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## UNIT 70 WOMEN AS BEARERS OF CULTURE

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### 70.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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After studying this Unit you will be able to:

- Understand the concepts of gender in migration and diaspora formation
- Identify the forces of cultural differences and change vis-à-vis gender representation
- Examine the role of gender in cultural retention and transmission
- Evaluate the role of gender in identity assertion and formation

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### 70.2 INTRODUCTION

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As mentioned in the earlier units, diasporas having lived for generations in the receiving country, continue to retain their identity and culture of the country of origin. But they also, at the same time, take up the customs, rituals and cultural practices of the adopted country, leading to formation of 'creole' culture. A diaspora's identification with their home country has generational impact as the first generation immigrants are more intimately connected to their home country as compared to the second generation who are born and brought up in the host country. While the parents continue to identify themselves with the country of origin, the second generation children find themselves much closer to the culture of the adopted country. The process of assimilation and integration has been found to be more effective with the second generation than the first generation.

During the 19th and 20th century, women were the passive partners in the immigration and diaspora formation process. But there has been a change in the 21st century when women have assumed a dominant role in immigration and now outnumber their male counterparts. Women are also a common link between the first and second generation immigrants and major transmitters of identity, culture, rituals and customs of the home country.

This Unit will focus on the role of gender, especially women as the main vehicle of cultural transmission and the ensuing cultural assimilation over generations. Some of these cultural norms are expressed through celebrations of festivals, dress, food, music, cinema and art. As it is not possible to cover the cultural practices of Indian diaspora living in various countries, the Unit has taken a case study from South Africa to understand the phenomenon of cultural transmission through women.

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### **70.3 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON GENDER ROLE**

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The process of immigration and diaspora formation is a dynamic and ongoing process and there is a continuum of change over the generations. As mentioned earlier, the first generation migrants continue to identify themselves with the home country because of emotional attachment and cultural and religious identification. The second generation because of cultural proximity to the host country is far removed from the 'other' culture of their parental place of belonging. The difference extends not only socially, culturally and politically but also in their habits and daily rituals, choice of music and art. There are also differences in culturally constructed ideologies and worldview between the first and second-generation migrants and the diaspora with women playing a major role in the process.

These cultural aspects in general could be understood as "the total shared, learned behaviour of a...functionally autonomous society that has maintained its existence through a sufficient number of generations" (Margaret Mead; see Mead and Rhoda, 2000: pp.22-23). It is passed down inter-generationally through tangible and intangible heritage that includes physical artifacts, clothing, food, language, religious beliefs, traditions, festivals and music. Historically, the choice of leaving home for a new location was decided by men, but the onus of retaining memories of home, of recreating them within the new contexts and ultimately acting as harbingers of homeland culture is a task deeply associated with women.

Women have a central role as homemakers and keepers of the diasporic cultures. Traditional gender norms kept men engaged in work to earn a livelihood, while women were confined within domestic walls, as home makers. They were primarily mothers, wives and sisters who took care of their home; were responsible for the bearing and rearing of children and cooked food. Women formed the foundation of family life (Kuper, 1960: 118). Women also carried the responsibility for safeguarding 'proper' cultural traditions and appropriate behaviour as "transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, songs, cuisine and... the mother tongue" (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 627).

Women are at the forefront of cultural propagation and occupy a significant role

as bearers of culture in society. In the process of migration to a new land, women act as custodians of their cultural heritage. They employ multiple strategies for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, reproduction of memories of homes, family values and culture within new geographies. They are also the one who form the nodal point of interaction between the home and host countries' culture and devise ways to handle the cultural differences and avoid the point of conflict between diverse social groups.

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## 70.4 SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN DIASPORIC LIVES

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Understanding the historical experiences of Indian indentured women is a difficult task because colonial history has excluded women's narratives. In fact, the White colonizers did not consider women as valuable workforce and requisitioned only strong/healthy men as indentured labourers. However, in 1860 for example, the colonial government in India made it mandatory that of the total number of indentured labourers shipped to Natal, 35% were to be women. A few years later, this proportion was raised to 50% (Kuper, 1960: 5).

The female populace that migrated with the men was initially confined to the domestic sphere but later joined the labour force, albeit at a lower remuneration than their male counterparts (Walker, 1990: pp.151-152). Indentured women faced enormous challenges as they were given smaller food rations than men and often denied food if they were pregnant or ill. Many were also subjected to sexual violence.

Quite disparagingly, the colonizers saw women as amoral subjects and an 'unnecessary nuisance' in society, which made them largely invisible in the eyes of the law (Desai and Goolam, 2010: pp.105, 218). The Coolie Commission required the compulsory registration of Indian women as either 'married', 'single' or 'concubines'. Widowed women were excluded from official marriage records which were 'a further loss of identity for women who already had a "nonhuman status" for being without a husband' (Ibid. 21).

Women's role has been both symbolic (to represent the nation or culture), and functional (to transmit it) to their children and other women. Women have borne the weight of cultural representation through prescriptions concerning their appropriate appearance and behavior, but at the same time they deeply internalize culture and the religious traditions that often communicate it to other social group. Particularly in anti-colonial or racial minority contexts, religion and culture have been politically mobilized and women have been called upon as both cultural emblems and as cultural police, in relation to other women (Winter 2016).

Diasporic women are not only cultural bearers of their families or communities, but also of their nations. Women "represent the nation through moral virtue and social norms, and to reproduce the national/ethnic group in biological as well as cultural terms" (Mortada 2010: 56). Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias's (1989) important work entitled *Woman-Nation-State*, laid the groundwork for understanding the connections between women and national/ethnic processes. Yuval-Davis and Anthias focus on women as "reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/ national groups, ... as transmitters of its culture; [and] ... as signifiers

of ethnic/ national differences-as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories" (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1990: 7-9).

Indian women usually migrate within the patriarchal framework and cultural considerations, and are supposed to preserve it as the bearers of Indian tradition, yet the process of migration and economic self-dependency give them an opportunity to assert independence, and redefine roles and perceptions of the self. Standing in-between the two worlds, with complex realities of unequal power dynamics of the homeland and stereotypical spaces of the hostland, women tend to experience conflicting subjectivities of freedom and subjugation. The space of the hyphen often gives them a freedom for self-exploration and deliberation to conceive new identities and move beyond the fixed definitions of femininity. Indian culture in a diasporic setting is under constant making and remaking while women as carriers of Indian culture play an important role in this process of both continuity and rupture (Pande 2018).

The public performance of Indian culture is a key element through which diaspora re-create meanings to identities relevant to a multicultural world. For example, the Miss India-Worldwide pageant is one such event. The kickoff banquet of the 2002 Miss India-Worldwide pageant, held in downtown Durban, was designed to be an elite and high-profile event broadly aimed at South Africans, including South African Indians. Beauty pageants of this sort offer an important site for observing globalized, gendered productions of national identity. Particularly in the case of India, the success of Indian beauty queens at international beauty pageants generated considerable debate and in thinking about Indian women and thus Indian culture as "global" (Sangari 2001).

The construction of Indian culture during this event offers a compelling snapshot of the ways in which the diaspora draws on both preexisting notions of high culture and transnational scripts of authentic Indianness. Women who were politically active during the political struggle tend to challenge more overtly prevailing cultural constructions of Indianness and Indian womanhood through transnational notions of Indianness while embracing an inclusive identity (Radhakrishnan 2005).

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## **70.5 THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN CREATING 'INDIAN IDENTITY'**

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Indentured women's unique struggle and their spirit for community, family and religion brought them together. The practice of Indian traditions in a foreign land provided them with a sense of normality, security, belonging, comfort and a link with the homeland. This not only strengthened their unique Indian identity but also enabled them to preserve and recreate their culture in a new geographical context. Thus, 'Indianness' has not only survived, but has been re-imagined and transmitted across generations over the last 160 years (Patel and Tina, 2012).

There were several reasons that led to the development of a specific Indian identity among the diaspora in which women played an equal role as their male counterparts.

a) Majority of the indentured labourers chose to settle in cities where there

was a concentration of the diverse communities of Indians. They formed a geographical and sociological identity through close community and kinship and in which women were closely associated.

- b) In the 1920's, Indian identity was strongly influenced by the growth of the nationalist movement in India. It helped formulate ideas of Indian subjectivity and strengthened the connection that Indian immigrants had with their home country. Some of the Indians like Madam Bikaji Cama played an important role in espousing India's cause in European countries.
- c) The British colonizers felt threatened by the increasing economic and cultural prosperity of the 'Passenger Indians' and lobbied for restrictions to be placed on them. The Asiatic Land Tenure Act of 1946 (also known as the Ghetto Act) in South Africa for example restricted Asian ownership and occupation of land. It prohibited Asians from owning or occupying property without a permit (Berghe, 1965: 127).

The British colonial power was also responsible in creating racial divisions by dividing the human race into the Whites, Asians (which included Indians, Coloureds, and Black Africans. It was irrespective of the gender and women too were classified based on the colour of the skin. They were also discriminated against based on colour while accessing and possessing resources. For example in South Africa, the Population Registration Act (1950) required citizens to be classified and registered according to their racial characteristics. There was also the Group Areas Act that ensured separate housing for each racial group.

As a result of this, Indians were forced to move into residential townships such as Chatsworth and Phoenix in Natal, reserved exclusively for them (Kuper, 1960: pp.263-264). This new social engineering and geographical exclusiveness in the newly established Indian townships marks the beginning of a racialized identity - what came to be officially known as the 'Indian community'. Prior to this there was a greater degree of mixing between people of various colour compositions.

Apparently, Indians practiced cultural exclusivity by marrying within their own communities, religions and caste groupings, but the notion of caste has evolved over time (Yengde, 2015). In the recent decades, there have been some marriages between Indians and people of other races, thus diluting the homogeneity of the Indian community. However, during the last few decades there have been a number of cases of mixed marriages between the Afro-Asian communities which has been popularly called 'Blasian'. But, this is not as common as marriages between the White and the Black people.

There were an estimated 8,114 'Blasian' married couples in 2018, which is about 0.1% of the total percentage of the married peoples (Mohan, 2020). 'Blasian' couples face a number of challenges. The Black and the White couples are likely to be Christian, whereas 'Blasian' couples are likely to be from different religions; either Christian or Muslim/Hindu etc. which is an added cultural barrier. Almost all mixed marriages receive some form of backlash from the older generation who grew up in the era of racial segregation (Amoateng and Tim, 2017: 13).

### **Check Your Progress 1**

Note: a) Check your answer with possible answers given at the end of the unit

1. Write a short note on the role of women as bearers and transmitters of culture.

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2. How have Indian women been able to retain the Indianness' of their tradition?

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## **70.6 WOMEN AS BEARERS OF CULTURE: CASE STUDY OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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Although interracial marriages dilute the cultural traits, women who marry within the community are known to carry it forward from generation to generation. Sometimes, identity groups have to face conflict and struggle to retain their culture as was noticed among the Indians in South Africa who were also involved in a cultural struggle – to practice, preserve and promote the Indian heritage. They strove to keep their vibrant cultural heritage alive by propagating their language, clothing, food, festivals and traditions. Women were at the forefront of this struggle and were successful in transforming for example Durban into ‘Little India’ – the largest Indian city outside of India (Mukherji, 2011).

Indian immigrant women had carried with them their rich cultural heritage – tangible and intangible. They took with them images/statues of their revered Gods, jewellery, spices (turmeric, chillies, curry leaves) and food grains like lentils, rice etc. These elements found their way into the culture, cuisine, costumes and traditions of their lives within the South African society (Pande, 2020: 116). Today, Indian culture is visible in Durban as “Indian women are distinctive in vivid saris; mosques and temples break the line of colonial architecture with minarets and domes;...shops are stocked with silks, brassware and spices,... oriental jewellery and trinketry,...lentils, rice, beans and oils, betel leaf and areca nut, lime, camphor, incense sticks, curry powders and masala” (Kuper, 1960: xiii).

The various markers of Indian culture include food, language, clothing, religion, festivals and cinema.. The following sections look at these various markers of Indian culture and examine them through a gendered lens.

We take the example of the diasporic Indian community in South Africa as a case study. ‘Indian’ culture has survived well in South Africa. Herein, the contribution of women in the Indian diaspora needs to be underscored. As harbingers of native traditions, they have successfully practiced and preserved their languages, religions/festivals, cuisines, clothing styles and art forms.

These have been passed down through generations and most of these traditional practices/cuisine and clothing styles survive even today, though there has been some dilution in certain markers of Indian culture over the years. The current generation of Indian diaspora is westernized and has assimilated well into the majority South African culture – their values, education, media/entertainment and food. South Africa is one of the most heterogeneous countries on the African continent. The Indian temples, mosques, markets, fusion dishes, and cultural community centres, have kept the ‘little India’ alive in Durban. Women in the diaspora have made sustained attempts to maintain and carry forward their ‘Indianness’, retrieve and safeguard Indian values, culture, traditions and cuisine, and transmit them to future generations.

### 70.6.1 Food, Cuisines and Spices



**Indian Spice Bazaar, Durban (Photo: Victoria Street Market, 2018)**

Food consumption is largely contingent upon purchasing capacity and traditional tastes. A survey carried out in 1941 indicated that of the typical income of £125 per year in Indian immigrant households in Natal, approximately 55 to 70 per cent was spent on food (Burrows, 1943: 33). In 2004, the average annual expenditure on food for South African households in the lowest income group was estimated around 4000 rands (approx. 16,000 INR) (Martins, 2005: 43).

The poor among the immigrant community most commonly consumed Rice, as it was cheap and easily accessible. Other dietary staples included dal (lentils), cereals and pulses, ghee (clarified butter), chilies, vegetables and tea. A majority of the Indian population were Hindus who followed a strict vegetarian diet, while the Muslim and Christian communities, who constituted the bulk of the trading class, also consumed beef, mutton and poultry (Burrows, 1943: 34). Women were responsible for sourcing and preparing these foods using Indian traditional methods and flavours and thus were able to preserve their traditional cuisine. The influence of older women, particularly grandmothers, was significant in terms of how food was prepared, what their families ate, when they fasted and what they consumed on those days (Singh and Nadene, 2010: 41).

In addition to the pure Indian cuisine passed down through generations, fusion food too, is popular within the Indian community. Indian cuisine blended with South African flavours because women incorporated traditional Zulu ingredients like Amasi (fermented milk drink) and relishes like Chakalaka (spicy vegetable condiment) (South African Tourism, 2020). One of the most iconic dishes and a true symbol of Indian and South African fusion cuisine is Durban's signature

‘Bunny Chow’. It is a spicy Indian curry served in a bowl of hollowed-out bread. The dish was created by the Indian indentured labourers. It is a staple food in South Africa and is available in almost every restaurant and food stall.

Another well known marker of ‘Indianness’ is the Indian Spice Bazaar at the Victoria Street Market, in Durban Central. Operational since 1870, it is the oldest market in Durban and exhibits the vibrancy and richness of Indian culture. Although famous for its Indian spice varieties, the bazaar also stocks traditional African artwork, seafood, Indian clothing, accessories and food and henna tattoo stalls, amongst others.

### **70.6.2 Language**

South Africans invariably understand the Indian community as a monolithic unit. However, it is divided along linguistic, religious and cultural lines. South African Indians speak at least five Indian languages – Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu – along with English, Afrikaans and Bantu languages (Kuper, 1960: xvii-xviii).

Languages help formulate distinct socio-linguistic sects within homogeneous communities. For example, Urdu was brought to Durban by indentured labourers as an ‘Islamic’ language in the 1890s. A sacred geographical community that spoke the language practiced Islamic rituals and traditions that helped form a distinctly Muslim identity. Urdu was also chosen as the language of instruction in mosques, madrasas and shrines in place of regional languages like Konkani, Malayalam or Tamil. Similarly, various other ethnic and religious sects were also formed along linguistic lines within the Indian community. Language thus helped preserve the diversity of the Indian diaspora (Green, 2008: 531-532).

The Constitution of South Africa also provides for the establishment of a statutory Pan South African Language Board to promote and ensure respect for all languages; including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996: 4).

Today, English is gradually replacing most Indian languages as the lingua franca of the younger generation. As a result of westernization, successive generations have lost touch with the ancestral language and cannot read their sacred texts as they are not familiar with the language in which they are written. However, a small minority of the Indian population, mainly older women, have been making sustained efforts to preserve and promote Indian culture through local community organizations and culture programmes. They also promote their traditional languages by speaking it at home and passing them down through generations.

### **70.6.3 Religious Festivals**

The Indian diaspora in South Africa is a mix of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Zoroastrians and agnostics (Kuper, 1960: xvii-xviii). More than eighty percent of the indentured immigrants that came to South Africa were Hindu, about twelve per cent were Muslims and the rest were Christians (Hughes, 2007: 157). Among the ‘passenger Indians’, Muslims formed the majority, whereas



Parsis and agnostics made up a small minority (Hiralal, 2008: 27). Muslim traders were often referred to as 'Arab traders' due to their traditional attire and long robes (Hiralal, 2008: 28; Tayob, 1995: 55). The indentured laborers brought with them a rich heritage steeped in their ancestral religion and culture. To express their spirituality, the well-to-do trading class with financial means established places of worship wherever they settled. In doing so, they enriched the broad cultural vistas of South Africa (Naidoo, 1986: 136).

For many years, women performed most religious functions at home. As they were bound to domestic duties, it made the observance of religious rituals relatively easy. Religion was also the defining factor for finalising matrimonial alliances, the beliefs they chose to pass on to their children and the food they ate. Levels of religious influence within households were traditionally determined by age and experience – grandmothers and elder female members guided on rituals procedures regarding rites of passage such as death, or celebratory occasions such as birth or marriage ceremonies (Singh and Nadene, 2010: 41). However, over successive generations, women have become more active economically, and thereby less interested in ritualistic religious practices which they learnt from the earlier generations (Naidoo, 1987: 135).

**Hindu Temples:** Indian women were instrumental in setting up Hindu temples in South Africa (Desai and Goolam, 2019). They played an active part in temple-related activities and in celebrating festivals in the temples at a community level. The first Indian immigrants established the Durban Hindu Temple, believed to be the oldest temple in all of South Africa, in 1875. The temple complex has three shrines – dedicated to Shiva, Draupadi and Mariamman each. It was declared a national monument in 1980.

The Hindu religion has one of the strongest presences of the 'Divine Feminine' amongst all major world religions. A considerable number of goddesses are known and worshipped throughout the various Hindu sects (Bryant, 2007: 441). The most revered goddess is arguably 'Shakti' (meaning: energy, power or strength), who represents the dynamic cosmic energy that moves the universe. She is regarded as a divine feminine power who takes various forms – the gracious Parvati (Mother goddess or the goddess of fertility, love and beauty), the fierce Kali (goddess of time, creation, destruction and power), Durga (goddess of war), Saraswati (goddess of knowledge) and Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) (Bryant, 2007: 443-444; Klostermaier, 2007: 238-247). Sita is an incarnation of goddess Lakshmi. She is often worshipped by Hindu women as the ideal wife, mother and daughter. She is also a symbol of true female resilience as she remained honorable throughout her abduction, imprisonment and exile. Draupadi, on the other hand, is worshipped as a reincarnation of goddess Kali. Goddess 'Mariamman' (meaning: Mother Mari) is the South Indian Hindu goddess Mother as well the goddess of rain. (Hiltebeitel, 1988: 72).

South Africa also has several temples dedicated to specific cultural deities. For example, the Clairwood Shree Siva Soobramoniar Temple (estb. in 1889) is dedicated specifically to 'Muruga' – son of the deity Shiva and an ancient God of the Tamil community. The Temple is known for its annual Thaipusam Kavadi festival, which is celebrated in the Tamil month of Thai (January/February). It entails large processions and is a major public event for the Tamilians in South Africa.

Another notable temple is the Umbilo Shree Ambalavaanar Alayam Temple, traditionally known as the First River Temple. It was built along the banks of the Umbilo River in 1875. It is believed to be one of the very first Hindu Temples on the African continent. The Umbilo Temple was also the first to celebrate the fire walking festival, which takes place annually in the month of March. Thousands of Hindu devotees attend the festivals, a majority of whom are women.

One of the largest religious movements in Durban today is the Hare Krishna Movement. Srila Prabhupada founded it in 1975, when he first visited Durban. The sect has also built the Sri-Sri Radha Radhanath Mandir (also known as the ISKCON Temple) in Chatsworth, Durban. It is one of the largest Hindu temples on the African continent and a popular site of worship for the Hindu diaspora.

**Hindu Festivals:** Some of the most widely observed Hindu festivals in South Africa are Diwali, Shivratri (Night of Shiva), Mariamman and Thaipusam festivals, Pongal, Ram Navami (Rama's Birthday), Krishna Ashtami (Krishna's Birthday) and 'Thimithi' (or 'fire walking'). Diwali is the most widely celebrated festival throughout all sects of the South African Hindu community. It is celebrated with the ritual lighting of lamps and prayers, which are usually led by the elder women of the household. Many Hindu organizations and local communities organize funfairs, dance and singing programmes on this day.

Mariamman and Thaipusam Kavadi festivals are major public events in South Africa. For the Indian Tamil community, they are a part of the process of mobilizing identity as well as personal devotion. The Mariamman festival is celebrated through animal sacrifice, possessions, making vows, fasting, skin piercings and fire walking. Thaipusam Kavadi, involves many of the rituals and austerities of the Mariamman festival. In addition, devotees ceremoniously carry a Kavadi or 'burden' (such as a pot of milk carried on the head). They walk on a set route around the temple carrying the Kavadi on their head and offer it at the temple (Ganesh, 2010: 33).



**Firewalking festival (Photo: Getty images, 2016)**

'Thimithi' or firewalking is a festival that celebrates Draupadi, one of the female characters of Mahabharata, who is considered an incarnation of goddess Mariamman. According to the Tamil Hindu mythology, Draupadi walked on fire to prove her chastity and purify herself after several attempts were made to

defile her. Similarly, devotees walk on hot coals as an act of purification and as an ordeal to prove their innocence before God. It is believed that those with a strong faith will emerge from the fire unharmed. Devotees often enter a state of trance, and believe that they are possessed by a deity who bestows extraordinary powers upon them (Diesel, 1991: 33; see also Maurya, 2017).

Islam in Durban: Many among the Indian immigrant population that first came to South Africa were Muslims. They carried with them a rich cultural heritage that gradually percolated into the socio-cultural ethos of Durban. Today about 1.6% of the total South African population practices Islam. Majority of them are Sunni Muslims, while a small percentage is Shias and Ahmadis (Lehohla, 2016: 42). The main festivals celebrated by the Muslim community include Muharram (month of mourning, marked by a procession on the tenth day), Ramadan (month of fasting), Eid-al-Fitr (end of Ramadan), Eid-al-Adha (marked by animal sacrifice) and Eid-e-Milad (birthday of Prophet Muhammad).

Muharram was the first communal indentured event to be observed in Natal. It was the only occasion in the year for which labourers from different plantations could come together as they were granted three days of annual leave. It was also known as ‘Coolie Christmas’ because it brought Muslims, Christians and Hindus together in a carnival-like celebration on the streets of Natal. Muharram thus became less of a Muslim festival and more of an ‘Indian festival’ (Desai and Goolam, 2010: 223). This is representative of the unity that binds the heterogeneous Indian community in South Africa.

Almost two decades after the arrival of the indentured Indian Muslims in Natal, the Jumma Masjid (or ‘Friday Mosque’) was built on Grey Street in Durban. It was the first formal site of Muslim worship in the country. It is built as a series of interlinking buildings, arcades and corridors, in which commerce, religion and community activities take place together. It is the second largest mosque in South Africa and can accommodate up to 6000 worshippers.

The Sufi Saheb Badshah Peer Masjid is another important religious site for Muslims in Durban. It was established in 1895 by saint Shah Ghulam Muhammad (popularly known as Sufi Saheb). It consists of a mosque, a residential quarter, an orphanage, a soup kitchen, welfare department, school, madrasa (Islamic school) and a cemetery within the same complex.



Muharram procession in Durban (Photo: SABC News, 2018).

**Christianity in Durban:** The Christian community is a small minority (only 1.4 %) of the ‘old diaspora’. It can be divided into two sub groups – the ‘traditional’ Christians (Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Roman Catholics), and the ‘pentecostals’ – Christians who are relatively newer converts (Pillay, 1991: 1). Since Christianity is the dominant religion in South Africa, the Indian Christian immigrants encountered less friction in settling and integrating into South African society. Some of the main Christian festivals celebrated include Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost (marking 50 days after Sunday) and Ascension Day (commemorating Jesus Christ's ascension into heaven). Some of the most popular churches in Durban are: The Methodist Church, St Thomas’ Church, St Mary’s Church, The Emmanuel Cathedral and St Nicholas Orthodox Church.

#### 70.6.4 Ethnic Dresses and Attires

Dress is a significant cultural marker – strongly rooted in religious and ethnic beliefs. Indian immigrants have adapted their traditional clothing patterns and styles in a foreign land and at the same time kept their roots intact. However, as a result of the creativity and efforts of the women folk, the Indian attire—among Hindus, Muslims and Christians—has survived in Durban, though with some modifications.

Dress among Indian women in Durban varies significantly – according to their religion, region, age, personal comfort and social circumstances. In almost all religions, women over 60 years of age cover themselves from neck to feet. However, the age-old practice of covering the face with the sari ‘pallu’ (the loose end of a sari) in front of elder men is no longer practiced in most communities (Singh and Nadene, 2010: 41).

For the Hindus, the sari continues to be the most popular and preferred form of dress outside the house. Within the home, a full length gown or dress is worn as a form of respect towards male members. These specific cultural dress codes followed by older Indian women teach younger generations the value of religious customs and prescribed clothing rules. The mythological characters of Sita and Draupadi are often used as reference points for younger Hindu women to emulate in terms of values and dress. The sari is a symbol of marriage among Hindu women and is generally worn by elderly women. However, it is widely available in myriad colours and styles and the younger Indian women also wear it on special occasions like weddings. The new generations of PIOs are quite flexible in terms of dress style and emulate western and Bollywood fashion trends. Longish dresses, jeans/trousers, sports shirts and Indian designed cotton tops (kurtas) are worn across all religious communities (Singh and Nadene, 2010: 42).

Among the Indian Muslim community in Durban, majority of the women wear the burqa/hijab or veil. Men sport long robes, especially for Friday prayers at the mosque and at festivals like Eid (Hiralal, 2008: 28). The Indian Christian community, on the other hand, has less strict dress codes and rules. It has integrated and adapted well to the cultural milieu of Durban. However, as successive generations become increasingly westernized, “traditional dress codes and personal choices become fertile grounds for contestation between... upward mobility and familial/community expectations about identities” (Singh

and Nadene, 2010: 43).

### 70.6.5 Music, Cinema and Television

Indian movies and TV channels are easily accessible and widely consumed by the Indian community. Although Indian languages are less frequently spoken among the younger generation of PIOs, Bollywood films and TV shows with English subtitles are quite popular. Indian TV channels like Zee TV, B4U, NDTV and Sony, as well as Tamil channels like Sun TV and KTV, have been introduced and well received in Durban over the last two decades. DVD and Netflix versions of Bollywood films are also in high demand in the country and a major source of influence on the youth culture. Spiritual and religious channels like Aastha and Lotus TV were launched in South Africa in 2004. They are two of the most watched channels in the country. They broadcast prayers, rituals, religious sermons and scriptures right into Indian homes in Durban, and thus contribute to keeping religious and cultural beliefs alive within the diaspora (Bansal, 2013).

The first Bollywood film festival in Durban was launched in 2002. It ran for about seven weeks. It travelled across the continent and screened a wide range of Bollywood films that attracted Indian audiences from across the country and across different generations of the Indian diaspora (Jager, 2002). Exposure to Bollywood and Indian TV shows is thus a persuasive factor in shaping the young generation of Indian women, many of whom uphold the Indian TV stars as their role models. It is also significant in educating the younger generations on the varied facets of Indian culture that otherwise might have been inaccessible (Singh and Nadene, 2010: 45).

#### Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Check your answer with possible answers given at the end of the unit

- 3 Describe briefly the fusion of food between Indian and South African cuisines?

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- 4. Describe the religious practice and significance of 'Thimithi' or firewalking practiced by Indian diaspora.

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### 70.7 LET US SUM UP

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The Unit discussed the critical role played by women as carriers of cultural traditions in the diaspora. By virtue of their roles as wives, mothers and homemakers, women have been tasked with rearing and socializing the next

generation and inculcating in them the values and traditions of the native culture. Even though Indian women usually migrate within the patriarchal framework and cultural considerations, and are supposed to preserve it as the bearers of Indian tradition, we see that the process of migration and economic self-dependency give them an opportunity to assert independence, and redefine their roles and assert their selfhood and identity. Indian culture in a diasporic setting is under constant making and remaking while women as carriers of Indian culture play an important role in this process of both continuity and rupture. Through a detailed case study of the Indian diasporic community in South Africa, we examined the contribution of women in keeping alive and transmitting culture and tradition through food, dress, religion and ritual, language and popular culture.

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## 70.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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### Check your progress 1

1. Diasporic women are not only cultural bearers of their families or communities, but also of their nations. Indian women usually migrate within the patriarchal framework and cultural considerations, and are supposed to preserve it as the bearers of Indian tradition, yet the process of migration and economic self-dependency give them an opportunity to assert independence, and redefine roles and perceptions of the self. Standing in-between the two worlds, with complex realities of unequal power dynamics of the homeland and stereotypical spaces of the hostland, women tend to experience conflicting subjectivities of freedom and subjugation.
2. Indentured women's unique struggle and their spirit for community, family and religion brought them together. The practice of Indian traditions in a foreign land provided them with a sense of normality, security, belonging, comfort and a link with the homeland. This not only strengthened their unique Indian identity but also enabled them to preserve and recreate their culture in a new geographical context. Thus, 'Indianness' has not only survived, but has been re-imagined and transmitted across generations over the last 160 years. Apparently, Indians practiced cultural exclusivity by marrying within their own communities, religions and caste groupings, but the notion of caste has evolved over time. In the recent decades, there have been some marriages between Indians and people of other races, thus diluting the homogeneity of the Indian community.

### Check your progress 2

3. In addition to the pure Indian cuisine passed down through generations, fusion food has also become popular within the Indian community. Indian cuisine blended with South African flavours because women incorporated traditional Zulu ingredients like Amasi (fermented milk drink) and relishes like Chakalaka (spicy vegetable condiment) (South African Tourism, 2020). One of the most iconic dishes and a true symbol of Indian and South African fusion cuisine is Durban's signature 'Bunny Chow'. It is a spicy Indian curry served in a bowl of hollowed-out bread. The dish is understood to be created by the Indian indentured labourers. It is a staple food in South Africa and is available in almost every restaurant and food stall.
4. 'Thimithi' or firewalking is a festival that celebrates Draupadi, one of the female characters of Mahabharata, who is considered an incarnation of goddess Mariamman. According to the Tamil Hindu mythology, Draupadi walked on fire to prove her chastity and purify herself after several attempts were made to defile her. Similarly, devotees walk on hot coals as an act of purification and as an ordeal to prove their innocence before God. It is believed that those with a strong faith will emerge from the fire unharmed. Devotees often enter a state of trance, and believe that they are possessed by a deity who bestows extraordinary powers upon them.