

THE GRIMITIYA IN SOUTH AFRICA – PRESENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

A Girmitiya's perspective

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16th November 2024 will mark the 164th anniversary of *Girmitiya* Arrival in Durban, then the only port in the erstwhile province of Natal, South Africa (SA). Presently, this region has the largest settlement of Indians outside Bharat.

Poignantly, November 16th always evokes painful memories for us *Girmitiyas* in SA, legatees of an “agreement” for bonded labour at a time when slavery was being abandoned to serve the capitalist designs of colonizers in the British colonies. The 1833 abolition of slavery transformed the designs of the colonial system, replacing slavery with indentured servitude from the then British controlled Madras Presidency and the Purvanchal areas of Union Provinces and Bihar ¹.

The *Girimit* (indentureship) was never a system designed for survival, only for profit. Despite the seemingly insurmountable odds, like elsewhere in the diaspora, the *Girmitiyas* managed to flourish, preserving and evolving centuries-old culture and over the 163 years in South Africa continue to demonstrate admirable resilience to bear adversity with courage, vision and fortitude.

Whilst indentureship extended between 1834-1917, it was curtailed in 1911 in Natal; a total of 152 200 *Girmitiyas* were transported, the 3rd highest during the indenture program².

The recruitment was stopped, the result the efforts of the Indian nationalists spearheaded by Gopal Krishna Gokhale to pressurize the Government of India into abolishing the system; it has been suggested that this was prompted by the *Girmitiya's* potential political value rather than because of the heinous system; Gokhale suggested that Natal's labour recruitment could be used as a bargaining point to gain a better position for merchant “free” Indians^{3, 4}.

Pari pasu, as per the Indian Relief Act (1914) which followed the halting of migration of merchants to Natal, the wives and children of parents living in South Africa were allowed to immigrate; this continued until the late 1920's⁵. Presently Indians make up less than 2.5% of the SA population of over 60 million; in Guyana, Fiji and Mauritius, Indians and make between 30- 70%. The *Girmitiya* component of the Indian population is not known⁶. Regardless of their reasons for crossing the ‘*kala pani*’, our ancestors lived through neo-slavery conditions, through unliveable wages, unbalanced gender ratios and had their humanity constantly eroded. As stated by Shri Ravi Dev:

“we were kept in a state of uncertainty: not slaves but certainly not free man, we must explore this uncertainty because of its lingering effects on our present predicament”⁷.

Today, notwithstanding our triumphs and tribulations, we *Girmitiyas* in SA stand united in our multiethnic, multicultural country with common and shared aspirations and energy to mould our emerging democracy into the global comity of nations.

However, there are several challenges.....

***Girmitiya* historicity**

The many publications, books, theses on our *Girmitiya* historicity are compromised by poor documentation and archiving, an underappreciated legacy of the racialized population registrations and relocations of administrations overseeing population registration. Historical perspectives from India will certainly provide important insights into the study of the *Girmit* – such as the details of push factors for recruitment, the details of connivance between British administrators in Natal and India, the document and emigration process and administration at the embarkment ports.

The Increasing interest in *Girmitiya* history is welcomed, but needs constant calibration, to progress from the narrative and descriptive to being interpretive and readily transported from staid academia to community platforms and school curricula. Currently, the *Girmitiya* narrative in SA has largely been documented by non-*Girmitiyas*, approximating “epistemic violence”. Thus, attempts in the direction of a social history, the voices of the indentured remain rather muted⁸. It is posited that *Girmitiyas* are best equipped to reflect on their past challenges, their dehumanization, anger, their history and critically their future. In SA *Girmitiyas* cannot speak of a shared national history with a common experience until our own unique *Girmit* history is appreciated.

The Guyanese Lomarch Roopnarine has commented (Guyana Chronicle 2nd October 2022):

“..... historians generally write about what they have researched and that it was time for scholars of Girmitiyas to write about themselves”.

SA *Girmitiyas*: Helots of the empire

- For several reasons, the *Girmitiya* in SA has been the most victimized in the erstwhile British empire’ - “*the helots of the empire*”, as suggested by Henry Polak.
- *Girmitiyas* in SA have borne the brunt of legislated racism and cultural hegemony and were only recognized as permanent citizens in SA in 1960.
- In no other colony in the British Empire did challenges (racial and economic competition) arise to the extent as in Natal; this has been attributed to no other colony having a sizeable settled White population as well a considerable indigenous (African) population.
- Opportunities for education were racialised; the first secondary school for Indians was established some 70 years after *Girmitiya* arrival – and then in an urban area largely populated by the privileged. Access to tertiary education in SA began mid-1950s⁹.
- Compared to the rest of the diaspora, there developed a large merchant class population that constituted at least 30% of the Indian population. *Girmitiyas* have been lazily conflated with this privileged merchant class. The Indian Relief Act (1914) which followed the halting of migration of merchants to Natal, allowed the wives and children of parents living in South Africa to immigrate; this continued until the late 1920’s⁵.
- The merchant class travelled with a “British Indian Passport”. Several merchants had their own ships that made fortnight/monthly trips to Durban, accounting for the

sharp rise in the merchant Indian migration to Natal. The success of merchant Indians in Natal attracted other traders from India who came from upper middle class business families and included, those:

“.....who held important posts in local government as mayors and magistrates, or whose ancestors had received valuable jagirs (land gifts) from the Moghuls” ¹⁰.

- Sanctions against SA by India (1946) prompted the global isolation until 1994 severed links between the diaspora and Bharat - entrenched the isolation of the *Girmitiya*, [particularly] compared to the merchant Indian.
- As much the entire Indian community was affected, the poor, invariably the *Girmitiya*, suffered the most; the privileged could attain their aspirations abroad.

Genesis of class divide

The so-called “Britain’s solemn pledge” spoke grandly of equal rights and opportunities to Indians, being British subjects, was reported by Naoroji¹¹ in a seminal article that reproduced important transcripts, as reproduced (verbatim), below:.

“BRITAIN’S SOLEMN PLEDGE.”

Act of Parliament 1833 (India):-

“That no Native of the said territories, nor any natural-born subject of His Majesty resident therein, shall by reason only of his religion, place of birth, descent, or any of them, be disabled from holding any place, office, or employment under the said Company.”

(The Company’s duties were transferred to the Crown.)

The Queen’s Proclamation of 1838:-

“We hold ourselves bound to the Natives of our Indian territories by the same obligations of duty which bind us to all our other subjects, and these obligations, by the blessing of Almighty God, we shall faithfully and conscientiously fulfil”

The knowledge of this by the informed, affluent merchant class and their kin and kith, created expectations that clashed with the worldview of the racist white colonists. It has been suggested that this was the *raison d’être* for Gandhi’s foray into politics in Natal, SA ^{11, 12}.

The *Girimitiyas* were largely dispatched to rural areas, quartered to barracks (“coolie lines) and like Africans, were pass bearing with restricted movement.

Merchant Indians were not under the jurisdictions of the Protector (as *Girimitiyas* were) and were mainly urban.

Effectively, the *Girimitiyas* locus standing was reduced to a non-descript piece of paper –so evocatively described by Amitav Ghosh in *Smoke and Ashes*: pp 89-90:

“These yellowing and tattered slips of paper have an aura of sacredness about them, as well they should, being testaments to the existence of people who might otherwise have been totally effaced from history.

There is something deeply moving about these flimsy pieces of paper with their ragged folds and water stains: every crease and mark is evidence of how fiercely they were guarded

during those interminable voyages in the cramped holds of vessels that were often former slave ships (like the Ibis).

Some of the later certificates of emigration include photographs of the migrants. These images too are often heartrending: the people in them appear impossibly young, just children, their eyes clouded with confusion, suspicion and hurt. It is hard to imagine the courage it must have taken for them to embark on journeys to unknown destinations”.

Although largely functioning in rural Natal and effectively quarantined to barracks on the allocated estates, *Girmitiyas* were conflated with the merchant class. It has been opined that this conflation was used to lever the interests of merchants and the Indian nationalists.

Girmitiyas who ventured into business (after indentureship – “free” *Girmit*) were handicapped by the monopoly of trade by the merchant class who had direct access to business (and credit) compared to “free” *Girmit* Indians.

In the light of the foregoing, the differential status of merchant and *Girmitiya* Indians created a class distinction - with passenger Indians often perceiving themselves as superior - as part of commercial bourgeoisie and not part of working class ¹³.

Genesis of anti-Indian racism

The genesis of anti-Indian ^{racism} perpetrated by Whites is multi-layered and multifactorial. Anti-Indian racism must be viewed within the imperial context of colonial attitudes towards people of colour. Inherent racial prejudice by Whites was an established reality in the various outposts of the British Empire.

Thus, Robert Knox in *The Races of Men* (1850) ¹⁴, wrote:

“race is everything” and that human character, both national and individual, *“is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs”.*

As per du Bois, Charles Dilke in *Greater Britain* (1868) was quite prescriptive in his views on race¹⁵:

“Nature seems to intend the English race of officers to direct and guide the cheap labour of the Eastern races.”

An editorial in the *Mercury* (leading Natal newspaper) in 1870¹⁶ resonates the White mindset:

“The proper destiny of the Anglo-Saxon in South Africa is to be the guardian, the guide, the controller of the coloured people around him. He is to impart to them his civilisation without raising them to his level”.

The colonial view of the time was that Europeans were ingenious, inventive and governed by law Africans were crafty, lazy, careless and subject to the arbitrary will of tribal leaders. Indians were held to be untrustworthy, cunning and opportunistic. It was inevitable that the Indian (*Girmitiya* or merchant), would be subjected to similar discriminatory attitudes and racial domination from whites and treated as “exogenous”.

Years later the Jan Smuts, statesman and Prime Minister of the Union of SA 1919 -24 and 1939 – 48, would comment¹⁷:

South Africa is a little epic of European civilisation on a dark continent. India is threatening this noble experiment ... All along this east coast of Africa from Mombasa to Durban and ultimately to Cape Town they are invading, infiltrating, penetrating in all sorts of devious

ways to reverse the role which we have thought our destiny ... We stand for something which will go and be lost to the world, if India gets control of eastern Africa”.

For Whites, the success of the Indian merchant and the recognition that Indians in general had a resilience and temperament matched by enterprise not encountered in the 300 years occupation of SA, exacerbated that almost intrinsic racial mindset:

The repatriation of Indians was a key issue in the National Party (the architects of apartheid) election manifesto in 1948¹⁸:

“The party holds the view that Indians are a foreign and outlandish element which is unassimilable. They can never become part of the country and therefore must be treated as an immigrant community. The party accepts as a basis of its policy the repatriation of as many Indians as possible... No Indian immigrant will be allowed to enter the country. So long as there are still Indians in the country, a definite policy of separation will be applied.”

Anti-Indian legislation calling for repatriation of Indians and White settlers seeking protection against established Indian traders and the reservation of the most suitable lands began from the late 19th century, culminated in the notorious apartheid legislation.

India was also at the forefront in the isolation of apartheid SA¹⁹; India was the first country to sever trade relations with the apartheid Government (in 1946) and subsequently imposed a complete - diplomatic, commercial, cultural and sports - embargo on South Africa.

Inevitably the sanctions against apartheid SA affected the poor and marginalized; for the majority of Indians, especially the *Girmitiyas* compared to the merchant Indian (given the historically tenuous links *Girmitiyas* had with India), the sanctions against SA ensured the continued isolation from the Motherland – effectively becoming the forgotten children of Bharat.

The *Girmitiya*’s history, challenges and marginalization in the wider Indian population and suffering has been largely under appreciated. The seeming failure of the earlier generation *Girmitiyas* to raise these issues may reflect a dissociative amnesia; regardless, it behoves writers on the *Girmitiya* narrative in SA give consideration to this issue.

***Girmitiya* challenges in present day SA**

Inevitably, political correctness and wokeism have gravitated to patronizing descriptions of the *Girmitiya* narrative in our multiethnic society. This is evident in the debate – for example - about the Arrival Day for *Girmitiyas* and the construction of a *Girmitiya* monument in Durban, home to the largest settlement of *Girmitiya* in the diaspora. Unlike in Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Guyana, we do not as yet (though promised). have a *Girmitiya* monument; neither is the Indian Arrival Day a national holiday.

It has been suggested that the *Girmitiya* monument must be ^{20, 21}:

“inclusive and one that unifies all South Africans”, that it should have “significance and relevance for all South Africans and not just Indians” and “transcend the historical confines of a single community (and) commemorate a chapter in a broader South African narrative”.

And furthermore:

“.....warned that honouring the past should not “lead to ‘ghettoisation’ and isolation from historical relationships with other ‘racial’ groups in post-apartheid South Africa”.

Such posturings only serve to airbrush the history and remarkable contribution made by *Girmitiyas* to the national patrimony.

Few South African Indian activists have suggested that aligning with the Indian diaspora would undermine the legacies of anti-apartheid struggle, that embracing Indian ethnicity was held to be antithetical to the ideology of non-racialism!!!!

Unsurprisingly, the very premise of global Indianness was questioned ²²:

“[Diaspora] is a word I abhor ... We, Indian South Africans, have had to struggle hard to claim our South Africanness and that is something that we jealously guard. We are not a diaspora of India in South Africa because we claimed South Africa for our own”.

***Girmitiyas* and ethnic dilemmas in SA**

In its scope and reach Apartheid was the arrowhead of the so-called “coloniality of power”, the living legacy of white imperialism. The current ethnic dilemmas that bedevil the *Girmitiya* is rooted therein.

The Peruvian Anibal Quijano describes the coloniality of power as having 3 dimensions: systems of racial hierarchy, systems of knowledge and cultural systems. The systems of racial hierarchy has particular relevance in SA society which was inspired by the Eurocentric Christian model that used skin colour and phenotype to structure inferiority and superiority to justify white hegemony²³.

Anti-Indian racism must be viewed within the larger imperial construct and attitudes towards person of colour. The Systems of Racial hierarchy in SA, as in Guyana, saw: *“Whites on top and Blacks at the bottom. Other groups like Indians and Chinese were placed in intermediate positions - for which they fought to maintain their subaltern status”* ⁷.

The dilemmas *Girmitiyas* face have been exacerbated by the nefarious legacies of apartheid. *Most agree that the cornerstone of apartheid was the 1953 Education act.*

In essence, this act motivated for a Christian national education model that had separate schools and differential education for Whites, Africans, Indians and Coloureds:

Thus HF Verwoed, the apartheid Minister of Native Affairs held that:

“There is no space for him [the “Native”] in the European Community above certain forms of labour. For this reason it is of no avail for him to receive training which has its aim in the absorption of the European Community, where he cannot be absorbed”. ²⁴

Segregated education disadvantaged all black groups, but it was particularly devastating for Africans.

The legacy of this differential education continues; the devastating impact on crucial parameters central to standard Human Development (income, unemployment rate, poverty and education rates amongst different races), is summarized in Table 2.

Poverty is highest among African, lowest among Whites – likewise the unemployment rates. The average income as a % of white income is lowest for Africans. The share of persons aged 25-64 years with degree attained during 2020 is also lowest among Africans.

With respect to the Human Development Index (HDI) which measures 3 aspects of basic human development namely health, education and standard of living) shows that SA has the lowest HDI in the diaspora (Table 3) ²⁵.

The SA government “pro-poor policies”, quotas and mandatory minimum African owned stakes in businesses have done little to narrow inequality. In post-apartheid South Africa, affluence has been de-racialised; poverty and inequality have remained racialized. In terms of poverty, unemployment, income and degree acquisition, Africans remain at the bottom of the totem pole. Unsurprisingly, as per the Gini coefficient (a summary measure of income inequality), SA remains the most unequal country in the world, ranking 1st out of 164 countries.

Rampant corruption, poor governance, deplorable service delivery, inept leadership has ensured a poor HDI and Gini coefficient. It is in this maelstrom of societal that Indians are challenged daily. Ethnic challenges are not due to ethnic differences *per se*, but due to socioeconomic factors in diverse population groups bedeviled by historical inequities.

The political theorist David Horowitz has written extensively on the issue of ethnic conflict in diverse population groups. Simplified, Horowitz’s social-psychological theory of ethnic conflict hold that ethnic conflicts are fuelled by political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial claims that characterise the competing groups - and not by ethnic differences *per se* ²⁶; he crystallises the issue as in the equation (below):

$$\text{Group Legitimacy} + \text{Group Comparison} + \text{Group Worth} = \text{Group Expectation}$$

It is appropriate to adapt this to contemporary SA society.

In respect of Group Legitimacy, the African has numerical superiority, greater suffering and is indigenous.

However, rampant socio-economic inequalities, rising unemployment, endemic corruption and the lack of a visionary and servant leadership stymies the pursuit of Group Worth among the African majority.

Juxtapose this with the socioeconomic standing of competing groups (*Grimitiya* and Whites) the Group Comparison that weights against the long-suffering African majority.

This results in failed Group expectation. In SA, given that the majority of the poor and the socioeconomically marginalized are Africans, the issue of group comparisons and a stymied group expectation, inevitably takes on a racial character - a legacy of spatial separation and differential resources. (Figure1)

Central to addressing ethnic dilemmas in SA is assiduously addressing the longstanding socioeconomic challenges; this requires an ethical leadership. *Girmitiyas* have a right to the national patrimony, rights to cultural and civic citizenship as constituents of the “universal class” that represents all groups in the nation.

Contributions by the *Girmitiyas* in SA ²⁷

The immense contribution of the Indian people to the economic development of Natal has been consistently recognized. In a leading article, early in 1865, the *Natal Mercury* pointed out that:

"Coolie (sic) immigration after several years' experience of it is deemed more essential to our prosperity than ever. It is the vitalizing principle..... Had it not been for coolie (sic) labour, we should certainly not have to say that our export increased from £26,000 in 1863 to £100,000 in 1864 and has prospects of a greater increase than before it. ..."

In 1901 the Protector of Indian Immigrants noted that employers realized the indispensability of Indian labour and pointed out that if Indian labour was withdrawn the *"country would at once be simply paralysed"*. Sir Liege Hulett, ex-Prime Minister of Natal Colony and a sugar baron, said (in 1903) *"Durban was absolutely built by the Indian people"* 28,29.

Heydenrych has expressed that *"without Indian labour, the Natal railways could hardly have been built and operated"* 30.

All the contributions made by *Grimitiyas* were made on the bedrock of "secret slavery", systematic abuse, human right violation, floggings, rape, malnutrition, suicides and overwork (17- or 18-hour day).

The progeny of the estate owners and similar beneficiaries of *Girmitiya* struggles, suffering and sacrifices, continue to thrive today; there has been no atonement, no acknowledgement of the evils committed.

Though othered from mainstream society, *Girmitiya* demonstrated "True Grit" – were thrifty. saved and lived for the morrow, always worked hard and invested in education. to this end, it will be remiss, given my professional affiliation, to comment on the *Girmitiya* contributions to Medicine in SA.

Pursuit of medical training for *Girmitiya* was hamstrung by the lack of formal schooling (above). Access to medical education in SA was the preserve of Whites (until 1950s). The opportunity to study abroad was an option for those well off; for those who did qualify as doctors, rampant racism ensured that there were neither opportunities in the public sector nor so scope for postgraduate training.

It speaks to the spirit of human endeavor, sacrifice and perseverance that despite unimaginable challenges, *Girmitiya* descendants play a pivotal role in the delivery of medical care and training in SA today, an enviable contribution that far exceeds our miniscule population in SA (2.5%).

In 1951, following the creation of the University of Natal Medical school to train students of colour (African, Indian and Coloured) in SA, the first specialists of colour were of *girmitiya* origin: Dr CN Pillay (Surgery), Dr BT Naidoo (Paediatrics), Dr S Kallichurun (Pathology), Dr Somers (Cardiology), Dr KS Naidoo (Orthopaedics). Dr Kallichurun was also the first Medical Dean of colour as well as the first female Medical Dean in SA.

Quo vadis SA Girmitiya

The SA *Girmitiya* identity and historicity must be highlighted at all appropriate fora. This has great importance for *Girmitiyas* in SA; it is imperative that our history as long-suffering victims of imperialism be presented as being distinct from the privileged sector of the wider Indian community.

Our struggle as *Girmitiyas* - while not comparable to the suffering of Africans - must resonate to the wider population, for example, in school curricula.

Steps towards this end should include:

- Endeavours to modernise *Girmitiya* museums, landmarks (arrival and resistance sites)
- Motivation for archives facilities/associations in the diaspora and in Bharat.
- Embracing the “Indentured” Labour Route Project (ILRP), launched in 2014 in Mauritius, which has the potential (below) for *Girmitiyas* to:
 - collaborate across diaspora to protect minority rights whenever violated.
 - forge linkages in the diaspora to ascertain common historical challenges and commonalities and pursue geneology.
 - afford a platform to articulate their experiences and thoughts.
 - motivate for *Girmitiya* history to be taught in school curricula
 - motivate for a *Girmitiya* studies chair at Diaspora Universities
 - support the development of *Girmitiya* diaspora database that has been conceived by the Dutch *Girmitiyas* – a remarkable and innovative undertaking.
 - profile their icons in the diaspora

The prime minister of Mauritius, Shri Jugnauth has commented, in respect of the ILRP, that :
“ *this project will not only help create a network of persons and institutions across the indentured diaspora but also contribute to nation building efforts** resulting into a greater understanding among peoples and societies within the indentured diaspora and the countries themselves”. ³¹

Conclusion

In many aspects of society and academia, *Girmitiyas* in SA have made tremendous contributions to the national patrimony and have attained great heights evolving from a pariah to a paragon status in many aspects of SA society.

The endeavors by the current government in Bharat to recognize the *Girmitiya* is laudable. With the increasing recognition of the India diaspora as a worthy soft power, this has potential benefit for Bharat given the nature of changing geopolitics. This has been intimated by Shri Ravi Dev⁷:

“We are living in a critical era when that (world) order is being challenged by India with the rise of these countries, their diasporas will inevitably be drawn into the penumbras of their ambitions”.

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Table 1: Distribution of *Girmitiyas* between 1834 – 1917 to colonial counties; adapted from various sources².

Colony migrated to	Period	Number
Mauritius	1843-1871	451 796
British Guyana	1834-1917	238 900
Natal	1860-1911	152 200
Trinidad	1845-1917	143 900
Fiji	1879-1916	61 000
Guadeloupe	1854-1885	42 200
Jamaica	1854-1889	36 400
Suriname	1873-1916	34 300
Martinique	1854-1889	25 500
French Guyana	1856-1895	19 276
St Lucia	1859-1895	4 354
Granada	1857-1885	3 200
St Vincent	1861-1880	2 472
Belize	1858-1-	
St Kitts	1861	361
Nevis	1874	315
St Croix	1863	321

Table 2: Income, poverty, unemployment and education rates among different races in SA

INCOME, POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION RATES AMONG DIFFERENT RACES: SUMMARY

	WHITE	INDIAN	COLOURED	AFRICAN
POVERTY (%) +	1	5.9	41.3	64.2
INCOME (%) \$	100	60	25	18
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (%) #	7.8	13.7	26.5	36.8
DEGREE *	26.8	15.1	5	4.8

* share of persons aged 25-64 years with degree attained 2020

+ Statistics South Africa and South Africa Human Rights Commission

Statistics South Africa 2020

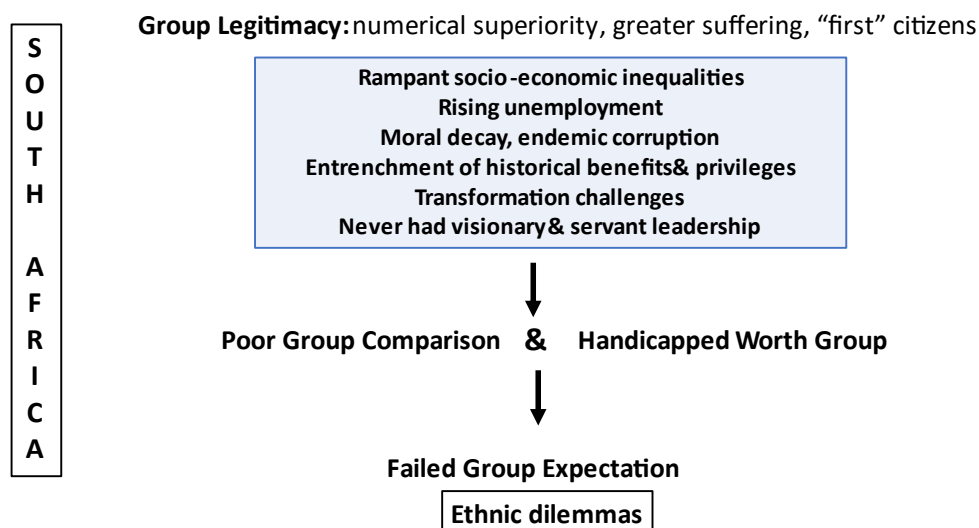
\$ South Africa: Twenty-Five Years Since Apartheid. <https://origins.osu.edu/article/south-africa-mandela->

Table 3: Human Development Index (HDI) from United Development Programme, September 2022²⁵

Country	HDI
Trinidad and Tobago	0.810
Malaysia	0.803
Malaysia	0.802
Fiji	0.730
Suriname	0.730
Guyana	0.714
South Africa	0.713

Figure 1: Girmitiyas in South Africa – ethnic challenges

Group Legitimacy + Group Comparison + Group Worth = Group expectations (Politics of Entitlement)



Donald L. Horowitz. Ethnic Groups in Conflict, Updated Edition With a New Preface 2001; 2nd Ed. University of California Press