

# **Role of Indian Diasporic Associations in Promoting Indian Diasporic Identity in South Africa**

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The Indian Diaspora in South Africa is not a monolithic identity and belongs to different parts and states of India. Each of them speaks a different language, has a unique culture and follows different traditions amongst themselves. In order to preserve and protect this culture especially during the colonial rule in South Africa, many of the Indian Diaspora Associations were formed. These Associations have a long history in promoting the unity amongst their specific communities through promotion of their languages, culture, festivals, practices, food etc. In a way this has provided the Indian Diaspora a unique identity within the larger context of the Indian Diaspora. The various associations and their work has proved to be beneficial in times of emergency and in promoting the interests and concerns of the Indian Diaspora in the global context.

## **History of the Indian Diaspora in South Africa**

The kind of exploitation that the Indians were subjected to during the British rule was of the worst kind as the East India Company was making all the attempts to colonise any fragmented nation which has not emerged into a nation-state yet. As was also evident that the East India Company was involved in business and worked only for the purpose of profit. The company had established a well thought land revenue collection system like the Zamindari, Ryotwari and Mahalwari system in India, which helped it to collect finance for its wars. During the British rule, the industry was changed such that India became only an exporter of raw material to the global markets and an importer of manufactured goods at higher prices. This left the economy in shatters. The British aimed at expanding their empire and looked for ways to produce commercial crops which can be further sold in the international market. Certain crops like sugar and rubber were in huge demand and seemed profitable in the markets. British started expanding their empire through East India Company in many parts of the African continent like South Africa, Mauritius, Ghana, Nigeria and others where there was huge availability of growing such crops. In order to grow such crops, the British needed skilled and semi-skilled labourers and they could find such labour in the Indian colony. After the abolition of slavery, the British thought of exporting labour through the indenture labour system. The indenture labour was also received well by the Indians as it was seen as a kind of escape from the harsh and difficult lives they had in the colonies due the social and economic conditions that existed. Therefore, there are many factors that are seen by some as the most important reasons why this indentureship contract was successful. The Indian population explosion is also one of the reasons for it as it is estimated to have risen from 185 million in 1800 to 285 million by 1900 (Malharbe 1991). Large number of Indians who lived in rural areas lived in extreme poverty.

The colonial policies had reduced many areas in North India to poppy and opium farms. There were famines, droughts, people were dying of hunger, floods, diseases. This made them opt for the indenture and look for prospect in foreign land rather than staying in India (Northrup 1995). The presence of Indians in South Africa is well known. As discussed above that due to the need of labourers in other British colonies, they started bringing in labourers from India to many colonies in Africa. One of these colonies was South Africa, where Indians went mostly under the category of 'indentured labour'. Indian labourers were hard working and efficient, which is what the Britishers needed at the moment. The Natal Government passed laws 13, 14 and 15 in 1859 which established the system of indentured labour from India to South Africa. These laws dealt with the rules and regulations that existed to put out the Indenture system in place for example, the powers and duties of the immigration officer, working conditions of the labourers, wages, terms of the contract etc. (South African History Online, 3.04.2011)

Therefore, starting 1860, the migration of Indians started to South Africa with the first ship 'Truro' reaching the ports of Durban from Madras with 342 indentured labourers. There were large number of Indian migrations from the year 1860-1886, there were atleast 4120 males, 1510 females and 870 children. The second ship was named 'Belvedere' and the twentieth ship that arrived in 1866 was named 'Isabella Hercus'. A total of 6,445 immigrants arrived between 1860-1866, with a total of 20 ships reaching South Africa between these six years. However, the migration started increasing and in the year 1906 between January to June itself, there were thirteen ships that went to South Africa with the Indian migrants carrying a total number of 6,141 migrants. So, a total of 152,184 Indians had been exported from India to work in South African farms under indentureship till 1911 when indentureship was completely stopped after a lot of efforts by the Indian leaders who pressurised the colonial government to abolish indentureship (Bhana, 1987).

However, the Indian migrants who went to South Africa as indentured labourers mostly decided to settle in foreign land even after the end of their contract. Therefore, the role of Indians in the socio-economic as well as the political structure of the country is immense. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi have played a very important role in developing the political consciousness amongst Indians in South Africa. There were various forms of media through which the Indians political consciousness was developed. At the same time, the formation of various Indian Diasporic Associations paved the way for a secured and assimilated future for the Indian community in South Africa.

Indians also migrated as 'Passenger Indians'. These consist of those Indians who migrated as per their own will and not because of any contract. These were the Indians who migrated for business purpose as traders. This type of migration was very less as compared to indentured Indians. Aboobakar Ahmad is known as the first Indians trader to settle in the Natal region of South Africa who migrated in 1875. Most of the Indians who belonged to this passenger Indian category became quite successful and even gave competition to the White community. It was also known that the Passenger Indians did not mingle socially with the Indenture Indians. These Indians were mostly Muslim and some were also Parsi, Hindu, Jains from Gujarat and Bombay.

### **Role of Diasporic Organisations in promoting 'Indianness'**

The Indian Diaspora distinctly maintained its religion and language, caste was also very important for the Indians. Though they were settled in South Africa and intended to live in foreign land forever, they were quite adamant in maintaining this Indian identity. This was done with the help of various associations especially created for this purpose. For example, the *Hindu Maha Sabha* established in 1908 was an association of like-minded Hindus working towards creating awareness about Hindutva, sensitising Indians about vegetarian food, promoting Hindu festivals and traditions. There were also many regional associations that came up later like the *South African Tamil Federation* which was completely focused on the interest of the Tamil Indians. Tamils have always been very protective of their culture especially their language. They feared that their language would be lost amongst other Indians and felt a need to promote Tamil culture. Tamil education was promoted by the Tamil Indians in South Africa and they also started their own schools. Tamil newspapers were also introduced like *Viveka Banu* and *Senthamil Selvan*. Another one was, *Andhra Association of South Africa (AASA)* established in 2017 in Johannesburg, South Africa to unite the Telugu speaking people from Andhra Pradesh in South India. AASA serves to promote the interests of the Telugu community through various events, festivals and community gatherings etc. There are a total of 800,000 Indians living in Kwazulu Natal and around 220,000 live in the Gauteng region. Amongst them there are approximately 40,000 Gujarati Hindus and around 60,000-80,000 Gujarati Muslims (Vahed 2010:615). Because of the different Gujarati identity, there were some associations like *Surat Hindu Association* which was established in the year 1907 for promoting Gujarati Hindu identity. However, there were also different castes that existed hence there was a need for caste-based associations from Kathiawadis like Pattani Soni Association, Mochi Mandar, Kumbhar Mandar. Three different Gujarati associations also came together and merged into one in 1993 as *Gujarati Hindu Sanskruti Kendra* to promote the interests of the Gujarati community as a whole (Vahed 2010).

Therefore, identities are a very intrinsic part of the Indian Diaspora in South Africa which is being maintained since the last century with the help of various regional associations and groups. This paper would attempt to look at some of the regional organisations that have played an important role in promoting the Indian Diaspora identity in South Africa. Some of these associations were formed in the early years when Indians were trying to find a new home in South Africa and were trying to consolidate themselves. The caste and regional differences were quite evident among the Indians who left for South Africa under the indentureship period. This is the reason that we find, associations based on religion and regional aspirations. There are many other smaller and inactive regional associations too. Due to various limitations, this paper is only discussing some of the Diasporic associations formed on the basis of religion, regions and language.

### **Hindi Maha Sabha**

#### ***Until the departure of Swami Shankaranand***

The South African Maha Sabha was formed in 1912 with an objective to revive the Hindus in the country. The South African Maha Sabha was formally announced in the National

Conference held in 1912 under the leadership of Swami Shankaranand. He was a reform oriented Hindu missionary from Punjab, India who had been brought to South Africa. The main aim of the Hindu Maha Sabha was to act as an umbrella organisation for Hindus all over South Africa but because of the concentration of Hindu Indians in the region of Durban mostly, it remained largely a Durban based organisation. South African Hindus are also divided into different linguistic groups – Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu which can be further divided according to their regional affiliations. For example, Gujaratis who form a large portion amongst Indian Hindus have further affiliations into Kathiawadis and Suratis depending on their region of origin. Due to the caste system and economic inequalities, there are differences on the basis of caste and class too (Bhana 1991). Hence, there were different types of Hindus amongst Indians who had travelled from different parts of India. The Hindu Maha Sabha attempted to bring together this variety of Hindus under the category of South African Hindu identity.

During the early years, the indentured migrants were busy in recreating a religious life for themselves in this new environment and mostly followed populist Hinduism. Several of the Indian festivals were celebrated widely and there was no central organisation that could represent the Hindus as a group altogether. Infact, days like Muharram were also well- known and were being actively participated by the Hindu population (Vahed 2002). But this soon became an issue of concern for some of the reform-oriented Hindus, who feared that the Hindu identity was being diluted and there is a need to assert the Hindu identity amongst Indians in South Africa. One such person named M. C. Varman helped raise some money to invite two important Arya Samajis from India to lecture the Hindus on South Africa. One was Bhai Parmanand who visited during August 1905 and March 1906 and other was Swami Shankaranand, who was instrumental in establishment of the Hindu Maha Sabha. Bhai Parmanand became a well-known figure around the world soon. He went and stayed with Gandhi as a vedic missionary and attracted many people for his lectures. His lectures were enchanting to the Hindus especially the youth and he talked about religion, education and philosophy. Bhai Parmanand left for Guyana in 1910 and thus started his journey on giving lectures at many other places in the world. He also met Lala Hardyal and supported his revolutionary ideas, he was the one who convinced him to go to USA to mobilise Indian population. Bhai Parmanand was the founder member of the famous and revolutionary Ghadar Party and was arrested during the revolt in 1915 and was sent to harsh imprisonment in the Andamans. He was released in 1920 as a gesture of goodwill by the colonial government. After that he joined Gandhi's Non-Violence Movement. But, Indians in South Africa loved him and made several attempts to bring him back to South Africa to motivate them. Unfortunately, he was denied visa to South Africa by the colonial government in 1922 and again in 1928 (27.06.2021).

The other prominent figure in South Africa was Swami Shankaranand who reached Durban, South Africa in the year 1908. The Hindus in South Africa welcomed him with open arms. The reception committee that came to receive him at Durban made it clear that they needed a leader. He brought about many significant changes for the Hindu community in South Africa. Just like Swami Parmanand, he was also a follower of Arya Samaj movement founded by Swami

Dayanand Saraswati. The Arya Samaj ideology talked mostly about reform of the Hindu society by bringing about a change in the evil past practices of the society like child marriage, enforced widowhood, caste system. The main problem with the colonists was their dominance in the field of education. It was felt that the introduction of English medium education has neglected the importance of culture among the Indian youth. He believed that Indian children should be provided education in vernacular medium so that they are close to their culture, language, customs and traditions. Swamiji's personality was so influential that he led to the formation of many organisations like Ved Dharma Sabha, Hindu Young Men's Association, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and Young Men's Vedic Society in South Africa.

Diwali as a festival was also recognised due to Swami's efforts. It was only due to Swami's effort that the Hindu population was being granted Diwali as a holiday. It wasn't a declared holiday earlier and majority of Hindus celebrated the festival of Muharram.

It was only Swami Shankarananda who made conscious efforts to unite the Hindu community as he saw that there was a pressing need to bring all the Hindus together. Therefore, in 1912 he convened a National Conference of all Hindu groups, which saw huge participation from all over the country of three hundred delegates. The deliberations during this Conference gave birth to Hindu Maha Sabha with Mr. CV Pillay as its first President.

### ***Hindu Maha Sabha from 1913***

After Swami Shankaranand's departure in 1913 there was a void in the leadership of the Maha Sabha but soon different leaders joined in. Later, the Maha Sabha proved to be an important organisation for promoting Hindu festivals, establishment of Hindu temples or places for religious gathering, legal recognition of Hindu priests, introduction of Hindi medium education for Indian children, establishment of Indian schools. It also worked towards providing religious education. The organisation also made conscious efforts towards keeping a check on missionary activities as they feared conversion. The founders and leaders of this organisation were concerned that South African Hindus were abandoning aspects of their heritage and becoming more and more western. They organised Conferences that focused specifically on issues related to the Indian community in South Africa for example, in 1944 recognition of Hindu marriages, conversion, religious education in schools were some of the major issues. Some of the common papers presented in the Conferences held in

Also, the Maha Sabha as an organisation was not involved in politics, but we also know that many leaders were politically involved in their individual capacities. They never used the platform of Maha Sabha to carry forward their political aspirations. As Bhawani Dayal, a leading figure in the history of Hinduism in South Africa also observed that Maha Sabha in India could not generate religious tensions because it was politically involved while in South Africa it is mainly concerned with religious, culture and welfare activities (Gopalan 2017).

### **Other Regional Indian Diaspora organisations**

There are many other regional Indian Diaspora organisations doing significant work for their communities and people. To name a few- Andhra Pradesh Association of South Africa, Natal Tamil Vedic Association, South African Tamil Federation.

The **Andhra Maha Sabha South Africa** was formed in 1931, with the efforts of Sir Kurma Reddy. The people from Andhra Pradesh realised how they had neglected their language and needed to come together to promote their culture and language. The Telugus attended a very important meeting in Durban in 1931. Thereafter, there were branch affiliates of the association that started operating soon. The **Andhra Pradesh Association of South Africa** was founded in Johannesburg in 2017 and works towards uniting the Telugu speaking Indian community in South Africa.

**South African Telugu Community (SATC)** has also been organising various educational and cultural events to promote the interests of Telugu community in South Africa. AASA has been organising community events, celebration of festivals. It provides welfare, growth and empowerment in order to provide the right platform for the Telugu speaking Indian community. They celebrate festivals like Ugadi with fanfare.

The **Natal Tamil Vedic Association** was established by the group of Tamil Indians in South Africa in order to promote their interests within the larger South African Indian community. This association was very significant in promoting Tamil education for the upliftment of the community. Being a diasporic community, the issues and concerns centred around promoting and protecting the Tamil culture and heritage amongst the Tamil Indians in South Africa. Their work was crucial in bringing together the Tamil Indians in South Africa with regard to protection of their culture, language, heritage, festivals, songs etc.

**South African Tamil Federation** was formed in the early 60s. Mr. N. C. Naidoo attended one of these meetings held in Pretoria by the Hindu shoe-makers group. There were many delegates who attended that meeting and expressed their views. On the return of Mr. Naidoo to Durban there were many people who expressed interest in establishment of a separate Tamil organisation. A lot of people could not gain membership of Natal Tamil Vedic Association due to the strict membership rules. In 1967 during a general meeting convened at the Natal Tamil Vedic Society Hall there were at least twenty two organisations present who expressed their concern of having a national Tamil body which should represent all of them. During the three day conference, many important papers were discussed by the delegates and one of them was by J.R. Devar on "The Need for a South African Tamil Organisation". The SATF then worked towards the promotion of Tamil language and made some demands like introduction of Tamil medium education in schools as third language, recognition of Tamil medium education, setting up of an examination board Thamizh Kazhagam which will be help in preparing the syllabus, conducting examinations and issuing certificates to students and teachers. Most of these demands were accomplished.

In 1979, in a crucial meeting between Natal Tamil Vedic Association and South African Tamil Federation it was decided to invite the NTVA to affiliate with SATF which will help in consolidation of programmes. Thus, the decade of 80s and 90s was quite successful where both organisations jointly organised various events. Department of Tamil was also established at the University of Durban and many such successful feats were accomplished which helped carry forward the interests of the South African Tamil community.

It must be noted that nearly all the Tamils of the early period spoke only Tamil and hardly knew English. As a source of communication and to give news about the country adopted, as

well as India the first Tamil newspaper - VIVEKA BANU - was introduced. The Tamils read this with avid interest. This came to an end when the principal editor went back to India. The 1930's saw the appearance of another Tamil newspaper - SENTHAMIL SELVAN - that satisfied the desire of the Tamils for news in their own language. Several other publications followed but they were short-lived for want of material support. The Tamil immigrants pursued, in a modest form, aspects, of their culture, at the same time exposing their children to them. They spoke their mother tongue within the confines of the barracks compound and outside and worshipped their chosen Deity at their simple make - shift temples. Some of the children were fortunate enough to receive the rudiments of Tamil from educated elders who may be counted among the many unsung personalities of early Tamil education. In spite of steady progress being maintained, Tamil leaders began to express concern about the future of Tamil education, because they feared that, as a strong priority was given to English education and there was motivation for it, the promotion of Tamil education would be neglected. More Tamil leaders emerged to promote Tamil culture vigorously.

### **Gujarati Network South Africa**

The Gujarati community amongst the Indian Diaspora in South Africa forms a significant portion of the population. If we look at the numbers, the Indian population of South Africa numbering over 1.1 million constituted 2.5 percent of the country's population of 45 million in census of 2001. Over 70 percent Indians live in Kwazulu Natal and 20 percent in Gauteng. This percentage of the Indians population consisted of roughly 40,000 Gujarati Hindus and around 60,000-80,000 Gujarati Muslims (Vahed 2010). The term Gujarati has been used for different traders who belong to different regions of Gujarat like Kutch, Kathiawad, Surat. There are also divisions on the basis of caste like Hindus, Parsis, Muslims and on the basis of class like traders, workers etc. (Vahed. 2010: 616).

The three major Gujarati Associations that had been working for the Hindu Gujaratis specifically were, the **Surat Hindu Association** formed in 1907, **Kathiawad Sewa Samaj** formed in 1943 and **Arya Bhadan Mandir**. The All of them merged in 1993 when the divisions of Gujaratis from Surat or Kathiawad was not as important as the survival of the Gujaratis within the Indian Diasporic community in South Africa. The establishment of Gujarati Hindu Sanskruti Kendra has served the purpose of uniting different Hindu communities of Gujarat.

Therefore, the various Associations of the Indian Diaspora community in South Africa has worked hard to keep together the Indian communities and to help them organise themselves to keep their culture, language, literature intact at one place and on the other to also fight against the evil practice of Apartheid in South Africa.

### **Conclusion**

The Indian Diaspora community which is not monolithic in nature has been able to best express itself with the help of various diasporic associations. These associations have been able to provide a platform where they can share their sentiments and concerns and build plans to carry forward their agendas in the future. Some of the Indian associations have also played an

important role in influencing the political agenda of the political parties and their leaders in South Africa. Moreover, after the significant change in the Diaspora policy of the Indian Government, which has adopted an approach of active association with the diaspora, these associations are also being heard intently by the political leadership in India. So much so that these associations have been able to influence the diaspora policy of the Government of India to a great extent. Thus, the importance of these Diasporic associations lies not just for the promotion of Indian culture and heritage but also symbolises the strength of these associations in the overall political and economic structure of their host countries.

Many Diaspora Associations have been instrumental in maintaining healthy bilateral relations of their host country with India. Any visit by the Indian Prime Minister to other countries includes a full day interaction with the Indian Diaspora population of that country. This new change in the Diaspora policy of the new government has been welcomed by the People of Indian Origin, who are now being heard by the government at home. The acknowledgement of this huge diaspora population itself has brought about significant changes in the attitude of the People of Indian Origin. The immediate and timely response of the Ministry of External Affairs in times of crisis of any person of Indian descent in any part of the world has been applauded. The Diaspora Associations are also being formally recognised by the Indian government at various points. For example, the work of Diaspora Associations during the Covid-19 pandemic 2020 has shown the capability and capacity of these groups to fully function in times of emergencies. These Diaspora Associations have not only helped people in their host countries but also sent help to their home countries as well by donating in the PM care fund. Similarly, the way Indian Diasporic Association have helped People of Indian Origin (PIO) especially students in Ukraine during the Russia- Ukraine war 2022 has also shown how systematically and effectively these associations can work. Thus, the existence of the Diasporic Associations can not only provide help to each other in times of crisis but also to their home countries if needed, and most importantly, these associations keep working towards building that Indian identity in another part of the world. This 'Indianness' is the essence through which Indians from all around the world come together and unite themselves.

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