

## Culture's Currency:

### *Indian Women and Multicultural Counselling*

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#### **Abstract**

This paper offers insights into the intersecting cultural layers of Indian women migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand. Utilising qualitative methodology, information is garnered from the work and life experiences of 30 Indian women resident in New Zealand. Their stories focus on their employment experiences and the challenge of finding work relevant to their qualifications and experience. Their footprints in a new land display an initial journey of trauma, hurt and identity struggles, followed in many instances by a deep and abiding sense of fulfilment for having the courage and grit to make their dreams and hopes a reality in New Zealand. The paper concludes with questions for reflection in the domain of multicultural counselling.

#### **Introduction**

New technologies, globalisation, dreams, hopes and the prospect of a global village draw millions of people into new countries as they cast their lot with inhabitants from myriad nations. Statistics indicate that almost one in ten people in the more developed nations is a migrant (Taylor, 2003). The tiny island nation of New Zealand has people from more than two hundred countries represented in its population of approximately four million (Statistics New Zealand, 2001, 2003). New Zealand is considered one of the newest nations in the world today, and its British and European roots can be traced back to the early settlers who came in large numbers by sea and settled in the land of the Maori, Aotearoa. Indians are recorded in the New Zealand census reports of 1881 as numbering six (TheoRoy, 1981). By 1896 there were 46 Indians, whose occupations are given as pedlars, domestics and hawkers (TheoRoy, 1981). Almost a hundred years later, the census figures of 1971 record 7807 Indians (TheoRoy, 1981).

As in the case of many early settlers around the world, the first Indian settlers were mainly men. Many of these men, hailing primarily from rural regions of Gujarat in western India and Punjab in northern India, came to New Zealand as a result of famine and drought in their own country (TheoRoy, 1981; Tiwari, 1980). Some of these settlers had served in the British army, had heard about New Zealand, and decided that

this may be the way to earn money, send it back home to India, then return to India (TheoRoy, 1981). There may also have been some Indian servants accompanying British officers retiring to New Zealand (TheoRoy, 1981). Many of the early settlers worked as bottle collectors, drain diggers, flax workers and scrub cutters, particularly in rural areas. In the towns, the Indians were known as pedlars of vegetables and fruit. It is interesting that many of these early settlers eventually settled down permanently in New Zealand, bought up land and built places for meeting and worship, and their descendants are involved in dairy farming and market gardening (Tiwari, 1980). Thus, for example, one finds today clusters of Indian farmers in Pukekohe, a Sikh gurdwara in Hamilton, and Indian temples in Auckland.

New Zealand's immigration policy underwent major changes in 1991 with the introduction of the points system, resulting in a flood of people from non-traditional source countries (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). Instead of the short term policy of getting in people to fill skill shortages, this policy was a long term one based on a point system which included qualifications, experience and age of the applicant (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). Census records show 30,000 Indians in 1991 and 60,000 Indians in 2003 (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). Indians today form 1.7% of the population of New Zealand and comprise an ethnic minority in this country. It is also pertinent to note that Statistics New Zealand classifies Indians as Asians, along with people from countries like China, Malaysia and Vietnam. Many of the Indians who came to New Zealand after 1987 lived in Indian urban areas, and hail from the cosmopolitan megacities of Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai and Calcutta. Moreover, unlike the early settlers, the recent migrants came with their families, or their families generally followed them within a few months of the first adult setting foot in New Zealand.

This paper presents some historical markers pertaining to Indian cultural roots, followed by the methodological approach and data sources that form the core of this study. This is followed by "Footprints in a new land", which presents the findings of the study as a composite picture of Indian women courting work, through an open letter to New Zealand women. The paper ends with some reflections on culture's currency for multicultural counsellors.

### Historical markers

Indian civilisation stretches back many centuries, at least five thousand years, to the Indus Valley civilisations and the cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Indian culture, particularly that of the majority Indian religion, Hinduism, traces its roots to the philosophical treatises of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and the epic stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. India has been the site of conquest of various peoples, including the

Greek, Alexander the Great, and the marauding hordes of Genghis Khan from Central Europe. In the last few centuries the Muslim rulers, the Mughals, were followed by traders from European nations. The traders gradually became rulers in India, and came from Portugal, Holland, France and Britain. The longest and most recent rulers were the British, and their legacy lives on in the English language which continues to be the lingua franca for commerce, legislation and in many instances education. Besides English, there are 17 official languages, which include Gujarathi, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil and Telugu.

The percentage of people following different religions in India comprise Hinduism (81.3%), Islam (12%), Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (1.9%), and other groups like the Buddhists, Jains, Parsis or followers of Zoroaster, Jews and those of the Baha'i religion (2.5% of the remaining population) ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)). India is a mosaic of cultures and has been considered the equivalent of Europe, due to the diversity of languages, modes of communication, religious rituals, food habits and dress. Yet in this diversity there is a distinct "Indianness", often undergirded by social hierarchy or the caste system. This stratified Indians into Brahmins, the priestly or highest class, followed by the Kshatriyas or warrior class, then the traders or Vaishyas, and at the lower end the Shudras or menial workers. India also has a large group, known as the dalits, who fall outside this caste system and were often considered the untouchables by the other four castes. Quite often the caste determined the occupation, and since one was born into a caste, social mobility was low. People married within their respective castes, and intermarriages were greatly frowned upon.

Other aspects of "Indianness" include a patriarchal society with respect for elders and belief in family values, an extended joint family and great value placed on hospitality. Indians tend to have an intrinsically religious nature. Many Indians lay great store on *karma* (destiny) or the fruits of one's behaviour, and *dharma* (duty), the importance of living a good life in accordance with religious and social rules (Pio, 2005c). The Indian woman is usually the primary caregiver both for the children and for older members of the family. She is also the one who does all the domestic chores, including cooking, washing and cleaning.

In the last decade India has been on a fast track to wealth and is today one of the largest software and back-office services nations in the world. India is also known internationally for its textiles, gems and jewellery. Further, India produces approximately 2.5 million graduates a year and a large number of highly qualified professionals ([www.eiu.com](http://www.eiu.com)). India has several internationally established industrial groups, and the presence of major global brand names ([www.eiu.com](http://www.eiu.com)). Over a billion people live on India's land mass, providing the advantage of cheap labour, and it is increasingly used

for outsourcing by countries in the European Union and North America. However, India still has 300 million living in poverty, 380 million illiterate, and 160 million without access to clean water (Kriplani, 2004).

These historical markers form the backdrop for the majority of Indian migrants to New Zealand. Interestingly, many of the recent settlers have come seeking a better quality of life for themselves and their children, and have had well-paying jobs and status back in India. One of the primary reasons for entering New Zealand seems to be the prospect of less bureaucratic red tape, international education for the children, an equitable society and the prospect of a varied menu of choices for their economic and social future.

In the context of this cultural backdrop for Indian migrants, culture is seen as a faithful reflection of social life (Griswold, 2004). There is a cornucopia of scholarship on immigration, culture, diversity management, employment of ethnic minorities, cross-cultural research and multicultural counselling. While humans have a desire to adapt and grow, each individual is enculturated with specific norms, values and beliefs early on in life (Kim, 1988, 1993). Such cultural identities serve as an essential framework for organising and interpreting our actions vis-à-vis ourselves and others, and affect how we are culturally defined (Orbe & Harris, 2001). Moreover, because cross-cultural adaptation necessarily involves acculturation and deculturation, various stress levels are experienced, particularly in the initial encounters (Orbe & Harris, 2001). Literature indicates the importance of socio-cultural factors in the journey of a migrant, including the capacity to transfer job skills and continue one's profession or line of work in the new country (Pio, 2004a, b; Watkins-Goffman, 2004).

### **Methodological approach and data sources**

Utilising a qualitative methodology, the current study involved semi-structured, in-depth, face to face interviews with 30 Indian women. Purposeful sampling and the snowballing technique were used to provide access to these women. The women were between 27 and 52 years of age, and all had been born outside New Zealand. All the women were fluent in spoken and written English, and had university degrees with English as the medium of instruction, due to the legacy of the British. The women were all employed or had their own businesses at the time of the interview. Further, all the women had at least one child and all were permanent residents of New Zealand, having lived in this country for one to ten years at the time of the interview.

The interview protocol was based on the literature of ethnic identity, migrant employment and acculturation. There was a discussion guide with open-ended questions, ranging from the nature of the first job and how employment was secured,

to strategies the women used in the early stages of setting up home in New Zealand. The stories included messages that the women may want to send to other women in New Zealand about the experiences of migrants.

The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed time and place. Most of the women preferred to have these interviews at a home, either the researcher's or the interviewee's. Where the women owned a business, the interview was conducted at the business venue. All the interviews were held over numerous cups of tea in an atmosphere of cordiality and hospitality, in keeping with the Indian tradition of hospitality and sharing of confidences in a known territory (Pio, 2004a).

The interviews varied in length from one to three hours, with an average of 75 minutes. Extensive notes taken during the interviews and field notes taken after them were added to the taped interviews, which were transcribed and processed into interview reports. A search for salient themes through coding and revisiting the reports for further refinement and exploration was followed in the analysis of the interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### **Footprints in a new land**

The findings of this study are presented as a composite picture in order to preserve the confidentiality of the women interviewed. In giving voice to the stories of the Indian women, a letter has been formulated expressing their struggles and concerns. The letter is addressed to the women of Aotearoa as a means of presenting the experiences in employment of migrant women – in this case Indian women in New Zealand. Seeking to be as faithful as possible to the interview data, the letter integrates actual quotes from the Indian women interviewed. The letter is constructed using the voice of one Indian woman who, in speaking for her Indian sisters, also requests the understanding and support of all women in New Zealand.

*My story is that of an ordinary woman caught up in the complex web of her own culture and that of a new country. A woman cloaked in the unbreakable embrace of my ethnicity, which often serves as an initial definition of who I am. As I bare my soul and share my experiences with you, I invite your understanding and your hope. I could be called Anita, Daphne, Gita, Persis, Radha or Shabana, for though I am Indian I could have the blood of the Anglo-Saxons running through my veins. Thus I could be Christian, Hindu, Muslim or Zoroastrian. Because India has been home to so many different peoples through the centuries, many of whom stayed back and assimilated into the local culture and intermarried, I could be light- or dark-skinned.*

*Packing our belongings, and holding our dreams in our hearts and minds we*

(my family) stepped into this beautiful new country – a journey of leaping forward into the unknown. Yet, however much one reads up about a new country or hears about it, when one actually starts living in New Zealand, the learning curve is steep. The simplest things, like how to put your garbage out once a week, modes of address, following directions, public transport systems, and the labels on cleaning agents in the supermarkets have to be learnt. The learning curve includes various processes (as different from India) for renting a home, dealing with estate agents, bankers, lawyers and new schools. Within this necessary learning is the overarching need for economic self-sufficiency as a migrant.

Once we had a place to live in, and the children were in school, I started looking for work. I had a wealth of experience from India, with university qualifications, and since these had been accredited by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) I was sure that I would get work appropriate to my qualifications and experience. I checked the newspapers and started applying for vacancies. One week passed. Two weeks went by. At the end of the third week, I called one company and they said that the vacancy had been filled. I did not realise then that this was to be a regular feature of the jobs I applied for. I learnt to redo my CV so that it did not show my place of education – since I had Indian qualifications – and did not show my age. However, my typical Indian name was a dead give-away. I collected a file of regret letters over the next six months, and this was of those organisations that chose to reply. In many instances, there was no reply. Sometimes I managed to get past the hurdle of initial selection, but at the telephone interview, when they heard my accent, the job seemed to disappear into thin air.

With single-minded, agonising clearness I continued courting work, and by then was prepared to take any job. Thankfully I secured work in an aide's capacity, at the lowest rung of an organisation. But I was grateful, for my husband still had not found work. I suppose, like many Indian men, he was conscious of his status, and hence refused to take work that was way below his level in India. I felt blessed that the children were doing well at school.

My story is similar to many of my Indian sisters. A postgraduate qualified friend was picking strawberries; a bilingual friend in two European languages was doing house-sitting; a highly qualified and experienced professional worked as a cleaner, and the list goes on. Thankfully some Indian women, who had financial power to back them, could wait for the right job to come along, saving themselves immense soul-searching and lowered self-efficacy. Many of us Indian women have been known for continuing to wear our Indian attire, the jewellery and long earrings, the "oily plaited hair", and as some say "smelling of curry". But as the

months rolled on, the attire changed to European clothing, the jewellery from India came out for special occasions with the Indian community or a group of people who valued Indian culture, and the long hair was often worn short. Food habits at home continued, because the family wanted Indian food, but for work, I was particular to take food that did not have our Indian herbs and spices.

It is quite exhausting being self-protective and having to defend who you are – your educational qualifications, your experience, which is considered “non-Kiwi” and “non-European” and therefore held in question. I have had occasions where even the English phrases I used have been ridiculed, till I started carrying Webster’s Dictionary around with me to prove my point. Sure, I did not need such responses, but I suppose this was part of the rites of passage as a migrant – rites of passage that have been traumatic. I have been depressed, tearful and wanting to grasp at images from my past and not accept my present reality. But I did not want to become a dried up husk of a woman, bitter with my experiences, and so I clung to my prayers and the support of my family and learnt to change. I decided not to lick my wounds and just go, go, GO!

With God’s grace today I have a good job, many friends from all ethnicities and am doing well. Yes, my husband too has a job and the children are enjoying this new country. Would I go back and live in India? The answer is an emphatic “No!” New Zealand is now my home and after my difficult transition into this country, well, I think I cannot go through any more major transitions. Many of my Indian sisters are also doing well, but this takes approximately two years. I wonder how much heartache and suffering would be eased if we had some kind of a job early on in this gorgeous country. Some Indian women have started their own businesses as they did not want the frustration of entering employment, and well, they were lucky to have the financial backing of their extended families. These women also tend to employ other Indians, thus giving Indian migrants the precious Kiwi experience, in order to find appropriate employment in New Zealand.

Perhaps it is necessary for the women of New Zealand to understand that we too are women just like them. We too have the same hopes and fears and anxieties that beset women. Will our children do well? Who are their friends? When can I afford that new jacket? Will my husband have the dinner ready when I get home from work? Will he remember our anniversary? Will my boss appreciate my efforts to stay back late and complete the report he wanted urgently? Will my child’s birthday party be enjoyed by all her friends? Can I serve as a positive role model for my children? Today I hold a job commensurate with my qualifications and experience, as do many other Indian women, but it’s been a long hard road.

*We Indian women are not here to take away jobs; we are not here to compete. We are here for a better quality of life, to live peacefully and in harmony in God's creation. In the early days of immigration we struggle ... won't you lend us a helping hand? Take a chance on a migrant and employ one. Sure each migrant is different, but then India is such a large country, populated with over a billion people, and you get all kinds of people like you would in any country in the world. Give me a chance; go beyond my skin and my accent and my visible diversity markers. Look into my heart and mind and give me a toehold. I will try not to let you down, for I too want to make a success of my existential leap into Aotearoa. New Zealand is now my homeland and I am filled with grateful wonder for the blessings in my life.*

### **Reflections on culture's currency**

There is an abundant literature on multicultural counselling, ranging from sensitising counsellors and educators to multicultural issues as an interactive approach (Anderson & Cranston-Gingras, 1991), multicultural counselling competencies and standards (Sue et al., 1992), a three-dimensional model for counselling racial/ethnic minorities (Atkinson et al., 1993), culture-centred counselling (Pedersen & Ivey, 1993), the broadening of psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural and existential humanistic thought (Cheatham et al., 1997), using race and culture in counselling (Helms & Cook, 1999), counselling American minorities (Atkinson, 2004), and the practice of multiculturalism as affirming diversity in counselling (Moodley, 1999; Seeman et al., 2004; Smith, 2004). Other writers emphasise the economic, social and political context within which the identity experiences are embedded (Lago & Thompson, 1996; Pio, 2005a; Trevino, 1996), the subtle nuances of the therapist's style (Albeniz & Holmes, 1996), and the much debated ethnic similarity in the patient-therapist dyad (Atkinson, 1983; Knipscheer & Kleber, 2004; Leong et al., 1995; Sue, 1998). The emphasis in this scholarship is on ethnicity and culture, sensitivity to differences, and an awareness of the dynamics of difference and sameness in a counselling relationship.

Schon (1983) and Anderson (1991) write of the importance of reflective moments for counsellors. Reflection that is critical, continuous and constructive (Tanno & Gonzalez, 1998) is necessary for every individual. At the dawn of a new century, we are in a world of multiple and parallel meaning systems, and to understand the connections of culture's currency multicultural counsellors need to address questions such as (Griswold, 2004; Pio, 2005a; Watkins-Goffman, 2004): What is the nature of the woman's work? How did she enter the workforce? What do various cultural aspects mean and how are they being interpreted in a new country? How does the woman deal with underemployment? What personal resources does this woman have? Who are the



role models in her life? What are her family ties? What are the challenges she faces with language, such as accent and phraseology? How open, flexible and multicultural is her outlook? How does she negotiate her identity as she bridges two worlds? How does she cope with the changing dynamics at home, particularly if she gets a job before her husband? Does the woman have access to post-settlement services? How does she cope with job dissatisfaction and periods of unemployment? What is the impact of her early months in a new country on her self-efficacy?

In an article entitled "The future of us", Macfie (2005, p. 47) writes, "We've invited in people whose qualifications are not suitable for the New Zealand workforce, and whose mastery of English is not good enough to satisfy employers, and then we've largely left them to sink or swim. On top of that, we've been pretty ambivalent about our new-found status as a multicultural society ..." In "Degrees of difference", a recent study into the status of university degree holders and their employment with specific reference to migrants, it is noted that migrants may "encounter barriers to prospective employment because qualifications obtained overseas are not recognised and accepted in New Zealand or because of discrimination by employers" (Statistics New Zealand, 2005, p. 2). Further, "newer immigrants sometimes take on lower skilled white collar jobs, before moving into occupations more commensurate with their qualifications" (Statistics New Zealand, 2005, p. 13). The report notes that migrants on the whole are generally more qualified than the local population, and that the migrant man seems to take longer to get work than the migrant woman (Statistics New Zealand, 2005). Ethnic women face barriers to full participation in society as well as economic security, hence the "vision of Aotearoa New Zealand will be an equitable inclusive and sustainable society where all women can achieve their aspirations" (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004, p. 7).

Such research fits in with the stories of the Indian women, all university graduates, who were interviewed for this study. Fortunately research, including the current study, shows that "years in New Zealand emerges as a key variable, showing that employment outcomes improve with duration of residence and indicating that for most qualified migrants, unemployment or under-employment in low skilled work is a transitional experience rather than a long term one" (Pio, 2004c, 2005b; Statistics New Zealand, 2005, p. 21). Culture's currency is crucial particularly when one considers that New Zealand as a country is getting browner and older (Macfie, 2005). This emphasises the constant need for awareness of diversity and multicultural issues in the arena of counselling.

Limitations of the current study include the nature of the sample, which has tapped into women who are between 27 and 52 years, whereas it is possible that looking at

younger women may present a different picture. It may also be possible to tease out specific factors in the external environment in each of the years that the women spend in New Zealand and link these to identity negotiations and self-efficacy, whereas in this study the difference in years was not examined. Further, it is possible that the age of the women above 45 years could influence their flexibility and degree of openness. Future areas of research could focus on longitudinal studies of these women, the specific strategies they employ to shift into work appropriate to their experience and qualifications, initial work experiences of other ethnic minority women in New Zealand, and the experiences of men in the world of work and its impact on their families.

*Culture's Currency: Indian Women and Multicultural Counselling* has presented the context of two worlds within which Indian women migrants are enfolded when they enter New Zealand. It is a poignant hope that an outcome of this paper will be a future where each woman can rejoice in her own state of well-being, as she contributes to her own empowerment and enrichment along with that of her sisters in this nation and around the world.

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