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Between Apartheid and Neoliberalism in Durban's Indian Quarter

Ashwin Desai & Goolam Vahed

A drive from Durban's beaches towards the once bustling "Indian quarter" will lead to a confluence of three streets: Monty Naicker, Alfred Bitini Xuma, and Yusuf Dadoo. It is appropriate that they meet at a point that was once the "Red Square" (and is today the site of the Nicol Square multi-storey parking lot). This always-congested traffic intersection was the venue for many an anti-apartheid rally during the tempestuous decade of the 1950s, a period that first brought the likes of Nelson Mandela, Albert Luthuli, Yusuf Dadoo, and Helen Joseph fully into the pages of history. Most significantly, Red Square was the gathering point for the historic 1952 Defiance Campaign, the first organized joint Indo-African opposition to apartheid.

The threesome of Dr. Xuma, leader of the African National Congress, Dr. Yusuf Dadoo, president of the Transvaal Indian Congress, and Dr. Monty Naicker, president of the Natal Indian Congress, were the pioneers of the very first attempt in the city to unite African and Indian struggles against racial oppression. Their declaration of cooperation between their three organizations—the Natal Indian Congress, the Transvaal Indian Congress, and the African National Congress—signed in 1947, is recorded in the history books as the "Doctors' Pact."

Indians began arriving in Natal in 1860, and by the 1890s, the "Indian Quarter" had already taken shape as the authorities used the "sanitation syndrome" to segregate Indians from white boroughs. Indians were forced to settle in three zones around Durban: a business and commercial area bounded by Pine Street (now Monty Naicker), Albert Street, the railway line, and the West Street cemetery; an area around Garnet Road and bordering Umgeni Road; and the area between Alice Street and the Greyville race course (Warwick Triangle).

We grew up in the Indian quarter during the 1960s and 1970s, Vahed on Pine Street and Desai on Prince Edward Street. Our histories are folded into the labyrinth of this area. Writing these words is to write our boyhoods. It was a time of street football (illegal of course); the electric atmosphere on Saturday nights as thousands thronged Victoria Street, dressed to the nines, to watch English and Hindu movies at the Shah Jehan, Avalon, and Naaz cinemas; the adolescent male street corner society with its petty chauvinisms and repressed sexualities; and the gangsters whom we both feared and respected.

We were witness, too, to the emptying out of the quarter: The movie houses closing; neighbors across generations disappearing into the designated Group Areas on the outskirts of the city; the Quarter locking-down every night as shop owners pulled down their steel shutters. It is a sign of the times that even the mosques have had to shut shop. Those who survived the Group Areas were relocated when the Western Freeway was built in the 1970s. It comes into the city at the very point where “Red Square” stands. In the name of “development,” even the dead were not spared. Part of the cemetery was lost and several hundred graves were dug up, much to the chagrin of locals.

Diagonally across the road to the right from “Red Square” are the Ajmeri and Madressa arcades. They are, in reality, tiny lanes filled with a multitude of shops whose goods spew out onto the narrow pathway. One wonders if this is not a canny way to ensure that informal traders do not trespass! Old crafts and memories harking back to the past still linger. “Record King” plies a trade in vinyl with copies of *The Temptations* and *Earth, Wind and Fire* with tattered original covers snatched up at basement prices by aficionados. There is one watch repairer left in the arcades, squeezed into a shop window, seemingly oblivious to the times we live in. It was here that housewives once bargained for quality “India pots,” *aghar batti* (incense), plastic utensils, and intricately designed gold jewellery. It was here, too, that the most sought-after tailors (*darjees*) got the measure of their clients, and many a father bought his son the popular handcrafted carom boards, a wonderful pastime before the age of the Internet and cell phones.

It was in these arcades that young Indian leftists of the Communist Party studied the political economy of the world in the 1930s and 1940s and swore allegiance to both Stalin and Gandhi as they plotted the overthrow of the conservative grandes of Indian politics who preferred appeasing the minority white regime instead of confronting it. It was also in these arcades that many a young couple first held hands in the anonymous throng and felt the anticipation of more beyond the gaze of orthodox parents and aunties and uncles.

The 1950s saw an explosion in the city’s nightlife. For the first time Indian women were seen dancing, smoking, and having a drink at the Himalaya Hotel on Beatrice Street and Goodwill Lounge on Victoria Street, where overseas and local jazz musicians performed into the early hours of the morning. The Delhi Restaurant at the corner of Pine and Yusuf Dadoo Streets competed with Point Road as a place of “sin,” wreaking of alcohol and cheap perfume.

Walk from Yusuf Dadoo Street through the Ajmeri or Madressa arcades and you will come to the appropriately name Cathedral Road. Turn right and you will be faced with the mighty Catholic Church, St. Emmanuel’s Cathedral. But in the cheek-by-jowl multi-cultural give-and-take that the Indian Quarter has become, you will have to first pass the iconic Manjra’s Café where all classes lined up—and still

do—for its signature dhal and rice. It is only for those with a strong body constitution, for the dhal can cause tummy rumbles.

It was at St. Emmanuel's Cathedral that a youthful Denis Hurley held sway, firing sermons for almost six decades against segregation, while liberation Catholicism rocked to the 5:30 Saturday afternoon African mass. Next door, and running across a whole block that covers Yusuf Dadoo, is the Grey Street mosque (Juma Musjid), the largest mosque in the southern hemisphere. Muslim traders Aboobaker Amod Jhaveri and Hajee Mahomed Hajee Dada built the mosque in 1881, with the resplendent minarets added in 1904. The mosque represents much of the past and the new. The past is reflected in the composition of the trustees who control the mosque. Following a century-old tradition, they are still selected on the basis of ethnicity related to villages of origin in India. The new is witnessed in the make-up of the congregation, which now has a majority of migrants from South Asia and Africa, reflecting important trends in the post-apartheid South African landscape.

Wealthier Muslims, having evacuated the Central Business District, have built mosques closer to their mansions in the suburbs. It is a sign of the times that the Himalaya Hotel, where Chief Albert Luthuli was given a thunderous farewell lunch en route to Oslo to collect his Nobel Peace Prize in 1961, has now been converted to a mosque frequented by the few South African-born Indian Muslims still left in the city. Above the mosque, the hotel has been revamped into apartment blocks with large "For Sale" boards plastered on the walls. There are few takers as nostalgia fails to ignite a return to the city.

The "old" congregation at St. Emmanuel's Cathedral has all but evaporated. The whites of the inner city have fled into the gated suburbs of the North Coast or Australia. Their domestic workers, who filled the pews of the African mass on Saturdays, followed the labor market out of the city. The Indian Catholics, many of whose forebears arrived as indentured laborers from locations like Pondicherry and who now lie buried behind the church, were bundled off to Chatsworth and Phoenix in the grand apartheid sweep of the Group Areas Act. Many of their children have sought redemption in Pentecostalism. The church, though, remains socially conscious. The Cathedral was a hive of activity during the anti-apartheid struggles of the 1980s and is now a shelter for African refugees. Despite its age, St. Emmanuel's Cathedral, which was built in 1904, remains an impressive building architecturally. The cross depicting Christ's crucifixion was carved out of Italian Carrara marble gifted by the wife of Napoleon III of France, Empress Eugenie, in memory of her son, the Prince Imperial, who was killed in the Zulu War of 1879.

Gujarati-speaking Hindus made up a large segment of the Indian trading class, and they had a strong presence in the Indian Quarter, introducing vegetarian restaurants (Kapitan's and Patel's being the most famous) and buildings like the Surat Hindu Association constructed in 1907 on Prince Edward Street, now

Dr. Goonam Street. How wonderful that Dr. Goonam is recognized in this fashion. This whisky-swilling, cigarette-smoking “Coolie Doctor,” the title of her magnificent autobiography, was the first Indian woman doctor in Natal and fought apartheid bravely but refused to bow to the liberation movement’s conventions. It is appropriate that she gets to replace British Royalty. When the Royal family visited South Africa in 1947 she led the call for a boycott. The Indian community, however, turned out in the thousands to hail *their* Queen. Dr Goonam may have lost that contest but won the war as history remembers her courage.

No visit to the Indian Quarter is complete without a “quarter beans” or “quarter mutton” at one of the many Indian cafes and restaurants in the area—Patel’s Vegetarian Lounge, Victory Lounge, and Bhagat’s have superseded Kapitan’s, the pre-eminent Indian eating house from the 1920s to the 1980s. Indian Delights like *bajjia*, *sev*, and nuts, a spicy mixture of green lentils and gram flour noodles, and the colorful sweetmeats dot the windows. But the bunny chow holds sway. It is a homegrown fast food and traditionally consists of a quarter loaf of bread from which the top portion is cut out, the hollowed part is filled with a curry stew of one’s choice, covering the portion that was cut out. In the early days, the curry of choice was beans. Broad beans were the all-time favorite. Eating a bunny chow has a very communal aspect as groups of two or more persons usually *gammal* (eat) together. The name probably emanated from the fact that Kapitan’s and Patel’s on Grey Street (now Yusuf Dadoo Street) were owned by *Banias* (an Indian trading caste) who created this dish as a cost-effective and convenient take-away. *Banias* were also referred to as “bunny ou’s.” Today the bunny chow is also on the menu of many five-star establishments. It is one of those curry-spilling moments to see *lahnee* (rich) Indians tucking into a bunny chow—mutton curry these days—in one of these places with a fork and knife.

Today, new migrants from India and Pakistan are threatening to dominate the old Indian food outlets. Chicken *tikka* and foods long forgotten from Gujarat have re-appeared. Kapitan’s has disappeared, and in its place is Little Gujarat. Locals have responded with “real Durban curry.” But it is a losing battle, not only because of the taste but also the price. A beautifully made, delicious *khadi khichdri* (yellow rice with spicy yellowish yoghurt sauce) at Little Gujarat costs R10. It is the *de facto* food of comfort for many. A *real* Durban vegetable curry costs between R30 and R50.

The Indian Quarter was once an area in which shop windows were graced with mannequins resplendent in beehive hairdos and the latest saris. And dotted around them were “material shops.” A few of the shops still hang on, but their color has long faded. Today the shoppers are mainly working-class Africans shopping for bargains in the new mainly Chinese- and Pakistani-owned outlets. In the “Pakistani Quarter” at the intersection of Albert and Dr. Goonam (Prince Edward) streets are many Pakistani hairdressers. For R20—a fifth of the cost of a haircut in the malls—one can get a haircut, shave, and head massage. A treat not to be missed! The *paan*

(betel leaf) is thrown in as a bonus. Bargaining remains central to the shopping experience. There are several restaurants serving “authentic” Pakistani delicacies, with *tandoori* chicken *braaied* (barbecued) on street corners. The aroma of exotic spices, ginger, and garlic is tormentingly mouth watering.

Opposite the mosque is the Gandhi library, standing as stark reminder of the Mahatma’s influence on the city. It is the only reminder in the Indian Quarter of his influence on the city. Ironically, Point Road, the spine of Durban’s Red Light district, has been renamed Mahatma Gandhi Street. But it might not be so ironic given Gandhi’s tortured experiments with his own sexuality.

The area carries few memories of the historically important African presence in the area. At one end of Yusuf Dadoo Street is a hostel for African women. This is a throwback to apartheid when African women were allowed into the city for the express purpose of ministering to the needs of white children. It was a single-sex hostel sans any family, for the women could not be distracted by the demands of their own families.

On Beatrice Street there is the YMCA where Steve Biko first preached of black consciousness. Directly next to the Victoria Street Market was a beer hall for Africans. A century ago, small numbers of Africans lived in backyards and other informal accommodation, while several African traders owned stores in the area. There was an African Market next to the Indian Market where beadwork, Zulu shields handcrafted from cowhide, and meats were sold, and herbalists and hawkers plied their trade. Several “Native eating houses” also dotted the area. Some Africans sold beer until the City Council acquired a monopoly on this lucrative trade. The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, the largest African union in the 1920s, operated for awhile under the leadership of A.W.G. Champion in premises rented from M.E. Paruk on Leopold Street. A Bantu social center was opened on Queen Street for the aspiring middle class. Music concerts, dances, soccer meetings, and boxing matches were held here to detract them from the pressing political issues of the day. There is little of this influence left, though.

Standing oblivious to the changes and dispossessions wrought by the developmental bulldozer is the shrine of Badsha Peer in the Brook Street cemetery. Sixteen acres in size, the cemetery was opened in 1864 and apportioned to (white) Episcopalians, Wesleyans, Roman Catholics, and “other” Christians, while a mere two acres were set aside for Indians and Africans. This sacred site had to concede ground to “progress” when part of the cemetery was dug up in the late 1970s to make way for the Western Freeway. The shrine is home of a Muslim “holy man,” Sheik Ahmed, who came on the *Truro*, the first ship to transport indentured Indian cargo to Natal in 1860. The saint’s *karâmât* (miracles) are legendary. They relate to healing the sick, assisting the weak, foreseeing accidents, and protecting others.

Warwick Junction includes many important landmarks. Sastri College was the first Indian High School in South Africa. Next to the college is the Currie's Fountain sports ground. It enjoys an iconic status because of the numerous cultural, sporting, and political events held since its opening in the 1910s. Today Currie's Fountain stands as forgotten as the political and sporting ideals of yesteryear.

A short walking distance from the Gandhi Library is the Victoria Street Market, one of two "Indian" markets built almost a century ago. Its history is really a story of Indian market gardeners and petty traders, who, despite the most callous attempts by the racist city council to erode their access to customers in the heart of the city, refused to be cowered. On a Saturday, this major tourist attraction drew as many as 50,000 visitors who visited the more than 200 stalls, which sold everything from curios, trinkets, and antiques to fish, rice, groceries, and cooked food like *puri patha* and sweetmeats like *jalebi*. From the very beginning, the authorities monitored the market vigilantly and complained of overstocking and unhygienic conditions. "Safety" then became the issue. Despite pressure from the city councillors the market endured. When it burned down in 1973, it was with good reason rumored that the white city fathers had a hand in the fire.

Following pressure from the community—and largely to boost the image of government-appointed organizations like the South African Indian Council—the Victoria Street Market was resurrected in the 1980s into a modern oddity with yellow walls and purple minarets. Inside the market, the attempt to catch the exotic feel of the East falls as flat as medieval Catholicism's take on the shape of the globe. Somehow one gets the sense that the resurrection is a fake. But still, the old favorites are here. Colored spices shaped in cones tumble out of stainless steel pots. Bowing to the changing market, the curry powder shops do a roaring trade in Chinese balms to a mainly African market. We know how the ANC government-aligned Congress of S.A. Trade Unions feels about Chinese t-shirts, which they oppose because cheap imports have decimated the local clothing and textile industry. But they have said nothing about this best seller. Across from the major spice shop is a table with a plethora of beads, including little ones shaped in the sign to display sensitivity to AIDS. Hanging above them are sarongs with the face of South Africa's president Jacob Zuma.

There are also a few curio shops where one gets a sense that there is always something more going on behind the curtain. In this age of canned hunting, we wonder whether anyone still buys curios of lion's heads. We ask who are the biggest customers. "Germans," is the instant reply. Some Europeans are clearly more sensitive to the holocaust visited on local wildlife than others. Inevitably the ubiquitous Pakistani cell phone shops across the city have a home in the Victoria Street Market. Business in "World Call" phone cards is roaring. There are tens of thousands of African and South Asian immigrants in the city. Largely shunned by locals, they seek connections elsewhere.

Thousands of people swirl outside the market, catching taxis and buses from the city's major transport node at Warwick Junction. It is in Warwick Avenue, too, that the second Indian market is located. Hemmed in on all sides by the latest world-class tourism developments, neglected and denied funds to upgrade the area, still somehow, the Indian Quarter honed over a century refuses to die. The mega-projects surrounding the Quarter only serve to increase its allure. A "Pakistani" haircut with a head massage thrown in. Vegetable curries sold by the most recent immigrants from Gujarat. A beautifully tailored suit. Old gold rolled into new designs. This is a place that apartheid, not from the want of trying, could not kill off. It is pushing back against the new developmental machine. The Quarter, a place, the very last watchmakers sitting with goggled eyes, scrutinizing the last springs deep inside the watches our fathers wore. This is Durban's Indian Quarter today.