

When the Rainbow is Bittersweet: Reflections on Being Queer and Indian in Durban

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is one of the few countries in Africa that no longer criminalises same-sex sexual activity, and the only one to recognise same-sex marriage under the legal system. Yet, at the same time, several groups in the country practice a conservatism that discourages people from being themselves, be it in professing their gender or their sexuality. This article explores the trials and tribulations of making a documentary film with a minority population within one such minority population – Queer and Indian – in Durban, the site of the largest number of Indians outside India. Written in a reflective style that frames the positioning of the authors, a key question posed is: what are the daily issues that queer South African people deal with? Battling with conservatism while trying to find one's queer voice is just one of them. The film engages with a few people who were generous to allow us to use their experiences with the state, the society, and healthcare. How does one reconcile the Rainbow Nation, the promise of constitutional equality with the insularity that people face on a regular basis? This article aims to be the start of a much larger conversation that needs to be had.

Keywords: Durban, Indian, queer, LGBTQI+, conservatism, intimacy

INTRODUCTION – LOOKING FOR THE RAINBOW IN THE RAINBOW NATION

It was July 2022, and we were preparing for the launch of a 26-minute documentary, 'When the Rainbow is Bittersweet'¹, at a conference, *Transnational Contact Zones*, hosted by the University of Pretoria². The remit of this conference was the subject of sexualities, specifically of 'African and South Asian sexualities and genders'. Beyond their rich diversity and differences, there is a dialectic relationship between South Asia and Africa (as a consequence of the often overlooked 'shared histories' of politics, political economy, migration, colonialism, apartheid, postcolonialism and decoloniality).

We maintain that the two geopolitics open up epistemic opportunities for intellectual and political enquiry in transnational ways that further address the idea of 'mediated encounters' even if the film we produced only tangentially covered these mediated encounters. To navigate an approach to this documentary we zoomed in on the neglected 'contact zone' between the various geocultural / geopolitical domains (South Asia and Africa) and took them as a reference point, rather than as an end point. We thought this would enable us to identify different patterns, architecture and taxonomies of pluriversal knowledge systems aligned to the project of being queer and Indian in Durban.

While the documentary featured in one format highlighting the visual, voice and testimony (beyond the research paper-driven sessions), we approached this project with a full recognition that sexualities and genders direct us in multifarious ways to meaningful entry points. More specifically, if gender³ is a system of classification based on sex that valorises male power, and if sexuality⁴ is the total expression (entailing for example, body image, gender

¹ Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bYUonr_C5Y.

² More details on the conference can be found here: <https://www.up.ac.za/faculty-of-humanities/calendar/event-info/3089137/transnational-contact-zones-african-and-south-asian-sexualities-and-genders>.

³ See for example, Aiken (1998) and Connell (1987).

⁴ See for example, Bell and Valentine (1995), Bell and Binnie (2000), Bersani (2001), Blasius (2001), Butler (1999) and Califia-Rice (2001).

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identity, gender role, sexual orientation, eroticism, relationships, love, and affection), then we are also logically engaging the domain of the intimate⁵.

Sexualities and genders are therefore inextricably bound up with the project of the intimate. 'Intimacy' as a word inspires thoughts of closeness, warmth, and shared affection in spatial and temporal terms. Mediated by multifaceted elements, intimacy may indeed be what Pratt (1991) labels a 'contact zone' and the entanglement (or relationality) of various things that induce social attachments. Intimacy is, as Stoler (2006: 15-16) describes a site of constant enquiry and usually is associated with affection, love, bodily closeness, proximity of personhood, and nearness of others. Berlant (1998: 285), for her part, reminds us that intimacy is found in unpredictable places and forms, emphasising that it is a closeness that demands to be opened up, and that it encodes the power of shared knowledge and experience. We find intimacy in humans, objects, spaces, affects, texts, practices, and, indeed, ideas too. It is also fundamentally about materialising relationships. If intimacy refers to nearness as 'something that can be measured by (...) the degree of involvement, engagement, concern, and attention one gives to it' (Stoler, 2006: 15), sexualities also provide an interesting opportunity for comparison that espouses modalities of relationships, associations, and entanglements.

Our approach in co-designing 'When the Rainbow is Bittersweet' induced several questions shaped by many thoughts and doubts. Did we do enough to let people know that this film will only be a sampling of the community concerned and will be merely the tip of the iceberg? Will queer people from all the communities spoken about react well to it? Will this film add value to the lives of so many queer people of colour in South Africa who feel invisibilised because of a lack of representation, on top of managing widespread community conservatism?

As the screening finished, we were humbled by the applause. The panel that followed was equally moving and left many of us quite emotional. It had not been the easiest journey, grappling with the social obstacles, the fears of our interlocutors, the gaps we had identified ourselves in the work, and realising how much more needs to be done.

We struggled for weeks to settle on a title for this film, as nothing seemed appropriate or encompassing enough to headline an introduction to the documentary that was so deeply personal to everyone involved, not least of those who appear in the film. Being LGBTQI+ and Indian in Durban comes to represent much of what is flawed in democratic South Africa: the inability to accept difference, the reverberations of a colonial, imperial, and apartheid past, and the violence of a country that continues to exact devastating personal and collective costs, especially on those who live on the margins and in the shadows (Riley, 2021; du Toit, 2008; Gevisser and Cameron, 1994; Msibi, 2018; Munro, 2020; Carolin, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This article examines the documentary and offers a chance to raise questions about some of the fault lines that besets South Africa almost thirty years after democracy. Since the focus is on what it means to be a member of the LGBTQI+⁶ community in this South African port city, Durban, that looks to the east, the film gestures towards larger questions of yet-to-be-realised freedom in South Africa and how the lessons of an oppressive past have not yet taken root. What are the ways to think about freedom and justice when political freedom without equality falls short of the promise made to us in the transition to state democracy of 1994?

The documentary draws from interviews that were conducted in Durban and Cape Town with people from the South African LGBTQI+ community – who were willing to talk to us – and their allies following ethical protocols which were approved by the University of Pretoria. At all points of the interviews, and even before embarking on this article, we made sure our interlocutors had the option of backing out from being a part of this project in any manner. The article uses the documentary as a backdrop for delving into different issues, and as starting point for a much larger discussion.

Throughout this work, we use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term for all marginalised sexual and gender identities, a reclaimed term that perhaps is a more comfortable fit and allows for gender and sexual fluidity within its reclaimed spaces. We have mixed feelings about it, given that language and nomenclature is context-bound and situated, but we feel it encompasses many more global south sexual and gender experiences than many other words that have emanated from the global north⁷.

⁵ See for example, Bobker (2020), Hines (2007), Padilla *et al.* (2000), Sciuto (2021), Simpson, Reynolds and Hafford-Letchfield (2021) and Stoler (2006).

⁶ An acronym commonly used for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*/Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and others. We are not engaging with specific South Asian gender identities or their invisibility in the South African Indian population, but they will be a part of future endeavours.

⁷ See for example, Jagose (1996) and Kirsch (2001).

TAKING THE MUCH-TRODDEN ROUTE FROM STANGERS TO DURBAN

It was a small crew that went to Durban in 2022 to film, arriving at the beginning of the floods that resulted in hundreds of deaths and the displacement of thousands, particularly those who live out of sight of this city's tourist imagination of beaches, surf, and sun. In hindsight, this backdrop was telling, as we struggled in the rain to find our way and meet our film shoot schedule. Relating just one sliver of the lives of Durbanites through the theme of the film meant that the team started in the town of KwaDukuza (formerly Stanger), an important site in the history of the province and the place where many indentured Indians and passenger Indians made a new home. Today, the town appears like many others – tired, potholed, and abandoned, left in the tall shadows of the wealth generated by those who controlled the sugar industry in Natal and who profited off the backs of those who came on the ships from India.

The escape from the new is epitomised in Durban's northern areas, such as Umhlanga and Ballito, playgrounds of the wealthy, that sit in sharp contrast to the overcrowded city centre, with its renamed and gridlocked roads struggling to contain the masses of informal traders and pedestrians on the sidewalks. Durban's inner city is testimony to an exodus of another kind, an extraction of wealth and privilege to the north. The city has responded to the new in ways much like other South African cities (Chutel, 2019).

Post 1994 – the moment of liberation for South Africa – has seen a burgeoning of gated suburbs and a proliferation of private schools that speak of yet more lines that separate (Scott, 2019). Class, race, colour, and sexuality in Durban tell of a 'closing up' – providing a tenacious armature for the negation of lives and realities that sit outside of what is seen as 'normal' (see for example more detailed explications on the topic of the politics of gender and sexuality in Hassim, 2014 and Posel, 2004). 'When the Rainbow is Bittersweet' offers an opportunity to home in on these divisions, asking questions of South Africa as to what freedom can yet look like in the aftermath of histories of oppression and violence, and the measures that can be taken that secure a different way of being.

This project has been challenging, finding people who'd be willing to share such a vulnerable part of their lives while living in the context of the conservatism of Indian Durban was a difficult task. Through word of mouth, we managed to enlist several people for the interviews. However, one by one, they started taking themselves off the list, fearing repercussions. What was even more interesting was the fact that some people – straight, cis-gender, South African Indians – were upset about the project as it would, according to them, take away from the monolithic portrayal of Indian culture in South Africa. Indeed, several people who have often been seen as allies of the LGBTQI+ community distanced themselves from this project.

Cultural minorities, as such, are a hugely complex group to navigate. Indeed, taking the words 'culture' and 'minority' separately, they can often be at loggerheads with each other. Particularly when one looks at groups within these cultural minorities, studies have shown that LGBTQI+ people of colour often face multiple forms of marginalisation, racism from ethnic outsiders, and heterosexism from everyone (Balsam *et al.*, 2011).

While the literature on minority stress focuses on larger discriminatory events, such as forced migration, uprooting, and ousting from places due to colour, gender, and sexuality, microaggressions often go unmapped. Indeed, perpetrators may not even understand the discriminatory aspects of their comments or actions. This leads to both poor mental and physical health. Often, the discrimination comes from within the queer community as well – with rejection from queer people of other ethnic groups, or the desirability of someone due to a skin colour fetish. Indeed, many people who are in mixed-race relationships at times wonder if they are feeding a fetish or are genuinely desired for the person they are.

What is often invisibilised in South Africa's case is the intersection of the Indian and 'Coloured' populations – the clashes of cultures in a way, and the notions of desirability, the overlap of love, affection, social relations between the two groups are swept under the carpet too. The historical separation created by the Apartheid state, and the insularity that remains today within these groups breeds an 'othering' where it becomes rare to see bi-racial couples in public. Socio-cultural acceptance often becomes a matter of concern.

This documentary, and indeed, this article as well, does not try to encompass the queer Indian Durbanite's experience as a whole. As we motivate, the story in this film counters the narrative of a singular narrative (see our next section on positionality). It is instead an effort in trying to open up a much-needed conversation on breaking barriers of caste, class, and conservatism and exploring thoughts on how to achieve the almost-utopic dream of equality and freedom for all.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENTS

In keeping with the principles of feminist research and praxis, we would like to summarise the backgrounds of the filmmakers and the authors of this article:

Siona O'Connell

I have been described as a humanist, a filmmaker, a writer, and a curator. I think it is to my advantage that I don't fit neatly into any disciplinary box, echoing my experience as a 'coloured' woman who grew up on the edge of District Six in Cape Town. Fittingly, our house, originally owned by my maternal grandfather, Bareyam Singh – a 'passenger' Indian from Punjab – was called *Vryheid* ('Freedom'). Like so many others in South Africa, I come from a complex heritage of the journey of an immigrant Indian, his rags-to-riches story, and his need for being the perfect brown sahib. A Sikh from Punjab, my grandfather, like so many other passenger Indians, managed to live up to the prosperity promised by life in the British colonies until he lost almost everything when the National Party took over in 1948.

I was raised in my grandfather's home with all the trappings of white gentrification, but without the same status due to him not only for being Indian but to his marriage to my grandmother, Aletta – 'Letty' – van Schalkwyk, a Coloured woman who was the descendant of a slave. My earliest and fondest memories are of our annual holidays to Durban, spent with Auntie Suchita – 'Suchi' – and Uncle Hermendra – 'Essay' – and their five children in their home in Kismet Arcade in Grey Street in the city centre. I remember going to a favourite hang-out spot, the Blue Lagoon, a recreational space historically demarcated for Indians.

We were regulars at the Island Hotel in Isipingo Beach, another designated Indian area. Besides my mother and, to some extent, me, having some 'Indian resemblance', my father and siblings didn't have the same 'look'. However, we were always included as part of the larger Indian family and friendship network, a repudiation perhaps of Apartheid lines in small but significant ways. I am shaped by the food cooked in the kitchen in Kismet Arcade, through annual celebrations of fireworks and sweetmeats, and watching my mother glow in a red and gold sari when my parents went to weddings. This was my experience of Durban – feeling secure in a space that had ties to my grandfather, a home that was rich in traditions, of being held and loved by a past that came from elsewhere.

These memories and my lived experience as a woman with mixed heritage in no way prepared me for the making of this film, sitting uneasily when I was confronted with the experiences of a group of people who I interviewed. Their story was not mine to tell as I liked it as it was not an experience to which I could wholly relate. As a storyteller, I required constant updating, a series of personal checks and balances, and catching myself when I was emotionally floored by the heart-wrenching description of brutality inflicted on young people who were 'outed' and ousted by their families.

As a filmmaker, I work dialogically; I have never used a script, relying on conversation and free-flowing talk. Given the sensitive nature of the interviews, it was a small team, with only the Director of Photography, Adam Asmal (son of anti-apartheid stalwart, Professor Kader Asmal), the interviewee, and me in the space, allowing for an intimacy that is difficult to achieve in productions of this nature.

Significantly, what was made clear, was that, notwithstanding consent forms, I would share the edited version with everyone before the film was launched, and each had the right to change or remove their contributions. In editing, my point of departure was clear: this is only a film. We could not compromise lives, no matter how compelling the interview was. I omitted footage that could have catastrophic effects on the participants and their families. What I drew from this self-censorship was how far South Africa has strayed from the values of a constitution that seeks to safeguard all its citizens, and how quickly we have forgotten the price paid for by millions of ordinary South Africans in the struggle against apartheid.

Debjoti Ghosh

Much like South Africa, India too is a rainbow nation. The birthplace of multiple ancient cultures and religions, home to several minorities, the Indian subcontinent is steeped in traditions and conservatism while eschewing multiculturalism, democratic values and constitutional equality in the various countries that were formed after the subcontinent ceased to be a part of the British Empire. Since its independence in 1947, India has seen countless rights-based movements, and one by one, several constitutional guarantees have been made stronger. This has often happened in the face of a rising right-wing Hindu fundamentalist trend. The Hindus (a catch-all term which doesn't do justice to the extremely diverse practices of those who identify as Hindu) are a political and numerical majority. However, within the group, the Hindus remain severely divided on the basis of worship, caste, class, and political belonging.

I grew up in Kolkata (then, and even now, for some of us, still Calcutta), India, in an upper-middle class, primarily Hindu family. At the time, 'coming out' in India was almost entirely unheard of. I had much privilege in my upbringing. Yet, at the same time, the precarity of growing up queer in a largely openly un-queer environment was an uphill battle. A boys' school, where I was bullied endlessly for not conforming to the mathematically gifted, science-studying, cricket-playing boy, led to some extremely dark moments in my life, but having a supportive family allowed me to escape the daily drudgery into the world of books and art and culture. Affluence also allowed for the advent of computers and the internet within the domestic walls of my home. All of this gave me exposure to a world filled with non-normative sexualities, genders, and desires, paving the way for me to find myself, and

gradually, I connected with others like me. At that time though, few people in Kolkata had access to the internet, but it was a start. It was comforting to know that I wasn't alone. It was empowering to know that there was already a movement around sexuality and gender minorities' recognition.

While I was navigating my growing pains and my sexuality, I was also made aware of the pros and cons of coming from a mixed heritage. What was interesting were the attitudinal changes that I witnessed with my background. My mother, being half Anglo-Indian, used to recall being called a 'mixed breed' and other pejoratives when growing up or even as an adult. Casteist slurs were not reserved just for the downtrodden castes, but also for those who had dared cross social borders, like my grandfather had. Indeed, had it not been for his immense success as a doctor, his daughters – the youngest being my mother – wouldn't have had much social capital.

Bizarrely, by the time I become a teenager, the same mixed-ness was considered to be exotic. Having White relatives added to my social capital if nothing else. Indeed, my coming out was informed by all of this – the education, the relative affluence, and the assurance of support from my family. This is what also allowed me to go into work related to human rights and LGBTQI+ activism, and later, academia. My work with transgender people in India, Brazil, and South Africa stemmed from the work I started in India on HIV, sexual, and gender minorities. As a lawyer, I focused on constitutional rights and access to rights. I have been involved, directly and indirectly, in the LGBTQI+ identity rights battles ensuing in India.

Being queer and Indian, I understand some of the identity battles of South African Indians. While some of the (mis)understandings of being Indian and the subcontinental culture have been replicated several thousand miles away from the land of their origin, the evolution of the cultural traits that were brought over by firstly the enslaved people from the subcontinent in the 1600s and later, the indentured labourers and passenger Indians brought over on the waves of the British empire has somewhat moved on a different path from the lands of their origin.

As an 'Indian Indian', as the likes of me are sometimes 'fondly' referred to, I recall my confusion on whether to categorise myself as the given Indian category or to tick 'coloured' because of my mixed heritage. Or should I categorise myself as 'other' – a foreigner, an alien in this space because I don't fit into the boxes provided?

When Professor O'Connell first started reaching out to people to talk about the documentary project and their views on South African Indian queerness, she was met with a lot of opposition. In fact, she was categorically told that she had no right to write about it as 'she wasn't Indian' and didn't understand the culture.' The defenders of the myth of the monolithic Indian culture were probably afraid that she might point at a few fissures in their ideas of 'Indianness'.

However, this is not unique to the Indians in South Africa. Where particular minorities have been oppressed, many a time, in their narratives of rights, revolution, and claiming of national identity and space, queer identities are invisibilised as they are seen as a threat to these claims.

Vasu Reddy

Identity formation is contingent on the experiential, the spatial, the personal (including the private), and the political (see for example, Castells, 1997; Duby, 1988; Du Gay, Evans and Redman, 2000). Identity in fact crosscuts with multiple factors; it weaves the textures of so much more (history, class, prejudice, and indeed intimacy for example). I was born in Durban at the St. Aidan's Mission Regional Hospital, a Catholic hospital. However, my formative years were spent in Verulam, a town approximately twenty-four kilometres from Durban. Established by Methodists in 1850, the town was named after the Earl of Verulam, patron of the British who settled there. Growing up in a closely-knit family of working-class parentage, and a fourth generation of Indian descent from South India, triggers many memories and experiences that contour my identity and positioning.

I grew up in an environment surrounded by sugar cane plantations, a town mainly inhabited by people of Indian descent while other racial groups lived adjacent to the town in designated areas. I lived in a small working-class township called Mountview – made up of semi-detached homes where neighbours were also close-knit. Given apartheid spatial planning we barely interacted with people of other ethnicities, so much so that, given the segregation at the time, my first real and meaningful interactions with other races only happened when I entered university in the mid to late 1980s.

My domestic environment was shaped by living with an extended family (my parents, my two sisters, my paternal grandparents and an unmarried paternal aunt). My dad worked at the Experimental Station (part of the South African Sugar Association laboratory located in Mount Edgecombe) where he tested soil samples, including cane leaves, research that ultimately helped improved cane crops and improved yield. With just a Grade 8 education, he knew all the chemistry formulas which came in handy when I studied chemistry in high school. My mother (also with only a Grade 8 education) worked in a clothing factory in Tongaat. My paternal grandfather, having worked as a vegetable hawker whose clients were mainly whites, retired during my teenage years.

My paternal grandmother and my aunt were probably some of the last batches of Indian domestics for white people, mainly undertaking washing, ironing, caregiving and menial garden work. While mum worked during the day, as my primary caregiver, my grandmother's cooking, combined with her deep nurture and care provided much

comfort. She was a strict taskmaster. Illiterate, she was a woman of small demeanour and yet powerful, strong, and decisive. My grandmother was a great storyteller and spoke to us mainly in Telegu (although interspersed with basic English), recounting many folktales and stories that induced my interest in narrative and storytelling. It was my grandmother who got me also stuck into books and reading.

In all of this, my 'coming out' in the 1980s was no easy task. Growing up in a working-class and conservative, deeply patriarchal family, school presented with deep bullying, intimidation, and intense homophobia. Labelled a sissy, moffie, faggot and many more labels, I retreated into silence about my awakening sexuality. I had no idea how to label and describe my attraction to men, except by escaping into my inner closet. I recall in the mid-eighties an animated conversation amongst my peers at high school (I was sixteen and in what is now known as Grade 11). The conversation was about a previous night's television drama where a character was described as 'gay'. I recall how the pupils were recounting the story and describing the person who came out. Entering the conversation, I asked, 'what is gay?' and one of my classmates recounted it is 'a moffie, a homosexual, a faggot'. At that moment, as I look back (with the knowledge I have now), it was a perfect encapsulation of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) described as the 'epistemology of the closet'.

From that point onwards, I had a sense of what my developing sexuality might be, that despite the privacy and loneliness of the closet, I could not be the only one who self-identified as such. And this was the beginning of my own project of coming into identity (first to myself), and then gradually as I entered university, the interactions with a rich diversity of people (Black, White, women, lesbian, gay) and simultaneously participating in student activism in the Black students' society and the Young Communists League at University as we made a small dent in the dying days of formal apartheid.

Beyond that, life changed dramatically through supportive networks of friends and activists. I was exposed to active LGBT organising, with the shaping influence of Zackie Achmat⁸, and together with many activist comrades we established the KwaZulu-Natal Chapter of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (part of the parent body, the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality that successfully lobbied the Constitutional Assembly to include the sexual orientation clause in the South African Constitution). While taking up a lectureship at the former University of Natal, simultaneously my activism intensified. I was elected to the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality⁹, then we transformed the KwaZulu-Natal Coalition into what is now known as the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community Centre (with support from the Treatment Action Campaign and later the AIDS Foundation of South Africa).

Coming out is a process and not an event. An effect of my activism focused on social justice was the deep ethical responsibility to inform my family about my sexuality. I was completely surprised with the level of acceptance and love displayed by my parents and siblings to my coming out process that it left with me deeper desire to play a more active role to visibilise being queer. I participated openly in several coming out television documentaries in the 1990s to demonstrate how it is possible to overcome the burdens of stigma, discrimination and ultimately to promote the normalisation of sexuality (particularly homosexuality) rather than to exceptionalise it as abject, negative and to be silenced. My role as co-director of this documentary is yet another entry point, not simply to describe the complexities of sexuality, but also to give credence to what Adichie (2009) labels 'the dangers of a single story' that forecloses discussion, debate and change¹⁰.

CONSTRUCTING THE SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN

South Africa as a country was constructed out of the lands of many indigenous groups (Simpson, 2022; Thompson, 2014). Through centuries of colonial occupation, a systematic process of erasure ensued, invisibilising practices, murder, and decimation of life for hundreds of thousands of original people. Along with those who survived are the descendants of the people brought in by the colonisers – whether it was those brought in to settle, those brought in to till the soil, dig the mines, or serve as household slaves. The Indians in South Africa are mostly descendants of such people, brought in as indentured labourers or those who came as 'passenger' Indians (see for

⁸ Abdurrazack 'Zackie' Achmat is a South African activist and film director. He co-founded the Treatment Action Campaign which was instrumental in ensuring access to anti-retroviral medication for all HIV infected people in South Africa, and he also co-founded the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE).

⁹ A group of organisations representing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people in South Africa.

¹⁰ While this film was a collaborative process, this was the brainchild of the directors, Vasu Reddy and Siona O'Connell. Siona's extensive experience in filmmaking, along with Vasu's personal experience of growing up and coming out on the shores of the Indian Ocean allowed them a particular vantage point. Debijoti Ghosh joined as a producer to add his viewpoints around being queer and Indian, growing up in India, and how the LGBTQIA+ activism in India has shaped recent narratives around rights, inclusion and narratives with diasporic/immigrant Indians.

example, Bhana and Pachai, 1984; Desai and Vahed, 2007, 2010, 2019; Meer, 1969; Vahed, 1997; Vahed and Desai, 2010).

A question that has come up time and again in our research of the documentary is, what exactly is Indian? Given the South African Government's continuation of quasi-apartheid categorification of Blacks, Whites, 'Coloureds', and Indians, this catch-all category of 'Indian' puts together people who have extremely varied histories, and while it may be seen as a way of putting affirmative action in place in post-apartheid South Africa, it has also created harsher divisions in society. Also, as the country becomes home to several immigrant populations, with each person carrying different identities from their home countries, these categories are all at once dumbfounding and confusing.

The South African Asian/Indian population makes up the smallest group in South Africa. As of 2022, there are 1,555,000 people of such descent. Many of them are descendants of the 'passenger' Indians and indentured labourers who were brought over from the British colonies in Asia. Some of them arrived in South Africa from various parts of South Asia as economic migrants after the fall of Apartheid. To understand where the conservatism within the South African Indian population stems from, it is imperative to look at the history of their arrival, their history of cultural displacement, and their history of loss.

EARLY ARRIVALS

Since its establishment in 1602, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) captured an estimated 1.1 million people from countries along the Indian Ocean spice route. Several of them were from the Indian subcontinent. Ships were sent to places such as Bengal, Madagascar, and Bali. They bought people and shipped them off as slaves to several trading posts including Cape Town (South African History Online, n. d.).

From 1860 onwards, immigrants from the Indian sub-continent arrived in South Africa in one of two ways: either as 'indentured labour', or as free or 'passenger' Indians. It is estimated that by 1911, approximately 150 000 Indians were living in South Africa, and most of them were resident in Natal. The reference to 'Indians' in South Africa implies a measure of cohesiveness and suggests a single geographic place of origin. However, immigrants to the British colony of Natal who were referred to as Indians were also from different parts of the sub-continent. At the time, they were often reductively referred to as 'Natal Indians', having arrived at the port of Natal, the Durban of today (Mistry, 1965). Indentured labour was a result of the abolishing of slavery internationally, which was fuelled by the fact that the British Empire found a cheap source of labour in its colonies in the Indian subcontinent (Gregoire, 2018).

'Brahmin by Birth' or 'Brahmin by Boat' – Recasting Caste Through Indenture

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India house what was officially known as the Cellular Jail, but more 'fondly' it was known as *Kala Pani* (black waters). To be sent there, across the sea, across the black waters of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic meant a loss of caste or *varna* for Hindus because it would cause a rupture from their belonging with the holy river, the Ganges. However, the same dreaded water-crossing got associated with going towards new lands, lands of promises, of economic freedom for many, and at times, freedom from the social oppression of caste, colour, and creed faced in their hometowns (Barak, 2017).

Getting on a boat, whether by voluntary or forced indenture, for a three-month-long journey to one of the colonies led to two things – one is a mingling of all castes, and even those beneath the caste system, formerly known as 'untouchables'. What this also led to was the chance for a new beginning – to rise the caste ladder. Brinsley Samaroo (Dabydeen, Morley, Samaroo, Wahab and Wells, 2010: 20) coins the phrase 'Brahmin by birth' or 'by boat' and found in his research that

Men and women from the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, looking around in the receiving depot and seeing no one who could attest to their true origins, gave themselves new names which indicated the upward direction which they now wished to pursue. They were now Singh (lion), Sher (tiger), raj Kumari (princess), Maha raj (Great King), or Maha Bir (Great Warrior). there were now many new Brahmins by boat rather than by birth.

The indentured contracts lasted for five years. 'Indentured labour' is defined as a form of labour in which persons are contracted for a fixed number of years in exchange for a very low wage, accommodation, and food. Such labourers generally had no choice in the matter and were at the mercy of their employers who treated them appallingly and often had no regard for the terms of the contract. They came to South Africa as a result of the British Empire using India to resolve the issue of a labour shortage on the sugar-cane fields of Natal. The Indian subcontinent formed part of the British Empire, and the Colonies of the Cape and Natal in Africa were also under

British rule at the time. Labour became another form of 'raw material' to be exported at the behest of the Empire and importing indentured labour between the colonies had become an established practice in the 1800s to resolve labour shortages.

Conditions of labour exploitation were widespread. Women received half of the remuneration given to men. Often, contracts were not honoured in terms of working hours and food rations, and the labourers had no rights which would allow them to object. Over two-thirds of the indentured labourers came from South India while the others came from North India. For the most part, they were from rural areas, and they were mainly low-caste Hindus from then Madras, now Chennai, in Southern India. One-third of the indentured labourers were women. It seems that class consciousness lessened in the new environment because of the need for solidarity and also, possibly, because of the absence of the village system which had undergirded divisions.

When the period of indenture had ended, a small percentage of people returned to India while most remained. Some entered subsequent indenture contracts because of the lack of options that they had to earn a living. Some were able to obtain other work in the coal mines, on the railroads, and in other emerging industries. As indentured labourers in industry, their working conditions were much better than on the farms, but they were still discriminated against and received lower wages than the non-indentured workers. There were several unsuccessful attempts to intervene in the ill-treatment of indentured Indian labourers in Africa. Finally, in 1911, a bill presented by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, an Indian social reformer, to the Viceroy of India saw the British Indian government banning any further indenture to this country (Vahed, 2020).

As African labour was being more frequently used on sugarcane farms and industry, the South African government started offering incentives to Indians to return to their home country. This was in 1914, and the incentives included free passage, and when not many people took up this offer, cash was added to the incentivised package. It was still not a popular option for many who had started thinking of South Africa as their home. For many, it may have been about going back to life in a different caste, a life of social oppression and relative poverty.

Along with the indentured labourers, many 'passenger' Indians arrived in South Africa. This term refers to those traveling from India, who came of their own volition and who were able to pay their passage. They came to take up economic opportunities in South Africa and were mainly Muslim traders from Gujarat. They set up businesses in the then-Natal, Transvaal and Free State. Some went to Cape Town. White shopkeepers felt threatened and treated them with hostility. Overtures were made to the Colonial Office in London to try to restrict the number of free Indians coming to South Africa.

Resistance, Solidarity, and the Role in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

In 1894 a man called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi - more famously known as Mahatma Gandhi later on - formed the Natal Indian Congress (or the NIC), which was aimed at uniting diverse cultural and religious immigrants from the Indian sub-continent into one organisation. 'Indianness' (Bhana, 1997) came into being, and was aimed at winning rights for the immigrants.

Natal's white population felt threatened by the Indian immigrants organising politically and proceeded to deal with them legislatively. For example, the 1891 Immigration Act banned all land grants to former indentured labourers, and a few years later, a tax was imposed on all indentured and former indentured labourers and their families. Opponents such as Gandhi advocated for the formation of a unifying identity and organisation. Gandhi used the imperial framework to advocate particularly for the rights of Indians as British subjects.

Most of the support received by Gandhi in the last phases of the *Satyagraha* (seeking truth) campaign (1907-1914)¹¹ came mainly from poorer classes who were not members of the NIC. This showed up the contradictions in the artificial unity created by 'Indianness'. Upper-class Indians often preferred to refer to themselves as 'Arabs' (with many of them being Muslim) to distinguish themselves from the lower-class 'coolies', a word that is a pejorative in the English language today but is still used for burden-bearers in many languages of the Indian subcontinent. It is no coincidence that many of the upper-class Indians were descendants of passenger Indians¹².

Ironically, the NIC, while first being a thorn in the side of the colonial authorities, was seen as a useful tool to keep Indians separated from Africans, thus, to break their solidarity. This suited the middle-class elite of the NIC

¹¹ Gandhi spent 21 years living in South Africa, from 1893-1914.

¹² What is interesting is that, in my (Debjyoti Ghosh's) personal experience, even on dating apps like Grindr and Tinder, many South African Indian Muslims put their ethnicity as Middle Eastern, which works in different ways. For one, there is a stereotyping of Indianness in South Africa, and this sets them apart; for another, it differentiates them from those who identify as Hindu. There is also the element of colourism that plagues not only the South African Indian community but the Indian diaspora and the subcontinent as well. This colourism also creeps into queer Indian people's lives and their perceptions of beauty in South Africa. We are not going into that aspect, as its outside the scope of this article. See Anjari, S. (2022) From Black Consciousness to Black Lives Matter: Confronting the colonial legacy of colourism in South Africa, *Agenda*, 36 (4), 158-169.

who formed the leadership of the organisation. However, over time, it became apparent that Indian oppression could not be seen in isolation from the oppression of all Black people in South Africa. This was particularly true during the time of apartheid, and the focus of the NIC became much broader.

The 1940s were particularly significant years for the various Indian Congresses. 'Indianness' was redefined to make alliances possible with other Black political groups in South Africa. This was linked to an emerging multi-racial vision of South Africa. It was an acknowledgement that various approaches were needed to stop the growth of white supremacy.

Before 1945, the NIC was dominated by the merchant elite. Its new leadership elected on 14 October 1945 signalled the start of a new direction for the NIC. The new leadership included radical young students, physicians trained abroad, trade unionists, and members of the Communist Party. A common Indian identity was forged, in solidarity with other oppressed people in South Africa. Dr G. M. ('Monty') Naicker (1920-1978) served as president of the NIC from 1945-1961. His expanded notion of 'Indianness' translated into a multi-racial approach. He led the thinking about forming cross-ethnic alliances. In the post-World War 2 period in particular, anti-colonial movements in India and Africa were keen to point out contradictions in the Allied nations' commitment to freedom for all while still exploiting colonial territories.

It was during this time that a growing number of third generation young Indians emerged, who were keen to claim their South African heritage and identity. Having been South African-born, they were more comfortable with claiming that space than the previous two generations had been. While they were somewhat distant from the traditional religious and cultural practices of India, they were not completely disconnected from it. Many were involved in the secular political movement in addition to being connected to religious and cultural organisations.

These interactions, and many more, laid the basis for ongoing cooperation with the African National Congress in the last phases of the struggle, particularly from the 1970s to the 1990s. The takeaway from this history is that Indians in South Africa were part of the vision of a free country. They paid with their lives and sacrificed their youth in the broader anti-apartheid struggle for the liberation of the unfree. What, then, happened after 1994? How did the commitment to liberation end up in the silencing of queer Indian lives? Thus unfolds the tale of the unfulfilled promise of equality and freedom to queer South African Indians.

The South African Constitution was inclusive from its inception. The Bill of Rights' Equality Clause reads as follows:

Equality

9. (1) Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.
- (2) Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken.
- (3) The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth.

(...)

With the fall of the apartheid regime, the new Constitution was seen as the steppingstone of a new legacy of equality. Over the next two decades, matters like LGBTQI+ recognition and LGBTQI+ marriage came up and were included within the ambit of the rights.

DURBAN – WHERE TRADITION BECOMES A BARRIER TO ACCEPTANCE

Despite people of Indian origin being in South Africa for centuries, they are viewed with a certain suspicion in the rainbow nation. This is fed further by some of them engaging with linking themselves to India and claiming space in the diasporic context, borrowing in part from the Jewish experience. With many people claiming that Indianness connected to an ancient culture the way Gandhi envisaged it, with the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism in India, many Hindu South African Indian people are aligning themselves with the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) and the current ruling party of India, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP). Parallel to this, many South African Indian Muslims are re-centring on Mecca and an Arab identity (as mentioned earlier). These turns have also fed the conservatism around a culture that was already a product of the apartheid-produced insularity. Yet, many others disown their 'Indianness' to declare their one-ness with Africa – as African people. As Parvathi Raman (2003) says:

If some Indians have yet again been driven to look beyond the borders of South Africa to make sense of who they are, this time around, they have different political affiliations and are negotiating with very different forms of Indian nationalism than those articulated in the first half of the twentieth century. The India that currently provides a 'resting place for the imagination' is not the India envisaged in 1947. Would it be legitimate to argue that one form of Indian nationalism is more 'authentic' than the other, or is it more relevant to ask what are the material consequences of certain types of political action under the umbrella of nationalism as a political project? In this context, the politics of the post-colonial world seems 'to be spawning (its) own neo-nationalist responses' which are increasingly embedded in the politics of the right.

This notion of neo-nationalism seldom encompasses queer people – in fact, for the most part, there is a rejection of non-normative sexualities and genders as they don't help the national project, nor drive forth the patriarchy within which such projects are entrenched. So what happens to those who are stuck between communities becoming more conservative because of an understanding of their ancientness and a different sense of belonging and a state that ostensibly accepts every person as they are?

Seeing Queer Durban Through Our Interviewees

Our first interview for the film was with Nonhlanhla Mkhize, director of the Durban Lesbian and Gay Health Centre. Her quiet demeanour is in sharp contrast to her describing the violence and risks to Indian LGBTQI+ bodies and lives in Durban, saying:

Indian Durban has two sides to it – one is the rich tapestry of culture and colour that is woven into the society, and the other is about communities where the concept of accepting, loving and supporting an individual that might identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, yeah, when you think about, is there a gay Indian Durban? Not really...

She makes the point that despite Indian Durban playing a role in the fight against racial oppression, struggle stalwarts have been mute in the face of violence against LGBTQI+. She details what happened in an incident in Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu Natal:

two young men, beautiful, vibrant, exciting, love life, got found out by the parent of the one partner that these are not just two best friends, but they are actually in a relationship. What does the dad do? In full view, everybody in the neighbourhood beats them both to the pulse on the pavement outside their own home... So a space that is supposed to be home is supposed to be safe, a parent that is supposed to be loving does this to you, and in full view of your community... now if a young person calls, and that's their experience, it makes it so difficult because we know, we can't tell you, be proud of who you are, because you are within a space where you are likely to be disowned all the liberties that you had, gone, and at best, kicked out of home, and at worst, given that, uh, you are not going to even use our surname anymore... it's impractical to advise a young person at 19 about the concept of, you know what, you are beautiful, you're a young beautiful Indian lad, you've finished your matric, you've got your whole life ahead, it makes it impossible...

Mkhize also spoke about the demographics of those who came to the centre, saying that while Black and 'coloured' people visited the premises for support, Indian visibility was online, the virtual space offering sanctuary in a climate that is inhospitable to Indian LGBTQIA+ people in Durban. Before the launch of the film, we produced a series of TikTok videos with the idea of generating interest in the film launch. It was astonishing to see the reactions on this online platform, with the clips reaching over 44,000 views. More encouraging were the comments that included 'I felt the same'; 'Don't be afraid'; 'Please share more', 'Thank you for sharing and educating', and 'OMG we have to watch'. Looking at the profiles of those who viewed the clips and who commented, it was clear that the overwhelming majority were Indian.

One of the interviewees for the documentary, Suntoosh Pillay, a psychologist asked,

What does it mean to be South African and Indian and LGBTQI+? One of the difficulties we see, just at the general level, is this kind of homogenisation of the Indian community and then, when they intersect, this kind of homogenisation of the Indian, LGBTQI+ community happens.

Living in the shadows and only coming out when it is safe to do so was attested to by all but one of the interviewees. Despite having led a much more emancipated life than most other queer Indian people from Durban, Duke Sarevejo remains pretty grounded in the surrounding reality. 'I am not naive to think it's all "kumbaya"...'. He further said:

Durban is harder to come out to for LGBTQI+ Indian Folk. I have lived in Johannesburg and Durban, it's, it's chalk and cheese, there is no comparison... it is purely a function of our history... the majority of Indian folk are based in Durban... it's [...] your family, it's your community members, it's your neighbours, the people you have a concern of judging you are around you, so if you move to another city, there's less judgment, you can be yourself, you can express yourself more, it's easier to be yourself in front of somebody that doesn't know you as opposed to somebody who knows you.

He cautioned any young queer person against revealing their sexual identities until it was safe to do so, understanding 'safe' to mean when the person had completed their education, was employed, and self-supporting.

Like the others, Sarajevo made the point about moving to Johannesburg and Cape Town, seemingly LGBTQI+ safe cities, where people could just be. The challenge is significant therefore for young, poor LGBTQI+ I people who do not have the means to have tertiary education or leave the family home. Many are destined to remain on the margins, in fear, and undercover. As Suntosh Pillay puts it:

I think class is key. In South Africa, class is linked to location. And when we think of identity, I like to look at place identity, you know, and looking at how place identity can be pivoted on how we think about queer identity, so questions of who we are linked to questions of where we are, and I think it is very different inhabiting a queer identity while being in Phoenix in Durban versus being in Glenwood in Durban, and although they might be 13 kilometres away, that 13 kilometres might as well be an entire universe away.

The Roadblocks Along the Way

Getting interviewees, as mentioned earlier, wasn't the easiest matter. While we tried to be as inclusive in our research as possible, the people who we had access to, for the most part, were cis-gendered people, middle class and upwards. To try and get a glimpse into the experiences of Indian transgender people, we scoured our sources. However, in our search for interviewees, this proved to be difficult, with people agreeing and then not turning up at the last minute.

Being transgender in Durban and choosing surgery is a fraught exercise, as the health system in KwaZulu Natal does not offer surgeries. In the film, well-respected Capetonian plastic surgeon Dr Kevin Adams, who is at the forefront of gender alignment surgery, makes the point that the Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, the primary clinic for gender alignment surgery in South Africa, has more than 300 people on the waiting list, some of whom started going to the transgender clinic there in 2009 when it opened.

Given the number of people overall across the country who are waiting for gender alignment procedures, the waiting list is endless as there is a lack of units providing end-to-end services. It is only recently that transgender people got the hope of being able to receive gender-affirming healthcare in KwaZulu Natal.

The Silence That Leads to Invisibility

At a speed-dating event that Duke Sarajevo had gone to, while he was told in a very apologetic manner that the event wasn't LGBTQIA+ inclusive, the organiser also told him that he wouldn't find any gay people in Durban. Her ignorance was telling of the larger symptoms in place. Nirvana and Lisa Louton spoke of being stared at by strangers when holding hands in public in Durban (which wasn't their experience in Johannesburg), elaborating further about the challenges of being a mixed-race lesbian couple. Lisa pointed to the resistance to change, recalling their puzzlement when completing forms at schools for their children – where the blank areas for parents stubbornly remain 'mother' and 'father'. Salesh Jagber grew up thinking he was the only gay person around. These observations point to a situation of ignorance that is a product of people not wanting to acknowledge the presence of non-normative sexualities and genders around them. Furthermore, the product of the invisibilisation of queer people feeds into the lack of acknowledgment of the majority populace. This invisibility is further fuelled when political parties want to tap into the conservative Indian vote, but don't want to talk about queerness at all.

Talking about the intersections of, politics of diversity and class, Mkhize says:

We have people who every year during the Gandhi peace walk are leading the pack, chanting messages of equality, dignity, freedom for all, saying that peace in our time, not in the future, peace in our time, equality in our time, and yet, when young persons are violated, news articles like *The Post* would hardly report on the violation of a young Indian child... [...] when it comes to the Indian community, they have not stood up, because specific political parties in this province and city that have specifically said we are here to fight for the Indian vote, and the question is, what happens to the diversity of the Indian community, are you talking about a particular gender expression and sexual orientation, or are you talking about everyone who is Indian in their totality, in their different expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity, and even when it comes to issues around class. If you are poor and Indian in Durban,

you have no rights... If you come from a poor family, and you happen to be gay and are violated, accessing justice is almost non-existence... the powers that be are mum.

CONCLUSION

‘When we talk about equality, when we talk about dignity until we are all free, no one is free’ (Mkhize)

It had been a gruelling few days in Durban in 2022 when filming took place. The rain was relentless and dodging potholes was insignificant compared with the emotional toll felt by the production team as a result of some harrowing interviews – not because of our interviewees, but because of their experiences. There seemed to be no way out of the Durban shadows until Salesh Jagber sat down in front of the camera, buoying our flagging spirits with his sense of self and confidence that was visible, wearing pride. Born to a working-class family in Estcourt, a town in the uThekela District in KwaZulu Natal, he displayed none of the unease and caution we had come to expect.

Jagber did not have the security afforded by his middle or upper-class childhood. He didn't move to another city to live as a gay man, nor did he hide his sexuality. He regaled us with tales of his telling his cousins that he was gay, of going to gay nightclubs in Durban frequented by mostly ‘coloured’ patrons and living his life to the fullest. He spoke about having children. He imagined a rainbow-‘coloured’ future, drawing us into a space that was illuminating.

It would be easy to think of Jagber as naïve. It would also be wrong. On the contrary, his grounding, sense of his place in the world, and his consciousness are all due, according to Jagber, to his mother and the strong women around him,

a lot of women, cheeky women, nice women, polite women, caring... they all have their different personalities, but when you put them together [...] they protect you until you can protect yourself... that's the kind of women we had in our family, or have....

On his ‘coming out’, Salesh Jagber recalls his mother saying, ‘you will always be my baby’. His experience of ‘coming out’ was of love and acceptance, even in his extended family. It is his optimism, self-assuredness, and empowerment that give hope. A hope that acceptance – an arguably simple act – of difference can shift the needle towards actualised freedom.

It is telling that it is the mother figure who charts the way forward out of the shadows and towards the fulfilment of a life that is free. Jagber's mother secures not only her son's liberation but also responds to the call by indentured Indians in the sugarcane fields in Natal in the 19th century who dreamed of freedom, of a better future. Her unambiguous acceptance of her son is a reminder to the rest of South Africa who are still due the promise made in April 1994, that we are owed another way of being.

As motivated in our reflective article, the project of being queer in Durban, following a shoot riddled with deep rain, aptly resulted in a rainbow. It was, for all of us, a project of mediated encounters with people willing to share their inner secrets, trials, tribulations and personal hurdles with deep resilience. If sexualities and genders represent the project of intimacies, replete with deep complexity and contestations, then we also hope that the viewer sees this documentary as scratching through the frames of our film on the surface of lives that subsequently beckons further questioning and thinking about being queer within a particular ethnoscape. In our view, there is no singular queer Indian Durban experience, but rather a developing sense of what being queer and Indian might evolve into. Indeed, genders and sexualities, like intimacy, are a mode of inquiry and practice, a set of beliefs, and praxis. We are in the realm of identity, experience, and all of their ongoing entanglements.

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