



INDIAN DIASPORA IN SOUTH AFRICA: A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The Indian diaspora in South Africa is a thriving group with a lasting cultural legacy. The Indian community in South Africa has a long and complex history that dates back more than 150 years. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Indians were sent to South Africa as indentured laborers. Over the years, the Indian community has faced many challenges, including racism, segregation, and apartheid. Despite these obstacles, South Africa's Indian population has prospered and significantly enriched its social, cultural, and economic fabric. Indians in South Africa come from a wide range of geographical and religious backgrounds. The community has embraced South African culture while retaining its own cultural identity, including its languages, customs, and festivals. The paper also looks at the cultural contributions made by the Indian community to South Africa, including the food and music. Indian restaurants and street food vendors may be found in most cities in South Africa, where Indian food has become a popular dish. Indian classical music, Bollywood music, and fusion music are just a few of the musical genres that the Indian community has significantly influenced in South Africa.

This paper gives a broad overview of the South African Indian diaspora with an emphasis on its historical and cultural dimensions. The socioeconomic circumstances of the Indian diaspora in South Africa shall be examined in this paper. It is remarkable the persistence and

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contributions of the Indian community to South Africa's cultural legacy, and their history plays a key role in that country's development.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Indentured Laborers, Indian Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

Africa is home to a sizable and diversified population of long-term residents from India. Many Indians first came to the continent as traders and merchants, and the community has its roots in the old trading routes between India and Africa. The Indian population in Africa expanded and underwent a religious and geographic diversification over time. During the colonial era, when the British Empire imported thousands of Indian immigrants to work on infrastructure projects and in other industries, one of the most major waves of Indian migration to Africa occurred. They persevered and eventually founded settlements in nations like South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania despite frequently being subjected to harsh working conditions and discriminating laws. The struggle for freedom was significantly aided by the Indian community in Africa and the end of colonial rule by engaging in political activism and fighting for better representation and rights. M.K. Gandhi, who spent several years in South Africa and formed many of his ideas about nonviolent resistance there, is one of the most well-known individuals from this era.

Many Indian professionals and merchants continued to immigrate to Africa after colonial control ended because of the potential for trade and commerce on the continent. The Indian population in Africa has made a name for itself as a major force in a variety of sectors, such as textiles, hospitality, and finance, and it has made a considerable contribution to the economic expansion and development of many African nations. The Indian community in Africa is a thriving and involved one that has kept close ties to its customs and cultural heritage. Community life is heavily influenced by religious organisations, language institutes, and cultural events. Along with forging deep links with other communities and making contributions to the nation's cultural and economic life, the Indian community has also assimilated into larger African society. The Indian population in Africa has encountered a variety of difficulties and barriers, such as prejudice and isolation



from mainstream society. To overcome these obstacles and create solid, vibrant communities, the community has remained resilient and resourceful.

One example of the Indian community's tenacity is the establishment of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in Africa. A government-funded organisation called the ICCR uses a variety of cultural events, scholarships, and exchanges to promote Indian heritage and culture in Africa. African communities' comprehension and admiration of Indian culture has improved because of the ICCR, which has also strengthened links between India and Africa. The robust and diverse Indian diaspora in Africa has significantly impacted the political, cultural, and economic landscape of the region. The community has persevered in the face of hardships and barriers by being inventive and resilient, preserving close ties to their cultural history while also assimilating into the larger African society. Africa's Indian population is a vital part of the continent's rich and diverse cultural fabric, and it will continue to have a big impact on the region's future.

Diaspora

A group of people leaving their native country or cultural roots is known as a diaspora, and this often happens for political, economic, or social reasons. While adjusting to the culture and traditions of their new home, diaspora communities may still have a strong sense of identity and ties to their native place. A distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural group that has scattered is referred to as a diaspora, while the more general idea of movement and displacement is referred to as diaspora.

History of Indian Diaspora in South Africa

The Indian diaspora in South Africa has a long and complicated history that dates all the way back to the 19th century. The first Indians were sent to South Africa by the British Empire as indentured servants for the purpose of working on the sugar cane estates in Natal, which is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Between 1860 and 1911, some 152,000 indentured labourers were transferred from India to South Africa. The indentured labour system was a type of bonded labour where workers were guaranteed a return trip to India when their



contract had expired, but in reality, many of them remained imprisoned in South Africa due to debt or other circumstances. The indentured labourers endured difficult working circumstances as well as a variety of discriminatory practises, such as limitations on their freedom of movement and the possession of property.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the Indian community in South Africa started to expand as more workers decided to stay in the nation when their contracts were up. As the Indian population in South Africa increased, it diversified, with members of various areas and religions being represented. The potential for trade and business in South Africa attracted a large number of Indian traders and merchants at this period. Early in the 20th century, the Indian population in South Africa grew more politically engaged, with numerous people and groups fighting for more representation and rights. Mahatma Gandhi, who spent several years in South Africa and formed many of his ideas about nonviolent resistance there, was one of the most well-known individuals from this era. Gandhi had a significant role in organising rallies against discriminatory laws and policies, and his ideals and activity influenced many in the Indian community in South Africa. The 1913 Transvaal Indian March, which saw thousands of Indians demonstrate against the government's proposal to fingerprint and register all Indians in the province, is one of the most well-known of these demonstrations. The apartheid era, which started in 1948 and lasted until the early 1990s, was especially difficult for the Indian population in South Africa notwithstanding these efforts. Racial segregation and discrimination were hallmarks of the apartheid state, and various ethnic groups were given varying legal and social statuses.

During apartheid, the Indian community in South Africa was subject to a number of discriminatory laws and rules, including restrictions on their right to own property and freedom of movement. Other Indian businesses were also singled out by the government, which imposed restrictions on their ability to grow and function. Despite these challenges, the Indian community in South Africa persisted and used creativity to oppose the apartheid government. Indian activists were instrumental in the fight against racial injustice and inequality; individuals like Ahmed Kathrada rose to prominence for their work in the anti-apartheid movement. Several Indian professionals and businesses fled political unrest and



persecution in India after apartheid ended by moving to South Africa, mostly from Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. Others travelled to South Africa to work for sizable Indian-owned businesses that were already there. With a strong sense of identity and a long cultural heritage, the Indian diaspora in South Africa is currently a diverse and dynamic community. Indentured labourers' descendants, long-established commercial communities, and new immigrants are all part of the community.

Religious institutions, language schools, and cultural festivals play a crucial role in community life, demonstrating how vital Indian cultural traditions still are to the community's identity. In addition, the Indian community in South Africa has integrated with other communities and forged close contacts with them, adding to the country's cultural and economic life. The history of the Indian diaspora in South Africa was impacted by colonialism, forced labour, apartheid, and migration. Indian South Africans have persevered in the face of adversity while also providing significant economic, social, and cultural contributions to their country. The current Indian diaspora in South Africa is evidence of how adaptable and diverse human experience is.

Identity formation of Indian Diaspora in South Africa

The growth of the Indian diaspora in South Africa was influenced by colonialism, apartheid, and post-apartheid South Africa. The introduction of the Indian people to South Africa began in the middle of the 19th century when migrants from India were hired to work on sugarcane fields in Natal. The British colonial authority transported these workers from many regions of India, including Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. These workers, most of whom belonged to lower castes, had minimal formal education. They were required to work in inhumane conditions for extremely meagre pay. Notwithstanding these obstacles, the Indian community in South Africa started to establish itself and forge its own distinctive identity.

The apartheid system, which was put in place by the South African government in 1948, was one of the most important elements that influenced the development of the Indian diaspora in that country. South Africans were divided into racial groups under apartheid, and Indians



were given their own classification. As a result, Many of the same laws and practices that discriminate against other non-white South Africans apply to Indians in South Africa. Apartheid drew diverse responses from the Indian community. Some people made the political decision to fight against apartheid, while others made the decision to survive by adjusting to the system. In order to preserve their cultural identity and financial independence, many Indians started to create their own associations and institutions, including companies and schools.

The Indian diaspora in South Africa also had issues with maintaining their cultural identity. Many Native Americans fought to protect their cultural traditions in the face of assimilationist pressures from the dominant white civilization. With their own institutions and social networks, the Indian population was able to maintain many of their cultural traditions, including their language, music, and cuisine. One of the key moments that influenced the identity of the Indian diaspora in South Africa was the democratic transition that occurred in 1994, when Nelson Mandela was elected as the nation's first black president. Through this change, apartheid came to an end and a new democratic administration that upheld the rights of all South Africans, regardless of race, was established. The Indian community in South Africa was significantly impacted by the democratic transition. The knowledge that apartheid's oppressive laws and practices would end gave many Indians a sense of comfort and hope. The transition was not without its difficulties, though, as many Indians had to face the legacy of apartheid and how it had influenced their identity and opportunities.

The Indian diaspora in South Africa has experienced opportunity as well as hardship during the post-apartheid era. On the one hand, the country's new democratic government has made an effort to include Indians in its development and has recognised their contributions to South African society. For instance, Indians in South Africa have taken part in a variety of initiatives to help social and economic development and been appointed to prominent government positions. Nonetheless, South Africa has seen significant unemployment, poverty, and inequality during the post-apartheid era, which has also been a period of economic and social turmoil. These difficulties have had an impact on many Indians, and



some have experienced prejudice and xenophobia from South Africans. The formation of the Indian diaspora in South Africa's identity has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical, social, and political factors. Since the arrival of Indian labourers in the middle of the 19th century and up until the democratic transition of 1994, the Indian community in South Africa has encountered a variety of challenges and opportunities in their quest to create a unique identity. Despite these challenges, the Indian diaspora in South Africa has persisted thanks to a strong sense of cultural and communal identification.

Socio-Economic conditions of Indian Diaspora in South Africa

The socioeconomic situations of the Indian diaspora in South Africa are influenced by a variety of factors, including historical legacies of marginalisation and discrimination as well as current structural disparities in the country. One of the main problems facing the Indian community in South Africa is poverty. The most recent census figures show that many Indians in South Africa live barely over the poverty line, with about one in four of them living below it. For individuals who reside in rural areas, where poverty rates are significantly higher, this is especially true. Unemployment is a significant problem for the Indian population in South Africa. Despite making up a sizable component of the middle class, there are still many unemployed Indians in South Africa, especially among young people and women. In addition, a slow economy and growing competition from other groups have caused many Indian-owned businesses in the nation to struggle in recent years. However, there are also a lot of success stories from the Indian community in South Africa. Indian professionals and entrepreneurs have been increasingly beginning their own enterprises and making major economic contributions in recent years. Many of these people have been able to access funds and resources that would be challenging to get without the help of their social and cultural networks. The Indian minority in South Africa has endured severe social and political marginalisation throughout the years in addition to economic hardships. Together with other non-white South Africans and those of mixed racial backgrounds, Indians were categorised as a "coloured" group during the apartheid era. As a result, they were subject to many of the same discriminatory laws and procedures as black South Africans, such as being evicted from their homes against their will and having their freedom



of movement and access to employment opportunities restricted. Despite the end of apartheid, many members of the Indian community in South Africa continue to face various forms of marginalisation and racism. For instance, they are frequently underrepresented in politics and the administration, and many still deal with discrimination and stereotypes on a daily basis.

However, one area where the Indian community in South Africa has thrived is education. Indians have a long tradition of valuing education and have traditionally had a significant presence in South African colleges and other educational institutions. Today, a large number of Indian students in South Africa are pursuing advanced degrees in fields like law, medicine, and engineering, which is helping the country's developing knowledge economy. In general, the socioeconomic conditions of the Indian diaspora in South Africa are complex and diverse, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities that the country faces.

Indian Diaspora as a soft power determinant in building India-South Africa relations

Stronger ties between the two nations can be facilitated by the Indian diaspora in South Africa. India and South Africa may be connected by the diaspora, which has strong ties to the country with more than a million residents of Indian heritage living there. The Indian diaspora may significantly improve relations between India and South Africa through cultural diplomacy. Indian culture has a significant influence on all aspects of South African culture, including music, dance, food, and clothing. Through fostering deeper understanding and appreciation of Indian culture in South Africa, the Indian diaspora can contribute to the development of closer cultural links between the two nations. The Indian diaspora can support commerce and economic relations between South Africa and India in addition to cultural diplomacy. A significant portion of South Africa's economy is made up of Indian-owned companies, many of which have connections to India. The Indian diaspora can aid in facilitating increased trade and investment between the two countries by taking advantage of these relationships. Education and information exchange are two other areas where the Indian diaspora may improve ties between India and South Africa. Several Indian South Africans have advanced degrees and are highly skilled in industries like medical, engineering, and computer technology. The diaspora can contribute to the improvement of research and



educational links between South Africa and India by imparting their knowledge and experience to their colleagues in those two nations. The promotion of inter-ethnic relations between South Africa and India can be greatly aided by the Indian diaspora.

There are many Indian South Africans who have friends and family in India, and travel between the two nations is frequent. The diaspora can contribute to greater understanding and friendship between the two nations by encouraging increased cultural interchange and communication between these populations. The Indian diaspora can exert significant influence in fostering political and diplomatic ties between India and South Africa in addition to these other areas. With significant ties to both nations, many Indian South Africans are involved in politics and civic life. The diaspora may support better cooperation and communication between India and South Africa on topics like climate change, security, and human rights by making use of these links. The diaspora can aid in fostering deeper understanding, collaboration, and goodwill between India and South Africa by making use of their cultural, economic, educational, and political ties to both nations.

The annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) conference is one instance of how the Indian diaspora has already contributed to fostering ties between India and South Africa. The Government of India created the PBD, a gathering of persons having Indian ancestry from all around the world, to encourage better communication and collaboration with the Indian diaspora. The PBD has taken place in South Africa on multiple occasions, and it has aided in strengthening ties between India and the Indian population there. By the efforts of groups like the South African Indian Council for Culture (SAICC) and the South African Indian Business Network, the Indian diaspora has additionally influenced relations between India and South Africa (SAIBN). These groups support stronger links between South Africa and India on the cultural and economic fronts and offer a forum for communication and cooperation between the two nations. Given the growing importance of the Indian Ocean region and the burgeoning global influence of both India and South Africa, there is a need for deeper engagement and cooperation between these two countries.



Challenges faced by Indian Diaspora in South Africa

- ❖ **Cultural marginalization-** In South Africa, the Indian population has additionally experienced cultural marginalisation. Due to the country's education system's historical emphasis on Western culture, Indian culture and heritage are not adequately represented in schools and institutions. For many Indian South Africans, who struggle to uphold their traditions and rituals in a predominantly Western society, this has led to a loss of cultural identity.

- ❖ **Discrimination-** From their immigration to South Africa, the Indian community has experienced discrimination. Indians and other non-white communities experienced institutionalised prejudice and marginalisation under the apartheid system of racial segregation. Indians were compelled to live in separate settlements outside of the city centre by the Group Areas Act of 1950, which designated some areas as "white-only." As a result, people were unable to obtain high-quality healthcare, education, and other services. The Indian community has endured prejudice in many different ways since apartheid was abolished in 1994, including limited employment prospects, unequal pay, and exclusion from the political and social arenas.

- ❖ **Economic struggles-** Indians living in South Africa have also had financial difficulties. Indians make a major economic contribution to the nation, but many of them labour in low-paying occupations and struggle to make ends meet. Due to a lack of access to education and employment opportunities, many families have found themselves in a cycle of poverty. Also, a huge number of Indian-owned firms have had to shut down as a result of competition from larger corporations and a lack of government backing.

- ❖ **Political exclusion-** Although making considerable contributions to the business and society of the nation, South Africa's Indian minority has been mostly shut out of political power. Only a few seats in parliament are held by Indians, who make up



about 3% of the total population of the nation. As a result, Indian interests and concerns have received little national representation.

- ❖ **Violence and hate crimes-** Violence and hate crimes have also targeted the Indian community in South Africa. Several assaults against homes and businesses owned by Indians have occurred in recent years. A wave of violence that broke out in Durban in 2019 led to the destruction of several Indian traders' shops. According to reports, the attacks were carried out by locals who claimed that Indian traders were stealing their jobs and means of subsistence.

- ❖ **Xenophobia-** Due to xenophobia, the Indian diaspora in South Africa has encountered significant challenges. The country has historically been unfriendly to foreigners, especially Indians. The Indian community was impacted by the xenophobic attacks in 2008 that targeted immigrants from other African nations. Many Indians were compelled to flee their homes, and Indian-owned businesses were plundered and burned.

Because of this, the Indian diaspora in South Africa has over the years had to contend with a number of problems, including racism, violence, and xenophobia. They have also had to deal with economic hardships, cultural marginalisation, and political exclusion. Due to these difficulties, the Indian population has lost out on opportunities and is underrepresented. Although they have faced challenges head-on, South Africa's Indian population has demonstrated resilience and tenacity, and their contributions to the nation's economy and society should be recognised and honoured.

CONCLUSION

Hence, despite these difficulties, the Indian minority has significantly influenced South African culture, especially in business, politics, and the arts. Indian entrepreneurs have founded numerous lucrative enterprises and industries, including the textile and sugar sectors. Gandhi and Ahmed Kathrada were two prominent Indian leaders who contributed



significantly to the anti-apartheid struggle that led to the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. The Indian community has significantly influenced South African culture as well. South African Indian cuisine has also become a well-liked cuisine in the nation, in addition to the colourful music and dance traditions of Indian communities, such as the Bhangra and Garba dances. Furthermore, celebrations of Indian cultural holidays like Diwali and Holi are becoming commonplace in South Africa, drawing guests from all walks of life. This is evidence of the Indian diaspora's adaptation and resiliency in South Africa, where they overcame obstacles to maintain their cultural heritage. Overall, South Africa's Indian diaspora is unique and important to the history and culture of that nation. They have made an enduring impact on South African society by their labour of love, tenacity, and cultural contributions. It is crucial to acknowledge and honour the achievements of all communities, especially the Indian diaspora, who have aided in forming the past, present, and future of South Africa as it continues to develop and thrive.

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