

## Women in Durban, South Africa: Family and Marriage as Anchorage for Change

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**KEYWORDS** Marriage. Family. Women. Indian Diaspora. South Africa. Social Change

**ABSTRACT** This paper is an attempt to capture the socio-cultural changes that have occurred 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. Data was gathered from interviews with 40 women, whose ages ranged from 20 to 84 years, essentially representing three generations. Our interest lay in comparing and contrasting the educational levels, values and practices to which the women subscribed. The purpose was to 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. conflictual situations of coexistence in subservience to family values together with a concomitant rise in individualism; and the need for a multidimensional model to assess change and continuity among people who are products of conservative value systems operating in a fast changing world which nonetheless remains interwoven with their domestic lifestyles.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there has been an increasing interest in the study of the Indian Diaspora, especially with respect to how new migrants of Indian origin are adapting to their host countries. Not all of them are necessarily directly from India, whereas many are from former British colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa, and Tanzania, among others. Some of them are the subject of recent ethnographic works of Chandra (2007) on the role of Indian youth in family businesses, Faria's (2001), Naidoo's (2007) and Vahed's (2008) work on Indian ethnicity and integration in Australia, Pattundeen's (2007) research on South African Indian women's transnational lifestyles as professional workers (Jagganath 2008), Somerville's (2008, 2009) analysis of homeland attachments among second generation Indo-Canadians and Purkayastha's (2007), and Saran's (2007, 2009) and Saran's (1985) investigation into issues among Indian youth in the United States of America (USA). All of these papers provide insightful data about people of Indian origin who are now settled in different parts of the world. But cumulatively their preoccupation with the contemporary conjuncture places a high premium on the synchronic mode of analysis, from which this paper attempts to divert in order to focus upon the value of a diachronic approach. Evidence for this paper cuts across three generations of women

whose life histories and contemporary circumstances provide an in-depth view of how values and norms among women of Indian origin prevailed and changed over time. Each generation spoke about the issues that were of significance to them in the processes of their growing up, and about how change was evident but also about how values should either remain the same or adapt to cope with the challenges that confront them.

In the course of an interview with an 84 year old respondent about how she viewed her daughter's and grand-daughter's social situation in comparison to her own while she was a teenager in the 1940s, she replied: *"In those days we had to do what our parents told us to do. We had no choice. Our job was to be good cooks and to ensure that our house and yard was kept clean. This gave us a good family image and if people were to come with marriage proposals or at least had us in mind, they would recommend our girls and boys with confidence to other families. They would say: 'This family takes pride in their neatness and their girls are very well mannered and obliging... Our job was to keep up the family name and image... Nowadays the girls are not like that."* This response bore close resemblance to Hilda Kuper's research in the 1950s when she revealed that: "Indian women were kept in close domestic seclusion"... "The domestic role of women, the care of the home, bearing and rearing of children, preparing the food, is recognized as the foundation of family life."

(Kuper 1960: 5; 118 – respectively). At least two issues emerge out of the response from the recent interview and the resonance it has with Kuper's observation. In one sense it confirms the conformity among Indian women with established beliefs and practices that spanned over several decades. A woman who was reared in the 1930s and 1940s clung to those values for the rest of her life, though recognizing with obvious reservation the differences between herself, her daughters and grand-daughter. In another sense it captures the relative and temporal perspectives of social change and transformation. These issues beg attention of the paradigms that have been used to explain social conditions among Indians overseas, as well as post World War Two changes in household relations against the rise of industrialization and urbanization.

Cwerner's (2001) account on temporal experiences is a befitting paradigm that describes the lives of Indian women in terms of their past and contemporary situations – in that it involves differences and changes in social norms, roles, behaviours, degrees of permissiveness, and cultural beliefs that occur over time. This perspective recognizes the close relationship between time and change, from which an ethnographic exercise must build up to demonstrate the value of the collated data. Kuper's (1960) position, devoid of any historical analysis of the Indian population in Durban, remained squarely within a synchronic mode of analysis. Her lack of focus on the changing educational levels among women of Indian origin – from the time that indentured labourers first arrived in South Africa in 1860 up to 1960, when her book on Indians in Natal was published, creates a picture of stagnation within this segment of South Africa's population. Although their educational achievements were at a comparatively lower level at that historical juncture, it did set the tone for the future of Indian women's entry into secondary and tertiary women's education, as well as into the world of professional salaried or self employment. Hilda Kuper's account of Indians in Natal resonates with Furnivall's (1948) perspective of plural societies, in the context of his work in colonial society of South East Asia. Furnivall's position was that culturally, plural societies are made up of incongruous and incompatible sections that cannot communicate easily. In economic terms the diverse cultural segments have commonality only in the market place; and politically it is the

hegemony of the colonial authority that binds and controls the population. Leo Kuper's (1969) and Smith's (1970) critique of Furnivall's position on plural societies is that underlying his position is the dual theory perspective which views multicultural populations as being characterized by a progressive segment (Whites) and a stagnant segment (the colonized). Therefore, in this perspective, it is implied that the colonized remain basically unchanging. Jain (1993) endorses the critiques by Leo Kuper and Smith. The changes that have taken place among Indian women in Durban could possibly be argued by incorporating the conventional and romantic social evolutionary perspective that is intrinsic to the notion of development in the second half of the twentieth century. Such an approach does not, however, always describe change as effectively as it should. Silberschmidt (2004), for instance, refuted this position as too Eurocentric to describe the growing independence to which women were forced to become accustomed, in Kissi District, Kenya, after colonialism imposed the need for men to become migrant workers. The growing independence of women gradually led to men becoming marginalized to a point make the changes fit simplistically into a linear evolutionist model. In view of this kind of position this paper raises a fundamental question: "Does the evidence suggest that the social changes through which Indian women lived through in Durban demonstrate that the social evolution model is appropriate to describe them?" Or, more crucially, is it too simplistic? If so, how to interpret the ethnographic data on continuity and change through multi-dimensional approaches? (Cwerner 2001; Drummond 1980; Jayawardene 1980).

## METHODOLOGY

Information for this paper was collected during two periods viz. in mid-2008 and mid-2009. The target group was 40 Hindu women whose ages ranged from 18 to 84 years. The purpose in choosing Hindu women was two-fold viz. to remain focused and they were a relatively easy target group to access. They were resident in three suburbs in Durban viz. Queensburgh, Clare Estate and Reservoir Hills. Information was sought through personalized interviews that comprised of mainly open-ended questions. The interviews ranged from one to two hours, with inputs often coming from more than one person at a time.

Households had to have at least two generations of women i.e. mother and daughter, to be interviewed. Nevertheless, households that had three generations of women, where a mother-in-law cum grandmother was available were the most preferred. This preference stemmed from our position at that time that such situations will allow us an insight into how changes in values and social preferences are articulated in ways that either reinforce a willingness to accept change or emphasize positions that are essentially a clash of value systems. In many instances there was an eagerness by other household women to participate in the conversations, often to make a point about issues such as family values and achievements – in terms of the difficult backgrounds that people came from, and on a few occasions trying to emphasize the distaste for the changes that young women are embracing. Many of the responses to the questions, particularly from the older women, revolved around their implicit and explicit understanding of “culture”, which was their synonym for subscription to religious values. Their dress codes, daily prayers, fasting – either dry (where Hindus follow a salt-less diet) or vegetarian diet on particular days of the week and during auspicious periods recorded in the Hindu almanac, the way they addressed kin, visitors and outsiders, often constituted important indicators in their creation of a distinctive Hindu identity.

### DISCUSSION

The following discussion incorporates the results and findings that have been reached through an analysis of data gleaned from interviews. The discussion has been broken down into three themes that have proved to be important and relevant to all 3 of the generations under study. This is in terms of conformance as well as to changes that have occurred across the generations. These themes include religion and dress code, pride and achievement through education, and from parental choice to individual decision.

#### Religion and Dress Codes

Religion is almost always the defining factor in the relationships that Hindu women keep, the beliefs that they choose to indoctrinate their children, the food that they eat, and the partners that they choose in marriage. It is mandatory, in socio-religious terms for Hindu men to ensure

that their parents are kept with them. This is often expressed, if not justified in terms of a scriptural injunction that one must first worship mother, father, and teacher (*guru*) before God (in such order) because God is manifest in each one of these symbols of divinity (*mata-pita-guru-deva*). Our survey found that whereas most of the forty households were nuclear, with an average of 2.8 children per household, the influence of older women, particularly grandmothers, was significant in terms of when families fasted, what they consumed on those days, how the food was prepared and at what times it was consumed. On the days of dry fasts when a no-salt diet is observed, the ingredients in a cooked sweet dish are carefully monitored from sunrise to sunset. During other religious occasions that often span over seven to ten days, women observe saltless diets for the entire period. The important periods of observance occurs among orthodox (*Sanathan*) Hindus is Ram Naumee (birth of Lord Rama celebrated over nine days), Krishna Asthamee (birth of Lord Krishna celebrated over seven or eight days – dependent on the Hindu almanac), and Navarathree, when God is worshipped as “Mother” and celebrated over ten days. Levels of religious influence within households are often determined by age, experience and beliefs. Within households grandmothers and eldest sisters almost inevitably become the important reference points for guidance on what to do and how to conduct rituals that might be affected by calamities such as death of a family member, or celebratory periods such as the birth of a child or before and after marriage ceremonies.

Dress among Indian women in Durban varies significantly - according to age, personal comfort and social circumstances. Whereas this is a matter of personal preference or household requirement, there is a tendency among some women to justify dress codes in metaphysical terms. Reference to scriptural texts such as the Ramayana or Bhagavad Gita through utterances of the respective deities names (Raam or Krishna), is often expressively used to show displeasure at any form of socially unacceptable dressing among younger women. Among elderly women, particularly those above 60 years of age, the body must be covered from neck to feet. The practice of avoiding eye contact or covering the face with the extension of the sari that is thrown over the shoulder - in front of elder men of the household is no longer observed. Whereas it is still prevalent in most

parts of India and there is an awareness of such practice, it is viewed as too archaic and inappropriate for the South African socio-political environment. Whereas the sari is usually the preferred outfit, within the home any other garment such as a full length gown or dress is the usual mark of respect towards household members. It is also a code that is meant to demonstrate to the younger generation moral and religious preferences. Among those who are familiar with the Hindu epics, the character of the leading women such as Sita in the *Ramayana* and Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* are often reference points for younger women to emulate in terms of values and dress. On occasion, reference was made to the unquestionable character of Sita (the consort of Rama) during the time of her capture by the Sri Lankan demon king, Ravana. In another instance an eighty-two year old woman referred to the episode of Draupadi, in the *Mahabharata*, being humiliated by her captors who tried to open up her sari. But through divine intervention there appeared to be no end to the process of undressing Draupadi. In both instances, reference to such episodes in the epics was intended to remind younger women about the interconnection between dressing and character with religious scripture. Although the sari is usually a symbol of marriage and old age among Hindu women in Durban, it is however also available in sufficiently diverse colours and styles that allow younger Indian women to adorn for special occasions, especially weddings.

Among the 'middle generation' women i.e. mothers/daughters-in-law, there was a profound tendency towards flexibility in dress codes – for themselves and their growing daughters. Their casualness within their homes in longish dresses or jeans, and sports shirts or Indian designed cotton tops (*kurtha*), and acceptance of their daughters' indulgence in fashionable western clothing demonstrates at least two things. On the one hand it shows the mothers willingness to exercise her new-found right to choice about how she chooses to dress within her home or when she is carrying out familial chores in public such as grocery shopping, taking out younger children, or visiting close friends or family. On the other hand it demonstrates the flexibility that mothers are willing to show towards their growing daughters in their choice to wear what they prefer. In both instances their right to choose is in fact a profound statement about the need to

break away from the rigidity of the past, but without compromising the appreciation for traditional wear. Mothers and daughters are often at constant loggerheads with the matriarchs of extended families – where the latter is generally seen as the regulator and watchdog of the family's public image, religiosity, and conformance to social expectations. In each of the interviews about dress codes, religion and morality, the responses with the middle generation women explicitly embraced the need for change, but without compromising the need to maintain what is viewed as traditionally Indian. The three responses below broadly capture what many of them feel about the interconnectivity of these issues and their link to change:

*We are proudly Hindu. But it does not mean that if we are wearing skirts and jeans that we are loose women. We know where to draw the line...I know it annoys my mother-in-law sometimes, especially when visitors come unannounced.*

*We have to change with the times, otherwise we will just be left behind....We wear Indian clothes and jewelry when it is time to...but it is not practical everyday.*

*I love my saris and Punjabis. But once I return from any function I have to remove them because it is too heavy and uncomfortable. I am more comfortable with western clothing. When I get older I think my taste will be more for Indian clothing – because the children will be growing and I think it will be more befitting for older women to dress appropriately. But now I am young. So I want to enjoy what fashion has to offer.*

In each of the statements the younger generation women nodded in approval, and in several instances saw this as the seeds of a breakaway from the general tradition of Indian wear. Most of the third generation has begun to not only to shy away from Indian clothing, but also from wearing western dresses. The practice of wearing jeans and shirts/tops has virtually replaced the traditional skirt or dress that is reminiscent of the post World War Two era. The dress is no longer a fashionable or preferred garment. Preference and comfort appears to lie in denim jeans, track suits, and other types of pants. In one instance a high school girl stated that she cannot wait to go to university so that she can dispense with the school shirt and skirt. This statement set the tone for conversations with

other school going females who were in similar grades. Their responses were generally similar, with an expectation that dresses will only be worn if they really are a compelling trend at particular times of their tertiary education or working lives. Their professionalism will most likely be symbolized in the wearing of suits than long dresses, which all of them felt was a garment for older women. The wearing of Indian outfits was more appropriate for social functions, even at work, rather than for regular business. All of the younger generation felt that the adornment of western clothing did not necessarily compromise them, whereas some were emphatic that it should not compromise their religious beliefs or the communities to which they belonged. Some who were articulate, politically, and socially conscious felt that their morality, education, and personal achievements should count more than the emphasis that is often placed on dressing and symbolic markings. In one instance a respondent argued that she was aware of women in saris and burkas (worn by Muslim women) who were traditional in their dressing but who flirted with men and frequented shopping malls just to get away from home more than their appearances might suggest about their perceived domesticity. Traditional dress codes and personal choices have become fertile ground for contestation between individual women's upward mobility and familial/community expectations about their identities and the responsibilities that they carry as custodians of family values.

### **Pride and Achievement through Education**

In each of the three generations of women there was a distinct line of progression in their levels of education. Each of the generations showed specific levels of attainment which had matched the expectation of the respective historical junctures in which they schooled. Among the elderly women whose ages were 60 years and above, the average level of schooling was 6.5 years. The highest level that was reached by some of the respondents was no more than standard six (Grade 8). Most others began their schooling after the age of six years, often around eight or nine years, depending upon how their extended family viewed schooling for girls at that time. There appeared to be at least two patterns that prevailed with respect to young girl's education in the first half of the twentieth century

among people of Indian origin. Neither of the patterns was determined by legislative requirements that imposed a need for parents to send their children to schools for at least a basic education - such as the contemporary situation in South Africa, which requires parents to admit their children to school for at least a basic education for up to seven years. Among Indians in the 1930s, as far as older respondents could recall, one was a situation where girls and boys were expected to attend school only up to the point where they could learn to count, know the letters of the alphabet and write their names. The other was a situation where parents encouraged their children to go up to at least standard eight (grade 10/tenth year), which was then a very high achievement and which afforded such graduates to take to teaching in mainly primary schools. Becoming a teacher prior to and after the Second World War was then a prestigious profession in South Africa. The state salary and benefits were at that time incentive to creating a nascent middle class within the Indian population. Such a profession almost spontaneously accorded respect to such families and their children were expected to supersede their parents, usually their father's, level of education and profession.

Among the first category noted above, work on family property such as farming lands, work in family businesses such as small stores, or paid employment were the means to their ends. Ensuring that their households survived through whatever form of income, and getting their children married into good homes were generally the norms among parents. Extended or joint families were usually big and could have up to twenty members living in a single property. It was the responsibility of the surviving parent as well as the eldest brother to ensure that younger siblings were nurtured according to family normative practices, protected until they were sufficiently independent, and married off in order for them to independently facilitate their future as potential extended families. These practices led to such households being viewed as "traditional" and sometimes "backward people" by privileged respondents who spoke freely and in comparative ways about how opportunities were grasped or missed. But it was not uncommon for other respondents to also refer to their families as "too traditional" or "very backward" when they recalled what privileges and opportunities they used had during their childhood days. A 68

years old recalled with nostalgia and a loud laugh, how her father took her out of school and also refused to allow a telephone into their house: *"When I was about ten years old I was only standard two, my father noticed my breasts developing and he told my mother that she must take me out of school. So before I could enter standard three I was not allowed to return....And when one of my father's clients asked him to put a phone in our house, he said: 'No, no, no! I have a big daughter at home.' By the age of sixteen, in 1959, I was married to a man whom my family chose....But I am not sorry now, my husband gave me a good life."*

Within the second category i.e. those whose parents encouraged their children to attend school as far as possible, respondents spoke in fluent English with greater confidence and appreciation for the opportunities they had. It was an opportunity and privilege that they felt they should pass unto their future generations. The highest level that the elderly women went up to was standard six (grade 8<sup>2</sup>). In the late 1930s and 1940s high schools were few and far between and were the domains of mainly younger boys. It was uncommon for young girls to travel alone by public transport and to complete high school up to Matric (grade 12). One of the respondents recalled: *"My father was happy for me to go up to standard six. But after that it was not possible because I would have to take the bus alone every day. My brother was very clever – he was a sportsman and got the highest grades right up to matric. But when he wanted to study in Johannesburg my father was reluctant to send him – because he was the only son. He told all our family: 'I have ten thousand pounds in the bank for him. What does he need to study for?' My brother was very disappointed and after he got married I understood why he took to alcohol so much."*

The pattern of going up to standard six prevailed until the early 1970s, when the South African government began building more schools in Indian dominated areas and more parents saw the need to encourage their daughters as well to continue with secondary schooling. Among the second generation women, especially those who were 50 years and older, the opportunities for secondary education were equally constrained. Their education was restricted to domesticity, including the art of rearing and caring for younger siblings. In families which had between six and

fourteen children, the task of rearing was not only that of the mothers. Elder daughters and first cousins (women) who shared the same property inevitably took responsibility for their younger siblings. This was an expectation and accepted norm in extended and joint family living arrangements. Studying was a hurdle against familial responsibilities and went against the tide of the conventionalisms that Indians recreated for themselves in South Africa. A 57 year old woman who was from a farming family north of Durban and married in 1969 at the age of 17 years, stated: *"We used to buy 100 pounds each of rice and flour every month. I used to make at least forty rotis everyday. After my sister got married all the responsibilities fell unto my shoulders. In the mornings I used to see to my younger brothers and sisters tidiness, their school lunches, their tea when they came back home from school everyday, and the supper for everybody. My mother would not have managed with the five of them (two brothers and three sisters) if I did not leave school. My eldest brother was married so his wife used to look after him, and my father and other brother – well my mother used to see to their needs....By the age of ten I knew how to do everything in the kitchen – make rotis, cook the food, serve our visitors and make sure everyone had clean clothes to wear everyday....We did not have those opportunities for education, but our children must make use of them."* Among those who were between 50 and 55 years of age a trend of educating themselves up to standard eight was discernable, whereas among those who were between 56 and 59 years of age, the trend was still up to standard six only. All of the 56 to 59 category married in the mid to late 1960s and all of the 50 to 55 year olds married in the 1970s. Across these two sub-categories i.e. from 50 to 59 years of age, there was consistency in their responses, that they could not see any other way for their children except for education and employment at the highest possible level. The evidence that emerged from the interviews concurred with Hilda Kuper's analysis of Indian women's education in the post World War Two period. Kuper noted that up until 1940 there were very few Indian girls that went to school in the city of Durban. She found that by 1954, in the entire province of Natal only 240 schools had girls registered in them, but few continued studying after puberty. Her statistics showed that

in Natal there were 384 Indian female teachers, 80 in full-time training, only 6 qualified doctors, 22 fully qualified nurses, 3 qualified social workers, and just two women training as lawyers. Despite such exposure to education, Kuper noted that "When women are educated and have considerable economic power, the emphasis on the essential feminine qualities is still maintained and respected" (Kuper 1956: 26).

All of the younger generation, between 20 and 39 years of age, agreed that their circumstances were significantly different from those of their parents and grandparents. They were not inclined to return to the earlier situations. There was unanimity in the idea that their education was a liberating force and that it constituted a substantial shift away from the minimal education of their grandparents and the slightly better privileges of their parents. Whereas their existence in South Africa's predominantly western orientation has contributed towards their education and growing liberal outlook to life, the younger generation was not easily persuaded that it is only westernization and modernization to which they have to thank. Their increased contact and awareness of rising levels of education in India and references to scriptural texts about gender equality influenced their identities as Hindus, but in a different form compared to their earlier generations. Exposure to Hollywood as well as India's film industry was a persuasive factor in shaping their educational ideals and exposure to the outside world (see Ray 2001). The articulate and educated leading Bollywood actresses have been raised to the level of Hollywood's stars - tending to serve as role models to many of the younger generation Indian women in South Africa. There was an expressed intention among several women that in order to emulate their favourite Bollywood star actresses only education could raise their levels of confidence and competitiveness in the world of professionalism and monetary success. Discussion during interviews continued to oscillate between the social constrictiveness of their parents past and the progressiveness in the opportunities of their contemporary privileges and rights, brought about through South Africa's comparatively better economic progress than what was achieved in the rest of the African continent from 1950 the mid-1980s. Economic progress swiftly translated for most of the classified groups in the racial hierarchy of Whites, Coloureds and Indians, into

better educational opportunities, but with a minimum and more constricted participation by Blacks. Secondary and tertiary education has as a result become not only a sporadic opportunity among some families but a fundamental requirement in most if not all Indian households. There is a resonance in this process to the descriptions that Ray (2001) provides of Fijian Indians in Fiji as well as those who migrated to Sydney, Australia. Like Fijian youth of Indian origin, Indian youth in South Africa have for themselves a platform that spawns its own unique type of cultural ecology. Its purpose is not to be counter-hegemonic but to prevalence of fusion-culture that keeps them connected to two ideal types emanating from India as well as the USA. India's liberalization in the 1990s through cinema and television created a hybrid genre among the youth that brought local social conventionalisms in India with western trends to interface halfway. Ray's (2001: 147) depiction of how this process constitutes a situation of 'ethnicisation of the nation' rather than a 'nationalization of the ethnic' is an apt manner of contextualizing an ethnic minority's attempts to carve out a social niche and cultural identity without unsettling attempts by a majority youth culture that enjoys a hegemonic position. The willingness among younger generation women to rise to higher levels in education therefore no longer lay in mere sporadic opportunities that are reminiscent of their past, but in active guidance and support from parents and family towards their goals of self-fulfillment in enabling environments for education created by the South African state.

### **From Parental Choice to Individual Decision**

Memories of the older women, whose ages ranged from the late 60s to the 84 years, about family life, education, and marriage were generally vivid and nostalgic. Their recollections about large orchards, herding of cattle and goats with male siblings and cousins, learning about the ways in the kitchen, chopping wood and lighting of outside fires served to describe a lifestyle that was more romanticized than inhibiting. Most Indian families had their own livestock of cattle, goats, and poultry. Much of their young lives were devoted to their care as part of their education in the domesticity that Indian indentured labourers tried to recreate for themselves in South Africa. Whereas men provided the capacity to acquire

livestock it was the mothers and their children, including daughters that managed them. It was the matriarchs' duty to ensure that their cows provided the requisite amount of milk the household needed, that chickens provided the requisite number of eggs for the week as well meat for their weekend feasts, and goats (among some) for trading, or for ritual offerings when they were needed. Yet, the history of the Indian women has a much more exploitative past in colonialism than in the patriarchal domination within the household. Desai and Vahed (2007: 118) for instance discuss the harshness of the colonists upon women and children when they first arrived in Durban. Initially, in 1860, they were denied rations. By 1866 the law was amended to allow women and children under ten just half the rations that men received. Since 1880 women were permitted to work, but were denied rations or wages if they did not. By the early twentieth century when the family was reconstituting itself to create a semblance of household structures reminiscent of village India, the importance of the woman as custodian of family values resurfaced. Meer (1972: 37) argued that "...the abnormal structure of the Indian family in South Africa created by the low proportion of women and the restrictions of indenture was rectified in the second decade of the twentieth century when Indian family life settled into traditional conservatism, and Indian women assumed full responsibility for maintaining that conservatism<sup>3</sup>." She went on to recognize that marriage was the most naturalistic expectation of the Indian woman (Meer 1972: 43). This expectation was one controlled by men but endorsed with equal fervor by women. The choice of marriage partners for daughters was not always a unilateral decision of the father. It was more complex and determined by the arrangements of the father, together with his male siblings as well as any closely related matriarch who was still living at that time. Introspective searches into family histories delved into actual caste backgrounds, prevalent sicknesses, criminal records of family members, educational backgrounds, livelihoods, among a range of other factors that might have been relevant at that time, served to verify suitability of their daughters' potential suitor. The prevalence of any known ailments, conviction of family members in any court of law, or divorce often acted as hurdles to the finalization in marriage agreements. One woman respondent did recall that *"everything had to be right about the*

*family we were marrying into so that the pride of our families is not hurt in the process. In those days if one person was locked up (jailed) or just one woman got divorced, the entire family was tarred with the same brush. All the girls would be regarded as fast and immoral."*

Reputation of the entire extended family was therefore a cornerstone to respectable relations within the entire community. It served as the basis for introductions to other respectable families in order to initiate a process towards marriage of their children. A sixty-five year old respondent, S, recalled her first cousin's introduction to her suitor and his extended family in 1958: *"When K was introduced to J, an entire battalion of people came from the north coast. At least four car loads and two vans full of people came to see her. Then someone spotted me and matched me with R. I told my mother I am not going to marry any farmer and go and live so far away from Durban. Then P came and started making fun of me. She said 'who will marry that farmer. He looks like a Red Indian!' I started crying even more. In the evening my father told me to stop crying because nothing was decided then. But in three weeks time they came again with a similar crowd to K's proposal. My mother told me it's my father's choice and she could not do anything about it. When my father saw me crying again after they left, he called me into his room and told me: 'They are a good family and I know what is good for you.' I knew I could not back-answer him.... Forty-nine years have now passed and I am still happily married."*

The middle generation women (40-60 years) oscillated between such parental imposition and flexibility in choosing their partners up to a point. Their marriage arrangements were an interesting diversion from their parents past in that they were "semi-arranged". A "semi-arranged" marriage in this context is reference to a process that is followed between two families who usually work through one or more third parties. The process usually takes the following path: an intention to marry off a daughter is made by parents to known relatives or friends; the girls age, height, complexion, family background, and educational level forms the basis for any possible meeting between two families; boy and girl meet – usually at wedding or prayer ceremonies, and if mutual interest is expressed by both potential partners, another process begins. This is usually a three-fold process that begins weeks if not months after the

first meeting, when the “boy’s family” visits the girl’s house. In this meeting the guests are treated to sweetmeats, tea, and possibly a full meal – either lunch or dinner. The second step is the engagement, which takes numerous forms from simple immediate family gatherings to huge and lavish ceremonies, in which gifts are exchanged and a formal meal is partaken. The third is the wedding ceremony itself, which is usually after a year or more after the initial introduction. The wedding ceremony also depends upon several factors such as the girl’s family’s financial situation, recent deaths in the immediate family or sicknesses that may be affecting a close member of the family. A significant change in tradition among the second generation was the privilege to say “no” to a possible suitor. But that was as far as that privilege went. In the 1960s and most of the 1970s it was not common practice for young couples to make their own choices, unless they were from homes where parents were more liberally minded. During these two decades increasing importance was placed on the educational levels of young girls who were ready for marriage. Although higher educational levels were appreciated, their commitment to domesticity and motherhood sought a higher value than paid or self-employment. Chetty’s research in the late 1970s brought her to conclude that “...The daughter-in-law is expected to be capable, obedient, and respectable, exercising caution in her behaviour as well as her speech, mannerisms, and dress. In short, she must conform.” (Chetty 1980: 34).

Stories abound about acceptances to introductions and subsequent break-ups before marriage. On numerous occasions the unsuitability of suitors or sheer lack of compatibility was found out. Despite family standing, educational levels, and caste status, propositions have been abruptly terminated for the sake of longer term interests. In such instances information about premarital affairs with women, substance abuse, and lack of discipline were the major causes of breakups. In one instance a 56 year old respondent recalled: *“At twenty-two years of age and having left school in standard nine in 1971, I was getting too old at home. My first three introductions soon after I left school were so laughable, I could not even give them a second look. I just said no each time. The fourth introduction was a good one – the guy was my caste, he went to university, he worked as an accountant and he was quite a modern type. A few times he and his sister came*

*and took me out to the movies after we were introduced. But soon stories started flying around that he was expelled from University for his political actions, he drank a lot and went often to night clubs. This was something we did not do in my family. Once my mother and aunt found out they discussed it for a while and then spoke to his father. They cut out the word straight away.”* In this instance the respondent was not consulted, but only told about the decision after it was made. Although it affected her then, in retrospect she felt that her elders’ decision was the correct one. That suitor had died of alcoholism several years before the interview. In another instance the respondent, a fifty year old teacher, recalled her introduction to a young man of her own caste background, a preference that she still has for her only child: *“We were introduced by my aunty in 1980. He was good looking, an employee in a bank and showed good promise. My mother was very happy and everything looked positive. But soon after he said he needed more time and that he would only be ready for marriage after two years. I detected a tone of uncertainty in his voice. So I called him the next day and told him to please carry on with his life. At first he was a bit shocked, and so were my family, but I put my foot down!”* In this instance the judgment of the respondent was questioned for only a short while. She felt that it was her family’s confidence in her morality and strong unquestionable values which forced them to accept her decision to terminate her acquaintance with the suitor.

Among the first generation women (20-39 years), knowledge about their parents and grandparents past varied from total lack of interest to serious intention to conscientise themselves about the trials and tribulations that their forbears underwent as an ethnic minority. Among those who showed little interest in the past of their forebears there was a tendency to be more resolute about their personal aspirations and contemporary issues. One curt response captured this segment’s sentiments about their parents/grandparents past: *“It’s time to look ahead. Whatever our grandparents and parents did were of significance to them in their time. Each generation has particular challenges to confront – so my job is to face my present challenges in order to know how to handle what might confront me tomorrow!”* Those who showed a serious interest had more of a nostalgic romanticized

perspective that served to enhance their identities of who they were – in terms of how their respective families worked their ways from virtual peasant or proletarian pasts into middle to upper class statuses. This segment showed signs of greater sensitivity towards issues of history and what lessons they have to learn from them. One of the respondents argued that: *“In a country like South Africa, Indians have to know their past well in order to know how to strategize for now and the future. Like our earlier generations we will always experience discrimination because of who we are.”* Another respondent felt that knowledge of their forebears past *“...only strengthens our resolve to improve upon the achievements of our earlier generations. We must work hard to ensure that we make the best of the opportunities that come our way...Our mothers and grandmothers didn’t have the opportunities that we have, so we must be grateful.”* Against the background of such differences there were also points of convergence among the respondents about what they preferred and how they saw their lives in the future. There was unanimity in the idea that women have the same opportunities as men in education and employment. The reality that their earlier generations could have lived lives of herding livestock, restricted to domesticity as they grew older or had to submit to parents choices for their marriages was too antiquated and repulsive for them. One respondent cried out: *“Thank God we were not born in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. It would be suicidal to Talibanise our values and ways of life in this day and age.”*<sup>4</sup>

The issues of education, employment, and marriage, represents the major hallmarks of change and adaptation of their values and perceptions for the future. All of this group had either completed their 12<sup>th</sup> grades in secondary school or had acquired tertiary education. Wage/salary and self employment among them surged to a point of becoming a normative phenomenon. In marriage, whereas most met their own partners, others met each other through introductions by family members. Their decision to agree or disagree was a matter of individual choice. One common factor that emerged within the context of conservative thinking was that the choice of partner should most preferably be from within the same linguistic or religious group. Though, the irony of their situations was that they neither spoke the languages which they claimed to be theirs, nor was religion a major factor in their daily lives.

Emphasis was more on belief and association with their ancestral origins in India than a real disposition towards talking their language or being preoccupied with specific forms of worship. Caste is indeed still a factor among those who see themselves as “upper caste”, although their positions were not openly or freely discussed. There was an implicit argument for continuity in such choices for marriage, with the only relaxation being the privilege of personal choice so long as it is from within the preferred caste. Cumulatively, these were aspects of their lives that found whole-hearted support and encouragement from their families.

Despite the transcendence of social constrictions, there is still a tendency among the third generation to abide by normative expectations of domesticity, especially in the rearing of children, cooking, and household arrangements. In this sense, Hilda Kuper’s and Meer’s observations (noted above), that Indian women however educated, still respected the duties reminiscent in conventional practices. The liberalism of this younger generation was spanned mainly over certain aspects of their lives. Most of them expressed the need for flexibility within households, provided it did not interfere with the sanctity of certain core values such as in their religious beliefs, their relationships with their families, particularly sisters and mothers and the closeness that siblings generally share with their parents. At least two responses summed up the level of conservatism that still prevails among them: *“When a person marries it is not only for love – because that is usually based on physical attraction. It is compatibility in the longer term that counts – that’s why religion, family values, and social standing are so important.”* Another stated: *“A marriage without your parents blessings is no marriage. We have to satisfy them too.”* Whereas their discussions often reflected divergence from the past, the underlying tendencies were more about respect for family values, and often about not wanting to engage in decisions that turned into confrontations with their families.

The lifestyles of this group display two paths viz. a ‘radical divergence’ from the domesticity of the past, as well as continuity in conforming to gender roles and expectations, despite the changes in lifestyle from their forebears. The radical divergence is often to do with taking their own decisions instead of awaiting parental guidance, especially with respect to educational

attainments, work and finding a partner in marriage, but mostly within the acceptable parameters of linguistic group or regional ancestral background. Although it is known that marriages take place across linguistic boundaries, such as between descendants of north (Hindi) and south (Tamil) India, it is not a widespread practice. The fact that they might be of Hindu background is not as material as the preference that “youngsters choosing to marry should stay within their herd” (this is from an interview with a Brahmin priest, 17 June 2009). Though caste preference in marriage still prevails, it is no longer as important and widespread as the preference for a partner from within the same linguistic group.

### CONCLUSION

Among each of the categories of women discussed above, it is quite apparent that their dress codes and conformity to conservative social norms, educational levels, and choice in marriage partners are generally reflective of the historical period to which they belong. If acquisition of higher educational achievements is a sign of upward mobility and progress when compared to domesticity, then the movement of each generation towards higher attainments must constitute a linear movement in status and achievements. It is unlikely that there could be a reversal of trends in the drive towards higher education and better paid employment for Hindu women in Durban. It is a contemporary norm that demonstrates a radical shift away from familial impositions that relegated young girls to household chores and supervision of younger siblings and immediate relatives. On the other hand, to reduce this to a form of mere cultural control under the auspices of patriarchal domination renders the evidence too simplistic and reductionist. Meer’s observation for instance confirms some of the evidence in this paper that women not only tend to enjoy levels of assertiveness within the household that are the same as men, but they also serve as custodians of norms that are often articulated as patriarchal domination. The woman who spoke about being fortunate not to be part of the process of “Talibanisation” as it apparently exists in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, was indeed making a more profound statement than she herself could have thought. Most of the young women who responded to our questions asserted measures of independence in

their choice and levels of education that demonstrates an evolutionary movement away from what is perceived as constrictions of the past. Talibanisation on the contrary represents a retrogressive movement for women of another religious background, restricting them to the domesticity of the past in ways that denies the reality of the dynamic changes that are so intrinsic to history.

Despite the changes that have taken place over the last century, what is not as pronounced as in the western democracies is the move towards individualism. Young Indian women still see themselves as part of the household structure in which they were raised until their marriage. Education and well paid employment for most Hindu women are means to an end – which is usually marriage and starting a family. Marriage is not only the fulfillment of a personal desire but also the culmination of a stage in a woman’s life according to the wishes and expectations of her family. Marrying within the linguistic group, albeit to a person of the same linguistic group/ancestral background, is a part of the social conformity that families expect out of their growing girls. Although caste is no longer as important as it used to be, and the move away from strict caste endogamy does constitute a radical shift from a few decades ago, there is still continuity about whom and on what religious grounds most women would wish to marry.

Against this background, it would be problematic to incorporate the changes that have taken place among Hindu women in South Africa within a singular model. It would be equally problematic to be dismissive about models of social evolution only because they are too Eurocentric. The evidence here shows some relevance of social evolutionism despite its “eurocentrism”, as well as to Drummond’s (1980) cultural continuum model and to Jayawardena’s focus upon ethnicity within the context of the history of social and political forces. And each generation here represents the temporal experiences that Cwerner talked about. Collectively, the evidence and the models call for a closer look at the possibility of viewing change and continuity within the context of a multidimensional approach.

### NOTES

1. Anand Singh is a professor of Anthropology and Nadene Harisunker is an MA student in Anthropology

- at the Howard College Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
2. Based on the assumption that schooling began at 6 years old.
  3. The word is not used in the pejorative sense, but rather to indicate an intention "to conserve" in the sense of social reproduction, which requires as much time and effort in the valorized process of 'change'.
  4. Talibanise is in reference to fundamentalist Islam and women in burkas (black garment that is worn by Muslim women covering them from head to feet.)

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