CHAPTER 9

Changing Caste Identities in the Indian Diaspora: A South African Perspective

Kalpana Hiralal

Introduction

In July 2011 the Natal Rajput Association (NRA), a caste based organization, held a centennial celebration at the Rajput Hall in Chatsworth, Durban. The event was marked by a book launch, prayer meetings, exhibitions, and a cultural show. There was great excitement and preparation for the event by the community and visitors from throughout South Africa flocked to the event. I, together with my colleague, was tasked to assist with a publication commemorating this event. During our fieldwork we conducted many interviews with both the youth and senior members of the community. The latter were nostalgic about the event, highlighting the importance of the NRA in perpetuating their ethnic identity and facilitating economic mobility of the community and stressing its continuity, whilst some youths were less enthusiastic and questioned the legitimacy of caste-based organisations in post-apartheid South Africa. Jeevanbhai Bhika, a senior member of the NRA who served on many committees recalls:

To ensure the survival of the association, numerous community activities were held. From its humble beginnings of holding meetings in Bansee Lane and Mansfield Road in Durban Central, the Natal Rajput Association is now proud to have their own premises in Arena Park, Chatsworth. ... We need more people to become involved in the Show, Prize-giving and religious celebrations held at the Rajput Hall. I have served The Natal Rajput Association for many years as assistant secretary. At present, I am a Trustee of the association. I am filled with a sense of pride that I have served, and am still serving my community, at the age of 73, and I urge and encourage the youth of today to get actively involved in community

1 This paper in a slightly altered form appears in the Journal Man In India, Caste in the diaspora: A Case study of the Natal Rajput Association in Durban, volume 93, no. 4, 2013, pp. 591–606.

2 Dr Veena Parboo Rawjee, Department of Marketing, Retail and Public Relations, Durban University of Technology, Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa.
initiatives. Your interest, input and youthful outlook is desperately needed to take the Natal Rajput Association into the next century. The youth are the leaders of the future and it is up to you to ensure that you preserve your history and heritage.

HIRALAL AND RAWJEE, 2011: 105–106

Bharat Gordhan, a youth stated:

As one of the pioneer organisations of the greater Gujarati community of Durban, the NRA has been a dedicated platform for the development of the cultural identity of many of us over these years. However, as the years have passed, the numbers have dwindled. I believe that this is because the objectives of the NRA have struggled to remain current. The NRA started off with a few non-resident Gujarati Rajput families that wanted to provide a platform for the development of their children’s identity. They continued the practice of the cultural values that were imbibed in them since they left their homeland. The current concern is to keep the younger people interested in the objectives of the NRA. ... We come from a generation that uses search engines to its full ability from the palm of our hand. Based on the average age and numbers of the attendees of the regular functions, the sustainability of the NRA is a concern. With the ease in which we emigrate within South Africa, it seems that we are running out of people to continue the legacy of our forefathers of the NRA. This remains a challenge for the current executive committee to overcome. What we as the Rajput community do for our communities from hereon will determine whether we will still stand out as the Rajputs of South Africa’s Indian diaspora or integrate with the rest.

HIRALAL AND RAWJEE, 2011: 106–107

The above views raise the following questions. What role did the NRA play in the lives of the older generation? To what extent did it maintain caste or jati based identity? Are caste-based organisations relevant in post-apartheid South Africa? Can caste-based organizations survive in post-apartheid South Africa?

Scholarly works over the past two decades both from a historical and contemporary perspective have sought to theorise caste in the diaspora in the context of changing notions of caste consciousness and endogamy and identity formation (Bhana and Bhoola, 2011; Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2012; Grieco, 1998; Jaffrelot, 2000; Kumar, 2004; Kumar, 2012; Mehta, 2001; Sartape, 2012; Waughray, 2009). Grieco’s study on Fiji Indian immigrants argues that differential patterns of migrations led to sustenance of caste identities. The Gujarati