

Transmigrant Indian Women: Creators of Diasporic Spaces

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ABSTRACT In this paper I look into social reproduction processes in the realms of family and household in the context of transnational families. These processes interweave with the economic enterprises, fluctuating global markets and state policies. My argument is that living in racially discriminatory social worlds, transmigrant women of Indian origin become aware of the continuous presence of social tension and conflict and in order to cope with these situations of adversity they deploy simultaneous and multiple strategies which are by and large based on their old and new experiences. In-depth examination of their strategies helps me to analyse the extent to which transmigrant women contribute to the Indian ethnic minority communities' challenge of acquiring meaningful social spaces in their transnational settings.

INTRODUCTION

In most patrilineal societies after marriage women experience their social dislocation from parental to marital homes. Coping with both joys and traumas of new situations they constantly work on their capabilities of creating as well as sustaining new social relationships, often within potentially inhospitable and discriminatory environments. My hypothesis is that a similar articulation of women's agency prevails in transnational social settings, where evidence shows that women's discursive abilities have significantly contributed to shaping of social processes among migrant groups in the Indian diaspora. The argument advanced in this paper rests on the foundation of my anthropological research on themes related to women's agency in Malaysia (1961, 1998, 2010), India (1976-78, 1983) Trinidad and Tobago (1984-86), U. K. (1966-74, 1998, 2005), U. S. A. (2003), Canada (2006, 2008) and South Africa (1994, 2003 and 2010), literary sources and other empirical data published by scholars in the field of diaspora studies. To elaborate my argument I look into the micro-politics and practices of social reproduction processes in the realms of family and household. In the context of transnational families these processes interweave with the economic enterprises, fluctuating global markets and state policies. My argument is that living in racially discriminatory social worlds, transmigrant women of Indian origin become aware of the continuous presence of social tension and conflict and in order to cope with these situations of adversity they deploy simultaneous and

multiple strategies which are by and large based on their old and new experiences and associated values and norms. Their participation in trans-border exchanges of goods, ideas and people reflects continuous process of transactions within social networks, organizations and communities (cf Charsley and Shaw 2006). In-depth examination of their strategies helps me to analyse the extent to which transmigrant women contribute to the Indian ethnic minority communities' challenge of acquiring meaningful social spaces in their transnational settings.

TRANSMIGRANT WOMEN'S AGENCY THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL SPACES

The paper focuses on the response and challenge of a transmigrant woman in Natal, South Africa, as described by Anusuya Singh¹ in her novel, *Behold the Earth Mourns*. This novel represents works by writers of Indian origin in South Africa and it deals with migration from one colony to another. Inevitably as a part of the history of imperialism and its culture, the historical and geo-political links between South Africa and India are shared histories and not just monolithic and distinct evolution of transnational spaces. Dealing with the Gandhian theme of *Satyagraha*, Anusuya Singh's protagonist, Yageswari's responses are transhistorically produced and not constructed just historically. The Indianness in this novel is under constant making, re-making, representation, erasure, assertion and dispute (cf. Sunder Rajan 1991: 129 as cited in Govinden 1998). The apartheid period of South African history highlighted the emergence of incipient ethnic

identity of migrants from India based on their cultural and racial background and in some ways apartheid policies of those years contributed to their solidarity against the hostility of other ethnic groups. In these processes transmigrant women carried out balancing acts 'between new and old countries, cultures, religions and languages' (Sam 1989: 11, as cited in Govinden 1998). They participated in public domain activities and brought out into open their personal causes like those of Yageshwari's plight owing to a ban on entry of brides from India.

Sustaining a given social structure over a period of time, social reproduction processes include complex social construction that is based on values and the social production of meanings. In this sense, straddling of transmigrant families' being and belonging into two (or in some cases more than two) cultures poses a situation of conflict and tension with reference to the social space which is appropriated by a hegemonic class (the 'Whites' in the case of South Africa) as a tool to reproduce its dominance. Anusuya Singh has dealt with the natal family of Yagesvari in Gujarat, India and of her husband Srenik in Natal, South Africa. She has further described how in transnational settings Indian diasporics have produced their own space and in addition we have the opportunity to examine, in particular, Yagesvari, a transmigrant woman's agency in the social production of space. This is in the sense of the cultural and the politico-economic practice of an individual. Later, as pointed out by Govinden² (1998), after Yagesvari's sacrifice came the militant type of responses by such collective actors as Phyllis Naidoo, Dr Goonam, Ellen Kuzwayo, Emma Mashinini. One can look at this challenge to unjust laws during apartheid period and participation of Yagesvari's grandfather in the freedom struggle of India as transnational links being compressed in terms of time and space and contributing to the formation of a distinct ethnic group of Indian South Africans³.

Here come into play, in the case of South Africa, the relationships among races, ethnic groups, nationalities and power hierarchies within national and global contexts. The collective representations of socio-political, economic and cultural boundaries reflect the processes of domination, struggle and resistance. Recurring symbolic and social interactions as depicted in *Behold the Earth Mourns* create new transnational ties that shape new social spaces. While

Anusuya Singh's *Behold the Earth Mourns* celebrated her protagonist, Yagesvari's solitary action, Black writing that came after the Soweto uprising in 1976 focussed on the collective consciousness of the oppressed under the apartheid regime of South Africa. Anusuya Singh, quite perceptively, foresaw the complexities of female subjectivity and of self-representation by women writers.⁴ Going beyond the relationship between "white colonisers" and "colonised Indians, Blacks and others", I also examine the impact of colonialism on the relationships between different colonised people. I controvert the centrality of the idea of the "west" and "mainstream whites" vis-à-vis their "ethnic others" or, of India as motherland and Indians in South Africa as offshoots of a civilizational Banyan tree and hence treating the notion of the 'centre' and the 'periphery' as a frame of one's discourse in the study of the Indian diaspora in South Africa. This framework does not disclose the diaspora's processes of transformation from being migrant traders/ indentured labourers during the colonial and apartheid regimes to now being well settled and entrenched citizens of an independent South African nation. Frequent conflicts among different minority ethnic groups and between sub-ethnic and class fractions within these ethnic groups in South Africa as well as in other parts of the world require ongoing exploration into multi-faceted and intricate links between people, time and space. Despite discriminatory laws rooted in the apartheid regime of South Africa and their negative impact on all not-classified white groups living in the country, Indian South Africans disclosed different responses. Yagesvari's husband, Srenik rebelled against the unjust laws whereas Srenik's elder brother Krishnadatta, a businessman, did not want to join the *Satyagraha* movement as long as the discriminatory laws did not threaten the security of his family and business. The parting of the ways with the Passive Resistance Movement strategy of non-violence came not only from within the ethnic Indian minority but also from the native South Africans who saw the Indian South Africans as exploiters of black labour in their shops and homes. Even Nelson Mandela (1994: 147) who supported non-violent passive resistance as a strategy opposed it as a moral principle because he found "no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon" against "a white minority regime (that was) bent on retaining its power at any cost."

Through the dialogues between the characters in the novel, Anusuya Singh has depicted different ideologies that showed up in responses to political challenges of the 1950s in South Africa. In this sense, from the theme of “Indian brides for Indian men” to the overarching concern of freedom for the black majority from white minority rule, it is not difficult to find in her novel *Behold the Earth Mourns* some traces of internal cleavages among the non-whites as a consequence of colonial and apartheid practices. Even now after 150 years of Indians’ arrival in South Africa, these practices are reflected in the rarity of inter-ethnic marriages in South Africa. Its obverse is evident in the U. K. and Canada where media frequently report the incidences of “honour killing” when a third culture kid (a girl) befriends a “white” male. The question arises: Are there any mutually accepted social spaces for Indian transmigrants and do Indian transmigrant women in South Africa show the signs of contributing to the production of such spaces?

If we go beyond *Behold the Earth Mourns* and look at recent researches by sociologists, anthropologists and historians (such as Anand Singh 2010; Puttendeen 2010; Vahed and Desai 2010, included in this collection of essays), we find that often, relatively stable and dense set of ties which span beyond and across the national borders constitute new social spaces in which transmigrant women have found wider scope for social interaction. Although the overarching frame of patriarchal social order tends to limit their creative capabilities, as has been shown by Amster and Lindquist (2005) in the case of Indonesian women, there are some ethnographic data available (see in particular Anand Singh’s paper in this collection) to show that South African transmigrant women of Indian descent have covered considerable ground by way of their empowerment. Their agency has created new vision and higher goals in terms of education, occupation and lifestyles; yet they are rooted in ideals of normative behaviour that their forefathers came with from India. Though the Indian languages are by and large not spoken as lingua franca the label of ‘linguistic group’ within the Indian ethnic minority still connotes speakers of particular regional language/ dialect of Indian origin. Thus, divisions among the Indian South Africans refer to almost a mythical sense of their ‘belonging’ to an ancient civilizational worldview while at the same time their ‘becoming’ South

Africans is visibly predominant. While in the case of Yagesvari of *Behold the Earth Mourns* location of activities is spread over transborder areas of Gujarat of India and Natal of South Africa, today the Indian South African women actors are involved in social, including business, networks which are deeply affected by the intensity of their ties as becomes clearer by the number, frequency and pace of their transactions. Since Anusuya Singh’s women protagonists of 1950s South Africa, the transborder activities of upwardly mobile professional and business women of Indian origin in South Africa of early twenty-first century have extended their global connections in the first, second and third world countries. For example, during my field visits to Durban in 1994 and 2003, I had the opportunity of interviewing some Indian South African women entrepreneurs. They told me that after the end of the apartheid regime, it was easier for them to bring to South Africa variety of goods at relatively cheaper rates from India and sell them with considerable profits in local markets.⁵ (For transborder travels of Indian South African women in search of better employment opportunities see Puttendeen’s paper in this collection). During my field researches in Canada in 2006 and 2008 and the U. K. in 1998, two of my Indian South African women informants, one living in Toronto, Canada and the other in Oxford, U. K., visited India to find suitable grooms for their daughters while they themselves had married white men. They referred to the global phenomenon of information technology experts (usually males) finding lucrative though often temporary or short-term assignments in multi-national companies as ‘suitable boys’, provided they could obtain permanent jobs in the first world countries.

In the context of our discussion on historical adversity and response to it, the term dislocation refers to a certain territorial space and also a condition of separation of a person from her/his area(s) of belonging to settling down in another place. A dislocated person for example, Yagesvari the protagonist in *Behold the Earth Mourns*, is no longer in her normal place of belonging and this condition has caused stretching of her existing familial relationships. This kind of dislocation in most cases brings about some form of damage or ill fortune or a calamitous event. An examination of Yagesvari’s (the dislocated person’s) response to the situation of this kind of adversity leads us to an exploration of her ways

of challenging it and we find that the entire social field is affected by multiple ties she has with her families in India and South Africa. Anusuya Singh gradually shifts her novel from being male-centred to being female centred and depicts the emergence of female consciousness of its protagonist, the transmigrant, Yagesvari. The condition of dislocation after marriage to a South African of Indian origin relates, in her case, crucially to the issue of citizenship. For her South Africa's legal restrictions on the re-entry of brides from India exacerbated complexity and challenges to already existing relationships at micro-level within the family in which her mother-in-law has overshadowed Yagesvari's personhood and the novel develops the theme of her love for Srenik (her husband) to the macro-level of colonial history. At this juncture of the domestic and the public, one can easily discern the impact on contemporary ethnic formations whereby over two thousand Indian South Africans participated in the *Satyagraha* movement. Thus, at the personal level, Yagesvari intensely senses her feeling of not being wanted, not being accepted as a citizen of South Africa and at the same time at a wider community level she strongly shares with her husband the commitment to the movement.

Regarding the issue of citizenship and the plight of Yagesvari negotiating the then current laws of South Africa, we find that Anusuya Singh's protagonist decides to go to South Africa after her child's birth in India. She exerts her agency and acts to change her circumstances. Yagesvari did not see herself as a whole person and felt as if she moved 'around in an unreality – an existence of day to day – a feeling of not being wanted, not being accepted. Since my arrival my life has been untenable and difficult' (Anusuya Singh 1960: 144). Upon her arrival in South Africa she is arrested in Durban⁶ for unlawful entry and put in prison. The novel ends on a note of despair, with Yagesvari attempting to commit suicide.

Citizenship issues including such questions as change of citizenship or acquiring dual citizenship are up to this day quite complex and unfathomable for most transmigrants. Family reunification policies have continued to create a path of making women conduits for fresh migration of non-family members via the mechanism of 'marriages of convenience'. In such cases deporting or detaining of one spouse for legal reasons did tear families apart. Legal

barriers do crop up as has been depicted in detail in U.K.'s Jasvinder Sanghera's book, *Shame*, published by Hodder and Stoughton in 2007. Forced into marriage with a man from Punjab unknown to her, rejected by those she loved, the book narrates the true story of a girl's struggle to survive. Jasvinder's triumph over adversity is no romantic tale. Rather it is one of terrible oppression and a harrowing struggle against a punitive code of honour. So we have issues of both historical and contemporary adversities which transmigrant women face on account of home and host countries (cf. Shaw 2006). Many "Yagesvaris" despair while some "Jasvinders" survive. Many others turn the historical adversity of dislocation into advantage and through their agency establish linkages between racial/ ethnic and national identities and power hierarchies within national and global arenas.

Learning to live in a new country where cultural assumptions and norms may vary vastly from their earlier experiences, transmigrant families' children (known as third culture kids, cf Pollock et al. 2001) grow up in different countries and often feel more at ease in the host country than their "home" country. Often third/ fourth generation young women and men do not find old personal transnational ties to kin and community very relevant and prefer to form new friendship ties which become more important. They tend to marry people of diverse affinities, irrespective of nationality and citizenship. All the same, currently a transnational marriage is legally difficult with many obstacles. For example Indonesian migrant women labourers in Malaysia face many bureaucratic barriers in case they wish to marry locally although to men of their own faith – Muslim Malaysians. First generation transmigrant parents tend to create – often through pressure tactics – a "home" culture for their children in the host country. Being and belonging spread out in such diverse situations and parents and children attach, in an unarticulated and unspoken manner, different meanings to the same social phenomenon (see Sinha 2009).

INTER-AND INTRA-ETHNIC RELATIONS

I have so far discussed the socio-cultural continuum between Indian women's dislocation from their families of orientation to those of procreation, on the one hand, and their migration from their families to overseas settings, on the

other hand. I have taken brief but representative narratives from fiction and ethnography about transmigrant Indian women in South Africa, Malaysia, Trinidad and Tobago, U. S. A., Canada and U. K. (countries known to me through first-hand fieldwork) to reveal dimensions of adaptation as well as severe conflict in their lives consequent upon transnational dislocation. Analytically this conflict rests upon the significant inverse correlation of solidarity and conflict between inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations in pluralist multicultural host societies.

As Uma Narayan (1995) has discussed, the current trend of globalisation is a direct outcome of the nineteenth century imperial expansionism that had nurtured a highly unjust and immoral socio-political order. Advancing this perception, I argue that current equations in matters of power hierarchies in both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations have significant inverse relations, that is, if inter-ethnic relations are at loggerhead one is likely to find intra-ethnic relations somewhat amiable but if inter-ethnic relations are amiable, there is likelihood of conflict-ridden intra-ethnic relations. If we take the instance of contemporary Malaysian society, the erstwhile supreme location of 'white' ethnicity is on the shifting sands of identity politics and white domination in terms of political and economic power has diminished to a very large extent. Inter-ethnic relations among the three main groups, namely, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians are more or less accepted along hierarchically-defined lines. On the other hand, intra-ethnic relations among the Indians, for example, are beset with conflict along lines of sub-ethnicity and class.

It is instructive to examine the impact of colonial policies on inter-and-intra-ethnic relations in the case of South Africa with particular reference to its Indian South African minority. Refracted through the predicament of brides migrating from India, *Behold the Earth Mourns* clearly indicates how the historical experiences of Indian migrants in South Africa foregrounded the way identity and difference were held in creative tension. Global movement of labour before and after the nineteenth century for primarily economic gains did influence the global cultural politics and its implications continue to be quite visible even today. Experience of living under colonialism and apartheid during the major part of the twentieth century comes to forefront in current acrimonies that are quite apparent in

contemporary South Africa. Despite the colloquial language being replete with cross-cultural influences and the emergence of a unique South Africanness across various social groups, at present the cement of economic growth under global capitalism is the only binding factor beneath the simmering antagonistic attitudes across racial groups.

The ideological differences within the Indian South African group, as elaborated through dialogues between the characters (Yagesvari's husband, Srenik and his elder brother) in *Behold the Earth Mourns*, become insignificant when Srenik encounters his African friend, Serete Luseka, who chides Srenik for his middle-class upbringing and highlights the impact of apartheid on the Black people. The following quotations from the novel (as cited by Govinden 1998: 9) bring out the strong opposition Serete Luseka felt against Srenik's choice of passive resistance.

I am part of a life where it is a jungle existence for me. To live, to breathe, is the survival of the fittest from the point where conception takes place in our mother's womb. We have to thwart the elements, thwart the physical background: our home life is unstable, divided and depressed. (Anusuya Singh 1960: 17)

Do you think you can turn the fear that hurts within me into a quiet suffering and expect repentance from whoever causes it ? - people like Srenik spoil things for us and there is no strength in this type of talk. (Anusuya Singh 1960: 18)

As pointed out earlier, Nelson Mandela (1994: 115) too was sceptical of the Indians and Africans being united because he was aware of his African grassroots supporters' view of "Indians as exploiters of black labour in their role as shopkeepers and merchants". Today, most Indian South Africans look upon affirmative action policy of the present government of South Africa as a biased action against the Indian South African minority. Thus, the Indian South Africans tend to perceive that they are facing two adversaries, one the 'Whites' and the other the 'Blacks'. The common stereotype among the Blacks as also certain sections of the Whites that Indian South Africans belong to a uniform middle class enforces this feeling of antagonism vis-a-vis a perceived solidary Indian ethnic group. Factually too, although the Indian South Africans constitute the smallest minority ethnic group in South Africa, a number of successful and upwardly mobile

Indian South Africans have indeed taken advantage of the ‘interstices’ even in the apartheid regime to enter a middle class status. Interestingly enough Indian South Africans of this successful middle class themselves often entertain the perceptions of all (or at least the majority) Indian South Africans as being middle class (cf Jain, R. K. 2010: 58—65). In contradistinction to this middle class minority status of Indian South Africans all Blacks, since they constitute the numerical majority of the population and a larger number among them are poor, are all considered to be poor and crime-prone in the perceptions of other ethnic groups.

Reinforced by the above-stated dynamics, although the Indian South Africans may have internal differences over their regions/ languages/ religious sects of origin but vis-a-vis the Whites and the Blacks they project a united front and the rainbow nation faces continuous thunder and lightning of racial conflicts. Anusuya Singh’s protagonist Yagesvari was sensitive to Srenik’s strong attachment to his place of birth. His firm resolution was to remain a South African even if it meant personal deprivation and sacrifice in the event of his wife being denied entry to South Africa and his sister dying for want of medical care which was withheld because she was not a White. In this context the researchers need to try and grasp why in the past so many indentured labourers did not wish to avail the facility of repatriation and today their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren wish to remain citizens of South Africa. Indian transmigrant women have no lesser role to play in creating social spaces for establishing strong South Africanness among the Indian minority group.

CONCLUSION

I come to two significant conclusions. One, adversity and advantage as two sides of the coin of transmigrant Indian women’s lives show a firm nexus of their significant roles between domestic and extra-domestic spaces. This has continued for the PIO (People of Indian Origin) women since their adaptation to new locations from the time of the creation of “villages” from “plantation campsites” during the post-indenture period (cf. Jain, R. K. 2009). The continuum has its imprint on the ‘returnee’ women of South Africa, discussed by Puttendeen (included in this volume).

Secondly, I raise the question as to what

lessons may be learnt through the story of their vicissitudes as transmigrant Indian women for the creation of new spaces for themselves and hence for women empowerment globally. Participating actively in ‘transnational spaces’ (as explained by Faist 2004), transmigrant women negotiate many critical matters associated with the continuation of family relations which they shape, maintain and re-shape through social networks. Most of the time such social networks include dispersed family members and creating new spaces for transnational households by deploying new household strategies and practices. Transmigration across national borders witness transnational marriages, parenting through distance, caring for elderly in the family through various arrangements (see Lam et al. 2002). New household strategies point to transmigrant women’s agency. Flexible citizenship policies, legal loopholes and easier and faster means of money-transfers across transnational spaces offer women’s agency to creatively re-define/ reshape established normative social practices and also to fulfil their long-cherished aspirations (cf. Constable 2003 and Amster and Lindquist 2005). Changing economic processes relating to trade and commerce and state policies regarding emigration, immigration and citizenship impact the processes of how women negotiate issues of maintaining family solidarity amidst multicultural social settings. Students of comparative Indian diaspora (for example, Munasinghe 2001) have shown that the cultural adaptation of long-settled Indian transmigrants in countries like Trinidad can be seen as ‘creolization’ around an Indian core. Here I extend the comparativist argument with special reference to Indian South Africans. I depict processes of cross-border, transnational and in sum, the ‘trans-creative’ (Jain Shobhita 2010) role of transmigrant Indian women through the exercise of agency and networks globally while still retaining their Indian cultural roots.

NOTES

- 1 It is worth noting that Anusuya Singh herself was a medical doctor and belonged to the middle class of Indian South Africans of Durban. She published this novel in 1960 to celebrate the centenary of the arrival of Indians in South Africa and I presented a shorter version of my paper at the GOPIO conference in 2010 in Durban to celebrate the 150th year of the same event.
- 2 I acknowledge my debt to Betty Govinden’s (1998) inspiring critical re-appraisal of this novel in a paper

that she presented at a GOPIO conference in Durban in 1998, when Indian South Africans celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Passive Resistance Movement of 1946-48 in South Africa. In addition, I have also benefitted from Govinden's book *A Time of Memory: Reflections on Recent South African Writings*, published in 2008.

- 3 Though most South Africans of Indian origin label themselves as South African Indians, it is not necessary that the analysts should also follow the emic category. As such the label 'South African Indians', to my mind, denotes Indians with South African connection whereas in reality they are South Africans with Indian connection. Naming them Indian South Africans refers to their South African nationality while the adjective 'Indian' refers to their origin. In this regard a reference may also be made to the terms relating to migrant groups across the globe. The Blacks in the USA are known as African Americans, groups from South Asia and Southeast Asia are generally known as Asian Americans. Similarly, after quite a bit of debate in Malaysia, migrants from India prefer to call themselves Indian Malaysians and the Chinese migrants are known as Chinese Malaysians. In all these cases the terms — Africans/ Indians/ Chinese — serve as adjectives pre-fixed to the major label of their respective nationality. This is my logic for using the label Indian South African and not South African Indian.
- 4 Anusuya Singh was born in 1917 and died in 1978. She did not see the end of apartheid regime in 1994 but rebelling against it she joined the Passive Resistance (Satyagraha) Movement after her return from U. K. in 1956 and she was able to vividly depict in her writings the impact of apartheid regime on Indians in South Africa. This is why her novel *Behold the Earth Mourns* is to be taken as one of the critical discourses on the subject of Indian diaspora in South Africa. This is also the reason why I have taken it as one of the main sources of my argument about transmigrant women's agency.
- 5 I am grateful to Anand Singh for pointing out in a personal communication that women from Durban who travel to buy goods in India and sell the same in S. A. are widely referred among the Indian South African groups as 'bag ladies/ aunties'.
- 6 The city of Durban, on the east coast of Natal, was the main port where Indians landed from 1860 onwards.

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