

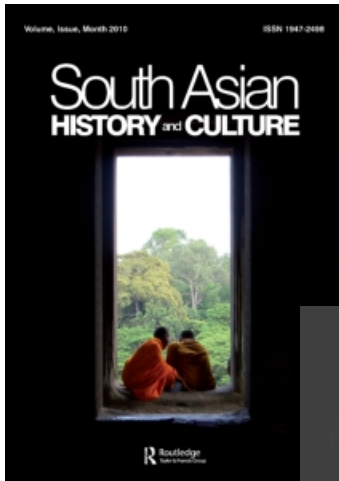
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An 'Imagined Community' in diaspora: Gujaratis in South Africa

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Increasing attention is being paid to the heterogeneous identity of Indian South Africans. This article contributes to this literature by highlighting the distinct migratory history of Gujarati South Africans and the importance these histories have in perceptions of community identity. It traces key features of the early Gujarati migratory process, the ways in which Gujarati identities have been reconfigured over the past century, the relationship between Gujarati Hindus and Muslims, Gujarati mobility, how Gujaratis fit into the broader Indian population and how Gujarat is imagined within the diaspora in the contemporary moment.

Keywords: South African Gujaratis; diaspora; Hindu; Muslim; identity; migration

The state of Gujarat is inextricably bound to South Africa. One of Gujarat's most revered sons, Mohandas K. Gandhi, learnt his trade as a political reformer here and South Africa has been home to one of the larger concentrations of Gujaratis in the diaspora for over a century. The year 2010 marks the 50th year of the institution of the linguistic state of Gujarat as well as the 150th year since the first indentured Indians set foot in Natal.¹

The British used indentured labour in Mauritius from 1834 and in Natal from 1860, and both the British and the Germans used indentured labour to construct the East African railways in the 1890s. Gujarati traders followed Indian workers to East and Southern Africa, as well as Mauritius, South Africa and Zimbabwe, where they established themselves in business as retail and wholesale merchants between white settlers and indigenous African peoples.² To put this into context, the Indian population of South Africa, numbering just over 1.1 million, constituted around 2.5% of the country's population of 45 million when the last census count was taken in 2001. Over 70% (800,000) Indians live in KwaZulu Natal and 20% (220,000) in Gauteng. Of these, there are approximately 40,000 Gujarati Hindus and 60,000–80,000 Gujarati Muslims.³

This article traces the key features of the early migratory process, the ways in which Gujarati identities have been reconfigured over the past century, the relationship between Gujarati Hindus and Muslims, Gujarati mobility and how Gujarat is imagined within the diaspora in the contemporary moment.

Gujaratis, as these narratives suggest, cannot be flattened out. The appellation 'Gujaratis', often used synonymously with 'traders' and 'passengers' in the literature on South African diaspora, does not correspond to a homogeneous merchant community.

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It applies to traders from different regions of Gujarat (Kutch, Kathiawar, Surat), religious backgrounds (Hindus, Parsis, Christians, Muslims) and class (traders, workers and variants).⁴ Gujaratis initially defined themselves in regional, sub-regional and micro-regional identities⁵ and speaking of Gujaratis in broad strokes masks these differences even if outsiders ignore these distinctions. Migrants left India for various reasons: there were gender, generational, religious and class differences. The historical links and meaning of Gujarat has differed, and present-day aspirations have been shaped by these differences. The imaging of Gujarat takes different forms in the contemporary moment. Some Gujaratis, in fact, do not draw inspiration from Gujarat but from Bollywood and India's economic ascendancy and cricketing might. Others may draw inspiration from the Middle East. Identity does not sit still and the meaning of Gujarat is always transforming.

For me, writing about Gujarat is as much a personal journey as it is an intellectual undertaking. My own bloodline goes back to Kathor, a small village on the banks of the Tapi River about 25 km from Surat city. Goolam Hoosen Vahed, my namesake and grandfather, was born in Kathor in 1900. He was sent to Natal when he was five to live with his sister Khatija who had married a pioneer settler Ismail Haffejee. Goolam Hoosen worked a series of lowly paid jobs. He married Mariam in Kathor in 1926. Two children, my father Mohamed (1928–1985) and his brother Ebrahim, were born in Durban before Goolam Hoosen returned to Kathor in 1934. By all accounts he was struggling to make ends meet on his paltry wages. In India, he joined Mercantile Marine in October 1934 and worked in the catering department on voyages between Bombay and London until 1939. Mariam died in childbirth in 1937. Struggling financially, he returned to Durban with his family in 1947. He took up a position as janitor at the *Musaffer Khana* in Alice Street and sent Mohamed and Ebrahim to work for relatives in rural Inanda. In local parlance he was a perennial 'battler'. After 4 years in Inanda, the brothers moved to Durban where Mohamed took up employment as salesman at a retail store Dominion Outfitters. His meagre income was supplemented by his wife Ayesha supplying *rotis* to local restaurants, keeping table boarders, preparing lunch for local business houses and food that Mohamed hawked at the Indian market on Saturdays. Mohamed, for his part, also did vegetable shopping at the Indian market for the flat residents each morning before going to work. Although Ayesha did not speak any English, Mohamed knew enough to serve his customers. He kept in touch with Kathor through regular correspondence through letter in Gujarati with relatives. Sometime in the late 1990s I arranged for Dr Usha Desai, a Gujarati lecturer, to translate the Gujarati letters and diary. But before she could make the translations, my car was stolen, with the material in it. For all practical purposes my link with Gujarat was also stolen. While I speak a smattering of Gujarati, which was the language of communication with my mother, my children speak English only.

In some ways, this personal history is symptomatic of the larger story of the community, and this article, which combines historical accounts with ethnographic interviews with key Gujarati community leaders, is an attempt to make sense of the community's wider social trajectory in South Africa.

The formative period: race, caste and class

Although affluent Gujarati traders had a centuries-old history of international trade, others were driven by more immediate needs. During the 1860s, rural families in Surat profited from the short-lived cotton boom resulting from southern states stopping cotton production during the American Civil War. When the boom ended, many families were left destitute. The 1877 *Gazetteer* reported that 'rural Bohras are not in so good a condition. . . . Many

contracted expensive habits during the prosperous times of the American war, and have fallen into debt' and went to Bombay, Mauritius, Burma, Siam and Rangoon in search of work.⁶

Monies remitted by migrants led to personal and community recovery. The *Gazetteer* reported in 1899 that the 'Randir and Surat Bohras have of late become rich and prosperous in trading with Burma and East Africa'. Many of the early migrants to Natal had arrived from Mauritius. They were spurred as much by the conditions in Mauritius as by stories of trade opportunities in Natal. Port Louis in Mauritius was plagued by diseases for several years in the 1860s. This, together with a hurricane in 1868 and opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 reduced the number of ships visiting Port Louis.⁷ Natal appealed to Indian traders because it was close to Mauritius, had similar climatic conditions and a ready Indian market.

Until the early 1890s, the majority of Natal's passenger migrants were Muslims who followed the lead of pioneers through kinship networking and chain migration. Although there were some very affluent traders among Hindus, many who came from the 1890s engaged in petty trade or entered the service sector as shop assistants, bookkeepers and teachers.⁸ Before the arrival of Hindus, passenger Muslims were incorrectly called 'Arabs' in Natal because of their religion and mode of dress, which consisted of a skull cap (*topi* or *fez*), trousers (*izzar*), tight waistcoat with silk buttons and chemise (*kamis*).⁹ Ebrahim Camroodeen, for example, complained to the immigration restriction officer that 'no distinction is made between common and better class Indians'.¹⁰ In a confidential report to the Durban Town Council (DTC) in 1885, police inspector Richard Alexander pointed out that the 'Arabs will only associate with Indians so far as trade compels them to'.¹¹ When A.S. Goga of Ladysmith died in Surat during a short vacation in 1899, for example, his death certificate gave his caste as 'Sooni Hora', whereas his Natal death certificate described him as 'Indian, commonly called Arab'.¹² Here we see Goga's multiple identities. He was a Sunni as opposed to Shia Muslim; a 'Hora' as opposed to Memon or Miabhai; a Muslim Indian ('Arab') as opposed to a Hindu Muslim and a trader as opposed to an indentured migrant. Muslims soon discovered that the racial order in Natal made no such distinction.

According to the 1904 census, there were 100,918 Indians in Natal. Swan (1985) estimated that passengers averaged around 2000 persons in the period 1890–1910. Although constituting a small segment of the Indian population, Gujaratis were divided by religion, ethnicity, class, caste and region. In class terms, they were segmented, broadly, into large capitalists with transnational connections, wholesalers with multiple branches, small retailers, salaried managers and highly exploited shop assistants. The broadest divide was between migrants from northwestern Gujarat (Saurashtra) and those from the south (around Surat). Muslim passengers from Porbander in the north were known as Memons (Jhavy, Moosa and Joosub) and Hindus, mainly Brahmins (Trikamjee, Gordhan, Soni), as Kathiawadis.¹³ Among Muslims, there were a small number of Urdu-speaking migrants from Rander (Miabhais) and Marathi speakers from Konkan (Koknees), but the majority were Sunni Bohras from the villages of Surat (names like Paruk, Moosa, Lockhat). Both Hindus and Muslims from Surat and surrounding villages were known as Surtis. Names did not necessarily correspond with caste or religion, as Patel, Soni and Desai were common to Hindus and Muslims, whereas Soni and Desai were common to Surtis and Kathiawadis. Brahmins featured in both groups.

The lines of division ran deep. Judge Chiman Patel, a respected community leader and President of the Gujarati Hindu Saraskauti Kendra, recalls that 'not even Patels could marry. For example, Dr P.L. Patel was a different grouping of Patel from my Patel family

so, even if P.L. wanted to marry my sister in those days, they would have [had] difficulties. And among Sonis there were Pattani Sonis and Girana Sonis and they too could not intermarry.' Some families retained their traditional caste occupations. Dr Desai pointed to the example of the Desai, Gandhi and Chohan (Muslim) families from Kathiawad who were in the grocery business, Sonis monopolized the jewellery trade and Mistris furniture.¹⁴ Caste was a form of social distinction among Gujarati Hindus as well as Muslims – even though in theory Islam rejected caste.

According to the 1877 *Gazetteer* Sunni Muslims, 'while professing Islam, did not intermarry with other Mussulmans'.¹⁵ Like Surtis, Memons were divided between those who came from Porbander – generally richer and relatively fairer in complexion – and those from outlying villages, known locally as Jodhya after one of the larger villages. Marriage was taboo between these groups on the basis of class and complexion. Most Gujaratis practiced endogamy with brides often imported from 'home'. A letter to *Indian Views*, a newspaper started by Gujarati Muslims, by a reader who signed off as 'Very Disgusted', lamented the caste system among Muslims:

There is, of course, the caste system and the class system in our community . . . One finds the caste system very strictly adhered to. And even in the respective castes there are classes. This sad state of affairs was summed up by an elderly Muslim when he was asked about a young Muslim girl by a very nice young Muslim man. The answer was: 'She does not belong to your community and, in any case, her parents consider themselves aristocratic' . . . [We] are Muslims first and Vohras, Memons, Koknis or Hyderabadis last.¹⁶

Meat was an important marker of identity among Hindus, implicating both class and caste. According to Dr Desai, retired professor of Indian languages at University of KwaZulu Natal, 'these so-called upper caste groups were 100 percent vegetarian. They were more concerned about vegetarianism than the other groups . . . The higher caste also considered themselves more religious. I don't know how true that is but they took care of temples and things like propagating religion, donating to temples and so on, because the lower income groups also had less money . . .'¹⁷ Closely connected as a source of distinction was language. As Dr Desai noted, 'the Kathiawadi dialect is a bit more "polished" than Surtis, Gandhian style I would say . . .'¹⁸ Like food, language was another way to signify affiliation with a certain social class and exclusive group memberships. This would change over time as more and more individuals availed themselves of the opportunities for secular education, and English became the main language of communication.

Class was also crucial in determining group membership. Some passengers had a long history of overseas trade links and access to credit extensions, finance, exploitable family labour, suppliers and distributors.¹⁹ Kathiawadis were smaller in number but economically powerful. In Natal, they extended their influence in local and regional markets. Aboobaker Amod, who is generally regarded as the first passenger in Natal,²⁰ told the Wragg Commission of 1887 that he owned businesses in Bombay, Calcutta and Durban, and used 'ships of my own' in addition to chartering others to transport merchandise from India.²¹ Similarly, *Dada Abdoolla and Co.* had 15 branches in Durban, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Heidelberg, Potchefstroom, Rustenburg, Zeerust, Umzinto, Umzimkulu and Mauritius and maintained business interests in Porbander. The principal partner in *Dada Abdoolla and Co.* was Abdoolla Adam Jhaveri, Aboobaker Amod's first cousin, and he had an important role to play in the evolution of Gandhi. When tensions emerged between Dada Abdoolla and his partners, Abdoolla invited Gandhi to Natal to assist in legal action against his cousins and partners. Gandhi persuaded them to take

the matter to arbitration. Arbitrator John Livingston ruled in Dada Abdoolla's favour but Gandhi convinced him to accept payment in instalments to avoid Tayob becoming insolvent.²² Gandhi would stay on for another two decades and play a leading role in the struggle of Indians against racial discrimination. It was also his making as a political reformer.²³

Among Parsis, Parsee Rustomjee was one of the wealthiest traders in Natal. He donated generously to educational, welfare and religious organizations of Hindus, Muslims and Christians and was one of Gandhi's closest associates. Gandhi commented in 1914 that Rustomjee 'knew no distinction of religion. He was a Parsee among Parsees, but also a Mahomedan among Mahomedans . . . He was a Hindu amongst Hindus and would do for them likewise'.²⁴

Large traders were the exception. The majority of Gujaratis were poorly paid retail assistants or small traders and hawkers who relied on merchants for credit.²⁵ Most shop assistants lived in unhygienic accommodation on shop premises. Reports of police and sanitary inspectors bear this out. For example, Inspector Daugherty recorded in 1889 that in seven Muslim-owned stores in Gardiner and Pine streets, windows could not open; partitions between shop and the sleeping premises in the rear were made of sacking; kitchens were dilapidated; and there were no toilets. 'All the premises are unfit for human habitation.'²⁶

Socially, there was interaction between Gujarati elites across religious grounds. According to one report in 1907, Hindu merchants arranged a Diwali celebration at the premises of a Muslim, Abdool Latif, which was attended by non-Hindus like Sheth Rustomjee and Dada Osman.²⁷ In 1911, Muslims like Dawud Mahomed, M.C. Anglia and Ismail Gora and Sorabji Rustomjee, a Parsi, attended Diwali celebrations. In his speech Mahomed commended the unity and considered these 'happy gatherings' of the two communities 'an excellent thing'.²⁸ When Imam Bawazeer, a Muslim priest, was departing for India in 1915, he remarked:

We are all Indians in the eyes of the Europeans in this country. We have never drawn distinctions between Mahomedans and Hindus in public matters. Mahomedans, like the Hindus, look upon India as our Motherland, and so is it a matter of fact, and when it is a matter of serving India, we must set aside any differences and be united.²⁹

Whatever their self-identification, the racist policies of the state played a role in increasing attachment to a 'racial' group. Dr Desai noted that when she was growing up in the 1950s Gujaratis 'used to be neighbours and related through language. My neighbour used to know when we celebrated Deepavali, though being a Muslim, and likewise, the Hindus used to go to Muslim houses and greet them "Happy Eid"'.³⁰ However, as Dr Bhai Seedat points out, relationships were often shaped by class: 'There were two types of Gujarati Hindus, those we got on very well with [Surtis], and the other community was high class, mainly Brahmins who hardly met with us, with a few exceptions.' 'High-class' Gujaratis generally kept aloof from the descendants of indentured migrants.

The 'Indian' identity of Gujaratis became paramount in the political sphere as they were denied class-based entry into the wider society. As Gandhi famously observed, 'no matter who they are . . . The Indian is bitterly hated . . . The Press almost unanimously refuses to call the Indian by his proper name. He is "Ramsamy", he is "Mr Sammy", he is "Mr Coolie."'³¹ Racist legislation rendered Indians second-class citizens. Merchants formed the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1894 under the leadership of Gandhi. The NIC's six presidents between 1894 and 1913 were prominent Gujarati Muslim merchants.³² The

highpoint of Gandhi's stay in Natal was the passive resistance campaigns of 1906–1908 and 1913 when Indians pursued the repeal of discriminatory legislation. The Indian Relief Act of 1914 provided some 'relief' though Indians continued to be discriminated against.³³ Racialization is an important grid through which to examine the Gujarati experience.

Indians, including Gujaratis, were involved in the political struggle through the twentieth century. In the 1930–1940s, Gujaratis like Dawood Seedat and Cassim Amra were key members of the Communist Party. At Witswatersrand University, I.C. Meer and Ahmed Kathrada befriended prominent African leaders like Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela. Kholvadian and Aligarh-educated Yusuf Dadoo (1909–1983) was one of the most respected anti-apartheid figures. Like Karl Marx, he lies buried at the Highgate Cemetery in London. Kathrada (b. 1929) was a Rivonia trialist with Nelson Mandela and sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island in 1964. Babla Saloojee was one of the first political prisoners to be murdered under apartheid (1964), while Ahmed Timol became an internationally renowned martyr when he died in police custody in 1971. Fatima Meer (b. 1928) and her husband I.C. Meer (1918–2000) were long-time comrades of ANC heavyweights Nelson and Winnie Mandela. Many Gujaratis also bought into various political structures created over the years to co-opt Indians.

Bhikhu Parekh once wrote that 'the Gujaratis, be they Hindus or Muslims, tend to avoid political life, and few of them in any part of the world occupy important elected political positions.'³⁴ This is not entirely true. In South Africa, Gujaratis continue to feature in the post-apartheid political landscape. Kader Asmal and Valli Moosa served as members of the ANC negotiating team in the early 1990s and were part of South Africa's first non-racial cabinet; Enver Surtee was appointed South African Deputy Minister of Basic Education in 2009; Dr Frene Ginwala was the speaker of National Assembly of South Africa from 1994 to 2004; Praveen Jamnadas Gordhan was appointed Minister of Finance in April 2009. Ashwin Trikamjee is on the Board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation while serving as the President of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha.

In several African countries, following independence Indians were discriminated against in jobs (Kenya, Uganda and Guyana), expelled (Aden, Burma and Uganda), repatriated (Sri Lanka) or felt insecure and began emigrating (Surinam and Fiji). In contrast, in South Africa, Indians are active in government and business notwithstanding the occasional uneasy relationship of Indians and Africans. It is not that South Africa has not seen any tensions along the Indian versus African axis. In January 1949 a violent racial riot between Indians and Africans left 149 people dead and many thousands homeless. There was a similar incident in 1985 around the Gandhi Settlement in Inanda. Playwright Mbongeni Ngema's 2002 song in Zulu, 'AmaNdiya' ('Indian'), condemned the alleged refusal of Indians to accept Africans as equals and being interested only in making money. The song also criticized post-1994 migration from South Asia and called on the 'strong men' of the Zulu nation to stand up against Indians who were 'more racist than Whites'. Notwithstanding this strain of African nationalism, Indians, it would be fair to say, are more concerned about high crime rates than a possible African backlash.

Education, marriage and identity

Social, economic and political changes since the mid-twentieth century have shaped Gujarati identities in important ways. The coming to power of the National Party (NP) in 1948 had paradoxical consequences. Although segregation was intensified, Indians were finally recognized as permanent citizens in 1961 and there was an expansion of educational opportunities and economic mobility. While *de facto* residential areas existed

in Durban long before the NP came to power, segregation was consolidated after 1948 through Group Areas. In Durban, Indians were segregated in working class townships like Chatsworth and Phoenix, whereas areas like Reservoir Hills and Westville were made available for middle-class housing. Literature on Indians in Western countries often refers to hyphenated identities and the tension between 'being ethnic' and 'mainstream' from growing up in a predominantly white mainstream cultural environment.³⁵ Segregation and apartheid removed this pressure as Indians lived in 'Indian communities' surrounded by temples, mosques, all-Indian schools, an Indians-only university and generally interacted with Indians in most aspects of their lives.

Small numbers of Gujaratis also took advantage of opportunities to study abroad. The first two Indian doctors in Durban were Gujarati. Keshav Macken qualified at Edinburgh University in 1932 and Dr Kassim Seedat at Grant College in Mumbai. Many wealthy Muslims sent their children to Aligarh University. The best known was Yusuf Dadoo. In 1946 Sorabjee Rustomjee, while on a visit to the United Nations, concluded an arrangement with Eamon Da Vlera, Chancellor of the National University for Ireland, for six South Africans to be accepted annually at the Royal College of Surgeon. From the 1950s to the 1980s a stream of Indians, mainly Gujaratis, benefited from this arrangement. The first group included Sorabjee Rustomjee's son and Ismail Sader, a Gujarati Muslim. Bhai Seedat, the son of Dr Kassim Seedat, went in the second group with fellow Gujaratis Ramesh Bhoola and Kanthi Bhoola, a physician who married an Irish woman and settled in Australia, pointing to the mobility of Gujaratis.³⁶

Judge Chiman Patel's story is indicative of the upward mobility of many Gujaratis through education. His grandfather immigrated alone to South Africa in 1910 and took up employment as a shop assistant. His father Narotam Patel moved to South Africa in 1927 at the age of 15 and was sent to work as a greengrocer's attendant for the firm of Napalal Ragavjeein in Verulam. He went to his village Bhagwanpura in 1932 and married Ruxmani, 'a very young bride, not quite 15, and she settled with him in Verulam'. In the early 1940s, a village acquaintance Govan Morar offered him a job at a café in Durban. Narotam worked there for almost 40 years until he bought the café from the ageing Govan Morar in 1979. Typical of many Gujaratis, while Chiman's elder brother joined the family business, Chiman went to London to study law. His subsequent travels saw him work in London and lecture in Botswana before returning to South Africa to lecture at the University of Natal and eventually enter private practice and be appointed a judge.

Literacy levels were generally low among Indians in mid-century. In 1930, for example, only 30.9% of children of school-going age attended school.³⁷ During the 1940s–1950s, Muslims like A.I. Kajee and A.M. Moolla opened Ahmedia Primary and Orient Islamic High that combined secular and religious education. Among Hindus, the Gandhi, Desai and Manjee families established Gandhi Desai High and Manilal Valjee Primary School, which paved the way for the emergence of professionals. Affluence meant that the schools had better facilities and a higher standard of education than most township Indian schools. The control of Indian education shifted to the Department of Indian Affairs in 1965 and free and compulsory education was available from 1970. This was coupled with the opening of the University of Durban-Westville in 1963 and expansion of the M.L. Sultan Technical College. Prior to this, some Indians accessed university education in what was called the Non-European University, which was run in the afternoons by white lecturers from the university.

A Medical School was opened in 1952 to stop Indians attending the white University of Witwatersrand. Dr P.L. Patel, the son of a small retailer, and Professor Fatima Mayat were among the first group of graduates. The Medical School and Teachers Training College

explains why so many Indians embraced teaching or medicine. The number of Indians who regarded English as their home language increased from 6% in 1951 to 93% in 1996. Many women began to enter the workforce from the 1960s. According to the 1996 Census, a third of Indians in employment between the ages of 15 and 65 were women. An indication of the advantage that women have taken of educational opportunities is that there were 19,100 female professionals compared with 22,700 men.³⁸

Changes in marriage patterns have been crucial in expanding identities. Immigration restrictions in the early 1950s which prohibited Indians from importing wives from India made it difficult to maintain endogamy. As important was the fact that education and work brought women into the public sphere and resulted in younger Gujaratis exploring relationships across narrow ethnic or caste boundaries. Among Muslims, for example, marriage partners expanded beyond the immediate village though most settled for Surti partners. Dr P.L. Patel, one of the founders of the Gujarati Hindu Saraskauti Kendra, remarked that 'the universities have become the biggest marriage-brokers.' Similarly, Dr Desai reflected on changing marriage patterns:

In the old days parents took their children to India to get married. If you were Kathiawadi, you married Kathiawadi, Surti married Surti. Not only that, if you were a Patel you married Patel, if you were a Brahmin you married Brahmin. . . . Change was brought about by the children going to university. Once they were at university and the children were from whichever group or class, it didn't matter, rich class or poor class, higher caste or lower caste, but being Gujarati was still important. First, Surtis married other Surtis and Kathiawadis married Kathiawadis, slowly they were breaking the caste system and then slowly the Kathiawadis and Surtis also started mixing.³⁹

There has clearly been a major change in marriage patterns. According to Judge Patel, education resulted in young people 'meeting people that they would not normally have met and things changed radically in one generation, from my father to mine. . . . Today, there's still prejudice at the subliminal level but they say, "Okay, it doesn't matter if you don't marry a Gujarati as long as you marry a Hindu"'. This has a parallel among Muslims where marriages have been taking place across ethnic boundaries. As Zuleikha Mayat, founder-president of the Women's Cultural Group, observed, 'older people are more accepting because they fear marriage to a non-Muslim or even across race and national boundaries.'⁴⁰ The post-apartheid period has witnessed the arrival of migrants from the sub-continent against whom many (Indian) South African Muslims harbour prejudices. Changing marriage patterns have pierced group boundaries. This has parallels in religious practices.

Religion and culture in the post-apartheid period

There were historic differences in religious practices among both Hindus and Muslims. Among Muslims, for example, the *Jumuah Masjid* in Durban was built in 1881 by Memon traders. The depth of sectarian divide is indicated in the decision of Surtis to build a mosque a short distance away in West Street in 1885. According to the Trust Deed dated 25 November 1893, trustees had to be 'natives' from Rander, Surat. The ethnic divide among Gujarati Muslims is underscored by the 1915 decision of the Supreme Court to expand the all-Memon Trust of the *Jumuah Masjid* to include five Memons, two Surtees, one Konkani and one 'colonial-born' trustee (descendants of indentured Indians). This distinction survives into the twenty-first century.⁴¹

Among Hindus, migrants from Surat formed the Surat Hindu Association in 1907 and opened a Gujarati School. Kathiawadis formed caste-specific organizations, such as the Pattani Soni Association, Mochi Mandar (shoemakers), Khumbar Mandar, Rajput Mandar, Koli Mandar and Soni Mandar, which were properly constituted associations. Kathiawadis attended the Surat Hindu School and language classes, but tension in the early 1940s resulted in Kathiawadis, led by English educated Dr N.P. Desai, forming the Kathiawadi Hindu Seva Samaj and subsequently establishing the Gandhi Desai High and Manilal Valjee Primary schools.

Religious differences deepened among Muslims from the 1960s as they began introducing Islam into their lives more systematically. Crucial in this regard was the Tabligh movement⁴² which was primarily associated with Surtis during the formative period, while the more populist practices were associated with Hydrabadees, as descendants of indentured Indians were called, and Memons. Social, political and economic changes from the late 1980s have made the demarcation between Surti, Miabhai, Kokni, Memon and Hydrabadee more fluid.⁴³ The past decade has been witness to a stronger affiliation with Islam, which is reflected in things such as women covering their faces; greater dietary concern; and a return to 'authentic' Islamic dress.⁴⁴ This has linked larger numbers of Muslims across ethnic boundaries, underscoring the fact that identities are forged through social relations. In considering where identity comes from, and congeals, one of the great incubators in Durban was the Surti and Memon mosques. As Muslims have moved out of central Durban to formerly white areas like Umhlanga and Morningside, the de-territorialization of mosques has added to the difficulty of maintaining boundaries.

Among Gujarati Hindus, Pandit Desai, an Arya Samajist who abhorred caste distinctions, formed a language organization in the 1960s called the Natal Gujarati Bakshee Africa. According to his daughter, Dr Usha Desai, her father insisted that groups stop using caste names like *Darjee* and *Koli* 'because there's a stigma. All can participate. Call it Natal Gujarati *Parishodh*, the time when people come together to discuss things in a conference. All castes participated'.⁴⁵ This was his way of breaking rigid caste distinctions.

The three main organizations among Gujarati Hindus, the Surat Hindu Association, Kathiawad Seva Samaj and Arya Bhadan Mandir, merged in 1993. The initiative was driven by U.P. Hargovan, K.B. Mehta, Dr P.L. Patel, C.T. Bhoola and Rabilal Gordhan. According to Dr Desai, as a result of education, professional association, and marriages between Surtis and Kathiawadis 'the new generation started asking, "What is this barrier of Kathiawadi and Surti?" They realized that this is not healthy for the Gujarati community because now we've come to a state where it's a fight for survival for Gujaratis... whether you are Kathiawadi or Surti didn't matter'.⁴⁶ Among my respondents, Chiman Patel also emphasized that the Kendra 'came about because, in the short-term, we felt that there was so much of Gujarati disunity, so much suspicion between those whose forefathers came from Shaurashtra and those from Surat. You had these disparate bodies and we started thinking, is this necessary?'

The Gujarati Hindu Sanskruti Kendra ('Centre' in Sanskrit) was built on the site of the Gandhi Desai School. The unification process was thorny. According to Dr Patel, 'smaller associations had been running for decades so there was a long debate before they merged'. Sub-identities were so strong that some organizations continued to hold separate festivities until recently. For Dr Patel, the Kendra has succeeded 'beyond our wildest dreams. We have about 50 or 60 functions a year... and there's tremendous support from the entire Gujarati community. We have linked up with the Indian Consulate and are the preferred venue for all the functions'.

One of the biggest challenges for Hindus is conversion to Christianity. The Hindu composition of the Indian population was over 80% in 1921. By 2001, Hindus as a percentage of the Indian population had dropped to 47.61 while the Christian population had increased to 24.12. Conversion among Gujaratis is minimal, according to Dr Desai, and only usually due to the rare cross-religious marriage.⁴⁷

Hindu–Muslim tensions?

Developments in India, by and large, have not sparked tensions between Muslims and Hindus in South Africa. When India achieved her independence on 15 August 1947, Dr Monty Naicker, President of the NIC, requested that ‘this happy occasion of our Motherland’s march towards her cherished goal be celebrated in a fitting manner’. A meeting at Albert Park was attended by 15,000 Indians with the flags of India and Pakistan unfurled side by side and pictures of Gandhi, Nehru, Azad and Jinnah hung on stage.⁴⁸ There were tensions in the mid-1980s when Ahmed Deedat of the Islamic Propagation Centre International produced a video in which he denigrated Hindu gods. The tape sowed division and was condemned by Hindus and Muslims but tensions eased because many Muslims, led by the Islamic Council of South Africa (ICSA), ‘deplored attempts by any group to degrade or criticise the religious beliefs and practices of any other community We urge Mr. Deedat to act responsibly with understanding of the fragile base of South African society’.⁴⁹ This proactive stance led to most Hindus accepting that Deedat’s was a minority voice among Muslims.

The 1990s witnessed the rise of the Hindutva movement in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into the limelight after the demolition of the sixteenth-century Babri mosque in 6 December 1992 by Hindutva supporters.⁵⁰ The Gujarat riots of 2002 and Mumbai bombings of November 2008 stoked tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India but did not have local ramifications in South Africa. According to Chiman Patel, ‘there were some attempts to establish BJP affiliated youth movements here but, in my capacity as the head of Kendra, we turned it down because we’ve always said that Hinduism preaches tolerance I don’t think that the rise of the BJP has radically affected people here.’ Whatever the private sentiments, there was no open Muslim–Hindu reaction in South Africa.

Multiethnic Islamic and Hindu community building is paralleled by Hindu–Muslim differences. According to my interviewees, the loss of the vernacular, physical restructuring of the city and greater attachment to religious identities have played a role. Chiman Patel recalled nostalgically:

When I grew up there was interaction because, for one, they spoke the same language and they had all been recent arrivals. When Solly-kaka saw me doing anything, he used to give it to me (discipline). Just above us, Hanifa-masi used to stay. I used to go and sleep some nights at her place and her son Aslam would stay at my place. Today there isn’t that. I don’t know why. Is it because the groups are forgetting their common origin and looking for a new identity? Some of the possibilities are practical things like we grew up in a common Grey Street area and now you are spread out. Previously, they spoke Gujarati. Most of them didn’t speak English. That’s also gone now.

Dr Bhai Seedat, a respected doctor within the Gujarati community, makes the same point:

They were able to interact with us – Dhupelias, Narans, Bhoolas – come to our homes and we went to theirs. They were part of our community. Now, we are either Muslims or non-Muslims, I mean, how many times have you seen a non-Muslim at a Muslim home or vice-versa, not

at open functions but at a home? We live in this cocoon atmosphere and our community, our young people are the poorer for it. This is a bad thing. I would rather you have social intercourse with other people.⁵¹

Notwithstanding romanticization the common view is that there was greater interaction in the past. Indians are creating narrower boundaries as South Indians, North Indians, Hindus, Tamils, Muslims, Telugus, Gujaratis and Hindustanis. Despite the growing sense of being Hindu or Muslim, Gujarati Hindus and Muslims are not antagonistic to each other, or at least not openly. Economic inequality has increased in the post-apartheid period as a result of the government's neo-liberal economic policies. This and affirmative action policies have prejudiced poorer Indians more than the affluent classes who are able to funnel funds out of the country, emigrate and send their children abroad to study. This has exacerbated class divisions between wealthier Indians in the suburbs and the majority in townships like Chatsworth and Phoenix.

Gujarat in the contemporary moment

In past few years with the rise of India as an emerging economic power, there is pride among many in the 'new' India. According to Dr Desai:

you know, when we first went with my father to India when I was very small, the roads were dusty and not properly laid. There's a huge difference, India has really advanced and even the villages have televisions and cellphones, all the modern technologies, air conditions, everything.⁵²

Increased movement between India and South Africa over the past fifteen years has been conspicuous. Some locals have been inviting/sponsoring family members from India and many recent migrants can be found in rural areas across the country. There has been an influx of priests and mawlanas as well. More people are visiting India on pilgrimage, making contact with family, even investing in villages.

Like the story of Dr Desai at the beginning of this article, one (Muslim) informant mentioned that his family owns a home in Kathor which members in the diaspora, in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Dubai and South Africa, use at different times of the year. Judge Patel mentioned that he has been 'going to India regularly. I go to the *ghaam* where we have a family home, that's Navsari, if you were travelling from Mumbai to Surat, it's one stop before Surat. It is a joint thing. Whoever goes from the extended family, those who live in England, Auckland, or Sydney, Vancouver, or Toronto, opens up the place and stays there'.

According to Zubie Seedat, a founder member of the Women's Cultural Group and one of the first female Indian lawyers in Durban, during recent visits to Mota Varaccha she has seen 'villagers' in South Africa, England, Australia and even the United States investing in their home village in property, schools and other infrastructure. Chiman Patel points to the fact that the Bank of Baroda has opened an office in Durban. Dr P.L. Patel mentioned a visit of a trade delegation from Gujarat which was hosted at the Kendra in February 2009. Many local Gujaratis attended the meeting with a high powered Indian delegation that included P. Baghela, the Managing Director and Commissioner of Tourism, Gujarat and Viresh Chandra Murmu, Additional Principal Secretary to Chief Minister, Gujarat State.

Pilgrimage has also been drawing South Africans to India. According to Dr Desai, Gujarati Hindus 'go at any time which is suitable, most go during the December-January holiday period'⁵³ to temples in Gujarat. Some Muslims visit the shrines of Sufi saints in

places like Ajmer where Muinuddin Chisty (1141–1230) is buried while members of the Tabligh Jamaat visit India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (including Gujarat) for their initial ‘breaking-in’ four month stint. However, many more Muslims choose to go on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia or on what is known as the ‘Three Mosques Tour’ (Jerusalem, Madinah and Makkah) and other historic sites in the Muslim world. Thomas Blom Hansen has recorded a conversation with a South African Gujarati Muslim:

We are Muslims, first and foremost, and just because our forefathers came from Gujarat, it does not make us Indians as we were told by the government for so many years . . . Some [Surtees] will even say that our fair skin and light eyes are because we were Brahmins . . . but that is not true. We were never Hindus; our forefathers were Arabs who came as traders and soldiers to Gujarat more than a thousand years ago. They took local women as their wives and that is why there are many Muslims in Gujarat . . . We are Arabs from Gujarat.⁵⁴

My interviews and observations suggest that this is a minority view. While Muslims are undoubtedly turning their gaze towards the Middle East, Gujarati Muslims continue to visit India, some retain property there and many harbour prejudices against recent Pakistani migrants (fellow Muslims) even while they sometimes may support the Pakistan cricket team.

Despite renewed interest in India there is little intimation of India becoming ‘home’. According to Dr Desai, ‘I don’t think my children or my brother’s children, any of them are going to go to India to settle there. South Africa is our home now.’⁵⁵ This despite the fact that people are applying for the OCI (Overseas Citizenship of India) which affords overseas Indians most rights in India except the vote. For Judge Patel, this should not be taken as a desire to relocate to India. People are applying for the document as a ‘security’ in the event of South Africa going the ‘Zimbabwe route’, some want to invest in property, others visit regularly and may want to avoid having to apply for a visa each time and ‘most important is university admission because many of our children cannot get admission here to certain courses because of university policies’. There remain critical Gujarati voices as well, such as academic sociologist and public commentator Ashwin Desai who frequently raises the ire of the local Indian consulate for chiding the policies of the Indian government with regard to the ‘untouchables’, Kashmir, the nuclear treaty with the United States and other similar issues.

Conclusion

Although Gujaratis may have been perceived by outsiders as an enclave within the minority Indian population, there were and are many differences and their identities have been changing in response to religious, economic, political, cultural and social changes. The changes have been marked over the past few decades as a result of education, economic mobility, the reshaping of urban space, and end of apartheid in the context of globalization. Virtually all Gujaratis regard English as their first (and mostly only) language, professional ties are established across ethnic groups and endogamy is difficult to sustain. None of this is to ignore that some Gujaratis continue to harbour subliminal prejudices against those from different backgrounds.

While the image of the ‘shopkeeper’ has been applied ubiquitously to Gujaratis, it is more myth than reality. Gujaratis have been highly mobile with constantly changing internal dynamics. They were among the first to take advantage of educational opportunities in South Africa and abroad so that a strong professional class emerged, whose members (initially teachers) began emigrating to Canada in the 1960s and are today found in the capitals

of many Western countries. Mobility remains a feature of Gujaratis. While apartheid may have sought to keep people in a mould, Gujaratis kept resisting this through their caste, class and national mobility. Events post-9/11 underscored for Muslims a consciousness of being part of a global *ummah*. And younger Muslims' link to Gujarat is superseded by identification with South Africa and Islam. Among Gujarati Hindus there is pride in India's achievements but perhaps not the same depth of being part of an international entity. We can expect further transformations as identities in post-apartheid South Africa remain on the move. The historic relationship between India and South Africa has been important and will remain so. Judge Patel points to Gandhi's 'iconic status', India's role in taking up apartheid at the United Nations and its support for the ANC in exile.

Renewed ties with their villages of origin should not be construed as opposition to the South African nation state. Most Gujaratis, while expressing occasional disquiet about the political situation, are comfortable in being South African. Indians formed the '1860 Legacy Foundation – Celebrating 150 years of Indians in South Africa' in February 2009 to organize the commemoration of the arrival of the first Indians in South Africa. The Foundation includes Hindus, Muslims and Christians, South and North Indians, professionals and workers and community activists.

At the time of writing there were no plans to commemorate Gujarat's 50th Anniversary. In fact, most of the informants were not even aware of this historic occasion. According to Dr P.L. Patel, 'we have not discussed that. That may still come up but right now I can't say that anything is planned'. Judge Patel made the same point, signifying that the success of the 2010 Football World Cup and commemorating their long stay in their 'home' is uppermost in the minds of most Gujaratis.

Notes

1. 152,641 Indians came to Natal as indentured migrants. While there were inducements to return to India, such as a free return passage after ten years, and tax penalties for those who remained, almost 60% remained in South Africa. See Desai and Vahed, *Inside Indenture*, for a discussion of the indentured experience.
2. For a discussion of the larger context within which traders from the western part of India expanded into east, central and southern Africa, see Mangat, *Asians of East Africa*.
3. The Gujarati Hindu figure was provided by Judge Chiman Patel. The Muslim figure is an estimate. Historically, Gujarati Muslims constituted a quarter of the total Indian population. There were around 250,000 Indian Muslims in South Africa according to the 2001 Census. The Gujarati segment would constitute around a quarter of this.
4. Markovits, *Global World of Indian Merchants*, 27.
5. Nair, 'Moving Life Worlds', 81.
6. *Gazetteer, Gujarat: Surat and Broach*, 1877, 57–8.
7. Barnwell and Touissaint, *Short History of Mauritius*, 158.
8. See Bhana and Brain. *Setting Down Roots*, 34–42.
9. Ginwala, 'Class, Consciousness and Control'.
10. Padayachee and Morrell, 'Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy'.
11. Alexander, 1885.
12. Natal Archives Depository, Pietermaritzburg (NAB), MSCE 17/28.
13. Prior to Indian independence (1947), most of Kathiawar was divided into princely states which were autonomous under British sovereignty (Kathiawar Agency) while the much of the rest of the peninsula was ruled directly by the British as part of the Bombay Presidency.
14. Interview with Dr Usha Desai, former Professor of Indian Languages at the University of Kwazulu Natal, March 24, 2009.
15. *Gazetteer, Gujarat*, 57.
16. *Indian Views*, June 4, 1958.
17. Interview with Dr Usha Desai.

18. Ibid.
19. Padayachee and Morrell, 'Dukawallahs', 9.
20. See Vahed 2005.
21. Meer, *Documents of Indenture Labour*, 389.
22. NAB, RSC 1/5/40; 54/1892.
23. See Bhana and Vahed, *Making of a Political Reformer*.
24. *Indian Opinion*, September 3, 1914.
25. Padayachee and Morrell, 'Dukawallahs', 10.
26. Durban Archives Repository (TBD), 3/DAR, 5/2/5/4/1, September 26, 1889.
27. *Indian Opinion*, November 16, 1907.
28. Ibid, October 21, 1911.
29. Ibid, December 3, 1915.
30. Interview with Dr Usha Desai.
31. 'Open Letter' to the Natal Legislative Assembly, December 19, 1894. 'F. Meer Collection'.
32. See Bhana, *Gandhi's Legacy*, 9–32.
33. See Bhana and Vahed, *Making of a Political Reformer*, 112–33.
34. Parekh, 'Foreword', *Gujaratis in the West*, xi.
35. Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity*, xi.
36. Interview with Dr Bhai Seedat, July 8, 2009. Dr Seedat provided the background and names of the early students.
37. Henning, *Indentured Indian*, 138.
38. South African Census 1996. Available online at <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/Census96/HTML/default.htm>.
39. Interview with Dr Usha Desai.
40. Interview with Mayat, March 20, 2008. Born in 1929 and president of the Women's Cultural Group which she founded in 1954.
41. NAB, RSC 1/5/307, 71/1917.
42. The Tabligh Jamaat was a transnational religious movement founded in India by Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944) in the early twentieth-century. It made inroads in South Africa in the early 1960s among Surtee traders when it was introduced by Bhai Padia following his pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.
43. See Vahed, 'Contesting "Orthodoxy"'.²
44. See Vahed, 'Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa'.
45. Interview with Dr Usha Desai.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. *The Leader*, August 21, 1948.
49. *Sunday Tribune*, April 30, 1986.
50. BJP supporters claimed that the mosque had been built by a Muslim emperor over a temple which commemorated the spot where the Hindu god Ram was born.
51. Interview with Ebrahim ('Bhai') Seedat, Ebrahim ('Bhai'). July 8, 2009. An obstetrician long involved in Gujarati affairs.
52. Interview with Dr Usha Desai.
53. Ibid.
54. Hansen, 'Arabs from Gujarat', 1.
55. Interview with Dr Usha Desai.

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