

Editorial

Adversity to Advantage: The Saga of People of Indian Origin (PIOs) in South Africa

INTRODUCTION

We welcome GOPIO's initiative in handing over to its academic chapter an extremely innovative theme: the transformation by the PIOs of their adversity into advantage. The burden of our opening remarks here is twofold: firstly, we try to clear the perspective in which this theme of adversity to advantage is to be handled. Secondly, it would be our endeavour to briefly delineate in historical and sociological terms the variations in the success of a few PIO communities globally to perform the transition from adversity to advantage. The interpretation offered here rests upon the pillars of a comparative method and a reading of the communities discussed here as open systems. The focus on communities as open systems means that our characterization of the present situation of these communities is as an ongoing process rather than a finished product. In other words, the dynamics portrayed in what follows will unfold in certain expected and unexpected ways in the future. Of course, the reflexivity, proactive actions and conscious agency of the actors in the developing situations would affect the outcomes in a major way. Our definition of the problematic of this volume, even if projected in an activist direction, would be to say that if certain steps and measures are taken in the light of our findings then certain foreseeable consequences are likely to follow.

AMETHODOLOGICALNOTEANDITS PRACTICALRAMIFICATIONS

We argue that methodological issues are not esoteric and academic but essential for making new and fresh sense of jaded commonsense. In the essays of this volume, we try to show that if we study process, practice and power in Indian diaspora one would need to move from frozen typology-building to comparison as cultural translation. Typologies are usually built, unless they are carefully crafted as 'ideal-types' (à la Max Weber) to raise hypotheses for empirical research, as finished products labeled in a once-for-all procrustean fashion. Sample, for instance, the epistemological fall-out of the common

historical type-casting of Indian immigrants to South Africa as either 'indentured labourers' or as 'merchants and traders' based on official categories of 'assisted emigrants' and 'passenger' Indians. One is not disputing the factual veracity of this typology as representing the situation at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, but the further question one may ask is whether or not the analyst's fixation at these 'types' helps in the delineation of change, viz., the upward mobility of the descendants of labourers into artisans, blue-collar workers, even successful mechanics and entrepreneurs and, commensurately, the downward mobility (even hypothetically) of certain categories of traders into those who lost in business and became middle class if not proletarians.

Secondly, the danger of working with these types for purposes of sociological and anthropological understanding is precisely that they are also the commonsensical categories of people one is studying. When the analyst's categories and those of his subjects become completely congruent the possibility of arriving at unexpected or innovative explanatory leads becomes minimal. Consider, for instance, the category 'caste' among diaspora Indians. As transnational research among overseas Indian communities has showed for a long time, the anthropologist/sociologist as well as his respondents in these communities share some understanding of the category of caste as an aspect of Indian 'culture'. Culture is something which is very commonly understood to be a factor in the repertoire of both the analyst and his respondents (In almost all its popular and commonsensical renditions 'culture' is treated as monolithic, monochromatic and homogeneous rather than as a diverse and contested category). It is, to make an analogy, what the pollsters call the 'common will' of the people. While the common will of the people represented as culture ensures the possibility of a 'dialogue' between the fieldworker and his/her respondent, do we realize sufficiently that the gain in the analytical understanding of a category like 'caste', for instance, as an aspect of the shared culture between the fieldworker and the respondents, is almost zero? Is this not the equivalent of the

legitimate critique one makes of the procedures of media-polls as being circular, viz., you get people to say what you want them to (since they consider you to be the ‘experts’ in the study of the ubiquitous ‘culture’)? To go back to the example of ‘caste’ in diaspora Indian communities, the congruence methodology spoken of earlier would give polar results—caste is either there or not there in these communities. Such reification and essentialization of caste treated as a commonsense category would lead to analytically barren results. This is our prime justification for the use of ‘etic’ analytical concepts in understanding the predicament and resilience of the PIOs.

Thirdly, in the *analysis* of the phenomenon relating to diaspora, the voice of the diasporic analysts should be heard over and above that of the external analysts, especially the colonialist and ex-colonialist scholars. This prescription has two dimensions. One, in social science research today we routinely take into account the proactivity, reflexivity, even subjectivity of those being studied and their analyses and interpretations. Secondly, the reflexivity of those who have studied diaspora from the outside, as it were, also needs to be taken into account. In this particular field of study, namely, the Indian diaspora, the outside scholars have almost uniformly depicted the diasporic subjects as victims and as helpless/exploited dependents of colonial and ex-colonial masters. The insiders (diasporic scholars themselves) have increasingly interpreted their own vicissitudes in the framework of ‘challenge and response’. We have elaborated this contrast in the reflexivity of the two categories of diaspora scholars in another publication (Singh 2009). With due caution, we may designate analyses of the contemporary writers of the ‘outside’ category as somewhat guilt-ridden and ‘expiatory’ and those of the ‘inside’ as positive and resilient.

Fourthly, the interface of the diasporics with their home territories or other “referent origins” (Dufoix 2008) needs to be analysed with due caution and sensitivity. While most contemporary interpretations of Indian diaspora have dwelt on aspects of the diasporics’ attachment to the Indian nation and Indian nationalism (proximate or ‘long distance’), we have argued in some of our recent writing (Jain 2010) that the most crucial identities and identifications of this constituency are with ‘sub-nation’ (or ‘region’ in Indian parlance) and trans-nation. More particularly, the brand ‘cultural nationalism’ (e.g., the *hindutva* or a certain kind

of pan-Indian fundamentalist Hindu ideology and practice) becomes hazardously counter-productive in a transnational world characterized by globalization and pluralistic identities. As a further evolutionary thrust in this direction, the subsuming of transnationalism into regionalism and vice-versa would be a most interesting development to watch in the interlocking relationship between India and its diaspora.

Following the methodological principles and procedures outlined above, substantive comparisons show the processes of interstitial mobility among Indian transmigrants to South Africa, reasons for and largely unsuccessful but lately resurgent responses to the late dismantling of plantation socio-economic system in Malaysia (Jain RK 2010a), internal and external forces behind the inter-ethnic imbroglio in Fiji, gradual and creative creolization (Lal 2005) in Trinidad and Tobago and political successes combined with ethnic and sub-ethnic tensions in Mauritius. All in all, the much longer socio-cultural (Eisenlohr 2006) history of the PIOs – contrary to the popularly sketched ‘backward’ profile of the old Indian diaspora as compared with the celebratory picture of the NRI frontiersmen—presents a balanced and all-round growth of these communities. Most of the examples are marked by success except for Malaysia and Fiji. Even in the latter cases as in Fiji and also, hopefully, in Malaysia (witness how a small but lately vibrant Indian minority in Malaysia is the vanguard of political change) the ongoing struggle and transnational adaptation vindicates our framework of ‘challenge and response’ in the depiction of these communities as open systems. It is in this sense that the NRIs of today, marked by what Hansen (2002) has called a “commodified nostalgia” for India, can learn a lesson of socio-cultural resilience from the PIOs. Our comparisons delineate the journey of Indian diasporics on a razor’s edge. The overall thrust of various contributions collected in this volume is to chart out a road-map for the future where narrow economic choices are undergirded in socio-cultural considerations and political moves are informed by the cultural poetics, including some of the root values, derived from the mother-country.

We are very happy to include as a preamble to this volume a succinct and significant contribution from the Commonwealth Secretariat to the GOPIO conference which was personally presented by Dr. Roli Degazon-Johnson, Education Adviser of the Secretariat. The modern

Commonwealth, we are reminded, consists of 1.6 billion people constituting a third of the world's population. In these days of pro-active NGOs globally, the Commonwealth (founded as early as 1949) stands as the beacon of voluntary governmental participation in a single association of 54 countries from all continents.¹ Certain historical insights and policy implications presented by Dr. Degazon-Johnson are worthy contributions to academic research. For instance, she points to the precedence over indentured labour in South Africa of the import of Indians as slave labour by the Dutch and the subsequent miscegenation of these immigrant 'servants' with ethnically diverse local populations to produce the Cape Coloured or the Cape Malay community. Also, she alludes to the research undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat on the complex issue of ethnically discriminatory treatment of the African Guyanese teachers vis-a-vis the Asian Guyanese ones leading to the problem of the mass exodus of the former to the developed countries of the West. It is heart-warming for us academics at the GOPIO that this encapsulated statement from the Commonwealth delineates its relationship with all the salient dimensions of contemporary Indian diaspora, viz., its socio-cultural diversity, political scenarios and leader-ship patterns, present and future contributions especially in the fields of education and health and, finally, a vision for common humanity through and beyond the peaceful coexistence of ethnicities and nations.

SUMMING UP THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The understanding of rich and varied contemporary socio-cultural and politico-economic processes among Indian South Africans set against the historical and comparative backdrop of global diaspora of PIOs and other ethnic groups is the common theme of all these essays. Let us reiterate here itself two general points in regard to the contributions presented here. We have included, as extension of the theme mainly about Indian South Africans and the PIOs, articles on what the PIOs in South Africa have been able to work with and amongst (viz., contributions by Reshma Sathipersadh and by Vivian Ojong and Janet M. Muthuki) that deal principally with non-Indian South Africans and articles on PIOs in Malaysia, Ireland and Mauritius that signal post-colonial experience and solidarity of the PIOs beyond South Africa on

occasions such as the present one of this global conference.

Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai examine Indian identities in the post-apartheid period, focusing in particular on the vexed issues of identity and belonging. The present conjuncture opens possibilities to debate these issues of identity. If access to resources continues to be defined exclusively by race then one can expect increasing frustration on the part of the poor 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.

Chandrashekhar Bhat and K. Laxmi Narayan focus on the consequences of contemporary globalization for diaspora communities, connecting them more than ever through transnational networks. They analyse the nature and functioning of such networks among Indian immigrants in South Africa.

Kamala Ganesh holds that Tamilness, Hinduness and Indianness are asserted as identities by the majority of the people of Tamil origin in present-day South Africa. The negotiated play is part of a minority's self-perceived rightful assertion of its South African citizenship in the rainbow nation. In so doing, Tamils are not only going beyond the compulsions of their origin as indentured immigrants in the nineteenth century, but also beyond the specific circumstances and political trajectory of the South African state from colonial to apartheid and post apartheid regimes. They are simultaneously part of the new transnational dynamics between India and its diasporas and mutually between the various Indian diasporas.

Anand Singh and Nadene Harisunker capture the socio-cultural changes among Hindu women whose ancestral roots are from the Hindi speaking areas of North India, now settled in Durban, on the east coast of South Africa. They demonstrate how increased exposure to education reflected at least two fundamental issues in the study of women in the South African segment of the Indian Diaspora viz. conflict situations of coexistence in subservience to family values together with a concomitant rise in individualism.

Shobhita Jain looks into social reproduction processes in the realms of family and household with special reference to South Africa in the context of transnational families. These processes

interweave with the economic enterprises, fluctuating global markets and state policies. She argues that living in racially discriminatory social worlds, transmigrant women of Indian origin become aware of the continuous presence of social tension and conflict and, in order to cope with these situations of adversity, they deploy simultaneous and multiple strategies which are by and large based on their old and new experiences. In-depth examination of their strategies helps her to analyse the extent to which transmigrant women contribute to the Indian ethnic minority communities' challenge of acquiring meaningful social spaces in their transnational settings. Since her paper is not geared specifically to a feminist point of view but to the general class situation, Shobhita Jain further takes up the point made by Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai (in this volume), how middle class bonding through living in the same gated communities and enjoying sports like cricket and golf cuts across racial barriers.

Gerelene Jagganath refers to the to-ing and fro-ing movement of professional Indian South African women between Durban, South Africa and overseas destinations and their dual/multiple existence within and between these settings. By focussing on their return visit(s) to South Africa, she is able to examine the time and space in-between the 'here' and 'there' processes of transnationalism.

Kalpna Hiralal assesses women's role in the Satyagraha campaign of 1913 in Natal, South Africa. By profiling the lives of Mrs Sheikh Mehtab, Miss Valliamma Munuswami Mudaliar and Mrs Kasturba Gandhi, she highlights the multiple personal and physical challenges women endured in the struggle, and simultaneously elaborates Indian women's contribution to policy decision-making, and public participation.

Shanta Balgobind Singh's paper represents a reflexive approach towards the study of a family member, her father T. Balgobind, in the context of upward social and economic mobility of Indian South Africans.

Chaitali Das considers resilience as a dynamic concept by looking at risk and protective factors for children of divorce in British-Indian families. She concludes that understanding resilience as a process within systems that are inter-linked is important.

Sadhna Manik presents an analysis of the career decision of South African teachers of Indian origin to leave South Africa (SA) to embrace teaching opportunities in the United Kingdom

(UK). She focuses primarily on the nature of school environment in ex-House of Delegates (HOD) public schools in KwaZulu Natal province (KZN) of SA as a facet of the career-related reasons for out-migration.

Amenah Jahangeer-Chojoo argues that although the Mauritian approach to politics has brought stability it has not necessarily contributed to enhancing the democratic system of governance in this island state. With particular reference to the Muslim minority in Mauritius she demonstrates that the apparent power-sharing among elites, in effect, tends to reinforce majoritarian domination by certain ethnic groups.

Savinder Kaur Gill and Nirmala Devi Gopal showcase the dynamics of religious identity amongst PIOs in Malaysia, particularly of Punjabi Sikhs.

Karen L Harris compares the Indian and Chinese indentured labour systems introduced into colonial South Africa in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. She shows that to a large extent the experiences of the Indian labour system informed and determined the nature of the Chinese scheme and argues that the impact of the one upon the other went far beyond the legal parameters of the indenture contracts and regulations, having ramifications which swept across the broader societal domain and which impacted on the very different place and perception of these two minorities in subsequent South African history.

Reshma and her co-authors' article reports the relationship between education on HIV/AIDS and sexual risk behaviours among rural and urban secondary school male students in Natal, South Africa and provides insights into the knowledge levels, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of the male participants and looks at how they positioned themselves in relation to the epidemic. A qualitative approach has enabled its authors to explore and understand the social and cultural meanings and practices underlying the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of the male participants. Using focus group interviews as an appropriate method of data collection the authors draw attention to the fact that men also suffer from harmful gender norms as manhood almost requires that they behave in ways that heighten their risk of HIV infection. The findings are that HIV/AIDS is increasingly being recognized as a gendered disease, impacting disproportionately on women but requiring an understanding of the role played by men and the

construction and performance of masculinity in driving the epidemic.

Vivian Besem Ojong and Janet Muthoni Muthuki examine the ways in which the migration of African professional women into South Africa in pursuit of empowerment opportunities is affecting power relations in the family. They bring out the implications of their new social and economic responsibilities for gender identities and argue for confronting ideological, socio-cultural as well as the material basis of African women's subordination to men.

It would be noted that in the essays being presented here, both among the authors and their respondents, there is partiality to a certain gender; women predominate. We believe that this is as it should be. Just as affirmative action in favour of disempowered minorities has become a universal ethical responsibility for citizens in all democracies, so be it in our academic deliberations. Let us add further that this move was not premeditated by the organizers of GOPIO or editors of the present volume. In that respect it may finally be said that this undertaking represents truly the temper of our times. For examples of women's 'transcreativity' (see Jain S 2010).

August 2010

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Editors

END-NOTE

1. As an example of the Indian Diaspora-Commonwealth interface, one of the editors of this volume, Ravindra Jain, was the recipient of the T.H.B. Symons Fellowship in Commonwealth Studies (1995-96) as a Visiting Professor at the Australian National University, Canberra, to research precisely on the comparative socio-cultural and politico-economic contributions of the Indian Diaspora (see Jain RK 2009 and 2010).

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