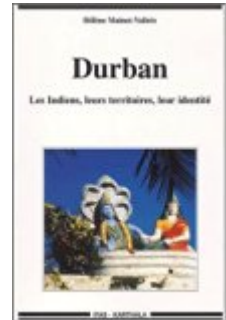


**Helene Mainet-Valleix.** *Durban, Les Indiens, leurs territoires, leur identite.* Paris: IFAS-KARTHALA, 2002. 269 pp. EUR 24.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-84586-314-9.



**Reviewed by** Stephane Vermeulin

**Published on** H-SAfrica (January, 2005)

*Durban, Les Indiens, leurs territoires, leur identite* by Helene Mainet-Valleix was originally written as a geography thesis for her Ph.D. In the book, which is derived from her academic work, the author deals with spatial dimension and the identity of the Indian community in Durban. Even though this study is unfortunately only available in the original French version, some papers are nevertheless available in English.[1]

Almost 75 percent of the 1,045,596 Indians living in South Africa live in Durban. This high concentration is mainly due to historical factors and to the restrictions on their mobility under the apartheid regime. These 650,000 Indians living in Durban constitute a very heterogeneous group since many religions, languages, cultures, social behaviors, etc. are represented within the community. The community, however, shares a common spatial framework, since all Indians live in urban areas. Mainet-Valleix consequently focuses her work on the analysis of the relations between Indian identities and urban space according to a geo-historical and sociological approach.

As a geographer, she studies the links between two major notions--territory and identity. A territory is more than just a spatial entity: it includes dynamics of appropriation as well as a feeling of "belonging" for a given group of population. In geography, the notion of identity is very often related to territories inasmuch as they constitute a spatial projection of a social and cultural environment. In this case, Mainet-Valleix considers the geographical origins and bases of Indian identity. She thus questions the extent of the influence of the city as a territory and as the locus from which identity is thought to originate and be rejuvenated. The first two chapters underline the historical processes of the settlement of the Indian community in Durban both during the nineteenth century and under the apartheid regime. The third and fourth chapters deal with Indian territories on two different scales: the scale of the house--that is, the scale of the family--and that of the area (or township), which can be considered as the scale of the community. In the last chapter, the author means to analyze spatial practices,

uses, and representations of the Indian community within the metropolitan area.

In the first chapter, the author presents the history of Indian urbanization and identifies various "paradoxes" it implies (p. 18). The first of these paradoxes is that even though most of the Indian immigrants came to South Africa as rural people and foreigners, they became both urban and South African. Mainet-Valleix distinguishes two main periods in the Indian history of Durban: the colonialist period (1860-1948) and the apartheid era (1948-early 1990s). In 1860, two ships arrived in Durban from Calcutta and Madras. They transported the first six hundred settlers of the 152,184 Indians who traveled to the Natal colony from 1860 up to 1911. Because of the lack of workers in the sugar-cane industry, the authorities needed hundreds of indentured laborers from India. Most of these indentured laborers were Hindus (93 percent) but some of them also were Muslims and Christians. During the next decade, these immigrants were followed by "free passengers" (mainly traders and Muslims). The wide range of languages spoken within the whole Indian community (Hindi, Bojpuri, Tamil, Telugu) shows how diverse Indian culture is. Their settlement was limited to the Natal province by such laws as the 1905 Immigration Restriction, which prohibited or restricted Indian mobility. These acts bring to light the reaction of the white community to what they called the "Asiatic menace"--the increasing number of Indians at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the second chapter, Mainet-Valleix deals with the second paradox--the economic integration of Indians at the time of the industrialization of Durban. She shows that, even though the main reason for discrimination was precisely economic competition, Indian business prospered in a city marked by segregation. Thanks to their aptitudes and the development of a very well-structured trading network, the Indians were able to integrate into the local economy.

The third paradox she identifies is that Indians adapted their identity to the local, urban context of Durban, yet without losing their specificities.[2] If strong disparities remain within the community, a new Indian identity has been gradually constructed that includes all Indian people. It is the elements of that identity which interest the author: even though the image of India as a place of origin remains a recurring trait in the current discourses, the variety of Indian languages has been eclipsed by English, since 94.4 percent of Indians spoke English at home in 1996. Religion is still a significant identity factor. The majority of Indians are Hindu, but there is an increasing number of Muslims and Christians. On this point, the data that Mainet-Valleix resorts to is unfortunately not up to date (1981) and may be inaccurate as regards the current situation. This chapter nevertheless greatly improves our knowledge of the complex history of the Indian community in Durban. From a sociological point of view, the Indian model is that of the "joint family," with a patriarchal authority and which can be both a place of oppression and of safety, especially for women. Segregation only reinforced that conscience of a global Indian identity. The Indian identity was both imposed by the apartheid government and asserted in opposition to it and in the fear of the African demographic mass. The construction of an Indian identity is thus to be linked with the necessity to create a group identity in the South African historical context.

In the second part the author explains the construction of an inclusive Indian culture, which, even though it remains full of contradiction and oppositions, is clearly urban. From the very start, the Indian settlements that were close to the inner city were significant in size and worried white residents who were afraid of an Indian penetration. In Durban, the "Asiatic menace" was a greater cause for concern than the "Native problem" because of the economic competition it implied. In 1871, local authorities wanted to create Indian locations and to confine Indian traders

within an *Indian bazaar*. This was the first step towards spatial segregation. Thereafter, many pieces of legislation, dealing with race, economics, land ownership or hygiene matters reinforced the spatial segregation of the Indian community. In reaction to this segregation, the components of Indian identity slowly evolved under such circumstances as common and collective discrimination, in spite of the efforts of the Indian commercial elite to distinguish itself politically with the creation of the Natal Indian Congress in 1894. Then, during the 1940s, a new generation of activists tried to open the political debate to the so-called non-white communities in order to bring together all people suffering from discrimination.

The author then analyzes the system of urban apartheid, which forcibly removed the Indians to the new townships of Phoenix and Chatsworth, far from the white areas. According to her, despite the spatial segregation, the Indians have never been totally excluded from the city, even as they developed expressions of urban opposition. Even if they did not join a single political party, the political actions carried out by a minority of Indians contributed to create an Indian political conscience and identity. During the apartheid era, the policies of segregation, and the Group Areas Act in particular, had serious consequences on family and community structures as well as on urban practices: the space of the township, for instance, has been progressively appropriated symbolically. The identity of the Indians as a group was produced by both apartheid and the struggle against it, at the expense of individual identities. In 1994, Indians voted in a majority for the conservative parties. According to Mainet-Valleix, this vote covers up various situations and was induced by a feeling of vulnerability, which was itself due partly to African racism. To my mind, this assertion is quite debatable. However, because the Indians were discriminated against, some of them were obviously afraid to see their identity slowly disappear. Thus, the vote is closely linked to social status and level of education. Nevertheless, as the

author has chosen to explore only the Indian point of view, she may, sometimes, have a partial view of the situation or she may miss information (from the African point of view, for example), which could complete her framework of analysis. This is undoubtedly the most critical remark I can make about her work. Another critical point directly related to the previous one is that she tries to explain the current stakes of Durban as a post-apartheid city with the single tool of the Indian community.

In the last three parts, the author intends to describe and analyze the representations and uses of Indians in the post-apartheid city. Mainet-Valleix uses a multi-scale analysis ranging from the dwelling place to the urban area and based on seven case studies: Mobeni Heights, Havenside, Bayview, Stanmore, Woodview, Tongaat, and Clairwood. According to her, the imposed landscapes of the townships were transformed and adapted by their inhabitants. The house, for instance, plays a physical and symbolic role of protection for the identity of the family, yet at the same time, she shows that household spaces have also founded Indian identity. Helene Mainet-Valleix introduces a fundamental and quite new piece of information: household and family are the main basis of the Indian identity.

She then moves on to the analysis of the diversity of Indian areas regarding housing, facilities, and services. The neighborhood is regarded as a place of sociability with many associations, social interactions, and codes. If people are mostly satisfied with their quality of life, some negative aspects like filthiness, noise, and violence have nonetheless become increasingly worrisome for many years. Among Indians, the image of the dwelling area is generally positive though some feel that few things--too few, maybe--have changed since 1996. Indians tend their areas with utmost care and the land claims that were requested during the 1990s can be seen as evidence of that feeling.

Finally, Indian spatial practices are questioned on a metropolitan scale. Such practices are characterized by an important mobility, affecting different places and occurring at various moments and according to various rhythms. The practices show that Indians expectedly know the Indian areas very well, go very often to the CBD, the white areas and shopping centers, but that only a very small number of them know and go to the African areas. Their spatial image of the city shows the central importance of the CBD that crystallizes the fears and desires of Indian people.

To conclude, this book demonstrates the very important role of Indians in Durban as well as the complexity and the heterogeneousness of this community. As a case study, Mainet-Valleix's analysis of the relation between identity and urbanity is really good and relevant. Frankly, I do not know whether it is possible to understand and explain the current transformations and the socio-spatial dynamics in such a big and complex city with this single piece of work. Many Indians, for instance, have moved to former white areas during the 1990s so that the spatial representation of the community is not the same anymore. There are many maps, pictures, and figures throughout the book. Her maps are very useful and well drawn but, unfortunately, the figures are not always accurate. It nevertheless remains a good study with interesting comments about the Indian community. Mainet-Valleix gives us a good opportunity to understand better one of the largest Indian communities settled out of India. For the last decade, many good works have been produced by B. Maharaj, B. Freund or V. Padayachee about Indians, but none of them explored the spatial dimension of Indian identity.[3] Thus, this study is different and original inasmuch as it is an overall and quite exhaustive work on this community, thanks to an interesting multi-scale analysis and a socio-historical approach. Finally, the author perfectly shows the high degree of complexity and the differences within the Indian community as well as the soli-

darity of such concepts as "territory" and "identity."

#### Notes

[1]. Helene Mainet-Valleix, "Experiencing One's City: Indian Identity in Durban," *Newtown Zebra* 10 (1998): pp.11-12.

[2]. Rehana E. Ebrahim-Vally, "Migration of an Identity: The Example of the So-Called South African Indians", paper presented at the Conference on Identity, Theory, Politics and History, Human Sciences research Council, Pretoria, 3-4 July 1997.

[3]. Brij Maharaj, "Social Relations and the Local State: Indian Segregation in Durban—the Prelude to Apartheid and the Group Areas Act", paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of American Geographers, Miami, 13-17 April 1991; Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban 1910-1990*, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1995); V. Padayachee, "Struggle, Collaboration and Democracy, the "Indian community" in South Africa, 1860-1999", *Economic and Political Weekly* 7 (1999): pp. 393-395.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

**Citation:** Stephane Vermeulin. Review of Mainet-Valleix, Helene. *Durban, Les Indiens, leurs territoires, leur identite*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10196>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.