

## ***Graduate Research Essay***

# **THE CHINESE & INDIAN DIASPORAS IN NEW ZEALAND: AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

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Migration has always been a major force in human history, but never more so than during last 150 years. Peoples from every corner of the globe have moved in unprecedented numbers and in many directions. Generated first by colonial, and then postcolonial geopolitical and economic realities, these migrations resulted in the formation of new communities. These communities became sites where beliefs, traditions and cultural practices from countries of origin encountered the host society. Some were lost, others endured unchanged and most were modified and adapted.

The study of the phenomenon of diaspora has become fertile ground for scholars from many disciplines. Used initially to refer to the dispersal of the Jews amongst the Gentiles in the eighth and ninth centuries B.C., “diaspora” has, in the second half of the twentieth century, come to refer to the scattering of any group of people in significant numbers from their “mother” country. It is a flexible and therefore useful term describing a universal human process rather than the movement of any one ethnic group or the specifics of a particular situation. It also neatly sidesteps one of the most vexed questions of modern identity politics; the issue of the interface between nationality and ethnicity, seeming to allow a non-contentious connection with both the country of origin and the new country.

It has long been held that New Zealand, tucked away at the bottom of the South Pacific, was largely untouched by global diasporic movements until relatively recently. It is true that the vast majority of New Zealanders still trace their ancestry to Māori, Anglo Saxon or Anglo Celtic roots. James Belich describes the cultural imperatives that drove this demographic pattern

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as a psychological phenomenon he dubs 'Better Britain'. According to this, from the mid-nineteenth century until well into the second half of the twentieth century, a major source of national pride was a perception that New Zealand was an improved version of the "mother" country, both culturally and racially.<sup>2</sup> However, while these forces have strongly coloured popular perceptions of who we are and where we come from, some have long realised that this belief system obscures the actuality of the situation. In the first edition of his seminal *A History of New Zealand*, Keith Sinclair (referring to non-Māori New Zealanders) wrote:

Quite reputable and recent books assert that New Zealanders are ninety-nine per cent British, a statement which might be taken to mean that ninety-nine per cent of their ancestors came from the British Isles. In fact it means that most New Zealanders (ninety-nine per cent in fact) were born within the British Commonwealth and Empire; the figure includes persons from India, Fiji, Samoa.... The European population is undoubtedly predominantly of British descent, but what proportion may have one or more German, Scandinavian Yugoslav or other non-British ancestor within the past century is quite unknown.<sup>3</sup>

Here Sinclair was alluding to the fact that New Zealand society includes multiple, albeit small, diasporic populations, and that their presence has traditionally been obscured or minimised by prevalent thinking on national origins. With White people of non-British Origin, for example Dalmatians and Italians, it was easy to subsume their experience into that of the mainstream.<sup>4</sup> For non-whites such as Indians and Chinese, the two oldest ethnic minority groups in New Zealand, this was more difficult. After initial hostilities subsided, myths developed about these groups, such as that of the 'model-minority'. According to this understanding of race, Chinese, and to a lesser extent Indian New Zealanders, are seen as differently coloured Kiwis, who may look different and eat foreign food, but are assumed and encouraged to share the values, attitudes and experience of society at large.<sup>5</sup>

This paper challenges this interpretation by presenting the oral histories of five New Zealand-born Chinese and Indian doctors, and situating them as members of communities that are, in fact, part of worldwide diasporic movements, rather than slight variations on the supposedly homogenous New Zealand society. The basic issue addressed is how second and third generation members of New Zealand's oldest and largest ethnic minorities have negotiated their identities while growing up in a culture that

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<sup>2</sup> James Belich *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland, 2001), 27-30, 243-4.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Sinclair *A History of New Zealand* (Middlesex, 1959), 297.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Roscoe, *Documentary in New Zealand: An Immigrant Nation* (Palmerston North, 1999), 113.

<sup>5</sup> Bevan Yee, "Coping With Insecurity: Everyday Experiences of Chinese New Zealanders," in *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity: The Chinese in New Zealand*, ed. Manying Ip (Auckland, 2003), 217-221.

for many years has largely ignored cultural difference. While the focus for the study is the period 1935–1995, it is important to acknowledge that in more recent times New Zealand society has become much more welcoming of cultural plurality.<sup>6</sup> The interviews were recorded in 2003. The study attempts to tell these histories from ‘within’, and to tie evidence of lived experience to aspects of the theories of the relationship between ethnicity, nationality and identity construction that are being developed by scholars both in New Zealand and overseas. It is also centrally concerned with placing the New Zealand experience in the context of the international literature on diaspora.

Some will question the validity of aggregating experience across ethnic groups. While it is acknowledged that both the Indian and Chinese communities in New Zealand have their own distinctive and particular history, the purpose of this paper is to interrogate identity formation amongst New Zealanders from ethnic minorities, rather than to advance scholarship on any particular history. Using this frame of reference, it makes sense to compare experience across ethnic groups to develop the wider picture of what it means to be a born and bred New Zealander when one is neither Pākehā nor Māori.

### **Chinese and Indian Diasporic Communities in New Zealand**

In order to put the histories of Chinese and Indian New Zealanders into the context of larger diasporic patterns, one must first consider the historical circumstances of these diasporas in New Zealand.

The first Chinese to arrive in New Zealand came to seek gold in the second half of the nineteenth century. The initial migrants were men who left their families behind in Canton, at that time racked by economic recession and civil unrest, and who intended to make some capital and return to China.<sup>7</sup> At its peak, the population of these men reached 5,004 in 1881.<sup>8</sup> The history of discrimination against the Chinese in New Zealand is now widely known, thanks largely to the efforts of historians from the Chinese community itself. “Highlights” of this history include the 1871 Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry to investigate claims that the Chinese posed a criminal, moral, sexual and public health risk to New Zealanders; the 1881 Chinese Immigration Act

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<sup>6</sup> This process, which started with the redirection of the immigration regulations under the Kirk government to a merit-based system rather than one based on country of origin, was underscored by Prime Minister Bolger’s identification of New Zealand as an Asian nation in 1990, and has been immeasurably influenced by the ongoing renaissance of Māori culture. In the last decade, a combination of factors, including the rising numbers of new New Zealanders and increased political will to address ethnic minority issues has meant that cultural diversity has become something to be publicly celebrated in this country.

<sup>7</sup> James Ng, “Talk on the Chinese in New Zealand” (2002): <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/history/chineseinNZ.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

which introduced the notorious poll tax at ten pounds a head (subsequently increased to 100 pounds in 1896); and legislation barring Chinese from seeking naturalisation in 1908.<sup>9</sup> Despite these measures, a small, largely male Chinese community remained in New Zealand after the gold ran out, running market gardens and laundries, until the Japanese invasion of Kwangtung prompted the First Labour Government to allow the families of Chinese in New Zealand to join them as war refugees. The advent of World War Two delayed repatriation, and in 1947, they were finally granted permanent residency, facilitating the beginnings of the New Zealand Chinese community in its present form.<sup>10</sup> There was very little other Asian immigration to New Zealand until changes in immigration policy in 1986, which generated an influx of people of Chinese ethnicity from China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan swamping the older New Zealand Chinese population numerically, and some would contend, culturally.<sup>11</sup>

The history of the Indian community in New Zealand is not as well researched or as well documented as that of the Chinese. The earliest settlers were Punjabi men, who settled in the Waikato between 1890 and 1910 and mainly worked as scrub cutters.<sup>12</sup> The larger group of Indians to arrive in New Zealand during this pioneer phase came from southern Gujarat, starting to arrive in small groups around 1910.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the 1921 Immigration Restriction Amendment Act, Indians were less subject to restrictive immigration measures because of their status as British subjects. This allowed many Indian men to come to New Zealand as “sojourners” and eventually return home with accumulated funds.<sup>14</sup> The 1921 Act enabled the Customs service to decline entry permits to people of non-European ancestry, stemming the traffic back and forth between India and New Zealand. Following pressure from the British Colonial Office, existing migrants were allowed a re-entry permit, and to bring their wives and children to New Zealand.<sup>15</sup> This changed the nature of Indian immigration to New Zealand. Between 1920 and 1930, overall numbers declined, but those who stayed put down more permanent roots and brought their wives and children to New

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<sup>9</sup> Malcolm McKinnon *Immigrants and Citizens* (Wellington, 1996), 23. It should be noted that the 1871 enquiry was remarkably fair minded, and found no evidence of any threat to society posed by the Chinese.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart William Grief *The Overseas Chinese in New Zealand* (Singapore, 1974), 45.

<sup>11</sup> James Ng, “Social Differences Between Kiwi-Chinese and Chinese Newcomers,” paper presented at “Chinese in Australasia and the Pacific: Old and New Migrations and Cultural Change,” Conference for the Study of Overseas Chinese, University of Otago, Dunedin, 1998, published at <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/ChinConf/Title.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Hew McLeod *Punjabis in New Zealand: A History of Punjabi Migration, 1890-1940* (Amritsar, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Jacqueline Leckie “The Southernmost Indian Diaspora: From Gujarat to Aotearoa,” *South Asia*, v. 21 (1998), 165.

<sup>14</sup> Terence McGee “Indian Settlement in New Zealand: 1900-1956,” *New Zealand Geographer*, v. 18 (1962): 206-9.

<sup>15</sup> Leckie “The Southernmost Indian Diaspora,” 172.

Zealand. Like the Chinese community, this newly established outpost of the Indian diaspora remained largely unchanged for several decades in the post-war period. This changed with the loosening of regulations in 1972, which allowed non-white professionals to come to New Zealand. At this point a few doctors, engineers and academics made the journey from India to New Zealand.<sup>16</sup> The sweeping changes made in 1986 have drastically altered the face of the Indian community in New Zealand, with an influx of Fiji Indians after the 1984 military coup in Fiji, as well as an increased flow of economic migrants from India itself.

From these brief historical sketches, it is possible to highlight some general points about how the phenomenon of Asian diaspora has played out in New Zealand. In 1990, Clarke, Peach and Vertovec, a group of British anthropologists and long time researchers of the South Asian diaspora in the United Kingdom, proposed a scheme by which to comparatively analyse South Asian diasporic populations.<sup>17</sup> With slight adaptation, it provides a useful matrix through which to view any diasporic community. It groups factors which impact on the diasporic experience into four general headings;

1. Migration processes and factors of settlement: type of migration, extent of ties with country of origin, economic activity in new country, geographic features of settlement, infrastructure of 'host' society.
2. Cultural composition: religion, language, region of origin, degree of cultural homogeneity.
3. Social structure and political power: extent and nature of ethnic pluralism in new country, class composition of diasporic group, degree of 'institutionalised racism', involvement in party politics.
4. Community development: organizations, leadership and degree of ethnic convergence or conflict.

This framework throws new light onto the histories of New Zealand's Chinese and Indian communities and underscores the strong similarities between the Chinese and Indian experience in New Zealand, despite their very different cultural backgrounds. A good illustration of the similarities is the type of migration that initially brought Indian and Chinese to these shores. Both groups primarily came to New Zealand in search of economic betterment. The initial migrants from both countries came from the landed rural peasantry. Several of the factors that encouraged migration are also common to both groups. Changing economic realities impacted heavily on rural people in the countries of origin, as did the absence of regulations preventing their entry to New Zealand, a particularly important after restrictive legislation had been enacted in other diasporic sites such as the

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<sup>16</sup> Steve Brawley "No 'White Policy' in New Zealand: Fact and Fiction in New Zealand's Asian Immigration Record, 1946–1972," *New Zealand Journal of History*, v.27, n.1 (1993), 32-3.

<sup>17</sup> C. Clarke, C. Peach and S. Vertovec "Introduction: themes in the study of South Asian diaspora," in *South Asians: Overseas Migration and Ethnicity*, eds. C. Clarke, C. Peach and S. Vertovec (Cambridge, 1990), 1-29.

United States and Australia.<sup>18</sup> New Zealand, perhaps by virtue of its geographical isolation and small population, seems not to have attracted the merchants or traders who were a feature of diasporic communities elsewhere. However, hard-working peasants found the occupational opportunities available – gold mining for the Chinese and hawking and scrub cutting for the Indians – attractive.

For both groups, ‘sojourning’ (the intention to return to India and China with the fruits of economic gains) and chain migration (people already in New Zealand encouraging and enabling friends and relatives to migrate) were strong features of early contact. These phenomena changed primarily because the New Zealand government transformed its official policy towards non-white immigrants. Following this decision, the men who had arrived as sojourners had to decide whether to go back home or settle permanently. Most left, but a few stayed and formed the nuclei of the New Zealand Asian communities. This is not to say that there was not still traffic between India and China and New Zealand. The point is that it was confined to the immediate families of those already here.<sup>19</sup> This meant that both communities developed an unusually high degree of cultural homogeneity in terms of region of origin, language, religion, class, level of education and, in the case of Indians, caste. While some in the Indian community maintained strong personal and financial ties with their villages of origin, the strong grip of the communist government in China throughout the second half of the twentieth century limited the contact Chinese New Zealanders had with Mainland China.<sup>20</sup>

The insularity of these numerically small and culturally homogenous nascent communities was augmented by a perception that they were not welcome or equal in New Zealand society.<sup>21</sup> Writers from within both communities have commented on this. Lalita Kasanji, a Gujarati sociology student, noted that

The third major reason why the Gujaratis’ activities remained within their community was because of the New Zealand European and Indian relationship. Even though the relationships between the two populations improved after World War Two, and many Gujarati women found their neighbours to be friendly and concerned about their welfare, the Gujaratis at times found Europeans to be prejudiced and discriminatory towards Indians. Gujaratis would find that on buses many Europeans would point to dilapidated houses and assert that Indians lived in them....<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> McKinnon *Immigrants and Citizens*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication, Mrs Karuna Ranchod, Historian, Wellington Indian Association. Ng “Talk on the Chinese in New Zealand,” 6.

<sup>21</sup> Raj Vasil and Hong-Key Yoon, *New Zealanders of Asian Origin* (Wellington, 1996), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Lalita Kasanji, “The Gujaratis in Wellington: The Study of an Ethnic Group,” (M.A. thesis, Victoria University Wellington, 1982), 77.

Similarly, in a paper presented in 2002, Wong Liu Sheung, a fourth generation Chinese New Zealander wrote:

Esther Fung tells of her grandfather who walked the streets selling his wares making a living, and while doing so, carried a bucket to place over his head in order to avoid the flying objects hurled at him. In my own [personal] history, children would hunt me down to pelt me with stones, if I was ever alone. Such unfriendly acts of public ridicule reduce people to the status of second or third class citizens, while victims struggle to find ways to live in such fearful environments.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to random acts of hostility, there were also instances of organised discrimination, such as the activities of the White New Zealand League, whose members opposed Indians purchasing land in the 1920s, and the official restrictions that meant Chinese were unable to vote, stand on juries or work in the public service until 1952.<sup>24</sup>

These factors drove communities in on themselves. Community organizations such as the New Zealand Indian Association, and various clan and church based Chinese groups, were established to provide social contact and support and to maintain cultural and religious practices.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps because of the small numbers involved, 'Little Indias' and 'Chinatowns' did not really develop in New Zealand, though in cities, certain streets, such as Haining St in Wellington had concentrated Chinese populations in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Chinese and Indian cultural organizations remained tight knit and homogenous throughout the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s. The influx of Chinese and Indians from different backgrounds in the 1980s and 90s provided an opportunity for change, but, for the Indian Association at least, the assimilation of new groups proved difficult, and eventually new organizations were formed to serve the newcomers.

### **Uncovering the History of Asian New Zealanders**

Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, Britain's South Asian population grew from a few thousand to 413,155, clustering in industrial cities where manufacturing jobs were available.<sup>26</sup> Their difference was highly visible to

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<sup>23</sup> Wong Liu Shueng "The Moulding of the Silent Immigrants: New Zealand Born Chinese," presented at the Auckland University of Technology Chinese Centre, 15 May 2002: <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/identity/Wongliushueng.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 8; Leckie "The Southernmost Indian Diaspora," 171.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Young, "Politics and Culture – The background and recent developments in the political culture of Chinese New Zealanders," presented at Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies, Victoria University Wellington, Chinese New Zealand Seminar Series, 26 March 2003: <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/politics/politicsandculture.htm>, 4-6.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Ballard "The Emergence of *Desh Pardesh*," in *The South Asian Presence in Britain*, ed. Roger Ballard (London, 1990), 6-7.

both the mainstream and to the migrants themselves. This resulted in open conflict and a subsequent outpouring of literature, academic and fictional, about what it means to be a British person of South Asian ancestry. British South Asians can read about their own history and see it at the movies. This is not the case for Asian New Zealanders. The relatively small size of these New Zealand communities coupled with strong impetus towards assimilation has meant that the specific histories of ethnic groups other than Māori or people of European descent have been largely unexplored. In the last couple of decades, this has started to change for the Chinese community, largely due to the work of scholars within the community.

For the historian, uncovering the histories of ethnic minorities in New Zealand is made difficult by the paucity of primary source material. Archival collections contain little primary material that directly speaks to the lived experiences of Indian and Chinese New Zealanders. What exists largely pertains to the Chinese community and consists of photographs and documents such as poll tax forms. There is also a small but significant amount of material that reflects how the wider community perceived Asians historically, consisting of cartoons and letters to the editor about Asian immigration as well as newspaper editorials and parliamentary debates on the subject dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. There is little in the way of memoirs or diaries through which the historian could explore the intellectual and emotional lives of Asian New Zealanders. What does exist, however, are the memories of New Zealanders of Asian descent alive today. These can be accessed using oral history, as is attempted in the present paper.

This paper is based on five interviews conducted in 2003 with New Zealand-born Indian and Chinese doctors. The interviews explore the issue of identity construction amongst New Zealand born Asians. Doctors were chosen for this purpose as, at least in a professional sense, they had “succeeded” in the wider New Zealand society and it was thought that exploration of how they reconcile their ethnic and professional identities may be interesting. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that doctors would have exposure to a wider cross section of society than other occupational groups in the course of their work, and therefore may have had the issue of their identity fore-grounded more frequently. Indeed, the sentinel question asked of the interview subjects was how they respond to the oft-asked question, “And where do you come from, dear?”

The doctors interviewed were all current or retired employees of Wellington Hospital where the author had personal contacts. The following table illustrates their demographic details. Pseudonyms have been used in all cases except that of Frank Kwok, whose personal and family history has been published elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> Therefore his real name has been used, with his

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<sup>27</sup> See Manying Ip, *Dragons on the Long White Cloud: the making of Chinese New Zealanders* (North Shore City, 1996), Top Shelf Productions 'An Immigrant Nation' screened on TV1, 03/12/1995, 'Precious Things' in *The Evening Post*, 3 April 2002, p.17, and 'Nancy Goddard CNZM: A Remarkable Woman Ahead of her Time' in *City Voice*, 19 June, 1997.



permission, to allow readers to cross reference information. Pseudonyms were chosen to reflect the actual origins of the participants.

**Table 1 – Informant Demographics**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>
Nilesh	29	Male	Indian	Single
Gareth	33	Male	Indian	Married
Andrew	39	Male	Chinese	Single
Kumar	44	Male	Indian	Married
Frank	74	Male	Chinese	Married

The absence of female subjects is a conspicuous feature of this group. Women were not deliberately excluded from the study. However, it proved impossible to find female subjects who were willing to participate in the time frame available. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. Each was between sixty and ninety minutes long, and were recorded on audiocassette. Approval from the Victoria University Ethics Committee was sought prior to making the recordings. A precondition of this approval was that the tapes be wiped at the end of the project unless participants wanted to keep them. Extensive notes were taken from the tapes, and these form the basis of the following analysis.

### **Being Chinese and Indian New Zealanders**

This paper is centrally concerned with the details, circumstances and histories of the interface between the Chinese and Indian diasporic communities and the wider New Zealand society. In previous sections, it endeavoured to describe the parameters of this interface on a theoretical basis and to outline in a general way some of the forces that have shaped diaspora in New Zealand. It now turns to examine how these forces have played out on an individual and personal level for second and third generation Indian and Chinese New Zealanders. In order to organise what are five quite dense personal histories, the material has been arranged thematically, with each theme representing a site of identity negotiation.

All five informants were born in New Zealand between 1929 and 1974. All are graduates of the Otago University School of Medicine, and at the time of interview, were practicing at Wellington Public Hospital, except Frank, who had retired. Amongst the Indian group, Kumar and Nilesh are members of the Gujerati community, and are second generation New Zealanders. Gareth is is Goan, and his parents, who were professionals, immigrated to New Zealand from Bombay in the late 1960s.

## **Origins and Family**

My grandfather came over and worked as a greengrocer [...] The theory was he was looking for a better life outside of India [...] I think he adapted quite well. He used to have a book, a dictionary actually, and he would learn five new words every day. By the end of it he spoke pretty good English.

Nilesh, 29.

The theme of origins and family was an important component of all five interviews and tended to impinge on discussion of all other issues. With minimal prompting, all informants talked easily and at reasonable length about the story of their forebears' arrival in New Zealand. In all cases a sense emerged that these were histories that had been told many times before and were versions that were accepted and agreed upon within informants' families of origin. They seemed to form a temporal crux around which individual notions of identity were formed

The two Chinese informants, Andrew and Frank, both had parents in the fruit and vegetable trade. Frank's father came to New Zealand from China in the early 1920s and established a business with his cousin. Andrew's father migrated as a six year old in 1935 to join family members already in New Zealand. Frank's father was already married with two children when he arrived and Andrew's mother came to New Zealand from China specifically to marry his father in an arranged marriage. These stories reflect the kin-based chains of migration that occurred in New Zealand after the tightening of immigration restrictions in 1921. The two Gujarati Indian informants, Nilesh and Kumar, have similar stories. They both had grandparents who came to New Zealand from India in the early decades of the twentieth century to work in the produce industry. Kumar's father was Indian-born and migrated to Wellington in 1950. It is unclear whether or not he migrated to join family members. Gareth's parents were Christian Indians from Goa. His father was a general practitioner in Bombay, and the family migrated to Mangakino in 1966. This story fits into the pattern of the small wave of Asian immigration that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s to fill professional shortages in rural areas. They subsequently moved to Morrinsville, where Gareth was born.

The most significant factor that emerged from the accounts of parental migration was the notion that parents and grandparents had migrated to New Zealand in search of a better life for their children, a common motivation for migrants of any ethnicity. This was sometimes articulated directly. The best example was Gareth, who spent some time explaining how his parents' decision came after the Maharashtra state government decided to make all schools Hindi medium. Gareth's family spoke English as a first language and his parents felt their children would be at a significant disadvantage because of this change, so arranged to emigrate. Despite the fact that they had family members in the United Kingdom already, they chose New

Zealand over England because of a perception that there was less racism in New Zealand and hence better opportunities for their children. This demonstrates a connection between populations in the country of origin and diasporic communities. Information flows back and forth between them, influencing the decisions of future migrants.

In other cases, the phenomenon of parental ambition for their children emerged in stories about their parents' efforts to ensure that they succeeded in their new environment. Nilesh tells how his mother "used to do a hell of a lot to help us get through school, and she really didn't like it when people did things to us that weren't fair," and how his father, a builder by day, used to work a night job at the university, sometimes only sleeping two hours a night, to better provide for his children. This speaks to a perception that New Zealand society was not a level playing field for Indian people, and that the family had to band together and redouble efforts in order to succeed. It is interesting in relation to Gareth's comment about the perceived lack of racism in New Zealand compared to England being a factor in his parents' decision to migrate here, as it is evidence that in most, if not all, Asian diasporic communities, the spectre of racism lies underneath and informs decisions and actions in all spheres of life. Further evidence of this emerges in all five narratives.

Another striking feature of the information about families was, except for Gareth's father, the absence of professional parents amongst the sample group. Three of the informants, Kumar, Frank, and Andrew had parents who worked in the fruit and vegetable trade; Nilesh's father is a builder. Kumar, Frank and Andrew's fathers all had very successful businesses, and later in life expanded their operations into packing, provedoring, and furniture sales respectively. None of the informants had professional mothers. All but Gareth's mother worked, either in family businesses, or in the case of Nilesh's mother, in her own shop. On the other hand, the brothers and sisters of all informants, except Frank are almost without exception, professional. This trend speaks volumes about the trajectory of the Indian and Chinese diasporic communities in New Zealand. The factors that limited the parents of the present informants to only operating family-owned businesses have already been well described. However, in light of the new information, it can be seen that over time, societal restrictions on these communities have eased, allowing them to move into different occupational spheres. What remains to be addressed however, is their perceptions of this shift and their place in New Zealand society,

Without exception, education was valued amongst the parents of the informants. They all replied "yes" or "very" to a direct question as to how much their parents valued education. However, the ways parents communicated this view to their children varied. New educational needs sometimes vied with community tradition over the need for children to enter the family business. Frank, an only son, illustrates this well. Talking about his father's business, he noted: "They [his parents] never said this to me ever [...] but I think they were a little bit disappointed that I wasn't going to take

over the business. They had built it up to a peak and then, just to let it drop....” Before he decided on medicine as a career, Kumar also remembers having a personal ambition to enter and develop his father’s business. However, once they started to excel at school, their parents encouraged them to go on to tertiary study. In contrast to this, Nilesh’s parents were quite explicit in their desire for their children to have professional careers. Referring to his mother, he said:

She wanted us to do what we wanted.... Also she didn’t want us to be working seven days a week in a dairy.... Both my parents wanted us to be professionals and nothing less because when you are a professional you can go anywhere you want and do anything you want. Indians have been chucked out of Fiji – it is less likely to happen in New Zealand, but....

There were only about three or four options in my father’s mind at that time – medicine and if you couldn’t get into that, dentistry. You could do pharmacy, accounting, law, that’s about it.

Andrew’s mother actively encouraged him to be a doctor, as did Gareth’s, though both for different reasons. Andrew thinks his mother believed him to be personally suited to medicine (in contrast to his siblings whom she did not encourage in this direction). Gareth says that his mother was partly motivated by a desire to continue what was a developing family tradition of doctors (her father, her husband, and she hoped, her son).

A further aspect of the informants’ families that was explored was the notion of relationships with extended families. While all of the informants spent the majority of their childhoods in a nuclear family environment, grandparents would stay in their homes during times of sickness or infirmity. Nilesh was also cared for by his grandmother while his mother worked. Although Gareth was separated from his extended families by his parent’s migration, when his grandparents became old and infirm, they came to New Zealand to be cared for by his mother. Frank, Andrew and Nilesh spoke of frequent contact with cousins during childhood which endures today. Brothers and sisters featured prominently in all the interviews, perhaps because they were the people with whom the informants negotiated the experience of growing up in a minority culture. Nilesh articulated this best when talking about his aspirations for his own children: “A nuclear family is two parents and 2.4 children. Indian families aren’t like that.... I want that for my children. My brother and sister are so close. You don’t always see that in a European family.” The use of the word “close” deserves further investigation. As in the context of Nilesh’s living arrangements (with his parents and brother), it cannot be seen as merely an expression of emotional closeness, though it certainly encompasses that. Rather it refers to a degree of involvement in one another’s every day lives that is not common in European families. Frank’s account of his family is similar. While he does not actually live with any of his nine sisters, references to them and their part

in the events of his life are constant threads in his narrative. Discussion about everything from his decision to be a doctor, to his marriage, to his feelings about Māori culture, is punctuated by reference to his sisters' opinion and experience.

As far as current living arrangements of other informants are concerned, Kumar has his mother and a nephew living with his wife and two children. The rest live on their own or with their spouses and children only. Nilesh and Kumar are both members of the Gujarati community. Their more communal living arrangements may reflect a cultural phenomenon that was probably common in the countries of origin of all informants, but which has only been maintained in New Zealand by some. However, the concept of having aging parents in their home was something that most informants felt comfortable with, suggesting that while European living arrangements have been adopted at a particular life stage, Asian notions of filial responsibility are still present and relevant.

### **Relationships With Diasporic Communities**

An additional, significant theme is the relationship informants have with their communities of origin. The outstanding feature of these discussions was that the level of contact individuals had today was strongly influenced by the level and nature of contact their families' had when they were growing up. Kumar and Nilesh are both heavily involved in the tight-knit Wellington Gujarati community. They both speak Gujarati and attend community religious and social events. Kumar has been on the executive of the Wellington Indian Association. For both, the values of the community have a substantial impact on decisions they make. When discussing the concept of marriage to a non-Indian, Nilesh commented:

[It] would be a big problem, one, because my parents would be devastated and two, they wouldn't have much contact with me, probably none, and it just wouldn't be my immediate family, but my extended family, and to me, it just wouldn't be worth it [...] My children wouldn't be thought of as Indian at all [...] I would like my children to be Indians. It's so much harder in my community. I think the Sri Lankan community is a little easier.

Kumar also commented on his marriage to an Indian of the same caste as himself: "I guess it was expected of me". While both Nilesh and Kumar have been back to India and visited their villages of origin, neither feels a strong connection to India. Rather they both see themselves primarily as New Zealanders, and members of the New Zealand Indian community. Their strongest affiliation is to their concept of Indian culture rather than India itself.

Frank also has a strong connection to the New Zealand Chinese community that is rooted in his parents' associations with Chinese people and

organizations. He describes his father's drive to see the community as a whole succeed and his attempts to convince other Chinese parents to educate their children, rather than having them work in the family businesses as soon as they could leave school. Frank's own connection with the Chinese community was tested by his marriage to Nanette, a Pākehā New Zealander: "Because of my upbringing and because of her own upbringing, we knew that it was wrong." The couple courted for fifteen years before marrying, during which time they both actively sought to find partners from their own ethnic groups. Marrying a non-Chinese woman meant Frank had to rethink what it meant to be Chinese for him. Nanette's appreciation and interest in things Chinese allowed him to achieve the degree of separation between the Chinese community and Chinese cultural values necessary to marry outside the community. Speaking of Nanette, he said: "My parents came to love her very much....She has right from the beginning been more Chinese than European." Frank and Nanette continued to widen their concept of what it means to be Chinese by going to live in Hong Kong with their young children for eight years. While in Hong Kong, he visited his ancestral village in China and re-established connections with family members still living there. Since then he has helped some of his relatives to come to New Zealand for education. He identifies the impetus behind this as his father's exhortation to not "ever forget your people at home."

Andrew and Gareth both grew up in the Waikato, in Morrinsville and Cambridge respectively. This meant they were relatively isolated from other members of their ethnic communities. Andrew remembers that there was only one other Chinese family in Cambridge. Because his parents spoke a particular dialect of Cantonese, and Andrew was not exposed to speakers of other dialects, he finds it difficult to communicate fluently in Cantonese with most other Chinese in New Zealand, despite the fact he still talks to his mother in Cantonese. Today, Andrew has no contact with Chinese community groups, but in recent years, has developed a few Chinese friends, whom he perceives somewhat differently to his non-Chinese friends. He says that while he would not feel comfortable going out drinking with them, he enjoys having yum char meals with them and "not having to explain the food to them." He feels that the wider Chinese community can be exclusionary in its own way, saying of the Chinese students he met at university: "I was always welcome to their things, but they would be fairly exclusive of white people." When discussing the Chinese community in general, he suggests that: "I think the Chinese people are the most racist people of all. The Chinese term for white people is 'foreign devils'. There was [sic] a superiority complex about Chinese. Whether or not this was a survival mechanism – I don't think so."

Gareth says that his parents made a conscious decision to try to "fit in" in New Zealand, and therefore did not join the Indian Association. It may have been that as Goan, Christian professionals they did not fit easily with the Punjabi Sikh farming community that made up most of the Waikato branch of the Indian Association, though he does mention friendships with

individual Sikh families. Gareth identifies his Catholicism as a major influence in shaping his identity, as this dictated the schools he attended, and therefore his predominantly Pākehā peer group. Today, like Andrew, he has friendships with other Indian people on a purely individual basis. He thinks the fact that he is married to a non-Indian has moved him further towards mainstream New Zealand society and away from the insularity that can characterise ethnic minority communities.

### **Medicine and Ethnicity**

I think I started off behind. I was this stupid little hick boy, Chinese boy from Cambridge [...] I must have had some attitudes that were Chinese. Just the way I saw things done and I saw people think about things. There's a certain amount of growing up as a medical student [...] you have to be reasonably worldly. I started to think European in Christchurch where I did my clinical years.

Andrew, 39.

The factor common to all these informants is that they succeeded well enough in the New Zealand schools system to be admitted to medical school. They did well at both the medical school and in the public hospital, and went on to become hospital-based specialists of various descriptions. All recalled their experience of medical school easily, and as the interviews unfolded, it became clear that the process of medical education was very important in the construction of their individual identities. For all informants, going to Dunedin was the first time they had lived apart from their families of origin, and for some this was a liberating experience. Frank remembers: "I did enjoy university [...] I had come into contact with the other Chinese people and we started getting into sports and things that we organised. We became more social [...] We tried to get all the Chinese people together." Andrew also speaks fondly and with some personal insight, of his time in Dunedin:

My parents were always very strict, traditional, so all of a sudden one had freedom [...] All of a sudden, I got recognition as a person, all of a sudden, I did things and it was fun. I have to say it changed me. I used to get on really well with my sister, but after that I didn't so much. We get on fine now, but that took many years. That wasn't because of her – it was probably because of me.

For Nilesh and Kumar, living apart from their families was difficult because of dietary requirements (both are vegetarians). In Kumar's case, a sister travelled to Dunedin with him to cook for him. Both returned to Wellington and their family homes at the first opportunity.

None of the informants felt discriminated against at medical school because of their ethnicity, though Frank recalls some standoffishness amongst fellow students when he was there in the 1940s. Although the younger informants also reported no discrimination in their careers to date, they acknowledge that it still does happen, albeit infrequently. Andrew went so far as to sketch a profile of the candidate most likely to pass a specialist examination; "White. Male, tidy and well spoken." However, both Frank and Kumar have experienced overt racial discrimination in their professional lives. Frank was refused a position as a registrar at Wellington Hospital in 1954, despite his belief that he was the best-qualified applicant for the job. Some years later he was told by Sir Frank Kitts, a member of the selection board, that a majority of the board members had been unwilling to appoint a Chinese registrar. During his final surgical examinations in the late 1980s Kumar was failed by an examiner who did not examine him fairly and who had a well-deserved reputation for racial bias. Neither Kumar nor Frank is particularly bitter about these incidents. Frank contextualizes what happened to him by saying: "You must remember that at that stage, it wasn't completely wrong to do that. At the time this was acceptable and had to be accepted." For Kumar, the sting of this incident was largely removed by the practical and emotional support he received from his senior colleagues. Implicit in the lack of rancour both men display about the racial discrimination they have experienced, is a sense that these things happened in the past and do not continue to happen to them or their children in New Zealand today. One doubts they could be so accepting if this was not the case.

As far as discrimination on the part of patients was concerned, there were almost no incidences reported, which is heartening, when one considers that in public medical practice, patients do not have the ability to choose their specialist. However all informants identified strongly with the experience of being regularly asked by Māori and Pākehā patients: "And where do you come from?" Gareth reflected the common feeling amongst informants, that what was actually being asked was not what part of New Zealand one comes from, but what one's ethnicity is. He replies to the question accordingly, but stresses that he was born in New Zealand as he feels it puts people more at ease with him. All informants felt that the question was almost never asked with malicious intent, but more out of curiosity about the concept of a foreign-looking doctor with a New Zealand accent. This may reflect that fact that until recently, Indian and Chinese people in New Zealand have been relatively invisible, especially in occupations like medicine, therefore it may not have occurred to Pākehā and Māori patients that the Chinese or Indian doctor in front of them may be a second, third or even fourth generation New Zealander.

Medical practice inevitably changes the relationships individuals have with their communities of origin. This happens on a number of levels, including elevation in social status in the eyes of the community. Most importantly, though in relation to this study, the medical paradigm gives



individuals a different frame of reference through which to view their communities – for the first time they see the ‘Indian community’ or the ‘Chinese community’ in terms of the health characteristics of these groups. Sometimes this leads to a degree of separation of the individual’s identity from the community of origin. As Andrew put it, after saying that he has a different, more authoritarian persona with Chinese patients: “As time goes on, one is forced into the mould of a European New Zealander”. So, while he can still recognize culturally appropriate ways of dealing with Chinese people, on a personal level, he is increasingly distanced from sharing the same needs as his Chinese patients. For Kumar, medical interaction with Gujarati people also means increased recognition of their culturally specific needs: “I’m more aware of the cultural issues, pain management, food, family support.” He finds Gujarati patients particularly rewarding, unlike Andrew, who finds dealing with Chinese patients challenging. Generally speaking, medical practice seemed to make the informants more aware of what made their ethnic groups (and themselves) different from mainstream society, and the predominant response to this was to compartmentalize their ethnic and professional personas. Andrew was the most explicit about this, referring to the concept of “thinking European” several times. Nilesh described his post-medical training persona as “65% Indian and 35% European.” Interestingly, Frank and Gareth, who are both married to Pākehā women, did not display this phenomenon.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Notions of Identity Amongst New Zealand Indian and Chinese Doctors**

I remember discussing Gallipoli in third form. I remember thinking ‘this is a really big part of New Zealand’s history – it shaped New Zealand’s psyche about never giving up [...] competing against the odds [...] I still think of it as a really significant thing. In fact I went to Gallipoli when I was travelling and I found it one of the most spiritual experiences. I remember thinking at the time [...] ‘this is New Zealand history, but its not really my history, even though it’s a part of my country’.

Gareth, 33.

These interviews make clear that notions of identity for this group were quite heterogeneous, and furthermore, on an individual level, had changed over time. Medicine has had a big impact on their identities, but other equally important factors were families, strength of association with ethnic communities and in some cases, the ethnicity of their spouse. While all five informants clearly identified themselves as New Zealanders, the intersection between national identity in and ethnicity was a subject on which all had

expended mental energy. Their stable personal and professional lives suggest that they have all found a sense of self with which they can function in society at a relatively high level. In the light of recent research describing the psychological struggle many Chinese New Zealanders have had with stable identity construction during a history marked by both invisibility and hostility, the present set of interviews suggest that medicine particularly, and probably professional success generally, may be helpful in healthy identity construction.<sup>28</sup> This may be because people in these positions tend to be seen more as individuals – and individuals in a position of power – than anonymous members of an ethnic community.

While this paper tries to place these narratives in the context of the histories of the Indian and Chinese communities in New Zealand, this concept was conspicuously absent in most of the discussions. Individuals, with the exception of Frank, were highly aware of their personal and family histories but did not seem to place these in context of wider community histories. This is not at all surprising in the context of the cultural climate in which these men were educated. Many of the details of the histories of these groups would not have been taught or even known when they were at school. Indian and Chinese cultural organisations were more focussed on passing on language and cultural traditions rather than developing a sense of the history of these communities in New Zealand. Apart from Frank, these informants did not really see themselves as members of worldwide diasporas, despite in all cases highly valuing their cultural heritage. This perhaps reflects the cultural isolation produced by the immigration restrictions in place between 1921 and 1986. As the Chinese and Indian communities were not being replenished by new members from the mother countries or other diasporic locations, perhaps the collective memory of the fact that there were people in other parts of the world with whom they shared more in common than just ancestry grew dim. Gareth, in particular, highlighted the importance of history in identity formation. He located the maturation of his own identity during/on his first trip to India, when he realised that the Indian people had a long, proud history. However, as far as a sense of his place as an Indian in the history of New Zealand was concerned, he was slightly lost, as the quote about Gallipoli shows. This may explain the primacy of family histories in these men's life stories. In the absence of a collective history, they turn to their families' stories for a sense of from where they have come.

All of this speaks to a great gap in New Zealand historical writing about the histories of ethnic minorities in this country. The tragedy of this is that it continues to deprive members of these communities of a strong sense of historical connection with this country. For other New Zealanders, it allows the perpetuation of an incomplete view of the history of their country. The development of literature on both the experience and theory of diasporas in the twentieth century provides a great stimulus for scholars in New Zealand to look at ethnic diversity in this country in a different light – both as

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<sup>28</sup> Yee "Coping With Insecurity," 215-231.

something that links us with the histories of other nations, and as a phenomenon which has features which occurred here alone. The teasing out of these strands has the potential to substantially aid the project of discovering what it is that makes New Zealand unique. In order to do this, we will have to turn repeatedly to the diasporic communities for information and understanding – something that mainstream historians, with a few notable exceptions, have not done to do to date, largely leaving these projects to members of the communities themselves. It is hoped that this paper constitutes a small amount of progress on this task.