CHAPTER SEVEN

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS: INJUSTICE, RACISM AND POVERTY IN THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Vinay Lal

Introduction

Although the Indian diaspora is today an incontestable fact of world culture, its global presence marked by such diverse cultural phenomena as Bollywood, Indian writing in English, tandoori cooking, and even the emergence of a new class of aggressive Indian business tycoons, it is not a matter of wide public knowledge that overseas Indian communities embody a strikingly wide array of political and socio-cultural histories. Most middle-class Indians, whose favorite overseas destination is unquestionably the United States, and whose image of the diasporic Indian has been shaped by success stories of Indians who have thrived in the US, Australia, Canada, and (to a lesser extent) the United Kingdom, have never thought much of the Indian diaspora as a worldwide phenomenon, and would be surprised to hear that older Indian diasporic communities are to be found in Southeast Asia, across the Caribbean, and in other countries such as Mauritius and Fiji. Perhaps nothing illustrates better the unwavering hold that the US has on the middle-class Indian imagination than the shocking ease with which fabricated figures – purporting to establish that 30–40 per cent of all doctors, engineers and NASA scientists in the US are of Indian origin – appearing in the once prestigious daily *Times of India* were widely trumpeted as an instantiation of a resurgent India and as a sign of what Indians can achieve in the unhindered spaces of diasporic settings (Mukul 2008).

As I shall seek to establish in this chapter, the story of the Indian diaspora can scarcely be written in the singular idiom of resounding successes, stories of rags to riches, or of the entrepreneurial drive of people determined to make their mark in life. Certain elementary distinctions are the bedrock of understanding why some diasporic Indian communities are more liable to suffer from political, economic or social disabilities than others, and what might be the systemic forms of exclusion or oppression which have operated to keep some diasporic communities on the margins. One can speak, with the obvious proviso that neat categorizations are almost always much less stable than is commonly supposed, of the 'old' and the 'new' diasporas, the first pre-eminently a diaspora of the 19th century, the latter largely of the 20th century; the former also coincides with the diaspora of the 'South', just as the latter appears to coincide with the diaspora of the 'North'. Although today Indian Americans may well pride themselves on being a 'model minority', a term of insidious intent, it is well to remember that the 1940 US census described Indians as the community with the lowest levels of schooling of any ethnic group (Lal 2008a: 46). Conversely, the economic disenfranchisement of Indians in Malaysia did not prevent one Indian, Ananda Krishnan, from becoming the wealthiest person in the country (Sze 2004).

The truly heroic saga of 19th-century indentured labourers who made their way to Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Fiji, South Africa and elsewhere has only in the last two decades received sustained scholarly attention, and the government of India's interest in this diaspora, indeed acknowledgment of its existence, is even more recent. It is at the annual gatherings known as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Celebration of Overseas Indians), initially orchestrated by the government of India in 2003, that the possibility of embracing the Indians of older diasporic communities as the children of Mother India was first seriously entertained in the post-independence period. Doubtless, there had had been earlier moments when the fate of overseas Indians in the global South had occasioned substantive concern in India, but one wonders whether, to take one example, the expulsion of Indians from Uganda and Kenya in the late 1960s might have been overlooked had many of them not had British citizenship and considerable assets at their command.

The indifference of the Indian government towards older diasporic communities may well have been a reflection of the fact that, as a country mired in poverty with comparatively little political or military leverage, India was in no position to influence the conduct of other nation states. Whatever cultural capital India may have acquired as the inheritor of Mahatma Gandhi's legacy, the overwhelming reality of Cold War politics rendered it rather ineffectual; moreover, rampant caste discrimination and oppression in India itself countered the country's claims to intervene on behalf of subjugated people of Indian origin. And yet there may have been other significant considerations that perhaps explain why India was generally not keen to embrace its dispersed children around the world. If one recalls a well-known scholar's controversial characterisation of indentured labour, which accounts for the bulk of early Indian migrations, as another name for slavery (Tinker 1974), one begins to suspect that the disapprobation with which many Indians have received this term has to do with much more than questions of historical accuracy or even scholarly predilections. Too close an association with black people, who are viewed as having uniquely borne the burdens of slavery, is seen as conferring insuperable disadvantages on Indians; it is also an indisputable fact, or nearly one, that Indians have seldom had social intimacy with black people.

The very invisibility of the older Indian diaspora, a mark of India's fragility and its own subjugation under colonial rule, was a sign of its vulnerability to forms of oppression. One could speak of 'origins', or invoke some conception of an 'Indian civilisation', in an attempt to assimilate Indian populations of the old diaspora into a notion of the motherland; but this had mainly sentimental value. It is no accident that the term NRI (Non-Resident Indian), which is now disingenuously passed off as a reference to any overseas Indian, only came into usage much less than two decades ago, and has acquired something of a magical resonance since the turn of the 21st century, when India finally became committed to opening its economy to foreign investments, reducing tariffs, and gradually eliminating the licence Raj. When we consider that a professional and affluent Indian-American elite, which in time would have both the means and the desire to support the economic liberalisation of India, was first established in the 1980s (Lal 2008a: 53–64), it becomes easier to understand why NRI became at the same time a term of approbation, indeed a sign of something to which the middle-class Indian could aspire. The entire destiny of the middle-class Indian consisted in effecting a transformation into the NRI. Once the NRI had become an established category, the NRI season came in its wake: every December–January, as the US-based NRIs returned 'home' for the winter holidays, ready to savour *makki ki roti* and *saag*, their relatives and friends put their own lives into nearly absolute suspension.

By the mid-1990s, if not earlier, it was also becoming increasingly clear that the distinctions between 'old' and 'new' diasporas, or of those of the 'South' and 'North', were more tentative and porous than had been commonly imagined. The 'old' diaspora was no more an exclusively working-class diaspora than the 'new' diaspora was a diaspora comprising only professional elites. The Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas gatherings in New Delhi were designed to invoke an ecumenical conception of the Indian diaspora that, as I have previously suggested, the government of India has almost always disowned. As I have also argued, the Indian government, and no less the educated elites of India, were oblivious to the presence of an older Indian diaspora and were predisposed towards viewing it as a reminder of everything that India had to leave behind if it wished to be seen as a nation marching towards progress and development. There was more than a touch of poverty in the older Indian diaspora, given its origins in the migrations of labourers often suffering from destitution, and most of all what India sought was to refurbish its image abroad so that India would not be indelibly stamped as a land of seething poverty. But India's aspirations to be viewed as a world power, its growing economic influence, and some adherence, howsoever notional, to political correctness all demanded that the government of India openly reject outright discrimination with respect to overseas Indians. The Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas gatherings have thus perforce sought to convey the impression that Mother India will take unto its bosom all of its dispersed children, however poor or wealthy, the older ones as much as the younger ones (Lal 2003: 19–37).

How meaningful the Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas gatherings, held annually since 2003, are to Indians residing in countries, such as Trinidad, Guyana, South Africa, Fiji, Kenya, and Malaysia where the racial divide is profound if not always transparent, where Indians, even as they might be dominant economic players, are shut out from civil society, or where the syncretistic culture forged through common Hindu and Muslim bonds is now being undermined by what can fairly be described as the communal evangelism of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, is an open question. Anti-Chinese riots have been a recurrent feature in modern Indonesian history, and, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on the United States, Muslims have been encountering increased harassment and discrimination the world over; but it appears that Indians

have had the singularly unpleasant distinction, in the post-World War II period, of facing eviction from more countries than any other community. There has been a pervasive feeling in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, where Gujaratis came to dominate the trading networks, constituting a comprador elite, that Indians occupy the same place that Jews once did as middlemen (and, one must add, as scapegoats), but I am not aware that those who have dealt with Indians unjustly, often with brutality and naked aggression, faced anything like the opprobrium that persecutors of Jews faced in the 20th century and later. The inescapable conclusion appears to be that Indians can be oppressed without much consequence to the oppressor.

While anything more than a sweeping glance at the liabilities faced by Indian communities around the entire world remains outside the scope of this chapter, numerous insights can be gained by delving into the contemporary histories of five diasporic communities, with histories that diverge as much as they intersect, in Trinidad, Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, and the Gulf. Both Fiji and Trinidad received large numbers of indentured labourers, largely from the Bhojpuri-speaking Gangetic belt in north India, who worked in the sugar plantations. However, the Indian presence in Trinidad, which dates from 1845, anticipates Indian migrations to Fiji by four decades; moreover, Trinidad's history is inseparable from an understanding of the Caribbean as the site of extraordinary hybridity, just as Fiji's Indians, who are now increasingly dispersed across the US, Australia and New Zealand, are forging another diaspora. The Indo-Fijian Australian standing in queue for an immigrant visa to the US awaits the chronicler of identity politics (cf. Voigt-Graf 2004).

The Indians of neither Trinidad nor Fiji retained much contact with India, but Malaysian Indians, owing certainly to the proximity of Malaysia to India, were more tempted to return to the motherland. Trinidad, with its population divided almost evenly between people of African and people of Indian origin, and Fiji, where the population is split between ethnic Fijians and Indo-Fijians, may be described as largely bipolar societies, but in Malaysia the Indian community is overshadowed by both the indigenous Malays and the inheritors of another great diasporic legacy, the Chinese. Malaysia has perhaps a more just claim to be viewed as a genuine experiment in 'multiculturalism', but equally nowhere else do Indians feel more weighed down by life.

South Africa complicates the picture still more: here Indians came to be classed as one of four major groups, alongside dominant Europeans, a substantial population of 'coloreds', and the numerically preponderant indigenous black population. If the creation of an apartheid state was the singularly sinister creation of South Africa, it is apposite that history's most creative and influential practitioner of non-violent resistance, Mohandas Gandhi, should have formulated and tested his ideas in South Africa for over two decades before returning to India. The presence of a considerable body of Indian elites, some of his critics have charged, facilitated Gandhi's resistance to South African whites. Whatever the merits of that allegation, one can better appreciate the tenacity with which Indians offered resistance to South Africa's colonial regime when one contrasts their condition with those of contemporary Indian labourers in the Gulf. The world 'apartheid' has found new life here: stripped of the barest rights of representation, precluded from the privileges of naturalisation and citizenship, the labouring diaspora of South Asians here prefigures a new (or shall we say old) world of overlords and serfs, playboys and workers, haves and have-nots.

Trinidad: politics and the racial divide

Indians first arrived in Trinidad aboard the *Fatel Rozack* on 30 May 1845. Slavery had been abolished a decade beforehand, the sugar plantations were largely idle, and a large and cheap labour force was required to churn out profits for the capitalist class. The Indians, George Lamming (1989) once movingly wrote, humanised the landscape, tilled the soil, and put the food on the table (Lal 1996: 133–42). In Trinidad, at least, Indians, despite growing up initially under conditions of appalling poverty, were still able to effect a number of remarkable transformations over two or three generations. One remarkable testimony to the solidarity forged by Indians across divides of class, religion and race is the celebration of the Shia festival of Muharram[1], which by the last quarter of the 19th century had assumed importance as perhaps the pre-eminent religious festival of subaltern Indians, Hindus and Muslims alike (Singh 1988).

Numerous roadblocks notwithstanding, through sheer perseverance, labour and thrift, and most significantly by a calculated withdrawal into their culture, in which they found forces of sustenance, Indians not only successfully laboured to give their children and grandchildren better economic futures but also attempted to step out of the life of the plantation. According to the 1921 Census, more than 60 per cent of them were engaged in agriculture, but over the next few decades they began to make their presence felt as professionals and entrepreneurs. Their very success would be held against them, as palpable evidence of their greed and exploitative nature: this theme of the acquisitive Indian, characterised – or rather caricatured – as, so to speak, the Jew of the East, appears as a recurrent theme in the history of the (older) Indian diaspora. The calypsonian Lord Superior voiced these sentiments in Trinidad, when he urged Prime Minister Dr Eric Williams, on the eve of independence in 1958, to 'tax them' Indians 'mad':

It have some old Indian people
Playing they like to beg
This time they got one million dollars
Tie between their leg
I am telling the Doctor
I am talking the facts
Is to chop loose the capra [cloth]
And haul out your income tax.

In Williams, if Indo-Trinidadian sentiment is to be taken seriously, Lord Superior most likely had a very sympathetic supporter. The views of Kamal Persad, one of the founders of the Caribbean *Indian Review*, are instructive: 'Eric Williams was the father of racialism in Trinidad; the father of corruption and the most anti-Indian individual in the one hundred and forty eight years of the Indian presence in this country' (1993: 6). 'It is only in the post-Williams era', the Indian Government's High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora says in evident agreement, 'that the East Indians started making a dent in politics' (Government of India 2000: 205).

Electoral politics in Trinidad, where Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians presently account in equal measure for a little over 85 per cent of the population of 1.5 million, is seared by an intense racial divide. The Indian presence in Trinidad's electoral politics was truly experienced for the first time in 1986 when the ruling party, the People's National Movement (PNM), which had reigned supreme since Trinidad derived its independence from British rule in 1962, lost to a coalition of the United Labor Front, led by the trade unionist Basdeo Panday, and the National Alliance for Reconstruction. The PNM has historically attracted Afro-Trinidadians much as the United National Congress (UNC), founded by Panday, derives most of its constituents from the Indian population; but for the present it was the Alliance's A. N. R. Robinson who was swept to power, with Basdeo Panday being given the international trade portfolio at a critical moment in Trinidad's history when the IMF had called for drastic economic reforms to avert what it described as economic collapse. In 1991 the PNM came back into power, but in 1995 Panday achieved what would have been considered absolutely improbable a decade ago, namely, outright electoral triumph. Thus, 150 years after Indians first arrived in Trinidad, an Indo-Trinidadian, whose ancestors came from the plains of north India, ascended to the office of the prime minister. Having served out his five-year term, Panday appeared to have consolidated the UNC's place in Trinidad's politics when he again led the party to victory, albeit with a narrow margin, in late 2000. But dissension within the party ranks led to a collapse of the government, and the December 2001 elections ended in a stalemate, with the UNC and the PNM each capturing 18 seats in the 36-seat Parliament. The machinations and negotiations that mark the history of electoral history of Trinidad at this juncture need not be recounted: suffice it to note that Parliament was dissolved shortly thereafter, and in the elections that followed later in 2002 Manning led the PNM, viewed by Indo-Trinidadians as wholly partial to Afro-Trinidadian interests, to victory with 20 seats.

Electoral politics is scarcely the only sign of the racial cleavage that afflicts Trinidad. The country's Sanatan Dharma Mahasabha, which claims to speak for the country's Hindus and closely monitors the state and its institutions, has time after time pointed to other manifestations of what it describes as the systemic undermining of the Indian population. From official patronage of the Carnival and the state's refusal to grant the Mahasabha a radio licence to allegations that school textbooks allow African and Afro-Trinidadian history a disproportionately high place on the syllabus, and that the government is keen to introduce 'racial quotas' which would reduce if not terminate the domination of the University of West Indies' St. Augustine campus by Indo-Trinidadians, the signs are

1 *Muhrarram culminates in a procession where tazias, or decorative and often very elaborate model mausoleums of Muslim martyrs, are held aloft and taken through a public procession before being immersed in a body of water.*

unmistakably clear of endeavours to represent Trinidad as a country of exclusively or predominantly African origins. Considering the Mahasabha's undisputed predisposition towards Hindu nationalism, one might be tempted to dismiss its frequent depiction of Indians as the victims of state-sanctioned racial bigotry and discrimination as rhetorical excess. Trinidad's growing problems with crime furnish perhaps one perspective on allegations of racism and discrimination. The US State Department, which views Trinidad as a valuable oil-producing ally, perforce had to admit in 2003 that 'criminal kidnappings for ransom were a growing problem' in Trinidad (US State Department 2004; Kairi Consultants 2004: 44)[2]. The Indian community has insinuated in the strongest terms that such kidnappings, the victims of which are largely Indians, are tolerated or overlooked by a police force composed predominantly of Afro-Trinidadians, who might be indifferent to the sufferings of Indians (Douglas 2004).

Fiji: indigenousness and the question of outsiders

Trinidad's Indians have the singular distinction of being the first diasporic Indians to mark their presence with an 'Indian Arrival Day'. Following efforts that can be dated back to the 1950s, and especially the proposal to initiate an 'Indian Emigration Day' in 1977 (Anon. 1991), 'Indian Arrival Day' was finally established in 1995 as a public celebration on the annual calendar. No sooner had this been accomplished than the government of Trinidad & Tobago declared Emancipation Day (on 1 August) a national holiday. The Ministry of Information's message to the nation made no mention of the Indian presence in the country, as though Trinidad was wholly a 'black country' (Anon. 1990: 6–8). Suddenly it seemed that both Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians were rivals to laying claim to the history of Trinidad, with little or no recognition on the part of either that they were, perhaps, equally interlopers in a country whose native inhabitants had been exterminated. True, the abolition of slavery in 1835 had paved the way for the arrival of Indians; but the arrival of Africans in the New World was contingent on something truly diabolical, namely, the decimation of an entire culture. In Trinidad, as in so many parts of the world, the subjects of a colonial regime had been left to vent their animosity towards each other. In early 1995, on the 150th anniversary of the arrival of Indians in Trinidad, Prime Minister Manning declared his willingness to accede to the demand that 'Indian Arrival Day' be designated a national holiday – except that he named the holiday 'Arrival Day'. On the assumption of the office of the prime minister in May, Basdeo Panday signalled the shift of power and the arrival of Indians on the national arena: 'Arrival Day' was rechristened 'Indian Arrival Day'.

The possibility of marking Indian arrival day in Fiji, where the prospects for Indians look far bleaker, barely exists; most of the conversations are about the departure of Indians. Thirty years ago Indians, first brought to Fiji in 1879 to work as indentured labourers on sugar plantations owned primarily by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia, accounted for over 50 per cent of Fiji's population. In Fiji, as in Trinidad, the violence perpetrated upon Indian indentured labourers can scarcely be overstated, even if one grants that the migrations also created conditions for new freedoms, such as emancipation from the often severe strictures of caste or economic independence for women (Lal 2004: 12–15). There is almost always violence in extreme forms of displacement, but here it was compounded by the fact that the economic, legal and political system was alien to Indian labourers, and there were no protections available to them. Over-tasking on the plantation was common, as was oppression under the native sirdar (overseer); troublemakers and dissenters were at once suppressed and subjected to violent assault and imprisonment. Sexual abuse and rape were widespread. Indians described living conditions as *narak* (hell) (Voigt-Graf 2004: 179), while one prominent scholar has used the term 'prison-like' to characterise plantation life under indenture (Naidu 2004).

Indians not only farmed the land, but it is from the profits of their labour that Queensland and New South Wales were developed. Yet far too many spokespersons for the ethnic Fijians and Europeans alike have chosen to obscure the history of Indians in Fiji – as though any recognition of the suffering of Indians undermines our understanding of the manner in which ethnic Fijians (or Melanesians) were deliberately confined by the colonial state to their native villages under the threat of draconian sanctions, a marginalisation justified by white elites on the grounds that only their isolation from a modern economy could keep them unsullied and guarantee their survival as a distinct race. The Indians became the mainstay of the sugar industry, by far the largest contributor to the Fijian economy; and yet, as the Fijian leader Ratu Lala Sukuna sadly admitted in 1936, demands for their exclusion from the political process, indeed from Fiji, were being voiced. As Sukuna wrote of Fiji's Indians, 'They have shouldered many burdens that have helped Fiji onward. We have derived much money from them by way of rents. A large proportion of our prosperity is derived from their labour' (Singh 2003: 224). Yet the Fijian politician Sakesai Butadroka had introduced a parliamentary motion in 1972 stating 'That this House agrees that the time has arrived when Indians or people of Indian origin in this country be repatriated back to India and that their traveling expenses back home and compensation for their properties in this country be met by the British'. Butadroka's Fijian Nationalist Party, carried aloft by the slogan, 'Fiji for the Fijians', captured nearly 25 per cent of the popular vote in the elections of 1974.

The Indians still till the soil, but under Fijian law the ownership of 83 per cent of the land is reserved for ethnic Fijians, and another 9 per cent comes under the jurisdiction of the government. Indians own less than 2 per cent of the land but produce 90 per cent of the sugar crop: they put the food on the table, but nevertheless are viewed as not rooted in the soil. At the same time, increasing migration by Indians to urban areas facilitated the creation of new wealth even as ethnic Fijians 'languished in subsistence agriculture'. The 'all-too obvious prosperity and higher standards of living of the Indians', the Singhvi Committee report states, 'led to growing resentment by the indigenous people, who felt outclassed in what they regarded as their own country' (Government of India 2000: 297). Following independence in 1970, 98 per cent of the Indians took out Fijian citizenship, though there is nothing to suggest that they came to acquire the privileges of citizenship. The fact that the term 'Fijian' is somehow reserved exclusively for ethnic Fijians is itself indicative of the secondary status of Indians[3]. Independence did not furnish Indians with rights over land; instead, the Indo-Fijians who had worked the land were granted 30-year leases. Ethnic Fijians, upon the expiry of the leases in 1997 and subsequent years, much preferred to let the land remain fallow in the name of nationalism and ethnic pride rather than be turned over to Indians (Paddock 2002; Sharma 2004: 8–9). Indo-Fijians, despite some obvious attempts to compel them into submission and eventual exile, have nonetheless shown great resilience: thus they also predominate among the traders, smaller businessmen and educators. They have been a presence in Fiji for several generations. Yet the leader of the coup of 2000, George Speight, who is of part-European descent and was then resident in Australia, and is much more of a foreigner to Fiji than any Indian born and settled there, had the audacity to describe Indians as 'foreigners'. There is, moreover, little that is 'indigenous' about the political arrangements devised for ethnic Fijians: the Great Council of Chiefs was largely a British invention, an attempt to appease ethnic Fijians alarmed at the prospect of Indian entry into Fiji.

Indians have been streaming out of Fiji since the two coups of 1987. The political reality is that the National Alliance, dominated by ethnic nationalists, Australian business interests and a few wealthy Indians, was handed a decisive defeat in the elections of April 1987, which brought to power a multiracial coalition; this display of democracy was found to be intolerable. Dr Timoci Bavadra, at the head of a coalition of the Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party, garnered the support of the Indo-Fijian community, and 19 of the 29 elected MPs were Indo-Fijian. Half the cabinet seats were filled by ethnic Fijians, and political power in the new government was admirably balanced between ethnic and Indian Fijians. Interpretations of the coup that dwell on a largely 'military' explanation, pointing to Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka's apprehensions about the Bavadra government as pro-communist and inimical to military interests (Scobell 1994), overlook Rabuka's political investment in the Taukei movement, an ethnic Fijian defence of 'our land' in which Butadroka played a leading role. The view that Indians were assuming political domination or poised to take control of the economy was groundless, but Rabuka was adept at exploiting the charge. The constitution that was promulgated in 1990 ensured the political supremacy of ethnic Fijians, who were guaranteed the office of the prime minister and a majority in the House of Representatives. The 1990 constitution, however, mandated a seven-year review,

2 *There were 227 killings in Trinidad in 2003, or proportionately twice as many as in the US, which itself has a homicide rate that exceeds, by a factor of 50 or more, the rate in countries such as Japan and Switzerland. The same US State Department report states: 'Afro-Trinidadians were employed in disproportionate numbers in the civil service, police, and military. Some Indo-Trinidadians asserted that they were excluded from equal representation in the civil service due to racial discrimination.'*

3 *In 1995 Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, architect of the two coups of 1987, issued an order stipulating that the term 'Fijian' was to be understood to mean all Fijians. Ethnic Fijians resisted, and the Indians still go under the designation of 'Indo-Fijian'.*

and during the interim conflict continued to simmer over the question of land leases. The constitution of 1997 eliminated many racially based provisions; and once a more level playing field had been permitted, Mahendra Chaudhry swept to power in the elections of 2000. His Labour Party, in alliance with two smaller Fijian parties, captured 70 per cent of the seats. This put an Indo-Fijian at the helm for the first time in Fiji's history – and so precipitated another crisis in Fiji's history.

Although George Speight was to defend his actions in launching the coup of 2000 with the observation that Fijians needed to take control of their own destiny, having allegedly been reduced to impotence in their own country, it is instructive that Chaudhry awarded 11 positions in his cabinet to ethnic Fijians and only six to Indians. It is said that history repeats itself as farce; in Fiji one suspects that farce is the only template of history. The same scenario of racialism, gangsterism and xenophobia was played out yet again as Chaudhry's government was overthrown, and once more the Methodist Church (cf. Ryle 2005), which has the support of most ethnic Fijians and backed the two coups of 1987, signalled its approval of a vile display of ethnic Fijian supremacy. The Indian Fijians, whose numbers have now been reduced to around 40 per cent of the population owing to massive migrations to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US, were found deserving of one ministerial seat in the new administration – and that a junior non-Cabinet post for 'multiethnic affairs'. The new – the other word for old, tested and corrupt – way of conducting 'multiethnic affairs' in Fiji appears to be to proceed on the assumption that the ethnic Fijians are the only true inheritors of the land and that Indo-Fijians, now settled there for five generations, are still visitors. As an Indo-Fijian woman from Labasa wrote to her daughter in 2003,

Fiji ke halat bahut kharab ho gai hae
(The conditions in Fiji are very bad now)
Hindustani per bahut museebat aahi rahi hae
(A deluge of problems has come down upon Indians)
Jameen le lete hain, ghar men se nikal dete hai
(Our land is taken away, we are forced out of our homes)
Atyachar karte hain
(Atrocities are committed [upon us])
Girmit se kamti nahi ye time
(Today is no less than girmit [the time of indentured labour])
(Cornell and Raj 2004).

One wonders how long it will be before the discourse shapes the reality, and Indo-Fijians are merely treated like visitors to their own land.

South Africa: apar theid and the colour of oppression

The migration of Indian farm labourers to South Africa commenced in 1860. Following the example of plantation owners in Madagascar and Mauritius, farmers in the province of Natal successfully lobbied the Indian government to send indentured labourers to farm the sugar plantations. Some 152,000 Indian workers came over the course of five decades: though predominantly Hindu, 12 per cent of them were Muslims and 2 per cent Christians. Among the Hindus, two-thirds were Tamil and Telugu speakers; the remainder were from north India, from the Gangetic belt. Their close association with the production of sugar has obscured the part Indians played in other arenas of agricultural production; on the coastal strips of Natal, one scholar has noted, Indians 'were the main producers of all crops other than sugar' (Freund 1995: 16). By 1900 Indians outnumbered whites in the province of Natal; there was also, by this time, a considerable presence of 'passenger' Indians – traders, moneylenders, teachers, doctors, lawyers and government clerks – besides those who, having their origins in the system of indentured labour, came to be known by the pejorative term 'coolies'.

Less than three decades after Indians arrived in Natal, strong objections to their presence were being echoed in petitions and in evidence offered to official commissions; calls for their removal would soon follow. One local chief, characterising his local homestead as 'overrun by coolies', sought relocation to Zululand, and another headman asked 'how was it that the Indians, who were comparatively new arrivals, had been well provided with land, and the natives, who were the aboriginals of the country, had been turned off?' (Hughes 2007: 160). Among those who complained of 'the Indian invasion' was John Dube, who in 1912 was elected first president of the African National Congress (ANC). John Dube and Mohandas Gandhi would be neighbours, but their close proximity to each other did not lead to neighbourliness. Dube voiced a sentiment we have encountered before, representing Indians as interlopers, avaricious middlemen and outsiders: 'we know by sad experience', he wrote, 'how beneath our very eyes our children's bread is taken by these Asiatics: how whatever little earnings we derive from Europeans, go to swell the purses of these strangers, with whom we seem obliged to trade' (Hughes 2007: 163).

The history of the Indian diaspora in South Africa has its own distinctive features: as is well known, it is here that non-violent resistance to unjust laws was initiated by Mohandas Gandhi and other members of the Indian community. Gandhi learned soon after his arrival that all Indians in South Africa were ultimately 'coolies' (Gandhi 1983: 93–4, 98, 107–9). Though Gandhi, like Dube, confined his activities of self-improvement to his own community, white opposition to the advancement of both Indians and Africans bred some awareness among them that their interest lay in forging a common front of resistance to colonial racism and discrimination. As Indians became increasingly more rooted in South Africa, the full force of legislative oppression came to be applied to them: a 1922 law placed restrictions on Indian trade and land ownership in Durban, and two years later Indians were stripped of the right to municipal franchise. Dr G. M. 'Monty' Naicker of Natal and Dr Yusuf M. Dadoo of the Transvaal were among those activists who, capitalising on earlier efforts to unionise Indian labourers, also waged a frontal battle against segregationists and helped to transform the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) into something of a mass organisation.

If John Dube and many others were inclined to view Indians as interlopers, taking the place of black Africans in the economy and the professions, others had come to the recognition that under apartheid both Indians and Africans suffered from deprivation and disenfranchisement. Economic conditions for Indians had so deteriorated that over 1,500 Indians repatriated in nine months of 1931 alone. One visitor to Durban in 1940 expressed to the town clerk his shock at 'the appalling conditions of the majority of Indians here, malnourished and housed in hovels, without any sanitation'. The Indians he met 'had the apathetical look of the half-starved' and struck him as the most 'hopeless, emaciated specimens of humanity' he had ever encountered.[4] This visitor's views would be endorsed by a University of Natal study in 1943–44 which found 70.6 per cent of Indians living below the poverty line and 40 per cent in destitution. An astounding 90 per cent of Indians, the *Daily News* reported on 8 June 1944, were malnourished. That the situation had not altered appreciably two decades later is amply attested by newspaper accounts. 'Poverty Grips Growing Indian Population', noted the *Daily News* on 11 May 1962. By 1966 the *Sunday Tribune* on 23 October 1966 could report that the 'Natal Indian's lot [is] improving', insofar as only slightly more than half of Indian households 'were living below the poverty line datum' compared with 63.7 per cent in 1963 (Ginwala 1987: 11). However, the 'myth that most Indians own shops, grow rich and live in large, ornate houses at Reservoir Hills' persisted, and a 1969 study by the University of Natal, which placed 50–60 per cent of Indian households at below the poverty line, added the sobering thought that 'many Indians have to skimp on food' so that they could maintain 'elementary living standards in other ways' (Daily News, 30 May 1969 and 16 December 1969).

Racial feelings were prevalent elsewhere in Indian diasporic settings, but in South Africa the ideology of racial segregation received full-blown expression and reverberated throughout all spheres of life. Racism was no longer to be predicated on mere sentiment; on the contrary, racial discrimination was institutionalised and brutally enforced through a draconian regime of political assassinations, staged trials, long periods of detention, exile and – most of all, one should say – the sanction of law as manifested in such legislative measures as the Group Areas Act 1950, which in the Durban area alone led to the forcible relocation of around 140,000 Indians from 1950 to 1980. The multiracial struggle, largely consolidated under the ANC, could not always obscure racial differences and animosities, as the African–Indian riots of January 1949, in which 142 people were killed, demonstrated. In 1985, again, the apartheid-era Indian settlement of Phoenix, where Gandhi had first put down roots and established a printing press, was torched: even as the memory of Gandhi was erased, memories of the reign of terror to which the Indian working class had been subjected in the killings of 1949 were revived. Nevertheless, what is of signal value is the fact that in the apartheid-era Indians fought alongside Africans and came to occupy significant leadership positions in the ANC. Their role is generously recognised in official histories of the ANC, and they have been well rewarded with official positions in recent years.

The end of apartheid in 1994 should have been comforting to Indians; and the expectation was high among them that the disabilities under which they, like Africans and (to a lesser extent) coloured people, had

4 *C. S. Smith, letter of 14 February 1940, in National Archives of South Africa, 3/DBN, 4/1/3/2033, 642. I am grateful to Professor Goolam Vahed for sharing his notes and a file of newspaper clippings with me.*

suffered would be removed. As elsewhere around the world, the white race in South Africa had set itself up as a transcendent entity, representing itself as a people whose presence alone kept the country from disintegrating into racial and ethnic hostilities. In the first free elections held in 1994, a clear majority of close to 70 per cent Indians voted for the Nationalist Party rather than the ANC. They may have been motivated by fears that affirmative action rigorously pursued by an ANC-led government would marginalise them; moreover, during the apartheid period state subsidies for Indian education, health, housing and social welfare had exceeded those for Africans on a per capita basis. Though Indians are aware that discrimination is no longer sanctioned by state policy, the feeling persists that the racialised hierarchies white South Africa brought into existence have prevailed and that black animosity has increasingly turned towards Indians. Matters came to the fore in mid-2002, when the Kwa-Zulu writer and musician, Mbongeni Ngema, released a song entitled 'AmaNdiya', the Zulu word for 'Indians'.[5] 'Oh brothers, / Oh, my fellow brothers', begins the song,

> We need strong and brave men
> to face the Indians.
> This situation is very difficult,
> Indians do not want to change
> Whites were far better than Indians
> Even Mandela has failed to convince them
> to change,
> Whites were far better than Indians.

Ngema then suggested that politicians, bribed by Indians, remained indifferent to the plight of Zulus. He invoked great figures from the Zulu past – just why he did so becomes clear from these lines:

> Indians have conquered Durban.
> We are poor because all things have been taken
> by Indians.
> They are oppressing us.
> Mkhize wants to open a business in West Street,
> Indians say there is no place to open a business.
> Our people are busy buying from Indian shops. . . .
> They [the Indians] don't want to support a single
> black shop.
> Indians keep coming from India.
> The airport is full of Indians.

The broadcasting of 'AmaNdiya', some South African Indians have maintained, may have kindled a violent crime wave against Indians. The South African Human Rights Commissioner, who rejected Ngema's plea that his views reflected those of black South Africans throughout the country, described 'AmaNdiya' as a song that 'taints an entire community' and 'perpetuates harmful myths and stereotypes'. 'AmaNdiya' would eventually be taken off the airwaves on the grounds that it 'promoted hate in sweeping, emotive language against Indians as a race'. But, as South African Indians ask, will such protections always be available to them? (Bridgraj 2002).

Malaysia: a frayed multiculturalism

Indian indentured labour in Malaysia, in contrast to Trinidad, originated in the late 19th century; and the vast bulk of the labourers were drawn from south India, predominantly from Tamil Nadu. As many as 90,000 Indians were brought to Malaysia every year between 1911 and 1930 (Wiebe and Mariappen 1978: 16), and in certain districts, for example in southern Kedah, the Indian population became preponderant. Malaysia's Indians, the 2000 census showed, account for 8 per cent of the country's population; some 80 per cent are Tamils, and a little over 81 per cent are Hindus; and the majority Malays and the Chinese constitute respectively nearly 54 per cent and 26 per cent of the population. It has often been said that in Malaysia the numerically preponderant Malays have a grip on government jobs, the Chinese predominate in business, and the Indians are congregated around plantations. Until recently, indeed, rubber plantations were still the largest employers of Indians, and although oil palm is rapidly replacing rubber as Malaysia's largest cash crop, a significant portion of Indian Malaysians still live in and around plantations.

Malaysia has long claimed, with good reason, that it represents one of the world's most arresting experiments in multiculturalism, but recent events, at the centre of which are political and cultural negotiations conducted by the Indians to assure some semblance of dignity for themselves among the dominant Malays, have put Malaysia's claims to be a genuinely multicultural and pluralistic society seriously into doubt. The condition of Malaysian Indians has long been precarious. In some years Indians have accounted for 40 per cent of felonies; beggars and vagrants come disproportionately from the Indian community; and suicide rates among Indians are exceptionally high (*Economist*, 22 February 2003; Suryanarayan 2007). The deplorable living conditions in the rubber estates have been well documented[6]. Water and electricity shortages are acute, and houses are in an extraordinarily dilapidated condition; workers are exposed to toxic pesticides, and medical services are grossly inadequate. Salaries of estate or plantation workers are among the lowest in the country, and in the mid-1990s nearly 70 per cent of workers were heavily in debt (Anon. 1981: 12; Seabrook 1994: 12; Subbarow n.d.). Estate schools, with a few exceptions, receive no state funding, nor has the government shown any desire to build schools for the Tamil community in urban areas which have witnessed a growth in Indian population as rubber plantations are shut down and Indonesians and Bangladeshis increasingly take the place of Tamils on estates. Alcoholism and subtle discrimination have together drained the life out of the community (Consumers Association of Penang n.d.).

There are numerous indices pointing to widespread poverty among Indians. Indians control only 1.2 per cent of corporate wealth; in urban areas they constitute up to 60 per cent of all squatters (Osman 2007; Economist, 22 February 2003). The long-standing correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Simon Elegant, has written that 'Malaysia's Indians are at the bottom of the country's social and economic scale' and they have been poorly served by their political leadership (Kuppuswamy 2003). But it is equally true that poverty afflicts the Malay community as well: a report published in 1998 admitted that 'poverty among Malays is still widespread as it is among urban settlers, indigenous peoples, plantation workers (mainly Indian) and New Village residents (mainly Chinese)' (SUARAM 1998: 10–11). Nevertheless, even if Indians have not been specifically targeted by the state, considerably greater segments of the Indian population remain deeply mired in poverty than is the case among other ethnic groups. The Malaysian policy of reserving jobs, not for disempowered minorities but for *bhumiputras*, or 'sons of the soil', is calculated to privilege the Malays and to assure them that state patronage remains the preserve of the native community. In Sabak, the eastern end of Malaysia, very recent Muslim immigrants from the Philippines and Indonesia have successfully been able to claim *bhumiputra* status, while many Indians who have known no country other than Malaysia continue to languish without identity cards, not to mention citizenship (Kuppusamy 2006).

The preservation of Malay hegemony takes many forms, some subtler than others. Malaysia openly prides itself on its multiculturalism, and practitioners of various faiths are allowed a free hand, yet Article 3 of the Federal Constitution unambiguously describes Malaysia as an Islamic state. This has amounted to Muslims being viewed as primus inter pares in every domain of life. Malaysians do not in the least take it as amiss that every university has a mosque, but none offers religious services for Hindus, Christians or practitioners of other faiths. Muslims may proselytise to others, but non-Muslims are forbidden by law from preaching to others. Hindus describe themselves as traumatised by recent events. In the celebrated 2005 case of Moorthy Maniam, a decorated Hindu soldier who scaled Mount Everest, the Islamic Affairs Council alleged that he had before his death converted to Islam; his wife, S. Kaliammal, declared that her husband's supposed conversion was not known to her or other family members. The Syariah [Sharia] High Court declared Moorthy Abdullah a Muslim, prevented his wife, a Hindu, from tendering evidence, and ordered him to be buried. The state has also supported the enforced rehabilitation of a Muslim wife of a Hindu spouse, besides conferring custody of the children of a woman who renounced Islam on her husband's mother. We can consider, as well, a wholly different set of events. The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), brought into being to resist state oppression and ensure equal rights for Indians as Malaysian citizens in matters religious and civil, alleges that one Hindu temple is being destroyed every three weeks (Lal 2006; Kuppusamy 2006). The Malaysian government claims that most Hindu temples are 'illegal' structures: this may well be true in a narrowly legal sense, since most of the some 17,000 temples sprang up haphazardly in and around plantations where Indians for decades constituted the principal

5 *I am grateful to Professor Surendra Bhana for sharing with me the translation of the song that appeared in the **Johannesburg Post**, 24–26 May 2002.*

6 *Much less has been documented about living conditions on oil palm plantations. Conditions on rubber estates are, however, likely to be much worse, since earnings have risen very little in relation to consumer prices. Studies of Indian poverty in Malaysia may be partly misleading in that the research has dwelled on the workers in rubber estates, even though oil palm estates were increasingly accounting for a greater share of employment in the 1990s; and today Indians constitute a large share of the urban poor.*

if not sole labour force. Developers, policy planners, state officials and businessmen have agitated for the removal of these temples not because they are unauthorised but rather because their removal is essential to plans of development.[7]

Hindraf's rally in Kuala Lumpur on 25 November 2007 brought the plight of Malaysian Indians to the notice of the world. Holding aloft pictures of Mohandas Gandhi, some 30,000 people gathered outside the British High Commission were dispersed by tear gas and chemical-laced water. Days later, the Malaysian government arrested five Hindraf leaders under the country's notorious colonial era Internal Security Act. The Malaysian government has made a desperate attempt to undermine Hindraf by caricaturing it as an organisation with terrorist links, an argument all too easily available to all states eager to put down dissent, but one should also not overlook the common colonial threads which run through this story. As Vijay Naidu has reminded us (2004: vi), speaking of the descendants of indentured labourers scattered around the globe, 'their contemporary conditions depended on the specific historical, demographic, economic and political circumstances. In all these countries, racism and the politics of ethnicity have been persistent offshoots of colonialism which have dogged post-colonial reconstruction.'

The future of Indians in the diaspora

The position of Indians in the diaspora has always been precarious. The dissolution of a democratically elected government, as in Fiji, owing in no small measure to the fact that it was headed by an Indian, even in a country where until recently they accounted for half of the population, points to the fragile position of Indians and the discriminatory and blatantly racist mechanisms deployed to keep them on the margins of civil society. One does not hear often of large population groups that are majorities or nearly so that are treated as minorities. To entertain such thoughts is by no means tantamount to reducing politics purely to a question of majorities and minorities: that very framework is a modern kind of political arithmetic which must be viewed with deep suspicion, however inevitably it may seem to constitute the bedrock of contemporary political thinking. Minorities have often had the confidence of majorities, as the case of Parsis in India so palpably demonstrates; by the same token, we should perhaps also pay heed to the formulation of Gandhi, who was quite clear that the litmus test of a democracy must for ever be how it treats its minorities – and, one might add, refugees, immigrants, the stateless and the homeless.

Fiji apart, it is necessary to understand that the problems of Indians in the diaspora, which had been of substantive concern to the Indian National Congress even as it waged a freedom struggle against the British, were underscored almost immediately after the attainment of independence by India in 1947 and Burma (now Myanmar) the following year. Indians had been prominent property owners in Burma, dominating business and trading circles, the civil services and the professions: in Rangoon (now Yangon) they accounted for half of the population of 240,000 in 1900. Hindustani was at least as popular as Burmese. Under the Indo–Burmese agreement of 1941, forced through by Burmese nationalist sentiment, Indian immigrants were required to meet certain financial obligations and literacy qualifications. The Burmese nationalist, Aung Sun, described the 'Indian vested interests' as not in favour of independence; he also thanked Jawaharlal Nehru for his efforts to check the 'rapacity and economic imperialism of Indian big business' (Bhattacharya 2003: 195).

The Indian exodus from Burma began during World War II, and although many Indians returned immediately after the war to help in the country's reconstruction, Indian businessmen and traders complained that neither their lives nor their possessions were safe under the growing political and economic instability created by the nationalist movement and Communist insurgencies. Indian landholdings were expropriated, and the highly affluent Chettiyars began to leave Burma in the early 1950s. When the Indian community appealed to Nehru for protection, he took the position that this was a matter between it and the Burmese state, and India was unable to intervene in the internal affairs of a foreign state; moreover, overseas Indians, having abjured Indian citizenship, could have no substantial claims on India. Adverting to the Indians in Fiji, Mauritius, Burma and Ceylon, Nehru put the option starkly in a Constituent Assembly debate on 8 March 1948: 'Either they get the franchise as nationals of the other country, or treat them as Indians minus the franchise and ask for the most favourable treatment given to an alien.' The suggestion that Indians were to rely on the goodwill of the 'host' country, coming as it did in the immediate aftermath of the mass murder of Jews and the extraordinarily shabby treatment of minorities elsewhere, does not flatter Nehru – even if one recognises that he may have been constrained not merely by the practical reality that India scarcely had any muscles to flex, but by his desire that his plans for a third front, a non-aligned movement, should not be derailed by excessive campaigning on behalf of overseas Indians. The perils of that view are there to be seen in Myanmar, where Indians, some 2.5 million of them, are now, in the words of the Singhvi Committee Report, 'near the bottom of the social pyramid', with few prospects for 'any significant improvement' (Government of India 2000: 261).

In a number of countries Indians were sacrificed, as we have seen, to nationalist politics. Wherever in Africa Indians established themselves, they became indispensable as the principal arteries of trade, shopkeepers to the nation, and so opened themselves to the charge that they had done so by illicit activities, by marginalising the local population, and with no other thought than that of promoting their own interests and prosperity. This interpretation is not without its Indian supporters: thus, the scholar and community activist Ashwin Desai, speaking of the Gujaratis in South Africa, has written that the 'real story of how these people exploited Africans, their contempt for the ordinary coolie and their desire to be accepted by the whites is hidden and forgotten' (Hansen 2002; cf. Vick 2000). It has sometimes been argued that the conduct of Indians in countries such as Kenya, where a negligible number of Indians held Kenyan citizenship even some months after independence in December 1963, has not been calculated to endear them to Africans (Chankardass 2001) – although, to cite the contrary example of Fiji, where 98 per cent of Indians availed themselves of citizenship, such measures provided no assurance of social acceptance. Still, even if one were inclined to accept these judgments, nothing can justify the cruel and brutal treatment meted out to Indians in Uganda, from where President Idi Amin effected their wholesale and immediate removal in the early 1970s, or the violent uprooting of the community in Kenya following an unsuccessful coup in 1982 (Patel 1972). Indians have all too often been sacrificed to black nationalist politics, and one ought not to forget that they, too, were subject to the machinery of racial discrimination and apartheid. Ashwin Desai relates that, on the eve of the second free elections in South Africa, Fatima Meer, the long-standing foe of apartheid, friend of Mandela, and icon of the Indian community, came canvassing for votes for the ANC, only to be told by common Indian flat dwellers in Chatsworth that they were 'not concerned about their former oppressors but were angry at their present oppressors' (Desai 2002: 17).

Three fundamental considerations arise, then, in thinking of the future of Indians in the diaspora. First, diasporic Indians cannot reasonably look to the Indian government for succour and assistance, and, whatever the strength of the emotional and cultural ties between them and the 'motherland', their centre of being lies elsewhere. The question 'what can India do for people of Indian ancestry abroad' begs to be effaced. Exceptions there surely are: where Indians have recently gone as labourers with work permits, as is the case with a significant number of migrants in the Middle East, the Indian government has sometimes felt obliged to lodge protests over their ill-treatment, or to otherwise act to protect their lives and property. India undertook the mammoth task of evacuating Indian passport holders from West Asia as the possibility of war in the days subsequent to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 loomed large. But, all things considered, it would be well for diasporic Indians to recognise that for the most part the Indian government is not capable of anything more than a toothless response to real or imagined affronts to its nationals or, more broadly, people of Indian descent.

Second, there is little question that the growth of Hindu nationalism in India has spawned increasing awareness of Hinduism among overseas Indian communities, an increase in what might (with some reservations) be described as Hindu evangelicalism, and renewed quests for 'Hindu identity'. It is not too early to speak of the emergence, in however incipient a form, of a global Hindu civil society, a movement determined to transform Hinduism into a potent world religion. In countries as diverse as the United States, Australia, Trinidad and Fiji, organisations which stand for a more aggressive and masculinist conception of Hinduism have also sought to insert themselves into public debates on civil rights, multiculturalism and plurality. The role of the Hindu Mahasabha in Trinidad was briefly considered earlier in this chapter, but the work of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Hindu Students Council (HSC) also readily comes to mind (Lal 2008a: 87–9). The Washington-based Hindu American Foundation,

7 *The most authoritative source of news from Malaysia is the website www.malaysiakini.com, but access to this site is strictly through subscription. The website has provided extensive coverage of temple destructions, the demonstrations by Indian activists and other matters discussed in this paragraph and the following.*

for example, is a zealous proponent of closer ties between the US, Israel and India, countries which, it is argued, are encircled by a web of Islamic terrorism (Lal 2008a: 122–3; 2008b). Unfortunately, this global Hindu civil society is displaying the worst tendencies of militant Hinduism, and it would be difficult to argue that such organisations have done much if anything to undertake poverty alleviation measures. Nevertheless, if Hinduism can be harnessed in the service of an aggressive identity politics, one should also hold out the hope that Hindus might be brought together to create a global civil society movement not only more congruent with the religion's traditions of tolerance and hospitality but also more attuned to contemporary discourses of citizenship and socio-economic equality.

Third, as a corollary, diasporic Indians must themselves display a different kind of political awareness. However much comfort there may be in thinking of identity as given, bound within purportedly natural categories, there is a greater courage in reconstituting identity along lines of political and cultural choices. It is for Gujaratis, Bengalis, Tamilians, Punjabis, Malayalis, Sindhis and others in the diaspora to forge links between themselves as Indians, to enter into coalitions with other marginalised, peripheral and disenfranchised people, and, most significantly, to formulate for themselves a moral, sensitive and democratic politics. True, such ethical choices may appear to be more easily exercised in the abstract, at a safe distance from the *Sturm und Drang* of politics, but it must nevertheless be recognised that Indians have generally had a difficult time in forging alliances with other disadvantaged groups. Indians have, not infrequently, shut blacks out of their moral vision; they may take pride in being described in the US as a 'model minority', but there is little understanding that the tag is less a characterisation of them and far more so a warning to those who are allegedly recalcitrant, lazy and 'unproductive' – African–Americans, Hispanics, among others – that they must shape up to become good citizens. The trumpeting of family values, the concerted refusal to engage with a wider notion of the 'public', the general segregation from other communities, the heavy investment in the temple among Hindus, and the often mindless replication of 'timeless' Indian traditions have been among the more distressing characteristics of Indian existence abroad, particularly in the affluent West.

There have been other forms of invisibility from which Indians in the lesser-known diaspora have suffered. The Indian diasporas closest to the 'homeland' have received comparatively little attention in the scholarly literature. The presence of a substantial Hindu community in Bangladesh, which over the years has had to reconcile itself to the fact that the partition is an enduring reality and that there is no prospective return to the putative homeland, ought to raise pressing questions for students of the Indian diaspora. Although reports of the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh have been circulating widely over recent years, their plight, insofar as anyone has cared to give it compelling attention[8], is viewed within the history of Hindu–Muslim relations on the Indian subcontinent rather than as part of the story of the diaspora under duress. Similarly, the histories of the Sri Lankan (or Jaffna) Tamils and Indian (or plantation) Tamils have not adequately been integrated into narratives of the Indian diaspora, and even less so into accounts of disabilities suffered by Indians in the diaspora. The Indo-Ceylon Agreement of 1964, rendered necessary by chauvinist Sinhalese sentiment which deprived Indian Tamils of their citizenship following Ceylon's attainment of independence in 1947, provided for the 'repatriation' of nearly two-thirds of these Tamils to India (Fries and Bibin 1984; Phadnis 1967). The expulsion of half a million Tamils over two decades, to which the Indian government lent its consent, has barely entered into the annals of human rights violations. The stateless Indian, expelled from Sri Lanka, Burma, Uganda, Kenya or elsewhere, is barely a category of social science discourse, and is almost nowhere recognised in the jubilant literature about the far-flung Indian diaspora.

In speaking of Indian diasporic populations closer to the 'homeland', let us also call to mind Indians in West Asia, particularly in the Gulf states. Although as late as around 1970 there were only 40,000 Indians in West Asia, their numbers grew rapidly in the 1980s. From 1992 to 1997, more than 400,000 Indians left for West Asia every year. To judge from the statistics maintained by the Indian Ministry of Labour, in 2000 there were three million or more Indians in West Asia (Rahman 2001; see Box 7.1). Indians, along with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, constitute the vast bulk of the huge construction force that has transformed the desert kingdoms of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation of seven autonomous states, into glittering hubs of leisure, travel and business. Dubai, the international face of the UAE, has been described as the ultimate spot for playboys: the lavish lifestyles of the ruling family and native and foreign elites, whose tastes for racehorses, expensive cars, designer luxury goods and choice hostess services run riot, are parasitic on the labour of a large class of serfs, predominantly of South Asian origins.

One might say that indentured servitude, which was officially abolished in 1917, has found a new lease of life in the Gulf states and in West Asia or the Middle East more broadly. Dubai is supremely symbolic of the increasing polarisation of the world into so-called world cities and mega slums, but for the present we need be concerned only with the deplorable treatment of South Asian labourers and the labour practices of their employers and contractors. A Human Rights Watch (2003) report described their working conditions in the UAE as 'less than human', and more recent reports by the same organisation reaffirm these earlier findings. 'Behind the glitter and luxury', states a lengthy 2006 report titled *Buildings Towers, Cheating Workers*, 'the experiences of these migrant workers present a much less attractive picture – of wage exploitation, indebtedness to unscrupulous recruiters, and working conditions that are hazardous to the point of being deadly' (Human Rights Watch 2006b: 2). A report on migrant workers in Saudi Arabia titled *Bad Dreams* argues that 'migrant workers in the purportedly modern society that the kingdom has become continue to suffer extreme forms of labor exploitation that sometimes rise to slavery-like conditions' (Human Rights Watch 2004: 1). Numerous reports have documented the various abuses to which migrant workers are routinely subjected, including working days extending to 14 hours or more, withholding of wages for several months, lack of health care facilities, absence of safety regulations, illegal confiscation of passports, and lack of freedom of movement. Deaths (and injuries) of workers on construction sites are often unreported and considerably understated (Human Rights Watch 2006b: 11); the sexual exploitation and illegal confinement of women has been widely documented. Nowhere in these countries do workers have the right to strike; unions are illegal; and salaries for contract workers, ranging from 500 to 1,000 dirhams ($136–270) monthly, place them below poverty levels.

Myron Weiner (1986: 47) suggested that even scholars paid so little attention to Indians in the Gulf because, living in 'a state of legal and political ambiguity, economic insecurity and as social outsiders', they constituted what he described as an 'incipient diaspora'. But such a view elides considerations of class and historical memory, and fails to recognise that a modern diaspora comprised overwhelmingly of the lower strata is viewed by Indian elites as a considerable embarrassment, as the very sign of India's secondary place in geopolitics and the world economy. Professor P. Ramasamy, a radical Indian academic in Malaysia, has described Indian governments as betraying 'the interest and welfare of millions of Indians locked in poverty and misery overseas'. Adverting to the government of India's sponsorship of the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebrations, he charges the government with wanting 'to develop the links with the wealthy segments of the overseas Indian community while turning a blind eye at the less savory side of the diaspora' (Kuppuswamy 2003). Under amnesty agreements signed between the Indian government and various Gulf states, Indians have been repatriated on several occasions: for instance, over 150,000 Indians returned home from Bahrain in 1996, and 280,000 from Dubai earlier in 2007 (Ahmad 2007; Menon 2008). State functionaries or apologists for indentured servitude may like to put forward such agreements as evidence of the sovereignty of law, but there is little doubt that the increased willingness on the part of South Asian workers to strike for improvements in working and living conditions has rattled the authorities (Aneja 2007). When in November 2007 4,000 South Asian migrant labourers charged with acts of vandalism were faced with deportation by UAE, no political party, not even the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which fancies itself as the voice of the oppressed working class, stepped forward to protest against their treatment. The discomfort that the 'old' diaspora is still likely to induce among those, whether scholars or politicians, who prefer to see the diaspora as an emancipatory and hybrid space for transnational flows of goods, ideas, and people is all too palpable; what is just as evident is the monochromatic voice in which the elites have taken to espousing the view that sacrifices are necessary on the altar of development.

In the Indian diaspora, then, as in India itself, there is an increasing disjunction between those who lead working-class lives and those who shuttle back and

8 *Even if we allow for the 'fact' (as has been represented to me) that the New York-based Bangladesh Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Unity Council subscribes to Hindutva ideology, and is prone to paint Islam with broad brushstrokes of evil, it seems that its massive compilation, titled 'Bangladesh: A Portrait of Covert Genocide' (2003), furnishes incontrovertible evidence of large-scale atrocities against Hindus.*

Box 7.1: Kerala's experience of international migration

The Centre for Development Studies at Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, has conducted periodic migration surveys in Kerala in 1998, 2003 and 2007. On the basis of expected variation in the proportion of emigrants in a household, the total sample size for the state as a whole was fixed at 10,000 households in each survey period. This survey was conducted at the request of the Department of Non-Resident Keralite Affairs, Government of Kerala, with full financial support.

According to the 2007 migration survey, the number of emigrants and return emigrants were estimated as 185,000 and 89,000 respectively. The number of non-resident Keralites (emigrants and return emigrants) account for 273,000. Similarly, the emigrant and return emigrant rate were estimated as 24.5 and 11.7 per 100 households. One-fourth of Kerala households are yet to send migrants outside India. With a population of about 32 million people, the average household size in Kerala is about five. If we assume that emigrants and return emigrants support four persons directly or indirectly through remittances, then 12 million or about 36 per cent of Kerala's population benefit from emigration.

Compared to the survey results of 1998, the data from 2007 indicates that the northern districts of Kerala are gaining importance as areas of emigration. Increasingly, more and more Kerala emigrants emanate from districts such as Malappuram, Kannur and Kasaragod. In Malappuram, 71 per cent of households have either an emigrant or a return emigrant. As of 2007, Malappuram district accounted for 336,000 emigrants, or about 18.2 per cent of the total number of emigrants from Kerala. The district with the second highest number of emigrants was Kannur, with 254,000.

Nearly half of emigrants was Muslim. Among Muslims, three in every four households (74 per cent) have a non-resident Keralite (NRK), compared to less than one in five Hindu households (22 per cent). Though Muslims constitute less than a quarter of the total population of Kerala, they represent almost half the total number of emigrants. For all religious, 89 per cent of emigrants have gone to the Gulf countries; and among Muslims 98 per cent.

The Gulf countries continue to be the principal destination of Kerala emigrants, although there has been a decline in the proportion from 95 per cent in 1998 to 89 per cent in 2007. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has been losing ground to the United Arab Emirates as the preferred destination of the Kerala emigrant, and countries beyond the Middle East such as the US and UK have also been receiving increasing numbers.

Labourers in non-agricultural sectors constituted the largest proportion of emigrants from Kerala, 27.4 per cent of the total. Unemployed people were the second largest group (24.3 per cent). Workers from the private sector (16.0 per cent), and among the self-employed (12.5 per cent) also emigrated in large numbers. The unemployment rate among emigrants was as high as 29.1 per cent prior to emigration, but only 6.9 per cent among returning emigrants. Emigration has thus had a significant salutary impact on the unemployment situation in Kerala. In an earlier study, we found that emigration and out-migration (migration to other parts of India) had reduced unemployment by 32 per cent. Similarly, remittances have had a significant effect on poverty alleviation in Kerala, with the best estimates pointing to a decline in poverty of about 12 per cent.

Emigrants are a selective group with respect to their demographic characteristics. Women are relatively few among them and so are the very young and the very old, with most emigrants aged 25-29 years. In 2007, the proportion of female emigrants was 14.4 per, with considerable variations among religious groups. Christians have the highest proportion of women emigrants and Muslims the lowest. In 2007, the average age of male emigrants was 26.8 years and that of females 22.7 years. The number of 'Gulf Wives', that is married women living in Kerala whose husbands are emigrants, is estimated to be about 1.2 million, which represents 10 per cent of married women in the state.

The largest number of emigrants has always been from among those with primary school education and without a secondary school leaving certificate - 45.27 per cent in 2007. The emigration rate among men in this group has been 9.3 per cent and 1.4 per cent among women. At higher educational levels, (degree, secondary level and upper secondary level), emigration rates are higher than the general average: the emigration rate is 11.2 per cent among degree holders, 9.3 per cent among secondary school leaving certificate holders, and 5.5 per cent among those who have not completed secondary schooling.

According to the balance of payments figures released by the Reserve Bank of India, remittances by overseas Indians as reflected in private transfers amounted to US$ 29.74 billion during 2006-07. According to our estimates, the total remittances to Kerala for 2006-7 were about Rs. 24,525 crores1 (US$5.4 billion). Nearly Rs 12,000 crores (US$2.7 billion) or 50 per cent of total remittances to the state, were received by the Muslim community which forms less than 25 per cent of the total population. The majority Hindu population received one-fourth of total remittances.

The total remittances in 2007 amounted to 20.2 per cent of the Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) of Kerala, forming more than 28 per cent of revenue receipts and 3.85 times the amount the state received from Central Government.

About 94 per cent of households with an emigrant had used remittances for subsistence. Next in order of importance was education (60 per cent of households) and nearly half had used remittances for repayment of the debts incurred by the cost of emigration. Only 11 per cent of the households used remittances for buying or building houses and less than 2 per cent for starting a business.

Emigration has had a significant impact on housing. Row after row of palatial houses are an eye-catching sight in many areas from which large numbers of people have emigrated. In our survey, the enumerators were required to classify the houses in the sample as 'luxurious', 'very good', 'good', 'poor' and 'kutcha'2. Most houses, 62 per cent, were classified as 'good'. Only about one in six was characterised as 'poor'. Over the years, the proportion of kutcha houses decreased considerably, from 10.5 per cent 1998 to 3.6 per cent in 2007. At the same time, the proportion of luxurious houses increased from 1.3 per cent in 1998 to 4.5 per cent in 2007. With the average quality of houses of NRK households better than that of non-NRK households, it is clear that emigration has had a positive impact on housing quality in Kerala.

In conclusion, migration has been the single most dynamic factor in the otherwise dismal scenario of Kerala's economy in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and is one of the positive outcomes of the Kerala Model of Development. Migration might have contributed more to poverty alleviation than any other factor, including agrarian reforms, trade union activities and social welfare legislation.

Irudaya Rajan, Chair Professor, Research Unit on International Migration, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

forth between metropolitan capitals. The tendency to reduce the Indian diaspora mainly to the US, witnessed for example in the modern Hindi film, is likely only to increase as remittances from US-based NRIs and growing foreign investment in the Indian economy become the overwhelming considerations for those whose only mantra is 'growth'. The modern Indian diaspora began in conditions of extreme adversity, and we are not likely to be sensitive to the acute adversity under which Indians still labour in many countries where they have a significant presence if we allow ourselves to think that the narratives of Silicon Valley 'miracles' and Salman Rushdie's post-September 11 platitudes about the uniqueness of American freedoms have adequately captured the spaces which the Indian diaspora inhabits. Ironically, the gulf between the 'old' and the 'new' diasporas may be narrowing in unexpected if unfortunate ways: the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a lawsuit in March 2008 on behalf of more than 500 Indian 'guest workers' in New Orleans, charging the company Signal International, recruiters, and labour brokers with human trafficking, illegal confinement of workers, and horrific working conditions in Gulf Coast shipyards amounting to 'modern day slavery' (Nossiter 2008; Preston 2008; Rajghatta 2008). But it is these workers, survivors of trafficking, who are now under investigation by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency and face deportation and even lengthy prison terms (see New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice URL). In the epic of the Indian diaspora are writ large contemporary stories of transnational migrations, globalisation, and human labour: if the diaspora is about success, it also offers narratives of oppression, hardship and resistance. The Indian diaspora, in this respect, is much like India itself – complex and variegated – and one hopes that it will before long have the Purana that it deserves[9].

9 *The Purana may, with some simplification, be considered an epic form of story-telling in pre-modern India.*

REFERENCES

Ahmad, Ashwin (2007) 'The Great Gulf: Labour Problems Hit Sheikhdom', Times of India, 9 December: 8.
Aneja, Atul (2007) 'Growing Assertion of Asian Workers in the Gulf', *The Hindu*, 22 November: 13.
Anon. (1981) 'Life in the Estates', *Utusan Konsumer, August*.
Anon. (1990) 'An Indian Position on the African Emancipation Day Celebration', *Indian Review*, 4 (August–September): 4–8.
Anon. (1991) 'Indian Arrival Day – May 1991', *Indian Review*, 1 (May–June): 1, 15.
Bhattacharya, Swapna (2003) 'Indians in Myanmar', in Sarva Daman Singh and Mahavir Singh (eds), *Indians Abroad*. Gurgaon, Haryana: Hope India Publications; London: Greenwich Millennium Press.
Bridgraj, Ajith (2002) 'Inspiring the Murder of Indians'. http://im.rediff.com/news/2002/aug/30spec.htm (consulted 31 August 2008).
Chankardass, Mala Kapur (2001) 'Is This My Country? To and from Kenya', *India International Centre Quarterly* 28(2): 14–24.
Consumers Association of Penang (n.d.) *Samsu (Intoxicating Liquor)*: The Silent Killer. Penang: CAP.
Cornell, John and Raj, Sushma (2004) 'A Passage to Sydney', in Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Bittersweet: An Indo-Fijian Experience*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
Desai, Ashwin (2002) We Are the Poors: *Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
Douglas, Sean (2004) '2003 Saw the End of Innocence', *Newsday*, 4 January. www.newsday.co.tt/stories.php?article_id=12324 (consulted 24 August 2008).
Freund, Bill (1995) *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban*, 1910–1990. London: Heinemann.
Fries, Yvonne and Bibin, Thomas (1984) The Undesirables. Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi & Co.
Gandhi, M K (1983 [1927]) *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House.
Ginwala, F (1987) Indian South Africans. London: Minority Rights Group.
Government of India (2000) *Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora* (Singhvi Committee). New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs.
Hansen, Thomas Blom (2002) 'Diasporic Dispositions', , 15(12).
Hughes, Heather (2007) '"The Coolies Will Elbow Us Out of the Country": African Reactions to Indian Immigration in the Colony of Natal, South Africa', Labour History Review,72(2): 155–68.
Human Rights Watch (2003) 'Dubai: Migrant Workers at Risk'. http://hrw.org/english/docs/2003/09/19/uae6388.htm (consulted 1 September 2008).
— (2004) *Bad Dreams: Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Workers in Saudi Arabia*. New York: Human Rights Watch 16 (5(E)).
— (2006a) 'UAE: Address Abuse of Migrant Workers'. http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/03/28/uae13090.htm (consulted 1 September 2008).
— (2006b) *Building Towers, Cheating Workers: Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in the United Arab Emirates* New York: Human Rights Watch 18 (8(E)).
Kairi Consultants (2004) *Trinidad & Tobago*: *Poverty Reduction and Social Development*. Submitted to Inter-American Development Bank. Port of Spain: Kairi Consultants.
Kuppuswamy, C S (2003) *Malaysian Indians: The Third Class Race*. South Asia Analysis Group Paper No. 618. www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers7/paper618.html (consulted 5 December 2008).
Kuppusamy, Baraddan (2006) 'In Search of Protection from Muslim Law'. www.malaysiakini.com/opinionsfeatures/45753 (consulted 1 September 2008).
Lal, Brij V (2004) 'Girmit, History, Memory', in Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Bittersweet: An Indo-Fijian Experience* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
Lal, Vinay (1996) 'Reflections on the Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean and Elsewhere', *New Quest*, 117 (May–June): 133–42.
— (2003) 'India in the World: Hinduism, the Diaspora, and the Anxiety of Influence', *Australian Religious Studies Review*, 16(2): 19–37.
— (2006) 'Multiculturalism at Risk: The Indian Minority in Malaysia', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(35): 3764–5.
— (2008a) *The Other Indians: A Political and Cultural History of South Asians in America*. New Delhi: HarperCollins; Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center Press, UCLA.
— (2008b) 'A Bloated Hinduism: North American Hindus and the Imagination of a Vanguard', paper delivered at a conference on Hindu Nationalist Organisations in Social and Political Context, Jawaharlal Nehru University, November 19–20.
Lamming, George (1989) 'The Indian Presence as a Caribbean Reality', in Frank Birbalsingh (ed.), *Indenture & Exile: The Indo-Caribbean Experience*. Toronto: Toronto South Asian Review.
Menon, M P M (2008) 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind', *Hindustan Times*, 16 January: 14.
Mukul, Akshaya (2008) '36% of Scientists at NASA are Indians: Govt Survey', *Times of India*, 11 March. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/36_of_scientists_at_NASA_are_Indians_Govt_survey/articleshow/2853178.cms (consulted 24 August 2008).
Naidu, Vijay (2004 [1979]) *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*. Lautoka, Fiji: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies.
New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (URL). www.nowcrj.org (consulted 1 October 2008).
Nossiter, Adam (2008) 'Workers Sue Gulf Coast Company That Imported Them', *New York Times*, 11 March.
Osman, Mohamed Nawab Bin Mohamed (2007) 'In the Land of Bhumiputra, Division', *Indian Express*, 8 December: 10.
Paddock, Richard C (2002) 'Fighting for a Slice of Heaven', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 July: A5.
Patel, Hasu H (1972) 'General Amin and the Indian Exodus from Uganda', Issue: *A Journal of Opinion*, 2(4): 12–22.
Persad, Kamal (1993) 'Donald Granado, Apologist for PNM Racism and Corruption', *Indian Review*, July: 3–6.
Phadnis, Urmila (1967) 'The Indo-Ceylon Pact and the 'Stateless' Indians in Ceylon', *Asian Survey* 7 (4):225-236.
Preston, Julia (2008) 'Workers on Hunger Strike Say They Were Misled on Visas', *New York Times*, 7 June.
Rahman, Anisur (2001) *Indian Labour Migration to the Gulf.* New Delhi: Rajat.
Rajghatta, Chidanand (2008) 'Trafficking Row: US Firm Stops Hiring Indians', *Times of India*, 29 March.
Ryle, Jacqueline (2005) 'Roots of Land and Church: The Christian State Debate in Fiji', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 5(1): 58–78.
Scobell, Andrew (1994) 'Politics, Professionalism, and Peacekeeping: An Analysis of the 1987 Military Coup in Fiji', *Comparative Politics*, 26(2): 187–201.
Seabrook, Jeremy (1994) 'Changing Life of the Tamils in Malaysia', *Utusan Konsumer*, Mid-October.
Sharma, K L (2004) *Growth, Inequality and Poverty in Fiji Islands: Institutional Constraints and Issues*. Suva: Department of Economics, University of the South Pacific.
Singh, Kelvin (1988) *Blood Stained Tombs: The Muharram Massacre*, 1884. London: Macmillan.
Singh, Sarva Daman (2003) 'Indians in Fiji', in Sarva Daman Singh and Mahavir Singh (eds), *Indians Abroad*. Gurgaon, Haryana: Hope India Publications; London: Greenwich Millennium Press.
SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia) (1998) *Malaysian Human Rights Report*. Selangor, Malaysia: Suara Kommunikasi.
Subbarow, N V (n.d.) *Estate Workers Living Conditions*. Penang: Consumers Association of Penang.
Suryanarayan, V (2007) 'Malaysian Indians: A Disadvan taged Community', *The Hindu*, 7 December: 10.
Sze, Joanna (2004) 'MB's 40 richest Malaysians' *Malaysia Business* (16 February). http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn6207/is_20040216/ai_n24907276 (consulted 13 August 2008).
Tinker, Hugh (1974) *A New System of Slavery*. London: Oxford University Press.
US State Department (2004) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, 2003: Trinidad. Washington, DC: US State Department. www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27921.htm (consulted 24 August 2008).
Vick, Karl (2000) 'A New View of Kenya's "Asians"', *Washington Post*, 15 March: A21.
Voigt-Graf, Carmen (2004) 'Twice Migrants' Relationship to their Ancestral Homeland: The Case of Indo-Fijians and India', *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 27 (2): 177–203.
Weiner, Myron (1986) 'Labour Migrations as Incipient Diasporas', in Gabriel Sheffer (ed.), *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*. London: Croom Helm.
Wiebe, Paul D and Mariappen, S (1978) Indian Malaysians: *The View from the Plantation*. Delhi: Manohar.