Sounding Belonging: Memory, Music and the Church in the Indian Diaspora of KwaZulu-Natal

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Introduction

- Over 165 years ago, Indians were brought to South Africa as indentured labourers.
- Many stayed after contracts ended, forming permanent communities.
- Focus: Indian Christian diaspora in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Explore how identity and memory are shaped through religious music and church life.

Historical Context

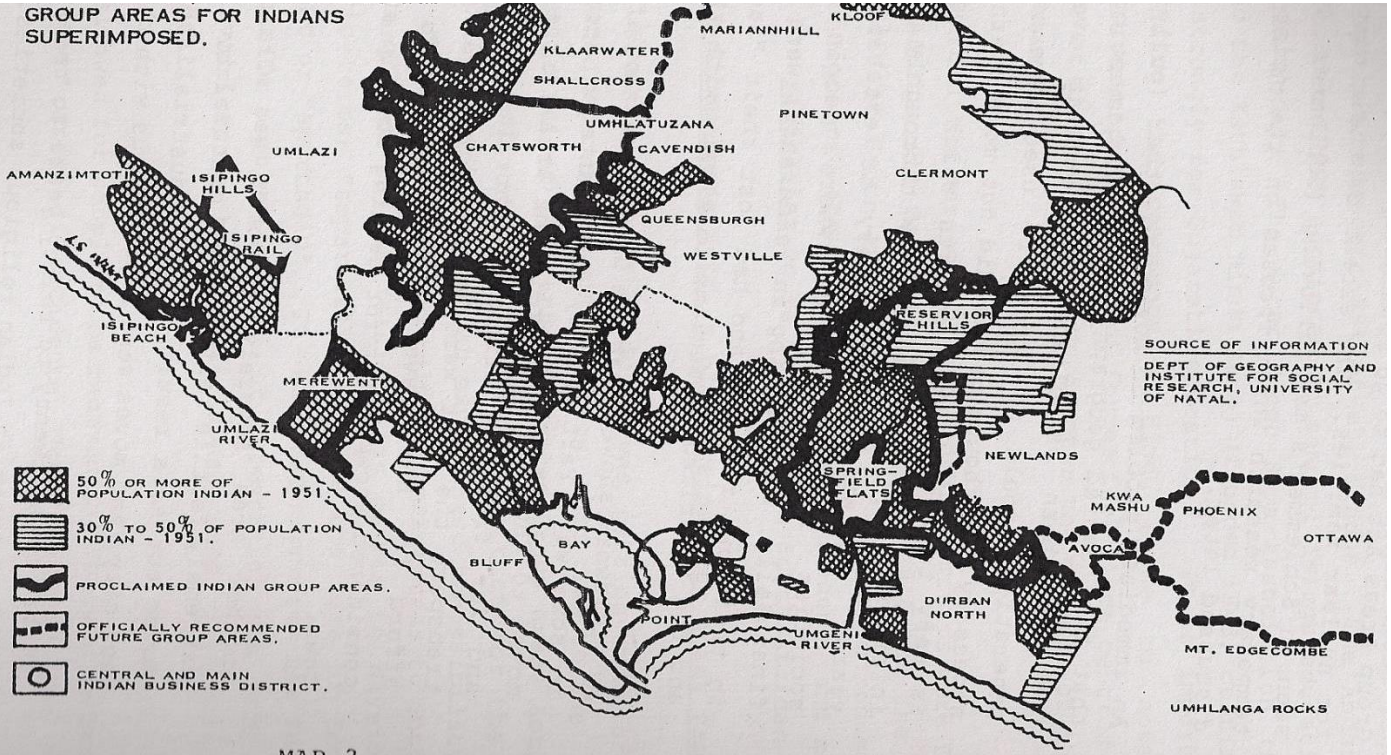
- Indenture system for sugarcane plantations (Singh 2008; Freund 1991; Swan 1985).
- Racial and social restrictions faced by Indians (Greyling 1979).
- Cultural and political marginalisation (Pillay 1987).
- Formation of a distinct diasporic identity (Chowdhury 2008, Ebr-Vally 2001, Moodley 1979, Webb 1957, Alexander 1950).

Indian Immigration to Natal: Historical Overview

Category	Details
Total Labourers Imported	152,184 (Freund 1991)
Year of Importation	1859
Religion	Hindu (majority), Christian (~2%), Muslim (<12%)
Gender Distribution	Men: 62%, Women: 25%
Primary Employment	Natal sugar and tea estates
Contract Type	Indentured contracts (renewable or return to India) (Brain, 2010)
Employer Obligations	Food, clothing, and residence provided by estate owners
Working Conditions	Inconsistent working hours and free time across estates
Cultural Considerations	Cultural, religious, and caste affiliations disregarded in accommodations (Swan, 1985)
Second Wave of Immigration	Passenger Indians (1870–1914) (Padayachee & Morrell, 1991)
End of Immigration	Immigration stopped in 1911
Impact of Immigration Halt	Limited contact with India affected cultural activities (Henning, 1993)
Internal Migration	Movement from rural north coast to Durban for upward mobility (Pillay, 1991b; Pachai, 1971)

Apartheid and Impact on Indian Communities in Durban

- Apartheid was officially introduced in South Africa in **1948** and formalized existing racial segregation into a system of institutionalised white supremacy**.**
- Racial and social restrictions – The Pegging Act, the Asiatic Land Tenure Act (1946)
- Forced removals under Group Areas Act (1961):
  - Chatsworth (south of Durban) in 1964
  - Phoenix (north of Durban) in 1976
- Impact of Apartheid:
  - Socio-economic implications of displacement
  - Disruption of communities and traditions
- Church music adapted and endured
- Music as a form of resistance and resilience


GROUP AREAS FOR INDIANS SUPERIMPOSED.
KLOOF
MARIANNHILL
KLAARWATER
SHALLCROSS
UMHLATUZANA
PINETOWN
CHATSWORTH
CAVENDISH
UMLAZI
AMANZIMTOTI
ISIPINGO HILLS
CLERMONT
QUEENSBURGH
ISIPINGO RAIL
WESTVILLE
RESERVIOR HILLS
ISIPINGO BEACH
MEREWENT
UMLAZI RIVER
NEWLANDS
SPRING-FIELD FLATS
KWA MASHU
PHOENIX
OTTAWA
AVOCA
BAY
BLUFF
DURBAN NORTH
POINT
UMGENI RIVER
MT. EDGECOMBE
UMHLANGA ROCKS
50% OR MORE OF POPULATION INDIAN - 1951.
30% TO 50% OF POPULATION INDIAN - 1951.
PROCLAIMED INDIAN GROUP AREAS.
OFFICIALLY RECOMMENDED FUTURE GROUP AREAS.
CENTRAL AND MAIN INDIAN BUSINESS DISTRICT.
SOURCE OF INFORMATION
DEPT OF GEOGRAPHY AND INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY OF NATAL.

MAP 3

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CITY OF DURBAN
UNDER SECTION 37 OF THE DURBAN BEACH BY-LAWS, THIS BATHING AREA IS RESERVED FOR THE SOLE USE OF MEMBERS OF THE WHITE RACE GROUP
STAD DURBAN
HIERDIE BAAIGEBIED IS, INGEVOLGE ARTIKEL 37 VAN DIE DURBANSE STRANDVERORDENINGE, UITGEHOU VIR DIE UITSLUITLIKE GEBRUIK VAN LEDE VAN DIE BLANKE RASSEGROEP
IDOLOBHA LASETHEKWINI
NGAPHANSI KWESIGABA 37 SOMTHETHO WAMABHISHI ASETHEKWENI, LENDAWO IGCINELWE UKUSETSHENZISWA NGAMALUNGU OHLANGA OLUMHLOPHE KUPHELA.

Tradition vs Adaptation

- Isolation and colonial pressure disrupted Indian traditions (Roy 2008).
- Conversion to Christianity required cultural adaptation.
- Emergence of hybrid spiritual practices.
- Gospel music infused with Indian musical elements.

Role of the Church

- Spiritual and cultural sanctuary.
- Hub for education and social unity.
- Preservation and transformation of culture.
- Music as a communal bonding tool.
- Pentecostal church
- The Bethesda church movement

Music as Cultural Memory

- Music as a form of diasporic memory (Ramnarine 1996).
- Blending Indian, Western, and African influences.
- Music as oral history and emotional expression.
- Hybrid identities reflected in sound.

HAPPY
81ST
BIRTHDAY!
PS. NELLIE

Musical Identity in Indian Pentecostal Churches

- • Transition from musical memory and tradition to new musical creativities and sounds
- • Musicians created their own traditions and forged a unique musical identity
- • Driven by cultural interaction in a multicultural society, not population movement
- • Emergence of politically expressed interpretations of social relations and creativity
- • Church music styles included traditional hymns, American Jazz, and social commentary

(Ramnarine 2007)

Conclusion & Reflections

- Identity is dynamic and adaptive.
- Church music preserves and reinvents tradition.
- A vehicle for belonging and continuity.
- Call for deeper study of diasporic music cultures.

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