

Identity and Belonging in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Case of Indian South Africans

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ABSTRACT This paper examines Indian identities in the post-apartheid period, focusing in particular on the vexed issues of identity and belonging. The inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President of a non-racial democratic South Africa on 10 May 1994 denoted the de-territorialisation of old apartheid racial identities. Race separateness was no longer codified in law and common citizenship was meant to glue all into a South African “nation”. The process has been far from simple as ‘Indian’ identity has been constructed, deconstructed and re-made over the years. A central dynamic of this process has been the tension between the way the state has tried to define identity. In the post-apartheid period too, there is unraveling of Indian identities in response to external factors such as the rise of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in India, the struggle of Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the Global War on Terror, while the state continues to play an interventionist role through its race-based affirmative action policies. All of this underscores tensions among Indians on how best to assert their belonging in Africa. As this article is being written there is a growing interest in the commemoration of 150 years since the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in South Africa in 1860. The present conjuncture opens possibilities to debate issues of identity and belonging. If access to resources continues to be defined exclusively by race then one can expect increasing frustration on the part of the poors who will most likely be susceptible to racial and ethnic overtures. On the other hand, the middle classes, living in the same gated communities and enjoying the same sports like cricket and golf, may witness bonding across racial lines.

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings (Said 1993: 7).