

**TRANSNATIONAL BELONGING:
THE EFFECTS OF THE INDEPENDENCE AND
PARTITION OF INDIA ON THE INDO-AFRICAN
DIASPORA**

GRETCHEN HEUBERGER

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER

ABSTRACT:

The independence and partition of India in August 1947 fundamentally changed how members of the Indian diaspora community in Africa identified and defined themselves by focusing on the experience of Indians in Mauritius, East Africa, and South Africa. First, independence caused them to move away from India as the source of political identity and see themselves as a distinct community defined by the unique context of their adopted country. Second, the partition of India required Indians in Africa to re-define notions of territorial belonging as Indians in the face of an India fundamentally different than the one they left. In some cases, the religious divisions exacerbated by partition also caused Indians in Africa to identify more strongly along religious lines. Different circumstances in Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa caused the Indian populations in those countries to react differently to the independence and partition of British India.

The independence and partition of India in August 1947 fundamentally changed how members of the Indian diaspora community in Africa identified and defined themselves. First, independence caused them no longer view India as the sole source of political identity and see themselves, for the first time, as a distinct community defined by the unique context of their adopted country: culturally different from Indians in India, and anywhere else. Indian independence shifted the focus of Indians living in Africa inward to their status in Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa. Second, the partition of India required Indians in Africa to re-define notions of territorial belonging as Indians in the face of an India fundamentally different than the one they left. In some cases, the religious divisions exacerbated by partition also caused Indians in Africa to identify more strongly along religious lines.

The context in which Indian emigration to Africa occurred between 1834 and 1917 is important in understanding the complex relationship between India and the diaspora in Africa. While Gujarati traders settled and established profitable trading posts in East Africa as early as the fifteenth century¹, and some free traders emigrated to East Africa and South Africa during the colonial period², the majority of the Indian population in Africa at the time of Indian independence was— or were the descendents of— conscripted laborers. The system of indentured servitude that was devised by the British to provide cheap labor to sugar plantations and infrastructure projects throughout the empire after the abolition of slavery in 1833 left the colonial machine without sufficiently cheap labor to support it.³ Wary of inciting the same activists who fought for the abolition of slavery, the British, Indian, and colonial governments were careful to frame the indentured labor system as a mutually beneficial enterprise— one that provided much needed cheap labor for European interests within the empire and economic opportunities for Indians suffering from famine and lack of employment in India. In practice the system was essentially slavery in a different guise and many illiterate Indians looking for improved opportunities signed strict contracts that bound them to years of labor far from their homes, often under harsh conditions.⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century strong, anti-colonial

¹ Kauleshwar Rai, *Indians and British Colonialism in East Africa: 1883-1939* (Patna: Associated Book Agency, 1979), 1.

² Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, eds., *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), 2.

³ Kay Saunders, ed., *Indentured Labour in the British Empire 1834-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 79.

⁴ Milton Israel and Narendra K. Wagle, eds., *Ethnicity, Identity, Migration: the South Asian Context* (Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre for South Asian Studies, 1993), 271., Saunders, 110.

Indian political leaders emerged and began drawing attention to the contradictions of empire, as particularly evident in the indentured labor system. The coercive and exploitive elements of indentured labor recruitment were revealed and the often deplorable conditions of indentured servants in countries such as Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa mobilized public opinion in India to take up the cause of their countrymen overseas. At a time when leaving one's homeland was a permanent action – both physically and mentally – the relationship between India and the diaspora took on a political element, with India assuming responsibility for the cause of Indians overseas. Increased activism and organization of Indians on the behalf of their countrymen abroad led to the abolition of the indentured labor system by Viceroy Hardinge in 1920.⁵ The context of the relationship between India and its diaspora in the empire was thus established through the activism of Indians in the sub-continent to alter the status quo under British rule, in the name of those abroad. Although they fought on behalf of Indians overseas, Indian nationalists continued to use the cause of the diaspora to gain concessions from the British Indian Government until India achieved independence in 1947.

The independence of India in 1947 affected the Indian diaspora in Africa profoundly in terms of cultural and political identities. Prior to independence, the home country was the source of political identity for the diaspora, who saw themselves as merely an extension of the Indian population within the British empire. The diaspora shared a common “pan-Indian” identity that was reinforced by a common subordinate relationship with the British. Writing in 1946, Nagendranath Gangulee clearly saw the interests of Indians at home and abroad as identical and demanded support for the Indian diaspora from the British Indian Government; “However, it is no longer possible for us to evade the issue that concerns the life and labour of the Indians in the Empire overseas; and since the issue is inter-related with the politico-economic system of the Empire, our task is to bring about fundamental change in our alliance with that system if we desire an equitable settlement of the problem of Indian immigration and settlement within the Empire.”⁶ Gangulee believed that the severe oppression of Indians in the diaspora should be a main concern of the British Government of India. He argued that if the New Indian Constitution of 1935 protected British enterprises in India from racial discrimination, but the British could not protect Indians in overseas British colonies from racial discrimination, “then

⁵ K. Hazareesingh, *History of the Indians in Mauritius* (London: MacMillan, 1975), 87.

⁶ Nagendranath Gangulee, *Indians in the Empire Overseas* (London: New India Publishing House Ltd., 1947), 20.

there lies the parting of ways.”⁷ Gangulee took up the cause of the Indian diaspora so enthusiastically that he argued that the failure of the British and Dominion governments to protect Indians in their territories alone was reason enough for India to demand independence. Like Gangulee, early Indian politicians and activists sought to highlight the contradictions of empire in order to reject British rule through logical and legal arguments. Gangulee’s position was a significant example of the ways Indian activists employed the cause of the diaspora to intellectually undermine the legitimacy of British domination in India.

In addition to seeing the fate of Indians at home and overseas as intertwined, Gangulee and other Indian nationalists in the twentieth century saw the causes of the diaspora as a useful political tool against British domination in India. As South Africa and Kenya took measures to limit or eliminate Indian immigration, politicians in India revealed the essential contradictions of empire and argued for independence. “A discriminative policy in regard to the rights of British subjects to migrate from one part of the Empire to another is undoubtedly responsible for the conviction that India cannot remain as a ‘free partner’ within the Empire if her nationals are subject to racial segregation.”⁸ Politicians and nationalists directly employed the cause of Indians abroad to argue for the independence of India itself: “it is obvious that the position of Indians in the Empire overseas cannot improve unless, and until, India is able to gain for herself the status equal to that of an independent state.”⁹ The irony of such a statement would be evident to Indians living abroad in the first few years after India achieved independence.

The case of South Africa was unique from those of Kenya and Mauritius because of its Dominion status, but offered examples of Indian politicians and the British Government of India taking an active interest and action on behalf of Indians living there. This interest was especially significant because the influence of the British Indian Government on the government of South Africa was particularly weak owing to South Africa’s status as a Dominion. Dominions were self-governing countries whose independence from the control of British Parliament was recognized by the 1931 Statute of Westminster.¹⁰ The British Government of India had even less influence over racial policy in South Africa than in the colonies of East Africa because the Home Government had no legal influence. This made the efforts of the British Indian Government on behalf of Indians in South Africa all the more significant as evidence that India

⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

was actively engaged in the cause of the diaspora.¹¹

The arrival of Indians in South Africa began in 1860 when the first indentured laborers were sent to Natal to work on sugar plantations, inspired by the success of those imported to Mauritius beginning in the 1830's.¹² Due to Gandhi's involvement in their cause at the turn of the twentieth century, the intense discrimination experienced by the Indians domiciled in South Africa is perhaps more commonly known than the discrimination faced by Indians in Kenya or Mauritius. Gandhi arrived in 1893 to work as a lawyer for a Gujarati Muslim businessman in South Africa and was appalled by the treatment of Indians there. He founded the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 and was the first to employ Indian public opinion at home for the cause of Indians living abroad.¹³ This practice continued up to the moment of Indian independence whereby Indian leaders abroad used public opinion in India to advance their cause, and political leaders in India drew attention to the plight of Indians overseas to subvert the British empire in India. Gandhi's ability to rally Indian public opinion in his fight for South African Indians was another example of how Indians at home and overseas saw themselves as one unit, bound by membership in the British empire. As the twentieth century progressed Indian communities abroad developed distinct features related to their country of adoption. It was this perceived mutual citizenship that kept their interests tightly allied with those of India. In South Africa Gandhi successfully created a sense of "Indian-ness" among a very heterogeneous group of immigrants from the sub-continent that facilitated the strong connection between Indians at home and abroad.¹⁴

Of the Dominion countries, South Africa had the most aggressive policies of racial discrimination, and the British Government of India employed what measures it could to fight such discriminatory policies. As retaliation for the harsh treatment of Indians, specifically in response to a three-pound poll tax, the British Government of India stopped valuable indentured labor from India to the Union of South Africa in 1911.¹⁵ After World War II, at the same time that he condemned the racial doctrines of the Nazis in Europe, South African political leader General Smuts introduced ever more restrictive legislation against Indians, culminating in the Asiatic

¹¹ I. R. Bahadursingh, *The Other India: The Overseas Indians and their Relationship with India: Proceedings of a Seminar* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1979), 64.

¹² Brigdal Pacahi, *The International Aspects of the South African Indian Question: 1860-1971* (Cape Town, South Africa: C. Sturik Pty Ltd., 1971), 6.

¹³ Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn and Vera Alexander, eds., *Peripheral Centres, Central Peripheries: India and its Diaspora(s)* (Berlin: Lit Verlag Berlin, 2006), 83.

¹⁴ Surendra Bhana, *Gandhi's Legacy: The Indian National Congress 1894-1994*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1997), 31.

¹⁵ Israel, *Ethnicity, Identity, Migration*, 288.

Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946 that confined Indian populations to certain geographic areas and barred them from owning businesses.¹⁶ This Act provoked the Central Legislature in India to apply economic sanctions on the Union of South Africa and to remove the Indian High Commissioner. However, such sanctions carried little weight and produced no notable positive results for Indians living in South Africa.¹⁷

Activism in India in response to the increasingly poor treatment of Indians in the colonies of East Africa was of more significance to Indian nationalists as a political tool against the British Empire because unlike the Dominions, the British Home Government had direct control over the policies of colonies. Mistreatment of Indians in the colonies of East Africa provided more direct leverage for Indians claiming the British Imperial system, of which they were a part, failed to protect them.

Indians on the sub-continent were gravely concerned about the welfare of their countrymen in Kenya, as was the case in South Africa. After Winston Churchill gave a speech at the East African Dinner in London in 1922, in which he assured Europeans that their exclusive rights to the fertile Kenyan highlands would be maintained, public and political opinion in India once again rallied for the cause of Indians overseas. “The Legislative Assembly raised a voice of protest against the ‘indiscreet, unwise, reckless and irresponsible’ pronouncement from a member of the Imperial Government, and passed a resolution stating that any attempt to violate principle of equality of status of Indians in Kenya would create a further breach in the relationship between India and the Empire.”¹⁸ Again, India demonstrated interest in the plight of Indians overseas and used the discrimination against them as just cause for the termination of the “relationship between India and the Empire.”

The relationship between Indians at home and overseas was important and useful not only to India, but also to the diaspora. From the “Milner Solution,” which maintained the racial segregation of Indians in Kenya from both native and European populations and reserved exclusive land ownership rights to the desirable Kenyan highlands for Europeans, “It became increasingly clear to Indian leaders in the colony that no redress of their legitimate grievances would be secured unless their case was taken up by the Indian National Congress.”¹⁹ After a three day round table meeting with the British Imperial Government failed to bring about any compromise,

¹⁶ Gangulee, *Indians in the Empire Overseas*, 25.

¹⁷ Bahadursingh, *The Other India*, 65.

¹⁸ Gangulee, *Indians in the Empire Overseas*, 95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

the Indians of Kenya “relied increasingly upon the Government of India to represent their case before the Colonial Office.”²⁰ Thus both Indians at home and abroad looked to each other for support.

The common “pan-Indian” identity, shared by India and the diaspora, and characterized by Indian political activism on the behalf of the diaspora, was fundamentally altered when India obtained political independence in 1947. After independence, evidence shows a deliberate shift in the policy of the Indian government, now comprised of the same politicians who fought for the diaspora under British rule, away from political concern for the welfare of Indians living abroad.

One explanation for this shift could be found in the new concerns India faced as an independent nation. Independent India gave less support to the ongoing struggle for the better treatment of Indians within the diaspora because it now had to develop relationships within an international context.

Prior to independence India was part of a larger and closely-knit entity—the Empire. What went on within this group elicited the interest of the people of India. With the replacement of the Empire by self-governing countries, the continuation of the old relationships became difficult. Diplomatic considerations became paramount after independence...India was no longer a subject nation fighting against its colonial master.²¹

For a number of internal and external reasons the cause of the diaspora community was one that independent India could not afford, or was unwilling, take up. In addition to internal financial, social, and political strains that prevented direct support for the diaspora, newly independent India sought to be the example for all countries seeking to throw off colonial domination. Both sets of concerns meant that India was less directly engaged in the cause of the diaspora.

In fact, after the independence of India, the Indian Government seemed to do even less for the diaspora population than the British Government of India had done.²² Prior to independence, the British Government of India had formulated policies to help the imminently independent Indian Government manage the diaspora population. Due to the rigorous support the Indian diaspora received

²⁰ Ibid., 99.

²¹ Bahadursingh, *The Other India*, 61, 62.

²² Ibid., 65.

from Indian nationalist politicians these policies anticipated that upon independence India would want to extend full citizenship rights to all people of Indian descent in the empire overseas.²³ While India remained under British rule, all Indians, at home or abroad, had the same status as citizens of the British Empire. Thus the British Government of India assumed independent India would want to continue that status quo by granting all people of Indian descent equal citizenship in India. However, the independent Indian Government did not utilize the British Indian Government's policy formulations and chose not to extend citizenship rights to people of Indian descent unable or unwilling to return to the sub-continent.

In terms of foreign policy, the independent Indian Government was still interested in putting an end to colonial domination, but its sights were now set higher than the liberation of Indian minority communities abroad. Instead, it was largely concerned with promoting third world solidarity and encouraging budding full-scale national liberation movements. After its own struggle to end colonial rule, independent India would not support the rights of Indians in Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa at the expense of local populations still oppressed by colonial rule. Therefore the Indian Government focused its energy on improving the position of native Africans in Kenya, South Africa, and Mauritius and offered little support to Indians in conflict with them.

Nationalist liberation movements led by Africans in South Africa and Kenya that gained momentum between the two world wars often "saw the Indians in their midst as colonial legacies, as poachers and exploiters."²⁴ This view of Indians as just another ethnic group that would exploit local populations was particularly evident in Kenya and South Africa where successful, free Indian traders (who migrated outside the indenture system) were conspicuously economically better off than African ethnic groups. The severe antipathy of local Africans toward Indian populations in their midst came to a head in South Africa where, in 1949, riots led by South African blacks targeted Indians.

In light of the clash of interests between Indians in Africa and local populations, as perceived by Africans, Independent India pursued a course of policy that supported native populations under British and French domination over Indians also domiciled in those countries. Where the interests of African people clashed with people of Indian descent, the government of India supported the former and urged Indians to assist rather than exploit African people.²⁵ Prime

²³ Israel, *Ethnicity, Identity, Migration*, 284.

²⁴ Bahadursingh, *The Other India*, 65.

²⁵ C. Kondapi, *Indians Overseas 1838-1949* (New Delhi: Indian Council of

Minister Nehru made this policy very clear in many speeches and letters. When the large-scale racial riots took place in Durban, South Africa, Nehru refrained from demanding justice for the injured Indians. Nehru reiterated India's policy in a statement in response to the riots: "While Indians, wherever they may be, expect to receive courteous treatment and protection and opportunity, we recognize that no vested interest must come in the way of the progress of the African people in their homeland, and that the progress and advancement of Africans must have priority over the claims of other people."²⁶ This statement, and many others like it, showed that the new role of India on the world stage was as a source of opposition to European colonial domination as a whole and took precedence over the specific grievances of the Indian diaspora, even as directly related to colonial exploitation as they were.

The shift of Indian support towards Africans caught the Indian diaspora in Africa by surprise. Many recalled how, before independence, Nehru expressed that the only way to improve conditions for overseas Indians was for India itself to be independent and be their advocate.²⁷ In light of such rhetoric Indians in the diaspora looked forward to increased intervention on their behalf after Indian independence. Prior to the independence of India, Kenya, due in large part to the prosperous free-trader Gujarati population, was one of the most important centers of the Indian diaspora in the minds of Indian political leaders at home. After independence was achieved "any such racial fellow feeling" was lost and India formulated a policy toward Indians in Kenya that echoed its decision to not extend citizenship to all people of Indian descent, "that as British passport holders, the East African Indians were Britain's responsibility."²⁸ Gandhi himself echoed this position when he wrote in *Satyagraha*, "Indian emigrants in other parts of the British Empire...if they are suppressed, will be suppressed thanks to the absence of *satyagraha* among themselves, and to India's inability to protect them."²⁹ Members of the diaspora community in Africa found that upon the independence of India, tireless supporters of their cause such as Gandhi and Nehru had moved away from their interests in favor of the new interests of the independent nation. These interests focused on ending colonial domination as a whole rather than the specific plight of the Indian diaspora.

Though outside the geographical scope of this paper, further

World Affairs, Oxford University Press, 1951), 521.

²⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: Second Series, Volume Nine* ed. S. Gopal (New Delhi: Teen Mutsi, 1991), 482.

²⁷ Bahadursingh, *The Other India*, 55.

²⁸ Ibid., 60.

²⁹ Mahatma Gandhi, *Satyagraha* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 307.

evidence for the deliberate shift away from the diaspora by the independent Indian government appeared in a 1948 letter from Nehru to the Indian representative in colonial Indonesia. This letter showed how the interests of native people, upon India's independence, superseded those of Indians overseas. In response to a request for support for Indians in Indonesia Nehru wrote, "I am only sorry that we cannot help them more than we have done. We are facing trouble in so many directions that our hands are full."³⁰ A month later Nehru reiterated the stance of India to the same representative in Indonesia: "We have realized quite well the difficulties of the position in Indonesia. I wish I could help but you know how we stand in the world and in our own country and apart from our full sympathy we can do little."³¹ Such a dismissal showed how India's position in the existing world order as an independent nation and its commitment to support native people against colonial aggressors were the primary influences on India's new foreign policy.

Karen A. Ray argued that the policies of the independent Indian Government toward the diaspora were a marked shift from that of the British Government of India. These policies left many Indians overseas cut off from India at a time when they looked to their country of origin with excitement and pride and began to "seek out their roots in the sub-continent and asking their Indian colleagues for political guidance."³² Upon independence, the Ministry of Overseas Indians, established by the British to promote relations with Indian communities abroad, was dismantled and "the overseas Indians left to their colonies of residence."³³

In 1946 Nehru instituted the aforementioned unilateral trade embargo on South Africa. True to India's new foreign policy goals this action was intended to unequivocally oppose the apartheid regime and show support for *all* South Africans oppressed by white domination. However, this policy served to cut off the Indian population of South Africa from India for almost four decades, leaving them culturally, politically, and economically isolated.³⁴ In Kenya the "newly independent government of India tried to pressure East African Asians into allying with African nationalism."³⁵ Ironically, the cause of the diaspora in Africa was taken up to justify the independence of India but once that independence was achieved

³⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: Second Series, Volume Five*, ed. S. Gopal (New Delhi, India: Teen Murti House, 1991), 531.

³¹ Nehru, *The Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 532.

³² Israel, *Ethnicity, Identity, Migration*, 283.

³³ *Ibid.*, 284.

³⁴ Mulloo, *Voices of the Indian Diaspora* (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Ltd., 2007), 102.

³⁵ Clarke, Colin, Ceri Peach, Steven Vertovec, eds., *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 157.

the interests of the diaspora were overshadowed by those of native Africans.

With their main source of identity, as well as political support, no longer adamantly attached to their cause, the Indian communities of Kenya, Mauritius, and South Africa turned inward and began to focus on the national movements of their adopted countries.³⁶ These communities, particularly in Mauritius, retained cultural ties with India as much as possible but saw that their political future rested within their adopted countries. Policies of the Indian Government such as the 1946 trade embargo on South Africa facilitated a profound shift in the identity of the Indian diaspora in Africa.³⁷ In place of a “pan-Indian” identity that was located in the home country, distinct Indo-Mauritian, Indo-Kenyan, and Indo-South African identities that “assumed additional [localized] features” were formed.³⁸

Indeed, the shift of the diaspora away from India as the center was more political than cultural. Even so, political linkages between India and the diaspora were far from lost. The Indian independence movement, as well as Gandhi’s early work in South Africa and the Arya Samaj movement of the 1920’s in Mauritius³⁹, heavily influenced nationalist movements in Africa. The success of the Indian nationalist movement, combined with the resulting distance it created between India and the diaspora, inspired Indian leaders in Africa to lead nationalist movements of their own. After all, *satyagraha* and the bases of India’s independence movement were not developed in India, but in South Africa specifically for the “struggle of overseas Indians for the dignity and political recognition to which they were entitled as Indian citizens of the British Empire.”⁴⁰

Dr. Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, the father of independent Mauritius, was influenced by Gandhi’s Quit India Campaign and used similar tactics to secure a new Mauritian constitution that enfranchised the Indian population in 1947.⁴¹ Hazareesingh considered the independence of India a “milestone in the political development” of Indians in Mauritius and an event that “completely changed their outlook” in terms of their own political situation.⁴² The shift away from India as the source of political support, though not

³⁶ Mulloo, *Voices of the Indian Diaspora*, 106.

³⁷ Ibid., 103.

³⁸ Bhana, *Gandhi’s Legacy*, 5.

³⁹ Mullo, *Voices of the Indian Diaspora*, 96.

⁴⁰ Israel, *Ethnicity, Identity, Migration*, 270.

⁴¹ Moomtaz Emrith, *History of the Muslims in Mauritius* (Vacoas, Mauritius: Editions Le Printemps, 1994), 290.

⁴² Hazareesingh, *History of the Indians in Mauritius*, 130.

as the source of political ideas, was reinforced by a letter from Prime Minister Nehru in 1947 to the Indian community of Mauritius thanking them for their “keen interest” in their ancestral cultural heritage, but added that the “first duty of Indo-Mauritians was to show loyalty to their country and that it was by integrating themselves in Mauritian life at all levels, that they could contribute to a wider appreciation of the cultural legacy of India.”⁴³

The influence of Indian politics, especially those of Gandhi, was particularly strong among Indian leaders such as Yusuf Mohamed Dadoo in South Africa, who corresponded with Gandhi directly about the plight of Indians in South Africa⁴⁴, and Dr. G. M. Naicker, president of the Natal Indian Congress. Dadoo and Naicker toured India before independence in 1946 and, after meeting with Gandhi, found the inspiration to launch a passive resistance campaign in South Africa which lasted from June 1946 to May 1948.⁴⁵ A speech on 1 June 1947 given by Dr. Naicker made very clear the direct influence of Indian politics on the struggle of Indians in South Africa for justice in their own country: “We were inspired not only by India’s great leaders and national organizations to continue unswervingly along our path, but also by the fighting spirit of the masses of India, who everywhere greeted us with spontaneous enthusiasm and encouraged us to fight with increased vigor.”⁴⁶ The language of this speech showed that the political relationship between India and the diaspora had shifted to one of inspiration and borrowing, one where India offered moral support rather than direct political intervention. Instead of looking to the Indian Government to solve their political woes, South African leaders Dadoo and Naicker sought to take action themselves using their ancestral and cultural connections to India as inspiration.

In addition to the shift in political identity, the independence and partition of India, marked by the violent clash between Hindus and Muslims, affected the identity of the diaspora along religious lines. Due to the circumstances of their migration, the history of the Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrants in Africa was closely knit. They enjoyed close relationships and less was thought about religious distinctions that were paramount at home. Regardless of the social differences they experienced in India, indentured immigrants in Africa in the nineteenth century found themselves living and working side by side, often in very difficult conditions. Survival in their new land required Indian indentured laborers to band together, and

⁴³ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁴ Yusuf Mohamed Dadoo, *Dr. Yusuf Mohamed Dadoo, Personal Papers*, ed. Peter Limb (Bellville, South Africa: University of the Western Cape, 1995), 4.

⁴⁵ Bhana, *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans*, 194.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 189.

distinctions of caste and religion were rendered less important.⁴⁷ In Mauritius, Hindus took part in the Muslim religious celebration of Moharram and Muslims celebrated alongside Hindus during Phag.⁴⁸ Moharram was also an occasion for Indians of South Africa to come together in celebration regardless of creed.⁴⁹ According to Gangulee it was necessary for Indians overseas to compromise and adapt their “habits” in order to live in their adopted African countries. Intermarriage between castes that was forbidden in India also occurred regularly.⁵⁰ For Indians born abroad, differences of caste and religion carried less cultural significance than in the home country.⁵¹

While Indians in Africa shifted away from India as the source of social identity and political power, concepts of religious identity were not as easily isolated from the subcontinent. In light of the extreme violence between Hindus and Muslims that followed partition on the sub-continent, it seems likely mutually tolerable relationship enjoyed by Indian Hindus and Muslims in the diaspora was also fundamentally harmed or altered. It is evident that divisions between Hindu and Muslim communities in Kenya and South Africa occurred later in the twentieth century. These were related to the partition of India— mostly through a shift by which Muslims of Indian descent identified with Pakistan or the global Islamic community instead of the territorial location of their ancestral homeland.⁵² But what happened in the diaspora along religious lines at the *moment* of partition, when mass violence between Hindus and Muslims reached its peak?

The pre-partition Indian diaspora included people from both present-day India and present-day Pakistan who, regardless of religious affiliation, identified as “Indian”. The decision to divide India and Pakistan was rooted in deep tensions between Muslims and Hindus and partition transferred these animosities into distinct territorial divisions. The division of the ancestral homelands of Indians abroad occurred along religious lines *after* their departure from the sub-continent. Many Indians in the diaspora, accustomed to using India as a cultural reference point, found that their ancestral homeland no longer lay in India at all.

That the division of India occurred after the departure of

⁴⁷ Emrith, *History of the Muslims in Mauritius*, 117.

⁴⁸ Hazareesingh, *History of the Indians in Mauritius*, 60.

⁴⁹ Brij V. Lal, Peter Reeves, and Rajesh Rai, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006).

⁵⁰ Gangulee, *Indians in the Empire Overseas*, 190.

⁵¹ Clarke, *South Asians Overseas*, 153.

⁵² Crispin Bates, ed., *Community, Empire, and Migration: South Asians in Diaspora* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001), 109.

Indians in the diaspora from the sub-continent led Bal and Sinha-Kerkoff to assert that “partition along religious lines has made it difficult for scholars since 1947 to link Hindus to Pakistan and Muslims to India”⁵³ The problem faced by scholars in conceptualizing the identities of diasporic Indians is, in fact, the exact same problem faced by Indians overseas at the time of partition. Bal and Sinha-Kerkoff found that in Mauritius, after “the partition of British India in 1947, people’s relation to the idealized ancestral motherland as well as to post-partition India changed.”⁵⁴ Thus Hindus, regardless of whether the location of their ancestral homes fell within the borders of Pakistan, emphasized their relationship to India, whereas Muslims distanced themselves from India and in some cases referred to Pakistan as their “homeland” even when the physical location of their ancestral homes fell within India.⁵⁵ It is evident that the division of India forced Indians overseas to re-conceptualize their relationship with an ancestral homeland that was now fundamentally altered.

In Mauritius, the shock of the partition and the ensuing violence in India and Pakistan was enough to override the history of solidarity among the Indians and brought religious tensions to the forefront. The partition of India and Pakistan “accentuated their identities as two very distinct communities regardless of the common ethnic affinities”⁵⁶; with Indian Hindus continuing to identify themselves with India and Indian Muslims looking away from India toward roots in Pakistan and the larger global Muslim community. From this point on, in Mauritius there was no longer an Indian community but a Hindu one and a Muslim one. This split was reflected in the political participation of both groups after granted the franchise under the new constitution in 1947. Instead of voting with the Hindu majority, which was closely aligned with their interests, Muslims in Mauritius joined the conservative party, motivated by fears of Hindu rule without Muslim representation. “Thus, it came to pass that the Muslims, who together with the Hindus, formed two segments of the Indo-Mauritian community and had gone through many trials and tribulations together over the years, found themselves taking different paths in politics.”⁵⁷ In Mauritius the partition of India did create new divisions among Hindus and Muslims. These divisions were reflected mostly in the political realm and never reflected the extreme communal violence of the subcontinent, but were significant as a direct result of the partition of British India.

⁵³ Gijsbert Oonk, ed. *Global Indian Diasporas: Exploring the Trajectories of Migration and Theory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 119.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁶ Emrith, *History of the Muslims in Mauritius*, 295.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

I found little evidence to suggest that the communal divisions created so immediately by partition in Mauritius were reflected in Kenya or South Africa, though I suspect similar problems of how to relate to such a dramatically altered homeland did occur. The absence of communal divisions in Kenya or South Africa are well explained by Chandrashekhhar Bhat's theory that the internal relationships in Indian communities abroad were often defined by the external conditions of their adopted countries. When writing of Indian immigrants in Africa prior to partition, Bhat described how "Indian identity supercedes all other bases of identity to enter onto ethnic competition often leading to conflict with other immigrant groups."⁵⁸

India served as a uniting force that allowed the diaspora to define themselves as Indian against a common British enemy and local populations. In Mauritius Indians formed the majority ethnic group. In the absence of another competing ethnic group the loss of India as the uniting force caused Indians to re-conceive their identities by defining themselves against each other, and fragment along religious lines. In Kenya and South Africa the Indian communities were a small ethnic minority, surrounded by a large native African population. This meant communal divisions were less significant than racial ones.⁵⁹ Speaking specifically of South Africa, Brij Maharaj wrote, "Caught between an antagonistic colonial minority government and fear of the indigenous masses, the Asians confirmed their cultural identity."⁶⁰ When threatened by or competing with larger ethnic groups, Indians in Kenya and South Africa were less concerned about the religious divisions among themselves.

In addition to having to compete with larger ethnic groups for economic rights and colonial favor, Indians in Kenya and South Africa also faced a more hostile and discriminatory colonial government than those in Mauritius. At the time of partition, Kenyan and South African Indian populations were engaged in an intense struggle against a common oppressive colonial entity that was increasingly hostile. According to Bhat's theory it was not in the interest of Indians in these countries to divide internally against each other when facing such a strong colonial force.⁶¹ While Indians in

⁵⁸ Chandrashekhhar Bhat, "Contexts of Intra and Inter Ethnic Conflict Among the Indian Diaspora Communities," *Occasional Papers* 5 (1999): 4.

⁵⁹ Richard Harvey Brown and George V. Coelho, eds., *Migration and Modernization: The Indian Diaspora in Comparative Perspective* (Williamsburg, Virginia: College of William and Mary, 1987), 67.

⁶⁰ Parvati Raghuram, Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, Brij Maharaj, and Dave Sangha, eds. *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories, Representations* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 26.

⁶¹ Bhat, "Contexts of Intra and Inter Ethnic Conflict Among the Indian Diaspora Communities", 1.

Mauritius still faced a struggle for equal rights relative to a small group of powerful European elites, they did not experience the degree of racial and economic discrimination that their counter parts in Kenya and South Africa did.⁶²

The presence of a common British force to which all Indians could be opposed unified colonial India with its countrymen overseas. After achieving independence in 1947, India was no longer united with its diaspora in Africa through mutual opposition to the British, and this led India to divide itself from the fate of the Indians who remained overseas in the empire. After independence when the British ceased to be a unifying force for Indians in opposition, communal divisions exploded on the subcontinent. These divisions were carried to Mauritius because the Indians there faced a relatively accommodating colonial government, due largely to the fact that Indians were the majority ethnic group on the island and had the capacity to compete economically with the European elites. In South Africa and Kenya, Indian populations were a small percentage of the whole and needed to remain unified to face hostile, racist, and exploitive colonial regimes.

The independence and partition of the Indian sub-continent directly affected lives of Indians living overseas and confused long-held notions of cultural, religious, and territorial belonging. Due to new foreign policy concerns that focused on the rights of native Africans and a diminished political use for Indians abroad, the independent Indian Government was less engaged in the cause of the diaspora than its colonial counterpart had been. The loss of support from India caused Indians overseas to shift away from India as the only source of identity and define themselves through the unique contexts of their positions as Indo-Kenyans, Indo-Mauritians, and Indo-South Africans. No longer able to depend directly on India, Indian political leaders in Africa such as Ramgoolam, Naicker, and Dadoo shifted their focus inward to create their own independence movements. Also, the partition of India required Indians in Africa to re-define notions of territorial belonging as “Indians” in the face of an India fundamentally different than the one they had left. In Mauritius, the communal violence that broke out in India caused Muslims and Hindus on the island to move away from ethnic conceptions of identity and define them selves along religious lines more than ever before. The independence and partition of the Indian sub-continent created a unique and pluralistic diaspora with very complex notions of belonging and identity and continues to inform the study of Indians overseas today.

⁶² Hazareesingh, *History of the Indians in Mauritius*, 133.