

Report on ‘The Indian Ocean as Memory Space’: The Indian Diaspora in Mauritius, East and South Africa on 28 September 2021

The CoHaB Indian Diaspora Centre (CoHaB IDC) had organized an international and interdisciplinary webinar on ‘The Indian Ocean as Memory Space’: The Indian Diaspora in Mauritius, East and South Africa on 28 September 2021 in collaboration with the Centre of Excellence in Maritime Studies (CEMAS), University of Mumbai.

Advocate Pheroze Nowrojee from Kenya, Ms. Kanya Padayachee from South Africa and Dr. Sushilla Gopaul from Mauritius were the speakers at this webinar which was chaired by Professor Anuradha Majumdar, Dean, Science and Technology, and I/C Director, CEMAS, University of Mumbai.

Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha, Director, CoHaB IDC, welcomed the speakers, chair and all the participants. Professor Bharucha gave an introduction to the concept of Memory space, *lieu de mémoire* in French, which is related to collective memory, stating that certain places, objects or events can have special significance related to the group's remembrance. This concept was coined by the French historian Pierre Nora who defines them as “complex things”. This term is now being used in the context of the Indian Diaspora for whom the Indian Ocean is one such Memory Space. It is a space or site, with which not just the memories of the British colonial period indentured and free diaspora are connected, but also the collective memories that go back much further in time.



Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha

She spoke about how maritime communities from India's Western and Eastern coasts have for over 4000 years engaged in trade and commerce with the Persian Gulf, the East African Coast and South East Asia. The sea routes were also conduits of diplomacy, exchange of culture and religions, which resulted in a pre-European Indian diaspora which continues to have an influence in these regions.

Professor Bharucha also spoke about the research being done around the world today on the Indian Ocean and its connection with the Indian Diaspora. One such research project called the ‘Indian Ocean as a Memory Space’ is at the Goethe University, Frankfurt, with which CoHaB IDC had held a joint conference in 2019. They are also one of the collaborators of the CoHaB IDC.

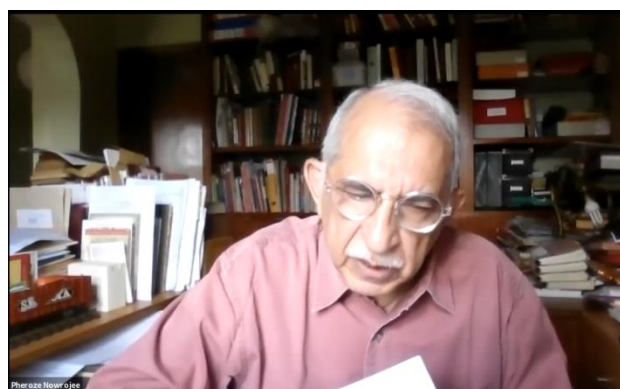
She then spoke about the webcast being a collaboration with the Mumbai University's Centre for Excellence in Maritime Studies (CEMAS) and its Director, Professor Anuradha Majumdar, who also chaired this event. Professor Bharucha noted how this was very appropriate as the CEMAS studies Maritime spaces and the webinar was focussed on the Indian Ocean as a Memory Site/Space in Diaspora Studies. She hoped to have many more collaborations with the CEMAS and conduct joint research projects in these areas. She then welcomed the speakers who represented the diverse colonial diasporas in the Indian Ocean space - Advocate Pheroze Nowrojee, Ms. Kanya Padyachee and Dr. Sooshilla Gopaul from South and East Africa and Mauritius, respectively. As they had participated earlier too in the CoHaB IDC's programmes, she welcomed them back to CoHaB IDC's own little 'Memory Site'.

Professor Bharucha then introduced the chair, Professor Majumdar, and requested her to give her opening remarks. Professor Majumdar is Dean, Science and Technology, I/C Director, CEMAS at the University of Mumbai. She is also a scholar with an impressive list of publications and awards to her credit.



Professor Anuradha Majumdar

Professor Majumdar spoke about how the Indian Diasporics have over the years made a name for themselves in their hostlands. She spoke about how the Indian ocean is the common thread between the three countries - Mauritius, East, and South Africa. She then introduced Advocate Pheroze Nowrojee. He is Senior Counsel in the High Courts of Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar. His family has been a part of the Diaspora since 1896. He has been awarded the Bharatiya Pravasi Samman Award in 2007 by India. He has given the South Asian Studies Council's Annual Gandhi Lecture at Yale University in 2017. He has authored several books and is a prize winner of BBC Africa Poetry Competition.



Advocate Pheroze Nowrojee

Advocate Nowrojee's talk titled '**Right of Memory vs. Erasure: Coolie History in Kenya 1896-1909**' discussed the role of the diasporic Indian coolies as builders of the civic

infrastructure of Kenya, the infrastructure of the first towns, as opposed to their role as just the builders of the railway line from Mombasa to Kisumu.

He spoke about why their history and its assessment has been done on the basis of wrong emigration figures which does not credit them with the building of the civic infrastructure that accompanied the construction of the railway line. His talk elucidated how history has not identified the coolies as the authors of this colony wide construction of the first townships.

As a result, the artisan and the middle supervisory staff, and their civic achievement have been erased from history and collective memory. He concluded the talk by emphasizing the wider role the had coolies played in creating Kenya as a colony.

Professor Anuradha Majumdar then introduced the second speaker for the day, Ms. Kanya Padayachee whose talk was titled **'A Perspective of the South African Indian Diaspora: The Trajectory of Participation in the Broader Political Struggle for Liberation'**. Ms Padayachee described herself as a political and social activist who was involved in the anti-apartheid and teacher union movements through the 80s and 90s. She is currently engaged in Community Based Participatory Research in Early Childhood Development (ECD) towards a PhD.

Ms. Padayachee's presentation chronicled the chequered trajectory of the Indian diaspora in the greater struggle for liberation in South Africa, with its early isolationist and parochial beginnings to the latter-day integrated and participatory politics that characterizes the current South African political landscape.



Ms. Kanya Padayachee

She spoke about when in the 1860s, the British Colonial Government in South Africa established a sugarcane industry, it failed to attract Zulu labourers to work the plantations. As a result, they had to import labour from another colony, India. Between 1860 and 1911, 152,184 immigrants, comprising indentured labourers and the free or 'passenger' (immigrants outside the contractual labour system) Indians arrived in Natal. She traced the history of the Indians, indentured and free, who by the end of the century, were working in almost every part of the Colony as well as across the borders on the diamond and gold fields.

Ms. Padayachee traced how the participation of Indians in the politics of South Africa was limited and emerged, simultaneous with the Coloured people, only after the political organisation of the Black elite in the late nineteenth century. Stimulated by the South African War of 1899-1902 and its aftermath, non-White (Black, Coloured and

Indian) political organizations began forming, separately, as a response to the increasingly harsh discriminatory laws enacted against them.

She noted how the Indian community established a number of political formations, the most prominent being the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) set up by Gandhi in 1894, and the Transvaal and Cape Indian Congresses in the early part of the 20th century. Members of the Indian Congress, together with socialist activists in the Communist Party of South Africa, were instrumental from the 1930s onwards in building alliances across racial divides. The small Indian, Coloured and White progressive sectors joined with progressive African activists and together, with Indian women integrally involved, they conducted a common non-racial struggle for freedom and equality. In conclusion, she spoke of how many South African Indians participated in preparing the new constitution and furthering the democratic project by assimilating completely. She summed up by quoting the critics about how Indians played a role in the liberation of South Africa where some fought for and some against just as has been noted in the other liberation struggles.

Professor Anuradha Majumdar then introduced the third and final speaker, Dr. Sushilla Gopaul who presented on **'The Voice of a Third Generation Indian Diasporan in Mauritius'**. Dr. Gopaul is a Mauritian of North Indian Origins. Her research was, first on contemporary poetry written by women, then she moved to postcolonial literature. She has written on English poetry, on modern literary theories and criticism. She headed the English Department at the Mauritius Institute of Education and is now a part-time lecturer at Open University of Mauritius.

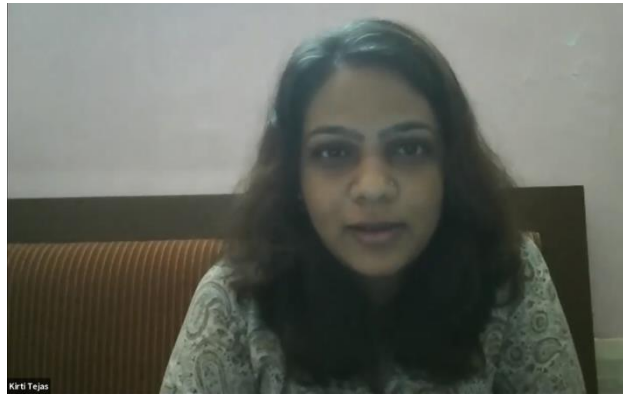


Dr. Sushilla Gopaul

Dr. Gopaul's presentation focused on the fallacies about the origins of the Indian diaspora in Mauritius. She offered her points of view regarding the same. Dr. Gopaul, herself a third generation diasporic in Mauritius, probed the directions in which the future should be looked at. To support her points, she drew from various renowned experts from the field such as Avtar Brah, Robin Cohen, Janet Wilson and Klaus Stierstorfer. While being objective, Dr. Gopaul did elaborate on her own experiences. She concluded on the note that although the diasporics live and assimilate with the natives, they continue to share values common to their Indian ancestral pool.

Professor Majumdar then requested Professor Bharucha to summarise. Professor Bharucha spoke about how CoHaB IDC is now moving towards becoming more interdisciplinary by collaborating with other disciplines such as Politics, History, Law, Sociology and Maritime Studies. Professor Bharucha also acknowledged the Indian diasporic presence from different parts of the world in the audience and thanked them for having made time in their schedules to attend the webinar.

The webinar ended with a vote of thanks by Ms. Kirti Risbud, Research Associate, CoHaB IDC.



Ms. Kirti Risbud

The webinar as usual, was well attended by participants from India and abroad.

You may view the entire lecture on the link given below:

['The Indian Ocean as Memory Space': The Indian Diaspora in Mauritius, East and South Africa](#)

Date: 28 September 2021
Place: Mumbai

Professor Nilufer E. Bharucha
Director, CoHaB IDC
