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**Communalism and Identity among  
South Asians in Diaspora**

by

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# **Communalism and Identity among South Asians in Diaspora**

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'Communalism' is a term used in India, but invented by colonial rulers in the nineteenth century, to refer to the use and manipulation of religious and/or ethnic differences for 'political' ends antithetical to the national (or colonial) interest. It is related to, but very different from, the idea of 'community'. Arguably, the rise of 'communalism' was partly a reaction to the undermining of older, more local communities by rapid economic and social change. During the period of colonial occupation alternative outlets for popular unease and discontent included the Indian nationalist movement, but the division of this movement into Muslim, Hindu, Brahmin, non-Brahmin and other fractions, encouraged by the colonial power for strategic reasons, became a hall-mark of Indian politics and social life in the late colonial period.

The secularist consensus established in the early years after Independence for a while promised a new future for India. However, during the past decade, the decline of secularism, the decline of the Congress Party, and the emergence of fundamentalist parties and organisations has made communalism once more a prominent feature of Indian life (Ludden 1990; Basu & Subramanyam 1996). Communalism has also spread beyond the subcontinent, the political conflicts within India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka increasingly being found mirrored amongst the substantial communities of Indians and Pakistanis living abroad.

For historians the question of how the twentieth century's conception of community and contemporary ideas of communalism came about is one of considerable controversy. However, among contemporary sociologists studying community or 'race relations' (as they used to be termed) in the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, the U.K. or Indian Ocean States it is often assumed that the identities of migrant communities are largely brought with them, and that they are based upon primordial and age-old forms of identity and conflict to be found in the Indian subcontinent. To put it simply, the fact that communalism is endemic in the Indian subcontinent today, means that it is considered an 'essential' feature of Indian society, and its appearance elsewhere is therefore regarded as unproblematic.

The international activities of militant political and religious organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad or Jammia Islamia are likewise predicated upon this

assumption, that the interests and identities of Hindus and Muslims everywhere are essentially the same. When looked at more closely however, and in comparative perspective, it soon becomes apparent that to 'be a Hindu' in Leicester, in England, for example, is very different from 'being a Hindu' in Durban South Africa, and that even within the subcontinent the identities of, for example, Muslims in Bombay, and those in Hyderabad, Lucknow or Bangladesh are very different from one another.

In the book *Community, Empire and Migration* (Bates forthcoming), a diverse group of historians and anthropologists have come together to question some of the assumptions of fundamentalists and western sociologists. They attempt to explain the divergent historical circumstances that have led to the various outcomes in terms of community relations amongst migrant groups in Asia. They also examine the origins and consequences of the widely varying identities that have emerged among migrant communities within South Asia, and amongst the many communities of South Asians scattered beyond the subcontinent in the former territories of Britain's colonial empire.

## COMMUNITY AND EMPIRE

Most contemporary scholars are keen to emphasize that ethnic identities are far from being primordial (e.g. Brass 1991; Engineer 1985). According to Paul Brass, competing elites draw upon, employ and even fabricate myths, symbols and other elements from indigenous societies in order to fashion a rhetoric that will mobilise populations in pursuit of collective and individual advantages. The modern centralized state plays a crucial role in this process, creating an arena in which ethnic nationalism can flourish. Some, such as Etienne Balibar, have even argued that nationalism and racism, as well as communalism, are indissolubly linked, being part of the process by which modern capitalist economies manage and control their populations, in particular, the size and remuneration of the workforce (Balibar 1991).

In the colonial context, the inadequacy of democratic structures renders elite leadership all the more important, and efforts by the colonial power to avert the emergence of a united front amongst indigenous elites (the strategy of 'divide and rule'), gave further encouragement to the emergence of a multiplicity of ethnic nationalisms (Tinker 1976).

In Africa, the institutions of indirect rule were built upon an assumption by the colonial power that African society was already divided into ethnic fractions, a theory which then frequently assumed the power of self-fulfillment. By empowering specified loyal elites, colonial regimes created a practical locus for political activity, even in communities where no such point of focus of power and loyalty had previously existed (Vail 1988 ; Lema 1993). The phenomenon is referred to as 'decentred despotism' by Mahmood Mamdani, who has argued that: '(A)partheid, usually considered unique to South Africa, is actually the generic form of the colonial state in Africa' (Mamdani 1996, p.8).

A key basis for the division of indigenous sovereignty in Africa was the idea of customary law. Land rights were treated as collective rather than individual and every colony had two legal systems, one modern and the other customary, to uphold these rights. Power in customary affairs was vested in local 'Native Authorities', composed of a hierarchy of 'chiefs'. The consequence of this system was a proliferation of representative authorities and their dependent communities, creating enormous obstacles to the mobilisation of the population against colonial rule. The anti-colonial struggle, when it did erupt, was then often in its earliest stages directed against these Native institutions rather than the European authorities which sponsored them.

In India, a similar phenomenon can be observed. Caste, tribe and Indian aristocracy were the bulwarks of customary rule, with zamindars and other feudal elites invested with unusual powers, a separation of public and private law enforced, and the use of caste and tribe as instruments of imperial management and control through enactments such as the criminal tribes legislation of the 1870s (Robb 1996; Nigam 1990; Cohn 1983).

However, divisions were not only promoted wilfully by the colonial government. Class played an important role too in generating rivalry and conflict. Thus not only nationalism, but rapid economic change in the late nineteenth century played a part in the emergence of rival caste associations, and revivalist and reform movements amongst both Hindus and Muslims (Pandey 1990). In 1909, 1918 and 1935 the British began to exploit these movements, and the conflicts that sometimes resulted, by institutionalising so-called communal differences in successive extensions of the franchise. Separate electorates were created for Hindus, Muslims, Untouchables and Adivasis, thus making it very difficult for nationalist politicians to unify these sections of society in the struggle against colonialism.

British policies, as in the African case, were built upon a highly developed epistemology and body of knowledge. Amongst the relevant ideas were the Aryan race theories of nineteenth century orientalists, and related developments in physical anthropology and linguistics at the end of that century (Bates 1996; Cohn 1996; Said 1993) By such means the colonial gaze hierarchically arranged subject peoples into groups according to their origins and physical characteristics. The conclusions of these studies upheld in every case, what Partha Chatterjee has referred to as 'the rule of colonial difference' (Chatterjee, P. 1997).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, race and the idea of racial difference, together with their constituent elements, the supposedly wholly endogamous castes and tribes of Africa and Asia, were generally the most important elements in colonial understanding and administrative arrangements. But as race theories were undermined by scientific scepticism, facilitated by the end of slavery, global migration, and the later genocidal conflicts in Europe, new ideas of culture and ethnicity came to take their place. Foremost amongst these was the notion of the 'Plural Society'. First fashioned to justify and explain Dutch policy in the colony of Indonesia (Furnivall 1939), the theory was developed and extended, to Africa and the Caribbean (Smith 1965; Kuper & Smith 1969), and several other

situations, although uncommonly so in the metropolitan societies of the West until at least the end of the twentieth century. Typically, the theory - critiqued by Martin Legassik (1977) - presented 'developing' colonial societies as the mirror image of the West. Western societies were seen as organic and unified, consensual normative systems, with highly developed institutions of civil and political society and a common value system. By contrast, 'developing' societies were depicted as fractured into their constitutive social elements, their various societies or communities living side by side in economic symbiosis but mutual avoidance, the only unity being that imposed by the colonial powers.

This then gave the colonial government an important role not only in maintaining order, but in arbitrating these differences, taking upon themselves the responsibility of balancing the interests of what were perceived to be the various fractions within a population. Hence the policy of separate representation for different religious or ethnic communities, and the institutionalisation of procedures for consultation with 'community leaders' in legislative councils and local authorities (a practice followed to this day in the U.K.<sup>1</sup>).

At independence, countries as diverse as India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Cyprus and Fiji, were left with constitutions which enshrined this idea, these constitutions remaining in force for a considerable time with little modification. In some cases, such as Mauritius, they have survived almost unchanged to this day. As with the policies of indirect rule in Africa, constitutions enshrining the idea of a 'plural society' frequently created the very social atomism and rivalry which they sought to contain. And when competition and rivalry erupt into violence this creates a further sense of distance and the process of division is complete (Tambiah 1996).

The outcome of colonial policies of divide and rule, however, were never as predictable as the above narrative suggests, and by explaining the fate of migrant Indian communities overseas it is hoped that it may become more easily possible to conceive of alternative possibilities of existence.

## COMMUNITY AND MIGRATION

Migration is sometimes put forward as being amongst the fundamental causes of communalism, leading to the 'mixing' of naturally exclusive communities (see for example Weiner 1988). It might alternatively be argued that if migration is indeed a determining factor this might simply be because dislocation promotes insecurity. Although they are often more prosperous than those they leave behind, communities of Indians abroad are beleaguered in a variety of ways - numerically

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<sup>1</sup> It is noticeable, that whilst police authorities in Britain are enjoined to consult with local 'community leaders' representative of Black, Asian, Muslim, Afro-Caribbean, and occasionally Gay and Lesbian 'communities', these leaders are not adopted through any constitutional or elective process but at the whim of officials. By contrast it is never felt necessary to single out and consult 'white' community leaders in this fashion since they form an almost absolute majority of elected members in local and national government. Not a single Muslim M.P., for example, had been elected to the U.K. Parliament until 1997 when Mohammed Salwar was elected to the constituency of Glasgow Govan - upon which he was immediately accused of electoral malpractice.

in a minority and culturally marginalised in the societies in which they live, as well as forced more often on a daily basis to face the extremes of 'white' racism. Within the Indian Ocean region however, communities of migrant Indians are to be found numerically and culturally in a majority, or at least in significant numbers, as in Mauritius and Sri Lanka. Both societies are prosperous. Quite why then communal conflict should erupt in one and not in the other remains a paradox. Even closer to the Hindu heartland of north India, in cities like Calcutta and Bhopal, migrant communities are sometimes able to integrate seamlessly into the societies in which they are placed. At other times they suffer apparently irreconcilable differences with neighbours from whom they are religiously, culturally or ethnically distanced.

By focusing on the issue of migrancy as a factor, insights could therefore be gained into the genesis of communal conflict. Studies of identity amongst migrant South Asian communities elsewhere however are few and far between. Migrancy and migrant identities within the Indian subcontinent are yet poorly addressed, whilst studies of the Indian communities in the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji and Africa, have invariably tended to focus on the economic dimension: the nature of plantation economies and the various systems of indenture or trade which brought them there in the first place (e.g. Daniel V. et al 1992). The *Community, Empire and Migration* volume attempts to fill the resulting gaps by calling upon a wide range of experts in the field of migration studies, both historians and anthropologists to focus, not on the economic causes and effects of migration streams, but on the problems of identity, ethnic conflict and the changing self-identification of migrants that have resulted. The studies themselves, by authors including John Kelly, Karen Leonard, Michael Twaddle, Nira Wickaramasinghe, Aminah Mohammad, and Ravi Thiara, are all drawn from atypical contexts within the developing world, such as East Africa, Sri Lanka and Fiji, as well as the U.S.A.

#### MIGRANT CULTURES AND 'POSTCOLONIAL' IDENTITIES

A consistent conclusion, noticed in the work of contributors to the volume, concerns the apparent adaptability of migrant communities, and the ease with which their identities have often integrated or otherwise transformed to meet the pressures of different circumstances - a possibly optimistic outcome in an era where identities, particularly religious identities, are increasingly regarded as intransigent and irreconcilable with one another. The research of John Kelly brings this theme very much to the fore, charting the history of Fijian migrant identity from 'coolie' to 'Indian', and the resistance of the Indian population to the communal space carved out for them by the British.

Fiji's migrant Indians accounted for forty-six per cent of the population by 1946. Most had arrived under indenture contracts to meet the needs of the island's burgeoning sugar industry. The Fijian indentured labourers were described as 'coolies' by the British, but referred to themselves as *giritiyas*, from the word 'girit' or agreement, referring to the indenture contract<sup>2</sup>. From the very beginning ethnic Fijian and Indian populations were spatially separated, a practice commonly

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<sup>2</sup> See also Kelly, 1991 and 1992.

followed in British colonies, ostensibly to manage, but in practice more often affirming colonial preconceptions of racial difference. After 1936 Fijian and Indian 'communities' were also differentially represented politically. The administration included members from the 'Indian' community within a limited programme of self-government in an effort to encourage continuing Indian immigration following the abolition of indenture in 1910. (This had been against the wishes of the short-lived Fiji Indian National Congress, who wanted a 'common roll', regardless of race).

Unionisation of the sugar workers, together with the growing size of the migrant community created a sense of unease amongst native Fijians, who sought to re-assert communal separation and their constitutional preponderance, as they saw it. These anxieties culminated after the outbreak of World War II when the Fijian chiefs reaffirmed their loyalty, and partnership with the colonial government, by offering recruits to fight in Africa or Egypt, whilst the Indians engaged in strike action against the Australian monopsony sugar milling company, CSR. The British declared sugar to be an essential war-time commodity, and the scene was set for a confrontation that surprisingly never took place. After a heated debate, the Central Indian War Committee refused to condemn the war, and when called upon by the government to organise a volunteer labour corps, voted to disband itself rather than either back or confront the government.

The situation contrasted markedly with that in India, where defiance of the colonial government and conflict with its communal allies was the hall-mark of Indian nationalism in the 1940s. Kelly explains this by arguing that the indentured migrants did not generally think of themselves as 'Indians' before they arrived in Fiji. Oral evidence suggests that caste and even religious identification was extremely uneven from one sugar estate to the next, and that Indian identities were numerous and overlapping, unlike the stereotyped roles cast for them by British and Fijian politicians. Ultimately, however, the separation of communities was reinforced in debates in the National Assembly, and the ethnic Fijian chiefs overhauled the 'Native Regulations' in 1944, in order to tie the indigenous or ethnic Fijians more tightly than ever to their natal villages. These separations, ethnic, spatial and constitutional, were maintained against the wishes of Indian representatives.

The implication is that the Indo-Fijians were moving at the time, and have presumably continued to move so since, towards a new form of postcolonial identity: an identity located outside the framework of colonial discourse. This struggle persists on the island to this day, as Indians endeavour not to be the threat they are conceived of being by the nervous Fijian majority. This was evinced most recently in the Indian communities' pacific and conciliatory response to the June 2000 coup led by the renegade Fijian adventurer, George Speight, against the government headed by the island's first elected Indian primeminister, Mahendra Chaudhry. Having organised to win the election, there was no comparable organisation of Fijian Indians to resist the rebels, despite highly racist and violent assaults on their community, which for some might have easily justified a resort to arms in self-defence.



## CONSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION AND THE SUBLIMATION OF CONFLICT: THE CASE OF MAURITIUS

The example of Mauritius presents a very different picture: an island apparently without conflict, and where the effects of colonial policies divide and rule, have been undermined by a series of carefully constructed political and social compromises. While the island is clearly divided on ethnic and religious grounds, 'Hindu' Mauritians follow a number of original customs and practices, quite different from those seen in the Indian subcontinent, with whom otherwise links and commonalities are considered so important<sup>3</sup>. Some 'castes' in Mauritius in particular are quite unrecognisable from a sub-continental perspective, and may incorporate mutually antagonistic castes from an Indian setting into a single group.

Thus, a 'Rajput' in Mauritius is of a sudra caste, the title having been usurped by this group in the nineteenth century. The terms Hindu and 'Indien' refer exclusively to north Indian Hindus. Migrants from Tamilnad identify their religious group as Tamil, not Hindu, and minority groups such as 'Telegus' and 'Marathis' are preoccupied with maintaining regional endogamy rather than with caste distinctions. The former Brahmin elite are referred to as the Maraz and together with the former Rajputs and other Kshatriyas, now called 'Babujis', enjoy the prestige conferred by high caste status, whilst politically they complain of marginalisation. The Vaish are the largest and most influential caste group on the island. Internally the group is divided into Koeri, Kurmi, Kahar, Ahir, Lohar and other jatis. In the past many admitted to Chamar status (as shown by historical records), but recently this seems to have become completely taboo. This group, now commonly known as 'Rajputs', will also sometimes describe themselves as 'Raviveds'.

Mauritian Muslims may not admit to originating from India at all, connecting instead with a broader Islamic identification, whilst Christian Tamils who came as slaves or skilled free labourers in the eighteenth century today are a class apart from the descendants of nineteenth century Tamils. Only one community freely admits to mixed origins and welcomes intermarriage, the Creoles, and even here shared religion is a determining factor in most partnerships.

Because of their numerical preponderance, the Prime-minister has so far always been chosen from among the Vaish community. All 'communities' are represented in the cabinet, and lobbies continually ensure that ethnic interests are secured through 'their' Minister. Whatever their formal constituency every major political party makes a point of inducting members of all communities, but the parties have to be led by Vaish if they are to stand any chance of electoral success. By one means or another, therefore, the majority community asserts its influence and control, even if formally the constitution attempts to effect a balance between their interests and those of other groups.

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<sup>3</sup> This discussion is partly based upon the author/editor's own first-hand observations in Mauritius in 1996 for which acknowledgment is due to support from travel grants awarded by the University of Edinburgh's Hayter and Travel and Research Funds and a generous grant from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

Apparently harmonious, in public at least, in private these arrangements are often resented, and although it is not openly discussed, there have been periods of serious disharmony in Mauritian society, beginning with rivalry between the elite Franco-Mauritian Parti de l'Ordre and the first creole/Indo-Mauritian party, L'Action Liberale at the beginning of the century.

The response of the British colonial government, as in India, was to manage popular demands through a strictly limited system of representation according to enumerated communities, with elected members outnumbered by officials and official nominees in the island's legislative council. Unsurprisingly, the continuation of this system meant that representation by community, even after the advent of party politics, became the accepted political practice in Mauritius. Such divisiveness that remains in the island's constitutional arrangements can therefore be blamed squarely on the legacy of British rule.

The electoral process ultimately adopted in Mauritius, with three members per constituency elected on the British first past the post system, combined with a distribution of seats to the 'best losers' from parties representing 'communities' that had failed to win a place, remains the established system of representation in place today. However, this is nothing in itself necessarily harmonious in this system. It was only the experience of violent confrontation that persuaded the *Partie Mauricien Sociale Democratique* under the leadership of Gaetan Duval to drop its communalist stance and to seek an alliance with the Labour Party following independence. Even then, it was arguably only the subsequent rise of a serious common enemy in the Marxist and highly popular trade union based *Mouvement Militant Mauricien* (founded by Paul Bérenger in 1969), and the ideology of MMM itself, that helped keep the communal peace thereafter (Mannick 1989).

We know from Scott (1985), that social and political conflict need not present itself in organised, violent or insurrectionary forms, yet may still be significant. What seems to have happened in Mauritius since 1968 is that since a formal accord has been arrived at to keep it at bay in the political sphere, communal conflict has simply been driven underground and into the small scale rivalries of day to day life. Your preferred drink, the car you drive, even your superstitions are all ethnically determined in modern Mauritius.

Competition between soft drink manufacturers is common the world over, but in Mauritius the Pepsi franchise is owned by the Muslim Gujarati Currimjee family, and as a result many Muslim retail outlets sell only Pepsi and at Muslim functions Pepsi is served. Biryani (a traditional Muslim dish), it is said, 'goes best with Pepsi', which thus has a unique place in the commensal rites of this community. The Coca-Cola franchise, by contrast, is owned by a Hindu family, is distributed in all Hindu retail outlets and is the preferred carbonated soft drink of this community. In their daily lives therefore Hindus and Muslims on the island know by their constitution that they belong to different fractions of society, and whilst prevented from doing so in Parliament, they act out a communal conflict in trivial aspects of their everyday existence.

These differences only assume more serious proportions when there is an apparent threat to livelihood or life and limb. In the wake of cyclone Hollanda in

February/March 1994 such a threat existed, when communications were disrupted and the island was without electricity for several weeks. A spate of robberies and petty assaults ensued. As it became apparent that the police were unable (or, allegedly, unwilling), to apprehend the perpetrator(s), the rumour spread that a loup-garou, or werewolf, going by the name of Touni-Minuit ('Naked at Midnight'), was on the loose: apparently a respectable member of the community by day, but perpetuating terrible crimes under the cover of darkness. Mistrustful of the authorities, armed groups of Muslim vigilantes were formed to patrol the streets in Muslim majority precincts, which for a while became no-go areas for local Hindus. When Muslims stormed a catholic shrine in the capital, asserting that they would destroy the spirit of the 'loup garou', senior political and ecclesiastical figures were hastily roused to calm tensions.

Whilst seemingly trivial, such incidents, and the persistence of endogamous marriage practices on the island, confirm the profound and quotidian nature of communal differences on the island of Mauritius. An uneasy truce on the communal front has emerged and coalition government has prevailed, but this has only been with the backing of repressive Industrial Relations Legislation (limiting the power of the MMM), the 1970 Public Order Act and subsequent enactments, which prohibit the publication of seditious, communal and libellous articles (broadly defined) in magazines and newspapers. There is also considerable political influence over the activities of courts of law – inhibiting the prosecution of cases that might provoke communal tension.

In many ways, the situation in Mauritius could be compared to that in Bengal, where the rise of the Communist Party of India (M) in the 1960s, a radical but highly pragmatic party, has maintained order in what was formerly was one of the most communally divided parts of India. However, the current peace in Mauritius is arguably a mere simulacrum of the harmony spoken of in the tourist brochures, and it prevails most probably despite rather than because of (as some would maintain) its colonial constitutional and electoral system. More recently still, the sheer prosperity of the island has assisted by divert attention away from politics altogether and into the business of making money.

#### SPATIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL APARTHEID IN EAST AND SOUTH AFRICA

In the case of South and East Africa, there is a rather different colonial legacy perpetuating developing and perpetuating communal differences. Here, more than constitutional divide and rule, a policy of spatial segregation was adopted in the colonial period and has subsequently played a crucial role in the construction of social difference. On this aspect, Michael Twaddle has taken issue with historians such as Robert Gregory (1993) and Prem Bhatia (1973), and East African Asian activists such as Yash Ghai who have pointed to 'Asian exclusivity' as a major cause of communal tensions in East Africa. These historians, rather like many in India in the recent past, make the mistake of describing effects as causes, he argues, when in reality communalism had not always been a feature of East African

society. In illustration of this one can point to the role that Zanzibar has long played in Indian Ocean trade, acting as site of interaction between West and South Asians for many centuries without dissent. The migration of South Asians did not really begin to take off until the completion of the Mombasa railway at the beginning of the twentieth century opened up trading opportunities in the interior (Seidenberg 1996). The British then made a point of recruiting Indians (particularly Ramagharian Sikhs) to run the railway, and growing numbers of South Asians, mostly traders from Gujarat, began to arrive.

Social estrangement however only developed as British officials insisted upon residential segregation in the small towns of eastern and northern Uganda. Segregation was imposed here upon racial rather than religious grounds, and it was race therefore that became the basis for subsequent conflict. The effects of urban segregation were then further compounded by a policy which excluded East African Asians both from rights of equal representation and from rural landholding in African as well as white-settler controlled areas. The effect was what Twaddle calls 'urban imprisonment' for south asian capital in East Africa, which for want of outlets elsewhere, was increasingly exported abroad.

The segregation imposed upon the East African Asian population was extreme, and the social consequences were equally exaggerated. Evidence for the phenomenon is seen in population statistics which suggest that prior to independence forty-nine per cent of Asians in Kenya lived in Nairobi, whilst thirty-six per cent of Asians in Tanganyika were based in the city of Dar es Salaam, and twenty-seven per cent of Ugandan Asians lived in the capital Kampala, the rest being found scattered among the other major cities (Gregory 1993, p.17).

The restriction of immigration by the British after 1944 finally, Twaddle argues, inhibited the development of an 'Asian' working class to parallel the successful petty bourgeoisie, and the racial stereotype of the acquisitive, conservative middle class Asian community was therefore soon complete. Even then there was nothing inevitable about the persecution of the Asian community from the early 1970s onwards. Despite their obvious differences Africans and Asians lived in harmony for many years, and even despite the legacy of spatial segregation, the history of South Asian communities in East Africa could easily have been a successful one but for the advent of Idi Amin's anarchical regime in Uganda, and the emergent population and economic crises of Kenya.

## SOUTH AFRICA

The issue of segregation could not of course be anything but important in South Africa, but the phenomenon of apartheid was but an extreme example of a policy, linked to theories of racial and religious difference, that was put into practice in a variety of colonial situations – most obviously of course in India itself, where under policies first established by the East India Company, white settlers were excluded from farming whilst in the port cities, mines and plantations they were given a privileged trading position. Indian capital, by contrast, was largely restricted to rural moneylending for much of the nineteenth century.

Co-operation between Indians and Africans against Apartheid began in 1947 with the so-called 'Doctor's Pact'. However, these efforts were undermined soon after by the infamous 1949 Durban riots, in which Indians were the victims of violence primarily provoked by falling real wages amongst African workers. Rather than causing the government to question its racist policies, such incidents merely persuaded it to re-affirm them, and the Durban riots were cited as pretext for the introduction of the Group Areas Act in 1950, which segregated the 'communities', as defined by the South African government, in urban areas and became one of the main pillars of apartheid.

Indians were especially affected by this legislation, and lost a great deal of land, especially in Natal. A consequence was a growing social separation of Africans and Indians, making co-operation and understanding more difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, Indian opposition to these policies was quite explicit. The South African Congress rejected the Department of Indian Affairs set up in 1962, and called for the creation of non-racial government departments. There was also a spectacularly successful organised boycott of the 1983 elections, which evoked comparisons with the 1937 elections in India, organised within the communal framework of the 1935 Government of India Act. And in 1984 a United Democratic Front was established between the African National Congress and the Indian Natal Congress in an attempt to overcome racial barriers (Thiara forthcoming).

Endemic violence, however, has been the principal legacy of apartheid, and to this day South African Indians are left with a desire to integrate but a continuing sense of fear and beleaguement. After decades of resisting racial segregation some respond ironically by re-affirming their 'Indian' identity and by building new links with the Indian subcontinent. South Africa has thus become a fruitful fund-raising and recruiting ground for organisations such as the Santanan Dharm and the B.J.P. The democratic government's response, in its rhetoric of 'rainbowism' has arguably, in the view of Thiara, done as much to emphasis as to emoliate the weal of racial segregation.

#### MIGRANT ORIGINS AND THE PERCEPTION OF IDENTITY: SRI LANKA AND MALAYSIA

The population of Sri Lanka, like that of any other country, was highly diverse. The origins of the island's inhabitants did not become an important issue, according to Nira Wickramasinghe (1995 and forthcoming), until British scholars began to speculate about it in the late nineteenth century and to devise hierarchical classifications of various groups according to the historical period in which they are supposed to have come.

The Aryan theory of Indo-European origins was a particularly important challenge. In pre-colonial Sri Lanka the notion of Arya existed, but Arya was a status obtainable through the performance of meritorious acts. British physical anthropologists by contrast believed it to be a racial category, enabling the differentiation of the South Asian population into discrete racial groups. A key

moment in Sri Lanka was the translation of the Mahavamsa epic into Sinhalese in the early twentieth century by W. Geiger. This assisted Sinhalese intellectuals who linked together colonial racial classifications with the tale of Vijaya's landing on the island in the 6th century B.C., thus providing the myth of a common, superior, Aryan origin for the Sinhalese people. This was far more appealing than depicting them as the descendants of the hordes of the demon-king Ravana (as depicted in the Ramayana), or any of the many other popular mythic theories of origin that abounded at the time.

The Vijayan myth captured people's imagination and became the kernel of Sinhalese nationalism. At the same time the identity of migrants was defined as everything 'un-Vijayan' by Buddhist revivalists and Sinhalese nationalists who were attempting to build community consciousness in the early decades of the twentieth century. Under the strains the great depression, this negative way of defining Sinhalese nationalism bore fateful fruit in violent encounters between unemployed Sinhalese and groups of migrant workers. Altogether these developments added considerable significance to attempts by the British to devise a constitution for Sri Lanka (or 'Ceylon' as it was then known), based upon their simplistic system of racial classification.

The very first scheme of democratic reform was announced in 1909. Demands for the abandonment of communal representation were rejected, and official representatives were in the majority, but just like in Mauritius there were elected representatives introduced for each of the 'communities', defined by the British as consisting of the Europeans, the 'Burghers', and 'Educated' Ceylonese (including Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims).

The Donoughmore commission promised the next major reform in 1928. Sri Lanka was a relatively prosperous, well educated and egalitarian society, however, and this presented a problem. According to British thinking, the franchise was not a right but a privilege, the granting of which must earn the loyalty of colonial subjects if it was to serve any purpose. Donoughmore therefore proposed a universal adult suffrage, but restricted it to those who could meet a test of residence for more than five years, and who affirmed a willingness to remain and permanently settle on the island. The issue of the various migratory origins of Sri Lanka's population thus suddenly became a crucial part of the definition of civic rights. Wickramasinghe argues that a sharp boundary was thereby created between the Sinhalese and more recent migratory inhabitants of the island – particularly the Tamil workers on the colonial tea plantations in the highlands. As if this were not enough, middle class Sinhalese nationalists demanded further restrictions including the retention of a specific literacy test (thereby excluding most Indian workers, as well as many Ceylonese). These were accepted, as well as a clause allowing the vote to anyone who met a property qualification, thus enfranchising every European and the richest Indians.

The Donoughmore constitution was thus a divisive affair, extending the suffrage on a simplistic basis of class and ethnicity. Unsurprisingly, anti-immigrant violence was a feature in the run up to the 1936 Council Elections and class and ethnicity - more than religion, the key feature in Indian constitutional arrangements

in the 1930s - have remained the significant points of fracture in Sri Lankan public life ever since.

Still more significantly, anti-immigration legislation came to be regarded by many as the sensible and legitimate way to deal with strains on the economy. And thus Sri Lanka introduced stringent restrictions on immigration long before such measures were even thought of elsewhere. This process of exclusion became yet more virulent in the decades following independence, spawning the Tamil-Sinhalese civil war that presently divides the island to this day.

## MALAYSIA

Processes of prescription and exclusion are also prominent in the management of ethnic boundaries by the government in colonial Malaysia, where spatial separation of ethnic groups, occurred every bit as pronounced as in East and South Africa. Encouragement was given furthermore to a distinct vocational segmentation of the workforce along ethnic lines. The process of identity construction amongst the Indian 'coolie' migrants who came to work on the sugar, coffee and rubber plantations and government undertakings in the nineteenth century began with their definition by the colonial authorities vis-à-vis their Malayan and Chinese counterparts. Despite this, many became thoroughly 'Malayan' in outlook, and where they looked to India for inspiration, it was 'South Indianness' (whence a large proportion of the migrants came) more than anything else, which became a characteristic of the Indian community.

Initially, Indian emigration to Malaysia was controlled by a few private recruiting firms, who were able to charge a high level of commission.<sup>4</sup> For this reason the colonial government stepped in to plan and direct mass Indian migration. Indian labour was preferred because of its alleged docility, a perception probably related to its low cost, poverty, lack of unionisation and greater dependence on the employer (Kaur forthcoming). This was in contrast to the 'surly' Malayan workers who, if they didn't like the working conditions, could more easily go home, or the 'industrious' Chinese who were better organised and were more commonly paid on a work-related basis, rather than a fixed wage. These stereotypes strengthened the case for further Indian immigration, the main purpose and effect of which was to depress wages. The truth of this is shown in the frequent and hardly credible appeals by plantations owners for more indentured labourers on the grounds of 'labour shortage', whilst simultaneously complaining of the desertion of labourers to Chinese enterprises where the pay was better. A further problem was the monopolisation of Chinese immigration by the Chinese enterprises, especially tin mining. The colonial authorities could not easily access or control this market, yet the Chinese entrepreneurs were major rivals to the Europeans. For this problem indentured Indian labour was the favoured solution, and after the abolition of indenture the *kangani* system (recruitment by returnee migrants, in exchange for a commission) was followed up until 1938 - a similar

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<sup>4</sup> See Kaur, 1997.

system to that adopted in other colonial plantation economies, including Mauritius (Carter 1995).

In place of the indenture contract, the kangani recruit was tied to his employer by debt, an equally powerful instrument, and the workers were housed in guarded compounds close to the plantations, with the kangani acting as an overseer or foreman. The workers were unskilled when recruited, and schooling and training was completely unknown until the 1930s, when the government was pressured into giving some grants for education. For this reason the Indian labourers, whilst a minority, were also always less mobile, were largely confined to rural districts, and were to be found in the lowest paid and lowest status occupations, even after the end of World War II. Prejudices against them were compounded by the fact that they were treated, and regarded, as transients, despite the growing numbers of second and third generation Indo-Malaysians resident by the 1930s.

In consequence of these and other factors, it was relatively late in the day that the Indian migrants began to organise and develop the sort of solidarity commonly seen amongst Chinese workers, a fact which was used by the colonial government and plantation owners to play one community off against another, particularly when the need arose for strike breaking. Little wonder then that communal divisions remains deeply entrenched to this day, although there have been several occasions when Chinese and Indian workers have fought valiantly against it. Thus in the 1920s there was a remarkable rise in working class Indian consciousness, resulting in a wave of strikes - most notably those of 1927 in the railways depots and other public works, and in 1937-40 on the Penang waterfront which were so serious that the British resorted to using troops to control the pickets (Sandhu 1993). By far the largest strike of all was that in the Batu Arang Colliery in 1937, which saw Indian workers joining with Chinese in protest. Furthermore, whilst few Indians joined the Malayan Communist Party, the growth in striking fostered a link between Indians and the trade unions, in particular the General Labour Union, which played a prominent role in post-war politics.

Self-assertion can also be seen in the growth of a Dravidian revivalist movement opposed to caste prejudice, and a reform movement promoting the education of the younger generation (Arasaratnam 1970, 1993). These egalitarian developments were promoted by Jawaharlal Nehru, who on a visit in 1950 urged the Indians to think less of India and to do more to contribute to Malaysian national life. This encouraged the M.I.C. to develop ties with other Malayan political parties, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), with whom they formed a united front to contest the federal elections in 1955. Thus the qualities of 'unIndianness' within the I.M.C., much as with the South African Indian Congress, facilitated the creation of alliances with indigenous political parties – a remarkable outcome in the light of the segregationist practices of the colonial regime. In the wake of the violence of the Malaysian Communist insurgency in the early 1950s, and ethnic riots in 1969, the need for unity remained an important feature on the political agenda in independent Malaysia. It is only since independence that religion has become a divisive issue, the 'Islamicisation' of the Malaysian nation, provoking anxiety



amongst indigenous Chinese and Hindus. Given past precedents, however, there are grounds for optimism that these anxieties may be overcome. Ethnicity, in-built as it was in the very framework of the economy, is still likely to remain an important line of fissure in the Malaysian body politic. A space for Indians is nonetheless being created within Malaysian society. The process must though involve a recognition by historians of the reality of positive developments that have already taken place in the past.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF TERRITORIAL ETHNICITY: THE MOHAJIRS IN PAKISTAN

For a more pessimistic case than that of Malaysia one can look to the situation of the Hyderabadis and other 'Mohajir' migrants to Pakistan, post '47. Here, the ethnography of Karen Leonard reveals a persistent pattern of prejudice against Hyderabad migrants, so pervasive as to encourage many to attempt to deny altogether their migrant origins (as with many second and third generation migrants in the U.K.).

Some Mohajirs interviewed by Karen Leonard spoke with great pride of their migrant identity, pointing out their elective choice to live in Pakistan, rather than the fact that they were merely born there. Others however, and especially the migrants from Hyderabad, were uncomfortable with the label, preferring to preserve their identity as Hyderabadis, or to integrate themselves as Pakistanis – an attempt which is not always welcomed. Integration has been made more difficult by the Pakistani government's practice of enumerating them in the census as a separate ethnic group, a practice which has encouraged Mohajirs to regard themselves in this light (echoes here of the practice of the colonial regime in India).

Hyderabadis were often highly educated and as migrants, like other Mohajirs, tended to be economically successful. This has fuelled a great deal of prejudice against them, and against which they have reacted. Despite this, the Hyderabadis have remained relatively apolitical and have kept their distance from the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), preferring, apparently, anonymity rather than association with an organisation increasingly notorious for its militancy and violence. More seriously, they reason that representing Mohajirs as an ethnic group demanding a territorial base cannot but end in disappointment and defeat. Instead, many are opting out and attempting to escape the Mohajir identity. This they can achieve through marriage, or by adopting a regional or metropolitan culture already extant. Thus, like some Indo-Fijians, many Hyderabad Mohajirs apparently choose anonymity and self-effacement, rather than representing themselves as any sort of migrant, if this means adopting an ethnic stance comparable to and in opposition to other groups in Pakistani society.

Politically though attempts by Mohajirs to make a place for themselves within the new state of Pakistan all started to come apart after 1970 when the rise of regionalism split the western and eastern halves of Pakistan apart. 'Territorial nationalism pushed aside ideological nationalism as the dominant mode of thinking' (Waseem forthcoming) and in West Pakistan, the Indus valley and

Punjabi origins of Pakistani civilization were increasingly emphasised, at the expense of Indo-Muslim civilization, thereby marginalising the Mohajirs. Simultaneously the accession to power of the Pakistani People's Party in Western Pakistan, committed to the goal of preserving Sindhi culture against the perceived onslaught of Mohajirs, in the words of Mohammad Waseem, 'spelt doom for the cherished world view of the migrant elite rooted in a unitarian model of politics'.

In response to the popular four cultures identification of Pakistan – Sindhi, Punjabi, Baluch and Pakhtun – Mohajirs then felt entitled to create their own sub-nationalism, centred in Karachi and Sindh. Interestingly although they inevitably became rivals, this rivalry did not preclude the possibility of co-operation between the MQM and PPP against the even greater threat from upcountry Baluch and Pakhtun migrants in Karachi, against whom they formed an electoral alliance in 1988. This alliance was however a short lived phenomenon, and relationships between the MQM and PPP in Sindh have been marked ever since by violence, terrorism and periodical interventions by the military in an attempt to restore order. An evident fact, however, is that at any point Mohajir-Sindhi rivalry might well have been averted. The whole issue arose not as a result of the activities of the state, but due to its inactivities, and its failure on several counts to secure the legal rights of individuals and property. Ethnicity therefore only emerged as an alternative basis on which to defend these interests once the Pakistani state had proven itself insufficient to the task.

#### MIGRANTS AND THEIR 'OTHERS' IN THE U.S.A.

Our final case study, based upon the research of Aminah Mohammed, describes a situation far removed from the classical circumstance of Hindu-Muslim rivalry within the Indian sub-continent. Or so it might seem at first glance. After all, is not the U.S.A. the most modern of societies, certainly the most prosperous, and by its constitution, theoretically egalitarian and liberal? The reality of course is that the U.S. is not in every instance a melting pot that subsumes identities, but a nation that imposes an additional abstract loyalty to the flag and constitution. The U.S. may be extremely prosperous, but it is also one of the most economically competitive, unequal and violent of societies (the parallels here with Pakistan in many ways abound).

Migrants from South Asia first began to arrive in the U.S.A. in considerable numbers in the 1960s following a liberalisation of immigration policies. Today there are more than a million, and since immigration policy has been biased towards the educated and qualified, they have been among the more successful of America's citizens. Although the United States is officially a secular country, its interpretation of secularism, whilst separating State and religion, enjoins that equal respect be given to all religions (this is not far removed from the Indian idea of *sarva dharma saramabhava*). Both Muslims and Hindus in the U.S.A. are therefore given considerable freedom, even encouragement, in the exercise of their beliefs<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Another important work on the relationship between religion and identity formation amongst South Asian migrants in the U.S.A. is by Lise McKean, 1996.

Because of this, and because South Asians in the U.S. are very scattered, one might imagine that, in this land of immigration, the relatively prosperous communities of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis might have found a way of living with each other, a *modus vivendi*, far removed from the conflicts and tensions of the subcontinent. This is, however, far from being the case.

In her research (1998 & forthcoming) Aminah Mohammed has pointed out a wide range of prejudices and a labyrinthine growth of associations. There are conflicts particularly over the issue of language. Urdu and Hindi are used as markers of difference, particularly among Muslims (for whom it can be a symbol of their religious devotion), and many South Asians will insist on speaking to other South Asians in Urdu or Hindi, regardless of where they come from. Most Hindus are in fact from Gujarat or Punjab. A rift has thus developed between the Hindi/Urdu speaking North Indians and the South Indians, who never meet together in the same associations. Amongst north Indians, the Hindus and Muslims also meet in separate associations, whilst amongst Muslims, Hyderabadis and those from a Mohajir background are to be found, as in modern Pakistan, keeping apart from one another and meeting in separate elite organisations Mohammed highlights particularly the role of community leaders, and holds them responsible for much of the animosity. Arguably though these rifts might still fit within classical instrumentalist theories of communalism. To begin with, one could point out that prosperity is not the same thing as economic security. The U.S. is a highly mobile and competitive society where expectations are high. Economic opportunities fluctuate, albeit at a generally much higher level than in other societies, and these South Asian communities will inevitably at times find themselves as economic rivals. An interesting point about these divisions is that they are not primarily, it seems, religious. Any number of geographical or linguistic bases might be found for the creation of a new association, but Hinduism and Islam do not have a monolithic function, overdetermining this process. Thus Indians will even shun Hindus from the Caribbean, questioning their 'Indianness', whilst Hindus from African origins will be accepted as equals. (There is most probably a class dimension to this, as Indians in the Caribbean were usually recruited as labourers, whilst those in Africa were more commonly from trading classes.)

Amidst the *mêlée* of competing associations, the prospects for co-operation may seem limited, however there are optimists (Aminah Mohammed amongst them) who insist that some sort of South Asian Pan-Ethnicity will eventually emerge, comparable to that seen among Afro-Americans and Chinese Americans. Evidence for this is to be seen already in annual events such as the Indian Day parades on August 15th, which are commonly attended by South Asians from every background. The prospects for a South Asian pan-ethnicity also seem to be strongest amongst the second and third generation offspring from migrant families, who culturally have more in common, not least of all the American language. Within the U.K., where South Asian communities have been established for rather longer, this development has already begun to take place. The principal obstacle is the lack of an appropriate vocabulary (the term 'South Asian' itself being unrecognised both by the migrant and host societies), but the English language, film and popular music have all

provided a means of communication that transcends communal boundaries. In particular one can point to the contributions of musicians such as the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who achieved a following throughout South Asia and particularly among Asian communities abroad. The phenomenon of neo-bhangra has also become a musical means of expressing South Asian identity, albeit in a male-dominated form, that is truly 'post-colonial', borrowing from every culture, and transcending ethno-religious boundaries. There is also of course the Bollywood movie industry, the stars of which enjoy a following in all parts of Asia and amongst every South Asian community abroad, and Pakistani 'sufi rock' bands such as Junoon, which have crossed the border in the opposite direction, winning a substantial following amongst Indian youth. In such ways, as James Clifford (1997) and Homi Bhabha (1990) have argued, old and new diasporas can offer the resources for emergent postcolonial identities.

#### CONCLUSION: A SOUTH ASIAN PAN-IDENTITY?

One could conclude from a historical point of view that a South Asian pan-identity does not need to be discovered, so much as RE-discovered. There are those who would maintain that such an identity was present in pre-modern times (Jalal & Bose 1998), and from the late nineteenth century there is evidence of high levels of mobility, and of the internationalisation of many South Asian migrants, from both working and middle class origins (Bates forthcoming - a). Arguably, pre-modern society was always more fluid: it was the colonial period itself which saw a 6 Peter Emmer and Brij V. Lal are among the most enthusiastic advocates of the liberating effects of migration, critiqued in Bates & Carter, 1994. rigidification of custom and occupational specialisation, and of concomitant identities (Bates & Carter, 1994; Washbrook 1996). Migration overseas was a means of escaping the increasingly inflexible and under-employed Indian labour market, and amongst those migrant workers, many had become highly cosmopolitan by the end of the colonial period, with Indians abroad commonly raising their status, economically and socially, and being 're-born' into a world free of caste, if not all forms of discrimination.<sup>6</sup> In the process new identities have been constructed to enable them to bridge the gap between the old and the new worlds and to maintain their links with both. Sadly, the legacy of conflict immediately before, during and after the decolonisation process, has commonly marred the relationship between South Asian communities, and between themselves and indigenous populations. The growth of postcolonial national identities has also commonly involved a process of definition by exclusion that has impacted negatively upon migrant groups, Sri Lanka and East Africa being here the most conspicuous examples.

However, identities cannot exist in a vacuum as a product of will, nor are they solely created from elements drawn from identities of the past. The evolution of laws, constitutions and political assemblies, and the segregation of communities, are a vital part in the history of identity formation. The imperial legacy in all these areas has often been profound, and imperial institutions enshrining caste, class,

race and religion as the boundaries of South Asian communities have had important and longterm effects.

Given the direction in which India is moving, and the fact that there seem at present to be few ominous consequences arising from the Mauritian practice of sustainable communalism, the question must be asked has India's Westminster-style constitution and its independent judiciary been more of a hindrance than an advantage in resolving communal differences? Or alternatively, are countries like Mauritius treading a potentially hazardous tightrope?

The crucial factor in communal conflicts does not simply seem to be juridicable rights, since although India has guaranteed the rights of minorities in legal terms, these guarantees do not extend into the areas of economics and the government has failed to provide even a minimum of subsistence for those at the bottom of the socioeconomic pile (Galanter 1994). The resulting upsurge in popular discontent has been magnified by India's centralised, and inflexible first-past-the-post political system into an on-going crisis of instability in the Central Government.

In Mauritius by contrast, although economic inequalities exist, minimum standards of living can be and have been more easily ensured, thereby mitigating differences and conflicts between communities. In the long term one might speculate that harmony is thus best ensured by constitutions, or at least political practices, that include in their definition of basic human rights, and are compelled to maintain in practice, a minimum of economic security and opportunity. The state thus needs to act as an arbiter of economic as well as political and social conflicts. While these problems wait to be addressed in India and elsewhere, a genuine pan-South Asian ethnicity, that realistically could begin to resolve the material and spiritual inequalities of the subcontinent and its satellite communities throughout the globe, will remain an ambition that awaits a different generation, and a different set of circumstances, to that of the present for an opportunity to be expressed.

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