

CASTE IN THE DIASPORA: A CASE STUDY OF THE NATAL RAJPUT ASSOCIATION IN DURBAN

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This article explores the role of caste-based or *jati* organisations amongst Gujarati speaking Hindus from a historical and contemporary perspective. It focuses on the Gujarati Rajput caste, a group of migrants who arrived in Natal in the late nineteenth century from towns and villages located in present-day Gujarat. This group of migrants, imbued with strong desires to protect and preserve their caste identity, formed the Natal Rajput Association (NRA). This article examines the role of the NRA as a caste group in the preservation of ethnic identity and as a vehicle for economic and social mobility, in the context of family, village and marriage alliances. Notions of caste consciousness changes in post-apartheid South Africa as new political and socio-economic realities gradually challenges South Africans of Indian descent in search of a broader South African identity.

Introduction

In July 2011 the Natal Rajput Association (NRA), a caste based organization, held a centennial celebration at the Rajput Hall in Chatsworth, Durban. The event was marked by a book launch, prayer meetings, exhibitions, and a cultural show. There was great excitement and preparation for the event by the community and visitors from throughout South Africa flocked to the event. I, together with my colleague¹, was tasked to assist with a publication commemorating this event. During our fieldwork we conducted many interviews with both the youth and senior members of the community. The latter were nostalgic about the event, highlighting the importance of the NRA in perpetuating their ethnic identity and facilitating economic mobility of the community and stressing its continuity, whilst some youth were less enthusiastic and questioned the legitimacy of caste-based organisations in post-apartheid South Africa. Jeevanbhai Bhika, a senior member of the NRA who served on many committees recalls:

To ensure the survival of the association, numerous community activities were held. From its humble beginnings of holding meetings in Bansee Lane and Mansfield Road in Durban Central, the Natal Rajput Association is now proud to have their own premises in Arena Park, Chatsworth. We need more people to become involved in the Show, Prize-giving and religious celebrations held at the Rajput Hall. I have served The Natal Rajput Association for many years as assistant secretary. At present, I am a Trustee of the association. I am filled with a sense of pride that I have served, and am still serving my community, at the age of 73, and I urge and encourage the youth of today to get actively involved in community initiatives. Your interest, input and youthful outlook is desperately needed to take the Natal Rajput Association into the next century. The youth are the leaders

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of the future and it is up to you to ensure that you preserve your history and heritage (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 105-106).

Bharat Gordhan, a youth stated

As one of the pioneer organisations of the greater Gujarati community of Durban, the NRA has been a dedicated platform for the development of the cultural identity of many of us over these years. However, as the years have passed, the numbers have dwindled. I believe that this is because the objectives of the NRA have struggled to remain current. The NRA started off with a few non-resident Gujarati Rajput families that wanted to provide a platform for the development of their children's identity. They continued the practice of the cultural values that were imbibed in them since they left their homeland. The current concern is to keep the younger people interested in the objectives of the NRA. ... We come from a generation that uses search engines to its full ability from the palm of our hand. Based on the average age and numbers of the attendees of the regular functions, the sustainability of the NRA is a concern. With the ease in which we emigrate within South Africa, it seems that we are running out of people to continue the legacy of our forefathers of the NRA. This remains a challenge for the current executive committee to overcome. What we as the Rajput community do for our communities from hereon will determine whether we will still stand out as the Rajputs of South Africa's Indian diaspora or integrate with the rest (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 106-107).

The above views raise the following questions. What role did the NRA play in the lives of the older generation? To what extent did it maintain caste or *jati* based identity? Are caste-based organisations relevant in post-apartheid South Africa? Can caste-based organizations remain intact in post-apartheid South Africa?

Scholarly works over the past two decades both from a historical and contemporary perspective have sought to theorise caste in the diaspora in the context of changing notions of caste consciousness and endogamy and identity formation (Bhana and Bhoola, 2011; Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2012; Grieco 1998; Jaffrelot, 2000; Kumar 2004; Kumar 2012; Mehta 2001; Sartape, 2012; Waughray 2009). Grieco's study on Fiji Indian immigrants argues that differential patterns of migrations led to sustenance of caste identities. The Gujarati Hindus arrived as free Indians, unencumbered by labour contracts, thus "many of the caste groups were able to maintain sub-caste integrity in Fiji. Sub-caste integrity provided the Gujarati community with the structural basis it needed for the continuation of caste-related behaviour in Fiji" (Grieco, 1998: 726). In the United Kingdom caste loyalties are still strong (Kumar, 2004; Waughray, 2007, 2009; Kumar 2012) largely because the Indian community in the UK "is still controlled by the first-generation families, and secondly that most Indians who came to the UK came in large family networks and not as isolated individuals" (Kumar, 2012: 9). In the historiography of South Africans of Indian descent caste formation and the relevance of caste organisations has recently gained scholarly attention (Bhana and Bhoola, 2011; Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2012; Kumar, 2012). Earlier studies by Kuper (1960, 1967) have argued that the Gujarati speaking Hindu community in Natal were most rigid in the practise

of the caste system and have managed to sustain caste identities largely through their economic background, strong links with India and retaining caste-endogamous marriages. Kumar (2012) in his study of the South Indian community in South Africa concludes that caste in the diaspora has evolved and that caste consciousness is far more relevant than actual caste practices. Two recent studies on evolving notions of caste practices amongst the Gujarati speaking Hindus (Bhana and Bhoola, 2011; Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2012) has steered us closer to the social history of this largely understudied group. Bhana and Bhoola (2011) have illustrated clearly how the Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj negotiated their identities to develop a broader regional identity in the creation of the Gujarati Sanskruti Kendra. Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2012) through the life histories of the Mochi (shoe-makers) community in Cape Town shows how caste consciousness amongst this group has declined largely through the secularization of the youth and a move towards a broader South African identity.

This article explores the role of caste-based or *jati* organisations amongst Gujarati speaking Hindus in Natal from a historical and contemporary perspective. It examines caste or *jati* formation amongst early immigrants, with particular reference to the Natal Rajput Association. It explores the role of caste in the preservation of an ethnic identity and as a vehicle for economic and social mobility, in the context of family, village and marriage alliances. This group sought to maintain group solidarity through caste ideology and caste behaviour. Whilst initially they were engaged in occupational specialization, in time this had little relevance and the idea was to sustain caste identities. However in post-apartheid South Africa, changing political and socio-economic realities, the NRA, as a caste-based organisation is gradually declining serving little relevance to the younger generation. This study will show that the caste system, whilst once a thriving and viable social system, has in the migratory process, transformed both in terms of its manifestations and class consciousness.

The Caste System

The caste system has permeated Indian societies for many centuries. It is a hierarchical social system (Nadkarni, 2003: 4783-4785) based on hereditary occupations commonly practised in India. An individual's social status is based on their hereditary occupation, at birth. The four main groupings were the *Brahmin* (priests) at the top, followed by the *kshatriya* (warrior caste), the *vaishya* (commoners, trading and artisan caste) and, at the bottom, the *sudra* (agricultural labourers). However while the caste system is bound by rules of endogamy and social taboos it has undergone transformations at different historical junctures. During the British Raj the introduction of census and the classification of castes led to "proliferation of caste associations aiming to change their levels in the hierarchy: aboriginals seeking classification as Hindus, Sikhs worried about

undercounting, Kolis claiming to be Koli Rajputs, and so on” (Celarent, 2011:1718). Hence it laid the foundation of early forms of affirmative action (Jaffrelot, 2000:757-758; Celarent, 2011: 1718). In contemporary India, caste, despite the secularisation of Indian society, persisted, “[O]ne irony of Indian politics is that its modern secular democracy has enhanced rather than reduced the political salience of traditional forms of social identity such as caste.” (Barker, 2010: 8). Caste associations in industrialized India have adopted new roles in the context of pressure and interest groups seeking benefits (especially requests from the lower castes) in terms of reservations in the civil service and education (Jaffrelot, 2000: 757-758; Celarent, 2011:1718). Thus over the centuries the caste system, has transformed, fluctuated, evolved itself creating new forms of consciousness, identities and actions. It is against these changing notions of caste practices and consciousness that I seek to examine caste in Natal from a historical and contemporary perspective.

Arrival of Gujarati Hindu Immigrants

Caste in Natal at the turn of the century was mainly practiced by Gujarati speaking Hindus. They arrived in Natal in the late 1890s and early 1900s. They together with Gujarati speaking Muslims, were known as “passenger” Indians because they had paid for their own fares on board steamships bound for Natal. They arrived not as contractual labours, but as free Indians under normal immigration laws. However, “passenger” Indian immigrants were not heterogeneous as a group, but also differentiated in terms of place of origin, caste, religion, and language (Hiralal 2009). Gujarati Hindus constituted several social groups and migrated mainly from present day Gujarat in western India. Gujarat in the late nineteenth century was not a contiguous unified region politically, but divided into a number of independently controlled territories. These included the States of Western India (including Nawanagar, Porbandar, Junagadh, and Bhavnagar), the British territories (including Ahmedabad, Kaira, Bharuch, Surat, and Panchmahals), the territories of Baroda State (including Navsari and Petland), and various other states. Many Gujarati immigrants came from these surrounding villages: Bardoli, Dhabel, Ghara, Kachholi, Kathor, Karadi, Kholvad, Matvad, Panoli, Rander, Sisodra, Varad and Varachha. The immigrants represented several caste groups reflecting most of the castes of a typical Gujarati village. These included Sonis (gold and silversmiths), Khatriis (weavers), Rajputs (Dhobi), Patidars, Kolis, and Kachhias (agricultural groups), Navs (barbers), and Mochis (shoemakers) (Bhana and Brain, 1990: 6; *The South African Indian Who’s Who* 1936–1937: 92–93; 107–109). As their numbers increased many of the Gujarati immigrants established themselves into separate caste based communities, for example, the Natal Lohana Niti Darshak Sabha, Sri Girnana Soni Hitvardhak Mandal, the Parsooram Darjee Association, Durban Hittechoo Mandal and the Northern Natal Mochie Sudharak Mandal (1959) (Northern Natal Kshatriya Mandal, 1984: 4; *Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj*, 1993:

33). These caste groups or associations were significant in the early days. Many young immigrants faced economic and social challenges in Natal and these bodies served as welfare structures in assisting young men to assimilate and adjust to their new environment (Desai, 1997: 54).

The pioneer Rajput migrants arrived as “passenger” Indians to colonial Natal towards the end of the 19th century, from the mid-1880s onwards. Like many “passenger” Indian immigrants, the early Rajput pioneers were motivated to emigrate by “push” and “pull” factors: devastating famines in western India, especially the period 1896-1900 prompted many to seek an alternate livelihood. The close proximity of towns and villages made communication easy by foot, bullock-wagon and train. Prospects of a better life and new opportunities in Natal and other parts of South Africa quickly spread by word of mouth and letters (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 11).

The Rajput immigrants in Natal came mainly from present day Gujarat. They trace their lineage from the Hindu *Kshatriya* caste. The term “Rajput”, comes from Sanskrit: *rajaputra*, which means “son of kings”. Rajputs are famed for their fighting abilities and once ruled numerous Indian princely states. Rajasthan is their original home. The Rajputs in Gujarat are made up of different clans mainly Rathore, Sisodiya, Panwar, Tomar, Jadhav, Solanki, Chauhan, Jadon, Silar, Rana, Mori and Parmar. The Rajputs constitute an important segment in the Hindu population in the state of Gujarat in India. They are known as *Darbars*, especially in the Kathiawar and Kutch regions. There are several sub-groups who claim lineage to the *Kshatriya* caste and Rajput clan: the *Gurjar* in Kutch, an artisan group were known as *Mistri*; the *Nadoda*, were mainly peasant farmers; the *Lohanas* were merchants and the *Mochi* were bootmakers. These sub-groups later formed their own caste associations based on their occupation. Prior to India’s independence, many Rajputs served as soldiers in the armies of Mughals, British, French, Muslim rulers of South India, like Nizam of Hyderabad and Nawab of Arcot. During the immediate post-independence period, affluent Rajputs became *zamindars*, owned vast farmlands and were known as *thakurs*. With the abolition of the *zamindari* system and the rationalization of military recruitment, many Rajputs engaged in jobs which they had hitherto never considered: craftsmen, peasant farmers and washer-men. Those who took to washing clothes were identified as *Dhobis*. The *Dhobis* were a caste group found in Pakistan and in India. They earned their livelihood by washing clothes for the higher castes. Many Rajputs in Gujarat and Maharashtra took to washing clothes and were referred to as *Dhobi* Rajputs. Over time they evolved into a distinct sub-caste group, bound by rules of endogamy (see http://www.indianetzone.com/31/dhobi_washerman_caste.htm; Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 6).

Thus the pioneer Rajputs who arrived to Natal in the late nineteenth century were often referred to as *Dhobi* Rajputs because their primary occupation in Gujarat was washing clothes which they later continued in Natal.

The Formation of the Natal Rajput Association (NRA)

In 1911 a small group of “committed and enthusiastic” immigrants sought to unite *Dhobi* Rajputs in Durban. They initially organised on an informal basis. The object was to provide a platform for the socio-cultural upliftment, co-operation and mutual aid between its members, who were all migrants. It started with the formation of the *Unai Shilling Fund* on 19 October 1911. The aim was to raise funds for the building of a *Dharmashala* (a caravansary) in Unai, Surat in India, hence the *Unai Shilling Fund*. The *Dharmashala* was to serve the local village residents in India as well as an accommodation facility for *Dhobi* Rajput immigrants commuting between India and Natal. The founding members of the *Unai* Fund – Bhikha Dayal, Dayaram Parshotam, Gopal Vanmali, Gordhan Jivan, Bhaidas Morar, Vanmali Morar, Naran Morar (elected President), Makan Naran, Dhanjee Doolabh and Parshotam Mooljee -hailed from the districts of Valsad and Surat in present day Gujarat. These individuals arrived between 1896 and 1910. Members of this *Unai Shilling Fund* contributed 1 shilling per month. *Dhobi* Rajput immigrants residing in the Transvaal travelling to India also donated £1 and 1 shilling to the fund. On 5 May 1915, Naran Morar (on behalf of the members of the *The Unai Shilling Fund of Natal*) purchased property for 261 rupees, from Rustamjee Narsavanjee in India. The property measured one acre and seventeen gutha and was located in Unai near Bansda, District of Surat. In 1917 a *Dharmashala* was built for 749 rupees and 13 annas. Many Rajput immigrants residing in Natal and the Transvaal frequented this *Dharmashala*, during their visits to India. The mandate to manage the affairs of the *Dharmashala* was assigned to fellow Rajput members in Unai (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 36-37). The *Unai Shilling Fund* served as an impetus for more active collective organization among its members.

In 1917 the *Dhobi* Rajputs saw the need to form a caste group based on their occupations: the *Durban Dhobi Mandal* was established. At the time they were largely engaged in the laundry trade and worked as washers, pressers and in the collection and distribution of clothing. The *Mandal* served largely the interests of immigrants residing in Durban. In 1921, the *Mandal* changed its name to the *Chouhan Rajput Mandal*. The name change was primarily due to the fact that the phrase *Dhobi* was associated with an inferior or lower caste. Sonis, Brahmins and Patels in Durban, who were of higher castes, often discriminated against *Dhobis* largely due to their occupational status. In addition, by then a few *Dhobi Rajputs* began to steer away from laundry work and engaged in non-traditional occupations such as retail trade, selling fresh produce and hawking. The phrase *Chouhan* was adopted to denote the clan ancestry shared by *Dhobi* Rajputs. The word Rajput was to denote that the *Dhobis* were the inheritors of the Rajput caste and of the *Kshatriya* clan. This instilled pride and dignity amongst its members. To encourage youth involvement, the *Rajput Chouhan Yuvak Mandal* was established in the 1920s. The collection of the monthly shilling continued to sustain the activities and

objectives of the *Chouhan Rajput Mandal*. Despite being a small organization, in terms of its membership, the *Chouhan Rajput Mandal* made several public donations. For example, in January 1915 it donated £51 to the Gormit Fund in India in March 1928, £7 to the Dakor Jilla to assist famine victims in India and £85 to the Umgeni Crematorium Society in Durban. In 1939 the *Chouhan Rajput Mandal* changed its name to the *Durban Rajput Mandal*. By 1939 the name *Chouhan Rajput Mandal* was no longer suitable as other Rajput immigrants of descendants of the Marwara, Hilogia, Chilata and Salekar clan began to settle in Durban. In 1948 it held its first general election meeting and formed a new cabinet. Maganbhai Narsi became the first chairman, Parsotambhai Hargovan, the Secretary and Govanbhai Gordhan the treasurer. In 1953 the *Rajput Chouhan Yuvak Mandal* was replaced by the *Rajput Yuvak Mandal*, with Parshotam Hargovan and Vanmali Magan elected President and Secretary respectively. After the 1950s membership of the *Durban Rajput Mandal* increased. In 1959 the *Durban Rajput Mandal* unanimously abolished the monthly shilling fund and started an annual Diwali collection. (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 36-37). Funds were raised during the religious festival of Diwali and the monies used for the upliftment of the *Mandal* members. In the 1960s the entry of young professionals steered the organisation to adopt a more formal and structured outlook. For example, Dr IN Rajput, a young newly qualified medical doctor arrived in Natal in 1961. He was the eldest son of Nathoobhai and Kikiben Naran of Kathor, Gujarat. He was approached by members of the *Durban Rajput Mandal* to join the association. He was appointed secretary and during his tenure, drafted a new constitution and introduced a name change from the *Durban Rajput Mandal* to *The Natal Rajput Association (NRA)*. The name change to the NRA was significant. The NRA adopted a more provincial identity both in terms of its location and goals. It sought to incorporate Rajput families living outside the periphery of Durban and broadened its objectives to include the upliftment and promotion of all matters affecting the social, educational, religious, cultural, economic and moral interest of the community residing in the Natal province.

On 5 May 1961 a new constitution was framed and ratified. On 26 August 1961 the constitution was registered at the deeds office in Pietermaritzburg. This was signed by Maganlalbhai Narsi (President), Vanmaribhai Magan (Secretary) and Govanbhai Gordhan (Treasurer). The governance and workings of the Association was largely a community affair. Association meetings were held at the business premises or homes of Rajput families in central Durban. In the early years there were several laundries owned and manned by Rajput immigrants in the Mansfield, Umbilo, Gale Street vicinity. Community meetings were held at Bunshee Lane, Mansfield Road and 106 Melbourne Road. However, as membership increased new venues were sought. On 16 March 1969 the NRA held its first general meeting at Bharat Hall in central Durban (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 36-39).

The formalisation of the NRA via the constitution meant a more formal programme for the Association. Members instituted and participated actively in many socio-cultural and educational activities. For example, the social aspects of the community were sustained through annual educational and cultural shows and community picnics. Community picnics was held bi-annually in winter and summer and provided an event for Rajput families to socialise. The cultural shows were also held annually providing a platform not only to showcase young talent but also to sustain their cultural and linguistic heritage. Cultural shows involved folk dancing, singing, plays and bhajan (prayer) items (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 67). Community members voluntarily rallied together by way of funds, assisting with transport, costume design and choreography. Govindbhai Gordhan recalls the early efforts by Rajput members:

.....the first education excursion and picnic to bluff was held in 1961the first prize giving and cultural show by small and youth children took part, and trained by Shardaben Desai who was teaching at Bharat hall Gujarati school. We had practice every weekend at Bansi lane laundry yard. Dr Rajput and I pick up the young children from their house and bring them for practice in his car and I had V. W. Kombi to take them to take part in practice... (Interview, Govindbhai Gordhan, 13 December 2010).

Role of caste associations in the lives of early immigrants

The early caste associations were formed to counteract the socio-economic and cultural challenges young males experienced in the migration process. Gujarati immigrants arrived in search of better livelihoods, were small in number, with limited financial resources, challenged by language constraints as many had very poor or no knowledge of the English language and had to assimilate to a new environment. The early migrants displayed characteristic traits and challenges which were typical of Gujarati immigrants of “passenger” origin in the diaspora. Their numbers increased through a system of chain migration and was predominantly male. However, upon arrival in Natal life was challenging. While the initial aim among some migrants was to make their fortunes in Natal and return to India, this was not always possible. The cost of frequent trips to India, the immigration restrictions on Free Indian immigrants on their entry to Natal, hindered family migration and at times threatened their vested business interests in Natal. For example, The Immigration Restriction Act of 1897 and its subsequent amendments in 1903 and 1913 required that Free immigrants apply for a domicile certificate, if they were to make Natal their home. Family migration became more frequent after the 1920s. Wives and children arrived much later, sometimes, 5 or 10 years after their spouses settled in Natal (Hiralal, 2009).

For Rajput migrants the various sub-caste associations served an important platform for young arrivals seeking residency in Natal. Fellow caste-members assisted one another in securing residency permits. The Immigration laws at the

turn of the century were constantly revised to curtail the entry of free migrants due to anti-Indian sentiments. The latter were often seen as an economic threat by local whites. Acquiring a residency permit proved to be a hassle for many new migrants. Hence fellow Gujarati *jatibha's* became facilitators in the migration, settlement and assimilation process. For example, Kuarjee Ramajee, a Dhoby applied for a Certificate of Domicile in 1907, which read as follows:

I, KUARJEE RAMAJEE OF 175 Gale Street, Durban, Dhoby do make oath and say: "That I am a native of India and 28 years of age. That I arrived in this Colony in the year 1896 by one of the German boats. I don't remember the month of my arrival. That when I arrived in this Colony in the year 1896 it was my first arrival in South Africa. That I am not an indentured Indian and also hold no pass under any act. That I have been carrying on business as a Dhoby in Durban since my arrival till date. That I have resided in this Colony ever since my arrival till date. That I have not left this Colony at any time from the date of my arrival till to-day. That this is my first application for a Certificate of Domicile. That I intend proceeding to India by the "SS Somali" sailing on or about the 31st instant. I therefore apply for a certificate of Domicile to enable me to return to this Colony.

The letter was dated 23 January 1907. Ramjee secured two affidavits from fellow immigrants who not only hailed from the same district but also belonged to the same caste group. For example, Dhanjee Doolab and Fakeer Bapoo in their letters dated 23 January 1907 wrote as follows:

Affidavit 1

I, Dhanjee Doolab of 181 Gale Street, Durban, Dhoby, do make and oath and say that I have resided several years in this Colony and hold my certificate of Domicile No. 13498. That I know KUARJEE RAMAJEE of 175 Gale Street, Durban, Dhoby, and have known him since his arrival in this Colony. That the above affidavit made by him is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Affidavit 2

I, Fakeer Bapoo of 19 Mansfield Road, Durban, Dhoby, do make oath and any:

That I have resided several years in this Colony and hold my Certificate of Domicile No. 13512. That I know KUARJEE RAMAJEE of 175 Gale Street, Durban, Dhoby and have known him for the last ten years in this Colony. That the attached affidavit made by him is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief". (Note this is cited verbatim as it appears on the affidavits (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011, 15).

The NRA in the formative years played an important role in maintaining economic endogamy (members engage in business transaction and networks within rather than outside their groups) creating a platform for employment opportunities for young migrants. In the recruitment and promotion of assistants, preferences were given to fellow caste-members or *jatibhai*. Many young men arrived between the ages of 17-25 and worked in family orientated laundry business, as assistants, managers or supervisors, whilst others worked as washers, pressers and in the

collection and distribution of clothing. For example, Gangaram Tulsi, was born in Surat in 1912. He arrived in Natal and later worked in various laundry outlets managed by fellow caste-members, among them Springbok Steam Laundry, which was owned by Dayabhai Harribhai. Young men would often live together, their living quarters either located on or adjacent to the business premises (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 30). Business partnerships in the early days were also characterised by caste affiliations, fellow caste-members often became business partners rather than with members of different castes. When capital was limited partnerships were often a basis for pooling resources and starting business ventures. For example, Thakorbbhai Makan and Dayabhai Harri formed a partnership and established Pyramid Steam Laundry in the 1940s. Both were migrants who arrived at the turn of the century. In another instance, Dayabhai Harribhai together with his wife Dhanubhen, started a door to door laundry business in Cato Manor in Durban in the 1950s. Between 1954 and 1956 he processed the washing at Kingsdale Laundry which was operated by fellow *jatibhai*, Fakirbhai Roopa. In 1956, fellow Rajput, Gonvinbhai Gordhan approached Dayabhai with a business proposal to work off his laundry premises at City Steam Laundry in Mansfield Road. Dayabhai agreed and within two years his business boomed and in February 1958 he purchased Springbok Steam Laundry in Gale Street from fellow *jatibhai* Kalyanbhai Dayaram for £650 pounds (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 21-31). Business conflicts were resolved within the NRA structures with senior executive members often forming an informal council to handle disputes. Thus the NRA in its formative years was a strong economic resource centre, assisting migrants with job opportunities, credit facilities and business networks. Economically it was the best resource body for newly arrived immigrants assisting them with re-settlement and integration into South African society.

It was not always possible for early Rajput migrants to adhere to traditional caste occupations with migration. In India, they worked as washers and pressers. In Natal, for a while, they followed the same occupation and a few established thriving laundry businesses once they had acquired sufficient capital. However, by the 1950s and 1970s changing economic realities led to many engaging in non-traditional occupations: general dealers, wholesalers, catering, hawking and fresh produce.

Caste endogamous marriages played an important role in perpetuating ethnic caste identities and in sustaining the NRA. The early immigrants made every effort to secure marriages within their castes or *jati*. Single young men who could not secure appropriate brides in Natal would often make trips to India to secure a bride from their own caste and return to South Africa. In this way they preserved their ethnic and cultural identities as the brides were accustomed to caste and traditional values (Desai, 1997: 48). Individuals who married outside of their caste were often ostracised. Up until the 1980s families arranging their children's marriages placed

sub-caste or *jati* high on the list of priorities in seeking a spouse. Family members – parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents – played a vital role in choosing the prospective spouse. Interviews conducted with women stressed the importance of sustaining caste endogamous marriages. One respondent stated:

Caste was very important ...we never use (sic) to mix with other Gujaratis...you got to marry in your caste...You see... they all got their own routine ...system...cooking styles, way of life, everything...it becomes very hard to adjust to that...they also used to believe if it is in your own caste...you adjust fast...(Interview Nirmalabhen, 18 August 2009).

Cultural and Religious Role

The NRA and its members played a pivotal role in sustaining their cultural identity, in terms of language, religion and cultural values. In the early days religion was sustained through observing the auspicious religious days on the Hindu calendar. Annual *havans* (a purifying ritual fire ceremony) were held annually. In those days business premises also served as a site for religious functions. For example in 1945 the Association held its *havan* ceremony at the Rampura Laundry in Durban. Community members often teamed up to form a Bhajan Mandal (prayer group who sang religious songs) who regularly performed at NRA cultural shows. Language and cultural values were promoted through cultural shows, with songs, folk dances and mini-plays. An important segment of the cultural shows was the promotion and acknowledgments of the educational achievements of the community by presenting deserving students with book awards and bursaries on an annual basis. Funding initiatives were largely based on member donations. The annual prize giving function started in 1961. Between 1964 and 1968 bursaries to the value of R474.00 were awarded to deserving post-matric students. These funds were raised by NRA members (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 38).

One of the major achievements of the NRA was the building of a community hall and temple, to serve the needs of its members and the larger community. This was largely achieved through hard work, dedication and commitment by its members. The hall and temple was built primarily from community donations and fund-raising activities by its members. In the 1970s members of the NRA decided to invest in real estate in Chatsworth on the outskirts of Durban. On 17 April 1972 the NRA purchased land (two thirds of an acre) in Chatsworth from the Durban City Council for an amount of R2750. 00. Two senior members of the Association, Thakorbhai Makan and Dayabhai Haribhai, provided the financial assistance for the purchase of the land. Community members worked tirelessly to raise funds for the hall (Rajput Hall) and temple. For example, the NRA Entertainment Committee was formed. This committee embarked on an innovative fund-raising campaign. They screened religious shows in various theatres, produced live shows and plays, hosting international singers and Bollywood personalities such as Kishore Kumar, Manna Dey and Gopi Krishna from India. In 1975 the NRA hosted Abraham Bhagat

from India, as part of its religious and cultural programme. Members of the NRA also contributed generously. At the annual picnic at Nagel Dam in 1975 a spontaneous donation for the building programme was initiated by Harkisonbhai Gordhan. Other members followed and a sum of R75, 000.00 was raised within an hour. This was indeed a historic occasion for the Association. Initially it was decided to erect a hall structure worth about R100 000, but as time passed a more ambitious project of R500 000, was contemplated (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 38-39).

In 1986 the NRA celebrated its 75th Anniversary (Platinum Jubilee). Two years later in 1988, the building plans for the hall were completed and on 2 April 1988 the NRA officially opened the Rajput Hall. The ceremony was accompanied by a prayer meeting and a cultural show. Sister organizations in the Cape, Transvaal, Zimbabwe and the South African Zimbabwe Rajput Association also supported the event. At this event senior members of the NRA were presented with a "Citation Award" by the President, Dr. IN Rajput to mark this historic occasion. In 1996 the NRA fulfilled its second goal, the completion of the Radha Krishna Temple. This occasion was also marked with prayer meetings, a cultural programme and prize giving show. In fact, for a small community of less than 500 families in Natal this was truly a remarkable achievement in the mid-1990s. The NRA became the first caste based Gujarati organization to build a temple in Durban and the only Rajput community in Southern Africa to do so. (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 38, Interview, Govinbhai Gordhan, 13 December 2010).

One of the reasons for the success and longevity of the NRA prior to the 1990s was the support it had acquired from its youth. In the early days the NRA sought to encourage youth participation and caste consciousness through the formation of a youth society. As mentioned earlier, the early immigrants established a *YuvakMandal* (Youth association) as early as 1927. Initially this was known as the *Unai Rajput Yuvak Mandal*. In 1951 it was replaced by the *Durban Rajput Yuvak Mandal*. The aim of this organization was to support the mother body, the *Durban Rajput Mandal* and encourage interest in their culture and music. Subsequently the youth sourced funds and established a Bhajan Mandal. In 1969 when well-known Indian artist, Sriram Bhagat visited South Africa the *Durban Rajput Yuvak Mandal* were involved in the concert. The music for folk dances and special dance items were compiled by this youth organization at various community cultural shows. As time passed *Durban Yuvak Mandal* was replaced by the *Natal Rajput Yuvak Mandal*. In the 1980s this *Mandal* was vibrant, active and engaged in several community projects (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 49).

Like the youth, the women within the NRA played a pivotal role in preserving caste identities. The early associations established by the *Dhobi* Rajputs were largely male orientated. This was largely due to two factors. Firstly, women immigrants mainly joined their spouses in the late 1930s after the Cape Town Agreement of

1927 which facilitated family migration. Secondly women's status was largely confined to the home. She was seen as the guardian of cultural values and religious instruction (Desai: 199: 53). Women supported caste based marriages and encouraged their children to marry within the Rajput community. They constantly kept close links with Rajput families in Gujarat via letters and visits (Interview, Govinbhai Gordhan, 13 December 2010). In the late 1980s a group of women, largely through the efforts of Vanmalibhai Magan, sought to collectively mobilize and form the *Natal Rajput Mahila Mandal*. This women's organization promoted the educational, cultural and religious aspects of the community. This group also contributed to the success and vibrancy of the NRA largely through its sustained support. Within the NRA it served as a fund-raising committee, collecting funds for fixtures, equipment and furniture for the Rajput Hall. The women also networked and engaged in fund-raising campaigns with other women's organization and communities such as the Saptah Mandir and the Gujarati Mahila Mandal, but its primarily allegiance was to the NRA. (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 63-66).

Post-Apartheid South Africa

In post-apartheid South Africa, the NRA is still in existence, but it is not imbued with the same vibrancy and commitment of the older generation and the youth have largely remained disinterested. Social and cultural functions are poorly attended at the Rajput Hall and marriages within fellow Rajputs are rare. Given the changing political and socio-economic realities post 1994, the NRA has forged a broader alliance with other Gujarati and Hindu communities, most notably, the Gujarati Sanskruti Kendra and the Surat Hindu Association. For example, it participates in Akhand Bhajans at the Spath Mandir and Kendra. It also renders cultural and religious items at their functions. Many NRA members are actively involved both administratively and culturally at Kendra and Saptah Mandir. Officials of the NRA assist the Kendra on various committees and sub-committees amongst them: Executive, Management, Cultural and Educational and religious (NRA Minute Book 1995-2004). The forging of broader alliances with other Gujarati communities is indicative that caste consciousness amongst the Rajputs is gradually declining. The observance of rules regarding caste purity, marriage rules and caste-based occupation were initially sustained by the pioneer *Dhobi* Rajputs. They zealously guarded their caste identities, with little desire to forge alliance with other sub-caste groups. Members of the NRA are aware that caste in its old form is irrelevant and cannot exist in the modern or contemporary South African society. Its members are currently seeking to re-evaluate and re-define their roles in terms of their goals and structures. Whilst they embrace a broader Gujarati identity, the current executive are keen to sustain the NRA structures. This has proved to be challenging given the changing shifts in identities and allegiance especially amongst the youth.

Conclusion

Thus the history of the NRA shows that it was constituted by a group of migrants with a strong desire to collectively organise along ethnic lines. The caste equilibrium was sustained by the loyalty of individuals, their commitment and their efforts to sustain caste consciousness. The NRA became a key resource for cultural preservation, economic and social advancement and community development within their caste based identities. These resources helped to preserve the ethnic culture and identity, elevate member social status and promote ethnic community building. However, in post-apartheid South Africa, the NRA whilst still in existence has lost its vibrancy in terms of community support for notions of caste consciousness. The words of a senior member of the NRA captures this statement aptly, "In the past, the Rajput community was the envy of other Gujarati communities because they used to host the most amazing shows which involved the young and the old. Today, sadly, participation has dwindled and fewer people are willing to get involved because of other commitments" (Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011: 106). For many Rajput youths caste consciousness has lost its currency. There are reasons for this.

Firstly there are *transformations in identities* among Gujarati speaking Hindus of South African origin. In other words there are generational shifts in identities. The socio-political economic changes that characterized South Africa post-1994 were to have serious repercussions. The manner in which Gujarati speaking Hindus of Rajput origin perceive themselves has undergone gradual transformations since the arrival of the early migrants. The early pioneer Rajput migrants came with a certain mind set and belief system that of creating a separate cultural identity, stressing the importance of caste related marriages and sharing a collective history based on identity. They saw themselves, as Rajputs, Gujaratis and then Indian nationals in that order. They had strong ties with India and were keen on sustaining them whilst in Africa. There was a desire by these immigrants in the Indian diaspora to reclaim their identity in the homeland, a yearning as Rushdie states, "[E]xiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (Rushdie, 1991: 10). During the apartheid era, the segregationist policies of the Nationalist Party further accentuated racial, class and ethnic differences. Black South Africans (Indians, Africans and Coloureds) were stripped of their very dignity and voting rights. However, what the Indian community had was resolve, cultural pride and commitment. These factors played a crucial role in the formation and sustenance of caste based organisations. For many Gujaratis caste-based or *jati* organisations insulated them against the harshness of apartheid, as community members sought to protect their *bhai* or *jatvara*. Thus the pioneer Rajputs saw the NRA not only as a marker of their social identity but a platform to restore their pride and dignity in the midst of apartheid policies. In the post-1994 period the youth have sought to embrace a more nationalistic and patriotic identity. Many Rajput youths whilst

acknowledging their cultural roots, being a Rajput and a Gujarati, are keener to embrace a broader South African identity. According to Bhana and Bhoola (2011), “[Y]ounger Indians, politicized by developments in South Africa, are dealing with inherent cultural symbolism differently. Or to put it differently, their Indianness is more rooted in South Africa than India” (Bhana and Bhoola, 2011: 32). Secondly *secularization of the youth* has also challenged the existence of the NRA. Caste affiliation no longer serves as a platform for economic and occupational mobility. This has been replaced by higher education. An individual’s social status is now largely determined and governed by his profession and class status rather than caste. Thirdly, the *decline of caste-endogamous marriages* has also contributed to the declining support for the NRA. Caste endogamy is largely maintained through caste-endogamous marriages. However, caste-based marriages are withering away in South Africa as young girls and boys no longer aspire to arrange marriages and opt for love across racial, religious, ethnic and linguistic lines. This to some extent has diluted the NRA from a purely Rajput group of members to a group integrated by varied castes, religion, linguistic and ethnic groups.

In conclusion the NRA as a caste-based organization has little relevance for the youth as caste consciousness has weakened and its traditional structure has eroded. There are, however, other similar Gujarati caste affiliated bodies still in existence in Durban. Further research is necessary to examine both their historical significance and their current challenges in post-apartheid South Africa.

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