



Women as Bearers of Culture: Case Study of Indian Diaspora in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Indian women in South Africa function as active bearers and transmitters of cultural heritage within diasporic contexts. Drawing on qualitative interviews, oral histories, and literature spanning indenture to contemporary times, the paper examines how women preserve languages, religious practices, rituals, and social norms despite displacement and systemic barriers. It highlights their instrumental roles in maintaining Hindu customs-through rituals, attire, and public religious expressions and transmitting native languages within household. Simultaneously, it presents how these women navigated and reshaped patriarchal norms in both domestic and public spheres. Migration sometimes enabled increased agency-women engaged in financial decision-making, labor participation, and collective cultural events-while in other cases, traditional gender roles persisted or intensified under diasporic pressures. The study also foregrounds prominent case examples such as Durban-based genealogies and narratives of activists like Amina Pahad, Fatima Meer, and Kasturba Gandhi, whose cultural leadership within community, political resistance, and women's organizations challenged both colonial and patriarchal systems. These cases demonstrate the entwined cultural and political roles women played-preserving Indian identity while fostering solidarity across racial lines and contributing to anti-apartheid movements. By situating women at the core of cultural preservation and transformation, this case study highlights the complexity of diasporic identity-making. It argues that women's ritual performance, inter-generational transmission of values, and public activism not only ensure cultural continuity but also actively shape evolving Creolised identities within South African society. The paper concludes that Indian diaspora women have served as both anchors of tradition and agents of cultural negotiation in the face of social, political, and gendered upheavals.

Keyword: *Anti-apartheid activism, Cultural transmission, Intergenerational change, South Africa, Women as culture bearers etc.*

Introduction

Although interracial marriages dilute the cultural traits, women who marry within the community are known to carry it forward from generation to generation. Sometimes, identity groups have to face conflict and struggle to retain their culture as was noticed among the Indians in South Africa who were also involved in a cultural struggle – to practice, preserve and promote the Indian heritage. They strove to keep their vibrant cultural heritage alive by propagating their language, clothing, food, festivals and traditions. Women were at the forefront of this struggle and were successful in transforming for example Durban into 'Little India' – the largest Indian city outside of India (Mukherji, 2011). Indian immigrant women had carried with them their rich cultural heritage-tangible and intangible. They took with them imag-

es/statues of their revered Gods, jewellery, spices (turmeric, chillies, curry leaves) and food grains like lentils, rice etc. These elements found their way into the culture, cuisine, costumes and traditions of their lives within the South African society (Pande, 2020: 116). Today, Indian culture is visible in Durban as “Indian women are distinctive in vivid saris; mosques and temples break the line of colonial architecture with minarets and domes;...shops are stocked with silks, brassware and spices,... oriental jewellery and trinketry,...lentils, rice, beans and oils, betel leaf and areca nut, lime, camphor, incense sticks, curry powders and masala” (Kuper, 1960: xiii). The various markers of Indian culture include food, language, clothing, religion, festivals and cinema. The following sections look at these various markers of Indian culture and examine them through a gendered lens. We take the example of the diasporic Indian community in South Africa as a case study. ‘Indian’ culture has survived well in South Africa. Herein, the contribution of women in the Indian diaspora needs to be underscored. As harbingers of native traditions, they have successfully practiced and preserved their languages, religions/ festivals, cuisines, clothing styles and art forms.

These have been passed down through generations and most of these traditional practices/cuisine and clothing styles survive even today, though there has been some dilution in certain markers of Indian culture over the years. The current generation of Indian diaspora is westernized and has assimilated well into the majority South African culture – their values, education, media/entertainment and food. South Africa is one of the most heterogeneous countries on the African continent. The Indian temples, mosques, markets, fusion dishes, and cultural community centres, have kept the ‘little India’ alive in Durban. Women in the diaspora have made sustained attempts to maintain and carry forward their ‘Indianness’, retrieve and safeguard Indian values, culture, traditions and cuisine, and transmit them to future generations.

70.6.1 Food, Cuisines and Spices Indian Spice Bazaar, Durban (Photo: Victoria Street Market, 2018) Food consumption is largely contingent upon purchasing capacity and traditional tastes. A survey carried out in 1941 indicated that of the typical income of £125 per year in Indian immigrant households in Natal, approximately 55 to 70 per cent was spent on food (Burrows, 1943: 33). In 2004, the average annual expenditure on food for South African households in the lowest income group was estimated around 4000 rands (approx. 16,000 INR) (Martins, 2005: 43). The poor among the immigrant community most commonly consumed Rice, as it was cheap and easily accessible. Other dietary staples included dal (lentils), cereals and pulses, ghee (clarified butter), chillies, vegetables and tea. A majority of the Indian population were Hindus who followed a strict vegetarian diet, while the Muslim and Christian communities, who constituted the bulk of the trading class, also consumed beef, mutton and poultry (Burrows, 1943: 34).

Women were responsible for sourcing and preparing these foods using Indian traditional methods and flavors and thus were able to preserve their traditional cuisine. The influence of older women, particularly grandmothers, was significant in terms of how food was prepared, what their families ate, when they fasted and what they consumed on those days (Singh and Nadene, 2010: 41). In addition to the pure Indian cuisine passed down through generations, fusion food too, is popular within the Indian community. Indian cuisine blended with South African flavours because women incorporated traditional Zulu ingredients like Amasi (fermented milk drink) and relishes like Chakalaka (spicy vegetable condiment) (South African Tourism, 2020). One of the most iconic dishes and a true symbol of Indian and South African fusion cuisine is Durban’s signature 53 Women as Bearers of Culture ‘Bunny Chow’. It is a spicy Indian curry served in a bowl of hollowed-out bread. The dish was created by the Indian indentured labourers. It is a staple food in South Africa and is available in almost every restaurant and food stall.

Another well-known marker of 'Indianness' is the Indian Spice Bazaar at the Victoria Street Market, in Durban Central. Operational since 1870, it is the oldest market in Durban and exhibits the vibrancy and richness of Indian culture. Although famous for its Indian spice varieties, the bazaar also stocks traditional African artwork, seafood, Indian clothing, accessories and food and henna tattoo stalls, amongst others. 70.6.2 Language South Africans invariably understand the Indian community as a monolithic unit. However, it is divided along linguistic, religious and cultural lines. South African Indians speak at least five Indian languages – Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu – along with English, Afrikaans and Bantu languages (Kuper, 1960: xvii-xviii). Languages help formulate distinct socio-linguistic sects within homogeneous communities. For example, Urdu was brought to Durban by indentured labourers as an 'Islamic' language in the 1890s. A sacred geographical community that spoke the language practiced Islamic rituals and traditions that helped form a distinctly Muslim identity. Urdu was also chosen as the language of instruction in mosques, madrasas and shrines in place of regional languages like Konkani, Malayalam or Tamil. Similarly, various other ethnic and religious sects were also formed along linguistic lines within the Indian community. Language thus helped preserve the diversity of the Indian diaspora (Green, 2008: 531-532).

The Constitution of South Africa also provides for the establishment of a statutory Pan South African Language Board to promote and ensure respect for all languages; including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996: 4). Today, English is gradually replacing most Indian languages as the lingua franca of the younger generation. As a result of westernization, successive generations have lost touch with the ancestral language and cannot read their sacred texts as they are not familiar with the language in which they are written. However, a small minority of the Indian population, mainly older women, have been making sustained efforts to preserve and promote Indian culture through local community organizations and culture programmes. They also promote their traditional languages by speaking it at home and passing them down through generations. 70.6.3 Religious Festivals the Indian diaspora in South Africa is a mix of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Zoroastrians and agnostics (Kuper, 1960: xvii-xviii). More than eighty percent of the indentured immigrants that came to South Africa were Hindu, about twelve per cent were Muslims and the rest were Christians (Hughes, 2007: 157).

Among the 'passenger Indians', Muslims formed the majority, whereas 54 MDIE 001 Gender and Diaspora Parsis and agnostics made up a small minority (Hiralal, 2008: 27). Muslim traders were often referred to as 'Arab traders' due to their traditional attire and long robes (Hiralal, 2008: 28; Tayob, 1995: 55). The indentured laborers brought with them a rich heritage steeped in their ancestral religion and culture. To express their spirituality, the well-to-do trading class with financial means established places of worship wherever they settled. In doing so, they enriched the broad cultural vistas of South Africa (Naidoo, 1986: 136). For many years, women performed most religious functions at home. As they were bound to domestic duties, it made the observance of religious rituals relatively easy. Religion was also the defining factor for finalising matrimonial alliances, the beliefs they chose to pass on to their children and the food they ate. Levels of religious influence within households were traditionally determined by age and experience – grandmothers and elder female members guided on rituals procedures regarding rites of passage such as death, or celebratory occasions such as birth or marriage ceremonies (Singh and Nadene, 2010: 41). However, over successive generations, women have become more active economically, and thereby less interested in ritualistic religious practices which they learnt from the earlier generations (Naidoo, 1987: 135). Hindu

Temples: Indian women were instrumental in setting up Hindu temples in South Africa (De-sai and Goolam, 2019). They played an active part in temple related activities and in celebrating festivals in the temples at a community level. The first Indian immigrants established the Durban Hindu Temple, believed to be the oldest temple in all of South Africa, in 1875.

The temple complex has three shrines – dedicated to Shiva, Draupadi and Mariamman each. It was declared a national monument in 1980. The Hindu religion has one of the strongest presences of the ‘Divine Feminine’ amongst all major world religions. A considerable number of goddesses are known and worshipped throughout the various Hindu sects (Bryant, 2007: 441). The most revered goddess is arguably ‘Shakti’ (meaning: energy, power or strength), who represents the dynamic cosmic energy that moves the universe. She is regarded as a divine feminine power who takes various forms – the gracious Parvati (Mother goddess or the goddess of fertility, love and beauty), the fierce Kali (goddess of time, creation, destruction and power), Durga (goddess of war), Saraswati (goddess of knowledge) and Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) (Bryant, 2007: 443-444; Klostermaier, 2007: 238-247). Sita is an incarnation of goddess Lakshmi. She is often worshipped by Hindu women as the ideal wife, mother and daughter. She is also a symbol of true female resilience as she remained honorable throughout her abduction, imprisonment and exile. Draupadi, on the other hand, is worshipped as a reincarnation of goddess Kali. Goddess ‘Mariamman’ (meaning: Mother Mari) is the South Indian Hindu goddess Mother as well the goddess of rain. (Hiltebeitel, 1988: 72). South Africa also has several temples dedicated to specific cultural deities. For example, the Clairwood Shree Siva Soobramoniar Temple (estb. in 1889) is dedicated specifically to ‘Muruga’ – son of the deity Shiva and an ancient God of the Tamil community. The Temple is known for its annual Thaipusam Kavadi festival, which is celebrated in the Tamil month of Thai (January/ February). It entails large processions and is a major public event for the Tamilians in South Africa. 55 Women as Bearers of Culture Another notable temple is the Umbilo Shree Ambalavaanar Alayam Temple, traditionally known as the First River Temple. It was built along the banks of the Umbilo River in 1875. It is believed to be one of the very first Hindu Temples on the African continent. The Umbilo Temple was also the first to celebrate the fire walking festival, which takes place annually in the month of March. Thousands of Hindu devotees attend the festivals, a majority of whom are women. One of the largest religious movements in Durban today is the Hare Krishna Movement. Srila Prabhupada founded it in 1975, when he first visited Durban.

The sect has also built the Sri-Sri Radha Radhanath Mandir (also known as the ISKCON Temple) in Chatsworth, Durban. It is one of the largest Hindu temples on the African continent and a popular site of worship for the Hindu diaspora. Hindu Festivals: Some of the most widely observed Hindu festivals in South Africa are Diwali, Shivratri (Night of Shiva), Mariamman and Thaipusam festivals, Pongal, Ram Navami (Rama’s Birthday), Krishna Ashtami (Krishna’s Birthday) and ‘Thimithi’ (or ‘fire walking’). Diwali is the most widely celebrated festival throughout all sects of the South African Hindu community. It is celebrated with the ritual lighting of lamps and prayers, which are usually led by the elder women of the household. Many Hindu organizations and local communities organize funfairs, dance and singing programmes on this day. Mariamman and Thaipusam Kavadi festivals are major public events in South Africa. For the Indian Tamil community, they are a part of the process of mobilizing identity as well as personal devotion. The Mariamman festival is celebrated through animal sacrifice, possessions, making vows, fasting, skin piercings and fire walking. Thaipusam Kavadi, involves many of the rituals and austerities of the Mariamman festival. In addition, devotees ceremoniously carry a Kavadi or ‘burden’ (such as a pot of milk carried on the head).

They walk on a set route around the temple carrying the Kavadi on their head and offer it at the temple (Ganesh, 2010: 33). Firewalking festival (Photo: Getty images, 2016) 'Thimithi' or firewalking is a festival that celebrates Draupadi, one of the female characters of Mahabharata, who is considered an incarnation of goddess Mariamman. According to the Tamil Hindu mythology, Draupadi walked on fire to prove her chastity and purify herself after several attempts were made to 56 MDIE 001 Gender and Diaspora defile her. Similarly, devotees walk on hot coals as an act of purification and as an ordeal to prove their innocence before God. It is believed that those with a strong faith will emerge from the fire unharmed. Devotees often enter a state of trance, and believe that they are possessed by a deity who bestows extraordinary powers upon them (Diesel, 1991: 33; see also Maurya, 2017). Islam in Durban: Many among the Indian immigrant population that first came to South Africa were Muslims. They carried with them a rich cultural heritage that gradually percolated into the socio-cultural ethos of Durban. Today about 1.6% of the total South African population practices Islam. Majority of them are Sunni Muslims, while a small percentage is Shias and Ahmadis (Lehohla, 2016: 42).

The main festivals celebrated by the Muslim community include Muharram (month of mourning, marked by a procession on the tenth day), Ramadan (month of fasting), Eid-al-Fitr (end of Ramadan), Eid-al-Adha (marked by animal sacrifice) and Eid-e-Milad (birthday of Prophet Muhammad). Muharram was the first communal indentured event to be observed in Natal. It was the only occasion in the year for which labourers from different plantations could come together as they were granted three days of annual leave. It was also known as 'Coolie Christmas' because it brought Muslims, Christians and Hindus together in a carnival-like celebration on the streets of Natal. Muharram thus became less of a Muslim festival and more of an 'Indian festival' (Desai and Goolam, 2010: 223). This is representative of the unity that binds the heterogeneous Indian community in South Africa. Almost two decades after the arrival of the indentured Indian Muslims in Natal, the Jumma Masjid (or 'Friday Mosque') was built on Grey Street in Durban.

It was the first formal site of Muslim worship in the country. It is built as a series of interlinking buildings, arcades and corridors, in which commerce, religion and community activities take place together. It is the second largest mosque in South Africa and can accommodate up to 6000 worshippers. The Sufi Saheb Badshah Peer Masjid is another important religious site for Muslims in Durban. It was established in 1895 by Saint Shah Ghulam Muhammad (popularly known as Sufi Saheb). It consists of a mosque, a residential quarter, an orphanage, a soup kitchen, welfare department, school, madrasa (Islamic school) and a cemetery within the same complex. Muharram procession in Durban (Photo: SABC News, 2018). 57 Women as Bearers of Culture Christianity in Durban: The Christian community is a small minority (only 1.4 %) of the 'old diaspora'. It can be divided into two sub groups – the 'traditional' Christians (Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Roman Catholics), and the 'pentecostals' – Christians who are relatively newer converts (Pillay, 1991: 1). Since Christianity is the dominant religion in South Africa, the Indian Christian immigrants encountered less friction in settling and integrating into South African society. Some of the main Christian festivals celebrated include Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost (marking 50 days after Sunday) and Ascension Day (commemorating Jesus Christ's ascension into heaven). Some of the most popular churches in Durban are: The Methodist Church, St Thomas' Church, St Mary's Church, The Emmanuel Cathedral and St Nicholas Orthodox Church.

Conclusion

Indian women in South Africa have been instrumental in both preserving and transforming cultural identity across generations. Through active transmission and adaptation, they bridge ancestral traditions and the lived realities of life in the diaspora. Women ensured intergenerational transmission of language, religion, rituals, and cuisine. They used native languages at home and maintained traditions like Holi and Muharram.

Married into patrilocal households, they upheld rituals and festivals, reinforcing cultural continuity even under pressure to assimilate. Beyond preserving culture, women adapted to new social structures, taking on roles uncommon in India-secondary earners, heads of households, or participants in family financial decisions. Widows and first-generation migrants, in particular, expanded women's agency and pushed cultural boundaries. Firsthand accounts from women-like Dr. Qono, Pillay, Singh-are vital sources that illuminate women's roles during exile and in the anti-apartheid struggle. They bear witness to historical injustices and resilience. Their stories also highlight complex identities shaped by exile and reintegration into post-apartheid South Africa. Indian women helped forge hybrid identities melding Indian, African, and Western influences. They participated in cultural groups or created 'coffee morning' networks blending traditions and new practices. Though English became dominant, remnants of native languages remain in food names and religious terminology-evidence of cultural hybridity.

Generational shifts have impacted cultural continuity. Younger Indian South Africans are less fluent in Indian languages, indicating a gradual distancing from original cultural forms. However, women-especially older generations-remain anchors of tradition, advocating for inclusion of Indian cultural heritage in public life and education.

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