

Diasporic dispositions

'Coolies' and 'Asiatics' no more, the Indians of South Africa recoil from India even as they reach out for Indian-ness. Attempts to sublimate the experiences of people of Indian origin – from descendents of indentured labourers to the newest wave of middle class migrants to the West – cannot work.

by *Thomas Blom Hansen*

The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa from the 1990s onwards led, among other things, to an intensification of the links between India and South Africa. The boycott of apartheid-era South Africa imposed by the government of India since 1948 had constrained official exchanges but did not prevent wealthy Indians of South Africa from visiting the Subcontinent regularly. The Indians in South Africa are a socially heterogeneous and relatively 'Westernised' group of people, now haunted by fears of being marginalised and stigmatised in 'new' South Africa. Forging links with India, or searching for authentic cultural and family roots, has for some of the more affluent sections emerged as one of several ways to cope with a bewildering situation.

Even during apartheid there were a number of linkages between India and South Africa – films, music, religious teachers – but more recently, new 'diasporic' links have been constructed. Two of these very different links will be explored in this article. One has been established by the entry into South Africa of transnational organisations such as the right wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO). Both these organisations actively seek to construct and maintain cultural, religious and sentimental ties between the dispersed populations originating in the Subcontinent and an India that is promoted as a cultural motherland and the source of Hindu culture. Both these organisations enjoy extensive support from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in New Delhi.

The other form of constructing this connection is 'roots tourism' to India which has been growing from the mid-1990s. Such visits are undertaken either in search of the ancestral village and family members or

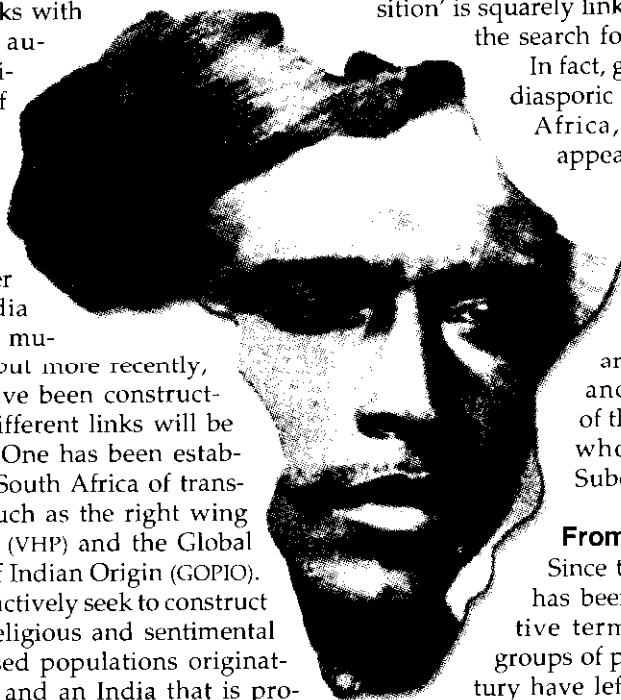
more generally in search of spiritual roots, often in connection with neo-Hindu movements like the Divine Light Mission, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Sai-movement.

But these activities notwithstanding, 'diasporic identities' are not very evident in contemporary South Africa. The search for a spiritual homeland, the idea of a diasporic political identity, or the search for comparative economic advantages of trade and investment in the Subcontinent are incidental and contentious issues among Indians in South Africa. The 'diasporic disposition' is squarely linked to upward social mobility and the search for middle class respectability.

In fact, given the limited interest in Indian diasporic identities in contemporary South Africa, the very category 'diaspora' appears inadequate and flawed, being increasingly driven by conservative political interests claiming to speak on behalf of 'Indians', unwilling to concede the existing divisions of class and community and unable to grasp and absorb the complex identities and varied historical experiences of the very different groups of people whose ancestors came from the Subcontinent.

From migrant to diasporic Indian

Since the late 1980s, the term 'diaspora' has been used as a neutral and descriptive term for the dispersed and varied groups of people who since the mid-19th century have left the Subcontinent as indentured labourers, traders, students and professionals in search of livelihoods abroad. But the term diaspora, originating in the Jewish experience, refers to suffering, to being forced to abandon the ancestral home, and to often heroic attempts to compensate for the loss of a homeland, as well as sustained attempts to reconstruct cultural and religious forms of community in exile. There is no doubt that the term diaspora applies more mean-

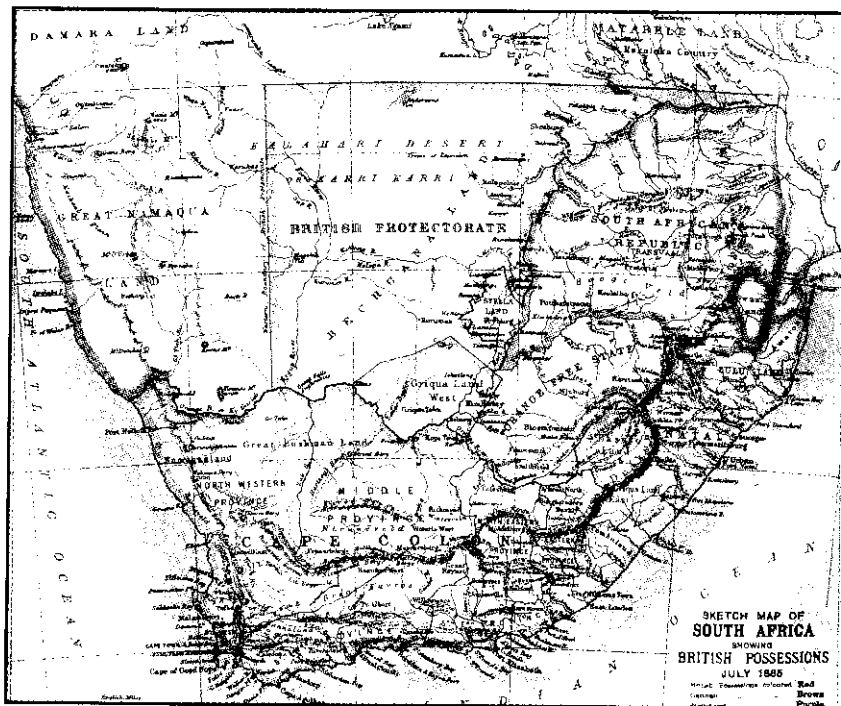




ingly to the experiences of South Asians who left the Subcontinent under the system of indenture in operation from the 1830s to 1910-11 than to the experiences of the numerically much larger emigration of South Asians to mainly Europe and North America in the last few decades of the 20th century.

However, the term diaspora only gained common currency in the 1990s among social scientists, intellectuals of the 'diaspora', as well as political entrepreneurs of Indian origin and the government of India, and received greater attention when the BJP came to power in 1998. The term 'diaspora' not only transmits a certain sense of shared destiny and predicament, but also an inherent will to preservation and celebration of the ancestral culture, and an equally inherent impulse towards forging and maintaining links with other migrant groups as well as the 'old' country. These assumptions about an almost inherent diasporic instinct are often reflected more or less openly in much of the available literature as discussions of how various Indian communities in the UK, in Fiji, Guyana or North America have been able to retain their cultural practices, and how much they have been modified and transformed by the 'alien' environment; how much the political and cultural dynamics of the subcontinent has shaped, or not shaped, their distinct identities as Sikhs, Hindus, Tamil, etc.

This is not to suggest that such inquiries are irrelevant or uninteresting. Insofar as they start from investigating how local ideas of 'Indianness', or Hindu or Muslim identity, have been encouraged by colonial authorities or missionary organisations from India, they serve an important purpose. What is objectionable is the attempt in such writings to impose on the 'first generation' of indentured migrants the sentiments and modes of connecting to the homeland characteristic of the recent generations of Subcontinental migrants (1950s and 60s labour migration, and post-1980s white collar). The power of the Jewish idea of diaspora cannot be understood without taking into account how the Zionist movement successfully framed the idea of the loss of the original homeland and nation at a time of untold suffering and persecution of Jews in many parts of the world. Likewise, the idea of an Indian, or Pakistani diaspora – both as an idea and a network – is inextricably linked to the modern nation states of South Asia. The second and third generation of migrants leaving India and Pakistan grew up in nation-states, were imparted a strong sense of national affiliation and identity, and many were well-educated people from higher



South Africa, 1885.

castes identifying themselves with a generalised 'great' tradition of Hinduism and Islam, rather than with the local forms of religion of the indentured labourers a century earlier.

The first generation of migrants, the 'coolies', did not leave a nation but various districts and areas in a vast colonial territory, heading for another colonial territory. The relative lack of any clear 'diasporic commitment' or identification with the 'motherland' has often been attributed to the assumed lack of a high cultural tradition among the migrants. Some scholars have suggested that the sea voyage and the labour regime and patterns of habitation on the plantations, from Fiji to Natal to Guyana, broke down and subverted distinctions of caste and community, encouraged inter-caste marriages and forced a new sense of equality upon the 'coolies' who were treated more or less equally in spite of differences of name and birth. While this is indeed plausible, it did not altogether remove the cultural logic of segmented social existence, which continued to play itself out along the lines of sect, occupation and language. To forge and maintain links with one's place of origin was not only difficult, it was also often seen as less desirable in terms of livelihoods and prospects. The South African authorities, for instance, devised a range of repatriation schemes for 'Asiatics' from 1910 until the late 1940s, but very few Indians found the economic incentives of the schemes and the prospects of returning to India comparable to the possibilities that South Africa offered.

The fall of apartheid from 1990 onwards coincided with a growing interest in organising and networking within the 'Indian diaspora' worldwide. After India

lifted sanctions against South Africa in the same year, the number of South Africans who had embarked on trips to India grew. But, these were not trips driven by a long suppressed, or by any means natural, urge to seek cultural roots in India. Not only had South African Indians developed their own identity, tied to South Africa and disentangled from the Subcontinent, but they were also separated from the worlds of India by differences of perception, moral conduct, expectations and notions of the self. Many South African Indians who visited India conceptualised this cultural gap as that of their own modernity versus the backwardness of India. This may well also be true of other populations of Subcontinental origin elsewhere.

Indians and Indian-ness

Indians came to South Africa in two ways. The vast majority came between 1860 and 1890 as indentured labourers to work on sugarcane plantations in the fertile coastal land of Natal. Most labourers belonged to lower caste communities from the northern districts of present day Tamil Nadu, the southern districts of contemporary Andhra Pradesh and the Bhojpur region of north India. They spoke Tamil, Telugu and Bhojpuri Hindi respectively. After completing their indenture contract many labourers bought or leased small patches of land and began farming or market gardening in and around Durban and along the coast. By the 1940s, most of their descendants had moved to Durban or other cities and had emerged as the backbone of the industrial workforce in the province. This period saw the formation of large Indian working class neighbourhoods in Durban, the emergence of a rich popular culture, and the growth of a range of cultural and educational initiatives. Indians were at the forefront of labour organisations and the struggle against the new racist legislation that came into existence in the late 1940s.

The Indian working-class culture was dislocated in many ways as apartheid's instrument of space management, the Group Areas Act, came into force in the late 1950s. Most of the Indian neighbourhoods in Durban were cleared and turned into open spaces or industrial estates and the majority of Indians relocated to large township areas south and north of the city. Similar areas were created in Johannesburg and other cities in the country, located as buffer zones between the huge and tightly policed African townships outside the cities and their white centres. This piece of grand social engineering created an enclosed, regulated spatial and social grid, with housing suitable for nuclear families, plots for temples, churches and mosques, community halls, schools, sports grounds and shopping centres.

In these new social spaces, conscientiously governed and maintained by the city's health department

to prevent Indians lapsing into what was seen as 'unsanitary habits', they developed a new township culture. This was more 'South African Indian' in the sense of being socially compressed and isolated from the Africans and whites. At the same time it was also less 'Indian' as the use of the vernacular tongues dwindled, conversions to Christianity increased, and Western popular culture and 'white' habits became the more dominant sources of entertainment and identification. The expanding economy of the country provided better jobs, educational opportunities multiplied and a large middle class developed in the densely populated Indian townships. By the 1980s, large sections of the 'Indian community' had achieved a standard of living and level of educational qualification next only to that of the whites in the country.

A much smaller group of 'passenger Indians' (approximately 15 percent of the migrants from the Subcontinent) arrived from the 1880s onwards from Gujarat and north India in search of trade and business opportunities. The majority was Gujarati-speaking Muslims and north Indian and Gujarati Hindus. This resourceful group established the entire Grey Street commercial area in Durban city and quickly spread into the interior, particularly in the towns and villages in Transvaal province and around the gold fields of Johannesburg. Known in local parlance as the 'merchant class', these traders provided both political and cultural leadership for the wider Indian community for many decades.

This original class division remained in place through most of the century and still marks a division among Indians, a rift deeper and more enduring than racial divides, as Ashwin Desai, the noted South African activist and academic, has argued. Wealthy businessmen sponsored educational institutions, religious shrines and cultural events, and were instrumental in maintaining links between South Africa and India through trade, family relations and cultural exchanges. However, the cultural and social unity of the 'Indian community' was far from self-evident. Wealthy Muslims sought in the early decades of the 20th century to distance themselves from the mass of dark-skinned 'Asiatic' labourers and gardeners, and to be re-classified as Arabs. Similar and much more successful attempts to Arabise and 'de-ethnicise' Muslims of Indian descent have since the 1970s been carried out by a range of very influential and conservative international Islamic movements, such as the Tablighi Jamaat. Today, most Muslims of a certain economic and cultural standing refuse to be identified as Indians and insist that they are first and foremost Muslims.

Along with the creation of new racially separate townships for Indians in the 1960s in Durban, Johannesburg and elsewhere, there was also a systematic strat-

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egy of education and shaping of cultural life in what became officially known as the 'Indian community'. In 1961, the apartheid state granted citizenship to Indians – after more than a century in the country – and began a strategy of incorporating them as prospective 'junior partners' of the white community in the larger project of race rule. This included a measure of self-governance, separate institutions, separate education for promoting Indian culture and languages, and a relatively privileged position in the labour market. This long period of almost 30 years of incorporative strategies had profound effects in terms of forging a sense of a lived, spatially bounded 'Indian community'. There was a substantial improvement in living standards in the Indian areas, a process of 'gentrification' that turned a large number of Indians into owners of homes, cars, telephones, and gave many a good education. Another effect was that contact with African communities was reduced. This Indian (self)enclosure contributed to a pronounced fear of Africans, which is seen in the marked antipathy among Indians to the African National Congress (ANC) in the post-apartheid period and their preference for conservative 'white' parties in recent elections.

This official strategy of depoliticising Indians and linking that to institutional benefits was devised in the face of two rather serious obstacles. Firstly, the Indian government enforced a policy of academic and artistic boycott, which made it difficult for Indian academics and classical artistes to work or perform in South Africa. However, artistes performing a lighter Bollywood-inspired repertoire and other forms of popular entertainment had much easier access to South Africa, merely having to sign a document in India that their shows would be open to non-Indian audiences. The government of India clearly wanted to limit access to academic and high cultural 'prestige goods', whereas dissemination of films, music and religious goods were low-profile areas of popular culture outside the purview of international organisations and foreign governments, and hence administered with less rigour.

The other serious obstacle was that a highly articulate section of the educated Indian elite and middle class refused to accept this incorporation into the structures of apartheid. They were not prepared to celebrate their own Indian-ness which they, in keeping with the non-racial and universalist ideals enshrined in ANC's Freedom Charter from 1955, denounced as 'ethnic'. One of the many paradoxes of the post-apartheid scenario was, however, that this eloquent 'non-racialism' quickly gave way to a new form of liberal multiculturalism bent on the celebration of cultural roots, difference and authenticity. By the late 1990s, many erstwhile secular and 'de-ethnicised' Indians were publicly praising 'Indian culture' and deplored what they saw as an increased marginalisation and sidelining of Indians by black nationalists of the ANC.

Scrambled egg discourse of origins

The VHP, the powerful worldwide Hindu nationalist organisation that acts as fundraiser abroad, and lethal front-organisation in communal clashes in India, had no presence in South Africa until 1995, when Krish Gokool, a wealthy businessman, opened a branch in Durban. The attempts of Gokool and others to establish the VHP as a new coordinating body in the religious field has, however, faced stiff opposition from existing organisations, notably the South African Hindu Mahasabha, an important umbrella for all Hindu organisations in the country for decades. The latter regards itself as a non-political organisation and has, indeed, always cultivated a good relationship with the authorities, both during and after the era of apartheid. As the dismantling of apartheid began, the question of the representation of the 'Hindu community' vis-a-vis the government gained new actuality.

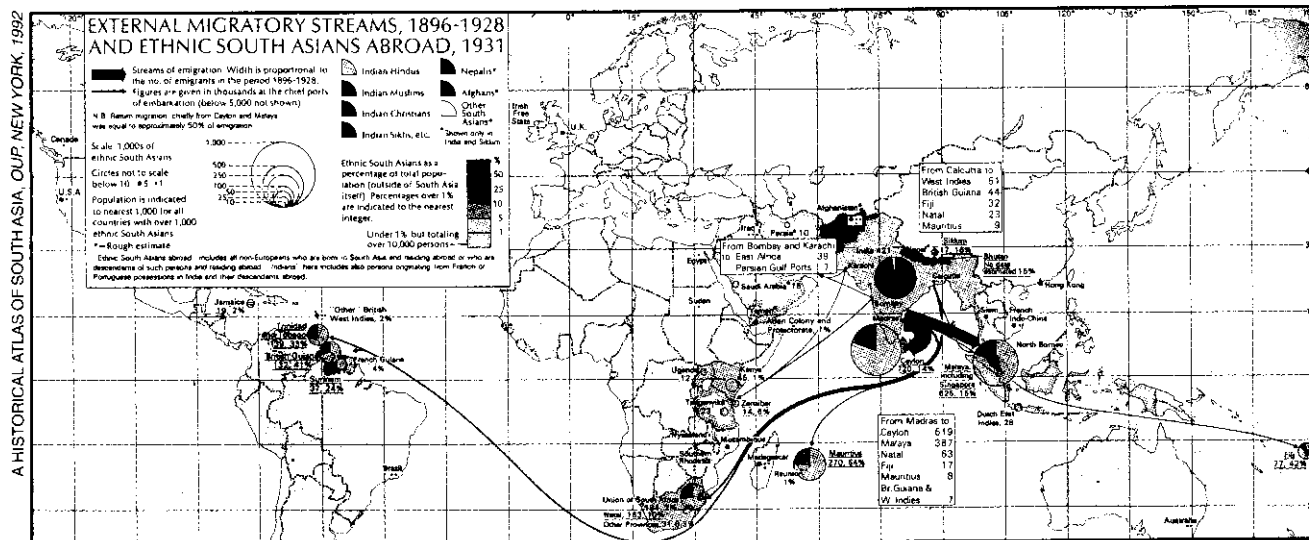
Most of the Hindu organisations in South Africa are averse to 'importing India's problem into South Africa', as the leader of the influential Hindi Shiksha Sangh (education association) put it. They regard the long-standing trend of conversion to Christianity, 'Westernisation' and the adoption of 'white culture' as more urgent challenges. In keeping with their traditional preoccupation with language, culture and religion, Indian organisations in South Africa seek to assert pride in Indian culture, promote a taste for Indian music and a knowledge of Indian languages. According to an activist of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh:

Although some of our people like to believe that they will be accepted as part of white culture if they have the right accent, become Christians and adopt white culture uncritically, it will never happen.

The resistance to the VHP is motivated by anxieties about the way in which the association with India could be forged and publicly represented. Gokool emphasised that although he felt strongly about the Babri Masjid episode:

...we cannot import that kind of politics into this country. It would never work here. I have started this association called Friends of BJP here, but I'm not too happy with their politics in India. I would like to see India become a Hindu state, but not in that way. ... we Indians are a minority here and we need to be careful and prudent in politics ... just like the Muslims sought protection of their rights and religion within the Congress, we need to do the same with ANC here. For Indians to organise politically along ethnic lines here could well prove to be suicidal. We must learn from history.

Despite such cautious sentiments, the politics of the Indian Subcontinent do tend to get transferred to South Africa in various forms. On 19 May 1993, a bomb de-



A HISTORICAL ATLAS OF SOUTH ASIA. OUP, NEW YORK, 1992

stroyed a Hindu temple in Lenasia in Johannesburg. It was believed to be retaliation for the demolition of the Babri Masjid in north India on 6 December 1992, five months earlier. Other South Asian examples haunting South African Indians are the assertion of a separate Tamil identity, and the protracted sectarian clashes within the Indian Muslim community, between the Deobandis and the Barelvis whose rivalry has its roots back in 19th century reform movements in South Asia.

To Gokool and other activists of the VHP, the danger does not lie in conversions per se, but in the internal divisions among Hindus, especially the tendency among people of Tamil ancestry to organise separately in Tamil federations, South Indian business fora among others, and develop their own independent links to global Tamil organisations. Such anxieties about Indian unity have also been echoed by A Rajbansi, the foremost 'collaborationist' politician of the apartheid era who in the 1990s reinvented himself as a populist leader of the Minority Front, a political party that in 1999 forged a close association with the ANC. In the 1999 election campaign, Rajbansi coined the slogan 'We are Indians without apologies', adopted a quite effective anti-white rhetoric, and asserted that the Indians, like Africans, were victims of white exploitation and contempt.

These perspectives on Indian unity in the face of the South African transformation, however, rarely had any explicit link to the notion of India as a cultural or religious homeland. The more explicitly political and strategic links between South African Indians and India articulated by the VHP constitute a qualitatively new attempt to 'diasporise' Indians in the country.

The Hindu nationalist agenda has appeared in South Africa since the 1990s in two different forms. One is the appearance of a 'modern', globalised, diasporic and 'thin' notion of Hinduism as the emblem of a shared civilisational identity competing with Islam and Christianity. This is the concept of modern Hinduism,

which the VHP has pursued with great success particularly in North America and Europe. It has also found expression in the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) which, apart from its broader philosophic and pragmatic concerns about defining Indian origins and promoting business interests, also cultivates notions of Indian-ness based on modern Hinduism and a strong attachment to India as the motherland of all Hindus.

The second takes the form of a more purist and directly translated version of Hindu nationalism, represented by the local subsidiary arm of the militant Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), with proliferating local units in the greater Durban area. As in Kenya, Fiji, Mauritius and elsewhere, this militant, purist and assertive Hindu nationalism has emerged from milieu influenced by the missionary work of the Arya Samaj, a 19th century reform movement, and by north Indian culture more broadly.

GOPIO was formed in 1989 in New York on the initiative of businessmen in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean who felt that Indians abroad should be organised along the lines of other diasporas such as the Jewish, the Anglo Saxon and the Chinese. The official homepage reads:

The People of Indian Origin are one among the main diasporas of the world. The others are Anglo-saxon, Jews, Japanese, Malays and Chinese. All these other main diasporas are organised and networked as a group. Together the PIOs are a diaspora of strength and substance; separated, you are minorities around the world. The new Millennium is a globalised world of diaspora civilizations. The Indian diaspora has a contributing role in the development of the world.

GOPIO's objective is to provide networks for business people, educational facilities for people of Indian



origin around the world, and create fora to strengthen and maintain the cultural identity of Indians abroad. Since its inception, a string of conferences have been organised in various countries, with delegates from Indian communities in many countries in the Western world, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. The GOPIO homepage states that "...no matter where Indians live and for how long... they are Indians in body and spirit. Almost all of them maintain their Indian cultural traditions and values".

In 1996, Krish Gokool formed a South African chapter of GOPIO in Durban. In the beginning, it only attracted a limited number of academics and business people. But with Durban hosting the 1998 annual GOPIO conference, the organisation began to be noticed in the Indian press and among political and public figures in the province. The conference, with its 600 delegates, attracted the attention of Indian academics and cultural activists and was broadly interpreted as a welcome initiative to strengthen connections between South African Indians and constituents of the Indian diaspora elsewhere and so break the isolation that apartheid had forced upon Indians in South Africa.

GOPIO attempted to inscribe the Indian experience in South Africa into its global, heroic narrative of how Indians, against all odds, have established themselves in a variety of countries and have through hard work, education and enterprise worked their way up to successful positions in the economy and the wider social structure. GOPIO's South African president, Haseem Seedat, the only Muslim representative from the country, told a reporter prior to the conference:

The community has persevered against all the odds apartheid placed in its way, and built mosques and temples and promoted their culture and religion. The resilience of the pioneers must be greatly admired and should set an example to minority groups elsewhere in the world.

The varied, contradictory and fundamentally class-based divided experience of Indians in South Africa and elsewhere was now being homogenised and merged into a single rags-to-riches narrative of ridding themselves of the shackles of colonialism. To observers like Ashwin Desai, GOPIO only reinforced old structures of domination, now in an ostensibly progressive garb:

The official rainbow nation ideology of South Africa allows dominant groups such as the Gujarati merchant class to claim that they too are heirs to the indenture experience. The real story of how these people exploited Africans, their contempt for the ordinary coolie and their desire to be accepted by the whites is hidden and forgotten.

GOPIO is broad-based and heterogenous enough to

harbour many different views about the purpose of its new global 'diasporic' network. To someone like Seedat, GOPIO could contribute to re-create a cultural pride and to retrieve the richness and linguistic treasures of Indian culture: "We must unite the people of Indian origin to make them realise the strength of their diversity. We must undo the 'scrambled eggs' created here as the colonisers suppressed our languages and custom".

Other members of GOPIO differ. Gokool found the conventional linking of language, religion and Indian identity altogether outdated and detrimental to the Hindu community in South Africa: "The language issue is outdated. Do you really have to be able to read Sanskrit to be a good Hindu? That is rubbish. Let us translate scriptures into English and make our religion accessible to young people. They simply don't want to learn such a difficult language. ... What is wrong with English? Isn't it our mother tongue here?"

But these differences on cultural objectives aside, the common focus pervading the GOPIO seemed to be to provide networks for business, trade and easier access to economic opportunities in India. The claim that "the income of the 22 million people of Indian origin around the world exceeds India's GDP" appears repeatedly in GOPIO material. It is an argument used by many Indian business people as to why India should give preferential treatment to Indian investors from overseas and accord them the respect and influence that corresponds with their actual economic power. GOPIO is campaigning for permanent representation in the upper house of the Indian parliament, and for voting rights for Indian expatriates.

This is the type of grandiose self-projection consistent with Benedict Anderson's comments on the desire for recognition in the old homeland that economic success in 'exile' seems to bring out. The 'PIO dream' articulated by Indian businessmen in Durban revolves around their own mastery of modernity, financial power, technology and discipline as opposed to the 'disorganisation' and 'backwardness' of India. One of their more fanciful projects was to institute a solely PIO inhabited 'village' near one of the Indian metropolises, a complete settlement created, designed and run by PIO business people that they could use for vacations and business trip. The man behind the idea clearly had a vision of kick-starting development in India through a 'rationality shock' when confronted with the capability of the PIOs.

In early 1999, the government of India began to issue so-called PIO cards to people of Indian origin and their spouses, granting holders quasi-citizenship rights in India - multiple entry for 10 years, right to do business, transfer foreign currency, own land and property, get admission to educational institutions on par with Indian citizens, etc. With this the Indian state has in practice adopted the principle of *jus sanguinis* (where blood or ethnicity is the defining element) for recognising citizenship rights in the country. In turn, this also

raises a range of questions regarding the actual racial determination of who exactly is an Indian. None of this has yet been given a formal legal codification.

So far the PIO card has mainly been a success among Indians in Europe and the USA, and GOPIO has now started a campaign for extending PIO rights to émigrés going back six generations so as to include descendants of indentured labourers. GOPIO is also campaigning for dual citizenship, and India's right wing government seems in favour of such an arrangement. A newly appointed Additional Secretary (NRI) in the Ministry of External Affairs, JC Sharma, showering praises on GOPIO, explained what the government of India expected from them. "We view the overseas community as more than just investors. The government expects them to play a role of unofficial ambassadors acquainting the people of the host countries with the life and culture of the motherland, its potential, problems and needs".

In January 2001, the largest GOPIO gathering ever was held in New Delhi. It was inaugurated by Prime Minister Vajpayee who told the delegates, from all segments of the 'diaspora', that "... from the tears and sweat of the indentured Indian labourer to the intellectual achievement of the Indian software community in Silicon Valley, the odyssey of the Indian community at large is a reflection of the potential of our people. We aspire to make India a knowledge superpower by the year 2010: you can help us fulfil this aspiration". The prime minister also announced the formation of "a high level committee on the Indian Diaspora" headed by LM Singhvi, a former high commissioner to the UK.

Like in Malaysia and Fiji where Indian identity strategies are subjects of dispute, opinion in the Indian community in South Africa is divided on the PIO card. Some found the card an excellent idea, a gesture from the Indian government that it cares for people of Indian origin and looks at them as quasi-citizens in whose favour it would intervene if need be. Others found that, given widespread anti-Indian feelings, it would be ill-advised to embrace such a scheme. As a businessman in Durban said:

It would leave the backdoor open and people from the majority here could say, "Look, India is only waiting for you, pack up and go home". ... Let us face it, nobody wants to live in India. It is a very difficult life there, and I know that when people return from India to Jan Smuts Airport in Johannesburg they say, "Thank God we are back again". That also happened during apartheid.

GOPIO has yet to evolve into an influential factor among South African Indians. It has to tread carefully, and remain sensitive to dominant discursive trends in the country and the latent suspicions of Indians. The celebration of cultural origins in South Africa must, therefore, remain firmly nested within the larger narrative of the anti-colonial struggle, which always cele-

brated the autochthony of Africans and their right to rule their own country. In South Africa, the Indian myth of origin can, therefore, only start at Addington Beach where indentured labourers disembarked in 1860, and in the brutalities of the indenture system, while India itself must remain an abstract, historical and non-political entity. The potential importance of GOPIO lies in the possibility that it can to some extent evade the issue of direct identification with India as a 'homeland' and instead offer an identification with a virtual, multi-local 'diasporic community', whose lifestyle and cosmology provide more intelligible objects of identification than India itself.

Seeking ancestral roots

The difficulties in identifying with India are amply clear in the stories of Indian South Africans embarking on 'roots tourism' to India. I met Mr and Mrs Pillay first in October 1998 at the Durban Archives where they had come to check 19th century ship registers in the hope of locating the village from where Mr Pillay's great grandfather had come. As Indians, they felt that since they could now afford it, their first foreign trip should be to India. On their return several months later, they had mixed feelings about their Indian sojourn. They seemed pleased but also on the whole somewhat troubled.

Mr Pillay was clearly puzzled by the place. He had suggested to their travel agent in Madras that they could perhaps look up the village in the telephone directory to check whether there were any Pillays there. The travel agent had just smiled and said, "I think this is your first visit to India, sir". It had taken many hours to reach his native village. The village was poorer than anything he had seen in South Africa in all his life. There was the smell of cow dung in the air, the animals walked about without purpose and the children were naked and quite dirty. To add to the disappointment, it turned out that there were several Pillays in the village - like in Durban! They enquired of many Pillay families if they had relatives in South Africa. A very old lady remembered talk about a distant uncle called Muruga who had left the village many years before her time.

The visiting Pillays spent a day with some native Pillays related to Muruga. This family of farmers was not very educated, and there was no direct conversation between them. The farmers had no idea which country the visitors were from and the visitors were not even sure that these were relatives. On being shown pictures of their house in Durban, the old lady of the house just kept beaming and repeating "America" all the time.

Mr Pillay feels strange about what happened in that village. In his discussion, there was one theme he returned to repeatedly, what he called the lack of 'work culture' in India. He also bemoaned that in some respects, notably in the tendency to fight among themselves, South African Indians were "becoming like these fellows in India!" Mrs Pillay on the other hand thought



it had been a wonderful trip. She liked the village. Even though it was poor and not very clean it was quiet, peaceful and beautiful. Their children did not like India much. They would have much preferred to go to Australia or Mauritius.

For the Pillays, as for so many others of their kind, their brush with India was an encounter with something disturbingly unknown, a place that made them feel very alien, very South African and very modern. It made them realise just how different they were, how 'white' they were in their 'work culture' and their habits, and how 'inauthentic' their Indian-ness was. Yet, the encounter with India was to Mr Pillay also a confrontation with elements of his own community and everyday life in Durban that he detested as negative marks, or residues, of the 'Indian' – internecine strife, petty politics, narrow-mindedness as opposed to what he saw as the inherently rational approach of 'whites'. This was a disturbing encounter with a sense of a cultural essence he denounced but could not ward off completely. Mrs Pillay experienced India within a truly 'orientalist' framework: as authentic, a place imbued with a certain inner beauty and harmony, and a place that exuded history and timelessness. These features neutralised or outweighed the lack of modern amenities. The lack of a modern organisation of life was of course the very precondition for maintaining the orientalist idealisation of India. This elevation of India's material deficiencies to a spiritual virtue is even more pronounced in Rashni's story.

Finding spiritual truth

Rashni's family decided some years back to become proper modern Hindus. As her father explained, "Like so many Indians we took to the white lifestyle – drinks, parties, *braai* (barbecue), outdoor life... but some years back some friends took us to the Sai Baba ashram here in Durban and that changed our lives. We are Indians, we were brought up like Indians and we should not deny that. We will never be accepted by the whites, that is one thing I have learned".

More than 10 years back, the family had moved from their apartment in the sprawling Indian working class township of Phoenix to a house in the prestigious Reservoir Hills. As the family turned towards the Sai movement seven years ago, it became vegetarian and teetotaler. It also decided to send the daughters for extra classes in Tamil and the classical dance, Bharatnatyam.

The family decided to visit the Sai Baba ashram near Bangalore. The ashram was simple and basic, but clean and well organised, unlike Bangalore. They could not quite understand how Bangalore could be the Silicon Valley of India. But the week at the ashram was a beautiful time.

After that they spent four days in Bombay, which they found to be similar to Johannesburg, a big, rude place where all they care about is making money. But unlike Jo'burg, they found Bombay crime-free. The one thing they could not understand was why the streets were not kept clean. "You can say many things about the white man, but he knows how to run a place. You can see how Bombay must have been beautiful in the past, in colonial times. Now it is a mess. Again it makes me think of Jo'burg. Have you seen what has happened to it now? Homeless people all over, bonfires in the streets and these young black guys behaving as if they owned the place".

The family's narrative resembled those normally expected of most 'Western' tourists and travellers in India. There was nothing particularly 'diasporic' about the idealisation of the purified and sublimated 'Indian-ness' and spiritual community manufactured through elaborate rules in the ashram outside Bangalore, and replicated in Sai ashrams elsewhere in the world. Various neo-Hindu movements have made big advances among upwardly mobile families in Durban, which are attracted to their apolitical assertion of Indian spirituality, disentangled from what many Indians see as 'backward' and 'ethnic' features of the traditional ritualised worship of earlier generations. But Rashni's family too expresses misgivings about the encounter with what is seen as an excess of the stigmatised marks of 'backward' Indian ethnicity: disorder, chaos and dirt.

The Pillays' encounter with India made them feel very South African, very modern

Catalysts of modernity

Anil's story displays an interesting tension between the assertion of Indian cultural pride on a global scale, on the one hand, and a simultaneous embarrassment about 'Indian' backwardness, particularly in what he sees as traditional and stifling systems of rank and hierarchy governing life in India. Anil is from Tongaat, a prosperous town north of Durban, located in the sugar district. The city is almost entirely Indian but as with all urban areas in South Africa, it has a number of densely populated African townships located outside the city proper, which service the Indian population. Tongaat has a strong Hindi-speaking community that takes pride in having descended from some of the first indentured labourers and traders who came via Calcutta to Natal from the Bhojpur region of north India more than five generations ago. Anil supports the ANC "...because there is no alternative for a minority like us", as he puts it. But he despises what he calls the "ANC Indians", who are "communists who discard their own background".

Anil first went to Delhi with some people from Hindi Shiksha Sangh. Though he felt it was nice to be in a place where everybody spoke Hindi, sometimes people spoke it in dialects he could not understand. He spent

a lot of time with Arya Samajis and people from the BJP and the RSS. He admires their educational work, their selfless attitude and their sense of history and pride in their own culture. Indians in South Africa are, by contrast, a bit ashamed of their own culture, he feels, because so many still believe that 'white is right'.

On the other hand, there are things about India Anil does not approve of, such as the Indian attitude to women and their hatred of Muslims and Pakistan. Such things would never work in South Africa. "That is not something we need here. We have enough problems and why should we not work with our Muslim compatriots". He believes that RSS activities in South Africa are "dangerous and stupid", because the Indians do not stand a chance if the Zulus turn against them. The fear of Zulu-Indian hostility has a long history from the riots in Durban in 1949, the destruction of Gandhi's Phoenix ashram in 1985, to the frequent accusations by Zulu leaders, intellectuals and artists that Indians are unpatriotic and racist.

Anil's subsequent visit to Bombay was purely professional and personally mortifying. He had gone with his boss, an engineer, to visit two companies manufacturing machine parts, in order to purchase pumps. His boss found the engineers in India to be very good, but they did not know anything about production. In India, the engineers would never do the dirty work. They were suspicious of the financial arrangements involved in the transaction, nobody would make any decisions without consulting the owner, and the pumps supplied by the firm were not up to the mark. All this was this very embarrassing for Anil. In India there is no professionalism and no pride in the job, according to Anil.

Anil shares with many well-educated, successful and culturally conservative Indians in South Africa and elsewhere the desire to purge Indian-ness and Indian culture of what they see as a backlog of conservatism and parochialism. Indians must assert themselves and the only way to do that is by adopting modern forms of knowledge, a modern work ethic, and a more self-confident attitude to the challenges of modern urban culture without discarding Hinduism or language.

There is in all these different encounters a marked ambivalence towards India. There is no commodified nostalgia of the kind that is visible among the first and second generation non-resident Indians in Europe or North America who belong to more recent waves of migration. There is, instead, often a conscious attempt to disown what are seen to be the more reprehensible aspects of India. To that extent, barring the more abstract identification with a broad civilisational entity there is not a very concrete attempt to recover an authenticated and certified cultural heritage from India.

Long distance nationalism

Converting of the experience of migration into a diaspora experience, that is, cultivating sentimental,

cultural, political and economic links with the country of origin as well as other groups living away from 'home', is neither a natural nor a logical process. The formation of diasporic sentiment and the cultivation of ties between India and various migrant communities have been pursued throughout the 20th century by organisations such as the Arya Samaj and other more orthodox groups. The VHP has continued this work but has, since the 1980s, attempted to become an encompassing organisation for all Hindu groups, merging religious and national identities. GOPIO promotes a not dissimilar vision of India as a homeland in cultural, economic and political terms. The consistent support from the government of India to GOPIO predates the formation of the BJP-led government and is driven by a desire to mobilise expatriate capital for foreign direct investment, the way China has done with such astounding success. The BJP has boosted these efforts and has added to them a new systematic attempt to foster long-distance (Hindu) nationalism among people of Indian origin across the globe. In the context of South Asia, the term 'diaspora' has today become inseparable from such political strategies, and inseparable from the celebration of the expatriate Indian, which only emerged with the emigration of elite communities to the Western world.

But the stories told to me by Indian South Africans suggest, furthermore, that the quest for creating a more authentic and pure identification with one's cultural origins, or simply with one's family history is squarely linked to upward social mobility, education and the pursuit of respectability. Rashni's family and Anil are attracted to organisations promoting various forms of neo-Hinduism and their desire to go to India was clearly mediated by the ideas of purity and origins promoted in these organisations. The term 'diaspora' presupposes the continued significance of the cultural and religious forms that migrants brought with them. But is this a valid assumption? Are there 'exoticising' mechanisms at work in these assumptions about South Asians? Would one make the same assumptions about, say, fourth generation Germans or Russians in North America? The stories above indicate that religious identification is only one factor, and that the alienation felt by South African Indians in their encounters with India had everything to do with asserting their own competence in modern living and organisation, as against Indians in India who are 'backward'.

In light of the history of incorporation of Indians into South Africa's society and economy, it is perhaps less surprising that cleanliness, work culture, discipline, individuality and urban management – all essential to the sense of being 'modern' – are what South African Indians find India lacking the most. Much the same would perhaps be true of Indians from other parts of the so-called 'diaspora'.