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Noting the Natal and Witwatersrand-centredness of the historiography of Indian South Africans, and this historiography’s neglect of caste amongst Gujarati Hindus where caste mattered, this study focuses on the Gujarati shoemaker caste in Cape Town. Through narratives of those engaged in making, repairing or selling shoes, the article seeks to understand caste as occupation and explores how caste organisation facilitated economic and social mobility beyond the world of shoemaking. By drawing attention to female shoemakers, for whom the South African setting was challenging yet empowering, the article disturbs an androcentric reading of the term shoemaker and points to the family as a crucial economic unit.

Introduction

South African artist and poet, Peter Clarke, once paid tribute to a Gujarati shoemaker of Simonstown. He wrote about the shoemaker, dressed in black trousers and covered with a protective apron, who with ‘familiarity, fondness, love … cups the shoe lodged in his embrace’. While pointing to the ‘stenches of assorted shoes’, Clarke observes the impressive skill of the shoemaker as he ‘pires leather away … cuts and glues and patches and stitches with rosined twine until the damaged areas disappear’. Residents of every suburb of Cape Town in its pre-apartheid days would have been familiar with the local Gujarati shoe repair shop. The Group Areas Act of 1950 saw the removal of Indians including many of these shoemakers to the Indian group area, Rylands, on the Cape Flats. The shoemaker families were of a caste known as Mochi. While some were able to retain their business in the former neighbourhoods, many others were not. Making a new home in Rylands, they inscribed themselves on the built landscape in the 1980s when they constructed a temple (Vishnu Mandir) and an adjoining hall called the Samaj Centre. These buildings are unique in Rylands for bearing the ‘signature’ of caste; other temples like the Siva Alayum (for Tamil-speakers) and the Radha Krishna Temple (for Gujarati-speakers across caste groups) represent linguistic divisions.

*An early draft of this article was originally given as a public lecture to the South Asia Initiative, Harvard University, in September 2010. I would like to thank Sugata Bose and others for the ensuing discussion, and Surendra Bhana and the anonymous readers of this journal who made useful comments.

2 Rylands was proclaimed in 1957, Cravenby in 1958 and later in the 1980s Pelican Park was set aside.
Indians are a minority in the Cape Town metropolitan area. Numbering 40,505 in 2001 they comprise 1.4 per cent of the city’s total population of 2,893,251. Hindus comprise only 0.2 per cent of the city’s people for the vast majority of Indians are Muslim. In the Western Cape, Indian Hindus (predominantly Gujaratis and Tamils) number 5,327 with the majority living in Cape Town. Indian immigrants arriving in Cape Town in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came mainly from the Bombay Presidency, an extensive area along the west coast of India. Gujaratis came from the Districts of Surat and Broach (now in Gujarat) and Muslims mostly from the Districts of Kolaba and Ratnagiri (now in Maharashtra). Smaller numbers of immigrants came from the Punjab, Bengal and the Madras presidency. Many of the Tamil-speakers, originally from the Madras presidency, would have come to the Cape via a prior stay in Natal. The caste groups amongst Gujarati Hindu immigrants included Kanbis or Patidars (agriculturalists, mainly bearing the surname Patel), Hajams (barbers), and much smaller numbers of Dhobis (laundrymen), Kumbars (potters), Ghanchis (oil-millers), Kharvas (sailors), Darjees (tailors), Suthars (carpenters), and Desais (landowners, officials). Mochis were the single largest caste group. Over the years they would display the greatest caste-consciousness. Mochi households in Cape Town currently can be estimated at 190. With the ending of group area restrictions they can be found beyond Rylands in many other suburbs of Cape Town but the temple continues to link them to Rylands.

The caste system embraces concepts such as varna and jat or jati. Varna refers to the broad classification and hierarchical ranking of people in society by Hindus. The jat or jati refer to the thousands of castes/sub-castes into which individuals are born and which most times denote an occupation. The varnas thus comprise groups of castes, but there are also the untouchables who generally would include those whose work involved contact with what Hindus considered polluting, such as dealing with the ending of life or with body waste. The caste system is marked by rules of endogamy, and social taboos that prescribe with whom one might eat and make physical contact with.

This article draws on a literature that cautions against seeing the caste system as static and that points instead to caste as a ‘changing reality’ whose form and significance are shaped by ‘social and historical processes’ and whose hierarchies are subject to challenges. In seeking to understand the Gujarati Mochi, it notes regional variations in caste hierarchies in India and what Slate has described as ‘the thickness of their local significance’. Prasad and Rajanikanth’s late-1980s study of leather artisans points to at least nine sub-castes including

4 A Population Profile of the City of Cape Town: Socio-Economic Information from the 2001 Census (Cape Town, Directorate of Strategic Information, 2003), pp. 7, 9 & 15.
5 Census 2001: Primary Tables Western Cape: Census ’96 and 2001 Compared. Report No. 03-02-13, 2001 (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 2005), p. 27. There are a further 1,722 Hindus of other races.
7 This information was provided by Nagin Patel.
8 I am grateful to Rohit Kooverjee for providing this information drawn from the directory of Gujarati households in Cape Town compiled by the Cape Town Hindu Seva Samaj in 2002.
9 These would be: Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (agriculturalists and traders) and Shudras (labourers, artisans).
11 D.P. Mines, Caste in India (Ann Arbor, Association for Asian Studies, 2009), pp. 2–43. Mines shows how British rule in India ‘effectively turned fluid and locally disparate jati into fixed all-Indian categories and as a result created new social identities that Indians, in turn, shaped further’. Newly formed caste organisations sought to secure benefits or claim a better position in the British ranked caste hierarchies. Pocock has shown how the Kanbis who were cultivators (Shudras) elevated themselves under British rule, named themselves Patidars, ensured this description prevailed in the 1931 census, and secured recognition as Kshatriyas or variously as Vaishyas. See D.F. Pocock, Kanbi and Patidar: A Study of the Patidar Community of Gujarat (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 1. & 56.
flayers, tanners and cobbler, with considerable variation in regional status. They found that the cobbler, the Mochi, enjoyed a higher status in Gujarat, while, in the north, the Mochi was considered untouchable. In Gujarat, Kim Knott points out, the Khalpas (the untouchables) did the work of skinning and tanning while the Mochis (the skilled artisans), working only with the finished leather, were part of the Shudra varna. Although the Gujarati Mochi lost their untouchable status by the 1930s, they were listed as one of the ‘backward classes’. If a Mochi in the north of India was untouchable and a Mochi in Gujarat was one of the ‘backward classes’, what then did it mean over time to be a Gujarati Mochi in Cape Town?

This article also addresses an imbalance in the historiography of Indian South Africans which has been mainly Natal and Witwatersrand-centred. The literature dealing with caste focuses predominantly on Natal Indians of indentured origin. Studies have statistically enumerated the castes of indentured workers; illustrated the collapse of caste identities in the colonial setting in favour of regional, religious or linguistic identities; and documented the loss of knowledge about caste terminology over time. Kuper, in her significant study of caste in Natal in 1960, argued: ‘[I]n Durban, the group that adheres most rigidly to caste is the Gujarati speaking Hindu trading community concentrated in the centre of the city’. With their more privileged economic status, unlike the indentured, they maintained links with India and could afford to retain endogamous practices. Yet Kuper and others have devoted scant attention to this group where caste seemed to matter most. Ebr.-Vally briefly points out that, while Gujaratis maintained caste practices, caste as occupation had not survived. Recently Bhana and Bhoola have explained how Gujaratis in Natal came to develop a broader regional identity as Kathiawadis in 1940s. A study of the prior relevance of caste organisations is still needed. The literature lags behind studies of caste amongst Gujaratis in the United Kingdom, for instance, although migration there took place later in the second half of the twentieth century.

Deliberately avoiding a quantitative approach, I present here a Cape Town community – the Mochi, especially those who retained a connection with shoes – that has been neglected in the national historiography and is now almost invisible in the city’s demographic landscape. Interviews with seven Gujarati Mochis (including three women) who have been involved in


17 R. Mesthrie, ‘The Linguistic Reflex of Social Change: Caste and Kinship Terms Among People of Indian Descent in Natal, South Africa’, Anthropological Linguistics, 32, 3–4 (Fall–Winter 1990), pp. 340–44, reporting findings in 1980 that there was knowledge of a few caste terms such as Brahman (priests), Sonar (goldsmith), Lohar (blacksmith), Teli (oil-maker), Nau (barber), Chamar (leather worker) and Dhobi (washerman), but over 42 terms had become obsolete.

18 Kuper, Indian People, p. 20.

19 Ebr.-Vally, Kala Pani, p. 144.


making, repairing or selling shoes provide narratives of family histories over at least three generations and insight into the interviewees’ own careers. A further four interviews with Mochis, two of whom were not involved in shoes themselves but whose families were, also contributed to understanding this caste group. In addition, I interviewed five Gujarati Indians of other castes. These interviews form part of a broader project which seeks to uncover the history of all Indians in Cape Town and more specifically those confined to Rylands.22 South African Mochis produced a leather-bound book containing small essays on the Mochi and biographical details of pioneer and affluent families – an invaluable resource for understanding how Mochis see themselves.23 Private papers, including the minutes of meetings of the Patidar Society in Cape Town from 1929 to 1946, offered insight into other caste and Hindu organisations.24 Together the oral and documentary sources provide evidence for a social history that explores the consciousness, agency and work experiences of Mochis in Cape Town, and that reveals the significance of caste as occupation, caste as belonging, and caste organisation as a vehicle for upward mobility.

A Mother’s Inspiration

Ramjee Magan (b. 1922) lives in Wynberg with his wife Lalitha (b.1934). At 88 (at the time of the interview) he is one of the oldest members of the Gujarati community. A charming speaker – whose English is sometimes interspersed with Gujarati sentences – he is able to create a vivid image of a time gone by.25 His father, Magan Pursotam Lalla, left his village, Gandevi in Surat, as a young boy of 12 and arrived in Cape Town in the early 1900s. In 1919 Magan was joined by his wife, Vajia. They had five children, Ramjee being the third oldest. Magan made a living as a shoe-repairer. Shoes or bags for repair would be collected early in the week; on Fridays they would be delivered to customers. Ramjee speaks with great pride about his father’s abilities as a craftsman and his work ethic. They had many white customers and he could charge them good prices. Magan also allowed his customers to open accounts so that they could pay him at the end of the month.

In 1939, one Friday afternoon, while on a delivery trip by bicycle, Magan was fatally hit by a car. Vajia, then in her late thirties, took control of Magan’s Shoe Stores with the assistance of two coloured workers. Ramjee and Lalitha are full of praise for Vajia’s character and ability. Ramjee stresses that the women ‘were sort of free you know . . . There was no criticism . . . nothing like that . . . They weren’t oppressed by their husband or by their religion. Our religion is very fair to our ladies . . . because we believe in Matha. Matha is our mother’.26

Magan had thought it important to educate his children – Ramjee points to the influence of his father’s Jewish customers. One of them had said, ‘Mr Magan you must educate your children otherwise you [are] going to continue working like this’. Thus they were all sent to school. After Magan’s death the eldest son, Khandubhai, was sent off to university. Knowing little about university education, Vajia asked one of her coloured customers, a Mr Thomas, to assist her in enrolling her son at the University of Cape Town. Khandubhai later became ‘the first Hindu or Mochi doctor in Cape Town’, says Ramjee. He is proud of his brother’s accomplishment as a Mochi. He says ‘that’s how the Patels and all that they caught on. No – we

22 Although the interviews dealt with a number of issues, I have focused only on caste for this article. Not all interviewees would agree that caste was relevant in their lives; all gave me permission to use their names.
24 Nagin Patel Papers (privately held, Cape Town).
26 This refers to worship of Goddess Durga who inspires fear and respect.
must educate our children . . . but the Mochis were pioneers’. His younger brother, Nagin, later went to England to qualify as a pharmacist. When Nagin opened up a pharmacy in Cape Town, the other brother Bhiku joined him while their sister, Dahi, worked in a doctor’s surgery.

Ramjee’s trajectory was different. On completion of Standard Seven his mother made a strange decision. Ramjee had slowly picked up shoe-repairing skills through spending time in the shop. Vajia now sent him to work for a Muslim barber, Mr Ismail Sallie, who came from the same village as Magan. She likely thought he needed some discipline. Ramjee says: ‘So we were a lot of boys who were naughty and 17 and 16 right. Then my mother said, “No Ram you better go . . . and learn a barber’s trade . . .”. She says, “No you just learn in case you don’t get a job you can do a barber’s shop”’. After several months with the barber, Vajia felt that Ramjee had matured. She said ““Tu have moto theyo [you have now become big] you had better take over the shop”’. Thus it was that Ramjee entered into the business with his mother. He says: ‘and we used to work till 11 o’clock in the night . . . My mother used to understand everything – stitched the work . . . She was the only Mochi woman in Cape Town who could do the repairs . . . and then all the other women also started helping their husbands because they couldn’t pay the wages for the coloured people you know’.

Ramjee also credits his mother with the decision that he should branch out to another business on the Main Road. Vajia spoke to a Muslim Gujarati who owned four shops and persuaded him to let Ramjee take over the Bombay Bazaar, a shoe store. From this man, Ramjee learnt basic shop-keeping skills. He shifted his repair section to the back of the shop; the front section was filled with new shoes. He soon expanded the business by drawing on the help of a Mochi friend from Port Elizabeth where there were many large Mochi-run shoe stores. They ordered from the shoe factories, many of which were based in that city. Ramjee’s friend supplied him with shoes from his wholesale business with good payment options. ‘And the goods were coming and I was selling . . . That’s how we made the money’. Vajia continued to run the first business until the 1950s. As a member of a consortium she also bought several properties.

Flushed with the success of his shoe shop, Ramjee began to think bigger. He bought a shoe factory in Claremont and named it the Pride Style Shoe Manufacturing Company. He wanted an American-sounding name and a long name. He enlisted the help of the former coloured foreman to help him run the operation, and took on a Mochi partner to be responsible for the book-keeping. He secured Jewish agents to go to Jewish shops for orders ‘for the Jews were the top people in . . . selling shoes’. Ramjee had to learn fast. As a shop-owner all he knew was cash and now, as manufacturer, one never saw cash. ‘The shop-keepers they have a bill. You must just sign that bill. We must keep it and a certain date you must put it in the bank. I never knew that. So the bank said, “No no no you keep all this. Soon as the 31th you bring it to us. That goes into your account”. That’s how we learnt banking’. He successfully ran this factory for 30 years.

When Ramjee married Lalitha, a young woman from Durban, she contributed to the family income by running her own shop on Main Road, the Terminus Sample Store, selling shoes and drapery. They eventually relinquished Magan’s original shop on Main Road, although Lalitha at first ran both shops. For three decades, Lalitha ran the Terminus Sample Store, closing it in 1983. Ramjee notes they could afford to buy a new car at regular intervals. They remained in Wynberg despite its being declared a coloured group area in the 1960s. Ramjee attributes this to their being in a coloured group area so there was no pressure on them to move, unlike those living in white group areas. Ramjee and Lalitha are happy in their neighbourhood and can call on coloured neighbours to assist with various things. Rylands, however, features in their narrative for this is where the temple is.

Although retired, Ramjee keeps himself occupied by making small purses which he happily gives to people on meeting them. He makes arch supports and soles for sale and has many orders for these. Ramjee has many tales to tell of his shoe-making days. Once he was
approached to go to gaol to custom-make a size 20 shoe for a prisoner. It was quite a challenge but he succeeded.

Of their four children (one of whom died as a child), only one, Jaywant, continues in the shoe business. He has a diploma in footwear technology and specialises in making shoes for people with disabilities. Here we have a merging of old knowledge handed down the generations with new knowledge gained through western education. Ramjee sees himself as the expert who teaches his son how to perfect his skills. Another son had a shoe shop for a while but moved into the property market, while a daughter qualified as an oral hygienist.

**Brotherly Business**

Brothers Bhadra (b. 1937) and Gunwant Jaga (b. 1942) are owners of Rocksole Shoe and Repairs in Wale Street, in the Bo-Kaap, one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Cape Town. We meet at Gunwant’s home in Green Point. It is prime property: a plush three-storey building, with a brilliant view of the Atlantic seaboard and the new Cape Town stadium. Gunwant rents out the lower floors and resides on the third floor. Gunwant invited his older brother to our meeting. There is respect for the older brother who is called upon to tell the important family history but this is how the brothers have always functioned – doing things together. Gunwant’s wife, Bhanu (b. 1944), also joins us, but mostly she is happy to let the brothers talk.

The story of the family’s business links three generations. Their grandfather, Jaga Jivan, left his village in Bodali (Navsari, Surat) in the 1900s to come to Cape Town to join his brothers. Bhadra’s eyes fill with tears as he relates how his grandfather started off: ‘They ... used to go door to door. Knock at the door. Collect the repairs ... Bring the repair shoes for repairing. Had it fixed. Delivered it. And that’s how they did a daily collection and delivery business’. Their grandfather had a first wife with whom he had children but he later married their grandmother, Jeevi, in India. Kassen (Bhadra and Gunwant’s father) was born in India but he came to Cape Town at the age of six. Kassen went to school for only a few years before joining his father in his business at Rocksole.

The brothers’ knowledge about their grandfather’s life and times is sketchy. They know that when their father was about eighteen, he went to India and married Shanti who was from the village, Amri, near Navsari. Kassen returned to Cape Town with Shanti and leased living quarters close to the shop from a Muslim family, the Ahmed brothers, who ran Atlas Trading Company, one of the oldest spice stores in the area. Bhadra was born soon after, followed by four other children (three girls and Gunwant). Kassen’s business progressed extremely well. In the mid-1940s he was able to purchase the three properties on which the business stood for what Bhadra calls ‘a princely sum of £5,000’. He notes that a car at that time cost £150. Bhadra tells a dramatic story of how his father got a lawyer to do the bidding because he wanted to remain anonymous. The auction took place on site. Kassen continued working at his bench and when the final bid was accepted, Kassen ‘came out [of the shop] in his apron’ and revealed his identity as the purchaser. ‘I believe it was ... a very big scene’. Their father was a hard worker, putting in hours from early morning through to the late hours of the night. He invested in modern machinery and had several staff working for him.

The brothers point out that their mother found companionship with the women of eight Indian families in the neighbourhood. From these women (who came from diverse caste groups) Shanti learnt to cook and sew as well as going shopping with them. She also learnt to speak Afrikaans, the dominant language of the neighbourhood. Gunwant says his father found Shanti a teacher to help her to learn some basic literacy skills such as being able to sign her

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27 Interview with Bhadra, Gunwant and Bhanu Jaga, 17 April 2010, Green Point, Cape Town.
name and read. Shanti ‘used to ... come to the shop and she used to write down tickets. She
used to take customers’ instructions’.

Gunwant and Bhadra went to nearby schools where they had both Indian and coloured
friends. Gunwant completed his high school education, while Bhadra left school after
completing Standard 8. They recall how they got drawn into the shop from early days. By the
1950s their home was above the shop in Wale Street and the brothers laugh as they recall that
their father would ring a bell for them to help in the shop. Gunwant elaborates:

And the bell used to go and we had to come down soon after school and ... Saturday Sunday
there wasn’t play time for us. ... Saturday was to serve customers. After that I used to polish and
clean the shop and prepare for ... Monday. Sunday [we] used to go to the shop. Bhadra used to
always do all the book work always the administration work and I used to always ... [be in] the
repair section. So that’s how we picked up.

Later, when Gunwant and Bhadra married they continued to live above the shop and their
wives were drawn in to assist. Bhanu recalls:

We had turns. We were two sister-in-laws ... we had weekly turns. Housework one week and the
one goes to the shop ... and the one gets the turn to do the cooking and clean up the house. Then we
had our children one after the other so we were occupied for the first ten years we didn’t do much.

Like most Indian shopkeepers, the brothers sold shoes on tick – this meant travelling weekly
to customers’ homes in various neighbourhoods of Cape Town to collect the money they were
owed. This system was widespread in Cape Town in the 1940s and 1950s and was the only
means by which the poor could buy goods. A system of trust developed between shopkeeper
and customer. Bhadra recollects: ‘Gunwant and I used to go Fridays and Saturdays. Knock at
the door. Collect money. And that’s how we ran our business and ... and of course we lost a
lot of the money in the process too...’. They carried on with this system, with each brother
having his own list, until the 1970s when the travelling got too much. With both brothers
having growing families they recently separated the business with Gunwant securing the
repairs section and Bhadra the new shoes section. They also reconstructed the building to put
up five storeys so that income could be derived from rent.

Kassen and his sons did more than repair and sell shoes. They diversified, becoming large
property owners in Rylands when it was declared for Indians. They had to relocate there
themselves for residence but they also bought extensive acres of land, built homes and leased
these. Their father left everything to his two sons and the brothers’ story is one of harmonious
working together without jealousy, suspicion or distrust. They talk over things, appreciate
each other’s strengths, and allow one another to be creative and experiment in the business of
money-making.

The brothers managed to fight off the group areas challenge to their business when the
Bo-Kaap was declared a Malay group area in 1957. They applied for permits annually to
continue their business; in return, officials demanded favours. Over the decades, they built
up a close relationship with the local Malay and coloured community. Bhadra explains:

When there is a death in the society I always make a note. I always go send them a sympathy card.
If there is a wedding invitation if you can’t attend the wedding ... send them a greeting card
... When there’s collections we are there for the society ... When there’s children ... wanting
to go overseas and they need donation, legitimate donations, we will give it to them.

Gunwant’s home in Green Point marks a new period in the democratic era where one can live
anywhere one chooses.28 After years of living in Rylands, race no longer remains a barrier to
finding a place in the city.

28 Group Areas restrictions were repealed in 1991.
A Widow’s Story

My desire to interview Bhikhi Keshev (née Kooverjee, b.1930) stemmed from the fact that she runs yoga classes in Rylands and I had wanted to know more about that. I learnt a lot about her yoga classes that morning and I also learnt so much more from this octogenarian. Bhikhi is the daughter of Nagar and Nandi Kooverjee. As a youth, Nagar made his way to Mumbai from Undach in Surat where he found work in the army and navy stores as a saddle-maker. From there he left for Africa, first settling in Port Elizabeth before moving to Cape Town in the 1920s where he started a shop, N. Kooverjee Bootmakers, in Park Road, Wynberg. When he died in 1941 at the age of 71, he left behind 40-year-old Nandi and six children (one son and five daughters). Babu, the eldest child, was only a teenager, Bhikhi was eleven and the youngest was only two. Rashmi (the son of Babu) speaks of the unfolding tragedy whereby all six children were orphaned:

Then my grandmother couldn’t take strain of all these small children and she didn’t know the language and she didn’t know the trade and … she died prematurely … And Bhikhiben and my father … cremated her and they made a life for themselves.

Babu left school to take over his father’s business while leaders in the Mochi community were appointed by the court to take care of the children’s assets which were in a trust. The youngest girl was dispatched to relatives in Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape. Babu did well for himself. In the 1950s he married Prabha Karsen who was from Johannesburg and they had three sons and a daughter. Babu’s Footwear Stores is now a well-known business in Cape Town – four branches are run by each of Babu’s sons and a grandson. Prabha, now in her seventies, still works with her children in the original store started by Nagar in Wynberg. Rashmi says: ‘She basically got into the store the day she married’. In addition to running one branch, Rashmi has diversified into the property market.

At the age of 19, Bhikhi married into the Keshev family who had run Oxsole Shoe Repairs in Trill Road, Observatory, since 1903. Bhikhi and her husband first lived above the shoe store (her husband had been born there), but after the birth of two daughters they moved to a home in a nearby street. In the late 1970s, the family was forced to live in Rylands as a result of the Group Areas Act, but continued to run the business in Observatory. Soon after, Bhikhi was widowed. She said of her husband’s death, ‘something broke in his heart when we moved’. Fortunately, Bhikhi was a shoe-repairer herself. She explains:

It is very very lucky that … when we were little children that Rashmi’s father [Babu] and myself we used to work in the cobbler shop and I learnt quite a bit of the trade and when I got married I became also very professional in my job and after … my husband’s death I was compelled to go and work. If I didn’t work I would have lost this house. I had a full bond [which] had to be paid.

For fifteen years thereafter this plucky woman single-handedly ran the business travelling daily from Rylands. Bhikhi was once interviewed for an Afrikaans school textbook for children. In it she speaks of customers who came in with many requests: to repair shoes the dog had chewed up or to colour-match shoes for a wedding dress. She successfully mixed a dye and satisfied the customer with perfectly matched shoes for the wedding day. She speaks of customers whom she knew as children and who now had their own children. Her shop was not just a business – customers came to chat. The premises were full of history; a machine

29 Interview with Bhikhiben Keshev, 20 January 2010, Rylands, Cape Town.
30 Interview with Rashmi Kooverjee, 28 January 2010, Rylands, Cape Town. Additional information on the family was also sourced from the Daan Data Granth, p. 4.
had been imported from Denmark at the turn of the century and the crate in which it came was
Bhikhi’s work bench. She concludes with an obvious lesson in life to inspire children. One
must love one’s work and give fully of oneself.31

When Bhikhi was 63, the owner of the premises gave her notice. A family business
that was close to 90 years old was now doomed. Bhikhi’s own association with the
premises had lasted over four decades and was a crucial part of her identity.32 She relates her
trauma:

After working on my own for 15 years I said what will I do? What will I do? I said no I’m going
to go crazy ... I was getting crazy because I’m at home. What do I do? And in that time ...
I took a big scrap book and I started writing in this book about my work. Drawings of the
tools. Drawings of the material I used. Drawings of the nails. I did all that and I came up to
25 pages .

It is from Bhikhi that I get the clearest idea of the shoemaker’s craft for she produces these
pages, covered in neat handwriting in pencil with diagrams. They provide information as to
when and how to use which foams, needle sizes, types of dyes, sandpaper, rubber soles, the
knives, skiving machine, hammer, screw drivers, scissors, brushes, and so on. There are
instructions on how to do specific repairs:

Before repairing always check inside of shoe especially if they brought in for \(\frac{1}{2}\) sole or full sole.
The inside of the shoe must look good. If the innersoles are worn out – replace them. Without a
good foundation the job will not be successful. To cut out the innersole take an impression of the
inside. For a beginner it is always useful to have various sizes cut out and hang them up. You can
size up with your innersole with your sample.

There is specific advice about different types of shoes and their demands. How does one, for
instance, repair bowling shoes? Bhikhi poured her pain on to paper and sought to use the
knowledge she had to help others. Many years later her booklet on the craft of shoe-repairing
was printed and distributed to township residents.

Bhikhi attributes her survival to her belief in God. Her yoga classes which are open to
women of all races and religions are dominated by her message of positive living. She is
also a mystical woman who speaks of strange happenings which led her to yoga. Her house
is often visited by hundreds of people who come to see a Lord Ganesha murthi (statue)
drinking milk from a teaspoon she offers. She demonstrates this to me and sure enough the
milk is quickly absorbed by the statue. Bhikhi’s life has been one of loss, shoes, divinity
and yoga.

**Family, Gender, Caste and Community**

These life histories point to how, within individual family units, skills were passed on;
women became substantial role-players in the home and business; children were drawn into
the business from an early age; and siblings assisted each other either through partnering in
business or supporting one another so that at least some could follow alternative occupational
routes. Challenging androcentric gender-blind readings of trades like shoemaking,33 the
women featured here offer a different image of the business. Unlike the village in India, the
Cape Town setting provided the first generation immigrant women with opportunities

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32 *Southern Suburbs Tatler*, 30 September 1993; *South*, 28 January to 1 February 1994.
33 Compare H. Bradford, ‘Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and
and they responded positively with male support since this aided the family economy and saved on wages to employees. It was a necessity, as another shoemaker indicated of his wife: ‘She had to... I had three shops [to manage] at one time’. 34 For Nandi, the isolation and challenges were traumatic. Vajia, on the other hand, became the key decision-maker in the family and continued her husband’s business. For Shanti, small skills were learnt that served the business. Second-generation women could, like Bhikhi, be skilled artisans, although a secondary role in the business, as in Bhanu’s case, was more usual.

Numerous other examples corroborate how the family unit facilitated the ventures of younger members in the trade. Magan Lalloo’s father, Ambaram, operated a shoe repair store on Main Road, Claremont, where Pick n Pay stands today. First helping his father by delivering shoes to customers, he later built his own business selling new shoes, drawing on his father’s contacts, an uncle’s contacts and his own neighbourhood friends. 35 Damyanti Chagan (b.1941, née Chavda), whose father Babar Chavda (b.1907 in Gadat, Navsari) had a small shoe repair store in Mowbray, explains how extended families helped each other: ‘This team of cousins... they used to buy leather [and] the cotton from one particular company firm and then they used to separate and each one take their share and that’s how...the unity was there...’. 36

The life stories, however, also point to an alternative support network of people originating from the same village in India (as in Ramjee’s apprenticeship with a Muslim barber), or speaking the same language (as did the Muslim gentleman who leased him the shop). Interactions with coloured and Jewish customers were significant too, and skilled coloured workers feature in the stories’ shadows. Ramjee’s narrative stresses how networking with Mochis in other cities was crucial to the expansion of his business. The Mochi network in Cape Town itself was influential. In each village in India, there were but a few Gujarati Mochi families; 37 in Cape Town, families from diverse villages gathered and found benefit in organising together, meeting socially and assisting one another. Nandita Sahai has urged one to look for the ‘fissures and fragmentary nature of caste relations’ instead of ‘privileging solidarity’. 38 In Britain slight ‘fissures’ emerged since the Mochis came from two regions of Gujarat: Kathiawad (Saurashtra) and Surat. 39 The Mochis in Cape Town all came from south Gujarat, mainly from Surat, making for greater homogeneity, and ‘fissures’ are not evident. Of greater significance is Mines’s characterisation of caste as ‘a mode of power, a mode of action, a mode of being and awareness...a mode of caring’; 40 or Ursula Rao’s emphasis upon ‘the affective and emotional dimension of caste’. 41

The artisans, through a Mochi Mandal (organisation), would regulate each other’s activities. In the early years they gathered at a home in Woodstock and made decisions for the good of all of them. Ramjee explains:

At the time the Mochis had a kind of understanding they will tell you where to open a shop. The headquarters were [in] Woodstock. They’d say ‘Ok Magan you can’t come here because other guys are here you must go down the line...Wynberg is reserved for you...’. That’s why we all

34 Interview with Magan Lalloo (b.1920), Claremont, Cape Town, 23 November 1996.
36 Interview with Damyanti Chagan, 9 April 2010, Bantry Bay, Cape Town.
40 Mines, Caste in India, p. 3.
in the suburbs. People went down to Kalk Bay because they nominate you. ‘Tu ta jaa tu ta jaa’ [you go there] so there’s no opposition or competition … or arguing. ‘That’s your territory. Tu taa wepaar kar’ [you do your business there]. That’s how we went to Kalk Bay to Muizenberg, Simonstown all that line. We put one of them … That’s how we survived. … They organised it. … They sort of made you aware that that territory is yours now. ‘‘Tu wepaar kar’ [you do your business].

While the early organisation may have been informal, in 1922 the Mochis in Cape Town pooled resources to buy a former brush factory in Mowbray, which served as a hall for their meetings, for religious and cultural and even some sporting functions. Babar Chavda, a Mochi by caste, went on to become a fruit and vegetable dealer, and he served as an official of this society for many years. Mitra Hall was conveniently situated just opposite his shop and his daughter, Damyanti, describes a feeling of camaraderie:

They used to meet on a Sunday and all the men used to come and meet in my Dad’s shop first and they used to have their little gas [talk]. Cokes used to fly he used to love his Coca Cola. And the women used to come into the kitchen and my mum used to take a paan\(^{42}\) tin out and … . ladies would be having paan and we used to have fun because all our friends would come because it was … [a] treat those days when the Mitra Mandal had their meeting and then when at half past seven or eight when they feel we have got a quorum now everybody is here ok now we all go to the hall and then the whole lot, men, women children everyone went to the hall and then the meeting took place.

The mandal also functioned as a kind of panchayat (community council). Damyanti explains the role of her father and that of the mandal as a whole:

I know when there’s a divorce he was anti-divorce. He would try and save it and if he could not save the marriage he made them pay a fine. You know this was all part of this committee … Even engagements – if you broke an engagement you had to pay for the damage done… Once the girl is engaged who’s going to marry that girl now? … That’s one of the things the mandal did.\(^{43}\)

Within the mandal, the women organised their own subsection to see to religious duties and functions.

Mobility is central to the Mochi story. From shoemaker and shoe-repairer, they moved to selling new shoes and in Ramjee’s case to the production of shoes in a modern factory. Babar Chavda’s move from shoes to being a fruit and vegetable dealer, an occupation of most of the Patidars (Patels) in Cape Town, may also have been motivated by such aspiration. Central to Mochi mobility and solidarity is how they were perceived by other castes in Cape Town. To the coloured or white customer, the Mochi was the shoemaker, the artisan. To Gujarati Hindus of higher caste, the Mochi was perceived differently as one who because of his/her work with leather was polluted. The words of India – untouchable, Dalit, scheduled castes or backward classes – are not used. Ramjee articulates the South African way of speaking of caste: ‘We were sort of a low class’. Several other Mochis speak of their earlier experiences with the second-largest caste group, the Patels. They felt looked-down-upon, noting that even as late as the 1950s and 1960s some of the older generation would not drink water at their homes.\(^{44}\) Élites emerged within the community to uplift the Mochis. Ramjee explains: ‘We had a Pandu Chiba, he was a great chap, a

\(^{42}\) Paan is a betel leaf filled with lime and areca nut. See R. Mesthrie, A Dictionary of South African Indian English (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2010), p. 174.

\(^{43}\) Other mandals operated similarly. Bhagatsingh Govan explains how the Measuria Shahitiya Vardak Mandal (f. 1911) representing the barber (Hajam) caste in Cape Town (originally comprising 24 families) would take care of matters affecting families such as death, marriage and divorce and the educational needs of youth. Interview with Bhagatsingh Govan (b.1939), 16 January 2010, Rylands, Cape Town.

\(^{44}\) I prefer not to identify my informants here by name.
reformer, and then we had … Mr Chavda, Babarbhai Chavda, they were all reformers. He [Mr Chavda] said, “These people are looking down upon us. We [are] going to get rid of that”.

One upward step was for Mochis to style themselves as Kshatriyas (warriors). Already in 1901 in India such claims of higher origins by Mochis had been noted, and it is likely that the renaming in South Africa bore this influence from India. The Cape Town Mochi Mandal was formally designated in 1922 as the Kshatriya Hindu Mitra Mandal (KHMM). Port Elizabeth Mochis had preceded them in 1918 by the constitution of the Port Elizabeth Kshatriya Gujarati Mandal (PEKGM). In 1943, stimulated by the 25th anniversary celebrations of the PEKGM, Mochi organisations from Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, East London and Border, Pretoria, and Cape Town joined forces to constitute the South African Kshatriya Mahasabha (SAKM). The idea was ‘closer unity and brotherhood, social reforms and to prepare the ground work for future generations in the field of education’. Babar Chavda, an official of the KHMM, was the SAKM’s founding president and his terms as president total 22 years.

The Daan Data Granth book produced by the SAKM in 1995, which records the donations made by prominent families to an education trust, provides crucial insights into how these caste members saw themselves. There are references to how some of them left India for South Africa ‘to escape from the ravages of poverty, hardship and the oppression meted out to them by the so-called “High Caste” Hindus’.

The book explains why Mochis took on the title Kshatriya:

The true fact is that our ancestry is of the Kshatriya origin. However over the centuries we have taken to different professions and work … Our ancestors came from the northern part of India. Several historians from ancient times, both Chinese and English, have made reference in their History books to the powerful rule of the Kshatriya in Afghanistan and Sind. We protected our country from the seventh to the eleventh centuries A.D. Chandragupta the great Kshatriya king, ruled most of India after the death of Alexander the Great.

In the thirteenth century A.D. the Muslims invaded India and our ancestors lost the battle. The Muslims annexed Sind in the beginning and started to convert Hindus into Muslims. Our ancestors who had the pride and dignity to be true Hindus, fled their land and trekked forward towards the South of India, finally landing at Kutch, Saurashtra, and various parts of Gujarat. Our ancestors under no circumstances conceded to convert to the Islamic religion and thus, took refuge with the Harijans in each village or town, where they finally settled.

…

The Harijan community would gather all dead animals in the villages and use their skins for various household functions. From these skins our ancestors made their first pair of shoes, known as ‘mojadi’ in those times. Mojadi making soon developed into a trade and the mojadi makers soon became known as ‘Mochis’. This is how we, Kshatriyas, came to be known as Mochis. Even today, we have the traditional Kshatriya surnames of ‘Parmar’, ‘Chavda’, ‘Chudasama’, ‘Gohil’, ‘Chauhan’, ‘Solanki’ and many others. We do not denounce the fact that we are born into a Mochi home and we are extremely proud of this fact.

Ramjee tells a joke which has obviously been repeated many times in the community. According to him, as they journeyed south their swords grew smaller so by the time they

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46 Daan Data Granth, p. 22.
47 Ibid., p. 27.
48 Ibid., p. 22.
49 Ibid., p. 216.
reached Gujarat they were left with a small knife suitable for shoemaking. Mochi organisations in Britain and America have similarly adopted the title Kshatriya.

Among several Mochi families there is a keen interest to trace their lineage and establish Kshatriya origins. One family succeeded in tracing their family tree 19 generations to an ancestor, Karan Singh. Jamnadas Chauhan (b.1930) points out how surnames changed as his ancestors moved southwards. Migration to South Africa brought other changes – the prevailing custom here was taking the father’s name as surname. Named Jamnadas Narotam, he went through the laborious task of restoring his surname to Chauhan. Arun Chavda links his name to the Chavda dynasty and kings who ruled between 746 to 942 AD. Bhadra Jaga points out to me that ‘Kshatriya lineage is royal lineage … at present we have people doing an investigation as far as the lineage is concerned’. 

Mochis also were influenced by the Arya Samaj movement, a Hindu reform movement directed at uplifting those oppressed by the caste system. The tale of Ranchod Govind Varma, a Port Elizabeth pioneer, is presented as an inspirational one by the SAKM. Coming from India in 1908, Ranchod was influenced by the Arya Samajist, Swami Shankaranandji, who visited South Africa between 1908 and 1911. In Port Elizabeth, he taught Indians how to perform havans and recite Vedic mantras. Ranchod went through the sacred thread ceremony (janoi or upvith) which was normally performed only on the higher castes. When Ranchod went to India in 1911 he was required to go through purification rites which people who left the village to travel overseas had to perform. The story goes that at the ceremony

… he was asked to remove the janoi, as he as a Mochi was not entitled to wear it. He resisted and opposed the idea. Uproar had started in the Jilla [district] Community and [they] threatened to cast him out … He strongly opposed that move, and soon was ceremonially accepted to wear janoi by a well-known Arya Samaj Pundit. Since then he took over the name Varma.

While mobilising as a caste, the SAKM nonetheless refused to see the caste system as one permanently set in stone and limiting movement and progress. It had this to say about the Brahman: ‘A Brahman is only a Brahman, if he substantiates all his spiritual and religious values, not because he is born into [a] Brahman family. Any non-Brahman who is capable of attaining such spiritual and religious values, is the true Brahman. He does not have to be born a Brahman’. Thus the SAKM challenged one of the central tenets of the caste system: birth and its role in caste determination.

Varma’s early example had an influence on Cape Town’s Mochi community. As Ramjee relates in his humorous way:

Mr Varma … he came to Cape Town. He says ‘No you guys are wrong. [You] can’t do this. Go for a picnic and kill the sheep and have a lukker [good] time’. He says ‘No [you] must stop all that’. So he says ‘No. You must have havans’ … That was the beginning of the improvement you know. So all our guys they improved …

50 Interview with Ramjee Magan, 3 August 2010.
51 The Gujarati Arya Kshatriya Mahasabha founded in Britain in 1975 represents some 3,000 Mochi families and is the national body to which all the smaller organisations are affiliated. Available at http://www.gakm.co.uk/ and http://gkmna.com, retrieved on 17 October 2011.
52 Interview with Jammadas Chauhan, 30 October 2007, Ottery, Cape Town.
53 E-mail from A. Chavda to author, 9 May 2010.
54 Interview with Bhadra Jaga, 17 April 2010; also telephone conversation with Arun Chavda, 9 May 2010.
56 A ceremony around a fire into which offerings such as ghee and other goods are poured. See Mesthrie, A Dictionary of South African Indian English, p. 97.
57 Daan Data Granth, pp. 9 & 32.
58 Ibid., p. 216.
What Ramjee describes is the process of what is known as sanskritisation, emulating the behaviour of the higher castes. This could involve embracing vegetarianism, for example. It could also come from removing oneself from contact with polluting substances.\(^{59}\) Owen Lynch’s study of upward mobility by the Jatav untouchable shoemakers of Agra in the course of the twentieth century points to similar processes and claims to Kshatriya status.\(^{60}\)

Upward mobility in Cape Town also came from other means, like property investments, a sign of improved social status. For the second and subsequent generations mobility was signified by leaving the world of shoes via education. The SAKM’s education trust provided hundreds of bursaries that enabled a younger generation of South African Mochis to get a tertiary education. The *Daan Data Granth* lists by name the educational accomplishments of its youngsters. In the Western Cape by 1995, 79 had degrees and 40 diplomas. The new generation are doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, accountants, teachers, nurses, social workers, radiographers, electrical engineers, dental technologists, oral hygienists, secretaries, fitters and turners and lithographers.\(^{61}\) So while many shoemakers speak with great pride about their shoemaking and shoe-repairing skills, their innovative approaches, their embrace of machinery, the story of Mochi progress has much to do with moving away from shoes. This pursuit of education was far more aggressive than was the case for the other castes in Cape Town.\(^{62}\)

The SAKM had much to do with moulding a Mochi consciousness, both in local centres as well as nationally. The conferences of the SAKM rotated in the different centres and could become a family occasion – Ramjee recalls piling his children in his car and travelling to different cities for such meetings. There is little doubt that the KHMM was one of the strongest caste bodies in Cape Town both in size and in vision. This is consistent with Hutton’s finding for India that the lower castes tended to be better at organising than the higher castes.\(^{63}\) Minutes of the Patidar Society in Cape Town reveal regular problems with meeting attendance, flagging interest and unaccomplished goals such as the purchase of a hall.\(^{64}\)

The mobilising of Mochis in South Africa also had some impact in India when the Port Elizabeth body inspired the setting up of a Surat Jilla Parishad in Bombay in 1925 ‘to unite the community residing in the various villages and towns in Gujarat … and to uplift the poverty stricken in the social, welfare and educational fields’.\(^{65}\) Isolated in various villages, Mochis in Surat came together in community through funding by the South African Mochis.

Unlike Indian Muslim immigrants in Cape Town, Gujarati Hindus in the city did not form village societies\(^{66}\) mainly because numbers from the individual villages were too small.\(^{67}\) While divided by caste, Gujarati Hindus nonetheless found it necessary to pool resources to preserve their religion, language and culture. The United Hindu Association (UHA) was founded in 1903 and in its early years was concerned with matters such as securing

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60 Referred to in Kolenda, *Caste in Contemporary India*, p. 103.
62 Telephone conversation with Nagin Patel, 17 August 2010.
63 Hutton, *Caste in India*, p. 99.
64 Nagin Patel Papers, Minute Book of the Patidar Society, 1929 to 1946. It did host Diwali celebrations and visitors from India, and sent money for the India independence movement.
65 *Daan Data Granth*, p. 22.
67 The Muslims from the Konkan villages of Maharashtra (who make up the majority of Indian Muslims in the Western Cape) formed village societies such as the Sakhrul Society, Janjira Society and Sangemeshwar Society – all of which survive today. Indian Muslims numbered 29,800 in the Western Cape in 2001 (*Census 2001: Primary Tables Western Cape*, p. 27).
a crematorium. After a period of dormancy it was revived in the 1920s and co-existed alongside caste bodies such as that of the Mochis, the Patidar Society and the Meisuria Shahitya Vardak Mandal. Babar Chavda may have been a leader of the KHMM and of the SAKM, but he also served as an official of the UHA. Leadership of the UHA, however, also came from several Patel families and from members of other castes.

The UHA had a hall in Chapel Street and managed the Gandhi Memorial School (f.1947) which in the early 1950s was relocated to new premises in Newlands. Here children learnt the Gujarati language after English school. This school played a significant role in creating the community of Gujarati Hindus. Mitra Hall, too, while run by Mochis, was frequented by all the caste groups who attended lectures given by visiting priests, or the yoga classes or sport activities. Friendships developed between individuals across castes. Nagin Patel relates the story of how his father, Vallabh, and a Mochi friend were both traveling to India in 1946. His father invited this friend to visit him in his village, Pardi Patta, near Lakhampor. Soon his father faced the reality of caste rules in the village whereby a Mochi would not have visited the home of a Kanbi. He lied to his mother that his friend was a Desai. She soon detected this untruth from his friend’s answers about which section of his village he lived in. In this context the caste-segmented village in India made for a more restrictive life than in Cape Town. In Cape Town, though, as in India, inter-caste marriages were frowned upon and as late as the 1980s these marriages produced their fair share of trauma for the young people bold enough to challenge these caste proscriptions.

The existence of the UHA as well as several caste bodies could provoke minor tensions that had to be managed. These simmering tensions erupted in the 1970s. Briefly put, relocation to Rylands led to a greater growth of Mochi consciousness through the 1970s and 1980s as Gujarati Hindus argued about who should build the temple there. Mochis led by Chavda, Chauhan and the Jagas amongst others built their temple. The UHA, renamed the Cape Hindu Cultural Society (CHCS) in 1973, built its temple on a non-caste basis but effectively excluded the Mochis, as they were a caste-bound group. Leaders like Chavda who had been part of the CHCS now were confined to Mochi projects. The youth of all castes felt the impact of the disputing elders in the 1980s. In 1993 Gunwant Jaga, responding to the calls of Mochi youth, presided over the renaming of the KHMM as the Cape Town Hindu Seva Samaj, a non-caste body. The late years of the twentieth century saw an easing of tensions amongst the Gujarati Hindu organisations. There was also a greater move to organise as Hindus; the Hindu Association of the Western Cape (HAWC, formed in 1995) links Gujaratis and Tamils. Religion as a basis for unity is a subject needing further exploration.

68 The revival of societies and caste organisations in the 1920s may have had to do with more settled family life being developed as wives and children came out from India.

69 Nagin Patel Papers, Notes on the United Hindu Association by Bhikoo Magan, undated. From 1940 to 1943, Chavda was chairman and may have served other terms but the records are incomplete.

70 There are several references in the Patidar minutes to a Hindu Hall in Chapel Street in 1938 and 1939. See also Nagin Patel Papers, B. Magan, Notes on the Gandhi Memorial School, undated; and Report by the Cape Yuvak Mandal on the Split in the Gujarati Community, 1988.

71 See for instance interviews with Nagin Patel (b.1944), 26 September 2007, Rylands Cape Town; Bharat Bhikha (b.1954), 30 January 2010, Rylands, Cape Town; and Bhagatsingh Govan (b.1939), 16 January 2010, Rylands, Cape Town.

72 Telephone conversation with Nagin Patel, 17 August 2010.

73 See Patidar Society minutes, 14 May, 8 June and 20 July 1930.

74 The argument of the KHMM was that it was simply building a temple and hall to replace the Mowbray hall which had been expropriated. The argument of the CHCS was that it was the main Gujarati Hindu body. The constitution of the CHCS was amended in 1977 to specifically exclude a member of a caste body from joining it. See Patel Papers, ‘A Special Committee Report on the Split in Our Gujarati Community by the Cape Yuvak Mandal’, 1988; ‘Notes by a Concerned Youth’, undated (probably late 1980s).
Conclusion

This article has pointed firstly to the survival of a caste occupation such as shoemaking, with members of the caste helping each other and regulating the trade in the early years. Caste and occupation had some significance and several individuals became quite wealthy in this pursuit. There was significant pride in the craft. Women found the South African setting empowering and took the opportunity to move beyond domesticity. Interviews suggest that this may also be true for Gujarati women of other castes and for Muslim women who joined the fruit and vegetable businesses of their husbands. Necessity may have been the greater motivation for the Mochi men to teach the women the craft or small skills rather than a belief in gender equality, but there is pride by the males in what these women achieved. The trained woman shoemaker became as steeped in the love of the craft as the male.

Family was central to the shoemaker’s economy, which drew on the labour even of children. Soon however, while one sibling remained in the craft, others had greater access to education. By the third generation the majority of Mochi youth entered the wider economy as professionals and blue-collar workers. Perceived by others as low-class, Mochis saw education as a sign of progress. Acquisition of property was yet another signifier. Mochis organised efficiently to facilitate their craft but also to uplift themselves. Styling themselves as Kshatriyas they sought to locate warrior ancestors and lineages. This was important for their self-image rather than influencing the perception of higher castes. The educated youth for whom caste had less emotional resonance later exerted pressure on their elders to transform their caste-based body.

As for the Jagas, Kooverjes and Chauhans, who have been leaders in the KHMM and Samaj, they also see themselves as part of a new South African citizenry. Through leadership in organisations such the Lions Club they sought acceptance as equals amongst whites and they use their talents in organising and raising funds for the benefit of all South Africans. Interviews are very much about how individuals see their own lives and have made sense of the past, and reveal their narrators’ multifaceted and historically layered identities as Mochis, Gujarati Hindus, Capetonians (with strong identification to old multi-racial neighbourhoods like Claremont, Observatory, the Bo-Kaap and Wynberg), as Indians for whom Rylands had been demarcated and, finally, as South Africans.

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75 See for instance interviews with Kanti Patel, 13 January 2010, Rylands, Cape Town; Ebrahim Omar, 29 November 2007, Rylands, Cape Town; and Luxmiben Gihwala, 26 March 2008, Rylands, Cape Town.