not going to die for anybody: they are going to die for their independence.” Robeson was subsequently accused of equating the US with a fascist state and was steadily discredited and isolated in the United States by the FBI. The FBI was able to gather testimony against his “un-American” activities from famous Black personalities like Jackie Robinson and Black anti-Communists like Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, who even used his office to distribute negative propaganda about Robeson, at the FBI’s behest.<sup>115</sup>

India, however, took the unexpected step in 1958 to recognize Robeson’s artistic and political contributions to anti-imperial and anti-racist struggles around the world. Nehru’s daughter and future prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, initiated “Paul Robeson Day” in India as a celebration in honor of her father’s friend. The US government warned India against the idea and tried to exert diplomatic pressure to cancel

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<sup>115</sup> Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of the Unauthorized Use of US Passports*, 84<sup>th</sup> Congress, Part 3, June 12, 1956; in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, Eric Bentley, ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p.770.

preparations, but failed. Nehru himself endorsed the “All-India Paul Robeson Celebration” and proceeded to observe it. The United States viewed the celebration as Communist-inspired and anti-American, and took it as evidence that “India was going Communist” (Foner 1978:5).

As Blacks fought for civil rights in the context of the Cold War, many Black leaders actively sought to discipline, distance themselves from, or silence outspoken activists within the ranks of their organizations, particularly if they had become popularly identified with the political Left or if their ideological stance were not in harmony with their organizations’ official positions. By the time Gandhi emerged as an inspiration for Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists, the earlier discourse of Black-Indian transnational solidarity against race and empire had more or less dissipated. Thus, during its first phase, the Civil Rights Movement focused on inclusion in the American polity. For example, the movement concentrated its energies on fighting for desegregation of public facilities and voting rights. Using Gandhi’s approach of nonviolent non-cooperation against unjust laws in South Africa, the movement successfully used boycotts, sit-ins and mass protest to bring about an end to legal segregation. This was no small victory; it culminated in the passage of the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965. During this phase of the movement, King and his associates tried to demonstrate their constitutional obedience in exchange for rights. King was careful to avoid violating any federal laws, to the dismay of many younger activists in the movement, for fear of losing the tentative and hard-won support of the Johnson administration. Emulating the South African Gandhi in the manner that A. Philip Randolph had advocated during the 1940s, King fought for rights and recognition within

the legal confines of a racist polity. However, during the last three years of his life, King's politics began to shift toward the Left as he acquired a more radical perspective, similar to that of the anti-imperial Gandhi. King spoke out against America's imperial pursuits in Vietnam and dedicated himself to forming the Poor People's Campaign, an inter-racial, class-based movement that called for structural economic reforms to address poverty in American society. These efforts ended abruptly with King's assassination.

### **King, Gandhi, and the Modern Civil Rights Movement**

The modern Civil Rights Movement gained national attention on December 1, 1955 with Rosa Parks' arrest in defiance of southern convention and law, when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a White passenger in Montgomery, Alabama. Through the organizational infrastructure of a Montgomery-based organization called the Women's Political Council, civil rights activists launched a 381-day long boycott of Montgomery buses in which about 50,000 Black passengers participated. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., a new preacher at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (a middle-class Black congregation in Montgomery), was elected to head the Montgomery Improvement Association. King emerged as the movement's spokesperson and subsequently became the face of the civil rights struggle in the US. With the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King and his associates successfully launched an American *Satyagraha*.

The modern Civil Rights Movement was informed by a transnational exchange of ideas. In addition to Black resistance traditions in the US, developments in European colonies around the world also inspired the movement, particularly the struggle in South Africa during the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as noted earlier. *Satyagraha*, Gandhi's strategy

of nonviolent socio-political transformation, had a profound influence on the CRM, particularly on King, the movement's most prominent spokesperson. "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method," wrote King (cited from C. King 1993:37), as he attempted to mould his strategy directly along lines tried by Gandhi just decades earlier. Lewis (1978:86), a major biographer of King, notes that "for Martin and his associates ... non-violent passive resistance was a *Weltansicht*, not merely a technique but the sole authentic approach to the problem of social injustice."

South Africa was the birthplace of *satyagraha*, Gandhi's political philosophy. As noted in chapter 4, it was in South Africa, while fighting for the rights of Indian indentured workers, that Gandhi began his rigorous process of self-examination and social critique. Shedding the arrogance and ignorance of his youth, Gandhi began to develop and test a method of compassionate resistance fashioned out of the Indian traditions of asceticism, austerity, and charity. King developed an interest in Gandhi through a number of sources. Baldwin (1995) attributes it to King's family background. For example, King's father, Martin Luther King, Sr., was in correspondence with the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa. ANC leader Albert Luthuli, a protégé of Gandhi, visited Atlanta in 1948, where he was received by a number of African-American leaders, including King's father. The elder King frequently discussed global politics with his son, who was an aspiring young preacher at the time. They spoke about Luthuli's visit, the struggle against White supremacy in South Africa, and Gandhi's influence on resistance strategies in that country.

As a student at Crozer Theological Seminary, King began to develop a strong intellectual interest in the role of Christianity in struggles for social justice. “Not until I entered Crozer Theological Seminary in 1948, ... did I begin a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social ills” noted King in *Stride Toward Freedom*, (cited from Lewis 1978:34). He was captivated by lectures given by Professor George W. Davis on the psychology of religion. Davis, according to West (1988:8), saw God “as a deity intimately and intricately involved in human history – a working, toiling God who labors through human beings to realize the ultimate end and aim of history.” Davis would analyze Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence in his lectures to show his students that Gandhi was doing “God’s work” (West 1988). *Satyagraha* had struck a chord in King and resonated with his own conviction that Christianity can be a vehicle for positive social change despite its imperialist and racist history. Addresses by Crozer President Benjamin E. Mays, introduced earlier, further stimulated King’s interest in Gandhi. According to Baldwin (1995), Mays frequently discussed developments in South Africa and India during the compulsory chapel services at the seminary. In addition, King (1998:23) recalls a lecture by Mordecai Johnson, the eminent theologian and President of Howard University, on his travels in India: “His message was so profound and electrifying,” wrote King, “that I left the meeting and bought a half-dozen books on Gandhi’s life and works.”

King’s encounter with *satyagraha* continued. In March 1957, while traveling to Ghana to see that country’s independence celebrations, he met a delegation of South African clergy who were associated with nonviolent resistance campaigns there, that originally had been set in motion by Gandhi. The clergymen were protesting South



African laws that restricted the rights of Indians to own or occupy land. King was impressed that over 15,000 people had pledged to defy the law on June 13, 1946, and that protestors had even pitched tents and begun to squat in defiance. Government authorities had taken no action when White vigilante groups attacked the Indian protestors. The racist violence toward the unarmed, nonviolent Indians had deeply troubled one Reverend Michael Scott, an English Anglican priest and member of the delegation to Ghana. He recounted to King his encounter with a Hindu woman activist who had been attacked and left to bleed. As the woman lay dying, she had told Scott that “it is not their fault, they don’t know what they are doing.” Astounded by her empathy, Scott shared with King that “her religion has taught her more than the attackers had found in the story of the crucifixion.”<sup>116</sup> More than 2000 nonviolent protestors were arrested in the 1946 campaign.

King was further interested to learn about the Defiance Campaign of 1952, a joint effort by Africans and Indians in South Africa to oppose the policies of the apartheid regime. King expressed deep admiration for a bus boycott outside of Johannesburg, in which thousands of ordinary Indians and Africans jointly protested segregated transportation, unjust fares, and poor service by choosing to walk ten to fifteen miles a day, in the tradition of Gandhi. Gandhi’s reasoning that “the willingness to suffer will eventually make the oppressor ashamed of his method” (cited from Baldwin 1995:10) had found an avid supporter in King, who by then had become thoroughly convinced of *satyagraha*’s applicability to the US context. Thus, international political events and

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<sup>116</sup> See <http://www.anc.co.za> last accessed in 2011.

ideological trends, in addition to African-American traditions of resistance, influenced both King's political thought and the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement.

Visiting India in 1959, King told newspaper reporters in New Delhi that "to other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim. This is because India means to me Mahatma Gandhi, a truly great man of the age" (cited from Momin 2001). King had an audience with Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, with whom he discussed the topics of racism and caste prejudice. Nehru informed King that the Indian Constitution held caste discrimination to be an illegal and punishable offense, and that India's affirmative action policy promoted the "untouchable" castes in university admissions and public sector employment. When a member of King's delegation inquired as to whether such a policy amounted to discrimination in reverse, Nehru replied, "Well it may be, but this is our way of atoning for centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people" (cited from Lewis, 1978:100). The encounter with Prime Minister Nehru impelled King to formulate a program of government-promoted compensation for African-Americans (Lewis 1978:100), a matter that he would return to during the later years of the Civil Rights Movement.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, King increasingly referenced Gandhi as a model and source of inspiration for his activism.<sup>117</sup> In the midst of the

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<sup>117</sup> While MLK and many of his associates in the SCLC embraced Gandhi's civil disobedience methods, many in the civil rights coalition did not. Younger activists, especially of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), were skeptical of MLK's advocacy of Gandhian methods. After the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four young Black girls, Anne Moody (2004), a veteran member of SNCC observed, "If Martin Luther King thinks nonviolence is really going to work for the South as it did for India, then he is out of his mind." In 1969, when SNCC was taken over by Black Power activists, the organization changed its name to the Student National Coordinating Committee, partly because of its reservation about having "non-violence" as part of its identity. The Black Power Movement (BPM) had a strong rhetoric of transnationalism as well, but did not evoke Gandhi's legacy, but instead leaned more toward the ideologies and movements originating in Cuba, China, Algeria and North Vietnam. The BPM also made frequent symbolic and rhetorical use of violence in order to distinguish itself from the those allied with King, non-violence, and the SCLC. (See Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, 2007)

Montgomery Bus Boycott, he spoke before the congregation of the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, one of his first speeches in the North since the beginning of the boycott. He drew connections between Gandhi's movement in India and the bus boycott in Montgomery: "Gandhi was able to break loose from the political and economic domination by the British and brought the British Empire to its knees. Let's now use this method in the United States."<sup>118</sup>

The sit-in campaigns launched by the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s also drew inspiration from Gandhi's *satyagrahas*. For example, students who participated in the famous sit-in at the Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina, which then launched the sit-in movement of the 1960s, had watched a documentary on Gandhi's campaigns in India and had read literature on Gandhi prior to their protest (Oppenheimer 1989). King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), even instituted an annual "Gandhi Award" to recognize an individual "doing the most during the year for better race relations through use of direct, non-violent action."<sup>119</sup> When some student activists complained about the poor clothing they received in Southern jails, SCLC clergyman James Bevel chided that they should not complain because "Gandhi had wrapped a rag around his balls and brought down the entire British empire" (cited from Halberstam 1998).

Besides the ideological influence of South Asian thought and practice on African Americans, a few South Asian individuals were also actively engaged in the Civil Rights

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<sup>118</sup> "King Speaks at Big Rally in Brooklyn," cited from The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, Stanford University, <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu>, last accessed September 3, 2013. Also see Stanley Rowland Jr., "2500 Here Hail Boycott Leader," *New York Times*, March 26, 1956, p. 27.

<sup>119</sup> "CORE Will Convene in St. Louis," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 25, 1960. p. 9.

Movement. Several prominent South Asian visitors traveling to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s pledged solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement and joined it for the duration of their stay. For example, Kaka Kalelkar, a close associate of Gandhi and a Member of the Indian Parliament, visited Montgomery, Alabama in 1958. Kalelkar wrote to King, “I have no doubt about the ultimate success of the coloured people. The American constitution is on your side, and so are justice and the spirit of the times with you. Need I add that the prayers of millions of my country folk are also on your side?”<sup>120</sup>

Ram Manohar Lohia, a leading Indian socialist, was also a major supporter of the African American struggle against racism. Lohia toured the American South in the early 1950s and urged African Americans to employ nonviolent civil disobedience tactics against Jim Crow. He lectured on *satyagraha* at Fisk University’s annual Race Relations Institute and spoke at the Highlander Folk School, a racially integrated model institution for community organizing in Tennessee, where both King and Rosa Parks later attended workshops. Returning to the US as an Indian Member of Parliament in 1964, Lohia relished an opportunity to offer *satyagraha* to Mississippi state authorities by refusing to leave a Jim Crow dining establishment, called Morrison’s Cafeteria, as was required of non-Whites. After being turned away by the restaurant staff the day before, Lohia returned on the next day, May 28, 1964, and refused to leave the premises. Deliberately courting arrest and attention, Lohia was dressed in Indian garb made of white *khadi* (“homespun” Indian cotton), a dark coat, and slippers, trying to be as visible as possible. He was arrested by police but released after fifteen minutes some distance away from the restaurant without further mistreatment. However, news of the arrest quickly reached the

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<sup>120</sup> Letter from Kaka Kalelkar to Martin Luther King, Jr. available at <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu>. last accessed September 3, 2013.

State Department, which soon issued a formal apology to the Indian Ambassador.<sup>121</sup>

Lohia told reporters that both the State Department and the Indian Embassy “may go to hell,” because his treatment and segregation in general were a “tyranny against the United States Constitution.” Segregation, he believed, was less a political issue than the result of a moral rot at the core of the American nation. He had come to Mississippi, he said, to study this “foul spot where injustice rules.”<sup>122</sup> Standing firm in his conviction, Lohia was not interested in an official apology from Adlai Stevenson, the American Ambassador to the United Nations. Stevenson should rather apologize to the Statue of Liberty, Lohia had scoffed, according to Reverend Edwin King, the White pastor of Tougaloo College, and an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).<sup>123</sup>

Like many segregated Southern establishments, Morrison’s Cafeteria sometimes made exceptions to serve foreigners. Lohia, as an Indian dignitary, would have been admitted on the grounds that he was a foreigner and “not a Negro,” but he was denied entry because of some prior unrelated incidents involving two other South Asians, Savithri Chattopadhyay, an Indian, and Hamid Kizilbash, a Pakistani, both academics at Tougaloo College, who had been engaged in campaigns to desegregate Jackson, Mississippi. Prior to Lohia’s arrival, Chattopadhyay and Kizilbash had tried repeatedly to gain entry into Morrison’s Cafeteria in order to break the color bar. Morrison’s staff responded that they were under orders from management to deny admission to South Asians henceforth, even as foreigners, because not only were they racially “difficult to distinguish from the Negro,” but were engaged in actively protesting segregation. The

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<sup>121</sup> “Mississippi Ousts Indian Politician From a Cafeteria,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 1964, p. 10; Also see “US Plans an Apology,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1964, p.10.

<sup>122</sup> Lohia’s statements appear in “Jackson, Miss., Hit by Indian Socialist,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 1964, p. 25

<sup>123</sup> Edwin King, “Lohia and the American Civil Rights Movement” *Gandhi Marg* 59 (1971), pp. 270-277.

fact that Morrison's had chosen that moment to extend Jim Crow to South Asians coincided well with Lohia's arrival, a development that he took full advantage of.<sup>124</sup> The incident is significant because it marks the moment when local Whites had learned to extend Jim Crow to South Asians, whom they now viewed as a threat. In reporting the incident, the *Chicago Defender* observed that Lohia's protest against Jim Crow as part of a global "revolution against color inequality." The "short, brown-skinned political leader," the *Defender* noted, had been arrested twenty times previously for non-violent civil disobedience. When asked about being refused service at the restaurant in Jackson and getting arrested yet again for refusing to leave the restaurant, Lohia joked that he was "really grateful" that it had happened because, "the fact that I had not been arrested in America was something of a blemish on my record." Lohia said that he courted arrest because he wished to participate in the "revolution against color inequality."<sup>125</sup>

On the night before his arrest, Lohia had met with many local activists at Tougaloo College who belonged to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a major partner in the civil rights coalition. He discussed *satyagraha* with them in great detail, thus beginning a conversation that would continue long after his arrest and departure from the United States. According to Reverend Edwin King, Lohia impressed upon SNCC activists to be patient in the face of ignorance and political lethargy. *Satyagraha* without long-term goals, Lohia warned, or detached from economic resistance, would be ineffective. He vowed that upon his return to India he would

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<sup>124</sup> In Clarice T. Campbell, *Civil Rights Chronicle: Letters from the South*, p. 218-219.

<sup>125</sup> Lohia's statements appear in "Color Arrest Pleases Man From India, *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 3, 1964, p. 6.

continue promoting awareness of economic inequality, women's rights, as well as caste and color injustice, which had brought him to Mississippi in the first place.<sup>126</sup>

### **SOUTH ASIANS IN THE UNITED STATES AFTER 1965: “HINDOO MENACE” OR “MODEL MINORITY”?**

The modern Civil Rights Movement, inspired in part by Gandhi's activism in South Africa and in India, was one of the most important social movements in American history. Its victories included the end of *de jure* segregation and the affirmation of the right of all Americans to vote with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Also during this period, the United States government, for its own reasons, was revising its restrictive and racist immigration laws (Ngai 2004). Just three months after the historic Voting Rights Act, President Lyndon Johnson also signed into law the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act at the Statue of Liberty in New York (see Figure 6.1). With the imposing Statue in the background, Johnson criticized the national origins quota of the old immigration policy as “violat[ing] the basic principle of American democracy – the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man. It has been un-American in the highest sense, because it has been untrue to the faith that brought thousands to these shores even before we were a country.”<sup>127</sup> In 1965, prior to the passage of the Immigration Reform Act (IRA), fewer than 600 Asian immigrants had come to the

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<sup>126</sup> Edwin King, “Lohia and the American Civil Rights Movement” in *Gandhi Marg* 59, 1971, pp. 270-277.

<sup>127</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 1966, pp. 1037-1040.)

United States. In 1970, almost 10,000 entered the US. In 1965, Asian Americans were less than 1 percent of the total population, their numbers limited hitherto by racist immigration policies that were designed specifically to exclude them (discussed above).



**Figure 6.1:** President Lyndon Johnson signs the Immigration Reform Act of 1965.  
**Source:** Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library

As a consequence of increased Asian immigration after the passage of the IRA, Asian Americans now make up close to 6 percent of the total population. Some demographic characteristics are introduced below.



<b>US Asian Group</b>	<b>Population (millions)</b>	<b>% of Total US Asians</b>
<b>Chinese</b>	4,010,114	23.2
<b>Filipino</b>	3,416,840	19.7
<b>Indian</b>	3,183,063	18.4
<b>Vietnamese</b>	1,737,433	10.0
<b>Korean</b>	1,706,822	9.9
<b>Japanese</b>	1,304,286	7.5
<b>Total US Asians</b>	17,320,856	100.0

**Table 6.2** The Six Largest Asian Groups in the United States  
**Source:** The Asian Population: 2010, US Census Bureau, March 2012.

Note: These figures are based on the total number of people identifying themselves as Asian, racially, including adults and children. There is some overlap in the numbers because some people belong to more than one group, e.g., people identifying themselves as both “Chinese and Filipino” – are counted in both groups.

The six largest Asian groups in the US are shown in Table 6.2. The Asian population, as a whole, experienced growth rates higher than that of any other racial group between 2000 and 2010. Overall, their population grew by 43 percent during the last decade, from 10.2 million in 2000 to 14.7 million in 2010. “Indian Americans” parallel many general demographic and geographic trends occurring among Asians as a whole, but they differ in some specific ways, as discussed below (see Table 6.3). Forty-seven percent of all Asians live in the western part of the country, whereas thirty-one percent of “Indian Americans” are concentrated in the northeast. “Indian-Americans” are

also geographically more evenly distributed than other Asian groups. Like the majority of Asian Americans, most “Indian Americans” live in metropolitan areas, with about 50 percent living in the top 12 “standard metropolitan statistical areas” (MSAs) as shown by the 2010 US Census. However, a third of the “Indian American” population lives in just four MSAs, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington DC. (US Department of Commerce: US Census 2010; Pew Report 2012).

	<b>Northeast (%)</b>	<b>Midwest (%)</b>	<b>South (%)</b>	<b>West (%)</b>
<b>US Population</b>	18	22	37	23
<b>US Asians</b>	20	11	21	47
<b>US Asian Groups</b>				
<b>Chinese</b>	27	9	15	49
<b>Filipino</b>	10	9	16	66
<b>Indian</b>	31	17	29	24
<b>Vietnamese</b>	10	8	32	49
<b>Korean</b>	21	11	23	45
<b>Japanese</b>	9	8	12	71

**Table 6.3** Asian-American Regions of Residence

**Source:** Pew research Center, 2012, p. 33

Note: Some of these are rounded figures. They may not add to 100%. Figures include mixed-race and mixed-group populations, regardless of Hispanic origin.

Educational levels of Asian Americans, as a group, are higher than those of the US population as a whole (see Table 6.4). In the 25 and older age cohort, 49 percent of

Asians held a college degree, in contrast to 28 percent of the US population as a whole.

However, there is considerable variation within the Asian American population itself.

	% with a bachelor's degree or more
<b>US Population</b>	28
<b>US Asians</b>	49
<b>US Asian Groups</b>	
<b>Indian</b>	70
<b>Korean</b>	53
<b>Chinese</b>	51
<b>Filipino</b>	47
<b>Japanese</b>	46
<b>Vietnamese</b>	26

**Table 6.4** College Education Among Asian-Americans, Ages 25 and Older  
**Source:** Pew Research Center 2012, p. 25

Note: Each group featured above includes mixed-race and mixed-group populations, regardless of Hispanic origin.

The Vietnamese, for example, fall below the US average at 26 percent while 70 percent of Indian Americans have baccalaureate degrees or higher (see Table 6.5).

Group	Less than College (%)	College + (%)
Asian	35	65
White	42	58
Black	62	38
Hispanic	84	16

**Table 6.5** Education Characteristics of Recent Immigrants by Race/ Ethnicity  
**Source:** Pew Research Center, 2012, p. 26

Note: “Recent immigrants” are those who have been living in the US for less than three years prior to the survey date. “College +” refers to those who are either currently enrolled in a four-year college, graduate school, or holding a bachelor’s/advanced degree. “Asian” includes mixed-race and mixed-group Asian populations, regardless of Hispanic origin. “White” and “Black” do not include Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.

Throughout its history, the United States has relied on immigrant labor, voluntary and involuntary, to meet the shifting needs of its economy. The 1965 Immigration Reform Act (IRA), which coincided with the Voting Rights Act, was enacted as part of a labor recruitment strategy on the part of the US government. Through the IRA, the US government was able to bypass and undermine mounting national demand for increased economic opportunity and the reduction of poverty, as will be shown below. As the demands of the poor mounted in the 1960s, a parallel demand emerged from business and industry for large numbers of skilled workers in the technical and professional sectors of the economy, as medical, scientific, military-technological, and research skills were especially in short supply. The revised 1965 Immigration Act enabled key industries to recruit highly trained professionals from beyond US borders. The IRA’s removal of

quotas based on national origins and its provision for the reunification of families were just and long overdue, but it is important to note that such reform was made to coincide with political and economic unrest in the country, and based on an apparent shortage of skilled labor.

As immigration from Europe, especially of skilled workers, declined during the 1960s, the recruitment of professionals from Asia, particularly South Asia, seemed to offer the perfect solution to meet labor needs in the US (Reimers 1981). In contrast to other Asian groups, whose numbers increased after 1965 mostly due to family reunification, Indians came mainly to fill occupational demand. Their Anglicized education and fluency in English, coupled with technical and professional skills, made South Asians a highly sought after workforce in the immediate post-1965 period. As an educated and professional elite, this wave of South Asian immigrants became an indispensable part of the US economy. They integrated relatively easily into the corporate and professional culture of the United States and became identified with certain specialized economic niches that emerged with the labor market segmentation of the 1970s and 1980s (Bhardwaj and Rao 1990). These South Asian professionals experienced much easier upward mobility into the middle and upper classes in comparison to other minorities of color.

It is important to note that the post-1965 wave of South Asian professional immigration had its impetus not only in the IRA but also in the fact that there existed in India a surplus of skilled labor at this time. The Indian government under Jawaharlal Nehru had invested heavily in higher education after independence. In the early 1960s,

India spent “a higher proportion of total educational expenditure on higher education than any other country” (Rudolph and Rudolph 1972:28). One of the problems of this policy for India itself was a mismatch between education and social need, leading to high levels of unemployment and underemployment of skilled labor. In fact, there were some 1.53 million unemployed among the educated in 1969, their numbers rising to 3.3 million around 1972 (Ghosh 1979). The resulting flow of human capital out of India, or “brain drain” as it is commonly known, was caused partly by this disparity. Thus, while the earliest waves of Indian emigration in response to the demands of global capitalism consisted of indentured servants (e.g. South Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) or manual laborers (e.g. Indian migration to the US at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as discussed above), in contrast, Indian immigrants to the United States after 1965 initially consisted of skilled professionals and their immediate families. For the United States, the main appeal of Indian intellectual capital was the fact that it had been financed elsewhere. Thus, with the stroke of a pen in 1965, the United States was able to gain, at no cost to itself, a highly trained labor force in a variety of professional sectors (Steinberg 1995; Prashad 2000).

One of the niches filled by South Asians in the United States was in medicine and allied health professions. A high demand for medical professionals, particularly in inner city hospitals, followed the passage of the 1965 Medicare Act, and resulted in the immigration of large numbers of South Asians trained in the medical field. In his memoir, *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story*, Abraham Verghese (1994), an Indian physician, recounts what he encountered in the hospitals where he worked:

During the hiatus in my medical education, while I worked as an orderly in America and before I went to India to finish medical school, I had seen from the

vantage of a hospital worker the signs of urban rot in Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, Trenton, and New York. The (insured) middle-class continued to flee farther out to the suburbs where chic, glass-fronted hospitals complete with birthing suites and nouvelle cuisine popped up on the freeway like Scandinavian furniture franchises.

Meanwhile, the once grand county hospitals were sliding inexorably, like the cities themselves, into critical states. Understaffing, underfunding, the old stories. Their patients had become the uninsured and indigent whose problems revolved around drug addiction and trauma. In the emergency rooms of these fading institutions, bodies were pressed together like so many sheep. Old people languished on stretchers shunted into hallways and corridors while beleaguered nurses attempted some form of triage.

An inevitable accompaniment to this scene of a city hospital under siege was the sight of foreign physicians. The names of these doctors – names like Srivastava, Patel, Khan, Iqbal, Hussein, Venkateswara, Menon – bore no resemblance to those of the patients being served or the physicians who supervised them.

The need for skilled foreign labor decreased with the economic downturn of the mid-1970s. To deal with this reality the 1965 Immigration Reform Act was amended to restrict the number of skilled foreign workers entering the US.<sup>128</sup> The amended IRA altered the socio-economic profile of Indian immigration to the US. Over the next decade, South Asians came to the US mostly through the other provision in the law, the family reunification quota.<sup>129</sup> After 1990, in contrast to their skilled predecessors, more South Asian immigrants were unemployed and unskilled. According to Hing (1993:104), 64 percent of these immigrants listed no occupation, and almost twelve percent listed blue-collar and service work. This later wave of South Asian immigrants did not assimilate easily into suburbia, in comparison to the earlier class of professionals; instead,

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<sup>128</sup> The amended Act of 1976 required foreign workers to prove that they had employment before entering the US. Employers were required to prove that they were unable to recruit an American citizen for the position.

<sup>129</sup> In the 1990s, a third wave of South Asian migrants, consisting mainly of software engineers, came to meet labor needs in the information technology sector. However, a large number of this group came under the H1-B visa program. Many have documented that the H1-B visa system is a form of modern indentured servitude system, with workers tied to a particular employer through a contract with minimal leverage or bargaining power over workplace rights or pay. Indians comprise the largest proportion of workers under the H1-B provision (see Pew Research Center 2012, p. 27).

they began to concentrate in urban ethnic enclaves within major metropolitan areas. The next chapter will examine the experience of South Asians in one such area, in Jersey City, New Jersey.

### **Model Minorities**

As shown in the first part of the chapter, South Asian migrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s were incorporated into the Yellow Peril discourse and seen as unassimilable aliens who contaminated and polluted the socio-cultural fabric of American society. In contrast, the South Asians who came after 1965 as a consequence of the IRA were heralded along with other Asians as a “model minority.” Their arrival, and the praise they received from White society as “model minorities” seemed to coincide with the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the urban riots of the 1960s.

After achieving its goal of fighting segregation and disfranchisement, the Civil Rights Movement had begun to turn its attention toward systemic racism and poverty in American society. As noted earlier, King dedicated the last three years of his life trying to mobilize a “Poor People’s Campaign,” a multi-racial class-based social movement to address poverty in the US. Interestingly, just as the Civil Rights Movement was trying to impress upon the nation that racism was a national rather than local problem, media and policy attention began to shift toward the cultural and behavioral dimensions of racism and inequality.

In January 1966, the *New York Times* published an extensive feature titled, “Success Story, Japanese American Style” by Berkeley sociologist William Peterson,



who distinguished between “problem minorities” and minorities who are able to lift themselves up through their own efforts. “The history of Japanese Americans,” according to Peterson, “challenges every such generalization about ethnic minorities, and for this reason alone deserves far more attention than it has been given.” According to Peterson, Japanese Americans had been subjected to discrimination in American society, as intense as if not worse than that experienced by other groups, yet they triumphed over adversity and injustice:

Barely more than 20 years after the end of the wartime camps, this is a minority that has risen above even prejudiced criticism. By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed. Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to this success story.<sup>130</sup>

Peterson then compared the Japanese to African-Americans, who apparently remained trapped in their marginal status:

Once the cumulative degradation has gone far enough, it is notoriously difficult to reverse the trend. When new opportunities, even equal opportunities, are opened up, the minority’s reaction to them is likely to be negative – either self-defeating apathy or a hatred so all-consuming as to be self-destructive. For all the well-meaning programs and countless scholarly studies now focused on the Negro we barely know how to repair the damage that the slave traders started.<sup>131</sup>

The subtext of Peterson’s argument was that Japanese Americans are to be applauded because they had succeeded without aid or complaint, in spite of their obvious

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<sup>130</sup> William Peterson, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” *New York Times*, Jan 9, 1966. p. 20

<sup>131</sup> William Peterson, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” *New York Times*, Jan 9, 1966. p. 20

need, whereas other groups, such as African Americans, had presumably failed despite state intervention and support. This argument resonated with the emerging mainstream White consensus that sought reprieve from civil unrest and “un-American” explanations for social inequality. The onus, these conservatives believed, rested with the individual to uplift himself or herself from a marginal socio-economic status. Peterson compared the experiences of Japanese Americans and African Americans (under the assumption of their apparently identical encounter with racism and dehumanization) and concluded that the Japanese succeeded by dint of their “diligence in work, combined with simple frugality, had an almost religious imperative, similar to what has been called ‘the Protestant work ethic’ in Western culture.”<sup>132</sup> The lack of upward mobility among other groups, according to Peterson, is attributable to their ostensible lack of similar cultural values. For Peterson, self-help and internal cultural capital were the keys to Japanese American success, not protest, state intervention, or movements for social change.

Although Peterson’s article focused on Japanese Americans in particular, it turns out that any Asian group could be substituted in their place in the emerging narrative of minority self-starters and winners by choice. *US News and World Report* joined the chorus of praise for Asian Americans at the end of 1966 with a piece titled, “Success Story of One Minority Group in US,” featuring the Chinese this time. The refrain was the same: “at a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities...[the Chinese] are moving ahead by applying the traditional virtues of hard work, thrift, and morality.”<sup>133</sup> Surprisingly, earlier representations of Chinatowns as

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<sup>132</sup> William Peterson, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” *New York Times*, Jan 9, 1966, p. 20

<sup>133</sup> *US News and World Report* “Success Story of One Minority Group in US” *December* 26, 1966.

enclaves of disease and filth and backwardness (described above) were absent in this account. Instead, the reader learns that

In any Chinatown from San Francisco to New York, you discover youngsters at grips with their studies. Crime and delinquency are found to be rather minor in scope. Still being taught in Chinatown is the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts – not a welfare check – in order to reach America’s “promised land... in crime ridden cities, Chinese districts turn up as “islands of peace and stability.”<sup>134</sup>

Again inviting a comparison to African Americans, the article described the Chinese experience as “a story of adversity and prejudice that would shock those now complaining about the hardships endured by today’s Negroes.”<sup>135</sup>

By the 1970s and 1980s, the claim that a specific cultural value system could predict advancement or setback on the road to the American Dream had displaced other explanations for poverty and prosperity in the United States, and become the favored paradigm. Images of Asians as undesirable outsiders were replaced, almost overnight, by those of quiet, hard-working people who succeeded without making any demands on the state or American society.

The transformation of Asian-Americans from the Yellow Peril to the Model Minority occurs at a pivotal moment in the history of race relations in the US. The urban rebellions of the 1960s were exerting great pressure on the dominant classes to acknowledge and examine the systemic nature of racism in American society. In the aftermath of the riots, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission in 1967 to

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<sup>134</sup> US News and World Report “Success Story of One Minority Group in US” *December* 26, 1966.

<sup>135</sup> US News and World Report “Success Story of One Minority Group in US” *December* 26, 1966.

investigate the cause of the nation-wide civil unrest. Headed by Otto Kerner, former governor of Illinois, the commission sought answers to three basic questions: “What happened? Why did it happen?” and “What can be done to prevent it from happening again?” *The United States Riot Commission’s Report* (1968:1-2), commonly referred to as the *Kerner Report*, discovered that the United States “is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.” The *Report’s* shocking conclusion stated that “What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the Negro can never forget – is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it” (United States Riot Commission, 1968: 2).

The *Kerner Report* marks an unprecedented milestone in US race relations. It was the first time that a government-appointed commission in the history of the nation had taken a structuralist perspective on inequality. “Never before had the nation gone so far toward accepting the collective responsibility for the terrible repercussions of white racism,” notes Steinberg (1995:79). In contrast to the mainstream view that urban unrest is caused by the pathological, aberrant behavior of Black youth, the *Kerner Report* saw the riots as a form of social protest by the powerless. It held “white racism” responsible for creating the conditions for the upheaval. The policy recommendations of the *Kerner Report* included immediate and improved access to basic needs such as employment, housing, and education, as well as expanded social welfare programs for the poor.

Suddenly, a series of events sidelined the *Kerner Report’s* sobering conclusions and urgent recommendations. National attention was absorbed by the assassinations of

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, on one hand, and the escalation of the Vietnam War, on the other hand. Public opinion began to swing wildly between liberal support for social reform and conservative, behaviorist attitudes that conveniently blamed the poor for their own predicaments. Conservative perspectives prevailed as the nation desperately sought stability. They were abetted by new, emerging “research” throughout the 1970s that Asian-Americans were quietly pursuing the American Dream, despite the uproar all around, despite any mistreatment they may have endured at the hands of others, and most importantly to conservative Whites, with apparently no ill will. This shift of public opinion toward the Right culminated in Richard Nixon’s election to the White House in 1968. The US government’s prior willingness to see racism as a systemic feature of American society came to a grinding halt, as Asians appeared to succeed in spite of adversity. Nixon seized the moment to strike out at the *Kerner Report* itself, holding it responsible for dividing an otherwise united nation. Urban America’s problem, he declared, was the absence of “law and order” (Ehrlichman 1982).

More “scholarly” literature proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s in order to lend “intellectual” credence to the behaviorist argument. Works like Thomas Sowell’s *Race and Culture* (1994), Shelby Steele’s *The Content of our Character* (1991), and Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* (1994), all firmly attributed Black inequality to a dysfunctional culture. One book, however, stands out for taking behaviorism in a “scientific” direction, making broad racist claims apparently based on genetics. This egregious work, titled *The Bell Curve* (Murray and Herrnstein, 1994), argued that Blacks were less intelligent than Whites and Asians, purportedly owing to their inferior genes, as measured by Black performance on IQ tests. Blacks, according to Harvard psychologist Richard Herrnstein

and Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute, would not benefit from higher education or other apparently misguided recommendations by the *Kerner Report*. Instead, argued *The Bell Curve*, Blacks were genetically better suited for non-intellectual pursuits such as manual labor or athletics. By the mid-1990s, such racist and conservative “theories” began to dominate the discourse on racial inequality, oscillating narrowly between genetic and cultural determinism. Sadly, *The Bell Curve* received a warm reception from the public despite its invidious pronouncements. Stephen Jay Gould (1981), the eminent polymath evolutionary biologist who had published a definitive rebuttal to scientific racism in the previous decade, was able to expose *The Bell Curve*’s glaring pseudo-science, but expressed great sadness over the book’s success. It “must reflect the depressing temper of our times,” Gould (1995:4) surmised, “– a historical moment of unprecedented ungenerosity, when a mood for slashing social programs can be powerfully abetted by an argument that beneficiaries cannot be helped, owing to inborn cognitive limits expressed as low IQ scores.”

After absolving Whites of all charges of supremacy and rendering historical and structural racism an insignificant factor in social inequality, the ascendant Model Minority Thesis went on to do the insidious work of spuriously linking African-American failure to Asian success. By evoking behavioral, cultural, and genetic factors to explain socio-economic success or failure, the Model Minority Thesis sought not only to discredit protest as frivolous and destructive, but also to disparage those who engaged in such methods. In the Model Minority stereotype, the state had discovered a tactic by which the resentment of the economically marginalized, of Blacks in particular, can be deflected away from the dominant classes, who were mostly White and who control resources and

opportunities, onto a third group, Asians. Asians were now introduced into the primordial American racial binary, not on their own terms, but on terms that the state saw fit: as a middleman minority. As middlemen, Asians were made to appear more eligible than other subordinate minorities to receive the rewards and opportunities that White society had to offer. The Model Minority Stereotype thus has helped to mollify White anxiety since the mid-to late 1960s, and deflect the demands of Blacks and other minorities away from Whites and onto Asians, who were now a buffer in the middle.

According to the Model Minority Thesis, socio-economic inequality was no longer as a function of oppression, but one of cultural inadequacies. Coincidentally, this school of thought appeared on the scene at the very moment that King was working to mobilize the Black poor, many of whom were now rallying around radical groups such as the Black Panther Party. Hardly an objective or neutral descriptive tool, the Model Minority Thesis became a politically opportune rhetoric devised to stymie the major national movements for social change that were active at the time. On one hand, by denying the existence of historic and institutional patterns of inequality in American society, the Model Minority Thesis left the poor to fend for themselves, against their own supposedly inherent flaws. On the other hand, the Model Minority Thesis also gave rise to the perception that Asians, as middlemen, have an apparent advantage over other groups, having somehow remained outside of the Black-White racial binary, but nevertheless capitalizing on it.

In time, South Asians were absorbed into this apparently laudatory narrative, whereas a century earlier, they had been incorporated into the derogatory and

exclusionary discourses that were popular at the time. Robert Oxnam ushered “Indians” into the trope of Asian-American success in a feature article in the *New York Times*:

A substantial minority of Asian-Americans comes from non-Confucian societies. But they too bring with them a heritage that has helped them to flourish in America. The half-million Americans of Indian extraction, for instance, boast the highest median family incomes of any Asian ethnic group. Indian traditions are much more diffuse and religious than the secular and structured inheritances from East Asian societies. Nevertheless the majority of Indian immigrants are highly motivated.<sup>136</sup>

However, between the apparent flattery and references to religiosity, South Asians were incorporated into the US labor market in a manner that has problematized their relations with other groups since, as the apparent differences between groups became heightened, on one hand, whilst inequality amongst South Asians themselves were obscured. This polarization is discussed below, with respect to South Asians and African Americans.

### **South Asians, African-Americans, and White Hegemony**

White supremacy in the United States has resulted in the representation and treatment of Blacks as a “problem,” as if neither White society, the capitalist economy, nor the US government have any culpability in the injustices perpetrated against African-Americans. In his classic work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, written over a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois (1999:9) reflected upon the question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” posed collectively to his people by all those who distanced themselves from responsibility for the persistent inequalities that plagued Black society. More than half a

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<sup>136</sup> “Why Asians Seem to Succeed Here” *New York Times Magazine*, November 30, 1986, p. 79.



century after Du Bois posed his poignant question, large numbers of South Asians began to enter the US. If White supremacist ideology had interrogated Du Bois and his people then, it now began to take notice of South Asians, the successful “brown” newcomers, and compare them to the usual subjects of their gaze, African Americans. If these people can succeed, reasoned neoconservative observers like Murray and Herrnstein (1994), Thomas Sowell (1994), and Dinesh D’Souza (1995), then why can’t Blacks? The South Asian presence in the US has complicated Du Bois’ question, which was posed within a racial context that was assumed to be binary. A century later, the question was reframed and directed toward the South Asian “model” minority: “How does it feel to be the solution?” as aptly summed up by Prashad (2000).

South Asians’ and African Americans’ regard of each other in American society after the inculcation of the model minority stereotype may be understood through the idea of “double consciousness,” introduced by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. For both groups, “double consciousness” has to do with the struggle to belong in America while being cast simultaneously as “outsiders”. It is an aphorism for the conflict between the promise of the American dream and the reality of racism. DuBois (1999:9-10) writes,

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

In *Souls*, double consciousness pertains to how African Americans live “betwixt and between” the Black and White worlds, traversing the border between these worlds yet fully settled in neither. Hence they continue to view themselves through a “veil,” placed upon them by the dominant White society. This veil, for Du Bois, is a metaphor for boundaries, separation, and differentiation, symbolic and material, through which he explores the problems of segregation, race, and identity. Double consciousness is the psychic result of the veil for DuBois; it is a Black mode of being in America, brought about by the tension of “duality,” or a “two-ness... warring inside one dark body” (1999:11).

Several African American intellectuals have interpreted double consciousness to mean a particular, colorized kind of mindset that they regard as prevalent among some Blacks. This mentality, they note, locks some Blacks into a perpetual quest for White approval but yields only disappointment, because of the prior White racist assessment of Blacks as a “problem.” Malcolm X, for example, takes double consciousness to mean the propensity among highly assimilated Black professionals to put Whiteness on a pedestal in spite of failing to achieve the kind of recognition they crave (West 1994). In his novel, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison (1995) reveals, through the clever use of personification, the invisibility that stalks Black Americans as they try to carve out a material existence in a hostile society that rejects them. Similarly, the contradiction of being simultaneously inside and outside of America constitutes a “dual existence” for Richard Wright (2008). A form of double consciousness may be found today among Black neoconservatives. Tate and Randolph (2002:2) identify four major characteristics of Black neo-conservatives:

1. They are restructuring the public discourse on black issues by shifting the onus of responsibility on African Americans for their political and economic plight appealing to whites by denying their culpability in the existing superordinate-subordinate race relations in society; and strengthening their individual and group political and economic alliances with the American conservative movement.
2. They have decisively shifted the terrain of the political discourse from the expansion of civil rights gains to the elimination of those gains by negating racism, sexism, and impoverishment as historical and contemporary determinants in the lives of African Americans.
3. They seek to destabilize the post-civil rights leadership (dubbed the “civil rights establishment”) and replace their liberal/progressive critique of systematic discrimination with a discourse on black cultural traditions and values as a source of black inequality.
4. They hope to become the critical voice of new leadership in the black community and ultimately sway a decisive percentage of the black electorate to the Republican Party.

Black neoconservatives not only exude the colorized mindset identified by Malcolm X, but further embody what he identified as the need for White approval and the willingness to accept progress on White terms, even at the expense of fellow Blacks if necessary. For Du Bois, the deeper problem of double consciousness lies in weighing the claims of national identity against other contrasting forms of subjectivity. Double consciousness, for Du Bois, results from the tension between the power of identity and the politics of identification. This dialectic is a recurrent motif in the thought and politics of W.E.B. DuBois, as he evolved intellectually from being a member of “the Talented Tenth”, to “New Negro,” “pan-Africanist,” to “Communist”. South Asians also live in a twilight zone of double consciousness, but with the additional difference that the veil, as

placed upon them by White society, also serves to separate them from Black society. The veiling of South Asians is traced below.

Many South Asians, as relatively recent arrivals in the American racial scene, have experienced a level of personal success that defies the traditional correlations between race, class, and assimilation in American society. In contrast to their response to Blacks, White society has congratulated South Asians as a conservative, self-reliant model minority that thrives without complaint or state assistance. News commentators, sociologists, and lay observers alike all openly wondered whether South Asians' seemingly inherent values of thrift, hard work, family, and cooperation were attributable to their "extraordinary" and "exotic" cultures or to their "unique," "superior" genes (eg. Murray and Herrnstein 1994). Furthermore, many South Asians themselves appeared unaffected by and even transcendent with respect to the apparent pettiness of racial politics and public quarrels over welfare and opportunity in America. As South Asian professionals began to realize every middle-class American dream, from merit scholarships to high-paying jobs, McMansions in suburbia to high-ranking political office, even they began to wonder if there was indeed something truly special about themselves. One consequence of the prosperity of South Asian professionals and the ensuing applause from White society regarding their success, is that many South Asians have become oblivious to the existence of the Du Boisian "veil," and the effects of symbolic and actual separations imposed by racial injustice and class privilege upon American society. As Steinberg observes about Asians in general in *The Ethnic Myth* (1989), many South Asians, in their struggle to cling to the respectability and prestige associated with their hard-won "middle class" status, appear to have internalized the

culturalist arguments of the Model Minority stereotype without heeding the consequences of the inequalities inscribed by American society upon not only other racialized communities, but also their own, particularly the poor.

This combination of success and praise has prompted neoconservatives to not only compare South Asians to Blacks, but also to use South Asians as tools with which to remind Blacks that they are still a “problem.” Some South-Asians like Dinesh D’Souza, for example, have joined Black neoconservatives in volunteering themselves to be used in such a manner for White hegemonic projects. They appear to be ignorant or in denial of the fact that their own personal success was a product of state engineering, through immigration policy controlled for class. They also forget that they were beneficiaries of advanced education in their countries of origin, as noted earlier, which, not surprisingly, they were able to convert into intellectual and cultural capital upon their arrival in this country (Prashad 2000). Commentators like D’Souza do not acknowledge how success is more likely for the children of the middle class, who have accumulated a certain amount of cultural capital, itself a consequence of the above mentioned processes of selection. The exclusive and narcissistic focus of neoconservatives like D’Souza prevent them from recognizing the extraordinary attainments in entrepreneurship, the professions, and in politics, of a very recently solidified Black middle-class, only a few decades after the viciousness of Jim Crow.

Neoconservatives who praise Asians are also elitists who willfully ignore and render invisible the deep pockets of poverty and visible scars of racism among those South Asians who could not “succeed” as self-starting, high-scoring, boot-straps

achievers, in accordance with the model minority stereotype. For example, D'Souza and others often trumpet the fact that South Asians, as a group, have the highest median income in the US at present. However, given the Model Minority stereotype's tactic of selectively highlighting certain characteristics while obscuring others, such as class inequality, it is less well-known that South Asians have, amongst themselves, one of the highest rates of inequality in the country. Twenty-five percent of South Asian households have annual incomes below \$25,000. Furthermore, in spite of their success in the field of medicine, a profession that they are popularly associated with, one-fifth of all South Asians in the United States have no health insurance, a figure above the national average (Prashad 2012: 24).

The source of the model minority stereotype as applied to South Asians, and the peculiar form of double consciousness it promotes, may be traced in part to the trope of "India" within Orientalism. For example, "ancient India" is invoked regularly in the popular media, as if to reveal American society to itself as opulent, flamboyant, and spiritually bankrupt, and therefore in need of intervention from Deepak Chopra and other sage counselors from the East who are ever ready to peddle their over-wrought philosophical theories of self-actualization. Transcendence is offered to anyone who would make the psychic journey to the spiritual wonderland that is "India." In this avatar of the model minority stereotype, "Indians" are found seated in the lotus position of yoga, emitting mysterious cosmological utterances, and bearing a special aura that elevates them above other minorities. This "India" is simultaneously a referent in the process of racialization through which South Asians are racially represented and excluded from the nation. It is also the basis by which they search for a place in contemporary American

society and navigate through its myriad contradictions. Being cast as spiritually superior beings, intelligent problem solvers, or pliant and cooperative servants are all ways in which the “Indian” model minority are created by, positioned within, and deployed by a White hegemonic ideology that seeks not only to rule them but to rule through them. One way in which they have resisted this representation is by embracing a collective South Asian identity as a temporary resting place in the shifting war of position within the American racial formation.

However, the domesticated caricature of South Asians above stands in sharp contrast to constructions of their identity after September 11, 2001. After the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, “Indians” became aliens once again, banished to some exurb of the old Hindoo Menace trope. In a case of apparently “mistaken” identity, they soon found themselves being profiled alongside other “Middle-Eastern-looking” brown people who were being collectively cast as “terrorists” as the American nation-state sought to pinpoint the threat to itself. The idea of the “despotic” Oriental (a familiar characterization in Orientalism) was resurrected, in which browns were allegedly here on a mission to deprive Americans of not only their livelihoods, but their lives as well,. In the “confusion” that resulted from the stereotypes that abounded, a Sikh Indian man, thought to be Muslim for wearing a turban, was killed by a White American, apparently in retaliation for the terrorist attacks against “his” nation.<sup>137</sup>

Contradictory as these impressions of “Indians” may seem – spiritual and successful on one hand, and alien terrorists on the other hand – they share in common the

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<sup>137</sup> See “Temple Shooting Dredges Up Memories of Long History of Bias Crimes Against Sikhs” from CNN, August 6, 2012 available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/06/us/sikhs-bias-crimes/index.html> last accessed on September 9, 2012

premise that “Indian” is fundamentally different from “American,” itself a word used to index Whiteness. East vs. West, spiritual vs. practical, and evil vs. good are well-worn dichotomies that characterize Orientalism in its European and American guises. The term “Indian,” as used in the United States, goes on to collapse the whole South Asian diaspora into a single racial signifier based on a reference to the entire subcontinent of “India.” Thus “Indian” applies not only to the 3.18 million South Asians in the US,<sup>138</sup> but also to others sharing similar phenotypes who may originate from Bangladesh, Africa, the United Kingdom, Fiji, the Caribbean, or elsewhere. The term hardly conveys the fact that many South Asians have been in the US for at least three generations now and regard themselves as American.

One might suppose that the first generation of South Asian migrants to arrive after 1965 signed a Faustian contract with a racist nation to work hard for material rewards but to remove themselves from it socially and politically. When they discovered that the United States wants only their labor and intellectual capital but not their grievances, their initial response was to retreat behind the “veil,” into the psychic shelters provided by ethno-nationalism and spirituality. These personal spaces affirmed their decision to work within the racist polity by couching it as part of a superior work ethic. Some “Indians” thus began to believe that theirs was a culture with “superior” values. This belief enabled them to regard themselves and to be regarded as superior to Blacks, who supposedly had forsaken values altogether. It is not surprising that such self-regard, as afforded by their mental refuge, is attractive to insecure immigrants who search for accommodation within the racist nation, wary as they are of the liabilities of being non-White in America.

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<sup>138</sup> See Table 5 in *The Asian Population 2010: US Census 2010 Briefs*.



The idea of a dubious social contract sheds some light on why former Republican presidential candidate Phil Gramm was serenaded and garlanded by Indian-Americans during his bid for office in 1996. With respect to immigration policy, when asked about whether admittance of Indian extended family members posed a burden on American society, Gramm replied with a resounding “No,” followed by a spirited defense of Indian Americans:

Why in the world are we trying to keep out of America an ethnic group that has the highest *per capita* income and the highest average education level in the country? I know there are people who say, ‘Well, they’re taking our jobs.’ I want to make just one point about that... People who work in America often talk with distinct foreign accents. Do you know why? Because we have a welfare system that rewards our own citizens for not working. I do not think it is fair to say that people who come to America, and they are willing to work, when some Americans are not, that they are taking jobs away. I think that is our problem; that is not their problem. I know how to fix that. The way to fix it is to reform welfare.”<sup>139</sup>

“Welfare,” as used by conservatives like Gramm, is a racial code word to denote Black dependency on the state which, they allege, is caused by the unwillingness of Blacks to work. “Indians,” on the other hand, received all the validation they needed from Gramm on that day for being a model minority, working hard, and never complaining, particularly about racism.

The double consciousness of some South Asians within racist American society serves as the context for Dinesh D’Souza’s conceited claim that the right kind of immigrants are a breed apart because they demonstrate a hard work ethic and an eagerness to succeed. D’Souza’s book, *The End of Racism* (1995) was found to be racist

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<sup>139</sup> Anand, Tania “Senator Gramm Cites Indians as Model Immigrants” *News India-Times*, May 10, 1996, p. 1

by most commentators; even noted Black conservative Glenn Loury,<sup>140</sup> who is usually in vocal harmony with D'Souza, felt it was somewhat excessive. An Indian immigrant himself, D'Souza argued that the oppressive conditions of life among African Americans are more the result of their own civilizational collapse than of the persistence of racism. Blacks feel their failure acutely, says D'Souza, because they are embarrassed by the irrepressible fact of Asian American excellence, which is now apparently self-evident to all.

D'Souza's self-praise and arrogance are based on faulty premises about Asian and South Asian success in the US. By assuming that their achievements in this country are due to natural or cultural selection, he fails to consider how South Asian attainments might be the result of government selection. The United States, through the special-skills provisions in the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, basically engineered the characteristics of South Asians immigrants over the next two decades. As pointed out earlier, this initial demographic selection gradually changed as non-professional South Asians immigrated (a) to be reunified with their families; (b) as refugees; (c) as workers in the service and hospitality trades; and (d) as small business people running shops (Lal 2008).

Only by ignoring historical facts is D'Souza able to promulgate his anti-Black propaganda, in which he has deployed all Asians as weapons. Why can't African Americans be more like Asians, he asks, with apparently innocent curiosity, after having internalized a seemingly benevolent but widespread attitude toward Asians in America.

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<sup>140</sup> Glenn C. Loury, who is a professor of economics at Boston University, resigned from the American Enterprise Institute's Council of Academic Advisors in protest over D'Souza's book. He claimed that the book "violated the canons of civility and commonality" and "is determined to place poor, urban blacks outside the orbit of American civilization... This book is dangerous... It really is madness." See "2 Quit Think Tank to Protest Book on Racism" in *India Abroad*, September 29, 1995, p. 20

Its chatter sounds as follows: “Where did you people learn to speak such good English?” “You people work hard.” “You people value your culture.” “You people are so smart.” Such “compliments” can be problematic for Asians because they are based on the naïve understanding that only pejorative statements or hurtful actions toward a group can be objectionable. This problem is ignored by D’Souza and others who have a stake in perpetuating the model minority stereotype, to which they owe their own success and acceptance by fellow neoconservatives. Worse, their unscientific conceptualization of whole groups of people as internally undifferentiated, and their unquestioned acceptance of attributes that are apparently entirely absent or present in other necessarily homogeneous groups, are not only incendiary, but also have the potential to ignite deadly conflict. Some casualties of the model minority stereotype will be discussed in the next chapter.

In an encounter with this seemingly benevolent variety of prejudice, young Piyush “Bobby” Jindal, (governor of Louisiana, erstwhile Rhodes scholar, stellar all-around high achiever, and anointed model citizen) recounts a friendly query he once received from his White elementary school teacher: “Why is it that all Indians are so smart and well-behaved?”<sup>141</sup> Aware that he was being addressed as a representative of the entire “Indian race,” Jindal quickly suppressed his annoyance at his teacher’s naïve but nevertheless irritating question, and answered mischievously, that it was Indian food that made Indians so good. Jindal’s mild reply to a condescending inquiry, juxtaposed with his later election to office as a conservative politician, exemplifies what “Americans” expect of their model minorities: an obliging disposition, even when being offended, and a

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<sup>141</sup> *Brown Alumni Magazine* May/June 1998, p. 1

continued willingness to serve Whites. Such docility appears to White society as a welcome “solution” to the “problem” of Blacks, who appear as an unpleasant and confrontational minority that seems preoccupied with charging Whites with racism but unwilling to take responsibility for their own uplift. Jindal’s accommodationism, on the other hand, seems far more preferable to being held accountable for the history of racism in the United States. In a multi-faceted war of representation, state-selected “Indians” such as D’Souza and Jindal become a means by which the hegemonic nation lays the blame for Black poverty and oppression on Blacks themselves, on one hand, but also silences those who struggle to keep structural constraints to civic and economic justice in public view.

Jesse Helms, the arch-conservative Senator from North Carolina, extolled Indian-Americans in his 1997 address to the Indian American Forum of Political Education (IAFPE): “I’ve met with you so many times, and I admire you so much. You, whether you like it or not, are the spirit of America.” He waxed on,

You understand the free enterprise system far better than a lot of people who were born and raised in this country... Indian Americans represent the best and the brightest the United States has to offer, and I don’t say that just to compliment you. It’s the truth. You go to the finest hospital, you can go to the universities, you can go into business and there they are, people from India...I had some heart difficulties several years ago. [The doctor who] worked with me and on me was from India and I shall never forget that he spent a great deal of time working with me.”<sup>142</sup>

In this highly coded compliment, “Indians” are being told that they are good, not on their own terms, but according to terms and values upheld by Helms. South Asians’

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<sup>142</sup> Haniffa, Aziz “Helms, at Forum, Calls for Better Ties With India” *India Abroad*, September 12, 1997. p. 18

performance is then used to berate not only those who do not do well, but also those who apparently fail to embrace the values praised by Helms. If “free enterprise” is an ideological value system as much as an economic system, its foes, then, are the poor and anyone who would object to the system. In praising “Indians,” Helms was echoing sentiments expressed by President Ronald Reagan (1989:163) to African Americans more than a decade earlier:

Now there’s no denying that during my presidency I had a cool relationship with most national black leaders. They fault me for many things, and I fault them for making the plight of poor black people even worse. I know that statement will raise a ruckus, but it’s what I think. Many of these leaders over the past twenty years have been so wed to the big-government, status-quo thinking that they have done a terrible disservice to the independence and aspirations of so many black Americans. Fortunately, some wonderfully gifted conservative black thinkers have emerged during the 1980s. I hope their influence grows in proportion to their independent brilliance.

Thus, by contrasting Black conservatives to the national Black leaders of the post-civil rights era, who apparently were responsible for making the plight of the Black poor worse, President Ronald Reagan made it clear that Blacks can earn his praise only if they embraced his conservative values.

The fact that some people of color have been able to achieve remarkable levels of success, for whatever reason, is evidence for conservatives that racism no longer exists and poses no barrier to advancement. The success of South Asians, some of it undoubtedly achieved despite tremendous odds, is marshaled as proof that Blacks and other minorities fail of their own accord. Unfortunately, in their eagerness to play the role

model, South Asians like D'Souza and Jindal become enlisted in the service of the political and racial projects to which such tropes are hitched within the racial formation of the United States.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter attempted to overview South Asian migration to the United States and their incorporation into the American racial hierarchy. It also examined how political ideas and strategies originating in India and South Africa influenced social movements for civil rights and anti-racism in the United States. Finally the chapter traced the evolution of a conservative backlash against the transnational confluence of ideas among South Asians and African Americans as imperial and racial subjects. The chapter noted the coincidence of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 and the emergence Model Minority Thesis, with its recruitment of South Asians into the labor force and into the middle class at the precise moment when demands for racial and economic justice for the poor were reaching fever pitch in the United States. I tried to show how the representations of South Asians in American discourse, as a “model minority” on one hand, and a “Hindoo Menace” on the other hand, have obscured the significance of the social movements for equality they had influenced just decades earlier. These contradictory stereotypes of South Asians not only undermine the solidarity they had forged with African Americans over the course of a century, but are also responsible for a more strained relationship with African Americans in the contemporary period.

South Asian Americans, like the Indians of South Africa and other Asians in the United States, were strategically positioned within the American racial formation as a

“buffer” between Blacks and Whites. They have been alternatively praised for their self-reliance and excellence, on one hand, and resented as a “menace,” on the other hand, that allegedly profits from trafficking between the mainstream and the margins.

“Middleman” theories, such as the model minority thesis, target groups which are perceived to specialize in business or the professions and concentrate in the petite bourgeoisie. As middlemen, Asians are marked as racially distinct from Whites or Blacks, yet their particular experience as racialized others in the United States is denied, or glossed over.

The model minority stereotype has great political utility in times of economic uncertainty. It often escapes criticism as a racist trope because of its seemingly flattering portrait of Asians, but in actuality, it masks Asian poverty and other forms of social dysfunction. By praising Asians for their apparent success and by blaming Blacks for their apparent failure, racist constructions of identity escape notice while conservatives succeed in legitimating the neo-liberal, pro-market, anti-welfare economic doctrines that produce inequality in the first place, but make them appear to originate within certain identities instead. The rich watch surreptitiously as Asians receive the resentment and envy of other groups in the United States, such as the Black poor, whose social exclusion and spatial isolation continue to deepen as a result of globalization, the historic neglect of Black poverty, and continued racism. Middle-class and poor Whites, whose previously unquestioned social superiority in American society is now under threat, are also angry about demographic changes and capitalist restructuring under globalization. This trend toward the resentment of Asians has made them vulnerable to racially motivated violence, as was evident in the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 and the Los Angeles

Riots of 1992. In the decade between Chin's murder and the LA Riots, there were a number of racist attacks on South Asians in Jersey City, New Jersey, which the next chapter will explore.

Like anti-Asian violence generally, anti-“Indian” violence occurs within an economic and political context. In the mid-1980s, South Asians found themselves once again incorporated into what I have called the “Hindoo Menace” discourse, first applied to them a century ago. Like the “Yellow Peril,” the “Hindoo Menace,” is a term that is applied to South Asians by a populace that is anxious about being economically and culturally overrun by “aliens.” Just as the Yellow Peril discourse had racially totalized all East Asians according to allegedly shared phenotypes, and labeled them all as “Chinese” regardless of their national or ethnic origin, the Hindoo Menace diatribe applies to all who hail from South Asia and its diaspora, and who apparently share the so-called “Indian” phenotype. Religion, ethnicity, language, caste, and other internal markers of difference among South Asians are disregarded by “Whites,” “Blacks,” and other “Asians,” who are themselves products of a totalizing gaze, but who now seek to totalize and locate South Asians racially as “Indian” within the American social and economic hierarchy. Additionally, the “dangerous Oriental” figure of yore is resurrected in the post-9/11 period as “Indian” is made to racially overlap with “middle-Eastern,” a designation that is stereotypically associated with terrorism.

After being extolled as a model minority like other Asians, South Asians became the Hindoo Menace again when they encountered resentment from other American racial/ethnic groups for apparently undermining their socio-economic advancement. This



perception ultimately resulted in xenophobic violence against South Asians similar to the targeting of Koreans during the L.A. Riots. The next chapter focuses on how South Asians fared when they experienced violence in the Jersey City area in the 1980s as part of a rising tide of anti-Asianism in the United States.

## **CHAPTER 7: “WE DID EVERYTHING BUT IT DIDN’T WORK OUT” – SOUTH ASIANS CONFRONT RACISM IN JERSEY CITY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter covered three areas: how South Asians sought a place within the American racial landscape; the South Asian influence on struggles for civil rights in the United States; and South Asian immigration to the US following the passage of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. After this immigration reform, a second wave of South Asian immigration to the US occurred, consisting mainly of professionals. These highly skilled workers were followed by others who came under the provision for family reunification. After 1965, Asians in general and South Asians in particular, became a more visible presence in American society, especially in cities. The previous chapter outlined how South Asians, along with other Asians, were subjected to various exclusionary measures from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward. Although restrictions against their immigration and naturalization were lifted in 1965, South Asians continued to occupy an ambiguous space of representation within the American racial hierarchy. The model minority stereotype, in particular, has been deeply problematic in this regard. The apparent compliments bestowed upon Asians by proponents of the stereotype deny the disfranchisement and hardships that Asians have had to contend with in American society. As a consequence, Asians have been used to lend legitimacy to conservative or racist policies toward other racial minorities, who are then depicted as lacking the

“positive” qualities belonging to Asians. Such treatment has bred resentment toward Asians, particularly from other communities of color. In sum, the characterization of Asians, including South Asians, as model minorities has led to the misperception that Asians do not experience structural inequality in American society.

The aim of this chapter is to consider the characterization of Asians as a “model minority,” through an examination of attacks against South Asians during the 1980s in and around Jersey City, New Jersey. South Asians in the area were targeted in a number of racist incidents, ranging from virulently anti-Indian graffiti, hate-mail, taunting and harassment, defamation of symbols of Indian culture, vandalism of their homes and businesses, destruction of property, and escalating to violent attacks. This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part overviews escalating violence against Asians in general, in the post-1965 period. The second part surveys the demographic and economic restructuring that occurred in the Jersey City during this period that set the stage for anti-South Asian violence in the area. The third section focuses on racist violence against South Asians in the Jersey City area, within the context outlined in the first two sections.

## **IMMIGRATION AND ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES**

The racial composition of American society, particularly in its major cities, began to undergo significant demographic transition after passage of the 1965 immigration reforms following an influx of Asian and Latino migrants. As the number of immigrants of color to the US increased after 1965, there was growing intellectual interest in

economic, political, and socio-cultural relations amongst these communities (Spickard, 2012; Schneider, 2011; Brettell, 2007; Roseman, 1977). I argued in chapter 2 that although relations between Blacks and Whites have been important in framing discussions on race relations in both South Africa and the United States, the intense intellectual and political focus on that binary has resulted in a dearth of understanding of the particular experiences of other communities of color as they struggle for rights and recognition within deeply racialized national contexts. Regarding the United States, Park and Park (199:289) observe that

while American society confronts multiracial realities, much of recent American race theory either dismisses the significance of Asian Americans and Latinos altogether, or subsumes them into traditional biracial models. The newcomers are neither “Black” nor “White,” but they are still characterized in those terms, and this tendency impedes the development of new and compelling ways to examine current race relations.

The growing presence of Latinos and Asians in American cities since 1965 has created spaces and opportunities for new forms of inter-minority coalitions and alliances, but also conflict and antagonism. On one hand, there has been a growing intellectual interest in coalitions between Asian Americans and other communities of color, particularly in their electoral behavior (Ramakrishnan, 2005). Asian and Latino communities engaged in joint political action in the early 1990s in the San Gabriel valley of Los Angeles to fight redistricting plans. There was similar action in NYC. In examining Asian American coalitions with other groups of color, Saito and Park (2000) note that inter-racial coalition politics are most likely to result if:

- (1) Racial /ethnic groups set aside short-term, group-specific considerations to address fundamental issues related to social change;
- (2) they resist narrow race-based politics while at the same time recognizing the importance of race in American society;
- (3) individuals and organizations build and sustain relationships across group boundaries over time as a basis for promoting collaborative efforts; and
- (4) each group contains organizations that serve as vehicles for community mobilization, leadership training, resource building, etc.

There has also been a focus on how groups of color deal with a variety of policy issues ranging from immigration to affirmative action (Price, 2009; Foner and Fredrickson, 2004; Bobo and Johnson, 2000;). With respect to immigration, for example, African-Americans tend to align themselves with conservative segments of the White population, with whom they share a skeptical viewpoint. On the other hand, Asian-Americans and Latinos have a more positive view of immigration (Kim and Lee, 2001).

The controversy surrounding Proposition 187 of 1994 in California<sup>1</sup> is a case in point. Park and Park (1999) show that conservative politicians and supporters of Proposition 187 in California tried to recruit the Black community to support the measure, arguing that immigrants took away jobs from African Americans. Nearly half of the Black population supported the proposition. Affirmative action has provoked different reactions. It is viewed more favorably by Latinos and Blacks, than by Asians

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<sup>1</sup> Proposition 187, also known as California Proposition 187 and the Save Our State (SOS) initiative, was a ballot referendum to establish a state-run screening system for citizenship that would prohibit “illegal immigrants” from having access to health care, education, and other services in California. Voters supported the proposition and it was the first time that a state had passed legislation related to immigration, which is a federal issue. The law was found unconstitutional by a federal court. Supporters of the proposition were concerned about illegal immigration into the US and the presence of a large Hispanic population in California. They maintained that their concerns were economic and that the state could not afford to provide social services to undocumented individuals. Opponents found the law racist and discriminatory because it profiled Hispanics and Asians as “illegal” immigrants. See Alvarez and Butterfield (2000); Lee, Ottati, and Hussain (2001); and Garcia (1995) for analysis.

(Ong, 2000; Jennings, 1994). Thus, Asians, Blacks, and Latinos were brought together in the American urban landscape during a period of profound economic and political transition, and found themselves in competition for resources, jobs, and political representation. Takaki observes that

since 1965, there's been a new wave of immigrants from Asia entering the United States – one out of every two immigrants comes from the Pacific shore. This is also sparking a backlash. There is [a] feeling that these new immigrants are taking over. And this is reinforced by the image that Asian-Americans are not quite 'American' – that they still have a foreign face to them.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will focus on such sentiments, which have ignited periodic episodes of anti-Asian violence from the 1980s onwards.

### **Anti-Asianism**

A wave of anti-Asian violence spread through several American cities during the 1980s and 1990s. Asian Americans began to be targeted by criminals because of stereotypic views that they are physically weak and incapable of defending themselves. In 1990, the *New York Times* reported that New York City was experiencing an increase in crimes against Asians. For example, “the number of subway robberies against Asians nearly tripled to 905 in 1989 from 304 in 1987,” according to the New York City Transit Authority Police.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Paul Yee, a community activist from Chinatown, New York, claimed that “the actual number of robberies of Asians may be more than three times the

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<sup>2</sup> Reported in *The Dallas Morning News*, November 24, 1989, p.1A

<sup>3</sup> Reported in *The New York Times*, October 7, 1990, p. 42, “Seeking Cash and Silent Victims: New York Thieves Prey on Asians”

reported figures because Asians are reluctant to report crimes to the police.”<sup>4</sup> The *Times* article attributes increased crimes against Asians to the perception that “Asians are less likely to resist.”<sup>5</sup> Recent immigrants are also less likely to complain to the police because of distrust of law enforcement, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the American legal system, immigration status, or skepticism regarding whether their complaints would be addressed by the police.<sup>6</sup> “Recent immigrants do not trust the police,” according to Yee, “because they associate them with often hostile police and military forces in their homelands. In addition, many Asians, like many other New Yorkers, feel that reporting a robbery is a waste of time since they think it is unlikely that the police will recover their property.” Mr. Yee added that “often, Asian victims do not speak English, and it is difficult to find a police interpreter who speaks their language or dialect.”<sup>7</sup> Crimes against Asian Americans were not isolated, but rather part of a rising tide of anti-Asian sentiment and structural violence during the economically and politically turbulent 1980s, according to Asian American observers. In explaining the escalating violence against Asians in the 1980s, Monona Yin, a spokesperson for the New York-based Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, noted that “We are in a bad period economically, and Asians are often scapegoated as people who have no right to be here and work here. Such

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<sup>4</sup> Reported in *The New York Times*, October 7, 1990, p. 42, “Seeking Cash and Silent Victims: New York Thieves Prey on Asians”

<sup>5</sup> Reported in *The New York Times*, October 7, 1990, p. 1, “Seeking Cash and Silent Victims: New York Thieves Prey on Asians”

<sup>6</sup> These issues were raised in a Congressional hearing on anti-Asian violence in the US on November 10, 1987, the first of its kind in the post-1965 period. However, in spite of ongoing violence in Jersey City, NJ (to be discussed later in the chapter) which was discussed in the hearing, no South Asians were called to testify. See US Government (1989).

<sup>7</sup> Reported in *The New York Times*, October 7, 1990, p. 42, “Seeking Cash and Silent Victims: New York Thieves Prey on Asians”

hostility is reflected in Washington, where lawmakers engage in ‘Japan-bashing’ over the issue of fair trade practices.”<sup>8</sup>

Asian “success,” which was initially praised by conservative White politicians in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, had become a source of economic anxiety by the mid-1980s, among Whites as well as other minorities. The media increasingly depicted the achievements of Asians as superior in comparison to Whites and other racial minorities. *Fortune* declared that Asian Americans are “already way ahead of the rest of the nation at the bank...the evidence is persuasive that Asian Americans are smarter than the rest of us.”<sup>9</sup> As the US economy receded in the 1980s, the Model Minority Thesis took a back seat as the earlier but ever present Yellow Peril narrative made a come-back. Aoki (1996:42) notes:

Rapidly inscribed on economically ascendant Japanese and Korean businesses in the 1970s and 1980s were older images of then Chinese immigrant labor unfairly competing with and ‘ratebusting’ nineteenth century white labor by working longer hours for lower pay due to differential family status, “free” family labor of immigrants in the twentieth century, possessing stamina or thicker skins...Anxieties remarkably similar to early twentieth century fears of Asian immigrants (“foreigners”) coming into imminent control of valuable American natural resources, were articulated in cases like *Terrace v. Thompson*.

As anxiety over economic uncertainty grew, Asian Americans began to experience violence, thereby exposing the reality of their essential “otherness” and marginality in the US. Whereas the Model Minority Thesis assigned Asians a exalted, mythic place above

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<sup>8</sup> Reported in *The New York Times*, October 7, 1990, p. 42, “Seeking Cash and Silent Victims: New York Thieves Prey on Asians”

<sup>9</sup> *Fortune*, “America’s Super Minority” November 24, 1986, p. 148.



Whites, the Yellow Peril discourse demoted Asians to unwelcome pests whenever they appeared to be overtaking anyone, not only Whites. As Asian success became a source of anxiety for other Americans, Asians became the scapegoats for the economic crises plaguing the nation. Increasingly, they were taunted with retribution.

Popular culture reproduced and reinforced the Yellow Peril discourse in retort to the Model Minority stereotype that had been overplayed earlier. For example, the African American rapper Ice Cube unabashedly employed hate speech in his song, "Black Korea"<sup>10</sup>:

"twenty D energizers."  
 "twenty D energizer? "  
 "D not C. D."  
 "B energizer? "  
 "D motherfucker, D! learn to speak english first, alright? D!"  
 "how many you say? "  
 "twenty, motherfucker, twenty."  
 "honey..."  
 "mother-fuck you!"  
 Everytime I wanna go get a fuckin brew  
 I gotta go down to the store with the two  
 Oriental one-penny countin motherfuckers  
 That make a nigga made enough to cause a little ruckus  
 Thinkin every brother in the world's out to take  
 So they watch every damn move that I make  
 They hope I don't pull out a gat and try to rob  
 They funky little store, but bitch, I got a job  
 ("look you little chinese motherfucker  
 I ain't tryin to steal none of yo' shit, leave me alone!"  
 "mother-fuck you!")  
 Yo yo, check it out

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<sup>10</sup> From the album *Death Certificate* by Ice Cube, lyrics copied from [http://www.lyricsfreak.com/i/ice+cube/black+korea\\_20066641.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/i/ice+cube/black+korea_20066641.html) last accessed August 21, 2012

So don't follow me, up and down your market  
 Or your little chop suey ass'll be a target  
 Of the nationwide boycott  
 Juice with the people, that's what the boy got  
 So pay respect to the black fist  
 Or we'll burn your store, right down to a crisp  
 And then we'll see ya!  
 Cause you can't turn the ghetto - into black korea  
 "i do fuck you!"

Ice Cube later apologized, describing the lyrics as rash and thoughtless, but Asians were angered by the fact that the song went on to be included in the album despite undergoing several editorial screenings during the production process, by numerous individuals, which made it clear to Asians that the producers had all considered the song fit for release. On another occasion, the rapper Chubb Rock chanted “Fuck you, eggroll” with a crowd at a concert in Los Angeles (cited from Wu 2002:30).

These instances of symbolic violence posing as “poetic license” and “lyrical honesty” were followed by episodes of apparently unrelated but real violence against Asian-Americans in 1992 during the LA Riots. However, the precedent for such attacks lay in hate crimes against Asians during the 1980s. The murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 was a landmark incident for Asian Americans as it awakened them to the precariousness of their civil rights. The murder is briefly described below, followed by a brief discussion of its implications.

### *Vincent Chin*

Vincent Chin was a 27 year old Chinese-American engineer from Detroit, Michigan, home of the American auto industry (See Figure 7.1). On the night of June 19, 1982, Chin had gone to a local bar with some friends to celebrate his upcoming wedding. Two unknown White men, a father and son who stood to lose their jobs due to automotive plant closings, approached Chin and began taunting him as a “Jap.” They later stated that they had felt justified in attacking Chin because of the loss of their jobs in light of the ascendancy of the Japanese car industry at the time. An eyewitness, Racine Colwell, a dancer at the bar, recalls hearing the father, Ronald Ebens, telling Chin that “it’s because of you motherfuckers we are out of work.”<sup>11</sup> Ebens and his son Michael Nitz had assumed that Chin was “Japanese” because of his racial features, but in reality Chin’s actual ethnicity made no difference to them, as they blamed anyone bearing Chin’s phenotype for their predicament. Ebens initiated a fight and Chin left after resisting briefly, according to Colwell. The duo stalked Chin out of the bar to a McDonald’s nearby to which Chin had relocated. Subsequently, Ebens and Nitz went back to their own car to retrieve a baseball bat and returned to McDonald’s, where they began to assault Chin. Chin attempted to flee into the street. A Black police officer who witnessed the assault recalls being surprised to see two White men in that predominantly Black neighborhood carrying baseball bats. He ignored them at first, as he was under the

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<sup>11</sup> From Emmy award-winning video documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* a production of Film News Now Foundation and WTVS/Detroit; producer, Renee Tajima; director, Christine Choy, New York: Filmmakers Library, 1988



**Figure 7.1 Top:** Vincent Chin was beaten into a coma by two racist autoworkers in Detroit, Michigan on June 19, 1982. He died four days later.

**Source:** <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com> last accessed May 19, 2013.

**Bottom:** Chin's distraught mother.

**Source:** <http://www.asian-nation.org> last accessed on May 19, 2013

assumption that two White men bearing baseball bats must be returning from a game at the local baseball stadium. Then he saw the pair chase Chin out of the McDonalds and into the street. Chin tried to take cover in a telephone booth but Ebens and Nitz managed to seize him and deliver a few blows. The officer saw that Chin had managed to escape for a short distance but slipped in the street, at which point Ebens and Nitz were upon him. Nitz, according to the officer, held Chin's collapsed body propped up to allow Ebens to take full swings, repeatedly, at Chin's head. Ebens, according to the officer, swung the bat "as if he were hitting for a home-run." Chin went into a coma and died four days later. He was buried on his wedding day.

Ebens and Nitz did not deny their actions, but maintained that Chin's death was merely the result of a bar-brawl that ended badly. In a plea-agreement, they admitted to committing manslaughter so that the charge of second-degree murder against them might be dropped. Ebens boasted in an interview that he had expected to go to jail for manslaughter, but was happily surprised to learn that he had been sentenced only to three years of probation and a fine of about \$4000. There was no imprisonment involved because the ruling judge felt that Ebens and Nitz were not a threat to society. The Asian American community was outraged by what they regarded as a miscarriage of justice. It seemed to them that judge's final sentence sent out the message that an Asian American life is worthless.<sup>12</sup>

The scapegoating of and violence against Asian Americans ought to be contextualized in relation to the transformation of the US economy during the 1980s. The

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<sup>12</sup> From Emmy award-winning video documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* A production of Film News Now Foundation and WTVS/Detroit; producer, Renee Tajima; director, Christine Choy, New York: Filmmakers Library, 1988, for an in-depth look at Chin's murder.

relative power of the US in the world was in decline from the heights attained during the post-World War II period. The American share of global economic production declined from 35 percent in 1950 to 23 percent in 1980. Asian nations in the Pacific Rim, on the other hand, were experiencing an economic boom. The erosion of the American industrial base resulted in layoffs and plant closures throughout the country, a trend which impacted the auto industry heavily. In 1982, the unemployment rate in Detroit had risen to a staggering 17 percent as the American auto industry yielded to its Asian competitors, especially Toyota and Honda. Numerous blue collar workers in the Detroit area lost their jobs (Kenyon, 2004; Sugrue, 1999; Thomas 1997; Vergara 1995).

The major American motor manufacturers, Chrysler, Ford and GM, blamed the decline of the auto industry on their own workers, claiming that union demands and low productivity made American workers less competitive in the global market.<sup>13</sup> Unions, in reaction, began a smear campaign against foreign automakers. The United Auto Workers Union printed bumper stickers with the phrases, “Datsun, Honda, Toyota – Pearl Harbor,” and “Real Americans Buy American.” Union halls around Detroit displayed signs reading “No Foreign Cars Allowed” and “Don’t Even Think of Parking a Foreign Car Here.” A local church organized an event in which, for one dollar, visitors could hit a Toyota car three times with a sledgehammer. Politicians and businessmen joined the fray. Congressman John Dingell (D.), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, railed against “those little yellow men” who were taking away American jobs. Baron Bates, Chrysler’s vice-president for marketing, suggested that dropping

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<sup>13</sup> See “Vincent Chin is Not Alone” in *A. Magazine*, July 31, 1990.

another atomic bomb on Japan would solve the auto industry's problems.<sup>14</sup> By the time Vincent Chin was murdered, the US had grown comfortable with modulating socio-economic and racial tensions through the routine deployment of stereotypes against Asians. The wrath of a legion of disgruntled autoworkers were received not by auto industry executives or government officials, but by Vincent Chin as he endured the blows dealt by Ebens and Nitz.

Violence against Asians-Americans occurred on a larger scale on April 29, 1992. The Los Angeles Riots erupted in South-Central Los Angeles when four White police officers were acquitted after beating a Black motorist, Rodney King, during a confrontation. Initially a Black-White issue, the trigger for the LA Riots was the acquittal of the White LAPD police officers who beat Rodney King. However, the conflict soon evolved into a multi-racial blow-out involving Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and Asians. South-Central Los Angeles had experienced a socio-economic downturn similar to that of Detroit during the 1970s and 1980s preceding Chin's murder.<sup>15</sup> Although the unfair

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<sup>14</sup> See "Vincent Chin is Not Alone" in *A. Magazine*, July 31, 1990 and "Hate and Ignorance can Kill" in *Michigan Chronicle*, June 13, 2012

<sup>15</sup> Epidemic plant closings in the rubber industry and smaller firms, indefinite lay-offs, and deep pay cuts came as a severe blow to a segment of the labor market that was highly unionized and contained an unusually large proportion of well-paid Black, Latino, and female blue-collar workers (Soja 1989). In Watts, economic conditions deteriorated more rapidly than in any other community within Los Angeles and did not improve since the riots of 1965. In the decade and a half following the first Watts eruption, the predominantly Black area of South Central Los Angeles, the future setting of 1992 riots, lost 40,000 in population, 20,000 jobs, and \$ 2500 in median family income, which at \$5900, fell below the city median for the Black population in the late 1970s (Soja 1989). This selective deindustrialization crushed organized labor and significantly weakened many of the contractual gains achieved in the two decades following the Second World War (*New York Times*, October 28, 2005). The concurrence of de-industrialization with a restructuring of the regional economy had a devastating effect on the Black population of Los Angeles. Restructuring has been propelled by two key sectors since the 1960s: aerospace/electronics and apparel manufacturing. The aerospace/electronics cluster of industrial sectors in southern California, probably the largest urban concentration of advanced technology-based industry in the world, grew by 50 percent in the region during the 1972-79 period (Soja 1989). The growth of the garment industry, on the other hand, ushered in another dramatic change in the regional labor market. Not only did the "high technocracy" settle in extraordinary numbers in LA; so did the largest pool of low-wage, weakly organized, and easily disciplined immigrant labor in the country. This still-growing labor pool has affected virtually every sector of the regional economy, but its imprint has been most visible, however, in the production of garments, especially in the "women's," "misses," and "juniors' outerwear" categories, which tends to be

verdict had triggered the Los Angeles “uprising,” as it is sometimes called, the underlying cause had more to do with pent-up feelings of powerlessness in poor communities within urban political economies that became increasingly excluded and isolated. Structural economic changes that had been underway for nearly two decades already, in conjunction with the dismantling of federally funded programs, were a particularly severe blow. By the 1980s, the criminal justice system emerged as the primary means by which the inner-city poor interacted with their government. Finally, they felt even more marginalized as the influx of new immigrants continued (Kim 2008; Soja 1989).

Unable to identify or effect change at the source of their marginalization, the rioters in Los Angeles, who were predominantly Black and Latino, directed their anger and frustrations at Koreans, who seemed within reach. The conflict, distinguished for being “the first multi-racial riot in the United States” continued for six days, in which more than 2000 Korean-owned small businesses in South-Central LA were looted, burned, and destroyed. Most of them were uninsured and only marginally profitable, but constituted the sole source of livelihood for their owners. The city sustained over \$350 million of damage. Angela Oh, a lawyer and Korean-American community activist, voiced the frustrations and despair of the Korean victims of the L.A. riots:

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highly labor-intensive, difficult to mechanize, and organized around small sweatshops in order to adapt more efficiently to rapidly changing fashion trends. Of the approximately 125,000 jobs in this sector, perhaps as many as 80 percent were held by undocumented workers in the 1980s, with 90 percent of all employees being women. Unionization rates are low while infringements of labor rights and violations of laws pertaining to minimum wage, overtime, child labor, and occupational safety are rife (Soja 1989). Thus race, ethnicity, immigrant status, age, and gender cut across this economic landscape, accelerating the fragmentation and polarization begun with deindustrialization. As a result, Blacks and Asians compete in a regional labor market that is more occupationally differentiated and socially segmented than ever before. This, in turn, leads to shifting class relations between the two groups.



The place of Koreans in American society is lonely and precarious. [We have] served as a convenient buffer between the racism of the White majority and the anger of the Black minority. Just as Korean-owned businesses, which suffered nearly half the looting and vandalism in last year's violence, became an outlet for the rage of many rioters, Korean-Americans here now view themselves as "human shields" in a complicated racial hierarchy. We stand between the African-Americans, who are really at the bottom rung, and the white community, which is at the top rung because they are at the top of the power structure. That is why I hate the term 'model minority.' It really makes me blanch. It translates into being a human shield.<sup>16</sup>

In the aftermath of the LA riots, Vice President Dan Quayle attributed the riots to a breakdown of "family values" in the inner city:

I believe that lawless social anarchy which we saw is directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society... It doesn't help matters when prime-time TV has Murphy Brown – a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid professional women – mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it another life choice.<sup>17</sup>

The instances of anti-Asian violence described here serve to affirm the assertion by W.E.B. Du Bois that race is the deciding variable in American society, in spite of the achievements of the Modern Civil Rights Movement. The words of the noted American author William Faulkner, that "the past is not dead, it isn't even past," seem to capture the mood after the L.A. Riots of 1992, as if a wave of past racial memories was sweeping overland, reminiscent of the urban unrest of mid-1960s. Each of these uprisings serves as

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<sup>16</sup> "Giving Voice to the Hurt and Betrayal of Korean-Americans" in *The New York Times*, May 2, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Reported in *New York Times*, May 20, 1992

reminders that the ghosts of American's deeply troubled racial past have yet to be exorcised. In each of these cases, the poorer segments of the urban population were outraged that neither the civil rights nor economic opportunity that they had long waited for had reached them, and because they were helpless to stave off the economic restructuring taking place around them but did not include them. In a society marked by class inequality, race and ethnicity have always served as a popular means to deflect and dilute class antagonisms. Such a society is characterized by a politics in which the awareness of class inequality, assuming that it exists, is incoherent, frustrated, and unsustainable. In the L.A. riots, the Black and Latino poor directed their anger and frustration against fellow people of color, the Koreans, who themselves endured particular forms of racism and class inequality in American society. From the Chinese Exclusion Act, to the Bellingham Riots, to Los Angeles 1992, Asian Americans have been scapegoats for American economic problems; these anti-Asian acts demonstrate that American society finds it convenient to strategically deploy sinister tropes, such as the Yellow Peril and the Hindoo Menace, and deflect blame onto Asians during moments of crisis.

Changes in immigration policy, on one hand, and economic restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, on the other hand, brought different racial minorities into closer contact in American cities. While this development opened up new possibilities for minority coalition politics and community activism, this contact has also opened up new arenas of conflict, as seen in the events described above. In each of these cases, the problem was that they were neither racial uprisings nor class rebellions based on organized social action and coherent strategy. Rather, these spontaneous, opportunistic, and largely male

attacks against a proximate “other,” Asians, reveal how effectively the wrath of disgruntled Americans may be channeled away from the true sources of power and decision that advantage some at the expense of others. Thus, tensions amongst communities of color continue to simmer as structural inequalities in American society remain unaddressed.

Five years after Vincent Chin’s murder and five years before the Los Angeles riots, the New York metropolitan area witnessed a series of racially motivated crimes including taunting, hate mail, racist graffiti, assault and murder directed at South Asians. Most of these incidents took place in Hudson County, New Jersey. The discussion below will focus on the Jersey City area, the chief locale of the crimes.

## **ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC RESTRUCTURING IN JERSEY CITY**

Historically considered a “gateway city” by immigrants and residents, and located conveniently across the Hudson River opposite New York City’s Manhattan, Jersey City is one of the most diverse urban communities in the United States. In the mid-1600s, around the same time that South Africa was colonized by the Dutch, the area that is now Jersey City was settled by the Dutch, who were the first European immigrants to the region. In the centuries that followed, Jersey City was home to Irish, Italian, and eastern European immigrants.

As with the Dutch encounter with South Africa, the area that developed into Jersey City had initially attracted the interest of explorers from the Dutch East India Company. Henry Hudson, an explorer with the Dutch East India Company, arrived on the New Jersey coast on April 6, 1609 to scout the environs and navigate the river that would one day bear his name. The first Dutch settlement in the area, Communipaw, was established about one mile south of present day Jersey City. A major street in Jersey City today, Communipaw Avenue, is named after this settlement. The entire area was later named Hudson County after Henry Hudson (Adams 1983).

Upon returning to Europe, Hudson reported to the Dutch East India Company that the area he had explored was picturesque and abundant with natural resources, “awaken[ing] among the merchants of Holland a great desire to engage in and even to secure a monopoly of trade thus suddenly opened to their enterprise” (cited from Winfield 1974:10). Consequently, in 1621, the Dutch West India Company acquired the charter to conduct trade in the region encompassing present day Delaware through Connecticut. In 1626, the Dutch established a fort in Manhattan and issued an edict for the colonization of New Jersey, through which “any member [of the West India Company] who should, within four years, plant a colony of fifty adults, in any part of New Netherland, excepting the island of Manhattan, should be acknowledged as a ‘Patroon’ or feudal chief of the territory thus colonized” (cited from Winfield 1874: 13). A number of conflicts with native inhabitants ensued during this period causing Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch Director General of this colony, to order Dutch settlers to be relocated in 1660 to a walled village named Bergen Square for protection. Bergen Square was located close to present day Journal Square and retains its original name. Around

1664, stewardship of the area was transferred to the British Crown and whereupon it was renamed New Jersey. The area experienced growth through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the town that became known as the Gateway to New York was especially prosperous. Commerce thrived after a ferry service between Jersey City's Paulus Hook area and New York City was opened in June 1764 (Winfield 1874, Richardson 1927). Jersey City experienced significant population growth after the Civil War and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the Civil War, its population was 29,000. However, by 1910, it had reached 268,000.<sup>18</sup> According to Tobin (1972:7),

Between 1880 and 1910, Jersey City underwent a significant physical transformation caused by the intensification of the continuing processes of industrialization, urbanization and immigration. By 1900 eleven railroads were operating in the city including the trunk lines of such major carriers as the Pennsylvania, Delaware, Lackawanna and Western, Lehigh Valley, Erie, and New York Central railroads. On the whole the city's trade and transportation sector employed almost 27,000 workers. Manufacturing also played a large part in the city's economy with over 700 concerns employing approximately 24,000 wage earners.

The city was once home to a number of large manufacturers including Colgate & Co., the pencil manufacturer Joseph Dixon Crucible & Co., the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, and the American Sugar Refining Company, among others (Grundy 1976).

At the political level, the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were characterized by tensions between city authorities and various civil society groups. The main grievances involved the rights to free speech and to protest in the city. Frank Hague, the Mayor of Jersey City from 1917 to 1947, was at the heart of many of these controversies, having

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<sup>18</sup> *New Jersey: A Guide to Its Present and Past* (1946). Compiled and written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of New Jersey, New York, NY: Hastings House.

become notorious for his authoritarian rule and manipulative tactics within the political machinery that controlled Jersey City. For example, Frank “I am the Law” Hague, as he was dubbed, turned down applications from political opponents seeking to hold public meetings (see Weissman 1976: 190). In the late 1930s, Hague had a political opponent, James Burkitt, imprisoned for six months for speaking at an anti-Hague rally in Journal Square. Hague was able to control his opposition through an ordinance he had issued that forbade public meetings without a special permit from himself. Opponents sued, and the case reached the US Supreme Court in 1939. According to *The New York Times*,

The Hague case concerned primarily the right of individuals, particularly C.I.O. organizers, to use the streets and public parks of Jersey City for meetings at which to further union organization and discuss the National Labor Relations Act. Refusal of Mayor Hague and other officials to permit these meetings was based on an ordinance of the city forbidding “public parades or public assembly in or upon the public streets, highways, public parks... until a permit shall be obtained from the Director of Public Safety.”<sup>19</sup>

In a landmark case on free speech, the US Supreme Court overturned Hague’s ordinance.

In addition to being Jersey City’s longest serving mayor (1917-1947), Hague was one of its most corrupt. One of most blatant displays of his corruption was the desk he had installed in his office for behind-the-scenes business deals. Calling it his “partners” desk, he used it explicitly for the purpose of soliciting bribes. By pushing out a center drawer that slid toward guests seated opposite him, Hague would collect the cash they deposited into it, as at a bank teller’s window, for an audience with him.<sup>20</sup> Hague

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<sup>19</sup> *The New York Times*, “A Fundamental Liberty Upheld in Hague Case: With Right of Assembly Reasserted, All ‘Four Freedoms’ of Constitution Are Well Established, June 11, 1939.

certainly was not alone in seeking extra-legal “compensation” for his services. A number of Jersey City officials were removed from office during subsequent decades and prosecuted for corruption (Daniels 2008).

In 1971, Paul Jordan, a Democratic mayoral candidate claiming to subscribe to a different ethos, was elected to office. With his election in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and the urban uprisings that swept through American cities in the late 1960s, Jordan promised accountable governance in Jersey City. Evoking John F. Kennedy, Jordan proclaimed to his numerous supporters, many of them African American or recently arrived from Puerto Rico, that “the torch had passed to a new generation” (cited from Weissman 1976: 201). In an attempt to woo this constituency, Jordan appointed Blacks and Puerto Ricans to the Board of Education, established a Puerto Rican Advisory Council, met regularly with the city clergy, and rescinded a policy of arresting addicts at the city’s medical center. Jersey City, however, like many American cities in the 1970s, was experiencing a period of de-industrialization and economic decline. Jordan, like other mayors, opted to follow pro-corporate urban renewal policies that often neglected to take public opinion, especially that of the lower class, into consideration. Jordan tore down low-income, largely Black, housing projects next to predominantly White neighborhoods and replaced them with middle-income housing cooperatives, which resulted in a fifty percent reduction in people living in low-income housing. Now concerned with public safety in a gentrifying area near the medical center, Jordan decided to remove a women’s job corps program (which served largely Black

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<sup>20</sup> The desk is on display at City Hall in Jersey City.

women) from the medical center complex where it was located, claiming that the program was attracting crime to the medical center (Weissman 1976; Lawless 2002).

Like many American cities, Jersey City saw a decline in manufacturing jobs and experienced massive economic restructuring over the last fifty years. From the 1960s onward, Jersey City lost much of its economic base as manufacturing left the city. Lake (2003:1006) posits that the decline during this period was accompanied by levels of middle-class white flight and suburbanization so great that they “marked such a new phase of urbanization in which the articulation of a new understanding of nature accompanied the spatial reorganization of class and race relations.” Railroad yards and waterfront industrial properties from the manufacturing era were abandoned as the city was no longer productive. In an attempt to revitalize itself, Jersey City tried to take advantage of its location close to lower Manhattan and network itself into the economic and cultural infrastructure of New York’s financial district. With the hope of re-orienting the area away from an ever-declining industrial base, the city tried to market its waterfront, which has spectacular views of the Manhattan skyline, for residential and commercial development. Two important waterfront development initiatives were Newport and Colgate. The Newport project entailed a major investment to build large residential/commercial buildings on the waterfront, directly opposite Manhattan. With private sector investment and a \$4 million federal urban development grant to revitalize urban areas, Newport offered 9,000 new residential units and more than 10 million square feet of office space, making it one of the largest residential/commercial development projects in the tri-state area (Grogan and Proscio, 2000). The Colgate waterfront project involved the transformation of the former toothpaste manufacturing plant into a large-



scale commercial venture to attract prominent financial firms to Jersey City. Tenants such as Merrill-Lynch and US West occupied spaces in the Colgate development. They were also important infrastructural developments in the area, most notably the PATH train service between Newark and Manhattan that ran through Jersey City. Additionally, the Hudson-Bergen light rail system was established to link the waterfronts of Hoboken and Jersey City.<sup>21</sup>

According to Lawless (2002: 1332), these developments were part of a “natural progression of development from a previous dependence on manufacturing, blue-collar jobs towards an economy centered on higher-value and higher-wage activities as the City sought to consolidate its role as a world-city spillover administration.” A central part of Jersey City’s redevelopment efforts were rental residential units along the waterfront that were priced one-third lower than rents in Manhattan. These units were aimed at younger professionals who worked in Manhattan or the burgeoning financial sector in Jersey City.

Such capital-friendly urban restructuring projects were embraced by both Democratic and Republican administrations in 1970s and 1980s. In 1992, Republican mayor Bret Schundler (Jersey City’s second Republican mayor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) continued pro-business development agendas initiated by his Democratic predecessors. Schundler implemented a corporate-friendly tax policy that offered 15-year tax abatements for new commercial developments. While Schundler’s policies were not popular *per se* within Jersey City as a whole, Lawless (2002:1334) points out that Schundler’s business-friendly stance “proved crucial in attracting new development in

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<sup>21</sup> See the Jersey City website at <http://www.cityofjerseycity.com/> for details on some of their current re-development projects.

that they provided stability and were competitive with what was being offered by other administrations in the region.” In a number of public pronouncements, Schundler stressed his pro-business policies of his administration. For example, in an article originally published in the *New Jersey Municipalities* magazine, Mayor Schundler laid out his economic approach as follows:

We have made it a point to create a pro-business attitude in Jersey city. Just to give one example, there are tremendous tax advantages to being located in Jersey City. We have no payroll tax; no city sales tax; no city income tax; no corporate tax; no personal property tax; no tax on unincorporated businesses; and no tax on commercial rent. In addition, downtown Jersey City falls within an Urban Enterprise Zone, so the state sales tax here is only 3%. We believe that lower taxes not only make for a more conducive business environment, but also strengthen the fiscal health of the city by freeing up investment dollars to help local businesses grow.<sup>22</sup>

The official rhetoric was that the development strategies being pursued would benefit the city as a whole. A planning official emphasized that Jersey City’s re-development policies would not create a dualistic, uneven city; the goal, instead, was that the benefits of these strategies would “spill over” into Jersey City as a whole. They did not want “to have a tale of two cities,” said officials, repeatedly. They were “trying not to create a new city leaving the old city in its shadow” (cited from Lawless 2002: 1339). However, the reality was very different. The much touted benefits of their pro-corporate economic development strategies not only failed to reach the lower classes of Jersey City’s population; they often had a negative impact on the poor, especially within the Black and Latino communities. Many felt that they were being marginalized from the economic

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<sup>22</sup> Cited from Bret Schundler, “Jersey City: From Mess to Mecca”  
<http://www.njfaq.com/bret2001/preex/messtomecca.shtml> last accessed November 22, 2012.

development strategies being pursued by city officials. Like many urban redevelopment schemes elsewhere, the hustle and bustle surrounding the Jersey City waterfront projects failed to involve or account for the Jersey City poor. A local Black activist commented (cited from Lawless 2002:1339),

I can't say that those incentives actually benefit us in the sense that it helps the community at large. I mean 20 years from now it might benefit us...but the immediate impact... it's nil, I would say.

In contrast to the new waterfront commercial development and high-end residential units that were going up in Port-Liberty, many parts of Jersey City were characterized by dilapidated buildings and boarded-up storefronts. The commercial growth that was to drive Jersey City's re-development schemes tended to attract professionals who either lived outside of Jersey City or in the high-end waterfront residential development. Most of the lower-income residents of Jersey City did not have the skills for the jobs opening up in the establishments along the waterfront. One Jersey City community activist noted that there were "lots of young people all the time who want jobs, but don't have the skills: they just don't have anything to market" (cited from Lawless 2002:1342). It was into this volatile economic and political landscape that a number of South Asians and other people of color began to immigrate after 1965.

## **SOUTH ASIANS RESIST RACIST VIOLENCE IN JERSEY CITY**

### **South Asian Settlement in Jersey City**

New Jersey has always been a major destination for international migrants, a trend that continued and intensified after 1965 (Stansfield 1998). The state's Asian population has grown about 1,400 percent since the 1970s. There were about 48,000 people residing in the state in 1970 who identified themselves as Asian. By 2010, there were 725,000 in number (see Table 7.1 below. Table 7.2 shows a distribution of the Asian population in general by county.).

<b>Census Year</b>	<b>Asian Population</b>	<b>Decennial Changes (Number)</b>	<b>Decennial Changes (Percent)</b>
1970	47,964	N.A.	N.A.
1980	102,890	54,926	114.5%
1990	270,839	167,949	163.2%
2000	474,828	203,989	75.3%
2010	725,726	250,898	52.8%

**Table 7.1:** Asian Population in New Jersey: 1970 to 2010  
**Source:** U.S Census Bureau, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010  
 Census of Population and Housing

New Jersey is also home to one of the largest South Asian settlements in the US. South Asians are New Jersey's largest Asian group, with their population reaching 292,256 as

of 2010 and constituting about 40 percent of the total Asian population of the state (see Table 7.3).

Middlesex County has the largest South Asian population in New Jersey, followed by Hudson County (see Figure 7.2). As of 2010, at the municipal level, the largest Asian population is concentrated in Jersey City (see Table 7.4), of which the South Asian population comprises 27,111.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> US Bureau of Census, 2010

County	Asian Population	Percent of Total Population
Altantic	20,595	7.5%
Bergen	131,329	14.5%
Burlington	19,395	4.3%
Camden	26,257	5.1%
Cape May	834	0.9%
Cumberland	1,907	1.2%
Essex	35,789	4.6%
Gloucester	7,609	2.6%
Hudson	84,924	13.4%
Hunterdon	4,181	3.3%
Mercer	32,752	8.9%
Middlesex	173,293	21.4%
Monmouth	31,258	5.0%
Morris	44,069	9.0%
Ocean	10,081	1.7%
Passaic	25,092	5.0%
Salem	557	0.8%
Somerset	45,650	14.1%
Sussex	2,642	1.8%
Union	24,839	4.6%
Warren	2,673	2.5%

**Table7.2:** New Jersey Asian Population by County, 2010  
**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census of Population and Housing

<b>County</b>	<b>Asian Indian</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>Filipino</b>	<b>Japanese</b>	<b>Korean</b>	<b>Vietnamese</b>	<b>Other Asian</b>
New Jersey	292,256	134,442	110,650	13,146	93,679	20,628	60,925
Atlantic	5,153	4,205	2,914	129	795	3,267	4,132
Bergen	24,973	17,236	19,155	5,922	56,773	734	6,536
Burlington	8,056	2,909	2,630	500	2,459	734	2,107
Camden	6,867	4,568	4,321	290	2,746	4,260	3,205
Cape May	175	169	242	19	70	89	70
Cumberland	618	313	380	181	114	66	235
Essex	10,853	9,020	9,003	682	2,447	967	2,817
Gloucester	2,107	1,288	2,092	102	546	505	969
Hudson	37,236	11,239	20,638	1,373	4,791	1,973	7,674
Hunterdon	1,673	1,207	485	74	308	98	336
Mercer	15,352	8,786	1,982	724	2,289	456	3,163
Middlesex	104,705	28,492	15,435	761	7,401	2,849	13,650
Monmouth	10,378	10,082	4,609	323	2,587	1,053	2,226
Morris	19,896	11,531	4,552	522	3,219	1,135	3,214
Ocean	2,337	1,538	3,874	197	835	515	785
Passaic	10,863	2,409	4,799	362	2,238	275	4,146
Salem	162	104	92	37	73	24	65
Somerset	21,625	12,955	4,564	430	2,179	741	3,156
Sussex	684	501	688	50	343	109	267
Union	7,607	5,410	7,565	408	1,259	662	1,928
Warren	936	480	630	60	207	116	244

**Table 7.3:** Asian Population by Selected Groups by County: New Jersey, 2010**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census of Population and Housing

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Asian Population</b>
Jersey City	Hudson	57,987
Edison township	Middlesex	42,842
Woodbridge township	Middlesex	22,137
Piscataway township	Middlesex	18,484
South Brunswick township	Middlesex	15,474
Parsippany-Troy Hills township	Morris	15,345
Fort Lee borough	Bergen	13,474
Franklin township	Somerset	12,337
Palisades Park borough	Bergen	11,273
East Brunswick township	Middlesex	10,683

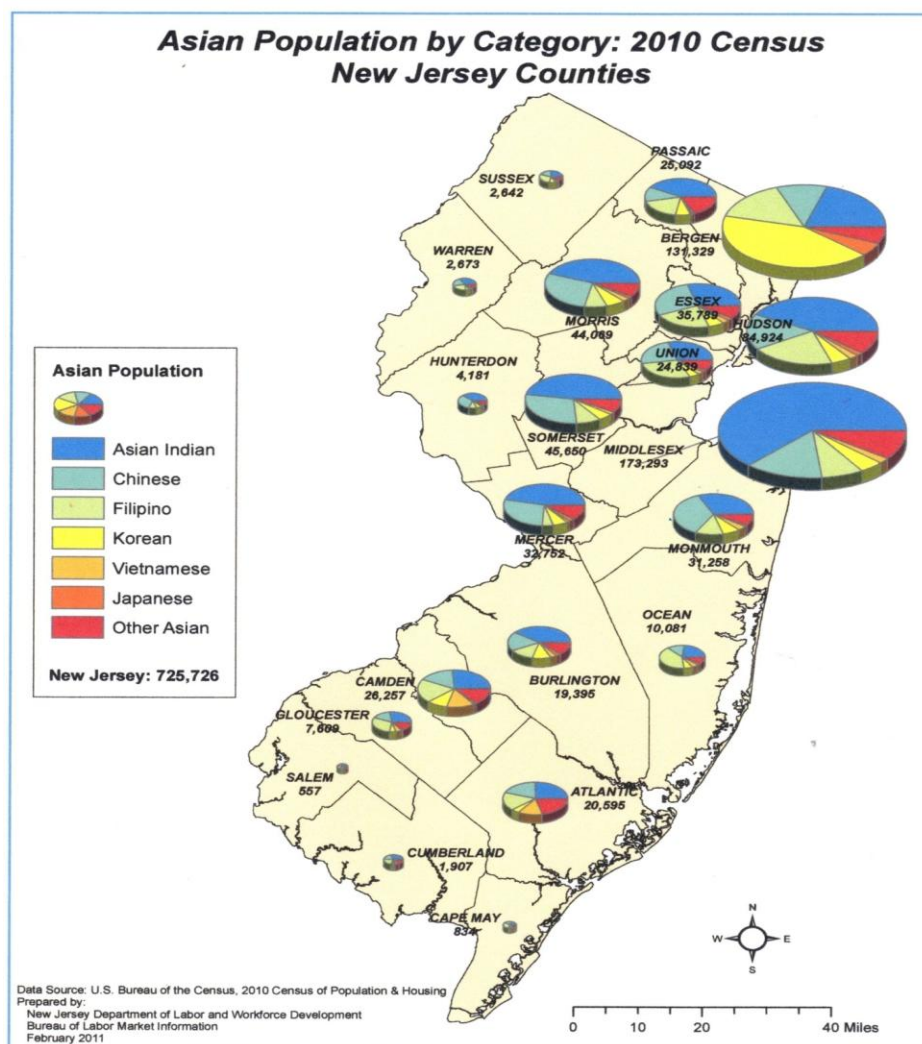
**Table 7.4:** New Jersey Municipalities with the Most Asian Residents, 2010

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census of Population and Housing

Lake (2003) observes that suburban growth, on one hand, and the de-population of urban New Jersey, on the other hand, were distinctly racialized processes. In fact, “the population of the eight largest cities was 93 percent white, on average, in 1930 but only 19 percent white by 2000,” according to Lake. By the same token, “Dramatic increases in nonwhite population partly offset the severity of white flight and confirmed the cities’ role as New Jersey’s enclaves for racial and ethnic minority populations” (Lake 2003:1008). For example, according to the 1970 census, Jersey City’s total population was 260,549. However, as a consequence of suburbanization and White flight, the city’s population fell to around 232,152 by the mid-1970s. On the other hand, “New Jersey,



with its many centers for science and high-tech industry, has been magnet for the many Indian immigrants who often are highly educated in various technical fields” according to Professor James Hughes of Rutgers University.<sup>24</sup> The state has also served, according to Hughes, as an immigrant outpost whereby “once a certain number of people of a



**Figure 7.2: The Asian Population of New Jersey**  
**Source: US Bureau of the Census, 2010**

<sup>24</sup> Cited from *The Home News*, “A Passage to America: Indians Making Jersey a Home Away from Home” July 14, 1991, p. A1/A5.

certain group establish themselves in a certain area, others follow.”<sup>25</sup> This has been the case in Jersey City, which has been a “gateway” for South Asian immigrants.

Immigrant communities from the developing world began to settle in Jersey City from the mid-1970s onwards. South Asians, like European immigrant groups from decades past, were attracted to the city’s proximity to Manhattan and its comparatively cheaper housing. Mono Sen, a long time South Asian Jersey City resident, community activist and former Deputy Mayor, observes that “in 1980, there were hardly 3000 Indians in Jersey City. It has been growing every census period since then.”<sup>26</sup> Lalitha Masson, a physician from India, came to Jersey City in 1966. She recalls that her colleagues and neighbors saw her as a “colorful novelty.” She “was invited by a number of host families to have dinner with them.” Jersey City, according to Masson, was dilapidated when she first arrived. “The streets were boarded up when we came to this country, and hospitals in the city were abandoned by White doctors. So for many years, they were run by Pakistani and Indian doctors.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Simmering Resentment**

Jersey City’s Asian population increased some 67.9% between 1980 and 1985 (from 9793 to 16,444) while the city’s overall population declined by 1.5% from 223,532 to 220,248.<sup>28</sup> Jersey City officials and local businesses welcomed the Asian community, particularly the 15,000 South Asians who arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As

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<sup>25</sup> Cited from *The Home News*, “A Passage to America: Indians Making Jersey a Home Away from Home” July 14, 1991, p. A1/A5.

<sup>26</sup> Cited from *The Jersey Journal* “City Attracts People From Around Globe” August 14, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Lalitha Masson, as told to Vivienne Walt, “A New Racism Gets Violent in Jersey City,” *Newsday*, 6 April 1988, Part II, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> US Bureau of Census Report, 1985

part of the fanfare to herald their arrival, the model minority stereotype was evoked by the media, as it had been for other Asian groups in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, and the South Asian immigrants were praised as “stabilizing, family-oriented forces in their communities” by Jersey City officials. Officials proclaimed that children of South Asian immigrants “a force of stability and good in the Jersey City community” because they “shun drug abuse and are seldom delinquents”<sup>29</sup> South Asians settled in two areas within Jersey City, around Journal Square and the Jersey Heights area along Central Avenue, and an ethnic enclave soon emerged as they began purchasing homes and opening small retail shops that catered to the community’s cultural and culinary needs (See Figure 7.3). The new immigrants moved into dilapidated buildings and began to contribute to the revitalization of the area by improving them.

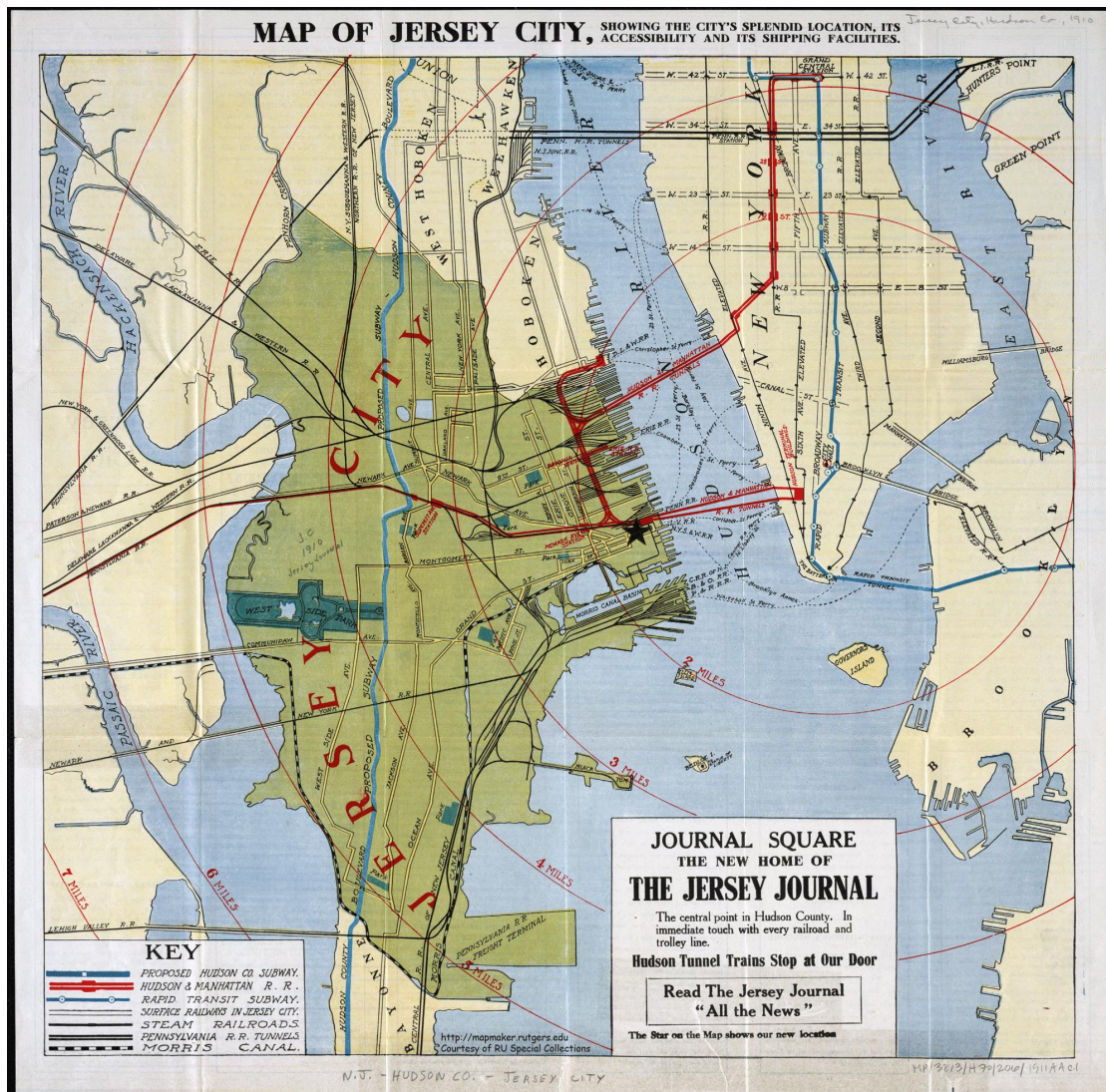
As a consequence of the 1965 immigration reform, Jersey City became one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the United States. As of the 2010 census, Jersey City is 21 percent white, 24 % Black, 24% Asian, and 28% Latino, and there are about 75 different languages spoken in Jersey City schools.<sup>30</sup> However, such diversity did not translate automatically into tolerance or happy multicultural co-existence. On the contrary, during the mid- to late 1980s, Jersey City was the locus of a wave of violence and hate crimes that seemed to be moving race-relations in exactly the opposite direction. A climate of resentment toward South Asians began to develop in the New York tri-state area, where many of the new immigrants had settled. In hindsight, it is possible to see

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<sup>29</sup> *The New York Times*, “Flow of 3d World Immigrants Alters Weave of US Society” June 30, 1986.

<sup>30</sup> See “New Jersey city Called Biggest ‘Melting Pot’ as State Diversity Increases” February 7, 2011. [http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-02-07/new-jersey-city-is-biggest-melting-pot-of-all-mayor-says.html?cmpid=msnmoney\[2/7/2011\]](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-02-07/new-jersey-city-is-biggest-melting-pot-of-all-mayor-says.html?cmpid=msnmoney[2/7/2011]) last accessed Thursday, January 10, 2013.

that the history of antagonism toward South Asians in Jersey City has multiple dimensions. By the time South Asians arrived in the city, most of the earlier Irish,



**Figure 7.3: Map of Jersey City**  
**Source: The Jersey Journal**

Italian, and German immigrants had left for the suburbs. The Whites who remained, most of whom belonged to the working classes, began to resent the newcomers who, unlike

themselves or their parents, came from parts of the world other than Europe, such as Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The residents of Jersey City, White and non-White observed that the new immigrants somehow appeared to be ready to occupy skilled professional jobs, or primed for entrepreneurial success.

A Polish cab driver from Jersey City expressed suspicion that many in the city shared. He remarked to a newspaper reporter, who was writing a piece on ethnic conflict in Jersey City, that the “problem,” as he saw it, was that “Indians...first started the whole hostage situation a few years back. People in this town haven’t thought much about Indians since they took all those American hostages.” When the reporter pointed out to the cabbie that the hostages in question were in fact taken by Iran, and not by Indians, the driver retorted, “who can tell the difference. They are all from the same area.”<sup>31</sup> The taxi driver’s casual confusion of Indian and Iranian identities, his disregard for their differences, and his limited understanding of geopolitical affairs all aptly capture the ignorance that lay at the heart of prejudice against South Asians at the time, and typify the openness with which such remarks were expressed. In time, these and other gross misunderstandings led to deadly consequences at the hands of vigilante assailants, White and non-White, who took it upon themselves to inflict a lesson upon South Asians for invading “their” city.

In times of economic uncertainty, it became easier, politically, to direct one’s wrath toward, and locate the cause of personal misfortune in, a group that could be identified as outsiders and aliens. The actual causes of the crises might have been

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<sup>31</sup> From *India West*, November 11, 1988, p. 1, Sunita Sorabji “Jersey City’s Other Minorities Discuss Problems of Ethnic Violence”. (Accessed through ProQuest.).

disinvestment from cities, owing to de-industrialization and global restructuring, but such lofty considerations did little to cool the simmering discontent. Indeed, “the big picture” was seldom considered by the majority, whose concerns were focused on jobs, housing, and opportunity for themselves. To the people in Hudson County during the 1980s, South Asians embodied the cause of unemployment, poverty, and inequality in their community.

To the casual observer in Jersey City, South Asians seemed to be succeeding where others did not. South Asians in Jersey City were widely regarded by fellow residents as enjoying great prosperity in the midst of others’ misery, given escalating unemployment and urban decline. Himanshu Shukla, a South Asian community activist from the area reflected that during the 1980s, “property values have quadrupled...One of the groups that has been seen as highly successful during this period is the Indian community”.<sup>32</sup> White working-class ethnics began to feel marginalized in an area they saw as their own domain and did not hesitate to express their resentment. However, this sentiment was not limited to Whites alone, as binaristic views of race relations would suggest; it was also expressed by other people of color, many of whom were recent immigrants themselves. Whites and non-Whites alike began to display animosity and aggression toward South Asians in Jersey City.

A Hispanic woman named Rosario Perez, who was living near the predominantly Indian section of Jersey City, was asked about rising inter-ethnic tensions in Jersey City by a newspaper reporter. As she began to relate her sense of alarm regarding festering

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<sup>32</sup> Cited from *Dallas Morning News*, November 24, 1989, “Victims of Hatred: Asian-Americans Face Rise in Racism, Violence.” p. 1a.



ill-feelings between South Asians and Latinos in Jersey City, her husband interrupted, “I’ll tell you why we don’t like Indians. They are cheap and they’ll \*\*\*\* you around for a dollar.” The woman tried to quiet her husband, but he raged on. “I don’t like it that we have lived here for so long, and that we are still renting our house. These Indian people, they come, they take over, they’ve got a house and business because they’re screwing us around. Everyone knows you can’t trust them.” A group of Hispanic youths bragged to the same reporter that they frequently scribbled anti-Indian graffiti and vandalized Indian stores.<sup>33</sup> Thus, while officials fussed about the new “model minority,” from the Subcontinent, the people of Jersey City subjected South Asians to the well-worn tropes of the Hindoo Menace stereotype. They created a local folklore rife with racist depictions of South Asians’ avarice, greed, and insularity. Accounts of South Asian cunning or alternatively, their outlandishness, were voiced freely in Jersey City and taken for granted as fact. Another popular myth that enjoyed wide circulation had to do with how South Asians were being awarded special funds and privileges by the US government for the purpose of outpacing other groups financially. A news report on Jersey City on the *Eye on Asia* program featured interviews with Jersey City residents who felt free to comment that “We’re just jealous because they (Indians) have more money than we do.”<sup>34</sup> A heavily-tattooed truck driver who appeared on the program lashed out against “Indians”: “These people come over here and get \$10,000 to start a business. That’s not right. And we have to work and fight all our life.”<sup>35</sup> However, he was not alone in voicing this

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<sup>33</sup> From *India West*, November 11, 1988, p. 1, Sunita Sorabji “Jersey City’s Other Minorities Discuss Problems of Ethnic Violence”. (Accessed through ProQuest.).

<sup>34</sup> “Excerpts From Unedited Version of ‘Eye on Asia’ Videotape,” Interviews with Jersey City Residents Conducted Two Weeks After the Beating of Dr. Kaushal Sharan in 1987”

erroneous belief. Others, convinced that the imaginary financial aid to South Asians was real, joined in his rant that it was unfair for South Asians to be awarded federal grants when they were not.

Prejudice against South Asians came to a head in the late 1980s when they began to encounter open racial hostility in the form of violence. They had endured verbal threats, vandalism, and harassment throughout the decade, but now the attacks seemed to be escalating. Mono Sen, the founder of a South Asian community organization, the Indo-American Association (IAA), recalled that “Fifteen years ago there were only about 3,000 Indians in the city... Some kids had never seen Indians before. They would shout things like, “Hey you Hindus.” Then around 10 years ago, the Indian stores on Central Avenue and homes of Indians in the Heights area were broken into with greater frequency.”<sup>36</sup> South Asians were afraid to enter a neighborhood dubbed “Johannesburg” by residents in the predominantly Black section of Central Avenue.<sup>37</sup> Soon thereafter, anti-South Asian vitriol began to escalate from epithets and hate mail into violence. Assault and murder followed, in full view of the state.

### **Deadly Anti-“Indian” Attacks**

Ramesh Patel, a South Asian resident of Jersey City during the turbulent 1980s, observed that “trouble had been brewing for some time in the mixed Hindu, Black, White, and Puerto Rican neighborhoods of Jersey City... incidents were egg-throwing,

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<sup>35</sup> Cited from “In Jersey City Indians Protest Violence,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1987, p. B2

<sup>36</sup> Helen Zia, “Jersey City Jags,” *The New Asian Times*, December 1988, 3.

<sup>37</sup> *The Jersey Journal*, September 25, 1987, p. 25, “Bigot Brags of Racial Attacks”



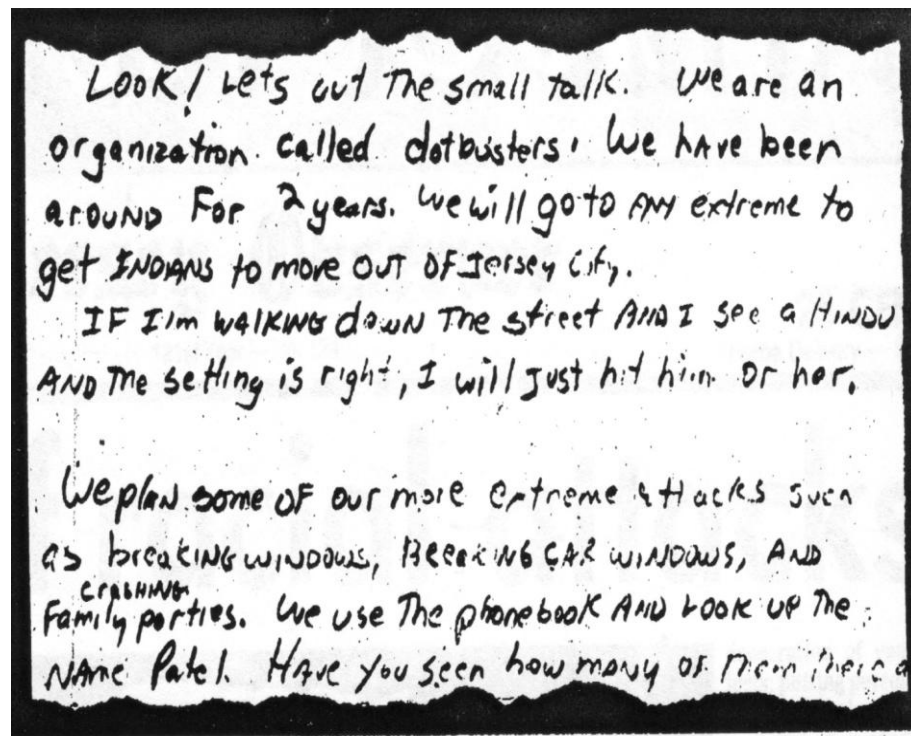
verbal harassing, pushing women on the street, swearing, and breaking windows of Indian businesses.”<sup>38</sup> In July 1987, *The Jersey Journal* captured the growing sense of alarm in the city in an article focusing on the rising tide of bigotry, hate, and harassment against South Asians. Subsequently, the *Journal* received a “letter” from a gang calling itself “the Dotbusters,” that voiced their hatred of South Asians and declared its intention to drive them out of Jersey City (see Figure 7.4):

I’m writing about your article during July about the abuse of Indian People. Well, I am here to state the other side. I hate them, if you had to live near them you would also. We are an organization called dot busters. We have been around for 2 years. We will go to any extreme to get Indians to move out of Jersey City. If I am walking down the street, I see a Hindu, and the setting is right, I will hit him or her. We plan some of our extreme attacks such as breaking windows, breaking car windows, and crashing family parties. We use the phone books and look up the name Patel. Have you seen how many of them there are? Do you even live in Jersey City? Do you walk down Central Avenue and experience what its like to be near them: we have and we just don’t want it anymore. You said that they would have to start protecting themselves because the police cannot always be there. They will never do anything. They are a weak race physically and mentally. We are going to continue our way. We will never be stopped.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “New Jersey Man Murdered in Anti-Hindu Violence: American Public Shocked as Dotbuster Gang Terrorizes Hindus, Attacks Indian Businesses” *Hinduism Today*, November 30, 1987: page 1.

<sup>39</sup> *The Jersey Journal* claimed that prior to publishing the letter in August 1987, it immediately notified the FBI of the letter and its contents. The *Journal* claimed that the FBI instructed the *Journal* to notify the local police, which the *Journal* claimed it did. (See “Anonymous Letter Sets Off Bias Probe” *The Jersey Journal*, October 13, 1987, page 1, 10).



LOOK! Lets cut The small talk. We are an organization called dotbusters. We have been around For 2 years. We will go to any extreme to get INDIANS to move OUT OF Jersey City.

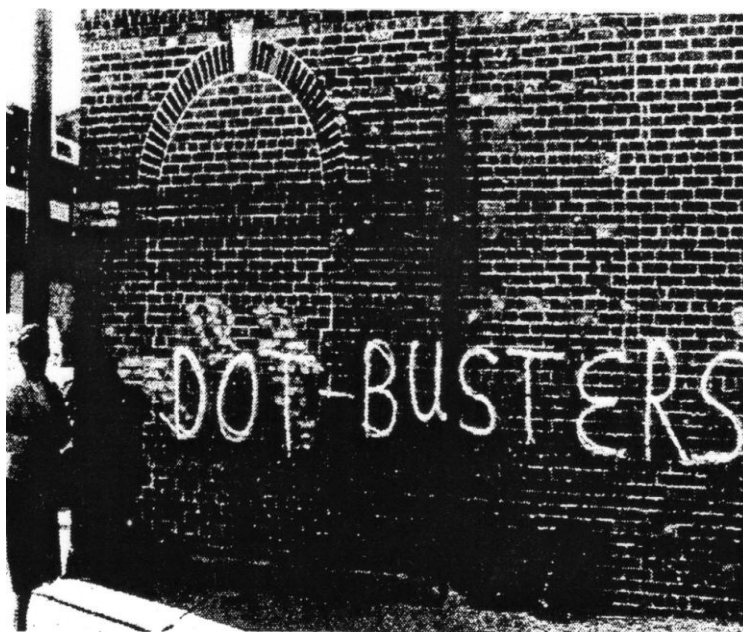
IF I'm walking down The street AND I see a HINDU AND The setting is right, I will just hit him or her.

We plan some OF our more extreme attacks such as breaking windows, breaking CAR windows, AND <sup>CRASHING</sup> family parties. We use The phonebook AND look UP The Name Patel. Have you seen how many of them there a

**Figure 7.4:** Excerpt of Hate Letter from the “Dotbusters”

**Source:** *Jersey Journal*, September 25, 1987, p. 1

The Dotbusters’ unabashed hatred of South Asians and declaration of war against them was hardly random or spontaneous; rather, it tapped into a rich vein of anti-“Indian” sentiment shared by the residents of the area. The fact that vandalism of South Asian



**Figure 7.5:** Dotbuster Graffiti in Jersey City  
Source: *The Jersey Journal*, October 9, 1987, p.10

property was rife and that physical and verbal attacks against South Asians were already commonplace merely emboldened the author(s) of the letter to openly express themselves (see Figure 7.5). In 1987 and 1988, however, things took a turn for the worse as violence escalated. The publication of the “Dotbuster letter” in conjunction with the unabated attacks threw South Asians into a spiral of panic. Thousands came forward after the publication of the letter to affirm that they were being harassed daily, and had been for years, in exactly the manner described in the letter. Some had long endured verbal and physical taunts, sometimes assault, on the streets of Jersey City with virtually no protection or assistance from the police.<sup>40</sup> Others complained about the increased number of obscene or threatening phone calls since the publication of the letter. A local

<sup>40</sup> See “Racists Attack Indians” in *The Times of India*, October 28, 1987, page 17

community activist, Hardy Singh, said that many parents were afraid to send their children to school after the letter appeared in the *Journal*. South Asian students at Dickinson High School in Jersey City complained that verbal taunts and other racially motivated forms of bullying increased after the letter appeared in the paper.<sup>41</sup> They reported that some of their tormenters at the school displayed “Dotbuster Identification Cards.”<sup>42</sup>

During this period, South Asians in the area lived as if under siege. Many avoided activities that necessitated leaving their homes unless absolutely necessary. Some were too fearful to go to work. The panic they felt increased with the number of attacks, which in turn fanned their fear into a feeling of paralysis. On the other hand, the attackers, sensing their victims’ mounting terror, seized the opportunity to commit more crimes with virtually no intervention from law enforcement. Eggs were thrown at South Asians and their property; they were beaten, physically harassed, and verbally abused on the streets. Gangsters staked out vantage points and stalked South Asians as they ventured out of their homes. Some favorite haunts of the assailants were the supermarkets on Central Avenue, where they thronged to wait for the occasional South Asian shopper. The youths knew that their victims, in need of food, would come by, sooner or later. They blocked the paths of any “Indian” who attempted to pass. They punched or hit the men; they groped, pushed down and kicked, insulted and spit upon women. Initially they targeted women who wore cultural attire or *bindis* (decorative dots) on their foreheads

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<sup>41</sup> See “Panic in Jersey City Over a Death” *India Abroad*, October 9, 1987, page 16.

<sup>42</sup> See “Asians Face Brutal Attacks From Jersey City ‘Dot Busters’: Indian Parents File \$10 Million Wrongful Death Suit” *Asian Week*, May 27, 1988 page 13.

but with time, gangsters learned to “read” the race of their victims regardless of attire. South Asians’ belongings were seized and/or destroyed. During this time, many South Asians reported receiving threatening phone calls at all hours of the day. Buildings occupied by South Asians were defaced with racial graffiti. South Asian homes were damaged as rocks, beer bottles and garbage were thrown at windows by youths walking or driving by. Some homes were bombed or set on fire. Throughout this period, South Asians consistently reported a lack of or delay in police response, or outright dismissal of their plight by the police who did respond. The few South Asian families who could move out of Jersey City, did so at this time,<sup>43</sup> just as the Dotbusters had intended, but most had no choice but to remain.

Within the context described above, three incidents that occurred in close succession are discussed below. All involved physical violence. The first involves attacks on two South Asian students, Syed Hasan and Vikas Aggarwal, from the Stevens Institute of Technology on September 12, 1987. The second incident pertains to the beating of Dr. Kaushal Sharan into a coma on September 24, 1987. The third case is the killing of Navroze Mody on September 27, 1987. These three cases are discussed here because they offer a window not only into the magnitude of crimes committed against South Asians during this time, but also offer a glimpse at the social and political inertia that South Asians encountered in the processes of seeking protection and representation under the law. The particular incidents are described first, then followed by an account of the mobilization by South Asians to demand redress for the violation of their rights. Official handling of the incidents are then discussed.

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<sup>43</sup> See “Bigotry is Forcing Indians to Move” in *The Jersey Journal*, June 17, 1988, p. 1, 13.

*Syed Hasan and Vikas Aggarwal*

On September 12, 1987, Syed Hasan and Vikas Aggarwal, two South Asian students from the Stevens Institute of Technology, had been walking to a Mexican restaurant in Hoboken, East LA, for dinner. According to court testimony, when they reached the restaurant, around 9pm, a man grabbed Hasan's umbrella from his hand. Aggarwal, who stepped forward to request the umbrella back, was punched in the face. Simultaneously, another man hit Hasan with a metal bar. Shaken, bleeding, and weak from the attack, Hasan and Aggarwal attempted to leave the area and return to the Stevens Institute, where they could report the assault to security. As they did so, they were assaulted again. Hasan was able to escape but Aggarwal collapsed on the curb. Ivan Salas, a man who worked at Chicken Galore, a nearby restaurant, had heard the assailants shout, "Hindu, Hindu" as well as the repeated pleas of the victims. Salas approached the assailants and appealed to them to stop their attack, whereupon they turned upon him and then fled the scene.<sup>44</sup>

Salas identified two of the attackers as "Chinito" and "Chinito's brother," both Latino. Three days after the attack, Detective Thomas Cahill, who was assigned to the case, found out that William "Chinito" Acevedo had been bragging to his friends at school that he "had beat up two Indians and the chicken man."<sup>45</sup> The Acevedo brothers were brought in for questioning to the Hoboken police station on September 17, 1987. However, to the disappointment of the South Asian community, the brothers were

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<sup>44</sup> See United States District Court, D, New Jersey, *Jamshid Mody, Plaintiff, v. City of Hoboken, et al, Defendants* Civ. A. No. 89-1672, March 6, 1991.

<sup>45</sup> See United States Court of Appeal, Third Circuit. 959 F.2d 461 page 18.

released without being charged. Ten days later, on September 27, 1987, the Acevedos were involved in the brutal killing of Navroze Mody, a South Asian man. Hoboken police's decision to let the Acevedo brothers go without charging them for the attacks on the Stevens students, remains controversial and will be discussed later in the chapter. South Asians who remember that terrible time still wonder whether Mody might have lived had the police charged the Acevedos for their prior attacks.<sup>46</sup>

### *Kaushal Sharan*

In the days between the assaults on the Stevens students and Mody's killing, another man was nearly killed as part of the racially motivated attacks on South Asians in Jersey City. Kaushal Sharan was beaten to an inch of his life with a baseball bat on the morning of September 24, 1987. Sharan, a medical doctor, had completed his training in India and had passed the first round of exams in order to qualify to practice medicine in the US (see Figure 7.6). He was completing a residency requirement at a Brooklyn hospital and lived with his brother in the Heights section of Jersey City in order to save some money. Sharan had gone out in the early hours of the morning to take care of some unfinished paperwork. "I went to a shop to print out some papers. I remember I closed the door and after that, I don't remember," he recounted.<sup>47</sup> As he exited the building, which was located at the intersection of Central Avenue and Ferry Street, he was struck in the back of his skull with a baseball bat. He was repeatedly beaten with the bat and left for dead. Sharan himself was unable to recall the incident afterward, but other accounts say

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<sup>46</sup> See "Murder Suspects Charged in Prior Racial Assaults," *The Jersey Journal*, January 15, 1988, pp. 1, 8.

<sup>47</sup> "Victim Struggles to Remember" *Jersey Journal*, October 16, 1987, pages 1 and 16.



**Figure 7.6. Top:** Kaushal Sharan was beaten into a coma by the “Dotbusters” gang in Jersey City, New Jersey on September 24, 1987. **Source:** *The Hudson Reporter*, May 3, 2009; available at <http://www.hudsonreporter.com> last accessed on May 19, 2013.

**Bottom:** Navroze Mody, center, pictured with friends, was beaten to death in Hoboken, NJ on September 27, 1987. **Source:** <http://www.filmiholic.com> last accessed on May 19, 2013.



that he was found lying on the curb, without identification. He was transported to the Jersey City Medical Center because he was “bleeding through his nose and both eyes. The left eye was completely black then, his entire head, swollen.” There were three fractures in his skull.<sup>48</sup> Initially, he was admitted into the hospital as “John Doe.” His family, who had filed a missing persons report, later learned that he was fighting for his life in the intensive care unit of the Jersey City Medical Center.

Vikram Solanki, a friend of Sharan and the family, lamented that the Heights area, where they lived, had witnessed an escalation of attacks against Indians just prior to Sharan’s beating, and nothing was being done about it. He recalled that “a neighbor had his house broken into with bricks...local kids continued to throw eggs at him and his house.”<sup>49</sup> Sharan, according to Solanki was concentrating exclusively on his medical exams and was rather oblivious to the goings on in the neighborhood. He “hadn’t been aware of the escalating violence against members of his community,” noted Solanki.<sup>50</sup>

### *Navroze Mody*

On September 27, 1987, Navroze Mody, a young business school graduate who worked for Citibank, had gone out with a group of friends to dinner at the Mexican Restaurant, East L.A., incidentally the same one at which Hasan and Aggarwal had intended to dine on the night they were assaulted. (See Figure 7.6). The restaurant was in

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<sup>48</sup> “Victim Struggles to Remember” *Jersey Journal*, October 16, 1987, pages 1 and 16.

<sup>49</sup> “Victim Struggles to Remember” *Jersey Journal*, October 16, 1987, pages 1 and 16.

<sup>50</sup> “Victim Struggles to Remember” *Jersey Journal*, October 16, 1987, pages 1 and 16.

a section of town that was regarded as cosmopolitan and trendy by local yuppies. In preceding decades, Hoboken had been a working-class Italian-American community, home to the famous singer Frank Sinatra and, more recently, home to the actor Joe Pantolino of *The Sopranos*, the hit TV series on the Mafia. After dinner, Mody and his friends stopped for drinks at the Gold Coast Café. As Mody and a friend (William Crawford) walked back to Crawford's car, which was parked at Willow and 9th Avenues, they ran into a gang of youths.

What transpired next remains in dispute. Some accounts claimed that the youths followed Mody and Crawford, teasing Mody about his baldness and taunting him about his racial and religious identity. In contrast, the youths claimed that it was Mody who provoked them with a martial arts stance inviting a fight. Four youths, all teenagers, subsequently assaulted Mody with blunt objects including bricks. After Mody fell to the ground, unconscious, one youth bludgeoned Mody's face repeatedly with a brick until it was unrecognizable. The youths then fled the scene. Mody was taken to the nearby St. Mary's Hospital, where he lay in a coma for nearly four days. He died on the fifth day, just before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Crawford, who was White, was not attacked. According to eyewitness accounts, four Latino youths, Ralph Gonzalez, Luis Padilla, and brothers Daniel Luis Acevedo and William Acevedo, had assaulted Mody.

Public response to these attacks and their handling by law enforcement will be discussed later the chapter.

### **South Asians Mobilize Against Hate**

The violence and intimidation directed against South Asians in Jersey City during the 1980s had instilled a sense of fear and alienation within the community. Acts of intimidation that had started as verbal humiliation, egg-throwing , and property damage had not only escalated to physical assault and murder, but had also become routine. As mentioned earlier, South Asian families increasingly felt like they were imprisoned in their homes, which too were not safe from attack, considering the incidents of arson and bombing that had taken place.<sup>51</sup> Vijaya Desai, a medical doctor and Jersey City resident, explained that as the targeted attacks escalated she and others did not “leave the house after 7pm. We only travel in groups and stay away from groups on the street. It’s a bad feeling. All of the Indians are afraid to go out of the house.”<sup>52</sup>

As the violence and terror mounted, the South Asian community of Jersey City mobilized to take action. They began with meetings to call attention to the problem and to solicit input from the community regarding the measures that ought to be taken to address it. Then, they organized a number of protests and rallies against the violence as a way of letting authorities know about their frustration with the official neglect of the problem. Finally, they formed several organizations in response to the violence in Hudson County. The National Organization for the Defense of Indian Americans (NODIA) was founded and headed by Dr. Lalitha Masson. MASALA, the Movement Advocating South Asian Links in America, was organized by college students at the University of Pennsylvania. Likewise, students from New Jersey and New York responded to the violence by forming

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<sup>51</sup> See “Many in Heights Say Racism is Routine” in *The Jersey Journal*, October 3, 1987, p. 1,16.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in *The Jersey Journal*, October 1, 1987, “Indians Fear to Walk city Streets” p. 1, 7.

Indian Youth Against Racism (IYAR) in 1987, which later became Youth Against Racism (YAR). The International Mahatma Gandhi Association (IMCA) was founded by Hardyal Singh, and Mono Sen created the Indo-American Association (IAA). Himanshu Shukla, originally a member of IYAR, organized the Indian American Political Action Club of Hudson County (IMPACT).

The aim of these groups was to represent South Asians and to bring about official recognition of hate crimes as civil rights violations that potentially could affect anyone. The first major mobilization of South Asians in Jersey City took place less than two weeks after Mody's killing. In October of 1987, a coalition of groups outraged by the escalating violence, especially the beating of Kaushal Sharan and the killing of Navroze Mody, organized a protest march. The march was significant as the first major civil rights protest in the United States that involved South Asians. It began outside the Journal Square Transportation Center, went around Newark Avenue, where a number of South Asians resided, and ended at the Five Corners Library. The demonstrators, who were more than one thousand in number, shouted, "We want justice" and "We will stay in New Jersey," and pledged not to be intimidated. Evoking the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, they began with a formal and public demand to local authorities to address the violence, recognize the rights of South Asians, and protect them under the law. However, Lalitha Masson made clear that while she and her organization, NODIA, were committed to the ideal of non-violence, that the community "are not going to stay quiet."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in *The Jersey Journal*, October 12, 1987, "Indians Vow Bigotry Won't Drive Them Out" p. 1, 11

The demonstrators were met at the library by Jersey City Mayor Anthony Cucci, who pledged to address the concerns of the marchers. However, they were dissatisfied with his casual characterization of the violence as being perpetrated by “a few ugly individuals.”<sup>54</sup> In spite of ongoing incidents, Cucci continued to treat the problem as a nuisance more than crime, let alone a hate crime, and made some statements about addressing it. He downplayed the idea that the violence had a pattern suggestive of targeted bigotry. Acts of bias against South Asians continued throughout the fall of 1987 while officials continued to maintain that the incidents were mere coincidences, which frustrated South Asians, who were convinced otherwise. In mid-January, 1988, about four months after Mody’s killing, vandals entered an apartment building on Central Avenue, where a large number of South Asians lived, and effaced their names from mailboxes. In place of the names, they wrote, “Go back to India,” and broke the alarm system.<sup>55</sup> The apartment building was situated across the street from the North District Headquarters of Jersey City police, the irony of which was not lost on horrified South Asians.

Following this incident, a coalition of six Hudson County South Asian groups sponsored a demonstration in front of the police headquarters opposite the vandalized building. They carried banners that read, “A spark neglected burns the house” and “discrimination by police is a shame to society.” The protesters demanded more effective police protection, more police initiative in preventing acts of bigotry, and for the police to arrest offenders who targeted South Asians or others out of hate. A number of

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in *The Jersey Journal*, October 12, 1987, “Indians Vow Bigotry Won’t Drive Them Out” p. 1, 11

<sup>55</sup> Reported in *The Jersey Journal*, January 25, 1988, “Indians Rally For Police Protection” p. 1, 6.

protesters voiced their frustration at police inaction, claiming that offenses continued because the police were not doing their jobs. Some of the residents of the vandalized apartment building complained that after the incident was reported, police took more than six hours to arrive from across the street to the scene of the crime. Assemblyman Robert Menendez (Dem.) was informed of the protest and invited to attend. Coalition leaders approached him to ask if he would consider sponsoring legislation that would increase the penalty of a crime if it could be proven that the crime had been motivated by hate and bias, whether it was ethnic, racial, or religious. Menendez told the crowd that he would.<sup>56</sup> One of the major successes of the coalition was its mobilization toward the passage of a “hate crimes bill” in the New Jersey Legislature.

In June 1988, about nine months after Mody’s killing, Jersey City mayor Anthony Cucci called for a meeting with local community activists to express his concern about acts of intimidation against South Asians, and the resulting exodus of South Asians from Jersey City. Lalitha Masson, founder of NODIA, was present at the meeting. She told the mayor that according to her estimates, about one thousand South Asians had left the city after Mody’s killing the year before. Cucci and other officials maintained that the city was doing everything in its power to address the violence and went on to add that his administration valued the presence and contribution of South Asians to Jersey City’s development.<sup>57</sup> However, such rhetoric rang hollow in the wake of unprosecuted crimes against South Asians from the year before and the ongoing, unabated attacks.

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in *The Jersey Journal*, January 25, 1987, “Indians Rally For Police Protection” p. 1, 6.

<sup>57</sup> See *The Jersey Journal*, June 18, 1988, p.13, “Jersey City Officials Aim to Stop the Violence”

Hudson County Prosecutor, Paul DePascale, who was also at the meeting, tried to reassure the assembly that the violence was isolated and random in nature, and hardly a part of a deliberate campaign against South Asians. Masson and other activists were incensed by DePascale's assessment and interrogated the prosecutor about why offenders were being released without being charged, let alone why harsher punishments were not being meted out to them, especially for acts of vandalism, intimidation, and harassment. DePascale claimed that his hands were tied because juveniles were involved, since teenagers charged with the class of offenses that were considered "disorderly conduct" were usually released into the custody of their parents and seldom sent to jail for such acts. Furthermore, he informed the group, that teenagers can only be charged with "ethnic" bias if they defaced "religious" buildings.<sup>58</sup> Unconvinced, the activists retorted that the bias they are enduring qualify as "all of the above," in that they had been subjected to ethnic, religious, racial, cultural, and other kinds of hate, all at once. Frustrated by the state's partial interpretation of the terms "bias" and "hate," they pressed forward with organizing and mobilizing toward the passage of a comprehensive "hate crimes" bill that made no such arbitrary distinction among victims, or between people and property. By then, South Asian activists had realized that in addition to combating the exasperating inertia exhibited by local officials, they had a greater fight ahead for civil rights and representation in the law, culture, and in politics. The passage of a hate crimes bill, they felt, would be a beginning in that battle. Some activists had already begun moving forward with the campaign. To that effect, South Asians began to relentlessly lobby sympathetic law makers in the state.

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<sup>58</sup> See *The Jersey Journal*, June 18, 1988, p.13, "Jersey City Officials Aim to Stop the Violence"

As a consequence of intense pressure from activists in Jersey City, two democratic assemblymen from north Hudson County, Robert Menendez and Bernard Kenny, agreed to introduced an anti-bias bill into the state legislature that summer. The bill called for tougher sentences in crimes involving racial, ethnic, and religious intimidation. Menendez and Kenny announced that they would ceremonially introduce the bill on the steps of the Hudson County court house, and hoped that their legislation would prevent future racial attacks. Mono Sen, chairman of the Indo-American Association of Jersey City welcomed the measure, and told the press that “this law is a long time coming, and I applaud these men for bringing it forward.”<sup>59</sup>

The bill, however, languished in the state assembly and made no progress toward passage. Himanshu Shukla of IYAR said that his group, made up largely of college students who were outraged by the violence and intimidation in Jersey City, was determined “to push hard for the bill.”<sup>60</sup> IYAR came to learn that the bill was being held up by the Speaker of the State Assembly, Chuck Hardwick, a powerful Republican politician. Shukla called the Speaker and “left a message saying we were holding Hardwick personally responsible for the delay in the bill. I said the IYAR was planning to hold a rally in October and would protest about the delay taking place.”<sup>61</sup> A Hardwick aide called back claiming that “they had been unaware of the Menendez bill.”<sup>62</sup> A few days later, Speaker Hardwick’s office contacted IYAR stating that they “did not like the Menendez bill, but were going to introduce a bill of their own.”<sup>63</sup> Hardwick did indeed

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<sup>59</sup>Quoted in *India-West*, May 20, 1988, page 27, “Jersey Assemblymmen Introduce hate Crime Legislation”

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”



introduce an anti-bias bill in the fall of 1988, but IYAR activists thought that its scope was too narrow to be effective. “Hardwick’s bill was not that strong, and we wanted to give it more teeth,”<sup>64</sup> said Shukla. One of its major weaknesses, he observed, was that it didn’t cover disorderly persons’ conduct, since the incidents most frequently reported by South Asians in the Hudson County area involved acts of vandalism, property damage, and hate graffiti. Punishment for these acts were very minor and served as no deterrent. To boot, the crimes were not recognized as motivated by bias. To illustrate what he meant, Shukla pointed out that “if in an all-White residential area, an Indian family suddenly found only their own tires regularly being slashed, this could not be a coincidence.”<sup>65</sup> IYAR activists and others fighting racial crimes in Jersey City wanted the bill to addresses instances of vandalism, graffiti, etc. as linked to ethnic, racial, and religious intimidation. To their surprise, Hardwick’s office was open to suggestions regarding the bill. “A lot of people in the IYAR, some of whom were law students, became involved in background research,” said Shukla. “We also got help from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, who looked into the legal aspects of the bill. In the end, about eight changes were made in the bill.”<sup>66</sup>

Activists from other states and organizations representing other constituencies were impressed that Jersey City activists were able to get a Republican controlled legislature to support and sponsor an anti-bias bill. “Campaigners have been trying for

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

years to get such a bill in New York, and with no success,” recalled Shukla. “Now here we were, having a Republican introducing a major piece of civil rights legislation. Many regarded that as a miracle. When the gay lobby heard about it, they decided it was the ideal opportunity to get gay rights taken care of.”<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, that was when Hardwick withdrew his support. “At this point we got stuck as Hardwick refused to accept the gay amendment as part of the bill,” Shukla explained. “The IYAR felt that it would be morally wrong to refuse to support gay people. We also refused to lobby to have the gay amendment dropped.”<sup>68</sup> As a consequence, the bill did not advance and the measure died in December 1989.

Fortunately for IYAR activists, Democrats took control of the state legislature in 1990. The group pushed for the resuscitation of the Menendez-Kenny bill and modified it to include the work they had done on the Hardwick bill. The ‘burden of proof’ clause, as it pertained to bias-related crimes, was changed from ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ to ‘a preponderance of evidence.’ Additionally, disorderly persons’ offenses became a fourth degree misdemeanor. Bias crimes against sexual orientation were also included in the bill. IYAR and other activists were jubilant when the bill passed into law. “The success of the bill,” Shukla hoped, “will send a clear message that society takes seriously the perversity of people picking on someone solely because of the color of their skin. The fact that we got that far with the bill is partly due to the peculiar nature of the case. The Dotbusters were so clearly perverse that legislators were in a position where they could

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

not but be in favor of doing something about this.”<sup>69</sup> Governor Jim Florio signed the Hate Crimes Bill into law on August 9, 1990. At the ceremony, Governor Florio said, “this legislation does more than punish. It says something about who we are and the ideals to which this state is committed.”<sup>70</sup> The New Jersey law served as a blueprint for several federal anti-bias acts.<sup>71</sup>

While legislation does not, in and of itself, address the underlying causes of racism and bigotry, the passage of the Hate Crimes Bill in New Jersey was an important victory for the activists who had worked tirelessly to see it through, in order to demonstrate that collective political action can yield tangible, positive results. Stanley Mark, an attorney with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, who worked with the Jersey City activists toward the 1990 legislation, reflected that “the Dotbuster cases definitely challenged the community, and the community rose to the challenge. But the people went beyond those cases and recognized a fundamental truth: that you have to exert your civil rights and defend yourself.”<sup>72</sup> Although the struggle had begun with the logistical issue of police protection, limited to logistical concerns pertaining to police protection, South Asians recognized that they could not fight for justice if they did not respond to the inherent crisis of representation that compounded their predicament and victimized them as much as the violence itself did. The repeated

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39, “How Community Fought Racism”

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in *The Record*, August 10, 1990, “Sentences Double For Crimes Spurred by Ethnic Origin, Race” p. A04

<sup>71</sup> Charles Schumer took up the cause of bias-crimes at the federal level. In the 1990s, Congress passed three hate crime laws: The Hate Crimes Statistics Act, 1990; the Violence Against Women Act; and the Hate Crimes Sentencing Enhancement Act, 1994. See *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and Identity Politics* by James B. Jacobs and Kimberley Porter (Oxford University Press, 1998) for further analysis of federal initiatives against hate crimes..

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in *The Record*, June 3, 2006, “Hate Crime Resurrects S. Asian Solidarity; Rights Groups Recall ‘80s Attacks on Indians” p. A01.

denial of the racism that they had encountered after the attacks made South Asians painfully aware of how they were being excluded and marginalized from the claim of victimization by dominant binaries of race, religion, gender, etc. However, instead of protesting to be included within such binaries by demanding particular rights as a small ethnic/other subset or variant of “White” or “Black,” South Asian activists opted to transcend binaries altogether by broadening the scope of their demand to address racism, bias, and hate in more general terms. They recognized that their experience was but an example of a greater problem at work. Therefore, it became important to them to rally around the idea of fighting bias closer to its source, which, as they saw it, was a gap in the law caused by dominant narratives of race, ethnicity, or religion in American society. Their strategy was to push for new legislation that would offer protection under an expanded umbrella of civil rights for all.

### **Major South Asian Organizations in Jersey City**

The passage of the hate crimes bill was undoubtedly a major success for the South Asian coalition. However, as with many social movements, there were lines of fracture and tension between the constituent organizations, that were temporarily set aside during mobilizations, but resurfaced from time to time. There were debates and disagreements about what sort of relationship they ought to have with public officials, with the community, amongst the leaders, etc. The views of each organization regarding the appropriate response to the violence varied according to the political roles that each believed South Asians ought to play in American society. On the whole, the organizations espoused a multicultural outlook. Therefore, with respect to ethnicity and

race, they tended to embrace pluralism rather than assimilationism. Thus, it is not surprising that attacks on the *sari* or *bindi*, for example, resulted in these symbols becoming rallying points for defending “Indian culture”. For example, women wore *saris* at protests and rallies as symbols of defiance and cultural pride.<sup>73</sup>

The Dotbuster letter had touched a raw nerve among South Asians and served as a catalyst for mass action when it stated that “Indians” were a “weak race,” physically and mentally. It was precisely for this perceived “weakness,” i.e., their supposed passivity and avoidance of violent confrontation, that they were taunted as “Hindu” and “Gandhi,” on the streets. In the minds of many South Asians, the attacks had raised specters of colonial rule and external domination, leading to inner doubts about an appropriate political response to their plight. The Dotbuster letter and the attacks were a blow to the collective South Asian psyche. In response, many felt compelled to rally around “Indian heritage” as a starting point.<sup>74</sup> However, as much as the crisis enabled them to set aside their communal and sectarian differences, certain generational, educational, religious, and class differences did express themselves in the positions that were taken and strategies that were considered. They became self-critical after the attacks, vowed to stop being perceived as passive and resist racist attacks through cultural self-assertion. Some youth called for physical retribution, but they were outnumbered by those who were able to steer away from such a course of action after considering its inherent potential losses,

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<sup>73</sup> See “In Jersey City, Indians Protest Violence” *The Jersey Journal*, p. B1

<sup>74</sup> See “New Jersey Man Murdered in Anti-Hindu Violence: American Public Shocked as “Dot-Buster” Gang Terrorizes Hindus, Attacks Indian Businesses” *Hinduism Today*, November 30, 1987, p. 1; and see “Fear of the Dark” *India Abroad*, October 5, 2007, p. M3-M4.

material, social, and political.<sup>75</sup> Most South Asians figured that as a small minority, they were numerically and culturally outnumbered by the multicultural majority that surrounded them. Therefore, they opted for non-violent protest and political pressure as a way of drawing attention to their plight. South Asian community organizers had always been active in the area, usually organizing cultural events or serving as community spokespersons, but after the attacks had escalated, more members of the community began to participate in developing a response. They went about putting up flyers quoting Gandhi, and called for the defense of women and places of worship. They admonished themselves that “the Indian community has been lily-livered too long.”<sup>76</sup>

Conflicting viewpoints emerged among the various organizations that sought to address the violence. The fissure between first and second generation Indian political activists proved to be the most significant and persistent in formulating a response. “First generation” activists were adults, mostly immigrants, who owned homes or businesses in the Jersey City area. The “second generation” tended to be college students or recent graduates who were either born in the US, or belonged to the “one-and-a-half” generation, who were born in India but had emigrated as young children with their first-generation parents.<sup>77</sup> With respect to ideology and strategy, these two generational groups found it difficult to reach an agreement regarding the nature and scope of the problem, on one hand, and the form of collective action to take, on the other hand. One issue they

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<sup>75</sup> See “In Jersey City, Indians Protest Violence”, *The New York Times*, October 12, 1987.

<sup>76</sup> Chris Mitchell, “Lily –livered No Longer,” *The Hoboken Reporter*, February 28, 1988, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> The term “one-and-a-half generation,” refers to individuals who immigrated as children and is often used by Korean-Americans in relating their own experiences. See Charles Ryu, “1.5 Generation,” in Joann Faung Jean Lee’s *Asian Americans Oral Histories* (New York: The New Press, 1992).

argued about was whether to use the courts or to build alliances with other racial minority groups. For example, second generation activists, sought to identify an explanatory angle that avoided blame, such as situating the attacks within a historical context of unaddressed systemic problems in the US. They tried to consider persistent racial injustice or poverty, as motivations for the attacks. They felt that soliciting the support of other minority groups, especially other Asian American organizations, would be beneficial, and could even prove vital because they perceived other Asians as being in positions similar to their own (Leonard, 2000; Purkayastha, 2005). First generation activists, on the other hand, were concerned more specifically with the practical logistics of stopping the racial violence at hand. They had little patience for understanding what they regarded as the convoluted motivations and aspirations of their attackers, who sought to gratify themselves at the expense of South Asians. They saw no reason why they ought to be understanding of other groups' projections of frustration onto South Asians, especially when South Asians did not create their problems. To these mostly middle-aged and older South Asians, such projections of frustration upon others were indicative of mental and emotional problems in their attackers that had little to do with South Asians, and ought to be dealt with as such. To the older generation, the attacks were a criminal issue that could benefit little from outreach, to Whites or to other minority groups, because the attacks were being perpetrated by both. They cited the fact that in the acid spraying case, the attackers were Black.<sup>78</sup> In their view, Whites and non-

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<sup>78</sup> In September and October of 1987, assailants sprayed acid on a South Asian man, Shailesh Patel, and his daughter in a supermarket on Newark Avenue in Jersey City. The victims sustained burns on their skin. These and other incidents were noted in the first Congressional hearing on anti-Asian violence in the US. See US Government (1989) p. 56.

Whites had found common cause in the idle torment of and bigotry against South Asians as their common ‘enemy,’ their new racial ‘other’ (Morning, 2001; Koshy, 1998).

Class differences among South Asians also played a role in how they responded to the violence, and which political groups they joined to address it. For example, Masson’s organization, the National Organization for the Defense of Indian Americans (NODIA), tended to attract first generation professionals and echoed mostly their interests, such as personal safety, equal rights, and equal protection under the law. On the other hand, the International Mahatma Gandhi Association (IMGA), another first generation group, tended to draw from the working class and less educated, whose concerns ran along lines of economic insecurity and cultural debasement, particularly questions pertaining to protecting community “honor” and women’s “virtue” given the attacks.

The IMGA, headed by Hardyal Singh, recognized the need for mobilization and political representation after the attacks. By invoking Mahatma Gandhi, the IMGA sought a particular form of association that underscored the need for vigilance and action, on one hand, but also an ongoing connection with the country of India as the cultural homeland imagined by IMGA’s working class constituency. Singh made it a point to wear a Gandhi cap and Nehru jacket at rallies, where he stood out. He insisted on speaking in Hindi, not only in order to demonstrate and encourage cultural pride locally, but also to communicate with the non-English speaking members of the older generation who were his constituents. He also aimed to court the intervention of the Indian



government in the Jersey City case, toward which he made elaborate gestures.<sup>79</sup> Singh and the IMGA tried to give voice to a segment of South Asians, from India, who felt trapped in Jersey City, who wished they could return to India but could not forfeit the opportunity to work in the United States. The IMGA and its constituency felt the sting of the attacks acutely on cultural terms: “Indian women are assaulted and spat upon...”<sup>80</sup> Singh told reporters from India, and declared that he and his organization were not going to stand by idly and tolerate what seemed to them as an insult to India and its civilization.

Singh went on to represent the situation in Jersey City as one in which “respectable” gender roles, “Indian” cultural virtues, and decorous behavior worthy of merit were being assaulted and undermined by licentious, pleasure-oriented “American” cultures who were taking advantage of Indians, who had no choice but to remain where they were. “You cannot say ‘I saw one Indian girl with her boyfriend’... You never see an Indian girl smoking, taking beer, or taking wine,”<sup>81</sup> claimed Singh, in an effort to affirm his constituents’ belief in themselves as hard-working Indians of modest income who had become the innocent victims of a baser culture. However, Singh did so in a manner that identified “Indian” women as the lynchpin on which the entire community’s honor rested. With so much at stake, Singh and the IMGA vowed not to remain complacent; they would reach out to “mother India” and entreat her to come to the defense of her overseas children.<sup>82</sup> Through such statements and gestures, Singh defined

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<sup>79</sup> See “Beating Victim Appeals to India” in *The Jersey Journal*, June 10, 1988, p. 1, 4

<sup>80</sup> Savyasaachi Jain, “consulate criticized on Jersey Attacks,” *India Abroad*, October 23, 1987.

<sup>81</sup> See Joann Faung and Jean Lee’s *Asian Americans Oral Histories*, New York: The New Press, 1992, p. 114.

<sup>82</sup> See “Stop Racial Attacks, India Tells US” *The Times of India*, October 16, 1987 p. 17 and “2 MPs Call for Action on ‘Dotbusters’: Question Minister About Killings and Harassment in NJ” *India Abroad*, April 1, 1988, p. 4

“Indian” identity politically in narrowly nationalist and gendered terms that caused controversy among other South Asians.

His portrayal of South Asians seemed naïve and even regressive to other organizations, first and second generation groups alike. NODIA, for one, and its charismatic woman leader, Lalitha Masson, felt boxed in by Singh’s definition of “Indians,” and soon parted ways with him, coming together only during mobilizations for common concerns. On one hand, they realized that the essentialist symbolism and traditionalist rhetoric employed by the IMGGA may be a way for its constituents to cope at a psychic level with the attacks and other concerns, stemming from how their particular life experiences shaped their perceptions of the problem. On the other hand, most educated professionals and youth could not readily identify with Singh. They felt that the IMGGA’s anxieties were misplaced and doubted the group’s effectiveness in combating the targeted form of racism that the South Asian community was experiencing. An incident at a different location – East Brunswick, New Jersey – demonstrated to Singh’s objectors the inadequacy of his identification and representation of the problem. The Khadbai family, who were Pakistani, had discovered the words “Dots U Smell” scrawled on their garage door.<sup>83</sup> The perpetrator, David Mortimer, had no affiliation with Jersey City or the Dotbusters. However, South Asian activists noted, Mortimer and his associates harbored anti-“Indian” sentiments that drew no distinction between Indians, Pakistanis, and other South Asians; all were “dots” alike to him. This indicated to the activists that Mortimer and his cohorts were targeting what they took to be a singular

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<sup>83</sup> See “Teenagers Accused of Ethnic Slurs” in *The Star Ledger*, August 27, 1991” “Hate Law is Rejected By a Court” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1992

racialized identity. Singh's appeal to Indian nationalism, his use of Indian political symbols, and solicitation of assistance from India seemed out of touch with the problem, as his opponents saw it. First, it led to the exclusion of non-Indians, like the Khadbais, at a time when unity, on the basis of a greater "South Asian" identity, was needed more than ever given the new national context that South Asians now found themselves in.<sup>84</sup>

Secondly, younger South Asians in particular felt constrained and misrepresented by his traditionalism, which they felt locked them into anachronistic identities and roles that they were interrogating within their own lives. Furthermore, in light of the mobilization underway, many young South Asians felt that Singh's views only served to highlight internal South Asian divisions against a seemingly unified American "norm" that found the South Asian presence so objectionable in the first place. Finally, NODIA and second generation groups felt that the IMGA failed to confront the problem of race, as peculiarly contrived in America, that lay at the heart of the violence against "Indians".<sup>85</sup>

Lalitha Masson's NODIA and other secular first generation organizations with educated, middle-class, professional bases felt that the struggle lay elsewhere; they were more forthright about the need to safeguard their hard-won middle-class privileges in a racist society. They did not want to capitulate to anti-"Indian" sentiments and demands, which they believed were nothing but expressions of envy toward Indian economic success.<sup>86</sup> NODIA and its members believed that South Asians represented a soft target

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<sup>84</sup> See "Hate Crime Resurrects S. Asian Solidarity; Rights Groups Recall '80s Attacks on Indians" *The Record*, June 3, 2006.

<sup>85</sup> See "How Community Fought Racism" *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39

<sup>86</sup> See "Indians Vow Bigotry Won't Drive Them Out" *The Jersey Observer*, October 12, 1987.

for individuals who were frustrated by their own dysfunctions. South Asian immigrants, according to NODIA, were the unfortunate victims of individuals who lacked both the ingenuity and initiative to address their own problems in their own country. Masson repeatedly stressed that the middle-class Indian professionals who had arrived in the late 1970s deserved respect for developing Jersey City and the surrounding areas at a time when it was falling apart and Whites were moving out. Masson argued that South Asians had not deprived Jersey City or Hoboken of anything; on the contrary, in her view, they were owed for giving more to the city than they had received back. Masson talked of how South Asians had worked hard and saved their own earnings to purchase real estate at a time when prices were low for macroeconomic reasons preceding South Asians' arrival in Jersey City. She recounted how towns were being deserted by their middle-class White residents, many of whom were of Irish or Italian origin, even before South Asians had moved to Jersey City. Other Whites had left in order to escape the influx of racial minorities in general, not just South Asians. Therefore, for Masson and others, envy and racial hatred of the newcomer were the only possible reasons for why South Asians were being singled out.<sup>87</sup>

“We were the pioneers,” Masson claimed, “These streets were boarded up.”<sup>88</sup> According to her, South Asians were being penalized for pursuing the American Dream, exactly as other immigrants before them had done, as anyone in the United States was free to do if they so chose; only, in her view, many found it easier to be lazy and blame

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<sup>87</sup> See “Jersey City Indians Battle Hate, Harassment Fueled by Economic Envy” *India-West*, October 16, 1987, p. 1

<sup>88</sup> Lalitha Masson, as told to Vivienne Walt, “A New Racism Gets Violent in New Jersey,” *New York Newsday*, April 6, 1988, Part II 5.

their failures on the striving South Asians. “We came to this country, and the hospitals in this city were abandoned by White doctors. So for many years they were run by Pakistani and Indian doctors,” noted Masson.<sup>89</sup> She insisted that well-educated, middle-class, hard-working immigrants were a source of uplift for a city in such a state of decline. “We don’t get into crime. Our children are getting top awards at schools. What more could you ask from a community?”<sup>90</sup>

Masson’s glowing portrait of the South Asian community soon became NODIA’s badge of honor, with important consequences for the formulation of political strategies in response to the violence. NODIA’s political identity and activism coalesced around the notion that Indians were blameless, tax-paying citizens who were entitled to state protection against criminals. State protection, for NODIA, was the key bargaining point in the struggle. For NODIA, this was a right deserved in exchange for duties fulfilled, as per the social contract upheld by the US Constitution. In other words, for NODIA, South Asians were entitled to protection because they paid their taxes; they were not touting moral or political claims to special privileges in American society. Thus, middle-class South Asians of NODIA cast South Asians as a group as distinct from other groups, who presumably had other perspectives on and approaches to entitlement under American law. However, other groups did not have the right to obstruct South Asians’ rights. In this way, Masson and NODIA, like the IMGA, sought to draw a contrast between South Asians and their attackers, whom they portrayed as lazy slackers who not only shirked

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<sup>89</sup> Lalitha Masson, as told to Vivienne Walt, “A New Racism Gets Violent in New Jersey,” *New York Newsday*, April 6, 1988, Part II 5.

<sup>90</sup> Lalitha Masson, as told to Vivienne Walt, “A New Racism Gets Violent in New Jersey,” *New York Newsday*, April 6, 1988, Part II 5.

their own duties, but attempted to prevent others from fulfilling theirs. NODIA pointed to “Indian” values, such as education, industry, thrift, and self-reliance, which they believed were lacking in their attackers. If others could not advance in the manner that South Asians had, maintained Masson unwaveringly, then the cause of their problems lay elsewhere, perhaps with the state or within themselves, but certainly not with South Asians.

First generation South Asian organizations were united in the view that their primary concern was protection: they wanted the daily attacks to stop. The violence directed toward them was a police matter, to be pursued through legal and political channels.<sup>91</sup> Making the demand for “equal protection under the law” gave them a preliminary grip on an evolving situation in which legal matters overlapped with the political. The demand invoked a particular idea of citizenship in order to advance their claim. On the whole, they were largely sympathetic to grand struggles against injustice, but felt that they ought to be pursued appropriately through constructive channels, not through displaced attacks on other communities. They refused to believe that the attacks they were enduring somehow constituted a resistance to systemic racism, as some younger activists claimed, when they were victims of racist targeting themselves. The attackers, in their view, were plainly criminals, and they scoffed at the notion that the youthful assailants were acting out a prescient impulse to decry racial injustice in American society. Such an idea seemed not only implausible to Masson and others, but disingenuous because it lent moral credibility to immoral acts. They argued that a more pragmatic and fruitful course of action would be to concentrate on the individuals who

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<sup>91</sup> See “Indians Rally for Police Protection” *The Jersey Journal*, January 25, 1988, p. 1, 6.

perpetrated the attacks, and the local police officials who failed to prosecute them, because that would reveal racism at work more concretely. After challenging the integrity of the police and local politicians through the courts, NODIA emphasized that South Asians ought to demand a role in selecting prosecutors for the trials of the assailants. By doing so, they would be able to expose the conspiracy of official ignorance and inaction surrounding the violence, especially in the Sharan and Mody cases. Well-defined positions and demands, they argued, sometimes pedantically, would be more effective in confronting racial injustice than what they perceived to be vague, unfounded drivel, as mouthed by liberal-minded South Asian youth about how the attackers' displaced aggression constituted a nascent political awakening. Equally important, concrete agendas would allow NODIA to situate the struggle beyond the narrow and anachronistic cultural terms being established by its main rival, the IMGA.

As Singh and Masson sought political recognition and capital, tension between IMGA and NODIA mounted, owing to personal differences between the two leaders, as well as ideological and class differences between their organizations. Both organizations courted political and media attention and, at times, each appeared to its rival to heighten its own profile while claiming to "advance the struggle" of the South Asian community. The rivalry between NODIA and the IMGA was clearly evident during the controversy surrounding a meeting with New Jersey's Governor Thomas Kean to discuss the possibility of passing hate crimes legislation.<sup>92</sup> Both groups had requested an audience with the Governor. However, NODIA had received a response whereas the IMGA had not. Furthermore, NODIA proceeded to meet the Governor with another organization, the

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<sup>92</sup> See "Split Over Kean Visit" *The Jersey Journal*, April 1, 1988. p. 2

Indo-American Association (IAA), rather than with the IMGA. NODIA and the IAA articulated their demands jointly, as both organizations sought to explicitly distance themselves from Singh. According to an IAA member, Singh's umbrella organization, the United Indian American Association (UIAA)<sup>93</sup> represented perhaps 10 people, at most.<sup>94</sup> He went on to add that Singh's thinking was not typical of the majority of Indians, and that his own organization had personal conflicts with him. Singh countered that there was no split within the Indian community, only apparent disagreements that were deliberately manufactured by NODIA and IAA in order to wrest political leadership for themselves. Singh was also very vocal in expressing his outrage about being snubbed by Governor Kean. In time, anyone dealing with Indian political organizations, from politicians to the media, learned to work with them separately.

However, NODIA, the IMGA, and the IAA were *ad hoc* organizations, and as such, they were unable to appeal to large cross-sections of South Asians, since their memberships were drawn primarily from family networks that tended to be divided along the lines of class or education (NODIA), or region, religion, and language (IMGA). In this regard, second generation groups parted ways with their first-generation counterparts along ideological lines in their demand for justice after the Jersey City attacks. They tried to cast a wider net in representing South Asians, as a whole, and attempted to steer away from divisive identifications based on constituent sub-groupings. They did not exhibit class divisions *per se*, but the fact that they drew members from elite universities

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<sup>93</sup> In addition to being president of the IMGA, Singh also held the position of president of the United Indian American Association, which he indicated was an umbrella organization representing six Hudson County Indian-American organizations.

<sup>94</sup> Jeffrey Hoff, "Indians Adamant on Trials," *The Hudson Dispatch*, April 4, 1988, 8.



suggests a middle-class orientation. In contrast to NODIA and others, second generation organizations sought to situate the violence against South Asians within the historical context of racism in the US. They emphasized reaching out to other racial groups for support, and proceeded to do so, as afforded by the college campuses in which they initially mobilized. They adopted a pan-racial rhetoric in which they identified themselves as “South Asian” and as “people of color” who shared an experience of racism, albeit a different one, with other groups. As a generation that had grown up in the US, they were acquainted with the narratives of racial oppression in the United States as experienced by other groups and, as college students or graduates, often from elite private universities, they regarded themselves as “progressives.” NODIA, the IMGA, and the IAA, however, regarded the student activists as naïve and felt that the younger generation was mistaking the artificially congenial atmosphere and the contrived diversity of college campuses for the ‘real’ world. The older generation and its organizations were convinced that society did not care how well these ‘misguided’ young people understood American history or whether they had friends among the other races (Misir 1996).

Indian Youth Against Racism (IYAR, which later changed its name to Youth Against Racism, YAR), organized in 1987, was an important member of the emerging coalition against the Dotbuster letter and the violence. Himanshu Shukla, a member of IYAR, also created the Indian American Political Action Club of Hudson County (IMPACT). These and other groups organized on several nearby campuses. All emphasized continuous action through political mobilization, education, lobbying, and protest. Their main goal was to ally themselves with other Asian American political

groups, such as the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, in order to respond to the present violence as the latest episode of a long history of anti-Asian violence in the United States.<sup>95</sup>

Initially, second generation organizations awkwardly tried to adopt the language of other minorities' struggles against racism.<sup>96</sup> For example, some students protested the idea of "institutional racism in the US," as an evil that must be rooted out, without clearly articulating what ought to be done about it. Other student activists emphasized their solidarity with other people of color in general and sympathized with "the working class." Some student leaders maintained pre-existing characterizations of South Asians. Jaykumar Menon, for example, echoed the erroneous view that American immigration laws permitted only wealthy South Asians to enter the US which, according to him, resulted in the absence of a South Asian working class. Such a make-up, according to Menon, meant that South Asians were "...artificially isolated from the struggle for voice that all minorities share."<sup>97</sup> In making his pronouncement, however, Menon had overlooked the very obvious presence of the IMGA who, essentialist as they were, tried to articulate a class-based challenge to NODIA's elitist statements on behalf of less-advantaged members of the South Asian community. In his idealized view of "the working class" Menon had failed to count the elderly South Asian workers who toiled in the back rooms of shops, for example, because they could not speak enough English to

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<sup>95</sup> See "A Movement of Parts : Asian American Activism, 10 Years After Vincent Chin" *A.Magazine*, April 30, 1992; "How community Fought Racism" *India Abroad*, June 15, 1990, p. 39; and "Hate Crime Resurrects S.Asian Solidarity – Rights Groups Recall '80s Attacks on Indians" *The Record*, June 3, 2006

<sup>96</sup> Interviews in "Coming From India," Radio Documentary about Asian Indians, New Jersey Historical Commission featuring South Asian intellectuals and activists such as Gyan Prakash, Lalitha Masson, Pradip Kothari among others on how different generations of South Asians tried to cope with racism in American society.

<sup>97</sup> Cited from Chris Mitchell, "Lily –livered No Longer," *The Hoboken Reporter*, February 28, 1988, p. 10.

work elsewhere. Thus, he was precluded from reflecting on nuances that fell outside of dominant, binarist, and reductionist models of race relations in the US. It seemed like common sense to uphold the accepted idea that there were two races, one White, one Black, and that the former race, as a singular, rich class oppressed the latter race collectively as a poor class. Such a collapse of race into class, obfuscated the problem confronting South Asians in Jersey City, but like other “progressives,” Menon did not question dominant binaries; instead, they were seen as axiomatic in spite of their inadequacy in explaining multi-variate situations involving multiple actors. Furthermore, the perpetrators, in the Jersey City case, were not just White. Other racial minorities were involved, from different class backgrounds, suggesting that it may be possible for victims of racism in one context to be racist themselves, in another context. For example, victims may become aggressors against those whom they perceive to have class advantages over themselves. As demonstrated during the LA Riots, the wrath of the disadvantaged was directed away from White privilege, economic power, or institutions that maintained inequality in society. Instead, their rage was spent on other minorities of color who were perceived to be advancing at everyone else’s expense. Such triangulations reveal that the reality was more complex than previously conceptualized. Binaristic modes of analysis are inadequate in explaining the shifting positions and roles of multiple actors in a complex society with dynamically evolving hierarchies. By interpreting the South Asian experience through the static dominant binary, Menon and others “progressives” had unwittingly constructed South Asians as a single privileged race/class which, ironically, resembled the Dotbusters’ caricature of “Indians.”

In time, however, differences among the various constituent South Asian organizations within the emerging coalition became secondary to the more primary concern of stopping the attackers, prosecuting them, and seeking protective legislation.

### **Official Attitudes Regarding Violence Against South Asians**

Community leaders and civil rights activists repeatedly expressed their frustration that local law enforcement officials were not acting quickly enough to address the escalating racist violence against South Asians in Jersey City and surrounding areas. The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, a member of the civil rights coalition demanding action in Hudson County, specifically complained that public officials, such as the Hudson County Prosecutor, Paul DePascale, had “not acted forcefully enough in prosecuting” offenders associated with the Dotbusters.<sup>98</sup> Another official, Walter Adams, the Director of Public Safety in Jersey City, actually blamed the media for the escalating violence, claiming that undue attention to a minor incidents had exacerbated ethnic tensions in the city. “The attacks against Indians have mushroomed since The Jersey Journal stories ran. It’s *The Journal’s* fault that this thing has gotten big and I’ll say it every chance I get,” said Adams.<sup>99</sup> South Asian activists were outraged by Adams’ claim and disputed it, pointing out the obvious fact that racism and numerous incidents of violence had preceded the publication of the Dotbuster letter. Lalitha Masson of NODIA said, “I don’t think the attacks have increased because of the article. On the

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted in “Three Indicted in Assault on Doctor,” *India Abroad*, September 18, 1992, p. 32.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in “Top Cop Blames the Media,” *The Jersey Journal*, October 13, 1987, p. 1.

contrary, the article has brought awareness and better unification of our community.

Before, our people were passive. Now they are encouraged to speak out.”<sup>100</sup>

The officials involved in the case all categorically denounced the attacks, mouthed the language of the United States being a nation of equal civil rights for all, and paid additional lip service to the need for tolerance. These individuals had also expressed great enthusiasm about the diversity and changing demographics of the area, particularly the new South Asian model minority that was moving in.<sup>101</sup> For example, with reference to South Asian immigrants, Wanaque Chief of Police Robert C. Kronyak waxed that the borough “... has seen more and more new faces coming here, people who have added to and strengthened the community.”<sup>102</sup> When asked about racism, their stock answer at first was that they found it to be deplorable and would not tolerate it in their jurisdictions, that such misguided evil, thankfully, had been conquered in American society, and was more or less non-existent in the present day. The attacks, officials were sure, had to have been perpetrated by extremists acting on bizarre ideas of their own. Therefore, their primary official response to the violence was to denounce the crimes as an aberration to the happy norm in Jersey City. The official view was that the incidents were isolated and the perpetrators were marginal to society. Activists were frustrated that such remarks understated the significance of the crimes, and that officials did very little to apprehend the perpetrators, let alone bring them to justice.

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<sup>100</sup> Quoted in “Top Cop Blames the Media,” *The Jersey Journal*, October 13, 1987, p. 10.

<sup>101</sup> See “The Cultures of India Thrive in Jersey City” in the *New York Times*, May 4, 1986, p. 11-1 in which cultural diversity, particular the diversity among “Indians” was being celebrated just a little more than a year before Mody’s murder and other incidents in Jersey City.

<sup>102</sup> Albert J. Parisi, “Remark Enrages the Indian Community,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 1988.

As South Asians increasingly realized that their appeals through official channels were falling on deaf ears, they turned toward public meetings, forums, protests, and rallies to make their demands known. Dr. Shamita Das Dasgupta of the Asian Indian Women's Association, observed that as recent immigrants, South Asians "are still trying to find a footing in this country." She viewed political mobilization in Jersey City as crucial to making the broader community aware of the extraordinary difficulties and violence that South Asians were experiencing in the Jersey City area.<sup>103</sup> Activists were particularly perturbed by the lack of momentum in the prosecution of assault cases. Various groups came together at a rally outside the steps of the Hudson County administrative building in Jersey City on December 15, 1987 to demand justice for Navroze Mody. More than 200 protesters gathered, braving freezing temperatures, wintry gusts, and icy rain in order to demand that Mody's assailants are tried as adults.

On the day after Navroze Mody was killed, four youths were arrested for the attacks that had left him in a coma. According to the police report, the four juveniles "began pushing and shoving and hitting the man, throwing him to the ground twice. He was then pummeled by the youths, who then fled."<sup>104</sup> The Hoboken police did not initially release the names of the arrested youths because they were juveniles, aged between 15 and 17. Dennis Shah, a member of the Concerned Indian Students of Columbia University, attended the rally. Shah spoke out that "if they are not tried as adults, that sends a signal that it is alright to be a racist in the United States."<sup>105</sup> On

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<sup>103</sup> Quoted in *The Jersey Journal*, December 16, 1987, p. 1, 24 "Death Could Unify Indian Community

<sup>104</sup> Reported in *The Jersey Journal*, October 2, 1987, p. 13n.

Friday, February 26, 1988, Superior Court Judge Sal Bovino ruled that the four young offenders, Ralph Gonzalez (17), Luis Padilla (16), Daniel Luis Acevedo (17), and William Acevedo (15), could be tried as adults for Mody's killing. In addition to charges they faced for the killing, two of the assailants, the Acevedo brothers, were also charged with aggravated assault in the beating of the two Stevens Institute students, Syed Hasan and Vikas Aggarwal. Navroze Mody's parents and other activists were deeply dismayed that the youths had been involved in attacks against South Asians prior to Mody's killing, yet had never been prosecuted. The Mody family, in particular, believed that Navroze's life might have been spared had the youths been prosecuted for their earlier crimes. On this basis, Jamshed Mody filed a civil suit against the City of Hoboken, where his son's killing had taken place, on the grounds that diligence on the part of the Hoboken police in arresting the Acevedo brothers earlier could have prevented their son's killing. Marc Bernstein, attorney for the Modys, argued in court that had the police taken the brothers into custody, Mody might have still been alive: "Even if they had been released, the fact that they had another case against them might have made them reluctant. They might have realized another incident would not bode well to their future in the free world"<sup>105</sup>

The police claimed that no charges had been filed against the Acevedo brothers in the case of the Stevens Institute students, Aggarwal and Hasan, because they did not press charges. Detective Thomas Cahill, who had been assigned to the case, claimed that while he was questioning the Acevedo brothers about these assaults, he had telephoned the students to inquire whether they wished to press charges or file a complaint against

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in *The Jersey Journal*, December 16, 1987, p. 1, 24 "Death Could Unify Indian Community"

<sup>106</sup> Reported in *The Jersey Journal*, "Murder Suspects Charged in Prior Racial Assaults" January 15, 1988, p. 1, 8.

the Acevedo brothers. Detective Cahill stated that the person he reached on the phone, whom he could not name, but whom he claimed was a representative of Hassan and Aggarwal, told Cahill that the two students did not wish to press charges. Cahill stated that he saw no reason to detain the Acevedos after that phone conversation. Hassan and Aggarwal, however, disputed Cahill's claim, claiming that they had made a statement to the police at St. Mary's Hospital, where they were being treated for injuries from their assaults. They had indicated then to police that they did indeed wish to press charges against their attackers. Furthermore, they said that they had never spoken to Detective Cahill, in person, by telephone, or by proxy, and had never told him that they did not wish to press charges. In his deposition testimony, Aggarwal claimed that he was "not aware that he had to take further action in addition to giving a statement to the police to press criminal charges against an individual,"<sup>107</sup> and that he and Hasan "never indicated that they were unwilling to cooperate with police in filing criminal charges against their assailants."<sup>108</sup>

Jamshed Mody, claimed that by failing to charge the Acevedo brothers for earlier episodes of violence against South Asians, the Hoboken police department "intentionally discriminated against Indians and that the city of Hoboken engaged in a custom or practice of discrimination against Indians."<sup>109</sup> Cahill denied in his deposition that he had discriminated against South Asians, but he was shown to have deviated from usual police procedure with respect to assault cases as well as racially motivated crimes. He later

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<sup>107</sup> Cited from *Jamshid Mody v. City of Hoboken*, no. 758 F. Supp. 1027), March 6, 1991, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Cited from *Jamshid Mody v. City of Hoboken*, no. 758 F. Supp. 1027), March 6, 1991, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Cited from *Jamshid Mody v. City of Hoboken*, no. 758 F. Supp. 1027), March 6, 1991, p. 6.



admitted that he “failed to adhere to proper police procedure during the investigation of the assault on the Indian students.”<sup>110</sup> Cahill also cited a conversation that he allegedly had with Hasan (whom he thought was a roommate of Aggarwal), who had apparently stated that neither he nor Aggarwal wished to file charges. Hassan and Aggarwal were not roommates and Hasan denied ever speaking to Cahill about pressing charges. In spite of these and other findings, Jamshed Mody’s civil lawsuit against the City of Hoboken was unsuccessful. In his report on the Hoboken police’s handling of the Acevedo brothers, Matthew Healey of John Jay College observed that

In my opinion, the handling of this case of Detective Cahill was inappropriate, deficient below generally accepted standards for this type of police activity... In my opinion, also the handling of this case reflects poorly on the quality of supervision on the part of whichever superior officers were responsible for reading and approving these reports and the actions of Detective Cahill. They accepted sub-standard work and inappropriate procedures by Cahill without correcting and changing his actions, thereby allowing Luis and William Acevedo to remain on the streets and bring about the subsequent death of Navroze Mody.<sup>111</sup>

South Asians wondered why the term “racial bias” was never brought up, by the prosecution or the defense, in the criminal case against the four teenagers charged with Mody’s killing. Although Mody was repeatedly taunted, “Hindu, Hindu” while he was being beaten into a coma, according to eyewitnesses, the Hudson County Prosecutor, Paul Depasquale, avoided mention of the fact that any sort of bias was involved.<sup>112</sup> Three of the four teens (Gonzalez, Daniel Luis Acevedo, and Luis Padilla) were found guilty of

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<sup>110</sup> Cited from *Jamshid Mody v. City of Hoboken*, no. 758 F. Supp. 1027), March 6, 1991, p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Cited from *Jamshid Mody v. City of Hoboken*, no. 758 F. Supp. 1027), March 6, 1991, p. 7.

<sup>112</sup> See “Dotbusters Trial Under Way” *The Times of India*, March 16, 1989, p. 13; and “Asians Face Brutal Attacks From Jersey City ‘Dot Busters’: Indian Parents File \$10 Million Wrongful Death Suit” *Asian Week*, May 27, 1988, p.13

aggravated assault and sentenced to ten years at a youth rehabilitation center. William Acevedo was convicted of simple assault and sentenced to six months at the same facility. Navroze Mody's father and activists observing the trial were deeply disappointed by the ruling. They argued that the assailants ought to have been found guilty of at least manslaughter, as was usually the case when street fights resulted in the loss of life. They were also perturbed by the fact that no mention of racial hatred was brought up during the trial. Korshed Mody, Navroze Mody's mother, was distraught by the outcome of the trial, which she felt sent a dangerous message to the world: "I am afraid for the Indian people. Out there, they will say, 'let's kill an Indian, and the most we'll get is aggravated assault'." <sup>113</sup>

### **The Struggle for Justice**

On March 16, 1988, Jersey City police arrested Peter Jester and James Kerner in connection with writing the original "Dotbuster letter" published in *The Jersey Journal* and the beating of another South Asian man, Bhered Patel, and his roommate in their South Street apartment. <sup>114</sup> Activists against the Dotbusters were concerned about the local authorities refusal to see the violence as being part of a pattern of racial hatred against South Asians. They noted that Hudson County Prosecutor Paul Depasquale, for example, seemed satisfied that Kerwin and Jester had finally been apprehended, because it meant that the gang now had fewer than ten members after the arrests. Activists also observed that DePascale went to great lengths to present Kerwin, the main author of the

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in "Jury Rules in Murder of Indian" *Philadelphia Inquirer* (PA), April 1, 1989, p. B3.

<sup>114</sup> " 'Dotbuster' Suspects Indicted" *Jersey Journal*, May 7, 1988, p. 1, 11.

Dotbuster letter, as “the epicenter of the Dotbuster movement,”<sup>115</sup> as if to show that the case was well under police control. It soon became known, however, that the police had refrained from arresting a third suspect, Martin Riccardi, for one of the assaults in spite of evidence that he too was linked to the Dotbuster gang. Instead, Depasquale and other officials had sought to direct attention toward Kerwin and Jester as the sole individuals personifying the Dotbusters in an attempt to limit official acknowledgement of the scope of racism against South Asians, close the Dotbuster mystery, and “move on.”<sup>116</sup> The problem, however, was that Kerwin and Jester were neither the only Dotbusters, nor was the racial violence against South Asians perpetrated by the Dotbusters alone. Incidents against South Asians in northern New Jersey continued well after the arrests of Kerwin and Jester, despite claims by local officials that the Dotbusters had been disbanded. Vandalism, assaults, and threats continued, but officials were still loath to admit that violence against South Asians may be more than isolated occurrences perpetrated by solitary deviants.

Police reluctance to label the racial attacks as “racially-motivated” partly stemmed from the fact that the attitudes of local police officers toward South Asians mirrored the attitudes of the general public. For many police officers, the harassment of South Asians was “not a big deal.” James Galvin, the Sixth Precinct Captain of Jersey City, told *New York Newsday* that South Asians protest both of the racial hostility and the police department’s apparent indifference, were “95 percent overreacting. They [South

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<sup>115</sup> Raul Vicente Jr., “Cops Arrest Two as ‘Dotbusters,’” *Gold Coast*, March 24-31, 1988, p. 4.

<sup>116</sup> See “Jury Told of Resistance to Indian Beating Probe,” *The Star Ledger*, February 5, 1993 accessed through Newsbank.

Asians] get a snowball through the window and they want a [police] car there right away.’’<sup>117</sup>

If such remarks reflected a lack of police sympathy on the surface, at a deeper level they belied an even greater reluctance among the authorities to pursue cases of violence against South Asians. The major reason for this, as it became apparent in court, was the fact that suspects in the cases were linked to the police department itself. In the case of Kaushal Sharan, defendant Mark Evangelista was a Hudson County police officer, and his brother was a Jersey City police officer. Co-defendant Martin Riccardi, mentioned above, was in fact the son of the North District former Chief of Detectives. The claim by police that the incidents against South Asians were not racially motivated had served to protect perpetrators who were fellow police, and their family members, and to forestall federal intervention into the arena.

In harmony with the prosecutor and the local courts, the police department denied, for as long as possible, that bias was the basis of the attacks. As closely intertwined political allies, the local government, the judiciary, and law enforcement together sought to avoid investigating the suspects as long as possible. By claiming that the Dotbusters were a fringe group whose actions were anomalous, the local political elite had tried to avoid the fiasco of having to admit that the Dotbusters were in fact part of the local establishment. Paul Depasquale, the Hudson County Prosecutor was dismissive of claims that bias may have been involved in the attacks. For example, when the press reported that two of the defendants in the Mody murder were responsible for a racial attack on a

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<sup>117</sup> Vivienne Walt, “A New Racism Gets Violent in New Jersey,” *New York Newsday*, April 6, 1988, part II, p. 5.

Pakistani and Indian student just one week earlier, DePascale not only denied that the Mody attack was ethnically motivated, but trivialized the matter by joking that “I think you can make the assumption that these two [the Mody defendants] didn’t like Asian Indians.”<sup>118</sup> The local police did not conduct a thorough investigation into the Sharan case.

Paul Depasquale’s role in the Hudson County administration and his handling, as the prosecutor, of the hate crimes against South Asians warrants attention. Depasquale was the Hudson County Prosecutor, but had also been appointed by Mayor Anthony Cucci as acting Police Director of the Jersey City police department in March 1988.<sup>119</sup> The defendants in the Mody case, on the other hand, were arraigned in July 1988. It came to light in court that had Depasquale chosen to vigorously prosecute Mody’s murder as a racial crime, his dual roles as a prosecutor and as head of the Jersey City Police Department would have come into conflict. Depasquale would have been under intense political pressure to open the Sharan beating as a racially motivated case if he had characterized and prosecuted the Mody case as racially-motivated. Prosecuting the Sharan case as racially motivated would have revealed that Martin Riccardi, the son of Depasquale’s associate Ben Riccardi, the Chief of Detectives, was linked to the Dotbusters and implicated in the Sharan beating. Such publicity would have made it more difficult for Depasquale to forestall a federal investigation.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Rekha Borsellino, “Tougher Law Asked in Attacks on Indians,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1988, p. 1 (Sect. 12).

<sup>119</sup> See “Cucci Appoints Prosecutor as Acting Police Director” *The Jersey Journal*, March 1, 1988, p. 1, 4.

<sup>120</sup> See “Responding to Hate Crimes: Redress for Racial Violence Requires Constant Vigilance and Persistence” *India Currents Magazine*, December 31, 1992, p. M15.

Instead, as head of police and chief county prosecutor, he opted to neglect pursuing charges of racism in any of the cases, including Mody's death, in order to protect associates who were affiliated with the Dotbusters. Furthermore, Cucci's appointment of DePascale indicates his close political relationship with the Mayor. Cucci, in turn, had strong ties with Dotbuster suspect Martin Riccardi's father, Ben Riccardi. Given the connections between Cucci, Riccardi, and DePascale, who were effectively the government, law enforcement, and the courts in Jersey City, it became obvious to South Asians that the cases brought before them were going nowhere. These three men, as the Jersey City power establishment, were not about to prosecute themselves.<sup>121</sup>

The strongest evidence against DePascale, the local police department, and Mayor Cucci in federal findings was that they were aware, as early as February 1988 and prior to DePascale's appointment in March as Acting Police Director of Jersey City Police, that suspect Martin Riccardi was linked to the beating of South Asian Bharat Kanubhai Patel and to the Dotbusters. They were aware of Riccardi's involvement even as the Mody murder case was being put together. It was known that Martin Riccardi was linked to Patel's beating because of a tape recording containing conversations between Peter Jester, James Kerwin, and Martin Riccardi regarding Patel. However, Riccardi escaped indictment whereas Jester and Kerwin did not. Then, as if these court proceedings were not taking place, Mayor Cucci proposed in September 1988 to appoint Ben Riccardi, Martin's father, to take over from Paul DePascale as the Police Director of the Jersey

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<sup>121</sup> See "The Use and Abuse of Police Powers: Law Enforcement Practices and the Minority Community in New Jersey," Report of the new Jersey Advisory committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights, July 1994. Also see "Jersey Panel to Probe Police Work" *India West*, July 2, 1993 accessed through ProQuest.

City Police Department. Ben Riccardi declined the appointment after *The Jersey Journal* made it known that his son Martin's name had been on the Jester and Kerwin tapes. *The Jersey Journal* also revealed that Ben Riccardi had asked Mayor Cucci to intervene earlier when Martin had failed the drug test toward employment with the Jersey City Fire Department.

Jersey City activists were losing confidence in the ability, capacity, and willingness of the local police to handle the violence. In testimony to the Jersey City Human Rights Commission after the violence escalated, a South Asian woman who had been knocked down by teenagers on the street just prior to her testimony, mentioned that she had been "harassed and spat upon at various times in the past three years." She went on to testify that she did not report these incidents because she did not have any confidence that the local authorities would take her complaints seriously.<sup>122</sup> After dealing with local inertia, Himanshu Shukla, a local activist and co-founder of IYAR (see above) thought the federal intervention was necessary because "in the past, we've had problems with the prosecution's handling of (dotbuster) cases."<sup>123</sup> Lalitha Masson was also in favor of federal involvement in the cases. She lamented the fact that it had taken local law enforcement five years to make an arrest in the Sharan case and was dismayed to learn that one of the suspects was a Hudson County police officer. This illustrated to her "the depths of racism" in the Jersey City community.<sup>124</sup> South Asians began to demand and mobilize for federal intervention in the hopes that justice might be served

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<sup>122</sup> See *The Jersey Journal*, October 16, 1987 p. 30 "Ending Ethnic Victimization"

<sup>123</sup> See *India-West* "Dotbuster Accused Go On Trial" January 15, 1993, p. 1

<sup>124</sup> Reported in *The Star Ledger*, September 12, 1992, "Fighting Bias Crime. Last accessed through NewsBank, Inc., on January 26, 2013

more swiftly. The Sharan case would be “the first time the US Department of Justice is prosecuting a racially-motivated crime against an Asian-Indian,” noted the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.<sup>125</sup> Finally, the federal government intervened after intense pressure by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the NAACP, the Urban League, and a coalition South Asian organizations. From Kaushal Sharan’s beating in 1987 until September 1992, no arrests or charges had been made against anyone who was involved. Michael Chertoff, United States Attorney for New Jersey acknowledged that there may be a lack of confidence in the local police. “That may be a misplaced fear,” he said, treading carefully, “but it is a reality... Sometimes we’re able to achieve results local law enforcement can’t through no fault of their own.”<sup>126</sup> In 1992, a federal trial against perpetrators Riccardi, Evangelista, and Kozak in the beating of Kaushal Sharan began as a result of sustained pressure and agitation by South Asian activists.

Federal investigators found that local authorities had made a collective effort to protect the Dotbusters, whose members included major figures in the local political and legal establishment. Joseph Irenas, the US District Judge, condemned the miscarriage of justice, beginning with the police investigation. He compared it to the official sanction of anti-Semitic pogroms in Nazi Germany and reprimanded local police for failing to follow obvious leads:

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<sup>125</sup> See “Dotbuster Accused Go On Trial” *India-West*, January 15, 1993, p. 1

<sup>126</sup> *The New York Times*, “Three Indicted in Beating of Indian Doctor” September 12, 1992 . See <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/12nyregion/3-indicted-in-beating-of> last accessed on August 28, 2012



I would be deaf, dumb, and blind not to say that I am very disappointed in what at least appears to be what the Jersey City police did... Had a policeman been beaten up and left in front of the firehouse, there's no doubt in my mind what kind of an investigation would have taken place.<sup>127</sup>

Gerald V. Hogan, a civil rights lawyer from the US department of Justice, also stated that Jersey City law enforcement officials were not adequately handling the case. In testimony before a federal jury, Hogan stated that “the Jersey City detectives did not interview anybody known to frequent the area around the beating...”.

Hogan went on to state that it was left to the FBI to begin interviewing witnesses.<sup>128</sup> It was found that witness Leo Szymanski's life had been threatened by two Hudson County Sheriff's officers after he agreed to testify. According to Hogan, as the FBI interviewed witnesses, they heard stories that “Kozak bragged about beating an Indian man.” Another government witness, Harold Carlsen, said that he saw Kozak, Evangelista, and Riccardi beat Sharan. Carlsen went on to testify that he heard Riccardi later brag about being involved in the beating and mentioning that he was not concerned about getting caught because his father was a high-ranking Jersey City police officer.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Deborah Yaffe, “Judge Rips Local Probe of Beating,” *The Jersey Journal*, June 19, 1993. Also see, “Jersey Panel to Probe Police Work” *India West*, July 2, 1993

<sup>128</sup> Reported in *The Star Ledger*, February 5, 1993 “Jury told of Resistance to Indian Beating Probe” Last accessed through NewsBank, Inc., on January 26, 2013

<sup>129</sup> Reported in *The Star Ledger*, February 5, 1993 “Jury told of Resistance to Indian Beating Probe” Last accessed through NewsBank, Inc., on January 26, 2013

Other eyewitnesses had seen the trio beating and kicking Dr. Saran, yelling “Get the Indian,” “Get the Hindu,” “Get out of here,” “You don’t belong here.”<sup>130</sup>

The case seemed to be moving forward as more evidence emerged. There was even a confession. Thomas Kozak, one of the accused, submitted a hand-written confession to the FBI:

I, Tommy Kozak, hereby make the following free and voluntary statement to William R. Flemming and Bradley W. Orsini, who have identified themselves as special agents fo the FBI. I have been advised by Special Agent Flemming that I am being interviewed regarding my involvement in the beating of Kaushal Sharan on Sept. 24, 1987, in the area of Central Avenue and Ferry Street, Jersey City, NJ.

I presently reside at 171 griffith City, NJ, and was born on 11/29, 67. I have a GED and can read and write English.

On 9/24/87 I was hanging out with Marty Riccardi and Mark Evangelista. We were driving in Mark’s silver Camaro in the area of Central Avenue. While we were driving we saw a dark-skinned Indian guy walking down Ferry Street. Marty said, “There’s a Dot Head. Let’s get him.” Mark parked the car on Ferry Street near “the wall.” Mark, who was playing baseball, had some baseball bats in his car. As we got out, Marty grabbed one of the bats. All three of us crossed the street and approached the Indian guy. When we got close, Marty took the bat and hit the Indian guy in the head. The Indian guy then fell down and Mark, Marty and myself began kicking him while he was on the ground. We all beat him for about a minute. During the time he was on the ground, Marty hit him several times with the bat. After about a minute we all ran back to the car and drove away. When we left the Indian guy was lying on the ground.

I have read this two page statement, have initialed all corrections, and it is entirely true and correct. Sd. Thomas Kozak.<sup>131</sup>

The South Asian community and civil rights activists began to feel optimistic that the confession and eyewitness accounts might result in convictions. However, later in the

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<sup>130</sup> Reported in *The Star Ledger*, February 5, 1993 “Jury told of Resistance to Indian Beating Probe” Last accessed through NewsBank, Inc., on January 26, 2013

<sup>131</sup> Cited from *India-West* “Dotbuster Accused Go On Trial” January 15, 1993, p. 1

trial, Kozak's lawyers tried to get the confession redacted. They claimed that Kozak had made the statement without an attorney present, and that he had not been aware of his rights. In a move that surprised and confused observers, Judge Irenas ruled that the confession could be submitted by the prosecution as part of their evidence but could not be seen as an admission of guilt.

Civil rights activists were devastated that in spite of what appeared to be a solid confession from Kozak and numerous eyewitnesses who testified to seeing the trio hitting, punching, and kicking Kaushal Sharan on the sidewalk, an all-White jury had found the men innocent of two of the federal charges brought against them. The jury was deadlocked on the third charge.<sup>132</sup> Local prosecutors were never made to bring charges against Riccardi, Evangelista, and Kozak, even after federal investigators had uncovered "new" evidence. Federal investigators did not demand that local investigations continue. Community members could not understand why the judge's initial outcry at the actions of the local authorities went nowhere in terms of bringing about justice for the victims. Nor did it seem to matter that federal prosecutors had repeatedly mentioned a local police conspiracy, "a wall of silence"<sup>133</sup>; local authorities were not accused of inappropriate and illegal behavior. Department of Justice attorney Gerard Hogan had even explained to the jury that the woman who placed the 911 call on the night of the beating felt too intimidated to give her name. "She did not want to be a witness against these three

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<sup>132</sup> See "Dotbusters Go Free: All-White Jury Fails to Convict Defendants in Racial Attacks," *India Currents Magazine*, March 31, 1993, p. 6,7; See also *The Star Ledger*, February 11, 1993, "US Jury Returns Split Verdict on Beating of Indian Doctor in Jersey City" Last accessed through NewsBank, Inc., on January 26, 2013

<sup>133</sup> See "Jury Told of Resistance to Indian Beating Probe," *The Star Ledger*, February 5, 1993.

men... That was the beginning of a chorus of No's."<sup>134</sup> And, Hogan had gone on to show how the Jersey City police failed to interview people who were present at the location of the attack. The Department of Justice, to the great dismay of civil rights activists and observers, did not press local authorities on any of these points even after demonstrating that they had been stonewalling.

Community leaders demanded a retrial. Upholding the acquittal of Evangelista and Riccardi from the previous trial, the Department of Justice decided to prosecute only Thomas Kozak in May 1993. However, this retrial ended in Kozak's acquittal and the case was dismissed in June. A disappointed Lalitha Masson said that the dismissal of the case was "discriminatory" and "oblivious to circumstantial evidence" proving to her that the American judicial system did not work for Asians.<sup>135</sup> The slow, partial justice of American courts offered South Asians little consolation. Activists felt as if their trust and confidence in the Department of Justice had been misplaced. They recalled that Michael Chertoff, the United States attorney for New Jersey had stated, at the press conference before the Sharan trial, that his office was "ready as a last resort to protect and safeguard those who are victimized on the basis of racial or ethnic hatred."<sup>136</sup> Now, after the acquittal of the three White men by all-White juries, in the immediate in the aftermath of the LA Riots, given the anti-Asian violence of the previous decade, and ongoing attacks on Jersey City streets, Chertoff's words rang hollow.

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<sup>134</sup> See "Jury Told of Resistance to Indian Beating Probe," *The Star Ledger*, February 5, 1993.

<sup>135</sup> Reported in *The Star Ledger*, June 20, 1993, "Dismissal in Beating of Indian MD Stirs Outrage" Last accessed through NewsBank, Inc., on January 26, 2013

<sup>136</sup> *The New York Times*, "Three Indicted in Beating of Indian Doctor" September 12, 1992 . See <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/12nyregion/3-indicted-in-beating-of> last accessed on August 28, 2012

## CONCLUSION

Jersey City's boosters were back to promoting it as a remarkable town in the 1990s, a city "on the move." Local politicians, administrators, and other public officials were once again extolling the "gateway" city's diversity and proximity to New York as important reasons why Jersey City was a great place to live for young professionals. The Jersey City that the Mody family had moved into, five months before Navroze Mody's fatal encounter in 1987, was undergoing major political and economic flux, like other American cities in decline. With its eroding manufacturing base, blue collar jobs, which were once the mainstay of most Jersey City residents, were disappearing. Immigrants from various parts of the developing world, including places like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, were moving into the area. Most occupied jobs at the extremes of the wage spectrum, as either skilled professionals or unskilled low-wage workers. At one end was Navroze Mody, who worked for Citibank. At the other end was Malkiat Singh, a South Asian taxi driver, who was killed in Jersey City in 1988.<sup>137</sup>

By 1980, a conservative political tide had swept the nation and socio-economic inequality in American cities was increasingly explained in behavioral terms. Urban poverty was seen as largely due to personal attributes such as the lack of a work ethic, initiative, and other values. The Model Minority stereotype (discussed in chapter 6) was frequently evoked to explain the success of Asians relative to other groups during the decade, but as cities continued to decline, Asians were increasingly scapegoated as a menace who deprived others of opportunity. Praise of Asian success gave way to fear of

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<sup>137</sup> See "Queens Cabbie Slain in Hudson" *The Jersey Journal*, June 18, 1988, p. 1.

Asian competition, both of which, as two sides of the same coin, contributed to resentment and violence in American cities like Jersey City, where emerging cultural diversity was being celebrated by public officials, on one hand, while the material inequality among different groups was either being ignored or blamed on the disadvantaged themselves. This chapter showed that as perceptions and representations of cultural diversity increasingly became divorced from materiality, the stage was being set for violence against Asians as the new ‘other.’ Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was murdered in 1982 by unemployed auto workers who blamed Chin for the decline of the American auto industry. In 1987, the ‘Dotbusters’ had declared war on South Asians in Jersey City and everywhere.

As in the Vincent Chin case, the local authorities of Hudson County, where Jersey City and neighboring Hoboken are located, refused to acknowledge racism in the violence against South Asians within their jurisdictions. On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vincent Chin’s murder, Congresswoman Judy Chu remarked that

... the murder of Vincent Chin and the denial of justice for his family brought together a diverse coalition of people who chose to stand against hate. Vincent’s death became the catalyst that helped forge the Asian Pacific American movement we have today, and it ultimately led to the creation of much needed entities like our Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. The House resolution I introduced on the significance of Vincent’s death expresses how profoundly this incident impacted our community and our country. We must never forget Vincent’s story or the need to vigilantly combat xenophobia, scapegoating, and prejudice. Thirty years later, many of these challenges remain, but we now have a much stronger voice to speak out against these injustices and reaffirm the values that our nation stands for.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Cited from <http://capac-chu.house.gov/press-release/capac-marks-30th-anniversary-vincent-chin%E2%80%99s-murder> (last accessed August 21, 2012)

In a similar vein, South Asians mobilized against violence and succeeded in campaigning for a ‘hate crimes bill’ in New Jersey, which eventually became a blueprint for national legislation. Also like Vincent Chin, the South Asians of Jersey City did not receive justice for the crimes themselves.

The Mody family had bought a house in the Jersey Heights area of Jersey City in April 1987, just five months before Navroze was killed. Jamshed and Korshed Mody, Navroze’s parents, were originally from Mumbai, India, but had moved to the United Kingdom in 1949. There they had opened what was, at the time, one of only three Indian restaurants in that country. The family moved to California just after young Navroze completed his secondary education in the UK. Navroze had initially enrolled at the University of San Diego, but transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, in 1981. After graduating, he obtained an MBA from the University of Chicago and went on to work for the credit card division of Citibank in New York. Like many of his peers, Mody, a young professional, had chosen to live in Jersey City because he had wanted to take advantage of its proximity to New York, and its comparatively affordable real estate.

Diane, Navroze’s sister, remembers that she did not like Jersey City at all. She was afraid to park her car there and walk about. She had expressed these reservations about the city to her brother, but observed that his motivation to live in there was purely locational, given the easy access to New York.<sup>139</sup> Dennine Bullard, Mody’s girlfriend at the time of his killing, recalled, “He always chose what I considered the weirdest places. I moved to New York to live in New York. He was very frugal. He was not going to live in

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<sup>139</sup> Reported in *India Abroad*, October 5, 2007, “In Memory of Navroze Mody” accessed from *Ethnic NewsWatch* database on September 22, 2012.

Manhattan because it was too expensive.”<sup>140</sup> Navroze Mody could have been a poster boy for the “new”, “revitalizing” Jersey City. Instead he became an emblem of its deadly decline. Jamshed Mody, Navroze’s father, reflected painfully on his son’s killing: “The District Attorney was very nice, but the justice system was not good. Those boys killed our son brutally. He was beaten so badly his eyeball came out, and they got off scot free. It was very traumatic. So many nights I couldn’t sleep.”<sup>141</sup>

Another aspiring professional, Kaushal Sharan, did manage to survive his attack in the gateway city. Sharan’s life, however, was not the same after the beating. He went to California for a time and then came back to New York with the fitful resolve of completing his medical exams as he had intended. The assault, however, left Sharan with some brain damage. An impaired memory impeded his ability to pass his exams. He told a newspaper reporter, “After the injury, I tried taking the exam other times and failed. By 2000, I was told I had to take the exams all over again, and I just couldn’t do it.”<sup>142</sup> Determined to do something with his life, Sharan worked hard to complete a Masters degree in public health at the University of Oklahoma. He attempted to work periodically as a medical consultant. He now lives with his wife and daughter in Norman, Oklahoma, and receives unemployment and disability benefits.

Globalization, national policy, and race relations in the United States had converged to bring Sharan, Mody, Singh and other South Asians to Jersey City, but the

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<sup>140</sup> Reported in *India Abroad*, October 5, 2007, “In Memory of Navroze Mody” accessed from *Ethnic NewsWatch* database on September 22, 2012.

<sup>141</sup> Reported in *India Abroad*, October 5, 2007, “In Memory of Navroze Mody” accessed from *Ethnic NewsWatch* database on September 22, 2012.

<sup>142</sup> Reported in *Hudson Reporter*, “ ‘Dotbusters’ Victim Looks Back” May 3, 2009. See [http://hudsonreporter.com/printer\\_friendly/2488227](http://hudsonreporter.com/printer_friendly/2488227) last accessed August 28, 2012



awareness of such facts offered little comfort to the victims' families who experienced their tragedies as a result of hate. The crux of the matter in the Dotbuster cases was not whether racism existed in the world or whether it was bad. Everyone agreed, at least in principle, that it did exist and that it was bad. The point that was being contested, in the court cases, as well as in public discourse, was whether violence, as experienced by South Asians, could be regarded as racist at all. As the attacks and the furor around them unfolded in Hudson County, officials and the media portrayed racism against South Asians as an unexpected aberration from otherwise normal, everyday life, such that it could not be identified as racism at all. Even Governor Kean, for example, took the official position, describing the Dotbusters as people "...who oozed from the gutters..."<sup>143</sup> as if to emphasize the "lowly" social origins of the attackers, who could not have been part of the mainstream or the middle class of New Jersey. It did not help matters that in official discourse, South Asian identity was represented as an anomaly that lay somewhere between a 'race,' 'religion,' and 'nationality'. Racialized as "Indians," they experienced hate on the basis of all three.

How does one "measure the pain of a single dream unfulfilled?"<sup>144</sup> Reflecting on his aspirations in the United States, and the trajectory of his life after his fateful beating, Kaushal Sharan surmised, "I look back and I think...we did everything, but it didn't work out."<sup>145</sup>

Jersey City "moves on."

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<sup>143</sup> See "Indians Rally for Probe," *The Record*, April 5, 1988, B-1, B-5.

<sup>144</sup> Stephen Jay Gould (1981:366), *The Mismeasure of Man*

<sup>145</sup> Reported in *Hudson Reporter*, "'Dotbusters' Victim Looks Back" May 3, 2009. See [http://hudsonreporter.com/printer\\_friendly/2488227](http://hudsonreporter.com/printer_friendly/2488227) last accessed August 28, 2012

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In the oft-quoted opening line of the “Ballad of East and West,” penned in 1889, the noted British writer Rudyard Kipling pondered the accepted wisdom of his day, that “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the history of the modern world during the century following the poem has entailed meetings across every kind of geographic axis imaginable. Not only has East met West; so have peoples met across every other divide: north-south, urban-rural, core-periphery, Black-White, to name a few. This dissertation explored some of those axes through the migration and resettlement experiences of South Asians in South Africa and the United States. I specifically examined how South Asian migrants negotiated the racial divide within two national contexts, South Africa and the United States, i.e., how they constructed their identities and politics in relation to other racialized subjects within these societies. To that end, I explored the dialogues, exchange of ideas, and forms of cooperation that precipitated from South Asians’ interactions with other racialized subjects in two national contexts, as well as transnationally. I also considered two instances of conflict between South Asians and other racialized subjects, in South Africa and the United States, as well as the causes of the conflict. Through this examination, the dissertation showed how the racialization of South Asians has impacted South Asian struggles for rights and recognition and shaped their articulation with broader movements for citizenship in the United States and South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> In Stedman, E.C. (ed.) (1895) *A Victorian Anthology, 1837-1895*, Cambridge: Riverside Press. This opening line is often misquoted, without reference to the lines that follow afterward, as exemplary of Kipling’s racist and imperialist attitude. When considered in its totality, however, it becomes apparent that Kipling is in fact referring to a meeting of equals.

As discussed in Chapter 3, most of South Africa's 1.3 million people of South Asian origin are descendants of indentured laborers who came to work on sugar and tea plantations as well as in the coal mines of colonial Natal. They were followed by a small group of traders and merchants who paid for their own passage and arrived as free persons. Their positioning in the South African racial hierarchy dates back to this time, when their identity was defined in relation to Africans and Whites as a "scab" race, despised for undercutting the other groups' labor power as well as undermining their entrepreneurial capacity. South Asians in South Africa lost many of their communal divisions (ethnicity, caste, etc.) as they became collectively racialized as "Indian" in relation to Africans and Whites within a deeply hostile and unequal society. as shown in Chapter 4. However, class has persisted among South African Indians.<sup>2</sup>

Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893 to assist a merchant with a lawsuit. He subsequently emerged as a major figure in Indian politics in South Africa, and remains a subject of controversy today, as discussed in Chapter 4. His major contributions to South African politics are the unification of South Africa's "Indians" into a single, collective political identity,<sup>3</sup> and the development of his idiomatic strategy, *satyagraha*. Gandhi's activism was initially geared toward the merchant class and based primarily on petitions and appeals, but by the first decade of the 1900s, he abandoned this elitist and accommodationist approach and embraced a politics of mass action, a strategic shift which led to the resistance of the British Empire. *Satyagraha* set the stage for Indian

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<sup>2</sup>They also requested that the contracts of indentured workers be drawn up in their own languages, so that laborers might understand the terms under which they were employed. They asked that the workers be entitled to free return passages to India after 5 and not 10 years. In addition to recommending freedom of religion for the workers, they asked that a Protector of Indians, fluent in Indian languages, be appointed.

<sup>3</sup> "...the different Indian races inhabiting South Africa have to be welded together and made to think corporately, to sink their sectarian prejudices." *Indian Opinion*, April 11, 1908.

politics in South Africa during the first four decades of the twentieth century but also diffused to the United States to inform that country's struggles for democracy and civil rights over the course of the twentieth century (as shown in Chapter 6).

Chapter 5 showed how by the 1940s, a new generation of Indian leaders born on South African soil steered Indian politics toward joint struggle with Africans. However, the 1949 riots erupted just as this strategy was beginning to take hold. A major episode in South African Indian history, the memory of the riots continues to affect Indian-African relations to the present day.<sup>4</sup> The causes of the conflict, as I have shown in Chapter 5, were multiple, but due primarily to the highly racialized climate in Durban, Natal's major city, and the unequal incorporation of Indians, Africans, and Whites into Durban's economy. The city's major industries were dominated by White capital while Indian and White merchants competed for local commercial advantage. African capital had yet to develop as the majority of Africans were still either peasants in the rural areas or wage earners in the city. Indian merchants had established shops, conducted trade, and provided services wherever these were lacking in non-White areas, including African townships and villages. Local African politicians frequently evoked the Indian presence in order to unify and mobilize their own constituencies as "Africans." This was particularly true in Cato Manor (discussed in Chapter 5), where the Indian and African poor were in direct competition for resources such as land, housing, local political support, and ultimately the services and protection of the White supremacist state.

The riots undermined the concerted effort being made at the time to build alliances between Indians and Africans, such as the Doctors' Pact and the Food

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<sup>4</sup> See "Pray for '49: Zulu King Zwelithini calls for reconciliation and a new beginning" *The Post*, December 19-23, 2012, pp. 1.

Campaign, and was likely instigated by the White government, as discussed in Chapter 5. The period following the riots was a time of great insecurity for Indians, as the seizure of Indian assets and their collective disfranchisement were increasingly proposed, by Africans and Whites, respectively, as solutions to the problem of the “Asiatic Menace”. The riots and the ongoing manipulation of their memory by aspiring African businessmen and politicians, in the name of African nationalism and advancement, have left an impression on the Indian political and cultural consciousness that lasts to this day.

By the time Gandhi left South Africa in 1913, Indians had been drawn together by the experience of racism as “Indians.” By 1949, their internal heterogeneity had coalesced under these conditions such that they had developed strong feelings of identification with the collective they had become. In the decades following 1949, Indians did not always identify or struggle as “Indians.” As noted in Chapter 4, Fatima Meer, the firebrand Indian intellectual and activist, instead emphasized and demanded the right of Indians to be “South African.” She and other Indians of her generation rejected the idea that they were a “diaspora of India.” Thus, Indians identified with a variety of liberation movements that were not necessarily based on “Indian-ness.” It has been one of the tasks of this dissertation to uncover how “Indian” identity has materialized, evolved, and continues to shape the lives of Indians in South Africa.

With respect to the United States, the South Asian presence dates back to the mid-1800s, when workers from the Punjab region of colonial India were brought to work on agriculture and lumber mills on the American west coast. South Asian migrants to the US during this period (as I have shown in chapter 6) were incorporated into the anti-Chinese discourse and practice that was emerging during the late 1800s and represented

collectively as the “Hindoo Menace.” As in South Africa, struggles over citizenship, rights, and entitlements were central to South Asian political activism in the US in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Congress passed a law in 1790 that only Whites could become naturalized citizens. Various immigration exclusion acts thereafter aimed to prevent Asians from gaining citizenship. South Asian immigrants were represented as particularly unassimilable and subjected to racist attacks on the west coast in the early 1900s. The Chinese Exclusion League even changed its name to the Asiatic Exclusion League in order to mobilize against the immigration of South Asians and other Asian groups.

Jensen (1988:248) points out that during the late 1800s and early 1900s, “the question of who was white and therefore eligible for citizenship was still being decided by the clerks of the court.” Whereas Indians in South Africa could not become citizens by claiming whiteness, South Asians in the US diligently tried to pursue a gap in the law through which the case could be made. In fact a number of other groups present in the US (Syrians, Armenians, Turks, for example) also tried to gain citizenship by claiming “whiteness,” the only channel to citizenship open to them. A few South Asians were naturalized during this period while others were excluded Visweswaran (1997). Chapter 6 showed how the Supreme Court cases of Japanese businessman Takeo Ozawa of 1922 and South Asian Bhagat Singh Thind were important for South Asian claims to citizenship. Ozawa sued for naturalization on the basis that (1) he looked white and (2) citizenship ought not be based on race or skin color but on demonstrated patriotism and loyalty to the nation-state. However, the Supreme Court rejected Ozawa’s petition on the grounds that he was of Japanese descent and not Caucasian, and therefore not entitled to

citizenship under the law. That same year, Bhagat Singh Thind tried to use the very reasoning of the Court in the *Ozawa* case that, according to anthropological theories of the time, South Asians were classified as Caucasian and therefore entitled to citizenship. However, the Court caught up with Thind and ruled that while racial science may classify South Asians and Whites in the same race, the “common” (i.e., White) man “knew” that South Asians were not white. Thus Thind was denied citizenship. As a consequence, previously naturalized South Asians were stripped of their citizenship. Chapter 6 then turned to the South Asian influence on American social movements, particularly through transnational exchanges, activism, political ideas, and methods of resistance used to destabilize bilateral relationships stemming from racism and imperialism.

The 1965 Immigration Reform laws drastically changed US immigration policy, especially with respect to Asian immigration. As a consequence, South Asian immigration increased dramatically, as explained in Chapter 6. Post-1965 South Asian immigrants initially consisted of skilled professionals. However, by the 1980s they were joined by a less educated workforce, leading to pronounced class inequality among South Asians in the US. This migration occurred during a time of tremendous political turmoil and economic transformation. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements began to call for economic justice beyond the ameliorative measures just passed to end discriminatory laws and practices. These struggles spurred a number of urban uprisings from the mid-to late 1960s, as well as a conservative White backlash that culminated in Richard Nixon’s election to the presidency in 1968. The demographic changes ushered in by the 1965 Immigration Reform Act occurred at a time when the US economy was experiencing a downturn. A decline in the number of manufacturing jobs in US cities

across the country resulted in the loss of well-paid unionized jobs, accelerating rates of unemployment, and the restructuring of the Keynesian state. Faced with increasing demands for social and economic justice by social movements, conservative policy makers increasingly evoked personal and behavioral characteristics as the cause of socio-economic inequality in the United States. It was at this moment that the trope of the “model minority” emerged, as an “explanation” not only of South Asian “success” but also the purported “failure” of other racial minorities.

Chapter 7 showed that as the conservative tide swept over the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s, violence against Asians began to escalate in American cities. While admired for the supposedly unique positive qualities that were said to be lacking in others, on one hand, Asians were simultaneously despised and blamed for the economic problems of the US during those decades, on the other hand. This contradictory representation resulted in a number of violent acts against Asians, such as Vincent Chin’s murder and the eruption of the 1992 LA Riots. During the decade between Chin’s murder and the LA riots, South Asians were the victims of racially motivated violence in Jersey City, New Jersey. Chapter 7 examined in detail how South Asians mobilized for justice and fought to counteract the official and unofficial denial of a systematic pattern of racist violence against South Asians, as well as the implications of this struggle for South Asian rights and representation.



## **The Contemporary Period**

Although contemporary events are not the focus of this dissertation, its observations may be extended toward an understanding of more recent developments regarding South Asians in South Africa and the United States. In South Africa, Indians protested extensively against apartheid and participated in all the major national liberation movements (the ANC, PAC, BCM, etc.) that brought about the transition to an African majority government in 1994. Yet they are still taunted in the popular media and by local politicians as not only aliens, outsiders, and foreigners, but also as enemies of Africans with a predatory agenda.

The Indian activists and political leaders of the 1950s stressed that the problems faced by the Indian community could only be solved as part of the wider solution to racism, apartheid, and inequality in South Africa. Thereafter, Indian political movements embraced the ideologies of the major national liberation movements, especially that of the ANC because it had stressed the principle of non-racialism at the time. Indians, a numerically small minority in South Africa, realized the necessity for unified national coalitions in order to address the poverty, inequality, and disfranchisement they experienced under apartheid. The ANC and its allies refused to emphasize their ethnic identities, as encouraged by the apartheid state, because they knew they would lend credence to separatist ideologies by doing so. They also rejected Africanist conceptions of nationalism that included only indigenous peoples in order to instill a more inclusive, civic sense of citizenship. Indian and African activists of this tradition emphasized the

common interests of all peoples and banished their ethnicities and other cultural differences to the private sphere (Marx, 1992; Frederikse, 1990).

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) also promoted the solidarity of all oppressed peoples, regardless of their ethnic identity. Steven Biko, the founder of the movement in the late 1960s, defined Coloureds, Indians, and Africans collectively as “Black,” since they all experienced oppression under apartheid. Here too, Indians moved their racial identity to the background in order to foreground a collective “black” identity which, they believed, promised civic rights in a future, free, South Africa. A non-racial, or Black, civic “South African” identity was the only way in which the small Indian minority could resist disfranchisement and civic invisibility under White minority rule, on one hand, but also the possibility of second-class citizenship in an alternative future dictated by indigeneity under African majority rule. Indians participated overwhelmingly in these opposition movements, because they understood that civic citizenship is created through shared, and not separate, struggles. Thus, these movements were mostly able to withstand the White government’s repeated attempts to divide the united communities along racial and ethnic lines (Boesak, 1976; Gerhart 1978; Arnold 1978).

There are many examples of Indian-African solidarity for an equitable future in South Africa. As early as 1946, Indians refused to accept the state’s offer of communal representation within the government of South Africa. Indians regarded it as a transparently co-optive ploy by the government to extend privileges to Indians while pitting them against the African majority, who were not extended participation. Africans and Indians participated together in the Defiance Campaign of the 1950s. Indians were instrumental in authoring and incorporating the concerns of all three “Black” groups into

the Freedom Charter (which later served as a basis of the constitution of democratic South Africa), building minority rights into it. When the military wing of the ANC, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, was formed in the early 1960s to challenge the white regime, many Indians joined it. Some, like Ahmed Kathrada, one of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*'s founding members, either served life sentences with Nelson Mandela or otherwise sacrificed their lives for the freedom struggle (Lalla, 2011). The 1973 labor strikes included numerous Indian participants. The (Indian) Southern Durban Civic Union supported the (African) Federation of Black Allied Workers in its 1974 boycott of bus fare increases by Indian bus owners in Chatsworth, Durban. Indian students at the University of Durban-Westville participated in numerous protests and boycotts with Africans. All of these are examples of successful, united mobilization against inequality under apartheid in South Africa (Desai and Vahed 2010; Desai 1996).

The ruling National Party (NP) tried again in 1984 to recruit Indians into the apartheid government, this time after the ANC leaders had been exiled, banned, or imprisoned. In one of the most successful instances of Indian-African solidarity, Indians overwhelmingly rejected the White government's proposal of a new parliamentary structure, called the "Tri-Cameral System," which extended legislative participation to the Indians and Coloured minorities (albeit in racially separate chambers of Parliament), but not to the African majority. The Natal Indian Congress, acting in place of the exiled and banned ANC, answered the call of duty by spearheading a national campaign to expose the chimera of the Tri-Cameral System and boycott the election of its delegates. One year earlier, the NIC and its affiliate, the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC), had established the United Democratic Front (UDF), a national alliance of civic associations,

trade unions, and women's, students' religious, and other democratic organizations.

Within the year, the UDF had grown into one of the largest protest movements in South Africa since the 1950s. After protesting the Tri-Cameral System, the UDF went on to demand the release of Nelson Mandela and democracy in South Africa (Naidoo, 2010; Singh 2005; Adam and Moodley, 1993).

Just at the height of Indian-African solidarity, anti-Indian riots broke out in 1985 in the Inanda area of Durban, which came as a shock to Indians and Africans alike, and deeply affected the Indian poor, who constituted a majority of the community and bore the brunt of the assault. It was suspected that a "third force" (now known to be the White government and its African agents, such as Chief Gatsha Buthelezi) was abroad in the Indian community, terrorizing the Indian poor and instigating the African poor to violence (Adam and Moodley, 1993; Charney 1991; Sutcliffe and Wellings 1988; Hughes 1987). As a consequence, many Indians, especially the poor, retain a residual fear regarding their place in an African majority country, having suffered violence at African hands. They expressed these anxieties in a BBC documentary made a few months before the first democratic election in 1994:

While Indians appreciate the peace-loving nature of Nelson Mandela they are unsure as to whether he can control the rank and file...

They [Africans] come on to our property and tell us it is Mandela's land and we have to get out.

I have become so disillusioned with the blacks. We did so much for them and now everything has been taken away from us. I have lost faith in my liberal ideals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Program on BBC2 broadcast on October 1, 1993. Reported in *Sunday Tribune Herald*, 4 October 1993

These fears were stoked once again by events just preceding the election. In March 1994, just one month before the election, African squatters invaded public sector housing units that were occupied by low-income Indian families in Cato Manor. Initially at a loss given the historic moment they were in, ANC officials, including Nelson Mandela, decided that they would condemn the action but not call for the eviction of the invaders. Nor did they promise alternative housing to Indians who lost their homes. The White National Party (NP) seized on the invasion of Indian homes to launch an aggressive election campaign in the Indian community that tapped into deep-seated Indian fears, particularly among the poor who had borne the brunt of anti-Indian assaults, that they would lose their property and their lives when an African majority comes into power (Gigaba and Maharaj 1996). As a result, approximately 70 percent of the Indian population voted for the NP during the historic 1994 election (Reynolds 1994). Nelson Mandela was disappointed but clearly did not fathom, at first, the reason for the unusual Indian vote:

In the Indian and Coloured areas you find that as much as seventy percent of the population voted against an African government. They decided to vote to be part of a minority and not the majority. They decided to be part of a past which has divided us, created conflict, hostility, instead of being part of the future. ... We have had the most difficult task in the government of National Unity because of the fact that the Indian and Coloured communities have identified themselves with the oppressors, and have created problems for me in promoting a spirit of reconciliation and the building of a nation which will be the joint activity of all South Africans.<sup>6</sup>

It was only after the ANC began to acknowledge Indian vulnerability, address the specific material concerns confronting Indians, such as housing, and recognize Indian

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<sup>6</sup> Speech delivered on receiving the freedom of Tongaat, a town linked to the sugar industry in Natal with a significant Indian population, October 21, 1994. See <http://www.anc.za.org>. Last accessed June 16, 2013.

cultural symbols as part of a multicultural campaign that the Indian vote began to shift toward the ANC in subsequent elections, such that the party was able to get a majority of Indian votes. Even still, although educated middle and upper class Indians readily identified with the African majority, wariness about an African-led government persisted among the Indian poor as anti-Indianism persisted (Habib and Naidoo 2004; Naidu 2000).

Racist public statements made by prominent African political figures, journalists, and artists deepened Indians' sense of vulnerability in the years after the historic elections. For example, in 1999, Amos Maphumulo, a former editor of the influential Zulu newspaper, *Ilanga* (introduced in Chapter 4), claimed that he was waiting for the day an African woman would give birth to another Idi Amin<sup>7</sup> who would get rid of Indians from South Africa, and that Indians incited Africans to violence during the apartheid years. In May 2002, Mbongeni Ngema, a popular Zulu musician, wrote a song titled "AmaNdiya," which likewise expressed strong anti-Indian sentiments. "This song represents the way many Africans feel about the behavior of Indians in this country," said the English language voice-over introducing the song. "It is intended to begin a constructive discussion that would lead to a true reconciliation between Indians and Africans." Its lyrics, however, were anything but constructive or conciliatory (cited from Baines 2006: 53):

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<sup>7</sup> The Ugandan tyrant who expelled Indians from Uganda in 1972 under threat of genocide. Reported in *The Sunday Times*, March 28, 1999.

Oh men!  
 Oh virulent men!  
 We need a courageous man  
 To delegate to the Indians  
 For this 'indaba' (matter) is complicated and now needs to be reported to men  
 Indians don't want to change even Mandela has failed to convince them  
 It was better with Whites  
 We knew then it was a racial conflict

Even our leadership is not keen to get involved in this situation  
 Your buds are watering for roti and beetlenuts  
 Indians are not interested to cast their vote but when they do so they vote for whites  
 And their numbers fill up the Parliament and in the Government mould

What do you say, Buthelezi, you're so quiet  
 Yet the children of your Ngqengelele kaMnyamana (Buthelezi's clan hierarchy)  
 Being turned into clowns by Indians  
 Zulus do not have money and are squatting in shacks as chattels of Indians

Where's Sbu Ndebele? Where's Prince Gideon Zulu?  
 Hawu Ndabezitha wakaDabulamanzi!  
 I have never seen Dlamini relocating to India  
 Yet here is Gumedede in Durban being homeless  
 We struggle so much here in Durban, as we, have been dispossessed by Indians  
 Who in turn are suppressing our people.

Mkhize is moaning, as he wants to open a business in West Street  
 Indians block him saying there is no place to open up a business or to rent it out  
 Our people are patronizing Indian businesses  
 What are you saying Mbeki? You are silent  
 Indians are playing the fool with us!

It's like that, brethren! Yeah men of men  
 [Fanagalo excerpts]: 'Hhayi, listen, I tell you that you must give people money,  
 Black folk buy from Indian shops in Isipingo, at Clairwood, in Durban and Verulam  
 Black people buy from Indians yet Indians do not even like to build schools for black  
 children  
 They don't even like children of black people

I have never seen, Dlamini, emigrating to Bombay, India  
 Yet, Indians, arrive everyday in Durban – they are packing the Airport full  
 It's so my men; it's so my men! But no Indian wants to see a black-owned shop.

Like “Black Korea,” Ice Cube’s diatribe against Koreans in the US (discussed in Chapter 7), “AmaNdiya” sought to strike a chord among Africans with strong anti-Indian feelings in a racially charged environment. Like Ice Cube, Ngema denied any intention to harm or to inflame, and insisted that he was merely reflecting social “reality.” Nevertheless, such “creative expressions” reinforce existing racial stereotypes and incite resentment rather than invite “discussion” as claimed. Bronwyn Harris, a researcher at the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, observes that

“AmaNdiya” does not only portray negative stereotypes that are drawn on racial lines. It also creates prejudice through the language of xenophobia. By presenting ‘Indians’ as outsiders from India, the song raises questions about belonging within South Africa. This moves beyond race alone because it introduces concepts of citizenship and nationality. It implies that ‘Indians’ are not South African and therefore have less legitimate claim to their citizenship than others.... Foreigners have become handy scapegoats for South Africa’s ills, particularly crime and unemployment. ‘AmaNdiya’ extends this xenophobic discourse to ‘Indians’ and so conflates a race-group with a national-group. This is a divisive trick. Not only does it challenge the idea of racial inclusiveness and unity, it also suggests that South African nationality is racially exclusive (cited from Baines 2006:61).

The dissertation showed that such representations of Indians as interlopers and perpetual outsiders are nothing new. Anti-Indianism has been an intimate part of the discourses of national liberation, nation-building and citizenship in South Africa, ever since the first Indians arrived in the country. Even John Dube, the esteemed first president of the ANC (introduced in Chapter 4) and contemporary of Gandhi, said “we know by sad experience how beneath our very eyes our children’s bread is taken by these Asiatics: how whatever little earnings we derive from Europeans, go to swell the purses of these strangers, with whom we seem obliged to trade” (Hughes 2007: 163). In the contemporary period, such sentiments have been rephrased for a new generation of



Africans who do not have the earlier generation's memory of joint resistance with Indians against apartheid. The "new" African-majority-led South Africa markets itself on the global stage as the "multicultural," "rainbow" nation in which all the cultures and races of South Africa are represented. However, the continuous experience of anti-Indianism within a climate of increasing "Africanization" has led a large segment of the Indian population, the poor, to increasingly see themselves as "stepchildren of the Rainbow Nation." (Maharaj 2005: 1).

Two contemporary struggles in Durban illustrate the daily battles of the poor against the dispossession in the "new" South Africa, but also exemplify their visionary politics to secure a future in a South Africa rapidly privatizing under the rubric of neo-liberalism and Africanization. The first is the joint struggle of poor Indians and Africans to retain their low-income housing in Chatsworth, Durban. The second is their fight to protect the Warwick Market, a major source of livelihood and one of the last public spaces in Durban remaining open to the poor. In Chatsworth, the local ANC authority, headed by an African mayor, an Indian deputy mayor, and a former left-leaning White geographer-turned-city manager, came together to execute a vicious campaign to remove Indian and African poor from sub-standard housing that was not producing the desired revenue for the municipality. At first, the new ANC government cut off amenities such as water to poor, unemployed tenants, Indian and African, citing non-payment for utilities. Then the Durban City Council sought to evict tenants from the dilapidated housing, this time citing the non-payment of rent. In an insightful analysis based on concrete examples of the lived experiences of the poor, Desai (2000) traces how the Durban City Council's actions were drawn directly from ANC's neo-liberal policies, which have only served to

further damage what was left of the social fabric of the poor, already rent by apartheid. His work also shows how unfair urban policies only served to ignite new social movements among the poor of Chatsworth, Indian and African, who had continued all along the exhausting work of jointly resisting injustice, just as they had done under apartheid.

Contrary to claims based on the currently fashionable ethnographic gaze into the alleged “melancholia” of Indians, their wistful longing for the good old days of apartheid, and their present politics of despair (see Hansen 2013 for example), the unified opposition to these evictions, as documented by Desai, suggest that the iconic South African resistance tradition that brought down apartheid is not only alive and well in the Indian community, but has been continuous. With no time to wallow in a sense of loss and hopelessness, these residents, mostly women, drew upon their resistance tradition to form a Gandhi-style united front against the Durban City Council, employing boycotts, civil disobedience, street protest, and litigation, all non-violently. When Fatima Meer, the veteran ANC activist, went to Chatsworth to recruit support for the ANC, she was struck by the clarity with which the residents of Chatsworth saw their problems. “We don’t care about our former oppressors. We are concerned about our immediate oppressors,”<sup>8</sup> they said, referring to the ANC-led, multicultural trio of the Durban City Council. During one meeting, a resident and activist told Desai, “We are not Indians. We are the poors.”

The “poors,” Indian and African, are still fighting against the Durban City Council, only now for the Warwick Market, another case that displays the dazzling facets of race, class, and gender inequality in the Rainbow Nation. The Warwick Avenue

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<sup>8</sup> *Times of India*, December 10, 2000.

Triangle in Durban, writes geographer and activist Brij Maharaj (2013), is one of the few racially integrated spaces that was not destroyed by the apartheid government but, ironically, is about to be demolished by an African-led government. The area houses the Warwick market, a flea market where poor Indian and African market gardeners, petty livestock traders, and trinket vendors, all mostly women, gather to sell their wares to fellow low-income consumers. The market, a thriving hub of informal retail and barter activity, caught the attention of the Durban City Council – in fact, the same unholy trinity of individuals who sought to evict the “poors” of Chatsworth – who now want to demolish the market and build a high-end shopping mall at the site as part of their “urban redevelopment” scheme. The vendors and their supporters have formed a social movement (the Early Morning Market Support Group) to resist the demolition of the market, but find that their opposition to the mall is being portrayed in distinctly racial terms by city officials and pro-business lobbyists. Proponents of the shopping mall claim that the anti-mall movement is preventing the African race from advancing economically. Activist Trevor Ngwane witnessed that at various planning meetings, mall advocates have repeatedly singled out Indians who oppose the mall, evoking the trope that Indians in South Africa aim to retard African progress. Proponents have since gone on to launch a counter-campaign, on decidedly racial terms, to promote the idea that demolishing the market and its informal activities would create long term growth and prosperity for Africans. More importantly, they claim, removing the market would get rid of the Indians who are obstructing opportunities long denied to Africans. Ngwane noted at a meeting that Durban City Councillor Majola quoted from an old “ANC strategy and tactics document” which stated that the fight for the Warwick Market was about “liberating

Africans.” Another senior city official, according to Ngwane, was less circumspect about his views regarding Indian prosperity, allegedly at African expense: “Kufanele sibakhiphe iqatha emlonyeni” (we must remove the piece of meat from their mouths).<sup>9</sup>

Indian-African tensions have taken on a new twist in a scandal that is currently unfolding in South Africa. Dubbed “Gupta-gate” by the South African media, the scandal involves the Guptas, a wealthy family from northern India with business interests in South Africa, and their dubious relationship with South African president Jacob Zuma, who is embroiled in his own scandals involving corruption and rape allegations (Basson 2012; Johnson 2010; Russell 2009). Zuma’s son Duduzane is a member of the board of directors of Sahara Holdings, a Gupta investment firm, and one of Zuma’s six wives is housed in a Gupta-financed mansion.<sup>10</sup> The Gupta family had been doing business in South Africa since 1993, just before the transition to democratic rule, but the incident that ignited the current scandal involves a lavish wedding held by the Guptas for their daughter at the Sun City Resort. In addition to booking the entire hotel for a no-expenses-spared week of wedding festivities for some 300 guests, the Guptas had somehow received clearance from the South African government to land their privately chartered Jet Airways A330-200 Airbus at Waterkloof, a nearby high-security air force base. The landing of a private plane bearing wedding guests at a military base equivalent to the Andrews Air Force Base in the United States, in terms of security, generated a wave of criticism in the vigilant South African press and various civil society groups.<sup>11</sup> Pertinent questions were being asked, regarding the nature of the cozy relationship between the

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<sup>9</sup> All of the quotes above are from “ANC Administration Sows Seeds of Racial Discord” July 23, 2009, available at <http://historymatters.co.za/anc-administration-sows-seeds-of-racial-discord/> last accessed June 25, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See “How Did Guptas Get So Powerful?” *Daily News* (South Africa), May 7, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> An investigation is currently underway to determine how the Gupta family were able to secure the necessary clearances to land a private aircraft at Waterkloof.

Gupta family, President Zuma, and the ANC hierarchy, the breach of military protocols, the violation of South African airspace and security for private purposes, unfair labor practices during the wedding celebrations, the gauche behavior of the wedding party, as well as the irony of the ostentatious display of their personal, foreign wealth at Sun City, a location that bears great symbolic importance from the anti-apartheid era as a landmark of protest against the White government's attempt to lure foreign capital and artists to South Africa through tourism.

Jeremy Cronin, the Deputy General Secretary of the South African Communist Party, remarked on the “deeply embarrassing” episode for the ANC. “We are not living in a banana republic. We are not a playground for rich foreigners to come and occupy our space, and take over a national key point.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Brij Maharaj, a prominent South African geographer and outspoken critic of the ANC's neo-liberal policies, observed that

The Guptas, non-entities in India, have become billionaires in South Africa, with persistent allegations that such rapid accumulation of wealth is related to their close connections with the ANC leadership hierarchy. They have lent their aviation facilities to the party during election campaigns; and their New Age newspaper [a pro-Zuma Gupta-owned newspaper published in South Africa] unashamedly supports the government.<sup>13</sup>

Maharaj, however, went on to express concern that the peculiarities of Gupta-gate could become generalized in the public mind and negatively impact ordinary South African Indians, given past experience and existing tensions between Indians and Africans:

The average South African in Soweto, Umlazi or Inanda would equate the outrageous antics of the Guptas, their vulgar flaunting of their wealth and the alleged caste/race-based discrimination by their guests at Sun City, with that of all

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<sup>12</sup> Cited from “Who let the Gupta family land at a South African military base?” available at <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/south-africa/130503/south-africa-gupta-family-uproar-jacob-zuma-india> last accessed June 21, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Cited from “Love on the Rocks?” in *The Post*, May 8, 2013, p. 1 available at <http://thepostza.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx> last accessed on June 21, 2013.

South Africans of Indian descent, and if left unchecked has the potential to impact adversely on the minority group.<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, just as probes into the depths of the dealings between Zuma and the Guptas were beginning, the affair began to take on an “Indian vs. African” dimension, just as Maharaj had guessed. Reports began to emerge of individual South African Indians being taunted as “Gupta” on city streets by Africans following an allegation in the press that guests at the Gupta wedding had insulted Africans.

One recent incident, described below, illustrates how this scandal is morphing into a racialized charge against Indians in general, such that the blatant class inequality and gross corruption being flouted during the wedding by the Guptas and their ANC cronies are getting ignored. The scandal threatens to eclipse and undermine the tremendous efforts made by the Indian poor to remain just in spite of racial manipulation, but even worse, careless handling of the scandal could precipitate violence against Indians, as the country has seen before. Abdul Rehman, the mayor of Newcastle, a historic Indian coal-mining town where Gandhi conducted some of his most important *satyagrahas* to mobilize indentured Indian coalminers, had gone to the local Road Traffic Inspectorate (RTI) to renew his driver’s license, shortly after the scandal had come to light. An African official at the RTI taunted him, “Hey Gupta, what are you doing here?” to which Rehman initially did not respond. However, after the official repeated the taunt, Rehman asked the man, “Do you know who I am?” The traffic official replied, “Yes. I know you are a Gupta.” When Rehman told the official that he was offended, the official told Rehman to “go back to India and take offence. Here in South Africa, this country

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<sup>14</sup> Cited from “Love on the Rocks?” in *The Post*, May 8, 2013, p. 1 available at <http://thepostza.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx> last accessed on June 21, 2013.

belongs to us.” The official continued, “you may be the mayor in town, but this is our territory!”<sup>15</sup> The Mayor of Newcastle reported the incident to the head of the RTI, who subsequently pressed the official to apologize to Rehman. The matter is now before the South African Human Rights Commission. An ANC official in KwaZulu-Natal apologized,<sup>16</sup> but the incident took on another life:

Shortly afterward, a well-known African journalist, Phumlani Mfeka, launched a diatribe in *The City Press* (a major Johannesburg newspaper with a large circulation in the African community) in which he rationalized the official’s treatment of Rehman as entirely deserved:

Dear Afzul,

...I penned this letter to you in the interests of educating, liberating and giving you a free, but stern, warning not to grandstand against an African person in the way you did to the traffic official who innocently mistook you for one of the Gupta brothers. Such an action is certain to attract severe African contempt. First and foremost, you are an Indian and, contrary to what you believe and what you perhaps have been taught, South Africa is an African country with its land in its totality and proportion rightfully belonging to its indigenous African people. ...

In 1949, Indians, with the support of the apartheid regime, attacked the African people and history will advise you of the casualties Indians suffered...

Now, in reading an article titled “Newcastle Mayor Lays complaint after ‘Gupta’ slur” (City Press, May 8), I was rather perplexed to read that an innocent case of mistaken identity is now being used in a senseless, vicious campaign to ensure a poor African traffic official loses his job, letting his family go hungry, merely because of your overarching arrogance and bruised sense of pomposity.

Who do you think you are, asking an African whether he knows who you are in his native land ?...

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<sup>15</sup> All of the quotes from Rehman’s incident are from “Indian-Origin Mayor in South Africa Faces Racist Slur” in *The Times of India*, May 8, 2013, available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-05-08/other-news/39115876\\_1\\_rehman-gupta-wedding](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-05-08/other-news/39115876_1_rehman-gupta-wedding) last accessed on June 21, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> See “ANC Condemns anti-Indian Remarks” in iOLNews, June 10, 2013, available at <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/anc-condemns-anti-indian-remarks-1.1530126> last accessed on June 21, 2013.

You also missed an opportunity to realize that Africans in this province do not regard Indians as their brethren and thus the ticking time bomb of a deadly confrontation between the two communities is inevitable and shall be exacerbated by the antagonistic attitude of Indians such as yourself...

The traffic official was absolutely correct in reminding you that India is your home, and you should perhaps begin to embrace India as your home as we Africans embrace South Africa as our home, which we are more than willing to fight for..."

Regards,  
Phumlani Mfeka

Such acts remind South African Indians of the tenuousness of their place in South African society, the fragility of their civic citizenship, how readily and repeatedly they are conflated as persons from India in spite of being "South African," how consistently they are racialized as outsiders and perpetual foreigners, and how they are always held collectively responsible for the actions of individuals, such as the Guptas, with whom they have little in common.

This dissertation has tried to show that identity formation is a complex, evolving process that entails a power struggle among distinctive personal, regional, and material forces to arrest the ontological meanings of 'self' and 'other' in order to make or invalidate claims to material, social, and psychic entitlements. "Indian" identity in South Africa is a product of this ongoing process. Although most Indians embrace a broad "South African" identity, their continued experience of anti-Indian racism, violence, and dispossession have resulted in a sense of ambivalence, especially among the poor, toward prematurely discarding their collective identifier, "Indian," as problematic as it may be. "One cannot get up one day and throw off one's ethnic tag," write activists Goolam



Vahed and Ashwin Desai (2010). Indians, who were once ambivalent toward Whites, having endured the brutality of white supremacist rule, especially the injustices wrought by the Group Areas Act, are now cautious about state power in African hands. Vahed and Desai observe that working class Indians who read daily about political instability and atrocities in other African countries draw their own conclusions about the future of Indians in “Black” South Africa, especially given their awareness of the mistreatment of Indians in Uganda and elsewhere in post-independence East Africa.

Thus, the convergence of several factors - the memory of past disfranchisement, their awareness of racist violence encountered by South Asians abroad, and ongoing anti-Indian diatribes within South Africa – have left the Indian poor, in particular, deeply uncertain about their future in South Africa that increasingly shifts toward indigeneity and away from civic ideals as the basis of citizenship under Africanization. Regularly reminded that “South African” stands for “African,” itself an identity that excludes them, many Indians have begun to question what happened to Nelson Mandela’s vision of non-racialism and democracy. Indians are being told, tautologically, that they can never be “African” enough to be South African because they too “Indian” to claim membership in the new nation. With their “South African” identity stripped of its civic meaning, on one hand, and but without the claim to indigeneity available to Africans, on the other hand, Indians fear being squeezed once again into an “Indian” identity that stands for second-class citizenship, just as it had under White supremacist rule, only under Black majority rule this time. Thus, ironically, after the fall of apartheid and two decades into Black majority rule, Indians are hesitant to abandon the ascribed identity of “Indian,” for fear of losing what remaining entitlements they have. Settler expropriation of indigenous

peoples under colonialism is a well-known historic fact that cannot be denied in contemporary struggles for freedom, equality, and democracy. A less well-known but equally tragic reality is the politicization of indigeneity by colonialism such that it has led to extreme forms of native self-assertion, as noted by Ugandan Indian political theorist Mahmoud Mamdani (2006).

The ANC has issued a statement of its zero-tolerance policy toward anti-Indianism<sup>17</sup> but, as noted above, the Indian poor are trying to unite with poor Africans to form a campaign to resist ANC-led, pro-business campaigns against the poor. ANC policy has been a continuation of apartheid era policy in many ways, but with a neo-liberal inflection to better fit in with the agendas of global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF (Desai 2003; Bond 2002; Bond 2000). New social movements among the poor serve to highlight the neglect of class inequality in contemporary South African politics and policy, as the ANC seeks to demonstrate its eligibility for membership within the emerging global neo-liberal elite. As a consequence of such choices by the ANC, the deep poverty in South African society as inherited from apartheid has only been exacerbated since the transition to African-majority rule. In such an environment, Indians offer an escape clause for the African elite whenever the poor demand why their aspirations from the anti-apartheid struggle are still not being met in post-apartheid South Africa.

In the contemporary United States, there are still attempts to deny or downplay systemic prejudice and racism faced by the Asian community, of which South Asians are a part. Instead of dealing with Asian issues, policy makers, academics, and activists find

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<sup>17</sup> See ANC Statement on Mazibuye African Forum, June 21, 2013, available at [www.anc.za.org](http://www.anc.za.org) last accessed June 26, 2013

it more convenient to leave the balance of power within the Black-White binary intact, than to interrogate and address the imbalances it has created for Asians. In his bestselling book, *Two Nations*, Andrew Hacker (2003) draws upon the famous phrase from the Kerner Report, “two nations, one black, one white, separate, hostile, and unequal,” (discussed in Chapter 6) to insist that race relations in America are indeed a Black-White binary. In this entreaty to Blacks on behalf of Whites, he writes (p. xiii) that “other groups find themselves sitting as spectators, while the two prominent players [Whites and Blacks] try to work out how or whether they can coexist with one another.” Just as D’Souza (1995) had extolled Asians as a model minority to a sympathetic, conservative White audience, Hacker undertook it upon himself to exclude Asians from any analysis of systemic racism by casting them as “White” on behalf of a sympathetic Black audience that is tired of being victimized and blamed by White conservatives for not being ‘successful’. “As hardly needs repeating,” writes Hacker, “Asia has been catapulting itself into the modern world; so if most Asians are not literally “White,” they have the technical and organizational skills expected by any “Western” or European-based culture (p. 12).” I hope that my analysis of the model minority stereotype in Chapters 6 and 7 has problematized in some small way the overgeneralized, spurious, and divisive commentary of writers like D’Souza and Hacker, either to praise or to discredit Asians as a collective. ‘Race,’ Marable (1995:118) writes,

is not a permanent historical category, but an unequal relationship between social groups. We must rethink old categories and old ways of perceiving each other. We must define the issue of diversity as a dynamic, changing concept, leading us to explore problems of human relations and social equality in a manner which will expand the principles of fairness and opportunity to all members of society.

By subsuming the experience of Asians and South Asians into the White racial experience, given all the problems of doing so, Hacker's reductionist and facile remarks ignore the dynamism of race as a category and racialization as a process. He also denies the historical realities of exclusion and violence that Asians have experienced as part of the process of racialization they have had to endure in this country, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

South Asians have experienced racism and violence in the United States ever since they first arrived. South Asians were the first victims of hate crimes after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and their targeting continues long afterward. Not only did they have to deal with the trauma of the tragedy (many worked at or lost their lives or loved ones at the World Trade Center), but were soon subjected, on the basis of their "race," to various acts of intimidation and violence directed against them in displaced retaliation for the terrorist attacks. Hours after the attack on the Twin Towers, Amrik Singh Chawla, who worked in the financial district in downtown Manhattan, was trying to make his way out of Manhattan, which was chaotic. He was suddenly chased by three men who were shouting expletives about his turban. Chawla recalls that he sprinted onto a train, then ran into a shop, removed his turban, and put it into his briefcase. "I'm like, terrified for my life now, not just seeing people flying out of buildings, but for my own life," he told the *New York Times*.<sup>18</sup> There were a number of similar incidents across the country.

The first killings following 9/11 attacks were South Asian. On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner in Mesa, Arizona, was shot and killed

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<sup>18</sup> Reported in "Arabs and Muslims Steer Through an Unsettling Scrutiny" *The New York Times*, September 13, 2001

while planting flowers near the roadside. His killer, Frank Rogue, bragged at a bar, according to witnesses, that he wanted to “kill the ragheads responsible for September 11<sup>th</sup>.” Rogue went on, “I stand for America all the way. I am an American. Go ahead. Arrest me and let those terrorists run wild.” On October 4, 2001, a South Asian man, Vasudev Patel, a convenience store worker, was shot and killed by Mark Stroman. Stroman had also killed another South Asian, Waquar Hassan, who worked in a hamburger joint near Dallas, Texas. Stroman had shot and injured a third South Asian man, Rias Uddin, a gas station attendant, blinding him. Stroman rationalized his actions: “We are at war. I did what I had to do. I did it to retaliate against those who retaliate against us.”<sup>19</sup> More recently, in August of 2012, Wade Michael Page killed six South Asians and wounded four at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Occurring around the time of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dotbuster violence in Jersey City, the Wisconsin killing was a chilling reminder of targeted violence against South Asians in the US, and for Sikhs, especially reminiscent of Bellingham in 1907.<sup>20</sup>

When not attacked physically, South Asians are subjected to diatribe. Joel Stein, a popular columnist for *Time* magazine, wrote an article titled “My Own Private India” in which he bemoans the demographic changes in his home town of Edison, New Jersey, due to the arrival of South Asians to the area, and trivializes the hate crimes against South Asians during the Dotbuster attacks. “Eventually, there were enough Indians in Edison to change the culture,” he jokes, “at which point my townsfolk started calling the new Edisonians ‘dotheads.’” He went on, “One kid I knew in high school drove down an

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<sup>19</sup> All of the above quotes are from “We are not the enemy: Hate Crimes against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to be Arab or Muslim after September 11” *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 14 (6) (G), November 2002, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> See “Police Identify Army veteran as Wisconsin Temple Shooting Gunman” reported on CNN, August 7, 2012. Also see “Wisconsin Temple Shooting Recalls New Jersey’s Dotbusters” reported in *Star Ledger*, September 9, 2012.

Indian-dense street yelling for its residents to ‘go home to India.’ In retrospect, I question just how good our schools were if ‘dot heads’ was the best racist insult we could come up with for a group of people whose gods have multiple arms and an elephant nose.” Then, in sympathy with anti-immigrant sentiments against Mexicans in Arizona, Stein writes, “Whenever I go back, I feel what people in Arizona talk about: a sense of loss and anomie and disbelief that anyone can eat food that spicy.”<sup>21</sup> Stein’s article generated a wave of protests from South Asian civil rights activists for evoking the old Hindoo Menace trope of South Asians as unassimilable, alien, undesirable, etc. Activists wanted to know why *Time* had gone ahead and published such a crude article, given that the magazine had discerning editorial protocols, or whether a special exception was made for the article because it was about South Asians. *Time* issued an apology for publishing the piece. Stein claimed that the piece was a satire and that he was unaware that it was offensive.

The pendulum swings back to the trusty model minority stereotype, only this time as a strategy for shaping the immigration reform proposed by the Obama administration. In 2009, Jason Richwine, got the wheels turning again in *Forbes* magazine about South Asians being the “greatest” model minority:

...among minority groups, Indians are clearly the latest and greatest “model.” In 2007, the median income of households headed by an Indian American was approximately \$83,000, compared with \$61,000 for East Asians and \$55,000 for whites... The superior educational attainment, academic culture and likely high IQ of Indian Americans has already made them an economic force in the US and that strength can only grow.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> All of the quotes above from Joel Stein are from “My Own Private India” *Time*, July 5, 2010

<sup>22</sup> Available at [http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors\\_immigrants\\_minority.html](http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors_immigrants_minority.html) last accessed on June 22, 2013.

As shown in Chapters 6 and 7, the model minority stereotype is a conceptual fallacy on many levels that not only ignores the enormous socio-economic, cultural, and other forms of diversity among South Asians themselves, but sets up erroneous comparisons and spurious correlations with other groups, similarly inadequately defined. The fact that Richwine uses it, in spite of its widespread rejection by Asians for fostering racism particularly after the LA Riots, suggests an undercurrent of malice in pitting one group against another. While appearing to extol the virtues of Indian Americans, Richwine consciously contrasts them with Hispanics, whom he deliberately defines as a “race.” Next, he recommends restricting “Hispanic” immigration because he believes that they have lower IQs than South Asians, thus incorporating some of *The Bell Curve*’s (discussed in Chapter 6) rant on Blacks and IQs, but setting it up against “Hispanics” this time around.

In fact, Richwine was the author of a controversial and baseless report published by the Heritage Foundation that claimed that the current immigration reform being considered by Congress would cost taxpayers more than \$1 trillion, a figure he admitted to having invented in order to shore up conservative opposition to “illegal immigrants” his code for Hispanics. These ideas were first developed in his controversial doctoral dissertation (2009) at Harvard University, where *Bell Curve* co-author Richard Herrnstein had also been based. The dissertation argued that immigration policy ought to favor groups with higher IQs (South Asians) and prohibit “less intelligent” groups (Hispanics) from migrating to the US. Aiming to rehash the pseudo science of *The Bell Curve*, but this time directed against Hispanics for a new generation of racists, Richwine stirs into

the already incendiary mix the claim that South Asians have higher IQs than Hispanics because they are “genetically superior”.<sup>23</sup>

South Asians are confounding observers once again at present by embodying the Model Minority and Hindoo Menace stereotypes simultaneously. Around the same time the Gupta-gate scandal emerged in South Africa, US newspapers were reporting on an insider trading scandal involving, incidentally, another Gupta (no relation, as far as I am aware).<sup>24</sup> Suave, genteel, and intelligent, Rajat Gupta was a prominent Indian-American businessman who represented the epitome of South Asian success in the United States. As Vijay Prashad (2012, 2000) puts it, Gupta’s generation of Indian immigrants was “twice-blessed,” because they not only benefitted from India’s post-independence investment in higher education, but also the 1965 Immigration Reform Act that removed restrictions on South Asian immigration to the US. From a humble middle class family in India, Gupta had gone on to graduate from the prestigious and exclusive Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, and the Harvard Business School. He climbed up the American corporate ladder “the old fashioned way”<sup>25</sup> and became the first Indian CEO of a major American company, the Wall Street giant McKinsey and Company. At McKinsey, Gupta worked hard to cultivate a network of business and political associates who, in time, came to rely on his acumen, prestige, and influence in their decision-making. Contrary to the maverick image of Wall Street executives, Gupta lived a quiet and private life as a dedicated family man who spent nearly all his spare time with his family, especially his three daughters. It was Gupta’s generation that was first celebrated

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<sup>23</sup> See *The Economist*, “The Richwine Affair,” May 14, 2013

<sup>24</sup> For example, *The New York Times Magazine* had a feature article on May 17, 2013, titled “Rajat Gupta’s Lust for Zeros.”

<sup>25</sup> “We make money the old fashioned way. We earn it.” Motto of the investment firm Smith Barney, now part of the Morgan Stanley group.



as the “model minority” in the US (as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7) and Gupta, by most accounts, embodied it (Raghavan 2013).

Rajat Gupta’s fall from grace – that precipitous arc from Model Minority to Hindoo Menace – began when he became entangled in a web of corrupt insider trading involving the Sri Lankan born billionaire, Raj Rajaratnam – a veritable Mr. Hyde to Gupta’s Dr. Jekyll, a South Asian Gordon Gecko, with such boorish ways and sociopathic disregard for the consequences of his own actions that he may, in fact, be termed a “menace.” Rajaratnam headed the highly successful Galleon hedge fund. Rajaratnam used his circle of corporate insiders (many of them South Asian, and which eventually included Gupta) to gather private information on companies’ performance so that he could game the system. He paid his informants handsomely for this proprietary information. Rajaratnam was arrested in 2009 and is currently serving 11 years in a federal penitentiary, in what has been termed the largest insider trading scandal in US history. Gupta was subsequently convicted for passing secret information from Goldman Sachs board decisions (on which Gupta served) to Rajaratnam, a favor for which Gupta would have received millions of dollars (Raghavan 2013).

One hundred years ago, Gandhi was a widely-recognized image of the global South Asian diaspora. Now, after Gandhi’s name has devolved into a slur against South Asians for passivity and weakness, “Gupta,” a metonym for greed, has joined the lexicon of anti-“Indian” epithets in South Africa and the United States. The tale of Rajat Gupta, a tragic South Asian anti-hero, and his doppelganger Raj Rajaratnam, also South Asian, belies a more insidious but overlooked story – the rise of the neo-liberal economic paradigm and the calamitous shifts it has caused worldwide in material life as well as

value systems. Gupta, together with other members of the global South Asian business elite, were the architects of outsourcing under neo-liberalism, having created the networks that enabled US and other corporations to move their operations to developing countries as a cost-saving measure.<sup>26</sup> They are part of a transnational, neo-liberal, multicultural, plutocratic elite that strikes at will with increasing impunity against the structures of civil society, with only the beleaguered and co-opted state left to protect citizens and uphold the principle of justice. The danger of the ‘Model Minority,’ ‘Hindoo Menace,’ and other culturalist constructions of South Asian identity is not only that they essentialize South Asian political behavior, ideological leanings, and economic choices by ascribing the traits of particular individuals upon entire groups; as seen in the light of both the South African and American “Gupta-gate” scandals, the real problem is that neo-liberalism has made it acceptable to celebrate greed and to measure “success” accordingly, and to deflect the blame for “failure” onto particular groups, such as South Asians, collectively.

Contemporary race relations in both South Africa and the United States are unfolding within the twin contexts of neo-liberal economic policy and multicultural political discourse. Neo-liberalism is steering states away from economic justice and social welfare, to focus instead on privatization, de-regulation, and entrepreneurship (Fainstein 2010; Smith 2005; Brenner and Theodore 2005; Harvey 2005). In this regard, the ANC-led elite in South Africa are no different from Gupta and Rajaratnam in the US; the global rich are multicultural. These economic policies have concurred with a cultural and political discourse that emphasizes the recognition of different and particular

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<sup>26</sup> In addition to Raghavan (2013), see “Change Agent” in *Business Today* (India), August 13, 2007

identities in the public sphere. Multiculturalism and identity politics have produced “new subjectivities” (as discussed in Chapter 2) under the idea that citizenship entails both general rights, shared by all citizens, as well as the recognition of particular cultural identities (Kymlicka 2007; Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1994). Multiculturalism was an important political “moment” in which marginalized populations (racial minorities, women, etc.) fought for rights, recognition, and protection. The importance of the “multicultural moment”, according to Stephen Bronner (2010: 3), is that these new social movements

forced radical theory, whether of the liberal or socialist persuasion, to address a set of what had basically been unacknowledged, yet obviously legitimate, grievances. These movements were revolutionary in the social, if not political or economic sense. Their intellectual advocates made it apparent that human history was neither made by the canonical ‘dead white males’ nor defined by the hegemonic institutions and assumptions of the ‘West.’ Socialization was transformed and, ‘multiculturalism’ provoked what in the 1980s were called the ‘culture wars’.

However, multiculturalism entered into a Faustian bargain as it became increasingly corporatized, according to Bronner, such that “the existential emphasis upon an ever more precise subjectivity undermines both systemic concepts like capitalism and class as well as universal categories for dealing with the ‘other’.” Critique of inequality becomes increasingly elusive as multiculturalism permits all subjectivities to claim equality under ‘difference.’

In both the US and South Africa, while cultural diversity was recognized, cultural boundaries simultaneously became reified and impenetrable. Little attention is paid to the material inequalities undergirding cultural identities and difference. In the US, South Asian Wall Street executives, medical professionals, silicon valley entrepreneurs,

undocumented gas station attendants, and 7-11 shopkeepers are singled out for reification as a “model minority,” with apparently nothing in common with other groups. South Africa, on the other hand, celebrates itself as a “Rainbow Nation,” in which various ethnic and racial groups are happily and peacefully co-exist. However, Desai (1996:12) warns that “the logic of rainbow racialism ultimately functions to contain and constrain other more revolutionary interventions... The ‘rainbow’ reinforces race and ethnicity for Desai, ironically the very separations imposed by apartheid. In a global neo-liberal environment, any multiculturalism that treats material inequality as mere difference will turn all difference into inequality.

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