

# Study on the Changing Role of Indian Immigrants in the Structure of Modern South African Society

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**Abstract:** *The early Indian diaspora in South Africa played different roles in three phases and continued to spill over its influence on South African society. Stage 1: Indian indentured laborers worked on sugarcane plantations, laying a good foundation for the stable development of the sugar industry in South Africa; Stage 2: Indian "sojourners" and free laborers together formed the Indian community, uniting the diversity of Indian immigrants into a close-knit organization; Stage 3: Early Indian immigrants in the economic development of the ethnic community Stage 3: The economic development of the early Indian immigrants in the community led to increased opportunities for political participation and the spread of Indian culture in the South African region, thus expanding their influence in various fields in South Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Indian immigrants; role change; South African social structure*

## 1. Introduction

Migration is an important topic in the study of modern world history. At present, academic research on South African Indian migration is relatively mature, but there are not many studies on the role of migration over a long period of time and over time. Therefore, it is of great academic significance to conduct research on this one topic. Over the years, there have been in-depth studies on Chinese South Africans in our academic circles, but as far as South African Indians are concerned, although there have been relevant monographs, they are not considered mature. Most of the previous articles on South African Indian immigrants only stayed in the colonial period, and did not account for the role played by Indians in social change. The purpose of this paper is to go beyond the study of the history of immigration and take the process of the development of Indian immigration in South Africa as a vein to analyze the basic situation of the Indian diaspora on the ground in South Africa, and to sort out their roles in social movements.

## 2. The introduction of indentured labor in India and the development of the Natal sugar industry

At the end of the 20th century, the Indian population of South Africa amounted to as many as one million, or 3% of the total population of South Africa at that time. <sup>[1]</sup>The early waves of South African Indian migration took place in the British colony of Natal, where Indians were twice introduced to South Africa as indentured laborers by the Natal colonial government. Since then, the ethnic history of South African Indians has unfolded.

Indian labor was first introduced by the colonial government in the 1860s. The reasons for the introduction of Indian laborers included the following: First, sugar production was in short supply due to the continuous increase in sugar consumption. Secondly, the British West Indies sugar region was faced with the plight of being unable to cultivate due to severe ecological damage, creating an opportunity for the development of the new sugar region of Natal. Thirdly, the rapid development of the sugar industry in Natal required a large number of laborers, and Indian skilled laborers became the optimal choice for the development of the sugar industry in the colony.

Upon arrival in the colony, Indian indentured laborers encountered poor living conditions and working environment. The laborers' wages were not paid on time, medical care was not guaranteed, and they were often beaten and verbally abused by the plantation owners. In the end, the first batch of Indian indentured laborers to arrive in Natal numbered 342<sup>[2]</sup>, with most choosing to return to India at the end of their employment. This was the end of the history of the first introduction of indentured labor in South Africa.

In the mid-to-late 19th century, the colonial government issued a decree to protect the rights and interests of laborers with the aim of introducing indentured labor for the second time. The colonial government took positive note of the lessons learned from the first introduction of labor and improved its policies, and in 1864 Natal enacted a decree fixing the length of service of indentured laborers at five years, while at the same time providing for the rights and benefits of free laborers. <sup>[3]</sup>Eventually, in 1876, indentured laborers were again brought to Natal and the population nearly tripled from 10,626 to 20,536. <sup>[4]</sup>

The two introductions of Indian laborers enabled the sugar industry in the British colony of Natal to grow by leaps and bounds, and the labor policy largely achieved the desired results. In terms of size, the Natal sugar factories tripled from 27 in 1860 to 56 in 1863. In terms of sugar exports, they rose from £19,415 in 1861 to £94,372 in 1864. <sup>[5]</sup>The rapid growth of the sugar industry also contributed to the prosperity of other agricultural sectors, making a significant contribution to the South African economy in just a few years.

As the Indian immigrant population in the Natal colony continued to grow, conflicts between the white colonizers and the Indian immigrants gradually rose. Various discriminatory provisions filled the social life of Indian immigrants, preventing the marginalized Indian community from integrating into mainstream society and gradually forming a relatively independent Indian community.

### **3. The formation of the Indian community in South Africa**

Like many ethnic minorities in pluralistic societies, South African Indian immigrants have a distinctly dual identity. On the one hand, there is a national identity, and on the other hand, there is an ethnic identity. For most of the historical period, their communal identity was higher than their national identity. The Indians now settled in South Africa have not been fully integrated into the local South African culture but have become a subcultural group within South Africa's pluralistic society.

The "collective memory of suffering" of Indian migrants, who were discriminated against and marginalized as an ethnic minority, contributed to the construction of ethnic identity. The oppression of Indian laborers by white colonizers and the rise of anti-Indian sentiments contributed to the national unity of Indian immigrants. The ostracism of Indian immigrants in South Africa at that time permeated all levels of social life. The Natal Indian Congress, founded in 1894, was a product of Indian immigrants' resistance to racial discrimination in South Africa. The awakening of native Indian nationalism promoted the construction of the ethnic identity of Indian immigrants in South Africa and accelerated the formation of Indian communities.

Most Indian immigrants are Hindus, and the common religious beliefs and the construction of religious meeting places have enabled traditional Indian culture to take root in South Africa and form a distinct ethnic culture. The preservation of traditional religious beliefs has strongly sustained the close relationship of the community and become a civilizational bond among the strangers. The preservation of traditional religious culture has not only strengthened the Indian immigrants' sense of identity with their traditional culture and enabled the Indian community to be established in its entirety, but has also contributed to the cultural pluralism of South Africa's cities and has profoundly influenced the structure of modern South African society.

The role of the family in the formation of the Indian diaspora in South Africa cannot be ignored. The Chinese sociologist Jingchao Wu has argued that women played a great role in stabilizing the diaspora and that diaspora communities without women were unable to take root in the region. <sup>[6]</sup>Whether it was the first Indians who traveled to South Africa to work on the plantations, or the Indian "sojourners" who came to South Africa later, women followed their husbands. Of the first Indian immigrants to South Africa, more than half of the male immigrants came with their wives, and more than a third of them were women. <sup>[7]</sup>According to the data and the theories of Jingchao Wu, the proportion of Indian women was an important factor in the formation of the Indian community.

In addition to this, numerous social organizations provide a platform for Indian solidarity in South Africa. The Natal Indian Congress, for example, has a large influence among the merchant class. The emergence of these social organizations and social institutions as containers of the spirit of the Indian diaspora signifies that the Indian community has become fully entrenched in South African society and has fundamentally altered the original social composition of the country.

#### 4. Indian Immigrants in Modern South African Society

By the mid-twentieth century, the Indian community in South Africa was well developed and the social life of Indian immigrants was secured. Today, the number of Natal-born Indians continues to grow and continues to influence modern South African society.

In economic life, Indian immigrants have contributed to the steady growth of the sugar industry in South Africa and have made an important contribution to the development of the South African economy in various sectors. On the one hand, based on the good foundation of early development, the sugar industry in the province of Natal now has an important position in the industry as a whole. Consistently ranked in the top 15 out of 120 sugar-producing countries globally, the South African sugar industry<sup>[8]</sup> is a catalyst for regional economic growth and development in South Africa and has had a positive impact on improving the quality of life of the South African population. On the other hand, the direction of employment of the Indian diaspora shows that immigrants are engaged in an increasingly wide range of industries. The rapid development of the ethnic economy of the South African Indian community has promoted an industrial clustering effect, which has resulted in Indian immigrants occupying a significant share of every relevant industry. Into the 21st century, with the increase in the number of skilled immigrants of Indian origin in South Africa and the improvement of education level, the Indian community's occupation is also gradually diversified, knowledge-based talents and skilled personnel are also increasing,<sup>[9]</sup> the influence of the industry is increasingly enhanced.

Politically, the Indian community in South Africa has effectively contributed to the democratization process in South Africa by taking full advantage of the economic advantages and spreading and developing Indian culture through its special ties with the motherland. After entering the 21st century, the average income of Indian households is the second highest in South Africa. <sup>[10]</sup>With the improvement of the Indian community, Indian immigrants as an independent class will gradually penetrate its influence from the periphery to the interior. In addition, the struggle of Indian immigrants against the oppression of the colonial government gave birth to the nonviolent resistance movement, which accelerated the awakening of the consciousness of the oppressed class. The movement not only dealt a direct blow to the reactionary authorities, but also contributed to the overall struggle against racism and, objectively, to the democratization of South Africa.

In cultural life, the Indian diaspora has retained its traditional religious culture, enriching the cultural fabric of South Africa in the process of social integration. The Indian immigrants in South Africa have always held fast to their religious beliefs and valued traditional Indian education. This has enabled Indian immigrants from different castes to intermingle in South Africa and build communities unified by diversity. In terms of religious affiliation, according to the 2000 South African census, Hindus numbered 581,000, which is about 1.35% of the total population of South Africa. <sup>[11]</sup>Instead of assimilating, Indian immigrants in South Africa have contributed to the city's diverse cultural atmosphere. For example, Hindu temples not only spread religious education to the entire South African Indian community, but also contributed to the rooting of Indian cultural traditions in South Africa. <sup>[12]</sup>In terms of education, the education of South African Indians is mainly categorized into family education and temple education. In order to ensure the continuity of their culture, South African Indians teach their children their mother tongue in family life. Temples, on the other hand, mainly provide religious education by telling religious stories orally or reading books about the history of the saints. In these two ways, South African Indian immigrants have preserved the religious culture of their people and formed a distinct ethnic culture.

In addition, South Africans of Indian descent played an intermediary role between the colonial government and the indigenous African population. With the development of political resistance, some Indian elites realized that the Indian community, as "imperial subjects" of the British, objectively played the role of a socio-political buffer between the colonizers and the indigenous African population. <sup>[13]</sup>Chinese scholars, such as He Jian, have argued that Indian immigrants utilized this flexible role to unite various forces to strengthen their political strength against European colonial rule on the one hand, and to prevent the European colonizers and the native Africans from joining forces to oppose the Indian community on the other. <sup>[14]</sup>This has had a positive impact on Indian migrants in South Africa.

All in all, as the number of immigrants continues to grow, so does their influence on South African society. At the same time, there has been a shift in the mindset of Indian immigrants from survival to development. As a result, they have not only contributed to the enhancement of South Africa's economic strength and the democratization of its politics, but also enriched the cultural fabric of the South African society, while at the same time revolutionizing its social composition.

## 5. Conclusion

The study of Indian migration in South Africa necessitates an understanding of the changing role of Indian migrants in the social fabric of South Africa, which has a large population. In terms of historical development, the role of Indian immigrants in the construction of modern South African society has had a largely positive impact on the locality.

Overall, the impact of immigrants on the places to which they move is twofold. First, immigrants can contribute to the development of the receiving country's economy through the communal economy. Secondly, prejudice and discrimination can lead to confrontation between social groups. If the receiving country fails to accept diversity with the right attitude, it will lead to serious social problems. Thirdly, immigrants contribute to constituting social pluralism. In modern societies, immigration has brought about increasing cultural clashes, but it has also given the world unprecedented opportunities for the intermingling of civilizations. It was in the clash of cultures between India and South Africa that the multiracial social structure developed, culminating in the "Rainbow Nation" of today.

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