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Abstract

Through the narrative genre I examine issues of identity and agency amongst 15 Gujarati Hindu immigrant women who arrived in Natal, South Africa between 1943 to 1953. I examine notions of "home" and "belonging" and argue that Gujarat, their place of birth is no longer perceived as their "homeland". However, it plays an important role in constructing their ethnic identity. Secondly, I examine issues of agency and argue that given their personal, economic and social circumstances, Gujarati Hindu women were able to negotiate new roles for themselves within the household. Migration generated new challenges within the traditional household which resulted in some women exercising more agency than others. By examining notions of agency, this paper seeks to dispel the myth of the "passive", "docile" Indian women, lacking autonomy in their lives. This paper hopes to add to the current theoretical debates on agency and identity in the diaspora.
Introduction

Over the past decade, the study of Gujarati people in various academic disciplines has begun to gain currency.¹ There are approximately 27 million people of Indian origin living in the diaspora, Gujaratis comprise over one third of the global Indian diaspora. “Gujarati loko” or Gujaratis is a term used to describe people who can trace their ancestry to the state of Gujarat, India. Gujaratis are a heterogeneous group in terms of their religion but share a common language, Gujarati.² Gujarati, located on the coast, north-west of India, is a region renowned for its rich cultural and economic history. Gujaratis are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and the commercial networks that have arisen out of this. Given its strategic location, it has for centuries, established trade links with communities in East Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. Alongside Indian indentured immigration, many Gujaratis emigrated as “free” or “passenger” Indians in search of economic opportunities, to North America, the United Kingdom, East and South Africa.³ In South Africa, Gujarati speaking Hindu immigrants arrived in the late 1890s. Many arrived as single men; their main port of entry was Natal. Gujarati Hindu women began arriving at the turn of the century, mainly as sponsored immigrants. In Natal, as elsewhere, Gujarati Hindu immigrant women have not only displayed resilience in the midst of adversity but played a pivotal role in retaining and maintaining their regional and religious identity in the diaspora. It is this experience in the diaspora that I wish to explore via their narratives.

“Diaspora”, which refers to the movement – forced or voluntary – of people from their homeland and their dispersal across the globe, has gained increasing currency as a

² Mukadam and Mawani (eds.)Gujaratis in the West: Evolving Identities in Contemporary Society, p.8. The Gujarati community is diverse and includes individuals from different faiths, such as Hindus, Islam, Jains and Christianity.
³ Mukadam and Mawani Gujaratis in the West, p.6. “Passenger” refer to immigrants who paid their own passage fares, who came as “free” Indians and who did not come under a contractual labour system.
theoretical term in academia over the past two decades. As diaspora studies has developed, critical feminist perspectives have begun to theorize the gendered dimensions of the migratory process and its relevance in understanding differentiated notions of “women’s agency”. Recent scholarly works on ethnic minorities and their experiences in the diaspora is not only testimony to the burgeoning interest in the subject, but also highlights more women writers, researching from “within”, sharing similar religious, ethnic, class and diasporic trajectories. Recent scholarly works have made significant contributions to debates on both the diversity and complexities of women’s diasporic experiences, in the context of race, class, language, generation, religion, identity, sexuality and women’s agency, as well as interrogating homogenized notions of “South Asian” and “Asian women”. These works not only privileges women’s experiences, but also aims at reifying social constructs of women as “oppressed” and subjugated, thus illuminating female agency. For example, Avtar Brah argues that women are perceived as the embodiment of “culture” and “tradition” on both the homeland and the diaspora and that the simplistic stereotype of docile, submissive Asian women under the dominance of traditional Hindu patriarchy needs to be

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Gayatri Gopinath observes that “all too often diasporas are narrativized through the bonds of relationality between men”

More specific to my study are the recent publications that have drawn attention to the experience of Gujarati Hindus in the diaspora. For example Hasmita Ramjis’ *Journeys of difference: the use of migratory narratives among British Hindu Gujaratis*, Elizabeth Hole’s doctoral dissertation “*Neither Here, nor There - An Anthropological Study of Gujarati Hindu Women in the Diaspora*” and Emma Crewe and Uma Kothari’s “*Gujarati migrants’ search for modernity in Britain*” have explored diasporic experiences of Gujaratis in the context of colonialism, historical trauma and globalisation, notions of “belonging”, the “homeland” and the construction of ethnic identities. While Crewe and Kothari’s work is significant in terms of understanding ways in which gender relations have been negotiated through diasporic experiences, it homogenizes the diasporic experiences of Gujaratis, thus masking the complexity and diversity that exist within the community in terms of religion, caste and class. Hole, in her thesis engages in a comparative study of Gujarati Hindus in Sweden and the United Kingdom. She examines their lives through the lens of familial, communal, public and ritual roles they play as bearers of the Hindu tradition and their sense of “belonging” to their “homeland”. Her study is important in that the comparative material reflects how some of these Gujarati Hindu women in the Diaspora deal with everyday predicaments.

In this paper I employ personal narrative to document and analyse the experiences of Gujarati Hindu immigrant women in the diaspora, with particular reference to Durban in Kwazulu/Natal. There are two reasons that generated my scholarly interest in this subject. Firstly being a descendent of a Gujarati Hindu immigrant family, I have listened to many narratives, not only describing what life was in “our village”, but also about, a certain aunt or grandmother or a widowed female who displayed strength in character and who wielded great influence over the men in their family, by being “under her thumb”. The latter intrigued me, and as a researcher, sought to examine the nature of this “power” women exercised. Secondly, there is a lacuna of information in South African Indian historiography regarding the migratory experiences of Gujarati Hindu women to Natal. While there has been a growing body of literature developing around

8 Hole ‘Neither Here –Nor There”; Ramji “Journeys of Difference”; Crewe and Kothari, “Gujarati migrants’ search for modernity in Britain”; Mehta “Gujarati communities in East African Diaspora: Major Historical trends”.

indentured Indian women, histories of Gujarati Hindu and Muslim women has yet to be fully analysed and documented. This is important, as the Indian community in South Africa arrived under two different types of migration. One was the indentured labour system and the other the “passenger” or “free” migration system. Their differentiated immigration status not only elucidates the different historical contexts of their arrival but also reflects their diverse migratory experiences. It is these migratory experiences that I wish to explore and document. Bhana in a review of Indian history in Natal, highlights the need for more work to be done on “popular” history to “find the voices of the people” by focusing on issues such as “family life, disputes, leisure time, diet, marriage, divorces, song, music, folktale……areas in which more research can capture the lives of ordinary people”.

In this paper, via the narratives genre I seek to “find the voices” of Gujarati Hindu immigrant women through an analysis of gender, identity and agency, and its role in the diaspora. My interest lies in exploring how my respondents define “home” and “belonging”, the degree of attachment with the “homeland” and how this changes

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11 Surendra Bhana, “The Present in the Past: Indian Experience 1860-1914” in The Oriental Anthropologist, 7(1), 2003, p.183. Uma Dhpulapia-Mesthrie in her paper titled “The Form, the Permit and the Photograph: An Archive of Mobility between South Africa and India” states a gendered study of the migration of passenger Indians “is direly neglected in existing works on the passenger Indian in South Africa.....The movements of the wives of Indian migrants and their minor children need to be included in accounts of the circulation of human beings in the Indian Ocean area”, p. 19. This paper was presented to Conference on print Cultures, Nationalisms and Publics of the Indian Ocean, Indian Ocean Network, University of the Witwatersrand, 15-17 January 2009.
through the migration process. I also examine notions of agency. The term “agency”, has been contested and theorized in new and variegated writings of feminist scholarship. “Agency” is constructed here as “someone who acts and brings about change”, to “effect change in themselves and their situations”. I argue here, that Gujarati Hindu women were able to exercise agency, due to certain personal and economic factors that resulted in women negotiating new roles for themselves within the traditional household. I argue further that given the variation in patriarchal attitudes, it allowed some women in the household to negotiate their roles, more so than others. Thus gendered relations are neither monolithic nor static, but should be understood in the context of both cultural and economic elements within which they interact. By examining notions of agency, this paper, challenges the popular image of Indian women in the sub-continent and in the diaspora as being marginalized and “passive”. This paper will also add to the historiography of Indians in South Africa, in particular the diasporic experiences of Gujarati Hindu women - a field that to date remains substantively unexplored.

Methodology
This paper utilizes life histories to investigate issues of agency and identity. This method is particularly useful, when investigating an understudied group or a topic in its infant stage. The field of narrative analysis in various disciplines has grown quite substantially. While there are criticisms levelled against narratives in terms of its

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approaches and methodology, others have argued otherwise, stating they are “significant genre for representing and analysing identity in its multiple guises in different contexts” and allows for the unravelling and understanding of “personal experience and meaning”\textsuperscript{17}. The life histories approach provides an in-depth insight into the lived experiences of women, and elucidates the voices of “silenced women”.\textsuperscript{18} The sample comprised of 15 Gujarati Hindu immigrant women, whose current ages are between 72 and 81 years, residing in Durban. Five of the participants are married, while ten are widows. All the participants were born in Gujarat and came from villages located mainly in the south eastern part of Gujarat. Three participants originated from Kholvad, one from Sorbarpardi, one from Kosamba, three from Kathor, one from Santham, two from Thaveri, two from Gandevi and two from Jalalpor. All fifteen of the participants arrived as sponsored spouses. Interviews were conducted in Durban, in the respondents’ homes between January and August 2009. A snowball technique was used to locate participants. I chose to speak to older women, who resided in Natal, well over 20 years or more, who would have lived long enough to formulate ideas of “belonging” and “home” in their present location. I located participants through social network groups, and personal contacts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, ranging between two to three hours. Interviews were conducted both in English and Gujarati. I also became a participant observer to gain a deeper insight into the social milieu of the women’s lives. This included observing and participating in cultural and religious functions. I also spent time in informal discussions with community members, in many different social settings. The data collected for this study was audio-taped on a digital recorder, transcribed, translated and analysed. What follows is an analysis of the data, which aims at documenting the issues of identity development and notions of agency amongst Gujarati Hindu immigrant women in Durban. The data reveals that while the fifteen women do have commonalities, in terms of their place of origin, language and religion, the narratives reveal that "in every woman, there is a history waiting to be told."\textsuperscript{19}

**Early life in Gujarat**


\textsuperscript{17} P. Atkinson, “Narrative Turn or Blind Alley?” *Qualitative Health Research*, 7 (3), 1997, pp.325-344; Ewing and Allen, “Women's Narratives About God and Gender”, p.98; Reissman “Analysis of Personal Narratives”.


The narratives reveal varying aspects of rural life and gendered relations in Gujarat in the mid-twentieth century. The villages in the narratives were often described as “gaam”\(^{20}\), undeveloped, with poor roads, “no electricity”, “drew water from the well” and used the “ox and wooden plough” for farming. Village life was “hard work”, with men working the land, while women attending to domestic duties. Agriculture was the primary occupation of many village folk, with the main cash crops being groundnuts, cotton and tobacco.\(^{21}\) Kanthabhen\(^ {22}\) 81 years old, born in Santham, describes her daily life in her village:

“Half past five six o’clock must up (get up)…make breakfast and then go to school……like that….11;00 o’clock I come back.. afternoon I must go back… school finished at 5 o’ clock parents cooked..and then we eat...if we had lesson to do, we did our lesson.......and when lesson finished. What other work (housework) needed to be done we did”\(^ {23}\)

The narratives also reveal that women’s status in traditional Gujarati society, to a very large extent, were culturally determined and socially constructed. It illuminates interesting aspects of female literacy, in particular the discrepancy between male and female education. Women were disadvantaged, not only by poor economic resources but also by the practice of seclusion or “purdah”, “arranged marriages” and the emphasis on domestic labour. In most villages education was free, but not compulsory. Village schools were government funded, and children began their academic career at the age of 5 to 17 (classes I to VII). The medium of instruction was not English but the local language, Gujarati. Higher education was confined to colleges and universities located in the cities. Of the fifteen respondents only 1 completed level VII. For example, Padmabhen, 80 years old, born in Kosamba, engaged in part-time work prior to marriage, to sustain the family income. She was employed at the local government school to teach Gujarati. She states: “I get paid 50 rupees a month to teach….life was very hard then.”\(^ {24}\) Others were forced to leave school once their marriage proposals or “nakki” was confirmed or when they reached puberty. Under these circumstances, they were encouraged to leave school, were perceived as young girls, and confined to the domestic realm. Young girls were discouraged from engaging in higher education for two reasons. Firstly, it conflicted with patriarchal notions of gendered roles, and secondly, it would result in the movements of young girls to the cities, living outside the

\(^{20}\) “gaam” means village in Gujarati.

\(^{21}\) Gujarat is the largest producer of groundnuts in India.

\(^{22}\) First names of respondents cited – for reasons of anonymity.

\(^{23}\) Interview Kanthabhen 29 March 2009.

\(^{24}\) Interview Padmabhen, 5 August 2009.
natal home prior to marriage, which was then unacceptable. As one respondent stated: “...there was no need to educate ourselves......we were not allowed to work after marriage at that time......not allowed to go out...girls were protected......scared they would get spoilt”.25 Thus the “purdah” system or seclusion restricted women’s social and economic mobility and confined women largely to the domestic sphere. It also signified respectability given the importance that was attached to women being “chaste” and “pure”. The priority given to women’s “honour” and the need to protect the family reputation was of utmost importance.

“Arranged” marriages were another mode of protecting women’s “honour”. All the respondents claimed their marriages were “arranged”. Family members – parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents – played a vital role in choosing the prospective spouse. One respondent stated “we had no choice to choose our husbands, it was chosen by the parents......they check the background of the families out...” 26 “Arranged” marriages were devoid of courtship with most respondents stating they “only met once” and “I had no idea what kind of person I was marrying or getting engaged to”. Nuptials were performed within a month or two of the marriage proposal. Caste played a significant role in the choice of marriage spouses. Nirmala, 75 years old, born in the village of Kathor, elaborated on its significance:

“Caste was very important ......we never use to mix with other Gujaratis.....you got to marry in your caste........You see... they all got their own routine ....system.......cooking styles, way of life, everything....it becomes very hard to adjust to that...they also used to believe if it is in your own caste.....you adjust fast......” 27

Caste is a hierarchical social system based on hereditary occupations. An individual’s social status is based on their hereditary occupations. The four main grouping were the Brahmin (priests) at the helm, followed by the kshatriya (warrior caste), then the vaishya (commoners, trading and artisan caste) and the bottom the sudra (agricultural labourers). This system was mainly confined to Hindus. The Gujarati Hindu community in Natal comprised of several caste or “jati” groupings which assumed the following hierarchical structure: the Patels and Desai belonged to the Brahmin caste; followed by the Soni’s (gold and silversmiths), the mochi (shoemakers) and the dhobi (washermen). The hereditary division of labour was not rigid. Many Indians of “passenger” origin, did engage in occupations that were outside their caste description. For example Gujarati

26 Interview Devibhen 6 July 2009.
27 Interview Nirmalabhen 18 August 2009.
Hindu males belonging to the “dhobi” caste group did not always adhere to caste occupations. A few engaged in the laundry trade, while others took to hawking fruit and vegetables and serving as accountants to larger Indian firms.

“My first trip abroad”

The arrival of Gujarati women as sponsored immigrants, was a common migratory pattern amongst Indians of `passenger' origin. The initial phase of Gujarati migration to Natal in the 1880s onwards was predominantly male. On arrival most immigrants were met by family and friends who provided them with employment and accommodation. During their stay in Natal, many made periodic trips to India to reconnect with family and friends. The desire to attain financial security and immigration restrictions imposed on Indians were some of the factors that hindered family immigration to Natal. Moreover Indians of `passenger’ origin, rather than marry locally would send for their wives left behind in India or return to India to marry within their religious and caste groups.28 For example Makan Naran, a Gujarati Hindu, arrived in Natal in 1896 from Surat. He later established a laundry business in 1908, at 168 Gale street in Durban.29 His wife Tapi Makan Naran only joined him in Natal in 1916 at the age of 31.30 Mayat in her book "A Treasure Trove of Memories" comments on women who were left behind in Gujarat:

“Like so many in the villages, they had to be content with husbands commuting from South Africa every other year. They were left behind to take care of the family estates; to look after the aged ones who were reluctant to leave the security of home and environment and to see to the education of the young ones since the facilities in South Africa were rather limited. The entire lives of these women were centred on the comings and goings of their husbands and sons.”31

However, the status of Indian wives and minor children were problematic issues for many Gujarati Hindus and Muslims residing in South Africa. Several amendments to the immigration laws in the post-union period, aimed at containing the “Asiatic” population.32 For example the Indian Relief Act of 1914 allowed for the entry of one wife

29 Interview, Mr Keshav Makan, 20 July 2009; Documentation Centre (DC), Makan Collection, document no. 1237/16.
30 Interview, Mr Keshav Makan 20 July 2009. I also had access to personal documents of the Makan family.
and the minor children of a domiciled Indian, and repatriation to India was to be encouraged to any Indian (whether indentured origin or not) who abandons his, his wife’ and his minor children’s right to domicile in South Africa.  

Nevertheless, Crewe and Kothari have argued that “gendered cultural rules and practices very directly shape migration.........for Gujarati women who, unlike men, nearly always move residence on marriage, migration from their parent’s home is inevitable”. The narratives in this study echo similar trajectories. All the women in this study stated that it was matrimonial that facilitated their primary migration outside their natal homes. As one respondent stated:

“It was not first trip to South Africa.....it was my first trip to Bombay......I did not see Bombay in my life...it is only 100 miles from Valsad to Bombay .......”

Another respondent described her emotional status prior to her embarkation to Natal:  
“I was crying, crying crying ...all the time...right to Bombay....could not eat....I never went out (I never travelled outside Bombay before)...I did not like it....I went with big people (accompanied by elderly people)...”

Thus for all the respondents, the journey across to Natal represented not only their maiden voyage abroad, but also their maiden voyage outside their natal villages. All the women complained of being “sea-sick”. Shantibhen, 80 years old, born in Kholvad and was 19 years old at the time of her embarkation to Natal describes her experience on board the Kampala

“I felt sea-sick all the time.......I could not eat ......my husband ...to get a couple of slices of bread......I put some butter on it........first time I eat a proper meal after eight days when I landed in Mombasa”

The narratives of the women of their formative years in Gujarat, reflects the patriarchal nature of Indian society, with constraints placed on women's social mobility, sexuality and economic independence. However, migration prompted a new scenario, highlighting women's transition from domestic seclusion to more visible roles in the public sphere, and their capacity to initiate change resulting from personal and economic factors.

33 Mesthrie “From Sastri to Deshmukh”, p.18.
34 Crew and Kothari “Gujarati Migrants’ Search for Modernity in Britain”, p. 15.
36 Interview Manjulabhen 18 August 2009.
37 Steam ship- owned and managed by British India Steam Navigation Co.- ran the Bombay –Durban service: Route taken Bombay-Mombasa, Beira-Lourenco Mrques (Maputo)-Durban.
38 Interview Shantibhen 17 February 2009.
**Historical Setting**

Indian women arrived in Natal under two different types of migration: indentured and "passenger" status. The system of indentured emigration stipulated a quota of 40 percent females for every shipload that left India for the colony. Between 1860 and 1911 a total of 152,184 indentured immigrants arrived in Natal to work on the coastal plantations and others spheres of the colonial economy; women constituted 29 percent of this total. Indentured women laboured mainly on the sugar and tea estates and were "ultra-exploitable". They were the "lowest paid workers in the colony", lived in overcrowded conditions and were subjected to sexual harassment. Indian women of "passenger" status (Hindus and Muslims) arrived under different circumstances. Unlike indentured women they arrived as "free" Indians, unencumbered by contractual labour obligations. On arrival they were met by family and friends and gradually assimilated within a close-knit communal organization based on caste, class and religious affiliation. In fact the appellation "indentured" and "passenger" also created a social hierarchy between the two groups, with the latter, perceiving themselves as culturally and economically "superior". During the 1913 passive resistance movement in Natal, Gandhi alluded to this differentiated immigration status, and the capacity of women of "passenger" origin to endure imprisonment. He stated "I knew that the step of sending women to jail was fraught with serious risk. Most of the sisters in Phoenix spoke Gujarati. They had not the training or experience of the Transvaal sisters".

Nevertheless, the respondents arrived in Natal between the years 1943 to 1953. This was a politically volatile period. Indians in South Africa like other non-whites were subjected to a series of discriminatory legislation that aimed at curtailing their economic

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43 According to Desai and Maharaj these references have faded over time and “identities have become to be seen as North and South Indian…than the earlier passenger/indentured divide”. Ashwin Desai and Brij Maharaj “The Making and (Re) Making of Ethnic Identity: The Case of Indian South Africans” The Oriental Anthropologist, vol. 7, no. 1, January 2007, p. 78.
44 Indians in Natal and Transvaal protested against discriminatory measures – mainly the £3 tax, non-recognition of Indian marriages and immigration controls.
and political rights. Opposition to the Nationalist Party government, who assumed power in 1948, led to the Defiance Campaigns of the 1950s. Indian women were actively involved in these campaigns. For example, Sita Gandhi, granddaughter of Gandhi, actively participated in defying segregation laws. Govinden states “The Library in Durban was segregated and on several occasions she defiantly went to the main white section rather than the 'Non-European' section to register her protest, thereby courting arrest.”

“Home” and “belonging”

Here I attempt to explore how my respondents define “home” and their sense of “belonging”, by examining the degree of ancestral links with their place of origin and its links to the construction of their ethnic identity. Diaspora studies have questioned the essentialist notions of identities – religious, gendered and ethnic - and the enduring “myth of return” to the “ancestral homeland” among immigrants.

In her analysis of Gujarati Hindu women in Sweden and the United Kingdom, Hole has argued “the homeland” conjures up nostalgic memories of the “better past” to which they long to return. She states that “Their shared experiences and backgrounds also make a sharable desire of return. They are longing to return”. Thus their urge to return to their homeland means that they will “never truly settle” and therefore are “neither here nor there”. Ramji in her analysis examines the homeland as an important variable in creating a distinct ethnic identity and in understanding the Gujarati Hindus relative success in the diaspora. My fieldwork findings conflicts with Hole’s analysis of sense of “belonging” but concurs with Ramjis with regards to the importance of place of origin in defining one’s ethnic identity. Zuleikha Mayat’s A Treasure Trove of Memories: Reflections on the Experiences of the People of Potchefstroom, explores conceptions of home in multiple settings, for example in India, and in Potchefstroom. This is illuminated by drawing on her family history, her

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47 Refers to a group of people - sharing a common place of origin, language, religion, and cultural tradition.
50 Hole, "Neither Here -Nor There", p.324
51 Ramji “Journeys of Difference”.

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grandparents who arrived as “passenger” Indians and settled in Potchefstroom in the 1880s.  

In this study all the respondents displayed no strong attachments to their place of birth. What is interesting is how the respondents subjective historical memories, towards their place of birth and their adopted country, are important in gaining insight into the ways in which they construct notions of “home” and “belonging”.

Vijubhen 73 years old, born in Jalalpor, stated:

“No, I do not miss India......after two or three years staying here ..........so used to this place. ..........I gave birth to three children ...so I am interested in my children.......I do not want to return to Gujarat....I am happy here......South Africa is my home......life is better here....”\(^53\)

Another respondent, Devibhen, 72 years of old, born in Gandevi, elucidated similar sentiments:

“Missed parents.....No I do not want to go back to India......They do not have a system like we have here......so used to our facilities......my mother and father are no longer there...nobody there......my family is here, my husband’s family is here.........I like living in South Africa....My family is here, my house is here......my big son is here, my daughter-in-law is here........if your family is here.......it becomes your home........”\(^54\)

Another respondent Indirabhen, 74 years old, born in Taveri stated:

“I did yearn to visit India......to see my father, mother and all........but no money to go......was mother of six children four boys and two daughters....how can I go?......husband earning in the shop was less......but Durban is my home....it is my husband’s home....whatever you do......wherever your husband is ....is your home...”\(^55\)

The narratives also reveals how their place of origin, played an important role in constructing their ethnic identity, in defining group consciousness, solidarity, their work ethic and their relative success in the Diaspora. One respondent stated:

“....wherever the Gujarati goes he takes his tradition with him....his skills with him......we are very hardworking people................you see there is a Gujarati saying ......*Na poche ravi thia poch kavi ja na poche kavi thia poche Gujarati* (where the sun does not go, the poet goes...where the poet cannot go the Gujarati will go).... You go to any part of the globe you find the Gujarati got his tradition, his culture, his language..........It is in his heart......he cannot let it go....”\(^56\)

Thus the narratives have revealed a new subjectivity that has been a direct result of their migration – changing notions of “home”. The women feel a sense of “belonging” to

\(^{52}\)Mayat, A Treasure Trove of Memories.

\(^{53}\)Interview Vijubhen 15 August 2009.

\(^{54}\)Interview Devibhen 6 July 2009.

\(^{55}\)Interview Indirabhen 9 April 2009.

\(^{56}\)Interview Padmabhen 5 August 2009.
their adopted country, South Africa, as opposed to Gujarat. Thus the degree of attachment or ties with Gujarat, their place of birth, has waned over time and space. Strong family ties, a more settled life and modern amenities are important factors in redefining their sense of “home”. Their place of birth, Gujarat, is an important determinant in terms of their “roots and origins” and understanding “where they have come from” in constructing their ethnic identity. All my respondents view themselves as “South Africans” and do not wish to relocate or settle permanently in Gujarat. Gujarat acts “as a powerful base for understanding the characteristics and attributes they saw themselves as possessing.” They expressed their ethnic identity in terms of their language and religious backgrounds. Gujarat over time, has become a geographical affiliation, “an imagined community”. Thus for these immigrant women their identities have changed over time. These findings concur with Stuart Hall’s view that identities are “fluid and constantly negotiated in the ‘interaction’ between individual and society.”

Agency and Migration

Recent, studies on gender, agency and migration has shown that immigrant women were not "passive victims", lacking in autonomy, but on the contrary exercised agency in the diaspora. When women are represented within the ‘passivity’ model in the migration process “either their motivation is not explored, or it is often supposed to be identical to that of their father or husband”. Rostami-Povey in her study, examines how Afghan women “devised ways of coping with life under most extreme forms of coercion, uncertainty and other constraints”, devising strategies to challenge patriarchal domination. For example, many women used the Borqa and hired a Mahram to

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57Radhakrishnan, “Ethnicity in the Age of Diaspora” p.121.
58 Radhakrishnan, “Ethnicity in the Age of Diaspora”, p.123.
63 Crew and Kothari, “Gujarati Migrant’s Search for Modernity in Britain”, p. 16.
64 For example in Afghanistan, women's mobility depended on the wearing of the hejab or Borqa. The Mahram (women in public had to be accompanied by their husbands or male blood relatives), Rostami-Povey “Gender, Agency and Identity”, p.297.
continue their secret social and political activities, thereby challenging “predefined spaces of confinement and silence”. Crewe and Kothari’s study has argued that migration was not necessarily “driven by men”, that the decision to marry was often mutual and “mothers and other female relatives were often involved in finding marriage partners”. Hole on the other hand, examines agency in the context of spiritual empowerment. She argues that while religious roles amongst Gujarati Hindu women are clearly gendered, it does not imply that “gendering always is to the women’s disadvantage”. Certain religious ceremonies, rituals and festivities, are part of the women’s sphere, making them “drivers”, and the men, “their position is largely that of observers”.

Women’s agency, in this study must be perceived in the context of its historical and cultural specificities. Hindu society was highly patriarchal, with women confined mainly to the domestic sphere. Patriarchal interpretation of Hindu texts and philosophy, defined women’s identity in relation to male identity thus “closing off any possibility of women forging independent identities”. It led to the concept of “stridharma”, whereby an ideal Hindu women was one who was chaste, docile, loyal and humble. She was seen as the guardian of the home and a preserver of her culture. In the marital home, a dutiful wife was one who practiced “pativrata”, who worshipped her husband ‘regardless of his worth or character, as if he were a god’. As one respondent stated in the interview “I was taught if you die….you must die in your husband’s home but not in your parent’s home……after marriage whatever it is the parents feel proud if you die in your husband’s house”.

Women negotiating their traditional roles in this study, were influenced by their differentiated social and economic milieu in which they found themselves. I am not implying the lack of patriarchal control within a Gujarati Hindu family for the period under review. On the contrary, it was firmly entrenched, with many families highly conservative and strict adherents of “arranged marriages”, the purdah and the caste system. I argue here, that the narratives reveal women’s capacity to initiate changes within this gendered framework. They challenged traditional notions of female labour

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65 Rostami-Povey, “Gender, Agency and Identity, the case of Afghan Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran”, pp.296-298.
66 Crew and Kothari, “Gujarati Migrant’s Search for Modernity in Britain”, p. 16.
67 Hole, “Neither Here Nor There”, p.298.
68 Nair “Renegotiating Home and Identity”, p.52.
69 Nair “Renegotiating Home and Identity”, p.53.
70 Interview Nirmalabhen 18 August 2009.
patterns and behavioural attitudes: they managed business enterprises, challenged patriarchal authority of the elders, devised creative ways to sustain family incomes and played an active role in community upliftment. These activities transcended domestic confinement. Migration “causes shifts in the individual situation and the social setting that open up opportunities for new forms of autonomy”.71 Thus Gujarati Hindu women were not “passive” or “docile” social actors, accepting this defined gendered status.

For example Kalavathie, 79 years old, born in Kathor, arrived in Natal in 1947 on board the steam ship Khandalla. Her husband was a South African born Indian, who ran a small shoe store in central Durban. At the age of 24 she joined her husband in their business and described herself as the “backbone” of the family enterprise. She explains:

“With my husband I tried to improve the shop... was in partnership.....not working out... took to alcohol could not get him out of that....... husband’s health was not so good.....I took my big son out of school .......went far as standard 8.......my sons and I used to work in the shop......I did shoe repairing, bicycle repairs, and brought the business up........”72

She further adds:

“I had to make major decisions, in the family....how to run a business....what we made ... what we have lost....so how we are going to come out of it...I sit with my two sons and discuss........we discussed together......my husband.....was still living.....he will not come in the picture.....he was more interested in his friends and his drink...you know ..I was like the man of the house......”73

Thus this example shows how personal experiences led to women taking control of their lives. Moreover their economic contribution to the home was not only visible, but contributed immensely to its survival.

Another respondent, Manjulabhen, 73 years old, recalls her attempts to supplement the family income:

“I learnt how to sew...cook fancy dishes......how to bake...I used to make duvet covers and sell, did lots of sewing to bring us up, I also make and sell papad, pickles, ........because we were not rich at all....Our poverty was bad....we were very poor...had to work hard....I was also a midwife...how to deliver a baby......I used to do home remedies, gardening.....I used to plant chillies, dhania, papadi .......”74

Another respondent Damyanthy, 72 years recalls how she negotiated part-time work with a local Indian boutique to earn an income:

71 Costa-Pinto “Constructing Identity, exercising Agency in the Diaspora”, p.9.
72 Interview Kalavathie 23 April 2009.
73 Interview Kalavathie 23 April 2009.
74 Interview Manjulabhen 18 August 2009.
“I did my own shopping.....I used to supply a lot of sarries to Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. I had a deal with Jayshrees, Shrimatis and Enen’s.\textsuperscript{75} I used to buy and sell (sarries) and they used to give me commission. I used to select sarries.......post it to them (customers)....when the money comes...that's how I get commission ...I never asked my husband for money........for myself.....my husband used to say I am very independent.”\textsuperscript{76}

Another respondent explained how she, as daughter-in-law, defied traditional notions of female behaviour and verbally challenged the head of the household, her father-in-law, during a family argument:

“I never used to hear swearing in my life and I used to hear it from here (her in laws house)....They used to swear each other all the time......one day my father-in-law he was eating and my sister-in-law said something.......and he said mari saasu (my mother-in-law)...I was taken aback......I thought being a father to tell a daughter like that......my blood did boil........and I said Bapa (referring to her father-in-law).......how can you swear your daughter like this ........is she your mother-in-law? ........from that day my father-in-law stopped swearing......I challenged him......I was a very daring person.”\textsuperscript{77}

In order to understand the different forms of patriarchy within the household questions were framed around sexual division of labour and women’s sexuality. One respondent describes her husband’s resentment of the purdah (seclusion) system during the early days of their marriage:

“In those days we were very backward......we used to wear cotton sarries, covered our heads. I covered my head. I could not dish out food and go front of my father-in-law......had to cover my head. When you open the door you have to cover your head.....as a sign of respect....you got to....Any man come in the house you can’t come and sit and talk with open head......My husband used to never like it....he used to always come and pull it from the back....he did not like it......one-day my father –in-law came to me and said...he (husband) does not like it......stop it then......so I stopped it.”\textsuperscript{78}

Another respondent stated:

“In those days we had a business....in partnership between the brothers....they increased another business and all that....ran short of manpower...and then my husband saw that my mother’s house, the women also go to shop and work ......then he ...call me to the shop....because I got knowledge of shop life ....I was the first one to go to the shop......I serve customers, write the tickets down for the shoes......stand in for my husband when he goes to bank.........”\textsuperscript{79}

She further adds:

“My husband supported me to go to college...but the head (father-in-law) of the family says no...you can't go against...he wanted me to go and study further or more.....but my father-in-law did not allow it.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{75}Indian owned clothing stores specializing in Indian garments and jewellery.
\textsuperscript{76}Interview Damyanthybhen 1 July 2009.
\textsuperscript{77}Interview Latabhen 15 July 2009.
\textsuperscript{78}Interview Indirabhen 9 April 2009.
\textsuperscript{79}Interview Kanthabhen 29 March 2009.
\textsuperscript{80}Interview Kanthbhen 29 March 2009.
Thus the above narratives reveal that patriarchal relations varied across households. Some men supported their wives entry into the labour market, their attempts at education empowerment and their resentment of the purdah system. These non-traditional attitudes held by Gujarati Hindu men did not impact on the masculine identity of Gujarati Hindu men. Thus not all Gujarati Hindu men were determined to keep women in constant subservience. I argue here, that patriarchal relations cannot be perceived within an essentialist framework, they are not immutable entities but constantly reconstructed and specific to particular historical periods.

The narratives also reveal that Gujarati Hindu women initiated and established community structures which promoted communal and philanthropic work. For example, one respondent reflects on her role:

“Some of these women brought these ideas…established a Luxmi Narayan Mahila Bhajan Mandal …every year we should collect money….to distribute to the poor and needy….say for instance there was a death in the family, the ladies used to go down there (homes, temples)…sing bhajans (religious prayer) and hymns and whatever it is….people give donation …R10 or R50…..whatever they felt like….money was then used to buy hampers to feed needy……”

The Luxmi Narayan Mahila Bhajan Mandal, (a women’s organization) was established in the 1970s. This organization was largely the initiative of a small group of women who were located in central Durban, who saw the need to be actively involved in the cultural and religious upliftment of the community. The Mandal engaged in humanitarian work becoming involved in regular feeding schemes and raising funds for charitable organizations. For example between 1980 and 2005, on “Krishna Janmastarmi” (celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna), the Mandal fed the residents of the Aryan Benevolent Home (Home for Aged) in Durban. In addition, the Mandal together with the Gujarati Hindu Charitable Trust was responsible for the construction of a fully equipped medical ward at a local state hospital in Durban.

**Conclusion**

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82 Interview Padmabhen 5 August 2009.

83 Shri Saptah Mandir Commemorative Brochure, August 2005; Gujarati Mahila Mandal 1930-1985, Golden Jubilee Brochure, (Translated from Gujarati); Interview Mr V.N Naik, 20 March 2009.
This paper is a pilot study of Gujarati Hindu women who came to South Africa in the mid twentieth century. It is an area of research that remains substantially unexplored and my intention here was to view them in the context of their experiences in assimilation on two levels: as Gujarati women in an already established Gujarati community and secondly, as Indian born women who had forged a new South African identity. While I am aware that the sample size may elicit criticism in the context of formulating a theoretical framework, this research must be viewed in the context of the call made by Bhana and Dhupelia-Mesthrie. However small the sample, the voices of the women that contributed towards this study provide a glimpse into their negotiated roles within the household and their notions of “home” and “belonging”. Further thoughts on these issues will eventually help to produce a more mature understanding of the migratory experiences of Gujarati Hindu women.