

# Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa

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## Introduction

The deracialization of South African society in the midst of accelerating economic and cultural globalization has set in motion profound social, cultural and political changes that have confronted the existing notions of identity of most South Africans. Many Muslims are faced with a dilemma, as state acceptance of abortion, prostitution, gay rights and so on are unacceptable to them. The dilemma for them is whether to integrate in the larger society or embrace an ever more strict observance of Islam, or 'valorize' the tradition, in post-modern jargon? How do they resolve the dilemma of participating in South African institutions yet remaining a conscious part of the worldwide *ummah*? Many Muslims are concerned because they have to find a place for themselves in the midst of a number of other religious, racial and ethnic groups in an environment that does not support an Islamic world-view. The central concern of this paper is to examine how changes in South Africa have resulted in the altering, affirming or abandoning of the identities of Muslims. This will involve an examination of the complex association between racial, ethnic, class, national and Islamic identities of Indian Muslims.

## Identity: Fluid and Complex

The 'post-modern' position is that identities, which provide individuals with 'firm locations as social individuals', are fluid.<sup>1</sup> According to Hall, they are constantly being negotiated in the 'interaction' between individual and society. The inner core of an individual ('the real me') is modified in 'dialogue with the cultural worlds "outside" and the identities which they offer'. Consequently, identity becomes a 'moveable feast: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems that surround us'.<sup>2</sup> As far as South Africa is concerned, one has to concur with Thornton that:

There is no fundamental identity that any South African clings to in common with all, or even most other South Africans. South Africans have multiple identities in multiple contexts; South Africans [also] have multiple identities in common contexts [e.g. political party] and common identities in multiple contexts ... A Muslim, may span many religious, political, social and cultural contexts and thus link them together into a social universe. These identities, then, can be said to be multiple and crosscutting in that each overlaps a range

## NATAL'S INDIANS, THE EMPIRE AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR, 1899-1902

By  
Goolam Vahed

Until recently there was a virtual exclusion of Black peoples from histories of the South African War which began on 11 October 1899 when the South African Republic and the Orange Free State declared war on Great Britain. The traditional historiography has focused primarily on the actions and sufferings of the white protagonists, both Boer and British.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising given that the focus by early scholars was almost entirely on the struggle between Afrikaner nationalism and British imperialism in which the role of Blacks was seen as irrelevant. The war, however, impacted heavily on all South Africans. By focusing on Indians, a little-studied group, this micro-study will contribute to the process of providing a more complete picture of the war years. As far as Indians are concerned a number of questions are raised. Why did Indians, who were subject to oppression by English-speaking whites, volunteer on the side of Britain? In what active and non-combatant roles did Indians participate in the war? How were they affected in the theatres of war? What losses did they suffer? Where did Indian refugees flee to and who provided for them? What was the impact of the Indian role to the overall situation?

### Arrival and Settlement of Indians:

Indians arrived in South Africa in two streams. Between 1860 and 1911, 152,641 workers arrived in Natal as indentured immigrants. From the mid-1870's entrepreneurs from Gujarat on the west coast of India began arriving in Natal.<sup>2</sup> A third social group comprised an educated elite that gradually emerged as a result of the early opportunities provided by mission schools. This small elite included lawyers, teachers, civil servants and accountants.<sup>3</sup> This class division, very lucidly explored in Swan's seminal work, was perpetuated during the war in the manner in which Natal's Indians were recruited, their role in the war and their treatment at the conclusion of the war. There were approximately 65,000 Indians in Natal at the outbreak of war. In search of economic opportunities, Indians had expanded beyond Natal's borders to other parts of South Africa and by the late 1890s there were at least 15,000 Indians in the Transvaal,<sup>4</sup> 700 to 1000 Indians at the Kimberly diamond fields by 1880.<sup>5</sup> Port Elizabeth and East London each had a few hundred Indians at the outbreak of war,<sup>6</sup> while there were around 2,000 Indians in Cape Town.<sup>7</sup>

By 1899 Indians faced discrimination at the hands of the English settlers and the Boers. Directly and indirectly they were made to feel like an unwanted people. The English settler legislature in Natal passed a spate of anti-Indian laws in the 1890s; in the Cape there was a growing sentiment for exclusion. After Natal achieved self-government in 1893, the government passed legislation to force Indians to reindenture or return to India upon completing their indenture and to legally subordinate non-indentured Indians so that whites would feel secure against the "Asiatic Menace."<sup>8</sup> During this period Indian politics was dominated by merchants who tried to obtain equality with Whites on the basis of Queen Victoria's 1858 Proclamation which asserted the equality of all British subjects. In 1894 merchants formed the NIC to protect their trade, franchise and residence rights. Each of the NIC's six presidents between 1894 and 1913 was a prominent merchant.<sup>9</sup> The attitude of the governments of the Boer republics was one of undisguised hostility towards Indians; indeed the OFS barred them totally. In the pre-war years British imperial authorities seemed like friends when they defended the rights of Indians. Thanks to British intervention, Law 3 of 1885 allowed only residential segregation instead of total segregation for the Indians in the Transvaal.<sup>10</sup> When, therefore, war broke out, Indians supported the British. Besides, since India was also part of the British empire, Indians felt that this would give them some leverage in their dealings with the British imperial authorities. More than anybody else Gandhi articulated this position.

### Declaration of Loyalty:

## Swami Shankeranand and the Consolidation of Hinduism in Natal, 1908-1914

By  
Goolam Vahed

Over a decade ago Maureen Swan remonstrated that in the pre-1914 discourse on Indian South Africans "there is no real place for anyone but Gandhi.... The flaw is that analyses which concentrate on Gandhi to the exclusion, or virtual exclusion, of his constituents, inevitably offer a superficial, and thus often distorted, picture of the social and political reality..."<sup>1</sup> Indians are treated in the existing literature as an undifferentiated mass; distinctions and differences within the Indian community are ignored. Little has changed since Swan first recorded her observations. There still remains very little representation of those outside of Gandhi's political community.

This study will attempt to fill this void by examining the stay in Natal of a prominent Hindu leader, Swami Shankeranand, who involved himself in political, social and religious matters, and who opposed Gandhi on many issues, including passive resistance. By shifting the focus from Gandhi it is hoped to explore the tensions and divisions amongst Indians, as well to move away from purely political issues to social and religious matters which receive scant mention in most works, but which played a vital role in moulding Indians identities.

### ARRIVAL OF INDIANS

The British annexation of Natal in 1843 and subsequent arrival of white immigrants stimulated the growth of settler agriculture. Natal imported indentured workers from India to solve the labour crisis. In all 152,184 indentured Indian immigrants arrived in Natal between 1860 and 1911 to work on the colony's sugar plantations. While there were a small number of higher class Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishas, the majority of immigrants were from the lower castes.<sup>2</sup> Immigrants spoke a number of different languages: those from the Ganges valley spoke Bhojpuri (or Hindi), those from western India spoke Gujarati and those from the south spoke Tamil or Telugu.<sup>3</sup>

Indentured Indians had to work for five years for the employer to whom they were assigned and were entitled to a free return passage to India after 10 years. However, 58% of migrants remained in the Colony after indenture as reintegration into Indian society was

**Short CV:**

Dr Goolam Vahed is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Durban-Westville. His research has focused on twentieth-century Durban and various aspects of the history of Indians in Natal. His most recent publication was completed in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies*. His work will also feature in forthcoming issues of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *Transformation* and *Journal of Muslim Minorities*. He is currently conducting research on indentured labour in Colonial Natal.

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**‘African Gandhi’:**

**The South African War and the Limits of Imperial Identity**

By

**Goolam Vahed**

Mahatma Gandhi achieved greatness for the struggles that he fought on the political, economic, cultural and moral fronts. His ideas about love, truth, soul force (‘brahmacharya’) and Satyagraha have universal appeal beyond the Indian setting and mark him as one of the outstanding individuals of the twentieth century. Yet the twenty-one years that Gandhi spent in South Africa were critical in the ‘Making of the Mahatma’. The African experience impacted on Gandhi’s conception of Indian identity and nationhood, Hinduism,<sup>1</sup> and understanding of colonialism. These years also allowed him to develop his special technique of transforming society. The South African War marked an important crossroads in Gandhi’s South African experience. Prior to the war he had relied heavily on the politics of petitioning and placed great emphasis on being part of a British Empire. The war experiences forced Gandhi to reassess this strategy. Feeling betrayed by the British, Gandhi began to seriously question his beliefs and methods, and look for alternative means of redress for Indians. While this transition was not sudden, the war years marked the beginning of Gandhi’s transformation. This study of Gandhi’s response to the war has relevance beyond his personal transformation. It broaches the wider issues of the position of Western educated elites in the colonial structure and their impact in ‘imagining’, following Benedict Anderson<sup>2</sup>, nationhood and transforming colonial states into nation-states.

**Gandhi Arrives in Natal**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in Porbander, Kathiawar, on the west coast of India in 1869. The youngest of six children, he completed his primary and secondary schooling in Rajcot where his family had moved in 1876. The opportunity that Gandhi had for a modern-style education must be seen in the context of Colonial states increasing their functions from the middle of the nineteenth century. This created a need

## A 'Public Health Nuisance': The Victoria Street Early Morning Squatters Market, 1910-1934

By  
Goolam Vahed

The focus of this paper is the "Indian Market", a famous tourist landmark in Durban. While local and foreign tourists have flocked in large numbers to the Market for most of this century, few realise that the Market has historically been an arena of struggle between Indians and whites concerned about public health in Durban, between Indians and the local state, and amongst Indians themselves. This struggle over the Market encapsulated the class and caste differences that existed amongst Indians, as well as the racial and class prejudice of Durban's planners and citizens.

There were four markets in Durban during the period under review. These were the City Market in Warwick Avenue where all selling was done by whites, a Native Meat Market in Victoria Street for African traders, an enclosed Indian Market in Victoria Street comprising of stalls where groceries, cakes, baskets, flowers, curios, and other items could be bought in addition to fruits and vegetables and finally, a street market in Victoria Street which was known as the "Early Morning" or "Squatters" Market which specialised in the sale of fruits and vegetables. It is the latter that this paper will focus on.

### Arrival of Indians **Centre**

<sup>184</sup>  
A total of 152,641 indentured Indians arrived between 1860 and 1911 to work on Natal's sugar plantations. Indentured immigrants were followed to Natal by entrepreneurs from Gujarat on the west coast of India who arrived from the mid-1870s at their own expense. While the majority of indentured Indians were Hindus of the lower caste, the majority of traders were Muslims. Indentured Indians came on five-year contracts with options to renew them, return to India, or stay in Natal. 58% chose to remain in the colony after indenture. Very few Indians reindentured.<sup>1</sup> In 1884, for example, there were 8,951 indentured Indians in Natal but 20,877 free Indians.<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning free Indians sought land in the vicinity of a market to grow fruits and vegetables such as potatoes, cabbages, garlic, paddy rice, melons, beans, chillies, and tobacco for the