

# ETHNIC GROUPS OF INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

S. D. MISTRY, M.B., B.S. (BOMBAY), D.C.H. (BOMBAY), *Johannesburg*

Following the lead given by Dr. Cosnett,<sup>1,2</sup> many studies on diabetes mellitus as observed in Indians residing in and around Durban have been published by Dr. Campbell and his colleagues.<sup>3-10</sup> The phrase 'Natal Indian' has gained wide currency as the authors take particular pain in referring to the Indian patients studied at King Edward VIII Hospital, Durban, as 'Natal Indians'.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, an erroneous impression has been created that the 'Natal Indian' belongs to a distinct race or an ethnic group. In addition, no evidence has been presented so far to show that the groups of patients studied by them are the representative samples of Indians living in the city of Durban or in the province of Natal. Like Indians in India, those in Natal as well as in the Transvaal and in the Cape Province—or in South Africa as a whole—may be divided into not one but many distinct ethnic groups. I hope the following description of the ethnic groups of Indians in South Africa will help in the understanding of the observations made on Indians.

Generally speaking, the Indian population of South Africa is composed of two so-called races, Dravidian and Aryan, each having distinct cultural and anthropological characteristics. Further, they can be said to belong to 5

groups on the basis of major Indian languages spoken in South Africa—Tamil, Telegu, Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu—and to 3 groups on the basis of religion—Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. These groups of people differ from one another considerably in their dietary habits, body build, colour of skin, marriage and social customs, cultural activities, home dress, place of origin in India, and so forth.

## DRAVIDIAN INDIANS

Tamil, Telegu, Kanarese, and Malayalam are the 4 great languages of people of Dravidian culture,<sup>20,21</sup> and of these only the first two are mainly spoken in South Africa. Tamil- and Telegu-speaking people immigrated to South Africa from the South Indian states of Madras and Andhra Pradesh respectively. Webster's *Third International Dictionary* describes Dravidian as 'an individual of an ancient Australoid race in India that forms the bulk of the population of Southern India'.<sup>21</sup> Generally speaking, they have a dark complexion, dark eyes, wavy or curly plentiful black hair, short stature, dolicocephalic head, prominent supra-orbital ridges, and broad nose with a depression at the root.<sup>22</sup> A great majority of the people of Dravidian race in South Africa are Hindus, but some are Christians and relatively few follow other religions.

Dravidian Hindus encourage cross-cousin marriages in accordance with their custom as prevailing in India.<sup>23</sup> Until recently, a man had a prescriptive right to marry his mother's brother's daughter, but this right is seldom enforced at present.

A marriage between children of sisters takes place occasionally, while the marriage between children of brothers is forbidden by custom. They are predominantly non-vegetarian and rice can be considered the main item of their food. Their social customs and rituals, literature, dancing, music, temple architecture, etc., bear distinctive stamp in contrast to those of Indians from Northern India.

The Christians of Dravidian stock, on the other hand, very frequently have English as their home language. Their dietary habit, system of marriage, Christian names, cultural activities, home dress, etc., have been influenced considerably by those in western societies. They neither encourage nor forbid cousin marriages. They are as a rule non-vegetarian.

#### ARYAN INDIANS

All Indians who do not belong to the Dravidian race can be said to belong to the Aryan race and culture. They speak Indo-Aryan languages, a subfamily of the great family of Indo-European languages.<sup>20</sup> In South Africa, people of Aryan race mainly speak Hindi (also known as Hindustani), Urdu, Gujarati, Memon, and Konkani. Their physical features and social customs vary considerably from one another depending upon their place of origin in India and upon the caste to which they belong. People who immigrated to South Africa from northern areas of India are somewhat taller and have lighter complexions than those from central and southern areas of India. People belonging to the so-called inferior castes, irrespective of their place of origin in India, are not infrequently shorter and have a darker complexion than those belonging to the so-called superior castes. However, generally speaking, people of Aryan stock in South Africa have light to dark brown (sometimes white or black) skin, medium to short stature and black-coloured hair and eyes. Their heads are long or round, the nose is medium without marked depression at the root, and hair is plentiful and more often straight than wavy or curly. Lighter-skinned Aryans belong mainly to the mediterranean group of Caucasoid race. A great majority of people of Aryan culture in South Africa are Hindus but some are Muslims and relatively few follow other religions.

Among Aryan Hindus, cousin marriages of any type are strictly forbidden by custom and religion, and yet most of the marriages take place between the members of the same caste. Among Muslims, first-cousin marriages, both cross and parallel, are encouraged by parents.<sup>23</sup> Although a great majority of Hindus are non-vegetarian, some communities among them such as Brahmans, Patidaars, Banias, etc., especially among Gujarati-speaking Hindus, are largely lacto-vegetarian by custom. Muslims, irrespective of language differences, are as a rule non-vegetarian and partake all common foods except pork which is prohibited by their religion.<sup>24</sup> Non-vegetarian Hindus, both Aryan and Dravidian, generally do not eat beef which is prohibited by their religion.

People who immigrated to South Africa from northern and north-eastern parts of India, mainly from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa, speak Hindi or Urdu. As a general rule, the home language of Hindus is Hindi and that of Muslims is Urdu. The majority of Indians, both Muslims and Hindus, who immigrated to South Africa from the Gujarat State on the west coast of India, north of Bombay, speak Gujarati at home, but some Muslims among them speak Urdu or Memon (one of the dialects of Gujarati). Gujarati-speaking people, irrespective of their religion, are generally considered to have a higher socio-economic status than any other language group of Indians in South Africa.<sup>27</sup> Indians who immigrated to

South Africa from the west coast of India south of Bombay, speak Konkani at home; most of them are Muslims and are mainly living in the Cape Province and in the Transvaal.

#### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF IMMIGRANT INDIANS

Dinath<sup>25</sup> has observed that the most outstanding feature of Indian immigration, whether in Africa, Mauritius, Malaya, Fiji, or the West Indies, is the tenacity with which immigrants retain most of their traditional culture in spite of considerable environmental changes, novel economic circumstances, restrictions imposed by law, and contact with peoples of alien culture and traditions. In forming new settlements, they have attempted to duplicate as much as possible their Indian background of powerful social mechanisms of caste, community, village, and kinship system. It is also noteworthy that their dietary preferences have not appreciably changed from those which prevailed in India. Thus, immigrant Indians, particularly in countries where they are found in large numbers, have retained most practices which characterize hundreds of castes and communities in India. The number of such distinct castes and communities among Indians residing in South Africa is not known but it is likely to be at least a few dozens. The separate identity of a caste or a community is maintained by a custom which permits a marriage to take place only if it is between the members of the same caste or community. Although this barrier of caste or community is sometimes disregarded by young people, the number of such marriages is small at present and the great majority of marriages take place among members belonging to the same caste, community, home language, religion, and place of origin in India. Although inter-caste marriages appear to be increasing in number, a marriage taking place between members of differing home language, religion, or race is only found occasionally.

#### THE DISTRIBUTION OF IMMIGRANT INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Unfortunately we do not know the precise distribution of Indians in the Republic since the census gives the figures for the Asiatics as a whole. However, it is true that the great majority of Asiatics are of Indian origin and that of the 477,125 Asiatics in the Republic, according to the 1960 census,<sup>26</sup> only about 6,000 are Chinese and immigrants from other Asiatic countries. Of the Asiatics in the Republic 394,854 (82.7%) live in Natal, 62,787 (13.2%) in the Transvaal, 18,477 (3.9%) in the Cape Province and only 7 (0.001%) in the Orange Free State. No less than 236,477 (59.9%) of the Asiatics in Natal live in the metropolitan area of Durban, and 28,993 (46.2%) of the Asiatics in the Transvaal live in the metropolitan area of Johannesburg. The distribution of non-Indian Asiatics on the other hand appears to be quite different from that of Indians, since, according to 1951 census figures,<sup>27</sup> 58.7% of them live in the Transvaal, 27.7% in the Cape Province and only 13.6% in Natal. In Johannesburg, the non-Indians constitute about 10% of the Asiatic population.

On the basis of 1951 census figures,<sup>27,28</sup> the first 3 tables are constructed to show the distribution of various ethnic groups described as found in South Africa in 3 of her provinces—Natal, Transvaal and the Cape, and in 2 cities—Durban and Johannesburg.

Table I shows the number and percentage of Asiatics as divided into Indians, Chinese, and others. It is evident that the proportion of non-Indians is minute in Natal (0.3%) but it rises as high as 7-9% in the Transvaal and the Cape Province.

TABLE I. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INDIANS, CHINESE AND OTHER ASIATICS (1951 CENSUS)

Asiatics	Republic of South Africa		Provinces						Metropolitan area of:			
	South Africa		Natal		Transvaal		Cape		Durban		Johannesburg	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Indians .. .. .	360,889	98.4	298,720	99.7	45,954	93.1	16,215	91.0	160,178	99.7	19,543	90.0
Chinese .. .. .	4,738	1.3	140	0.1	3,142	6.4	1,456	8.2	134	0.1	2,060	9.5
Others .. .. .	1,037	0.3	644	0.2	246	0.5	147	0.8	362	0.2	117	0.5
Total .. .. .	366,664	100.0	299,504	100.0	49,342	100.0	17,818	100.0	160,674	100.0	21,720	100.0

TABLE II. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INDIANS ACCORDING TO THEIR HOME LANGUAGE (1951 CENSUS)

Home language	Republic of South Africa		Provinces						Metropolitan area of:			
			Natal		Transvaal		Cape		Durban		Johannesburg	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Tamil .. .. .	120,181	33.3	114,444	38.3	5,082	11.1	655	4.0	60,818	38.0	2,185	11.2
Telegu .. .. .	30,210	8.4	30,125	10.0	83	0.2	2	0.01	18,483	11.5	18	0.1
Hindi .. .. .	89,145	24.7	86,594	29.0	2,091	4.5	460	2.8	41,928	26.2	771	3.9
Gujarati .. .. .	39,495	10.9	16,438	5.5	21,893	47.6	1,164	7.2	9,253	5.8	9,835	50.3
Urdu .. .. .	25,455	7.0	22,492	7.5	2,352	5.1	611	3.8	14,441	9.0	951	4.9
Other Indian .. .. .	26,090	7.2	14,985	5.0	7,700	16.7	3,405	21.0	6,309	3.9	2,119	10.8
English and/or Afrikaans .. .. .	30,068	8.3	13,463	4.5	6,713	14.6	9,892	61.0	8,840	5.5	3,648	18.6
Unspecified .. .. .	245	0.1	179	0.1	40	0.1	26	0.2	106	0.1	16	0.1
Total .. .. .	360,889	99.9	298,720	99.9	45,954	99.9	16,215	100.0	160,178	100.0	19,543	99.9

Table II shows the number and percentage of Indians belonging to various language groups. It can be seen that about half the Indian population of Natal is composed of people speaking the Dravidian languages, Tamil and Telegu, and more than one-quarter of them speak Hindi, one of the Indo-Aryan languages. In the Transvaal, the percentage of Indians speaking the 2 Dravidian languages is only 12%, while about half the population is composed of people speaking Gujarati, also an Indo-Aryan language. In the Cape Province, only less than one-fifth of the population speak the 5 major Indian languages spoken in South Africa, while about three-fifths of them have English and/or Afrikaans as their home language and the remaining one-fifth speak other Indian languages not mentioned separately in census reports.

Table III shows the number and percentage of Asiatics according to their religion, and it is clear that in Natal about three-quarters of them are Hindus, whereas in the Transvaal and in the Cape Province the majority are Muslims. Christians constitute only about 5-8% of the Asiatic population of Natal and the Transvaal, but in the Cape Province they are nearly one-quarter of the population. It is generally believed that Muslims are more advanced economically than Hindus and Christians, although a considerable number of Urdu-speaking Muslims whose ancestors originally came from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa, are poor.

In all 3 tables given (I-III), it can also be seen that the relative proportions of the ethnic groups of Indians in the cities of Durban and Johannesburg are more or less the same as that of the respective provinces, Natal and the Transvaal. Similarly, these proportions in the country as a whole follow the same pattern as that of Natal, where more than four-fifths of the Indian population of the country live.

It should be remembered that among Indians in South Africa, Hindus have as their home languages Tamil, Telegu, Hindi and Gujarati; Muslims mainly speak Urdu, Gujarati and other Indian languages like Konkani and Memon; and Christians mainly speak English, Tamil or Telegu. Unfortunately, the proportions of various language groups in each of the three religions and *vice versa* are not known. Most of the South African-born adults and school-going children (and according to the 1951 census 90.5% of the Asiatics are born

in South Africa) can speak either or both the official languages of the country, English and Afrikaans. There is a tendency, most marked among the younger Indians, to speak English or Afrikaans at home instead of their Indian home language. There are many families besides Christians who have completely adopted English or Afrikaans as their home language and this may be considered as an indication of the westernization of Indians in South Africa. It appears from the percentage of Indians who reported English and/or Afrikaans as their home language at the time of the 1951 census (Table II) that the trend towards westernization is most conspicuous in the Cape Province and is relatively more in the Transvaal than in Natal.

In Natal, 70% of the Indians are considered to live below the poverty datum line,<sup>29,30</sup> but the corresponding information about Indians living in the Transvaal or in the Cape Province is not known. However, it is generally believed that Indians in the Transvaal are economically more advanced than those in Natal or in the Cape Province. It is reported that although a proportion of Indians living in the main cities of the Transvaal, Johannesburg and Pretoria; are very poor, most of those living in small towns belong to the middle class.<sup>24</sup> Also, in the Transvaal, the relative proportions of Muslims and Gujarati-speaking people are greater than in Natal or the Cape Province, and this tends to substantiate the general belief that on the whole the Indians in the Transvaal are better off.<sup>11</sup> However, if the proportion of unemployed persons is considered to indicate poverty or affluence of Indians in the provinces, the difference is not very striking. On the basis of the 1960 census figures,<sup>31</sup> the proportion of unemployed Asiatics expressed as percentage of the economically active Asiatic population above the age of 15 years is shown in Table IV.

It is also noteworthy that more than four-fifths of the Indians in South Africa live in urban areas in contrast to less than one-fifth of the Indians in India. According to 1960 census figures<sup>31</sup> the number and percentage of urban and rural Asiatic populations of South Africa and 3 of her provinces are shown in Table V. It can be seen that more than four-fifths of the Asiatics in Natal, more than nine-tenths in Transvaal, and nearly all the population in the Cape Province, live in the urban areas.

TABLE III. THE DISTRIBUTION OF ASIATICS ACCORDING TO THEIR RELIGION (1951 CENSUS)

Religion	Republic of South Africa		Provinces						Metropolitan area of:			
			Natal		Transvaal		Cape		Durban		Johannesburg	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Hindu .. .. .	246,233	67.1	226,795	75.7	15,412	31.2	4,026	22.6	119,756	74.5	7,782	35.8
Muslim .. .. .	78,787	21.5	43,656	14.6	26,891	54.5	8,240	46.2	25,041	15.6	9,759	44.9
Christian .. .. .	22,883	6.2	15,759	5.3	2,784	5.6	4,311	24.2	9,426	5.9	1,570	7.2
Others and non-specified ..	18,761	5.2	13,281	4.4	4,255	8.6	1,241	7.0	6,451	4.0	2,609	12.0
Total .. .. .	366,664	100.0	299,491	100.0	49,342	99.9	17,818	100.0	17,818	100.0	21,720	99.9

TABLE IV. THE DISTRIBUTION OF UNEMPLOYED ASIATICS ACCORDING TO 1960 CENSUS

Region	Economically active population age 15 years and over	Unemployed persons	Percentage of unemployed persons
Natal .. .. .	102,286	23,273	22.7
Transvaal .. ..	17,352	2,624	15.1
Cape .. .. .	6,181	1,027	16.6
Total for South Africa .. .. .	125,820	26,924	21.4

TABLE V. THE DISTRIBUTION OF URBAN AND RURAL POPULATIONS OF ASIATICS (1960 CENSUS)

Region	Urban		Rural	
	No.	%	No.	%
Natal .. .. .	319,032	80.0	75,822	19.2
Transvaal .. ..	58,736	92.1	5,051	7.9
Cape .. .. .	18,234	98.7	243	1.3
Total for South Africa .. .. .	396,009	83.0	81,116	17.0

## DISCUSSION

It is evident from what is described above that immigrant Indians in South Africa and possibly also in other countries, where they are found in large numbers, constitute a heterogeneous society composed of many ethnic groups. Religion, home language, caste or community, place of origin in India, etc., continue to play a significant role in the life of immigrant Indians who tenaciously retain most of their traditional culture in spite of considerable environmental changes, novel economic circumstances, and contact with peoples of alien culture and traditions, etc. Anthropological characteristics, dietary habits, marriage and other social customs and rituals, economic status, etc. among the ethnic groups differ considerably from one to the other and so observations based on one or two ethnic groups should not be generalized and considered valid for the Indian population as a whole.<sup>32</sup> This is particularly true for the study of diseases like diabetes mellitus, coronary heart disease, etc., which are known to be affected by heredity, diet and affluence. It is also clear from what is described in this paper that the mode of life of Indians in South Africa depends mainly upon the ethnic group to which they belong and is not influenced considerably by residence in any province. The ethnic groups are distributed in varying proportions in the 3 provinces Natal, Transvaal and the Cape. Therefore to say that 'Transvaal Indians form more of a genetic isolate'<sup>31</sup> or that any group of Indian patients studied at a hospital in Durban belong to the 'Natal Indian' race or ethnic group, is not appropriate in scientific publications. The significance of the differences in the ethnic groups of Indians outlined here lies in the fact that carefully planned studies on these ethnic groups can possibly throw some light on the aetiology of diseases like diabetes mellitus, coronary heart disease, etc., particularly if they could be combined with the studies on similar groups of Indians living in the regions in India from which the South African immigrants came originally.<sup>24,33</sup>

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Broadly speaking the major ethnic groups of Indians who immigrated to South Africa from India may be summarized as follows:

## A. Dravidians

- (a) Hindus
  - (i) Tamil-speaking
  - (ii) Telegu-speaking
- (b) Christians

## B. Aryans

- (a) Hindus
  - (i) Hindi-speaking
  - (ii) Gujarati-speaking
- (b) Muslims
  - (i) Urdu-speaking
  - (ii) Gujarati- and Memon-speaking
  - (iii) Konkani-speaking

The characteristics of these ethnic groups are briefly outlined and on the basis of 1951 and 1960 census figures their distribution in the 3 provinces Natal, Transvaal, and the Cape, and in 2 cities, Durban and Johannesburg, as well as in the country as a whole, is presented.

It is concluded that immigrant Indians of South Africa and possibly also in other countries where they are found in large numbers, constitute a heterogeneous society composed of not one, as is frequently believed, but many distinct ethnic groups differing from one another in many respects, e.g. anthropological characteristics, dietary habits, marriage and other social customs, cultural activities, religion, place of origin in India, etc. With appropriately planned studies these differences in the ethnic groups of immigrant Indians may prove valuable in the aetiological studies of some common diseases.

This paper was prepared during the period of scholarship granted to me by the British Council, to whom I am most grateful. I thank Dr. C. Clouverakis and Dr. S. Ahmed of Guy's Hospital, London, and Mr. M. D. Mistry, for their helpful criticism.

## REFERENCES

1. Cosnett, J. E. (1957): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **31**, 1109.
2. *Idem* (1959): *Brit. Med. J.*, **1**, 187.
3. Campbell, G. D. and McNeill, W. G. (1959): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **33**, 656.
4. *Idem* (1959): *Brit. Med. J.*, **2**, 73.
5. Campbell, G. D. (1959): *Med. Proc.*, **5**, 559.
6. *Idem* (1960): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **34**, 332.
7. *Idem* (1960): *Brit. Med. J.*, **2**, 537.
8. Cosnett, J. E. (1961): *Ibid.*, **1**, 1466.
9. Campbell, G. D. (1961): *Ibid.*, **1**, 1538.
10. Halthorn, M. K. S., Gillman, T. and Campbell, G. D. (1961): *Lancet*, **1**, 1314.
11. Campbell, G. D. and McKechnie, J. (1961): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **35**, 1008.
12. Campbell, G. D. (1961): *Med. Proc.*, **7**, 395.
13. Jackson, W. P. U., Campbell, G. D., Notelowitz, M. and Blumsohn, D. (1962): *Diabetes*, **11**, Suppl. 98.
14. Campbell, G. D. (1962): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **36**, 488.
15. *Idem* (1963): *E. Afr. Med. J.*, **5**, 267.
16. Campbell, G. D., Batchelor, E. L., McKechnie, J. and Naidoo, L. P. (1963): *Lancet*, **2**, 738.
17. Campbell, G. D. (1963): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **37**, 1195.
18. McKechnie, J. K. (1964): *Ibid.*, **38**, 182.
19. McKechnie, J. K. and Davidson, F. J. (1964): *Ibid.*, **38**, 208.
20. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1963): Vol. 12, p. 234. London: Encyclopaedia Britannica Ltd.
21. *Websters Third International Dictionary* (1961), p. 686. London: Bell & Sons.
22. Majmudar, D. N. (1958): *Race and Cultures of India*, p. 443. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
23. Seftel, H. C. (1964): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **38**, 278.
24. Walker, A. R. P., Mistry, S. D. and Seftel, H. C. (1963): *Ibid.*, **37**, 1217.
25. Dinath, J. (1963): Thesis in Social Anthropology for B.A. (Hons.) degree, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
26. South African Bureau of Census and Statistics (1963): *Report of South African Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 1960*, Vol. 1, p. 8. Pretoria: Government Printer.
27. *Idem* (1958): *Report of South African Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 1951*, Vol. 6, p. 128. Pretoria: Government Printer.
28. *Idem* (1960): *Report of South African Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 1951*, Vol. 7, p. 71. Pretoria: Government Printer.
29. Woods, C. A. (1954): *Natal Regional Survey*, Vol. 9. London: Oxford University Press.
30. Kuper, H. (1960): *Indian People in Natal*, p. 58. Durban: Natal University Press.
31. South African Bureau of Census and Statistics (1962): *Report of South African Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 1960*, No. 2 (Industry Divisions), p. 42. Pretoria: Government Printer.
32. Mistry, S. D. (1964): *Med. Proc.*, **10**, 164.
33. Walker, A. R. P. (1963): *S. Afr. Med. J.*, **37**, 1155.