

## **Freedom as anxiety Indian South Africans in the post-apartheid city**

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**Almost two decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa still displays high levels of racial segregation. Studying the South African Indian minority, Thomas Blom helps us understand why the fact of maintaining boundaries with other groups has become crucial to individuals' attempts at reimagining themselves in a new free and uncertain society.**

Reviewed: Thomas Blom Hansen, *Melancholia of Freedom: Social Life in an Indian Township in South Africa*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012

In 1994, South Africa was released from apartheid. This event unleashed many hopes: a new rainbow nation would emerge and its citizens would live together in the “first nonracial society on the planet<sup>1</sup>”. But blacks, whites and others continue to live side by side without really engaging with each other; marriages across communities hardly occur and racial inequalities remain. Why? The book of Thomas Blom Hansen contributes to answering this question by diving into the world of South African Indians, a minority which remains largely understudied. Narrating with much detail how life looks like in an Indian township, Hansen uncovers the complex and often contradictory sentiments that developed among this community with the end of apartheid.

### **Reimagining oneself in a changed society**

Hansen's book seeks to understand how communities redefine their collective identities in the face of social change. The end of apartheid was indeed a tremendous and positive change. But Hansen's thesis is that freedom first and foremost generated a lot of anxiety.

Apartheid and spatial segregation had shaped every aspect of people's lives. Administrative classification had fixed racial identities, and government categories had acquired a reality in ordinary lives. Individual selves had come to be systematically reduced to their phenotypic appearance, and people could only develop an actual sense of themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Passages to Freedom: the Politics of Racial Reconciliation in South Africa”, *Public Culture*, vol. 20, n°1, Winter 2008, p. 5-18

within their own segregated racial world. Their everyday subjectivities, their personal and family horizons were bounded by the space of the township.

The end of apartheid considerably altered this state of facts: spatial boundaries are now formally abolished, and racial groups can't ignore each other anymore. According to Hansen, one of the most important problematics of post-apartheid South Africa is that communities have to live under a new "economy of recognition" (p. 2). The contact with other groups forces them to reinvent their ethnic identity<sup>2</sup>. This process generates a lot of anxiety, which Hansen characterizes as Melancholia.

Melancholia refers to the psychic state in which one feels a sense of loss without being able to clearly identify what exactly has been lost (p. 16). With the end of apartheid, oppressed communities have surely gained many things, but they have also lost what had been so crucial to shape their identities: forced segregation. The "comfort" of segregation is now threatened by an increasing spatial proximity with other racial groups. However, given the highly problematic nature of apartheid, nostalgic memories of the township life cannot be publicly enunciated. As the loss of the racial enclave cannot be formally acknowledged, "the experience of freedom becomes melancholic" (p. 17).

### **A multi-layered ethnography of Indian Durban**

To support this thesis on the melancholic nature of freedom, the book focuses on the Indian minority. Having spent most of his academic career studying India<sup>3</sup>, Hansen could surely develop easier connections with South African Indians than with any other group. This choice also proved heuristic on many grounds. Indians' position in South African racial stratification is indeed quite atypical, which makes the analysis all the more interesting: an "intermediate group of quasi citizens between white privilege and African disenfranchisement" (p. 15), Indians are characterized by a double estrangement. Both blacks and whites consider them as an alien community. Indian South Africans are also a highly heterogeneous community (constituted of a wealthy Gujarati Muslim middle-class, a Hindi/Urdu speaking segment of farmers and artisans, and a Telugu/Tamil speaking poor working-class), but whose urban experience has been homogenized by apartheid: "one became an Indian because one lived an Indian life – went to Indian schools, shopped in Indian shops, went to Indian cinema halls and Indian beaches, and visited family in other parts of the country who has also lived in enclaves designated for Indians" (p. 80). This is worth studying to understand how spatial segregation shapes everyday life and subjectivities.

Hansen's study focuses on the Indian township of Chatsworth in the city of Durban, which is often characterized as the largest Indian city outside India<sup>4</sup>. The population of

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<sup>2</sup> The idea that ethnic groups define who they are through the interaction with other groups has first been developed by Fredrik Barth in his book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). He suggests that ethnic identities emerge when different groups come into contact. This is particularly relevant to understand the new identity dynamics of post-apartheid South Africa, where interracial contact is new.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen is indeed a leading scholar on issues of religious conflict and violence in India. His most influential books are *The Saffron Wave. Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton University Press, 1999) and *Wages of Violence. Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton University Press, 2001)

<sup>4</sup> The city's population is 37% Black African, 27% Indian and 26% White, as per the 2001 South African census (<http://census.adrianfrith.com/place/57218>)

Chatsworth itself is 85% Indian and 14% Black African<sup>5</sup>. Repeated fieldwork trips, spanned over a period of almost ten years, allowed Hansen to gather a rich ethnographic material that offers a vivid picture of the area (observations, interviews, pictures, archives, movies, theater plays, talk shows). The book focuses on ordinary life. It examines people's everyday practices and, more importantly, the self-reflexive moral and cultural debate that these practices generate within the community. In Hansen's approach, Indian South Africans don't only act, but they also talk and argue about it, producing a tremendous body of jokes, speeches and reflections, that express their hopes and anxieties about their own culture.

Hansen's ethnography is a multi-layered one, describing the multiple fields in which Indian identity is being reinvented on a daily basis: urban space, religious practices, diasporic desires, politics, music, cinema, relations with Africans, youth culture, sexuality, etc. The result is a luxuriant book, which is difficult to classify due to the variety of themes it addresses.

### **Indians and Africans in Chatsworth**

One of the most significant contributions of the book is to shed light on the complex relations between Africans and Indians in the post-apartheid era. With the end of state-sponsored segregation, Indian enclaves are no longer strictly insulated. Africans are now living in Chatsworth. The township is no longer a homogenous space in which Indians could assert the distinctiveness of their culture, but an increasingly mixed one in which ethnic boundaries must be constantly redefined.

The developing presence of Africans has first and foremost generated acute feelings of danger. Collective memories of the violent events that opposed the two communities (the 1949 riots in the area of Cato Manor; the 1985 riots in the Indian settlement of Inanda) are still vivid. At that time, it had become clear to most Indians that segregation from Africans was the only way to ensure their physical safety. The end of apartheid has therefore reactivated feelings of insecurity.

But the sensation of danger is also coupled with anxieties of pollution: in Chatsworth, Africans are referred to as *ravans* (black demon from South India) and considered as violent sexual predators. Separating oneself from Blacks (through higher and higher walls, increased securitization of houses and sanctioning of interracial relationships) has therefore become a sign of good status and morality. "Turning one's back on categorical others" (p. 125) is one of the strategies used by Indians to keep a sense of their culture in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **Searching for Indianness**

However, differentiating oneself from external others is not sufficient. Chatsworth inhabitants must also respond to the difficult challenge of defining themselves internally. Who are they as South African Indians? The book describes the various, more or less successful attempts to answer this question.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://census.adrianfrith.com/place/57211>

One of these strategies is self-deprecating humor. The book offers a fascinating account of all the jokes Chatsworth Indians make about themselves. The recurring character of these jokes is the *charou*, a working-class poorly educated township Indian, speaking colloquial South African Indian English, eating meat, drinking cheap liquor, and enjoying low-grade Bollywood songs and movies (p. 78). The *charou* is an ambivalent figure, which embodies what South African Indians try not to be, but which is also looked at with tenderness and nostalgia. The ridiculization of this figure creates a space of cultural intimacy and ethnic closure, “wherein one can be Indian without apologies” (p. 92). This “offstage version<sup>6</sup>” of South African Indian enables a form of complicity in the community.

Chatsworth inhabitants also try to redefine themselves by reinforcing their ties with their “mother country,” India. Hansen revisits the concept of diaspora and shows that the diasporic experience is fraught with anxiety and cultural self-doubt. South African Indians are afraid of not being Indian enough, of lacking authenticity in their cultural practices, of being corrupted by their *charou* way of life. Middle-class Indians seek to overcome these fears by multiplying “roots tourism” trips to India. However, these trips prove often disconcerting and confusing, as South African Indians encounter a society in which they feel like complete strangers, and which does not correspond to the romanticized vision they had. Hansen’s thesis is that India functions best as a “fetish”, that is “a lie that works” (p. 202): South African Indians are attached to the idea of India and build their identity according to it, no matter how far they are from the actual Indian reality.

But there is an alternative way of defining one’s identity in an uncertain post-apartheid society. This way is religion and Hansen devotes the last two chapters of his book to it. In a national context where being Indian remains difficult, Chatsworth inhabitants try to tie themselves to more universal and meaningful references: Hinduism, Islam, and Pentecostalism. Within the South African Indian community, some Hindus have therefore tried to purify their religious rituals from all the ancestral practices of local *charous*. Muslims have been through a similar process, getting rid of local ritualistic traditions, to follow a purer, more literal global Islam. Finally, Chatsworth has witnessed a growing amount of conversions to Pentecostalism, a religious “passing” that often implies a strong cultural disavowal of Indian practices. These are examples of how the Indian identity can be relegated to the backstage in post-apartheid South Africa.

## Conclusion

Hansen’s book is definitely a very important one. It is unclassifiable too. This short review could certainly not do justice to the variety of themes it covers. Indeed, students of segregation, ethnic conflict, urban space, identity, religion, migration, music and cinema will all find something of interest here. More generally, *Melancholia of Freedom* offers a fascinating insight into the fate of minority groups, and the boundary work they engage in. South Africa is of course a paradigmatic case (in terms of the extent of segregation and discrimination ethnic groups face there), but Hansen’s account allows us to better understand the processes through which minorities maintain identity and sociability in difficult contexts. The book shows that identity-making is not just about ethnicity: class and social status also play a big role in people’s attempts at redefining themselves. For middle-class Indians, maintaining respectability in post-apartheid South Africa has become a top priority. This implies differentiating themselves from both Africans and *charous*. It therefore appears

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Syrock (ed.), *Off Stage/On Display : Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press

crucial to disaggregate the Indian minority to uncover the social and moral conflicts that run through it. The book is an invitation to pursue research along these lines.

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