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South Africa's Indian art: A neglected social history

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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

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Title: South Africa's Indian Art, A Neglected Social History.

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South Africa's Indian Art, a neglected Social History.
A preliminary report on work in progress.

Monique Vajifdar, April 1991.

The days when Art History was seen as a discipline related to Art and to none of the other social sciences are long since gone. Art, as a product of the society which generated it, can inform us about that society.

So, in the case of my own research, what started as a straight-forward art-historical documentation process, listing Indian artefacts in private collections, developed rapidly into a social historical documentation relating the story behind each object listed.

In my research, I have chosen to focus on the PWV area of the Transvaal. Professor Matthews at the University of Durban-Westville has done some work relating to collections of Art in Durban,but no work has been done in the Transvaal.

As a lecturer starting a new course in Indian Art History, I undertook this project to record original artefacts which could provide source materials for seminars and research.

A second objective of the research, was to make a selection from the objects discovered, exhibit them at the Gertrude Posel Gallery with a detailed catalogue, to give them exposure to a wider public.

My research uncovered many items which deserve such exposure. There are pictures, textiles, carpets, clothing, furniture, architectural elements in stone and wood, domestic utensils and ornaments. There are objects of considerable religious importance and others which are purely secular in function. Some of the items are from India and others are locally made.

The objects are of interest purely as art objects: they show considerable technical skill, and enable one to observe the stylistic developments in Indian Art History. However, it became clear that considerably more could be learnt from the objects by relating them to their function and social history context.

As my research began, over a year ago,and I interviewed a range of collectors, I became aware of the fact that there were a variety of reasons why these collections were so little known by the wider South African public. These reasons relate, on the one hand, to the

particular history of Indians in this country, to their marginalisation and physical relegation to seperate residential areas, and on the other, to the effective dismissal as inferior, or "uncivilised" by the South African Government of all non-European Cultures. These factors have given the Indian community a level of media "invisibility" astonishing in a community of over one million.

I propose to analyse the factors contributing to this state of affairs, look at the implications of it for the study of Indian Culture in South Africa, and then conclude by looking to the future.

The Historical Context:

The first Indians were brought to South Africa from India as indentured labourers between 1860 and 1911. Most were from South India, and they were brought to work in the large sugar plantations in Natal. They were predominantly Tamil-speaking and Hindu in religion. Some of these labourers went back to India once their period of indenture had been worked out, others could not afford to, or did not wish to and decided to settle in South Africa. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a different group of Indians started to arrive. Fewer in number, they came mostly from a small area in Gujerat to trade.

While anxious to use the new supply of labour Indians provided, the Government was unwilling to permit too many Indians right of entry. By 1920, Indian immigration had all but stopped. From the time of their arrival, Indians were subjected to a battery of legal restrictions on what they could earn, and where they could live. This is in contrast to the opportunities offered other but white immigrants at the same period. Indians were seen as migrant labour and such were offered no right of residence in South Africa, until the 1960s. It is even claimed that the Group Areas Act, which came to affect all of South Africa's non-white population, was drafted to facilitate the repatriation of South African Indians to India.

Throughout their history here, Indians have fought the restrictions imposed on them. The high level of restrictions affecting every area of their lives is given as an explanation of the surprisingly high level of polical consciousness and involvement in the Indian community. Historically the majority of Indians have identified their struggle for survival, with that fought by the black majority, and what they have tried to achieve has been in the interest of all South Africans, and not just to serve narrow communal interest.

Nevertheless, in 1991, the reality is that Indians do often live in separate residential areas, they have been through separate Indian schools which taught the Culture of this country's rulers. Their culture is not accesible to the majority, and they and their Culture are marginalised.

Consequences of Marginalisation for the study of Indian Art and Social History

I will first look at the consequences for the Indian Community: within the Indian Community here, Culture in the form of art objects and Cultural awareness has not been seen as a priority. Seen as something quite distinct from religion and religious observance, it is identified with craft-work, and dismissed as a past-time for women. Apart from the sexism of this dismissal, it also denies the real economic contribution such "women's work" made to her family.

Because of their history of political insecurity in this country, Indians describe how all their efforts went into the struggle to make a living. The prosperity that some Indians enjoy today is a recent development, dating back to the economic boom in the 1960s. For the greatest part of their time here, Indians have had to battle for economic survival, and this has entailed an unsettled existence. As labourers, they were taken to where the work was. And as traders, they had to compete in the market place with other traders. This often meant going to remote, far-flung places to set-up a trading post in an area where no-one else wanted to live. In the Transvaal, virtually every small town has one or more Indian trading families.

There are four main areas where Indian Culture is evidenced: in clothing, in religious observance, in domestic utensils and in language. In interviews with older members of the community, they will describe how in the old days, they were aware of a distinct religious identity but not a distinct identity in any other way. It is not surprising therefore, that religious practise, whether Hindu or Muslim, has been preserved, while the other distinct facets of cultural identity have been eroded or lost.
The development of racism against blacks in the Indian community is seen as a direct result of enforced separate residential areas: "we no longer rub shoulders with each other, we do not know each other any more."

Indians here have become used to their Culture being dismissed as less "civilised" than "western" Civilisation and therefore less worthy of study. When people are seen as transitional, their cultural objects and practises also become unfairly devalued.

Time after time, I had to justify my interest in all the old objects people had in their possession. "It is only an old thing, very shabby", I would hear over and over again as an old family heirloom was brought out. And when I explained what I could learn from the object about social history and craft techniques of the time, usually there followed an admission from the owner, that however "shabby", the object had great sentimental value for their family.

Indians no less than any other community, have been affected by the prevailing materialism in this society. As such, they are as keen as most South Africans to aquire the latest and newest commodities. For an art or social historian, this acquisitiveness and the corresponding eagerness to dispose of"old" things, is a disaster.

Sometimes, through sheer luck, a social historian is in the right place at the right time: Dr. Henning, from the Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville was documenting the history of the Bree Street School in Newtown, the oldest Indian school in the Transvaal. He happened to visit the authorities in charge of the school just after they had completed an extensive Spring clean. When he asked to see all the earliest records of the school, he was directed to the large dustbins behind the school. After spending several hours going through the bins, he came away with several thousand documents, and the first Head-master's Log-book.

It would be completely wrong to suggest that because so little has been adequately documented, no Indians are interested in documenting their own social history.

An important factor which mitigates against written records is the strength of Oral tradition in the Indian community. Social Custom, Folk Art traditions, family structures, religion and language have all been preserved this way. But the strong family ties which permitted this transmission of Culture, have weakened in recent years. Instead of living in extended families, Indians live more and more in nuclear family units. Thanks to the Group Areas Act, a lot of time and energy now goes into commuting long distances to work. There is less time for cultural activities, and T.V. Culture has invaded Indian homes as much as anywhere else in urban areas of South Africa.

However, the political insecurity Indians have experienced, has sharpened their awareness that unless they record their own experience, it will be ignored or distorted by the powers that be.

As has been mentioned elsewhere, the scale of legislation enacted against Indians, served to polarise them politically, and prevented for a very long time, any possible co-option. It took the advent of the Tricameral Parliament in the early 1980s, before it happened at all.

This political consciousness and activity in itself created a wealth of archival material: letters, journals, press-cuttings, photos, and books. The problem was that by their very nature, these materials had a tendency to get destroyed. Possesion of them at times of political repression, could lead to harrassment and arrest. Sometimes the collectors of such material disposed of them themselves, sometimes they were confiscated by the Security Police, or lost in the confusion surrounding an arrest.

Luckily, some of these collections survive thanks to their having been lodged in University collections, like the William Cullen at Wits and the Unisa Library in Pretoria.

What were the consequences of the marginalisation of Indians for the wider Community?

The main consequence for the wider Community has been ignorance about Indian Culture. There are few places in South Africa where it can be studied,in a formal sense at an institution, or informally through contact with Indians. The remoteness of the Indian town-ships in the Transvaal- Lenasia, Laudium, Azadville, Roshnee - to name a few, make informal contact difficult.

The main institution which offers courses in Indian Culture is the University of Durban-Westville. While it is no longer exclusively an Indian Institution, it is nevertheless tainted by its origin as an Apartheid institution.

At present, there are very few collections of Indian Art available to the Public. There are also very few places in South Africa where aspects of Indian Culture are exhibited. As a preliminary to this research project, I did a survey of the Public collections in South Africa to establish where Indian Art and Indian Artefacts are stored and displayed.

So far in this paper, when talking about objects, I have not explained the distinction between Indian objects from India, and Indian objects from South Africa. This is because the cultural roots and the style and technique used to make the objects are from India. However, like any Cultural Tradition, Indian Culture is a living tradition in this country. In the last 130 years,South African Indian Culture has aquired its own distinct character.

There is only one collection of art from India in a museum in South Africa. These are the twenty-six Indian Miniatures in the George the Sixth Collection in Port Elizabeth. They were acquired in the 1960s, because the curator at the time felt that there was a substantial Indian population in P.E., and their art should be represented in the local museum. Unfortunately, they are in store and not on display.

Collections of photos and documents which do exist, in Durban and Johannesburg, relating to Indian Social History, suffer themselves from poor documentation. Either there is no description and one is left guessing what is happening, or who is in the photo. Otherwise, one is often left in no doubt that the label was composed by someone assured of his own relative importance in relation to the subject. Present day curators hardly know where to start with the massive job

of documentation and research, such is the scale of the task and so few are the people to do it.

In Durban, there are two social history displays: a small, perhaps to be extended exhibit at the local history Museum, on indentured labour in Natal and on Gandhi in Natal. The other, much larger exhibition is at the Documentation Centre at the University of Durban Westville. It attempts to cover many aspects of the history of Indians in this country. It is unfortunate that neither the involvement of Indians in politics, nor in labour issues is adequately covered.

Looking to the future:

It is an often repeated belief in this country, that Indian Art and Culture are principally of interest to Indians. While this is wholly consistent with the old Apartheid philosophy of separate development, it is time to throw out such a narrow-minded view and allow all South Africans access to the variety of Cultures which is their heritage.

The debate about which museums should collect and display which artefacts is a live issue in South Africa, at the moment. Existing museums are seen by the wider community as culture palaces inaccessible to the majority of the population. How do you make the division between an art object and one of merely cultural value? When is a photograph or a piece of clothing art and when is it merely documentation? If these examples seem contrived, they are being debated at the moment by the custodians of the national collections, and the decisions reached affect the final exhibition place of the object.

I would argue that for collections reflecting aspects of social or local history to start presenting a less stilted view of history, it is essential to engage in a process of community consultation to establish which issues the community feel have shaped their lives, and which should be represented. At the very least one would ensure a wider range of people feeling that the museum was theirs.

It is a time to acknowledge past neglect and to attempt to redress wrongs whereever possible, for the benefit of all South Africans. Within an institution like Wits University, the process of redressing the original strong Eurocentric bias of all the courses started a few years back, with new African Studies being offered in a number of departments. While highly commendable, this process was not taken far enough. South Africa is made up of communities with various cultural identities and historical roots. It seems the birth-right of every South African to have access to that cultural wealth. However, up till now, access to Indian Culture (from the sub-continent), and to South African Indian Culture (from the million-strong community here), has been restricted to the community itself, and to students at the University of Durban-Westville.

This makes the projected academic development at Wits of a half-course in Indian Art, particularly timely. While it can only serve as an introduction to the topic, it is a move in the right direction. It has also become possible to envisage the end of academic boycott and the possibility of cultural exchange at an institutional level. The Indian Minister of Culture has expressed great interest in the possibility of Indian studies being instituted at Wits and has promised to assist with visiting academics from India, and teaching materials.

It is in the University's own interest to engage in the debate of how to make itself more relevant to the wider community. While tapping the knowledge held in people's heads and discovering treasures kept in their cupboards, the process of out-reach inevitably draws more people to the University.

I started this paper by asserting that the study of Art History was intrinsically linked to broader social studies. I am not ending this paper by asserting that it is only through the study of Art History that we will draw more students to Wits. However, flippancy aside, I do argue that Culture permeates everything, and that in the process of redress that this University is attempting, tinkering with syllabuses is not enough. The process has to be right too; I would argue that that means community consultation and involvement.