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AMBIVALENCE ABOUT APARTHEID

CHRIS FULLER

Melancholia of freedom: social life in an Indian township in South Africa

BY THOMAS BLOM HANSEN

The universal elation that followed the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 has long since ebbed away, but the promise of a new, non-racial freedom was always uncomfortable for the country's Indians, who (like the Coloureds) occupied an intermediate position between the privileged whites and oppressed blacks. Thomas Blom Hansen's book is about Indians in Durban, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, particularly in Chatsworth, a formerly Indian township in the city where he completed several periods of fieldwork between 1998-9 and 2007. After 1994, the Indian working class's economic position has become more precarious, many Africans have come to live in Chatsworth, its residents have become preoccupied by their safety and security, and the end of apartheid means that it can no longer be blamed for the problems of everyday life. The outcome is a 'multilayered sense of loss', which gives rise to a lot of self-deprecating humour, but is also accompanied by a deep-seated melancholy that stems from anxiety about how identity and history can be expressed. 'The attachment to the recent past during apartheid, where community life flourished in the racial enclave, cannot be publicly enunciated at this point except as narratives of struggles to defy the state. The emotional attachments to this period and its forms of life must remain repressed and can only be referred to in intimate and informal settings.' For Indians – but also for other sections of South African society – 'the loss of this deeply problematic past, its pleasures, and its forms of life cannot be acknowledged. The past is tense, and the experience of freedom becomes melancholic' (pp. 16-17). The Chatsworth Indians' 'melancholia of freedom', which is this book's central theme, is richly and evocatively described by Hansen.



Mr Govender and his house in Chatsworth
(from a photograph by Thomas Blom Hansen)

The first ethnographic monograph on the South African Indians was Hilda Kuper's *Indian people in Natal* (1960). Kuper carried out her fieldwork in Durban in the mid-1950s, after apartheid had become official policy in South Africa, but just before the city's Indians – as well as its Africans and Coloureds – suffered a drastic change in their fortunes because, in 1958, the Durban city council began to force non-whites out of their old residential areas and into new townships. *Indian people in*

Natal is just about as far removed from *Melancholia of freedom* as any two anthropology books could be in terms of the data they present, the theories they cite, and the styles of writing that they display. Reading Kuper's and Hansen's books together is a reminder of how much anthropology has changed in fifty years, but more importantly and substantively it highlights the contrast between the Indians' social life before the consolidation of apartheid and after its demise.

By present-day criteria, *Indian people in Natal* is an old-fashioned book, but it is still an impressive one. It is not caught up in the fallacies of timeless functionalism, and its first part carefully describes the history of the Indians, changes in the caste system and the emergence of new elites. The second part is a detailed ethnography of family, kinship and marriage, and life-cycle rituals; the third part discusses popular Hinduism in similar detail. In these two parts, Kuper compares the Hindi and Tamil sections of the Indian community amongst whom she did most of her fieldwork. M. N. Srinivas's monograph, *Religion and society among the Coorgs of south India* (1952), which she cites, almost certainly influenced how Kuper discussed kinship and religion. Her approach is almost entirely descriptive, so that the theoretical debates of the day – for example, about cross-cousin marriage in south India or hypergamy in the north – are not mentioned, although her scrupulously careful account of Hinduism has stood the test of time. All in all, without flattening out variation as if the Durban Indians were a uniform community, *Indian people in Natal* gives us a well-rounded, well-documented, anthropological portrayal of a large, urban social group, which is also valuable today as a historical source. Hansen recognises the book as a 'classic study' (p. 60), but says it is written in a 'remarkably depoliticized tone', which is true but not, I think, entirely fair, since Kuper was transparently clear about the wider political context and the imminent threat of forcible displacement that the Indians faced.

The majority of South African Indians are descended from indentured labourers who arrived in Natal between 1860 and 1911 to work on sugarcane plantations. These mainly low-caste migrants, mostly Hindus, came from districts near Madras city in south India and the Bhojpuri region in north India. Some arrived in family groups and there were some single women, but at least two-thirds of the migrants were male; the skewed sex ratio encouraged considerable mixing and intermarriage between Indians and members of other groups in Natal. When their indenture contracts ended, many Indians acquired land and became peasant farmers and market gardeners in and around Durban; they also became craftsmen and petty traders, small landlords, manual labourers and factory workers in the city. By the 1940s, most of the labourers' descendants lived in Durban and a sizeable Indian working class was developing. The minority Indian population in South Africa is descended from the 'passenger' Indians, who came from Gujarat and north India as traders and businessmen; most were Muslims and the rest Hindus. These commercial migrants settled in Durban, but also spread across the country, and some of them – especially wealthy Gujarati businessmen – became the cultural and political elite of the wider Indian community. According to Kuper, the Gujaratis were the only Indian group in which 'traditional' caste remained important in the 1950s. Among the rest, caste endogamy was still partly observed and preferred by some mainly older people, but it was on the wane; most 'young South African Indians are ignorant of the intricacies of caste' and for them 'it is an embarrassing subject, irrelevant in the daily battle of existence' (Kuper 1960: 39). By the 1970s, probably, caste divisions hardly mattered at all for marriage or anything else, except among Gujaratis. Linguistic divisions (Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, etc.) still count in some contexts, even though (again except for Gujaratis) a colloquial English full of Indian expressions is the language of the home for most Indians.

After 1958, several Indian townships were established in Durban, but Chatsworth was the biggest and, by the late 1970s, at least 250,000 people lived there, occupying small, modern, standardised houses and flats. One of the most controversial features of forced resettlement has been its impact on Indian extended families. Because Kuper studied the Indian family system carefully, her account

(chapter 6) is important in this context. Despite some definitional ambiguities common in the literature at the time, it is clear that among both north and south Indians in Durban in the 1950s, just as in India, the patrilineal extended or joint family was the ideal, and furthermore that Kuper was mainly discussing residential family groups; joint property ownership was normally significant only for a minority of wealthy families. It was rare for all members of an extended family to form one residential group; instead, they occupied separate houses, but preferably near each other. In some large houses, however, extended families stayed under one roof, each separate couple or nuclear-family unit having its own room(s). The segmentation of large extended families was also common, especially owing to friction between adult brothers, or young wives and mothers-in-law. The net outcome, according to Kuper's survey figures, is that in 1953 42 per cent of residential groups were based on nuclear families and 48 per cent on extended (or joint) families, but the latter percentage includes both completely undivided families and those living under one roof which were partly divided, because nuclear-family units were cooking on separate hearths. In general, all Indians, including those in nuclear-family households, acknowledged the great importance of wider kinship ties, even though a 'weakening' of the traditional family system, favoured by the younger generation but deplored by the older, was said to be occurring.

Kuper's material plainly shows that extended families were common in the 1950s. Hence moving to small houses in Chatsworth and other townships probably did cause many of them to break up; moreover, the allocation of houses apparently made it difficult for closely related families to live near each other. The township planning officials wanted to get rid of overcrowded slums, but they also wanted to 'reform' the Indian family system. Their policy may not have displeased everyone, however, given younger people's preferences, and a survey in 1978 reportedly showed that two-thirds of Indians preferred to live in nuclear-family households (Freund 1995: 76, 86). Hansen provides no data about families in Chatsworth that can be compared directly with Kuper's in order to assess how much has actually changed since the 1950s. For the most part, he focuses instead on the discourse of the Indian family as 'an enduring mythical structure' (p. 66) and examines the pervasive moralising about the joint family's disintegration, which is of course a perennial preoccupation in India as well.

By the 1970s, many younger, educated Indians saw the old family system as redundant and repressive, and were distancing themselves from 'traditional' culture, which signified 'a conservative and now corrupted past' (p. 77). Moreover, in the townships, 'the most disavowed and yet celebrated figure of everyday life' is the *charou*, 'a deracinated township Indian who is unable to understand his or her own culture' (p. 79). The term is derogatory, but it is nevertheless used by people to talk about themselves, and in Chatsworth 'a real charou' is marked by 'a certain way of speaking, joking, eating (and drinking), and comporment that is characteristic of working-class life'. The opposite of the charou is the elite or middle-class Indian, who is known as *alahnee*, a term both approving and insulting that may be applied to 'any Indian that is doing well, is educated, has good manners, and so on' (p. 80). Neither *charou* nor *lahnee* appears in Kuper's book; maybe the terms were not current in the 1950s, but maybe she chose not to mention derogatory slang.

The charou is the key figure in Chatsworth and Hansen locates him (or her) in relation to 'two powerful external gazes in which Indianness must be performed'. The first, common to both whites and blacks, is the 'general public gaze [which] is marked by condescending and orientalist assumptions about ... Indians'. The second is the gaze of 'the Indian elite and middle classes, the lahnees, for whom India appeared as a cultural homeland'. He continues: 'Squeezed between these powerful gazes, the language and practices of the charou inevitably appear imperfect, if not morally deficient' (pp. 80-1). Nevertheless, 'the charou culture was in fact the very stuff of cultural intimacy, the shared secret that enabled a sense of community, and the much-cherished informality that marks the memory of the township in its [pre-1994] heyday' (p. 82).

All this is convincing about the charou as the personification of Indian working-class culture. In chapter 4, Hansen also argues that the self-deprecating, joking attitude of charous explains the perennial absurdity of township politics, which is best understood as primarily about entertainment and performance. On the other hand, he does not provide much social or economic information about the Indian working class, either using his own data or by referring to earlier studies such as Bill Freund's (1995). Market gardening has now more or less disappeared, but is petty commerce still important? Extensive Indian participation in the city's motor trade is mentioned, but it isn't clear how much of the charou working class might also be classified as petty bourgeois. The garment factories, which employed many Indians of both sexes, have mostly closed, but how many of Chatsworth's Indians are still industrial workers, in the private or public sectors? How many of them, men and women, have white-collar jobs in shops and offices? Thus it isn't clear, either, whether a sizeable proportion of the charou working class actually belongs to the lower-middle class in occupational terms. And how many are unemployed and have to scratch a living through casual work or by illicit means? The relationship between charou, as a status category, and the working class, as a socio-economic stratum, is therefore unduly vague.

Moreover, despite occasional references to problems faced by women in paid employment, it is unclear whether 'respectable' women ideally stay at home in Chatsworth and, more generally, whether charou is a strongly gendered category. Education is surely crucial in this context as well. Hansen refers, for example, to the Indians' collective pride in their educational achievements, as well as to their anxiety about falling academic and disciplinary standards in Chatsworth's schools since 1994. Education is obviously highly valued by the middle class, but is it by the working class as well? Education is plainly the primary route to middle-class employment – as a teacher or an accountant, a doctor or an engineer – and class mobility within the Indian population is mentioned. For instance, in a family typifying 'the social mobility of many Indians since the 1960s' (p. 204), Mr Pillay was a school teacher, his wife was a clerk, and their elder child was studying in an engineering college. Indeed, Smitha Radhakrishnan, who carried out research in Chatsworth in 2001-2, specifically refers to the 'visible upward mobility of many Indians' and to the growing cohort of educated professional women, particular in the information technology industry (2011: 184, 188). Without a systematic discussion of class mobility, however, fully understanding the relationship between charous and lahnees is difficult and Hansen's concept of 'gaze' has only limited utility.

In chapter 3, entitled 'Charous and Ravans: a story of mutual nonrecognition' (p. 97), Hansen tackles the vexed question of race head-on and doesn't pull his punches. His principal argument is that, especially in KwaZulu-Natal, Africans (almost all Zulus) and Indians sought to be recognised by their white colonial masters, but they have never been able to 'see' each other. White dominance has blinded Indians and Africans to each other. For Africans, Indians are impostors, parasites and coloured people pretending to be white; for Indians, Zulus are mostly incomprehensible and primitive. Indians often call Africans *ravans*, after Ravana, the demon king of Hindu mythology, which evokes the sense that Africans are morally inverted, violent, and sexually predatory. In 1949, longstanding tensions, mainly economic in nature, led to serious race riots between Indians and Zulus in Durban that remain strong in public memory. Mutual incomprehension between Indians and Africans is reinforced by a general dearth of ordinary social interaction and, of course, by very little intermarriage.

Chatsworth's transformation began when Africans moved into the area, slowly at first and rapidly after 1994. Africans, Indian residents say, brought noise and nuisance, drinking and drug-taking, sexual licence and violence. There is much anxiety about schools (as just noted) and especially about the sexualisation of teenage culture, which allegedly threatens Indian girls in particular. Fear of crime has meant higher walls around houses and increased security measures, but closed houses

have also become a sign of respectability and morality. To keep one's door unlocked like everyone ideally did in old Chatsworth is now a sign of low status and dubious openness to the Africans outside.

Yet it is clear, too, as chapter 5 shows, that change is under way, especially in the younger generation. Young Indian, working-class men have developed a distinctive car culture, and spend a lot of time and money on their 'charou wheels' – flashy, souped-up cars with deafening sound systems that are driven dangerously fast. Linked to this car culture are the Indian taxi companies, whose colourfully decorated 'swanking taxis' contrast with the African companies' emphasis on the stylishness of drivers and conductors, and on the music played in them. But more and more Indian taxis are also playing music, adjusted to customer tastes: as one driver explained, he plays *bhangra* (Punjabi folk music mixed with drums and bass) in the daytime, rhythm and blues when kids leave school, and *kwaito* (South African pop music heavily influenced by black American styles) in the evening (p. 196). The taxis blaring music matter because they are so definitive of Chatsworth's youth culture, and so disliked and feared by many older Indians as symbols of black sexuality and aggression, even though most passengers are actually Indians. Moreover, argues Hansen, there is actually 'a convergence of patterns of life, movement, and cultural enjoyment among the younger generation in Indian and African townships' (p. 197). Middle-class Indians, however, never see it this way; instead, they view the 'gradual Africanization of the culture in the former Indian townships ... as the dominance of a morally inferior charou way of life' (p. 198). 'Afro-Indian', a 'new morally ambiguous cultural genre' cannot be recognised, or at least not yet (p. 199). This conclusion, though, is ambiguous; Hansen seems to imply that it will be recognised in future, so that there will be a softening of the Indian-African divide, even if not a melting pot. On the other hand, perhaps this new youth culture is just that – a rebellious expression by young people that they will grow out of by reverting to conventional racial antipathies.

Within the South African racial system, Indians differ from black Africans or Coloureds because they can claim a history and culture entirely outside South Africa, so that they have an alternative, external point of reference. For lahnees, especially the Gujarati elite, as we have seen, the connection with India has always been vital. The growth of roots tourism and religious pilgrimage to India, which is usually combined with sightseeing and shopping, as well as the current popularity of Bollywood films, are discussed in chapter 6.

For ordinary Indians, the relationship with the 'home country' is not quite what it seems. Take, for example, Mr and Mrs Pillay's search for their 'roots' in India in the late 1990s. The Pillays, who were mentioned above, first checked the ship registers in the Durban Archives to try to find Mr Pillay's great-grandfather's name. But the registers contained hundreds of Pillays, apparently because many low-caste migrants arriving in Durban gave their landlords' names to the officials (p. 318, n. 7); interestingly, a sample ship's register reproduced by Kuper (1960: 275-9) shows that out of almost 500 indentured labourers from Madras in 1891, only 27 belonged to the high-ranking, non-Brahman Vellalar/Pillai caste. Eventually, Mr Pillay's ancestor's name was located in the Archives, but surprisingly the entry stated that he was a paying passenger from Mauritius, not an indentured labourer directly from India. But the Pillays still set off to India, where a guide took them to a village in which several people called Pillay lived. But none of them knew anything about relatives in South Africa, except for one very old lady who recalled an uncle who had gone there. The Pillays spent a day with this lady's family 'who we thought could be our distant relatives, but we were not sure' (p. 205). Most probably, indeed, they weren't related, if the great-grandfather was a low-caste man who took the name 'Pillay'. After returning to South Africa, Mr Pillay felt strange about his visit to the village and expressed very mixed feelings about India, although his wife found the country beautiful and harmonious. For both of them, though, India was 'disturbingly unknown'; it made

them feel very alien and South African, and also made them realise 'how inauthentic their own embodied sense of Indianness was' (p. 207).

Hansen argues that the Pillays' experience of roots tourism exemplifies a more general phenomenon: for most Indians, 'the attachment to things and phenomena that are "Indian" is best thought of as fetishistic' (p. 201), because they are ambivalently both desired and disavowed, while lacking any real connection with most people's everyday life in South Africa. In the final analysis, except for the elite and some middle-class people, the society and culture of India itself are not effective constituents of South African Indians' ethnic identity and, despite appearances to the contrary, 'the category "Indian" appears evermore obsolete in South Africa' (p. 222). A rather different conclusion is reached by Sharad Chari, who studied Merebank, another formerly Indian township in Durban, as well as adjacent Wentworth, a Coloured township. Chari compares the autobiographical narratives of a Coloured man and an Indian, Mr Juggernath, whose grandfather was an indentured labourer from north India. Unlike the Pillays in Chatsworth, Mr Juggernath has a clear sense of where he and his family came from; indeed, so vital are Indian families in his narrative that 'Merebank itself appears as an extended family' (Chari 2006: 121). Chari argues that the contrasting narratives of Mr Juggernath and his Coloured counterpart reflect the difference between the two groups; both are racially stigmatised, but Indians also possess 'cultural affiliations' that enable greater Indian participation in a developing political economy (ibid.: 106-7). Roughly speaking, therefore, Indianness has greater functional importance for Durban Indians in Chari's analysis than in Hansen's. It is hard to draw conclusions from so few cases, however, and I cannot tell how far Chari's material qualifies Hansen's argument.

Hansen argues that the obsolescence of 'Indian' as an ethnic category is closely connected to religious change. For most people, ancestral religion in the form of 'a persistent devotion to Hinduism and Islam, but also to a range of neo-Hindu outfits and many branches of Christianity', has been central to their Indianness (p. 225). Among Hindus and Muslims in South Africa (much as in India), a tension has always existed between popular and elite religious forms of belief and practice, the 'little' and 'great traditions'. Popular Hinduism in the 1950s was described at length by Kuper (part 3) and fifty years later it still includes many non-Sanskritic rituals such as fire-walking and the Kavadi festival, when devotees of the Tamil god Murugan pierce their flesh with hooks carrying limes or pulling little carts, or with skewers through the mouth. (The Kavadi ritual, incidentally, is mistakenly equated with the notorious 'hook swinging' by Hansen [p. 234].) Popular Islam is a typical melange of Sufi-inspired, local South Asian forms focused on saint worship and annual festival celebrations. In recent years, however, the tension between popular and elite religiosity has been modified; whereas religious authenticity used to be located in the subcontinent, it is now increasingly about participation in 'a proper, global, and universalized tradition within Hinduism or Islam' (p. 225). The change is more evident in Islam than Hinduism, partly owing to the prominence of the Gujarati Muslim elite, but in both cases popular religion anchored in South Asia tends to be seen as a backward-looking, low-status charou tradition. For a growing number of charous today, the solution to the liabilities of their religious inheritance and another route into a global religious culture is actually conversion to Pentecostal Christianity, whose preachers systematically condemn Hinduism and persuade converts to cleanse themselves and their homes of every trace of 'superstition' brought by their ancestors from India.

In ending this book, Hansen writes that for minorities like the township Indians: 'Real freedom and sovereignty within the new nation have ... been experienced as a partial loss, not of unfreedom but of its predominant experiential form: cultural autonomy' (p. 294). It is this cultural autonomy that they are now seeking to retain or re-establish. As this quotation succinctly indicates, *Melancholia of freedom* is mostly about the politics of culture, rather than, say, the sociology of ethnic stratification, a theme that would undoubtedly have given the book a different focus. In places, I thought that more facts and figures about class in Chatsworth, and more ethnographic description like Kuper's, as

well as fewer quotations from celebrated theorists, would have enhanced my understanding of the charous and their social life. But Hansen is a persuasive writer and his book, which has taught me a lot about modern South Africa and its Indian population, deserves to be widely read.

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