

University of Mumbai



Indian Diaspora Centre

Constructions of Home and Belonging Indian Diaspora Centre (CoHaB IDC)

Centre for African Studies

A Report on the talk “Issues in East African Writing”



The Centre for African Studies and CoHaB IDC together, had organized a talk titled “Issues in East African Writing” by Pheroze Nowrojee on 16th August, 2017. Pheroze Nowrojee born in Nairobi, is a leading human rights lawyer, poet and writer, who over many decades has

been an influential part of the political and social movements for constitutional and social change in Kenya. He is the author of - *A Kenyan Journey* (2014), *Dukawala and Other Stories* (2017), *Pio Gama Pinto: Patriot for Social Justice* (2007) and *A Vote for Kenya: The Elections and the Constitution* (2013).

Pheroze Nowrojee began the talk by tracing the historic genealogy of migration of Indians from Kutch region of Gujarat, Kutch being the hub of trade, commerce and the centre for ship building, to the East African shores. The sea voyage was greatly dependent on the monsoon winds which facilitated the journey. Thus, the merchants and tradesmen in that sense engaged in seasonal migration, moving to and fro between India and Africa. The official entry of Indians in Africa, which is recorded in history, was marked by the arrival of 32,000 indentured labourers on the East coast of Africa in 1896 for the construction of railway line between Kenya and Uganda. Slavery being finally abolished, indenture labour became synonymous with another form of exploitation and oppression. Since, it was difficult to obtain local labour, Indians readily accepted and saw it as an opportunity for a better future, which facilitated an upward mobility, and thus, moved deeper into the heart of Africa for the construction of the railways. This is clearly illustrated in his book, *A Kenyan Journey*. Nowrojee remarked that the treatment of Indians abroad is closely tied up with the history of indenture labour.

Nowrojee, then discussed the problems of assimilation, which the Indian diasporics faced in Africa and spoke about the struggle for equal rights and property rights. He elucidated on the process of establishing a life and earning the means of livelihood by giving an example of the *Dukawalas* (Swahili for "shopkeeper" and "dukan" Gujarati for shop). He also mentioned about Gandhi's efforts in galvanizing the masses in South Africa against the unequal and atrocious treatment received by the Other at the hands of the British.

Memories and tradition played an important role in the construction of an identity for the diasporic Indians. They carried memories, traditions and values with them, when they moved across the waters. But, what is the meaning of the transformation of memories, traditions and values? How does one transmit these intangible virtues? How can one, now, identify the community? Nowrojee is of the viewpoint that we need to closely analyse these processes of identity formation in order to understand, not only the stories of departure, but also the stories of arrival. "The boundaries of something doable keep shifting all the time." Thus, the focus should be more on the stories of arrival and the motives for moving, which seldom is related to become what one wants to be.



Nowrojee ended the talk by opening it up for discussion, comments and questions from the audience. A question regarding the use of native language by the Indians was asked by a student. Nowrojee replied to the question by explaining that the native Indian languages are dying out amongst the young Indian diasporics in Africa. The popular slang amongst the youth now is Sheng, which is amalgamation of Swahili and English. Further, questions regarding “a sense of diasporic nomadism” were raised, which lead to the problem of - in whose history should we include the diasporics? Pheroze Nowrojee pointed out to the danger of a single story and history. There are multiple realities which exist simultaneously. The history of a nation is not only created intrinsically within the nation, but also outside the nation from multiple locations across the world. Then, who gets to decide what gets included in the history of the nation? The problem lies in who is speaking and from which subject position. Thus, Nowrojee suggested that we need to do away with an essentialised view of the nation and nationalism. We need to question our claim to nationalism.

The talk was well attended by students of the University of Mumbai and other guests.