

Review Forum

New histories of education in South Africa: authors' reflections on *Schooling Muslims in Natal*

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A few weeks after *Schooling Muslims* came into print in July 2015, a local Durban newspaper announced its publication and reproduced a selection from the text in its pages. That section was drawn from our conclusion, which briefly considers twenty-first century transformations and developments. Among other significant changes, we drew attention to shifting urban social geographies and noted that Durban's mosques and madrassas, established over a 100 years ago by the city's Muslim 'founding fathers', now provided religious sustenance for new immigrant diasporas and new converts to Islam. Our point was to indicate the continued vibrancy of Islamic spaces in a port city that has nurtured transoceanic community-formation despite formal exclusions through colonial, segregationist and apartheid strategies of division.

While pleased for press attention, we were distressed by the article's headline: 'Today Mainly Migrants Worship at Urban Mosques'.¹ Our concerns were related to the climate of xenophobic tensions and lethal violence – reminiscent of the horrors of 2008 – that, in April of 2015, compelled many immigrants to leave the Durban city centre and set up camps of refuge on its outskirts. Against these realities, the headline not only failed to reflect our point but also appeared to lay open a possibly dangerous misreading.

We thus, here, wish to reflect further on the current relevance of the story we tell in this book. Xenophobia and racism have dogged 'Indians' from the late nineteenth century, when colonial policy in Natal amalgamated

South Asian migrants of diverse religious, cultural, linguistic, class and caste origin into a 'population group', later incorporated into apartheid classifications. Such race ideology continues to be affirmed as normative in ongoing public debates about whether 'Indians benefited from apartheid',² or in calls by fringe groups for Indian South Africans to 'go home'.³ Accusatory declarations about 'Indian' educational privilege have also threaded through recent university student protests, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. Reflected in quotas, and in other race-based university admissions policies, is the idea of the relative advantage possessed by South Africans of Indian ancestry, when compared with students subjected to the horrifying legacies of Bantu Education.

Yet cries of 'privilege' and 'benefit' are ahistorical and lack explanation. They are at best expressions of frustration about persistent social inequalities and, at worst, politically expedient claim-making that pushes a new, exclusive identity politics. They cannot tell us how social inequalities were historically created nor through what structural or ideological engines they continue to be reproduced and maintained.

Schooling Muslims provides an important backstory in this regard. Education is a significant driver of social mobility but also of class entrenchment. Understanding education history in South Africa can potentially establish grounds for a more effective and unified strategy of educational – and social – change.

That the reviews in this forum are notably generous and collegial does not (we are aware) reflect on our work as being without many elements that deserve criticism and debate. It rather highlights the extent to which researchers who share an interest in histories of schooling are passionately united in the recognition of how very much this past matters for understanding the present educational predicaments and for shaping South Africa's future.

If it were merely that this history confirmed the current and prominent discourse that works to establish 'degrees of victimhood' under apartheid, there would be little more to say. Indeed, what is evident from public debates about 'Indian privilege' is how much of a trap group-think and the comparisons it invites can be. Accusation breeds defense and invites a chronicling of the hardships and deprivations underpinning the Indian South African experience as a means to demonstrate belonging and entitlement to civic recognition.⁴ Such arguments reinforce a conception of apartheid oppression mechanistically, as strata of suffering, rather than

a political and economic *system* built through uneven and changing relationships and out of diverse social fields. Histories of education are particularly valuable for revealing formations of power across generations of change and the structures and actors, ideas and forces, that produce and resist it.

Recent and ongoing studies of schooling, critical and empirically driven, are important because they confirm, complicate and also disturb the sometimes-formulaic ideas about how the educational present came about. Collectively they can help to identify new platforms for galvanising efforts, by the state and civil society alike, towards ideals of universal quality education, social tolerance and more equitable economic relations.⁵

Our contribution in *Schooling Muslims* is in tracing a tradition of academic aspiration and attendant civic struggle, which represents a distinctive historical thread from that rooted in Christian mission or student protest. This tradition had its origins in the sponsorship of Muslim entrepreneurs and patrons who, from the late nineteenth century, stepped in to provide communal ‘upliftment’ in the absence of willing state actors. Early founders of madrassas and mosques provided for Muslims both Indian and African, the latter most notably comprised of ‘Zanzibaris’ (East African captives liberated by British anti-slave efforts). While that support continued into the next century, an expansion and focus on ‘Indian education’ had everything to do with the particular circumstances of free and indentured South Asian migrants, whose position within colonial Natal was shaped by the context of British Empire in India. The quest for religious schooling that was not Christian meant that negotiations with the Natal colonial government to provide ‘modern’ education set off early on a ‘track’ different than that pursued by and for isiZulu-speaking Christians in the colony. Funding, and the energies required to traverse official hostility, rested on the political skill and business enterprises of prosperous Muslim families, whose capital often had a trans-oceanic scope and whose leadership was a crucial base for Gandhi in his early political activities.

This distinctive ‘track’ was consequential in terms of how Indian education fared under apartheid, in the resilience of academic curriculum, aspirations cultivated by families, and the opportunities afforded. Indian education was a powerful generator of communal identity long before separate development, and this may help to explain why, although there were important fronts of intensive opposition, many Indians embraced higher education and professional advancement that were on offer from

the early 1960s. As was the case for Africans (both in Natal and around the continent) who had opportunity, some Indian South Africans found their way overseas – to Britain, the United States and India – to study for professional degrees.

Blame and xenophobic sentiments surfacing in current public debates are making many South Africans of Indian ancestry feel they do not belong to South Africa, creating anxiety and also intensifying racial and racist thinking. Some have responded to negative press by pointing to the contributions of ‘Indians’ in the anti-apartheid struggle, staking a group-based claim to national belonging. This, too, enforces the legacies of race even as it affirms local, civic commitment. More seriously problematic, others have reacted to the situation through ‘civilisational’ language, suggesting that there is something intrinsic or essential to the Indian make-up that is responsible for group ‘progress’. Central to this latter view is an alleged Indian obsession with education, which is repeatedly emphasised in discourses as a ‘race characteristic’.

The story in *Schooling Muslims* undermines this sort of thinking also. One of the saddest aspects of the post-apartheid period is the failure to address problems in schooling, which poses serious ramifications also at tertiary level. Apartheid was a brutal system but educational failures can no longer be left fully at that door. Aggressive rallying against any ‘group’ for the problems faced, and any retreat into race- or culture-based ideas of superiority, not only miss the misery and damage set in motion by the former order but reproduce its brutalities.

Notes

1. See (no author) ‘Today Mainly Migrants Worship at Urban Mosques’, *Mercury*, August 28, 2015.
2. See (no author) ‘Indians Benefited from Apartheid: Economist’, *Daily News*, August 11, 2016.
3. See Pillay 2017. For example, from 2013, the ‘Mazibuye African Forum’ denounced Indian South Africans as non-African foreigners who should not be entitled to land ownership, redress benefits, and who should be compelled to ‘return’ to India. That some Indian South Africans were threatened with violence during the April 2015 xenophobic demonstrations indicates an ongoing vulnerability.
4. See For example (no author), ‘Debunking the Myth of Indian Privilege’, *Daily News*, August 19, 2016.

5. Recent histories of education in South Africa include the published and ongoing research of our fellow forum panelists and those of others; we cannot do better than to refer to the notes and references provided by Healy-Clancy, Mark Hunter and Dan Magaziner in the review forum featured in this edition.

Reference

Pillay, K (2017) “‘AmaNdiya, they’re not South Africans!’ Xenophobia and citizenship’, in C Ballantine, M Chapman, K Erwin and G Maré (eds) *Living Together, Living Apart: social cohesion in a future South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.