Apartheid, Immigration and Exclusion: The "Indian Question" in South Africa*

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This paper attempts to analyse the "Indian Question" in South Africa during the period from the early Indian immigration years of 1860s to the late 1980s when the demise of apartheid set in motion. Historically, South Africa's social policy until 1994 had been that of segregation followed by apartheid -- the latter being coined and put to practice in 1948 only. The "Indian Question" in South Africa can be defined as the "problematic" status of Indians in terms of their right to immigration and socio-political equality with the British or Dutch White settlers. As such it also subsumes the theme of ethnic/race relations situation of Indians in South Africa.

It is argued that the "Indian Question" had been shaped by the political economy and class dynamics specific to South Africa. In this context it is theoretically fruitful to conceptualise South African economy and society as a peripheral capitalist social formation. Historically, such societies have been marked by the articulation of both capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production in the manner that the former invariably dominated and distorted the latter.

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The Nationalist Government when it was in power in the late 1940s defined apartheid as follows: "The guiding principle behind the policy is that the non-whites of the country, especially the Blacks, should be guided by the Whites towards self-realization and self-government within their communities and in their own areas....The apartheid policy is based on South Africa's traditional policy of separate development of the races (Quoted in Vatcher 1965: 156). South Africa's former Prime Minister Hendrik F. Verwoerd had said in the House of Assembly in 1963: "Reduced to its simplest form the problem is nothing else than this: we want to keep South Africa white ..."keeping it white" can only mean one thing, namely, white domination — not 'leadership', not 'guidance' but 'control', 'supremacy"

"Inclusion" of Blacks and Whites

Before analyzing the "Indian Question" it is important to briefly discuss the "inclusion" policy of the apartheid regime with respect to the immigration of two other racial groups in South Africa, namely the Blacks and the Whites. During the apartheid period, the two groups were desirable in South Africa, though for different reasons. Most Black immigrants originated in the neighbouring countries of South Africa and had been working in the mining sector. In 1979 they numbered around half-a-million, but subsequently due to international sanctions against apartheid their number declined by about half in the next few years. Extremely harsh apartheid measures including wage differentials, split labour market situation, etc. kept the immigrant and the indigenous Black labour thoroughly exploited.

White immigration into South Africa had been vigorously promoted in

Cape and Natal since the days of systematic colonization in the 19th century. Available data for the period 1924-1982 suggest that of the total 1.1 million immigrants that entered South Africa during this period, more than 70% originated in Europe. Even during the late 1980s Europe continued to remain the major source of immigration to South Africa. Most of these immigrants were skilled and semi-skilled workers, professionals and managerial and administrative personnel. Obviously, a great majority of them were not averse to apartheid and all that it entailed. A sociological study of British immigrants had found them "ordinary people" lacking any distinctiveness, and tending to conform to the given social structure and values of South Africa (Stone 1973: 252). Besides permanent immigrants, South Africa also received and continues to receive even today a large number of tourists from Europe and North America. In 1981, for example, the two continents contributed close to 60 percent of the total tourist traffic to South Africa.

A large number of western countries were active supporters of the apartheid. Their move to lift economic sanctions prematurely in the early 1990s as well as their failure to effectively implement the same during the heyday of apartheid adequately underscores the above statement. The reason was the high economic stakes of the western countries in South Africa's political economy which had al least two major components: (1) western countries' investment in and trade with South Africa, and (2) their dependence on South Africa for certain critical minerals/ metals. Prominent among these western countries were Britain, the US, Japan, France, West Germany, Italy and Switzerland. The total direct and indirect foreign investment in South

Africa by 1979 was estimated at ten billion pounds. Three largest trading partners were Britain, Japan and the U.S.

Besides profit from investment and trade with South Africa, another factor in the western support for apartheid was the import dependence of the western countries and Japan on certain critical minerals such as chromium, manganese, vanadium and the platinum group of metals. Each of these minerals has important industrial and defense-related applications in aero-space, power-generation, transport, steel and chemical industries. Until the end of the cold war these minerals were not easily available from other sources.

Apartheid in South Africa thus helped earn enormous profits for the foreign as well as local bourgeoisie. The vested foreign interests in return provides moral and diplomatic support and saw to it that south Africa remained stable which meant the continuity of the white minority regime and the perpetuation of apartheid. It was on the strength of this support that until 1990 South Africa had successfully been debunking the United Nations resolutions regarding the independence of Namibia as well as the rights of non-White majority population in South Africa.

Apartheid in South Africa was as much oppressive to Indians as to the native Blacks. Viewed in historical perspective, racial discrimination against the Indians in South Africa underlined the same politico-economic imperatives that rendered the oppression of the Black masses inevitable. In other words, racial discrimination involving Indians cannot be seen in isolation from apartheid and the earlier segregation policies. Before we summarize here some of these policies and their implications for the South Africa In-

dians, a brief discussion about the immigration of Indians in South Africa would be in order.

Colonial Economy and Indian Immigration

The early 19th century South African economy was pre-capitalist economy, which was largely centered on slave-labour based production of wine, wool, ostrich feathers and consumer crops. In the Cape colony systematic colonization was hampered due to lack of sizeable European settlement as well as the Great Trek. The economic situation of Natal in the early 1960s was similar to that of the Cape. Given the underdeveloped nature of the economy it should not be surprising that very few Europeans were interested to settle in these two colonies. Natal was first thought to be suitable for cotton production. However, cotton production was not commercially viable and therefore gave way to sugar production which flourished in due course of time. For the commercial production of sugar a steady supply of labour was required for which the colonists first turned to the native labour, failing which to the Indian indentured labour. At that time the Indian indentured labour was being exported to various other British colonies (Tinker 1974). Natal Government's request for Indian indentured labour was initially turned down by the British Indian government, but following the offer of revised terms and conditions, the emigration was allowed on an experimental basis (Narain 1962: 20). The first shipment of Indian indentured labour had reached Durban on 17th November 1860. In spite of many hurdles in India the recruitment of indentured labour for South Africa continued until

its abolition in 1911, by which time a total of 152,184 labourers had been imported into Natal. Of this total, only 35,716 (about 23%) returned to India during 1860-1911, rest of them chose to stay on in South Africa.

Over two-thirds of the total Indian indentured labourers were recruited in the Madras Presidency and the rest of them in the Bengal Presidency and the United Provinces. The former consisted of mainly Tamil and Telugu speaking people, and the latter Hindi or Bhojpuri speaking. The majority of labourers were young, male (about 70%) and unmarried. Religion-wise about 90% were Hindus, 8.5% Muslims and 1.4% Christians, with a tiny sprinkling of Jains and Buddhists (Jain 1999).

Women constituted about one-third of the total Indian indentured labour in South Africa. Although they were brought to Natal reluctantly, they were found to be very useful, particularly on the sugar estates. Some women were also employed in the tea gardens where their labour was used most intensively. According to (Beall 1990; 63), "during the tea-picking season which lasted for nine months of the year, they laboured in the fields for eleven to thirteen hours a day". Their labour was cheap. They were paid half the male rate and were given half the male rations. When they did not work they were not paid and received no rations. "This led women to push themselves to work whether sick, pregnant or even in labour. It was not uncommon for women to drop dead at their work (Beall 1990: 63).

Besides the production function, even more important function of Indian women was their role as reproducers of labour power on a generational basis. This was particularly true during the late nineteenth and the early

twentieth centuries. However, this was a transitory phenomenon. After 1911 following the end of indenture system a number of freed-indenture women faced destitution and starvation. Not surprisingly, a large number of women were repatriated to India on various grounds.

Indentured immigrants were followed by Indian traders, presumably to supply them with spices and other goods. The traders, who began to arrive in 1860s, were called "passenger" Indians, for they migrated to Natal under the ordinary immigration leave, paying their own passages and enjoying equal citizenship rights with Europeans. They were disfranchised in 1896. "Free passenger" Indians were also called "Arabs", as a majority of them belonged to the Gujarati Muslim trading communities of the Bombay Presidency. Over half of the "passengers" Indians were Muslims, mainly Gujarati speaking. Majority of Hindus were also Gujarati, particularly from Kathiawar, Surat and Porbandar. There were also a few Parsees from Bombay and Jains from Gujarat. About 50 families went from Mauritius, East Africa and Sri Lanka (Kuper 1960: 8; Carrim 1993: 4). A small number of "Portuguese Indians" (that is, the Goans) from Mozambique also immigrated into South Africa (Pillay 1976: 1). As already mentioned, passenger Indians were mainly merchant traders who supplied condiments, cloth and commodities not only to Indians but also to local Africans and European farmers. It was in relation to these immigrants that racial discrimination against Indians first emerged in South Africa.

Racial Discrimination

For the first 25 years of the importation of Indian indentured labour in South Africa, there was generally no racial discrimination against Indians except that a large number of time-expired as well as indentured labourers worked and lived under conditions of semi-slavery. However, as "passage" or trader Indians upon their arrival became entrenched in the expanding economy of Natal and began to compete with their European counterparts, racial discrimination against Indians also began to emerge. The Indian Immigrants Commission of 1887 noted the "undoubted ability of these Arab (sic) traders to compete with European merchants" (quoted in Pachai 1971: 7). The Commission had also observed that "the majority of White colonists are strongly opposed to the presence of the free Indian commercial pursuits" (quoted in Narain 1962: 97). The equal civic status of free Indians was revoked in Natal. In spite of Mahatma Gandhi's efforts to the contrary, the Indians were disenfranchised in 1896 in Natal on the ground that they were not familiar with the working of elective representative institutions and that the Indian voters might swamp the European voters. By introducing a European language qualification criterion, the passage immigration was considerably reduced. Highly discretionary municipal trading licensing system, with no jurisdiction of the Natal Supreme Court, also restricted the vocational freedom of Indians.

In the Transvaal, the Indian were denied any mining rights. Statutory segregation required them to reside and work in the "coolie locations". In 1907 Indian immigration was restricted by the Transvaal Government. The Draft Asiatic Act passed in the same year required Indians to register and iden-

tify by means of fingerprints. It was against these and a number of other anti-Indian legislations that Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha was launched. Gandhi's struggle for the racial equality of Indians in South Africa, however, was only a partial success. He could not evolve a multi-racial front against White racism in South Africa. Even within the Indian community the movement had a weak economic base. At the height of the movement in 1910, for example, about 40 percent of the Indian population was indentured labourers; the rest of its was engaged in petty trade, small agriculture, fruit and vegetable gardening, mining and factory work, etc. It should not be surprising therefore that following the departure of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa after the Smuts-Gandhi Agreement in 1914, the forged unity and movement among Indians against racialism disintegrated.

In spite of tremendous economic development in South Africa during the inter-war period, a majority of Indians were still poor. By the mid-1940s, most of the indentured labourers and their descendants had moved on to manual jobs in the manufacturing sector. A section of Indians was employed in the service sector - laundry and dry cleaning, hotel and catering, teaching, transportation, and domestic service. The descendants of the "passage" immigrants continued to dominate in trade and commerce, and their competitive position in the Indian and mixed areas of Durban became a source of antagonism to the emergent African commercial petty bourgeoisie resulting in the 1949 Durban riots.

Apartheid and Exclusion

The apartheid policy owed its existence to the Afrikaner Nationalist Government which first came to power in 1948. One of the most repressive laws of the apartheid regime that adversely affected all the non-White people in South Africa was the Group Areas Act (enacted first in 1950, amended six times, consolidated in 1957, and again amended several times) which reinforced racial segregation for business and residence. The then Prime Minister Malan had described it as "the kernel of the apartheid policy... the most crucial for determining the future of race relations in South Africa" (quote in Horwitz 1967: 273).

The Indians were hard hit by the Group Areas Act. In the 30 year period of the first enactment of the Act, about a quarter of a million Indians and about 375,000 Coloured had been moved from their former locations to the newly designated areas which on December 31, 1980 numbered 258 and 581 respectively. At the same time during the 1950-72 period, some 4,546 trading licenses of Indians were revoked. Of these, only 547 were renewed or resettled, leaving out about 4,000 traders ruined.

The apartheid measures in general and the Group Areas Act in particular had generally impeded the occupational mobility of Indians. As a result of prohibition on Indians' inter-provincial movement and other restrictions, Indian labour, skill and capital could not find better market and investment opportunities. While the Indian commercial petty bourgeoisie could not transform itself into industrial bourgeoisie, Indian urban workers had to content themselves with excessively low wages. Consequently, in 1963

about two-thirds of the Indian households in Durban (where over 80 percent of South African Indian population was concentrated) were found to be living below their poverty datum line.

In spite of restricted occupational mobility under apartheid, the Indians have become a highly urbanized group. The proportion of Indians living in urban areas increased from about 70 percent in 1936 to about 83 percent in 1960 and 91 percent in 1980. Correspondingly, their dependence on agricultural occupations (in terms of the percentage of the total Indian working population) sharply declined from 38 percent in 1939 to less than 4 percent in 1980. At the same time industrial jobs became increasingly more important: about 41 percent of the Indian work-force was engaged in manufacturing in 1970 as against only 19 percent in 1936. Although the proportion of Indians engaged in commercial activities did not change appreciably during the 1936-60 period, it did change significantly between 1960 and 1970 from 18 percent to 24 percent. The data for 1980-81 showed that industrial manufacturing sector was still the largest employer absorbing about 46 percent of the Indian workforce. This was followed by wholesale and retail trades (16 percent), government service (9 percent), transport (5 percent), etc. This suggests that the Indians in South Africa constitute segments of urban proletariat and petty bourgeoisie.

Relaxation in Apartheid

As has already been mentioned, until 1960 Indians in South Africa used to be regarded as "sojourners". In spite of failures in the past the objective was to repatriate them to India. However, in 1961 the South African government

accepted them "as a permanent part of the population". Subsequently, in accordance with the apartheid policy, a cabinet rank Minister of Indian Affairs was appointed to help the Indian community develop socially, politically and economically. Until 1984, a forty-five member South African Indian Council assisted the Minister.

Since the late 1970s, efforts had been made by the South African government to incorporate the Coloured as well as Indians into the apartheid regime. In August 1984, constitutional reforms were affected to create Coloured and Indian chambers of parliament to the exclusion of Black participation in the Government. Although in 1981, the majority of Indians had boycotted elections to the officially approved South African Indian Council, the Council nevertheless participated in the government with the hope that such a move would help in weakening apartheid. Notwithstanding constitutional reforms, however, the real political power remained in the hands of the White minority.

The constitutional reforms with respect to the Indian and Coloured communities were the politico-legal expression of the process of relaxation of apartheid since 1977 in such areas as public transportation, selected trades and professions, churches and sports. In the case of Indians, for example, it was announced in 1978 that Indian traders in White areas would no longer be resettled under the Group Areas Act (except in the rural areas in Transvaal and at Ladysmith, Natal). The reasons for the relaxation of apartheid in the case of Indians and Coloureds were both economic and political. Politically, it was thought that the incorporation of these two minority groups would keep the non-White front against apartheid divided. Economically,

the move made considerable savings for the government. Largely consisting of proletariat and petty bourgeoisie, the two communities were already highly urbanized (77 percent Coloureds and 91 percent Indians in 1980), and therefore the maintenance of segregated facilities for them was both unnecessary and uneconomic.

The Black bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie too were wooed by the apartheid regime. Since November 4, 1977, urban Blacks were allowed to engage in 66 areas of trade and profession compared to only 24 earlier. Similarly, according to another government announcement of November 2, 1979, Whites and Blacks could operate business in partnership. The them Minister of Cooperation and Development had said that these steps were part of the Government's strategy of drawing Blacks into free enterprise and uniting them with the White "against Marxism" (Keesings' Contemporary Archives 1981, 1981: 30887).

In the case of Black workers the relaxation of apartheid obtained from the fact that there had been an acute shortage of skilled labour. The shortage of labour had compelled the government to allow an increasing number of Blacks to be trained in jobs earlier reserved for Whites. The Minister of Manpower Utilisation, S.P. Botha had announced on April 4, 1980, that the ban on employing skilled Black building workers in White areas would be lifted because "the shortage of artisans was becoming so acute that certain building operations were in serious jeopardy" (Ibid). And this was subsequently implemented despite opposition by the industry's two White trade unions. Thus the relaxation of apartheid in selected areas represented a two-prong strategy on the part of the South African Government. On the one

hand, it was aimed at integrating the White and non-White bourgeoisie — the class which has its own vested interest in the status quo in South Africa. On the other hand, it was designed to recruit and train more Black workers for skilled jobs in the expanding capitalist economy of South Africa. One major concession announced in April 1986 towards relaxation of apartheid was the repeal of notorious pass-laws, which barred Blacks without permits from living and working in White areas. Although the release of all pass-law offenders from jails and the moratorium on pass-law arrests had been heralded by the racist Pretoria regime as the proof of its commitment to political reform, the anti-apartheid activists were rightly concerned that pass-laws might be replaced by some new forms of influx control, such as strict prohibitions on unauthorized housing, or requirements that urban dwellers must have jobs. Already, initiatives were afoot to issue new identity cards to all South Africans, irrespective of race, by the year-end. Eventually none of these measures could be planned or implemented as wide-spread Black unrest and uprisings since the mid-1980s compelled the Government to seriously think of political reform in South Africa.

In spite of some relaxation, the apartheid remained a reality in South Africa until its demise in the early 1990s. In the 1960s it was hoped and predicted that "external pressure will steadily increase and eventually help in bringing about racial change in South Africa" (van den Berghe 1965: 247; also Kuper 1965: 410). It was also assumed by many scholars (e.g. van den Berghe 1965; van der Horst 1965) and by the apologists of apartheid that increasing industrialization and urbanization and the resultant market forces in the capitalist economy of South Africa would render the racial factor irrelevant.

None of these predictions had proved right. Because of the fact that the Western countries gained substantial profit from their investments in South Africa and that the majority of African countries were economically dependent on it, trade sanctions against South Africa had not been effectively implemented until the mid-1980s. Massive industrialization in South Africa had also not dissolved the apartheid structure and ideology, because as a sociologist had rightly pointed out in the mid-1960s, "the racial patterns yield to political rather than industrial change" (Blumer 1965).

Since the late 1970s for about a decade, apartheid in South Africa was at the cross-roads. The political dilemma of "adapt or die" continued to exist before the apartheid regime. The accommodation of the Indians and Coloureds and the exclusion of the Blacks from the government had further complicated the problem. Although more than ever South Africa was militarily prepared to deal with any situation resulting from either internal revolt or external invasion, and at the same time the organized African resistance in the form of African National Congress or Pan-Africanist Congress had already been eliminated, millions of urban Black workers continued to pose a real threat to apartheid (Harsch 1980: 319-23; Stasiulis 1980: 484). Additionally, the Black Consciousness movement was increasingly spreading among the youth and students (Biko 1978; Gerhart 1978). The 1976 Soweto uprisings and other major industrial strikes during this period demonstrated the nationwide dimension of the struggle of the Black masses of South Africa.

Towards the close of 1980s certain national and international politico-economic developments compelled the South African Government to recon-

sider its policy. Internally, the crippling effects of international economic sanctions, black on black violence (particularly between supporters of the African National Congress and the lnkatha Party) which claimed over 15,000 lives between 1984 and 1990; and the increasing black unrest and uprisings against the apartheid state were the major factors forcing the South African government to move towards a political settlement. At the same time in the atmosphere of declining Cold War South Africa was no longer a strategically important state for Western defense. The South African liberation movement too faced a new situation. The collapse of the USSR deprived the ANC of its most consistent supporter. The pressure thus increased on the ANC to negotiate with the Government. The quick and timely initiatives taken by Nelson Mandela and the government led by President De Klerk who had assumed power in 1989 led to a chain of events resulting in the demise of apartheid: release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, repeal of almost all the major apartheid laws by June 1991, return of exiled black leaders, suspension of armed struggle by the ANC, and protracted negotiations in the Convention for a Democratic South Africa towards a non-racial polity.

Indians have a chequered history of political activism in South Africa since the late nineteenth century when Mahatma Gandhi took up the "Indian Question" and demanded racial equality for Indians there. Gandhi's political legacy was carried on by Dr. Yusuf Dadoo and Dr. G. M. Naicker and others in the 1940s and the 50s. They promoted an united struggle against racism through protests, strikes, passive resistances and other means. These and a number of prominent Indian leaders and their families suffered imprisonment, torture and prosecution. The Indian leaders have always recognized

the primacy of the interests of the African majority and the leadership of the African National Congress. They have asked for no special status. In fact, they have rejected the "privileges" offered by the apartheid regime in 1984 and called for a non-racial democratic society" (Reddy 1986: 12). Since the late 1960s the Indian leaders have also been active within the ANC politics. A number of them are now members of the ANC's national executive committee and presently share power in the South African government.

Since the late 1970s Indian community in South Africa has been undergoing subtle transformation, particularly in socio-cultural field. Indians in South Africa are today more integrated into the wider society than ever before in the past. By now all of them are native to South Africa by birth and they no longer consider themselves "sojourners" from India. The caste system among them had disappeared a long ago, and the Indian languages, earlier spoken by them at home, are fast disappearing giving way to English. Not more than five percent of Indians in South Africa speak various Indian languages at home. Religion, however, has continued to retain its hold on the community, and socially divide the adherents into the respective faiths of their forefathers, that is, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. With hardly any intermarriage among them, these divisions, particularly between the Hindus and the Muslims, have cast some doubts about the homogeneity of the Indian community.

Concluding Remarks

The so-called "Indian Question" in South Africa which was first raised by Mahatma Gandhi there and was pursued by him and other nationalist leaders in India was never resolved. During the inter-war period, the Indians were subjected to the same segregation policy which was primarily designed to cheaply reproduce African labour in the native reserves. In the case of Indians, segregation policy was basically intended to restrict the operation of the commercial petty bourgeoisie which was offering competition to its European counterpart. The White opinion at that time in South Africa was that the progress of Indians would have a bad influence on the natives in that the latter would also demand the same rights and privileges which were being demanded by the former. Besides segregation, until 1961 Indians were regarded as "sojourners" and over 72,000 of them were repatriated under various schemes before the Second World War.

In the final analysis the future of the Indian community in South Africa is inevitably linked to the overall political economy of South Africa. At the present juncture expectations from the recently implemented Reconstruction and Development Programmes are high among the blacks who suffered the worst injustices of the apartheid. About 50% of blacks presently live below the poverty line. Moreover, for most and particularly in rural areas, housing, food, water, education and health care facilities are not adequate. These problems coupled with high unemployment rate among the blacks have understandably given rise to crime and violence among them which if not controlled might trigger ethnic/racial violence, particularly against the Indians. On the positive side however one cannot ignore the vast and

diverse economy of South Africa which is capable of delivering goods and eventually prevent any major ethnic/ racial conflict in the country. All in all, in post-apartheid South Africa the future of the Indian community appears to be secure and promising.

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