

# Deconstructing the dominant narrative of Sophiatown: An Indian perspective of the 1950s

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The cosmopolitan nature of Sophiatown is often revered as an exemplary case study for strives towards social cohesion within diverse communities. Rearticulating this notion, scholars who have written extensively on the history of Sophiatown have increasingly used lexicon such as 'diverse', 'multicultural' and 'multiracial' amongst a plethora of words describing Sophiatown. However, the usage of such terminologies and the acceptance of Sophiatown as a multiracial society often lack credible emphasis on the racial composition of the suburb, even amongst its prestigious writers. The historiography of Sophiatown has been, for many years, a victim of binary thinking and a tendency to view South African history as a black versus white trajectory. In the case of Sophiatown, the trajectory has been largely focused on the machinery of the state in removing black people from Sophiatown and relocating them to Meadowlands. Even more so, the stamina of the apartheid government in forcefully destroying Sophiatown was seen as victory over black people and the continuation of separate development and group areas. Consequently, the history of the Indian, mixed race and white population (who formed the minority population of Sophiatown) has received little if no attention. Having realised the existing vacuum in the history of Sophiatown, the onus of this article is deliberately aimed towards robustly diversifying and deconstructing the literature of Sophiatown through the inclusion of Indian perspectives on the socio-economic environment of the freehold township (the history of mixed race and white people needs extensive research). To achieve this objective, the article predominantly comprises perspectives derived from oral interviews conducted with former residents of the Sophiatown community.

**Contribution:** The research critically unpacks the memories, experiences and agencies of Indian people in moulding a freehold township (Sophiatown) through formations of relationships and community networks. Furthermore, the research reveals the importance of oral history as a method of articulating pivotal trajectories and memories that fill lacunas in local histories.

**Keywords:** Sophiatown; community; Indians; oral history; segregation; family; freehold; *Slums Act* 1930.

## Introduction

In 1897, an investor by the name of Herman Tobiansky bought 237 acres of land 4.5 miles west of Johannesburg intending to develop an attractive town (Coplan 1985:13). Sophiatown was named by Tobiansky after his wife Sophia and some of the streets after his children (Hart & Pirie 1984:44). Sophiatown, also known as 'Kofifi' or 'Sof town' to those who resided in it, was established in 1905, 3 years after the Anglo-Boer War; the suburb had an area of 260 acres, which was divided into 1694 plots (Purkey 1993:16). Initially, the suburb<sup>1</sup> was fenceless and easily accessible, contradicting the developing tendency of demarcating localities. 'Sof town' was initially planned and built for strict occupation by white people, who formed a minority of the population of South Africa during the pre- and post-apartheid era (University of Witwatersrand [WITS], Historical Papers, A3278 Amina Cachalia Papers, 1885–2006).<sup>2</sup> The racial composition of Sophiatown was in principle designed to be homogenous at the exclusion of non-white people; this was in par with the social and cultural normality of segregation in South Africa (Hart & Pirie 1990:44).

This, however, did not turn out as planned; Sophiatown was not preferred as a residential area by the white middle class because of its proximity to an undesirable sewage area, and this was perceived to be unsanitary (Mattera 1987:49). For this reason, there were people who were more than willing and able to invest in such an area. Consequently, the suburb became populated by people from a variety of socio-economical and racial backgrounds (Mattera 1987:49). Thus, the

1. In some instances, the words township/ghetto/slum will be used to reflect the changing nature of Sophiatown.

2. The Cachalia Papers provide a pivotal framework for understanding the social, economic and political experiences of Indian people in South Africa. The archive assisted in contextualising and positioning the dynamics grappled by Indians in Sophiatown and their relation to the macro-politics of apartheid South Africa.

**Note:** Special Collection entitled Social Memory Studies, sub-edited by Christina Landman (UNISA) and Sekgothe Mokgoatšana (UL).

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township was inevitably inhabited by black, Indian, Chinese, mixed race and, in far lesser numbers, white people. As a result, Sophiatown, similar to District Six, became an example of a multicultural township during the South African apartheid era. Between the 1920s and 1940s, Sophiatown experienced population growth as more and more people arrived in the suburb, especially during the apex of the manufacturing sector (Goodhew 2000:244). As a result of diversity, the growth of its population and the government's limited legislation power over the ownership of private land, Sophiatown lived up to its description as a freehold suburb, '... it was inhabited by an estimate of 20 000 people of different ethnic backgrounds who lived tightly-knit, mixing cultures, traditions and superstitions ...' (Mattera 1987:49).

The suburb was acclaimed as the most cosmopolitan of black townships and perhaps the most perfect experiment in non-racial community living in defiance of the segregation and apartheid laws (Coplan 1985:13). In an effort to curb its progression, Sophiatown, Martindale and Newclare, collectively known as Western Areas, were proclaimed white areas under the draconian and infamous Urban Areas Act of 1923. The Western Areas were not the only areas affected by such proclamations. In the same way, Cato Manor was also proclaimed by the Durban City Council as a white area in 1958, and by 1964, all black people were forcefully removed to KwaMashu and Indians to Merebank and Chatsworth (Edwards 1994:419). Cato Manor, District Six and Sophiatown were all multiracial suburbs, and people of all races were allowed to acquire property (Hart & Pirie 1990:45). In essence, because black titleholders had property rights in Sophiatown, they were persuaded by financial difficulties to shelter tenants on their properties (Lodge 1981:111), contributing immensely to population growth and the development of slums.

The primary objective of this article is to deconstruct the dominant narratives that continue to feed the perception of Sophiatown as a plural society without articulating the experiences of minority groups in the suburb, inevitably excluding them from the narrative. Academics and experts in regional history have focused largely on the history of black people; consequently, minimum attention has been invested on the experiences of Indians. The modus operandi of this article is to deconstruct the dominant narrative on Sophiatown and to argue that Indian people were active contributors to the socio-economic landscape of Sophiatown, and though they were in smaller numbers compared to black people, they shared and contributed to the construction of the landscape and its vibrancy.

In order to achieve these objectives, the research for this article mainly depended on oral history as an informative component in addition to archival and secondary sources. A vast majority of the interviewees reside in Lenasia, situated 50 km or so from Johannesburg.<sup>3</sup> The interviews were conducted over a period of 2 years with an interplay between

group interviews, individual interviews and site visitations. The chronological focus of this article evidently required deliberations with senior citizens who lived in Sophiatown. Consequently, dynamics pertaining to memory, recollection and nostalgia were interrogated and benchmarked with secondary and primary sources.

## The nature of Sophiatown

The nature of Sophiatown was typical of most townships; rapid urbanisation gave rise to illegal activities and gambling, especially the illicit selling of liquor and prostitution (Hannerz 1994:181–193). Streets were overcrowded with street vendors, children playing traditional games and boys selling newspapers and cleaning shoes of gangsters for pocket money (Glaser 1998:719–736). In many townships of the 1950s, such as Alexandra and Soweto (Glaser 1998:719–736), the presence of gangs, who inhabited street corners, claiming, at times violently, their territories was common (Modisane 1963:33). In Alexandra, the Msomi gang and the Spoilers were the most notorious gangs during the 1950s; they were known for being violent and extorting the community members of Alexandra (Bonner & Nieftagodien 2001:33). Sophiatown's criminal activity was compared with Chicago in America (Derrick 1999:13), and gangs such as the 'Berliners', the 'Vultures' and the 'Americans', to mention a few, were prevalent in Sophiatown. The gangs of Sophiatown, similar to the gangs of Alexandra and Soweto, were influenced by American films, and they emulated the actors they saw in the cinema in terms of their dress, weaponry and language (Fenwick 1996:617–632).

Furthermore, the township was, according to *Kortboy, a Sophiatown Legend*, known to be vibrant, and the dance halls and shebeens buzzed with tunes such as the '39 Steps' and 'Back of the Moon' (Derrick 1999:30–60). Here, music icons such as Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, amongst others, entertained the crowds. On the other hand, illegal shebeens also existed and sold a concoction known as skokiaan. The presence of illegal shebeens was characterised by continuous police raids targeting women who brewed and sold illegal liquor.

It was in this environment and context that Indian families contributed fundamentally to the nature of Sophiatown. The Sophiatown community of the 1940s is often portrayed as a well-knit community; when interviewed on 02 November 2011, Mr Rasheed Subjee mentioned that Sophiatown 'was one big family', and in this big communal family, were segments of black, Indian and Asian families. Therefore, the notion of 'family' – as shall be seen later – was highly valued among interviewees. The study of family size and its relation to the economic conditions of the family, as well as living conditions, education and familial unity, are important in understanding the history and experiences of Indian families in Sophiatown. Individual family economies played an important role in familial relations and determined and shaped to a very large extent the experiences and living conditions of these families (Maasdorp & Pillay 1997:45).

3. Lenasia was declared a Group Area in the 1960s to house Indian people who were temporarily placed by the government in the military camp or Ammunition Depot 91 adjacent to Lenasia.

The term 'family' is complex and has many understandings and perceptions. Goode (1963:30) points out that a family cannot be concretely defined by the presence of parents (mother and father being female and male, respectively), biological children or children at all. If a family is defined particularly by the presence of parents, single-headed households would not be defined as a 'family' (Goode 1963:30). Most 'families' anywhere would not qualify to be referred to as a family, particularly single-parent households or same-sex marriages, depending on the legalities of marriages of different countries. In some cases, the term 'family' is defined only when the couple or parties involved undergo a cultural, religious or traditional ceremony that qualifies them to be a family (Goode 1963:30). Whilst some people consider their cousins and extended families to be part of their family, others do not and prefer to think of their immediate relations as family.

In addition, Goode (1963) states:

... that 'family' is not a single thing [*phenomenon*], to be captured by a neat verbal formula ... many social units can be thought of as 'more or less' families, as they are more or less similar to the traditional type of family ... much of the graded similarity can be traced to the different kinds of role relations to be found in that traditional unit. (p. 9)

The complexities heavily embedded in the use of the term 'family' by different people in differing circumstances are also present in this article.

During the interview on 28 November 2012, Mrs Ramdien mentioned that she lived with her cousins and members of the family who were adopted. She continuously emphasised that they were her 'family' and did not like to refer to them as adopted. Most of the interviewees were asked about their experiences with people in Sophiatown; they referred to their societal living as 'familial'. Often, the interviewees did not refer to each other as neighbours, instead they viewed and referred to one another as 'family'. The word 'family' was used loosely to describe the connected nature in which they lived.

Although they were not by biological definition a 'family', they lived and treated their neighbours and, at times, strangers as their 'family' regardless of race, class and religious affiliations. For instance, Mr Rasheed Subjee's interview on 02 November 2011 revealed strong community relations:

'The white owner of the bakery was very kind, often when we had nothing to eat, my mother would speak to him and he would give us food on credit; and when my father and mother received money they paid him back. Often he removed the credit and told us not to repay him back anymore because we were his family.'

Mr Subjee's experience with the local Sophiatown baker is a reflection of good relations, a sense of community between neighbours and people living in Sophiatown. The giving nature was evident not only between shop owners and residents of Sophiatown but also amongst neighbours when they gave each other food in times of need. When neighbours had to leave their house for a few days, not only did they

know that it was generally safe to do so, but they also relied on their neighbours ('family') to watch over their property (Modisane 1963:17). However, these are perceptions and viewpoints of interviewees reiterating their histories and describing themselves as family. Mr Subjee also mentioned that 'there was no welfare and the absence of that made Sophiatown a close-knit society that helped and relied on one another [*because they regarded each other as "family"*']'. One of the major similarities shared by the families studied in this article was the large nature of the families, which was characteristic of the time period. For Mr Subjee, the main cause for large families was largely the lack of birth control mechanisms and, inevitably, the absence of educational infrastructure specialising in family planning. The health infrastructure of Sophiatown, according to Mr Subjee, was inadequate, and sex education was not an effective part of primary and secondary schooling.

In addition, Mr Kokkie Singh, in an interview on 29 November 2012, associated large families chiefly with cultural and religious obligations of their era. Furthermore, the reason his parents' families were large was because his parents' marriage was arranged by their parents and they married abiding to the cultural norms of the era in which they lived. Early marriage (arranged), according to Mr Singh, provided couples with enough time to raise their children. With the advent of industrialisation and westernisation, large family and early marriage were threatened. Industrialisation and increased urbanisation gave many women employment opportunities in the cities (Kakar 2007:214–221). This caused them to have fewer children and postpone marriage; however, this article does not imply that this was the case in Sophiatown (Kakar 2007:214–221). In comparison to the older generations, the younger generation of the families studied preferred to have fewer children and, as a result smaller families.

The size of the family had an impact on the economic well-being of the family and wider implications. Family income played a pivotal role in the economic status and the well-being of large Indian families in Sophiatown. For the most part of the apartheid era, Indian people were employed in menial as well as professional labour in Johannesburg. Whilst some were employed as teachers and, to a smaller extent, as doctors, many worked in factories, hotels, cinemas, road hauling, restaurants and personnel services. Others worked in the retail and wholesale trade (WITS, Historical Papers, A3278 Amina Cachalia Papers, 1885–2006). In addition, the Asiatic Land and Trading Act of 1939 prohibited Indian people from occupying land not owned by Indians. In reaction to the Asiatic Land Act of 1939, the Transvaal Indian Congress expressed the view that Indians cannot become farmers without owning land in South Africa (Arkin 1981:152).

Placing the experiences of Indian labourers in a national context, the inquiry into the Durban Riots of 1949 revealed the discrimination Indians experienced in terms of employment (WITS, Historical Papers, Ballinger. WG collection, A924, A410/C2.2). According to the Natal Indian



Organisation,<sup>4</sup> a larger percentage of the African population and not Indians were employed in the motor industries, sugar mills, railways and harbours. A majority of Indians in Durban were labourers, according to the S.A.R. & H. Indian Employees Union. These workers laboured in the Mechanical Department and in the harbour sheds in Durban and were never offered 21 days annual sick leave and were only offered salary increases after 5 years of service (WITS, William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, Ballinger. WG collection, A410/C2.2, S.A.R. & H. Indian Employees Union, memorandum of grievances, affecting the Indian workers of the S.A.R. & H. Indian Employees Union to the general manager and the minister of railways for the remedying of the same). In addition, government regulations, to a large extent, placed limitations on the economic growth of Indian people. The implementation of the Liquor Law of 1929, for instance, prohibited Indian waiters and waitresses from serving alcoholic beverages in restaurants and hotels (WITS, William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, AD 843 Mc 2.5–2.7.8). This law had the effect of preventing hotel and restaurant owners from employing Indians in the Transvaal, resulting in increased unemployment and the normalisation of discrimination against Indian people. Mr 'Baba' Subjee, Mr Rasheed Subjee's younger brother, in an interview on 02 November 2012, remembered the struggle and hardship his father as a breadwinner had to endure whilst staying in Sophiatown:

'My father always struggled to find employment; I remember whenever he left to look for work my mother would always say a prayer of guidance for him to find some form of employment. My father always used to go for part-time employment in addition to his job in order to make additional income.'

Mr Subjee engaged in various part-time employments and depended on the money to support his family; unfortunately, his work as a waiter did not have some form of specialisation. The nature of his 'piece jobs'<sup>5</sup> was unpredictable, and the Subjees hoped and prayed that, whenever he returned home, he would have made some form of money to ensure that there was food on the table. In some instances, Mr Subjee would not make money at all, which made life very difficult. However, Mr Subjee was a hard worker and a man dedicated to his family. Baba recalls how proud he was of his father when a visitor came to his house to offer his father employment for the day:

'The white man would come to our house and say "Issu" you must come and work for me" they used to call him the good worker because he gave his all and he had us in mind when he worked ... Those days were hard for our parents, they struggled to keep food on the table. So my father would take part-time employment to make a little bit more money to support the family because we were a lot of children, maybe if we were one or two children it may have not been that bad. But being a lot of children in the house, depending on a few shillings for survival was hard.'

4.The Natal Indian Organisation represented Indian employees in various industries advocating for employment opportunities and wages.

5.The name 'piece jobs' is a loose term used instead of 'part-time employment'.

The entire Subjee income was directed towards the children and household essentials, including food, rent, education, clothing and transport to work. It was the responsibility of breadwinners, whether male or female, to ensure the well-being of the family. To ensure the well-being of the family outside formal employment, similar to the Subjees, Mr Singh senior also had to find informal employment to support his family. Mr Kokkie Singh, in an interview held on 29 November 2012, recalled:

'My father had a horse and cart; he used to do carting from the market that was his work. People used to buy goods at the market and because they were either too heavy or an expensive load to transport with a car, my father used to deliver their goods for them to their homes. They loaded goods from the market going into Vrededorp; his last load was coming into Sophiatown.'

It is evident that both parents' informal and formal employments were not enough to financially support their family, and the repercussions were felt by their children who had to seek employment at a young age, resulting in the early dropout from schools. Indian people in Sophiatown, similar to other races, had to adapt to the racial economic prohibitions implemented by apartheid legislation. Their economic circumstances contributed vastly in the maintenance of positive community relations to cushion, in some instances, the harsh repercussions of economic difficulties.

## Indian education

In addition to the economic circumstances of Indian families, children actively shaped the social landscape of Sophiatown. The history of Indian education in South Africa was established by Christian missionaries in Natal. Indian and mixed race children started attending schools together from as early as 1909, even after the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 (Pillay 1994:46). In addition, the first Indian school in the Transvaal was opened in Johannesburg and was based in Newtown in 1913, enrolling 136 Indian boys (Pillay 1994:46). From as early as 1912, the request for racially separate schools was made to the Witwatersrand Central Board in order to maintain and promote the religious, language and cultural interests of Indian people (Pillay 1994:46).

Because of constrained financial circumstances, the Subjee and the Sunker families encouraged their children to seek employment at an early age; the wider implication of this meant that the children had to leave school in order to contribute to the sustenance of their families. For instance, Mr Sunker attended his schooling in Sophiatown at a 'Coloured School', where he studied up to Standard 3, before moving to an Indian school in Vrededorp, where he only studied up to Standard 5. However, he could not continue his studies because he had to help support both his parents and his family.

Elaborating on the history of African education in Sophiatown, the philanthropic Father Trevor Huddleston mentions that not more than one-third of the African children

of school-going age were in school at all. In many districts, there was no compulsory education for the African and of course no age limit. 'Of those who were able to get into school an extremely high percentage left at very low standards' (Huddleston 1956:159). This was the case with many Indian learners of Sophiatown who left at low standards to support their families.

Part of the reason many students left their studies at an early age was because of the lack of secondary schools for non-white people in the Transvaal. In total, there was only one secondary school for black people in the Transvaal (Huddleston 1956:159). The statement submitted and prepared by the Transvaal Indian Congress to the Transvaal Education Inquiry Commission in 1937 requested the opening of a secondary school for Indians in Johannesburg (WITS, Historical Papers, Amina Cachalia collection A3278). The report further mentioned that a student who desired to attend a secondary school had to go to Sastri College in Durban (WITS, Historical Papers, Amina Cachalia collection A3278). Families could not afford to send their children as far away as Durban for a secondary education. In contrast to non-European secondary schools, Europeans had a total of 91 secondary schools and the Cape had 99 (Union of South Africa, U.G. 40-58, 04 J 705 R2, 1920, Report of the Secretary for Education for the Year ended 31st December, 1919:68). In addition, the total enrolment for non-Europeans<sup>6</sup> studying beyond Standard 6 in the Transvaal was 10 and Standard VI and below was 3507 (Union of South Africa, U.G. 40-58, 04 J 705 R2, 1920, Report of the Secretary for Education for the Year ended 31st December 1919:68). The decision to stop studying and find work to supplement the family income was further encouraged by the lack of secondary schools in Johannesburg for Indians.

In addition, the rationale for leaving school at an early age is that school leavers would provide economically for the large Indian families, and the sooner the child left schooling, the sooner would there be an improvement in the financial situation of the household (Huddleston 1956:159). Consequently, all the Subjee children never went beyond Standard 5, but this was not a rare case as many children, regardless of race, only studied to up to Standard 5. However, for the Subjees, the reason for not achieving higher levels of schooling was solely financial, and the repercussion of a lack of schooling was experienced much later in their lives. On the other hand, leaving school early cannot be solely associated with the desire to support struggling families.

Focusing on the experiences of Indian women, cultural factors, such as early marriage, household duties and parent's preference to educate males rather than females, also played fundamental roles in explaining why females did not finish schooling (Arkin 1981:33). Having not been affected by these factors, Mrs Sunker started her primary education in Sophiatown Primary School and she was there until Standard

6. The term non-Europeans refer to races that were not classified as white people in the 1920s.

1. Mrs Sunker remarkably studied up to Standard 7; I deliberately describe her studying up to Standard 7 as 'remarkable' because it was a rarity, depending on financial circumstances, to study as far as she did. In comparison, Mr Singh went to the same school where he studied up to Standard 4. The school policy in Sophiatown educated Indian and mixed race children up until Standard 5, which, based on Mr Singh's observations during an interview on 29 November 2012, reiterates the rationale that Indian students studied outside Sophiatown:

'The teachers in Sophiatown were very good, we had mostly White and Coloured teachers who taught up to Standard 5, but I went up to Standard 4. Then I went to school in Fordsburg Bree Street Indian Primary School up to Standard 5. This was so because I had to get into high school. It was very difficult to get to high school from Sophiatown. When I passed my primary schooling I got accepted into Johannesburg Indian High School. I studied up to Standard 8 because we were not financially well off. My parents suggested I do teaching and I was the first chap in the family to go up to Standard 8; nobody went so far ...'

Both Mr Singh and Mrs Sunker achieved high standards. However, Mrs Sunker chose not to study any further; she married and found her passion in being a housewife. Mr Singh, on the other hand, coming from a poor family, as he describes, did the exceptional. Whilst his peers worked formally and informally to support their low-income families, he studied much further in the hope of becoming a teacher and being a member of a respectable profession.

Mr Singh and Mrs Sunker are representatives of Indian families who valued a good education, which results in better employment prospects and earning respect. However, this does not necessarily mean other Indian families did not value education. Coming from a poor family background, Mr Singh's family was determined to educate him, and throughout his educational journey, he experienced financial challenges. Firstly, the bus fare to get to the Johannesburg Teachers' College was expensive for his family and Mr Singh remembers paying 2 pennies going there and another 2 pennies returning home. Fortunately, Mr Singh was awarded with a teacher's bursary from the Department of Education, which paid for the 2 years required to finish the teaching diploma. However, as a condition of receiving the bursary, recipients were compelled to work in a government school for a period of 2 years. Thus, every month a portion of the teacher's salary would be deducted by the government until the total amount of school fees owed was paid.

In terms of commuting to town, the bus was the most convenient form of transportation as it travelled from Newlands to Sophiatown. In addition, the bus was faster, offered more comfort, especially warmth and shelter in the winter seasons, and was more accessible. However, it was costly; the horse and cart on the other hand took much longer to arrive at the college. It was strenuous to use because it required Mr Singh to wake up much earlier than usual, and using the horse and cart made him susceptible to different

weather patterns, such as rainy, windy and the extremely hot, sunny days.

Education amongst the respondents was, and still remains, important as a mechanism for financial prosperity and individual growth. However, in some instances, 'education was seen by many individuals and groups as a key agent of control' (Goodhew 2004:28). Control in terms of racial separation and, on the flip side of the coin, disciplining and moulding children.

In terms of perceptions towards education, interviewees seemed to have a different perspective and this is derived from the fact that many of them did not attend schools in Sophiatown. There was an impression that the quality of education offered by the education department is of a higher standard, as expressed by the interviewees. In addition, when asked about his memories as a scholar in an interview on 28 November 2011, Mr Rasheed Subjee recalled that, 'School was the main entertainment'. He attended an Afrikaans-speaking school in Sophiatown where they were taught by white teachers using Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. Describing his education, he mentioned:

'We only had Coloured and Afrikaans teachers in our school. We never had any Black teachers or students ... my mother convinced him [*principal*] to enrol us in the school although we did not have birth certificates, he understood.'

The medium of instruction for the majority of Indian and mixed race schools was Afrikaans. The Transvaal Indian Congress accepted Afrikaans as a medium of instruction but suggested strongly the advantages of both Afrikaans and English for Indian people (WITS, William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, Amina Cachalia collection). Amongst other reasons, the Transvaal Indian Congress favoured English as a medium of instruction because Afrikaans universities did not enrol Indians (WITS, William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, Amina Cachalia collection). Indian students who were enrolled into universities studied overseas, where English was a medium of instruction. (The University of Cape Town had only 44 non-Europeans before 1937 and the debate in parliament objected to the presence of non-Europeans in European universities [WITS, William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, Amina Cachalia collection, Statement Submitted and Prepared by the Transvaal Indian Congress to the Transvaal Education Inquiry Commission 1937].)

The financial challenges experienced in obtaining an education manifested themselves in a variety of ways. During winter the difference between the haves and the have-nots clearly manifested. According to Mr Rasheed Subjee, everyone walked to school, and unable to afford school shoes in winter, they walked barefoot to school. He also mentioned that his older brother had to carry his younger sister on his back as it was too cold for her to walk in the winter mist. Similarly, Mr Kokkie Singh reminisced in an interview on 29 November 2012 that he also walked barefoot, wearing

short trousers and a shirt with short sleeves in winter; his family could not afford the school uniform.

For the Subjee family, life was difficult; having to buy many pairs of school shoes and meet other scholarly needs was simply unaffordable for them. Having walked to school barefoot, he looked forward to receiving peanuts from the school once a week, and in winter, soup. Furthermore, the school also provided students with free stationery labelled TED, which stood for the Transvaal Education Department. This was in contrast to the missionary schools (black schools), as evident in Trevor Huddleston's account:

Many times I have gone round the school in Tucker Street, an old crumbling red brick chapel, its windows broken, its wooden floor curving and cracking under the weight of children sitting there, a hundred, two hundred perhaps, their slates in their hands, no desks, no benches, no blackboards, no books ... just teacher sitting at a rickety wooden table, trying to hold their attention ... (Modisane 1963:161)

In comparison, according to Mr Subjee, infrastructure and equipment were of exceptional quality in their 'Coloured School' and they were well supplied with stationery. However, he and his brothers lacked such fundamental resources at home as the supply of electricity was non-existent and homework was done by candle light. Even more challenging was the unavailability of adequate space for the completion of homework because of the nature of their large family.

On the other hand, the Subjees looked forward to the food they received on a daily basis from the school, where they were fed bread with butter, milk, fruits, Milo and vegetable and beef soup every school day. Mr Rasheed Subjee mentioned that at home they were very poor and could not afford to drink tea with milk, so they drank black tea. He regularly did not finish the milk he was given at school so that he could mix it with the black tea at home. The school provided groceries, and by doing so, it helped reduce household expenditure on groceries. It also reduced the anxiety of not being able to consume certain foods and beverages such as Milo and milk, which were considered to be luxuries and expensive.

## Childhood experiences in Sophiatown

A vast majority of childhood experiences expressed by interviewees were focused on memories of schools attended. Similarly, in an interview with Mrs Sunker on 28 November 2012, the notion that inequality within schools was not rampant was once again brought to the fore, 'above all, within Sophiatown some Indian children of the rich and the poor experienced the same schooling and received the same quality of education'. In schools, both the children of the wealthy and the poor indulged in the same food given by the Department of Education; thus, food as a distinction of class did not play a fundamental role. Class distinction was, however, evident in the clothes that students wore to school and with which they



played in the streets. For example, whilst children of the wealthy wore a variety of quality clothing, Mr Subjee's siblings only received a pair of khaki shorts and shirts for Christmas from their parents' relatives. The clothes were to be their uniform throughout the following year.

In writings about childhood experiences in Sophiatown, Mattera's *Memory is the Weapon* reflects on childhood behaviour amongst children in Sophiatown. Growing up in Sophiatown, Don Mattera and his peers<sup>7</sup> performed the brave task of looking out for the police (Mattera 1987). Because of frequent police raids on illegal shebeens:

[T]he women paid us to keep watch for the police trucks known as *kvela kvela* which is Zulu for 'ride-ride' 'Zinja' (Dogs) we would shout, so that the entire neighbourhood echoed our warning cries, which gave illegal traders time to hide their wares. (p. 53)

Mattera also recalls how the young 'spies' were often punished in the form of beatings by the police when they were caught 'sounding their "dogs are here" warning' ... the beating was often severe that a firm and bitter hatred of the police was born inside them and inside me' (Mattera 1987:53). In a close-knit society like Sophiatown, children played and most importantly lived together regardless of colour, class or socio-economic backgrounds.

With no social facilities such as parks and swimming pools, Mr Subjee and his friends played with cartwheels that were used to sell scraps. Mrs Sunker remembers playing games such as throwing tennis balls to each other, making holes in the sand and throwing stones upwards.<sup>8</sup> Often they would go to Victoria Street, where they slid down a semi-slope. They roamed the streets of Sophiatown, playing with other children of the neighbourhood, particularly during weekends. An interview with Mr Kokkie Singh on 29 November 2012 revealed that some games enjoyed by youngsters included playing with marbles, whilst others enjoyed 'black mampatile' (hide and seek). Mr Sunker's interview on 28 November 2012 indicated that, like many other youngsters in South African townships during the apartheid era, envied white children who were privileged with recreation centres, sports fields for cricket and soccer, and swimming pools.

Similar to Mr Sunker, Mattera (1987) noted that:

[W]e used to scrape there [*dumping site*] and at times we would find old films that were thrown away, when we looked at them towards the sun we could see images of people which made us laugh. For us that was the ultimate fun because we did not have toys. We had to make our own toys. We also found old bicycle wheels. As we pushed the wheel, we imagined ourselves riding bikes that our parents could never afford for us. (p. 51)

7. Don Mattera, in his book *Memory is the Weapon*, states that children of all races and economic backgrounds played with each other in Sophiatown; this article assumes that Indian children were peers with the likes of Don Mattera and further socialised with Mattera, inevitably leading them to play the same form of games (Mattera 1987:15).

8. The stone game Mrs Sunker is talking about is very ancient and is played by throwing a stone upwards, and as the stone is in the air, they would scratch out the stones in the hole. As she throws the stone upwards again, she pushes the stone back into the hole but leaving one outside the hole. Should the player fail to catch the stone in the air or fail to leave out one stone outside the hole, the next player gets to play.

The point most respondents emphasised indefatigably was that it was safe to play in the streets and that crime was not an issue regardless of the presence of gangs. For most of the respondents, childhood memories are focused on the experiences of visiting the cinemas. Sophiatown was one of the first suburbs to have two cinemas, Bolansky and Odin cinemas.<sup>9</sup> Mattera estimates the seating arrangements of Odin Cinema to have been approximately 1100 people at a time, and the theatre also doubled as a hall that hosted gatherings organised by the ANC and various other political and non-political organisations (Mattera 1987:51).

Besides the cinemas and other forms of entertainment that brought together children from different walks of life, there was a particular event that children in Sophiatown anticipated with great excitement and that was Guy Fawkes Night. Still celebrated in many townships across South Africa, Mattera (1987) describes it:

[A]s a captivating show of bedazzlement and colour and comedy, many people hardly aware at the time of the political significance of 'Guy Fawks'. Paint, polish, and powder were prettily plastered on young faces as the children enacted their parent's roles. (p. 51)

Children from diverse ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds congregated in the streets in a spirit of dance and excitement.

Christmas also encouraged the unity of the people of Sophiatown. Muslims, Hindus, Christians and people of other religious organisations joined in the celebrations. Food and drink were shared by neighbours, 'enemies shook hands and good friends consolidated their friendships with gifts and good wishes, and new commitment to love' (Mattera 1987:54).

In articulating their childhood histories, interviewees' utterances were often embedded with nostalgia for the past. Often oral testimonies, according to Carton and Vis (2008:66), were embedded with self-selection. In this activity, interviewees' often display themselves or their experiences in a positive light (Ritchie 2003:34). This was observed in the description of their childhood, the education they received and the emphasis on the non-racial composition of their circle of friends. Thus, the political nature of South Africa and Sophiatown played a major role in the manner in which interviewees perceived their lives. At times, interviewees perceived themselves as heroes of Sophiatown as well as victims of apartheid legislation.

Crime in Sophiatown manifested itself in many ways, and the repercussion of crime was social disintegration. According to Mattera, some parents participated in criminal activities by often protecting their criminal children from the justice system and community members played a role in protecting criminals as well. For instance, Mattera (1987) states in *Memory is the Weapon*:

9. According to Mattera, cinemas in Sophiatown were owned by Jewish people. Picture Palace was named Bolanski after its owner and the other only cinema in Sophiatown was Odin Cinema, named after a man called Lakier (Mattera 1987:49).

In many instances families instead of chastising their delinquent children, actually goaded them to commit acts of violence, and 'profitable' crimes such as theft, robbery, and burglary ... parents lived unashamed of the criminality of their misguided and unguided children, at times hiding the bloodstained shirt or the murder weapon. (p. 60)

The affiliation to a gang ensured an entrance to a lavish lifestyle of expensive clothing, security, respect and fear from the community. However, parents and church organisations motivated the youth to complete their schooling and be active members of the church in order to prevent gang affiliation (Huddleston 1956:58). On the other hand, music, sports, hobbies, clothes, politics, food and patriotism have the potential to bring people together. However, the inception of the forced removals (beginning in the mid-1950s) brought forth another phenomenon that questioned the notion of unity in Sophiatown. Those who lived in affluent houses were not in favour of the forced removals mainly attributable to the emotional and financial attachments they had with their properties. On the other hand, non-property owners of Sophiatown exulted at the possibility of becoming recipients of new housing in Meadowlands, which was a major improvement in their living conditions. Consequently, the resistance to the forced removals<sup>10</sup> was weakened or divided by the potential gains and losses of those affected by the removals. Thus, Sophiatown residents became increasingly disunited during the forced removals; it was characteristic of any modern suburb in the current landscape of South Africa having been characterised by class, political and other divisions that form part of any society.

## Living conditions in Sophiatown

The study of the living conditions of Indian families is important in achieving an understanding of their experiences in Sophiatown. The ownership of property in Sophiatown was a strong indicator of class differentiation between the middle and working classes. In most cases, property owners in Sophiatown were successful lawyers, educated people and flourishing business people (Mattera 1987:45).

However, there existed a different picture from the romanticised version of Sophiatown and its prestigious buildings belonging to the middle class. This grim picture represents the economically challenged individuals who constituted the 'poor' of the Sophiatown community and lived in dilapidated backrooms and buildings owned by the wealthier minority (Huddleston 1956:56). The unique element was that dilapidated shanty houses were in close proximity to the more affluent houses (Mattera 1987):

On the other side, Sophiatown was characterised by double storey mansions and quaint cottages, with attractive, well-tended gardens, stood side by side with wood and iron shacks locked in a fraternal embrace of filth and felony. (p. 50)

10. The study of forced removals and the impact on Indian people is discussed in a separate study.

Often, the backrooms of bigger houses had shanties in the backyards where families lived communally on a rental basis. In addition, Mattera (1987) states:

[P]roperty owners, especially Jews and Indians, built several single quarters on small plots and also encouraged the erection of wood and zinc shanties at rentals of two or three pounds a month. (p. 74)

Undoubtedly, the payment of mortgages was a difficulty experienced by a number of black property owners. To remedy the situation, the letting of backrooms was conducted to ensure that bond payments were up to date (Hart & Pirie 1984:38–47). Whilst families rented small backrooms, families who could afford to do so, rented housing structures. However, it was more expensive to do so because rent was higher for houses than backyard shanties. Building structures were shared in many cases by diverse races, leading to exchange of cultures through communal living. The size of the family and class affiliation played a determinant role in the nature of buildings inhabited by Sophiatown residents.

For instance, the Singh family, according to an interview with Mr Kokkie Singh, 29 November 2012, lived at 23 Toby Street with his father, brothers and their wives. The house had three bedrooms, one lounge, one kitchen and a passage; younger members of the family slept in the backroom, which was characterised by a room and a kitchen. They slept in the kitchen on the floor, whilst relatives slept in the room. Over time the uncles started to move out, making more space in the house. It was, however, common occurrence that Indian extended families lived together (Khatri 1975:633–642). It was a cultural trend for Indians to live in this manner to reap the financial security of living in an extended household.

Living arrangements of this nature have advantages and disadvantages. Firstly, the advantages are that the financial well-being of the family is secured because employed uncles periodically contributed money for food, rent, school fees and other essentials required by the larger family. In the study of the Indian extended family, Khatri (1975:633–642) shows that extended families are adequately driven by mutual and inclusive decision-making processes that ensure the holistic well-being of the family. Thus, financial decisions taken are fundamentally designed to maintain the integrity and unity of the family, particularly because living under one roof encompasses, according Orenstein (1961:341–350), 'sharing the same hearth and immovable property'.

According to Mr Kokkie Singh, his brothers could afford to contribute to the family bank account because they used to work in factories in Newclare and Westdene, whilst others worked at Edblo, which was in Johannesburg. In essence, there was increased emotional, psychological and financial interdependence amongst family members. Lastly, a living arrangement of this nature ensured strong familial relations and unity because wealth belonged to the extended family rather than the nuclear family (Orenstein 1961:341–350).



However, such arranged methods of living are characterised by disadvantages and challenges. Taking an early historical approach to issues pertaining to gender and gender relations in extended families, Freund's analysis of the levels of female insubordination and exclusion interrogates the notions 'unity' and 'strong familial relations'. In doing so, Freund (1991:414–429) focuses his argument on the position of vulnerability and exploitation that women occupied when they were married into Indian extended families in Natal. Women were to be housewives and caregivers, thus restrained from participating in formal employment. Freund and Orenstein share the view that often, especially before and after industrialisation, the inability of women to find employment reduced their bargaining voices and decisions were made by men.

With regards to the interviewees, the research found that women were accepted as pivotal contributors to the well-being of the household. This was within the extended and nuclear households as mothers and outside the household as labourers. For instance, the Subjees depended heavily on their mother's salary to supplement their father's in order to maintain the well-being of the family. Thus, their financial contributions were fundamental to sustaining their living conditions.

A disadvantage of extended families living together is primarily the small living space. According to Mr Singh, there existed a lack of privacy and overcrowdedness. Family politics was also evident, which supposedly motivated the need for uncles to move into their own houses with their own families. Although the specifics relating to internal politics were pushed aside by the interviewees, it is clear that the extended family living together was threatened, not only by internal disputes but by the nuclear family preferring alternative living arrangements (Freund 1991:414–429).

Nuclear families opting to live in a house of their own would ensure access to privacy, self-reliance, independence, self-actualisation and self-determination outside the influence of the extended family. In essence, overall decisions pertaining to the well-being of the family are no longer the jurisdiction of the extended family, and the wife is consulted as a decision maker (Khatri 1975:633–642). The ramifications of this, however, are increased fundamental expenses such as electricity, school fees, groceries, rent and transport. To maintain the family, Indian women in Natal were encouraged to find employment in the ever-expanding manufacturing sectors (particularly in the 1950s) and to contribute to the financial needs of their households, which gave them power. In addition, the extended family loses the interconnectedness that was harnessed by constant interaction within the household because the families are separated (Khatri 1975:633–642). For instance, in an interview on 29 November 2012, Mr Kokkie Singh mentioned that when the Singh extended family moved out of their house to their own separate dwellings, they relied heavily on telephones for interaction. They had no longer congregated at the table to

converse on their daily experiences as they had done in their extended home. The interconnectedness they experienced during their stay as an extended household fragmented as a result of moving into separate houses.

In the case of the Subjees, regular rent increases meant that they were forced to move several times around Sophiatown to find less-expensive accommodation. As indicated by Mr Subjee during an interview on 28 November 2011, because of economic challenges, the Subjees always moved around and stayed in a total of four houses in Sophiatown, in Morris Street, Victoria Road, Milner Street and, finally, Tucker Street. The Subjee family did not have much to carry around, so they used wheelbarrows to transport their luggage. The use of wheelbarrows was convenient as they only had a coal stove, a bench (bunk) and two mattresses. Furthermore, the Subjees, according to Mr Rasheed Subjee, perceived chairs and sofas as luxuries. In an attempt to increase mobility he recalls:

'We would take a bed sheet and fasten our clothes inside and carry them, we did not have bags in which we could pack our belongings. Things were bad ... in our house there were times when we had to wait for our parents to finish eating so that we could use their plates because we did not have enough plates and cups.'

The little property they had was portable, and moving around to different houses was not difficult because the streets were not very far from one another. However, judging from the current landscape of Sophiatown and having walked the actual streets, the journey was tiring. Even more tiring was the hauling of the luggage, considering the uneven terrain characterising Sophiatown. Although Mr Subjee cannot remember the exact length of time they stayed in each of the houses, he remembers their physical conditions:

'The house in Morris Street was a 200 square meter plot. It had two rooms and a structure that housed two other families at the back yard. We stayed in the two-roomed house but lived in the one room. My mother would partition the room into two, she would put a string and sew old clothes together and hung it to separate the rooms ... you would find in most cases up to four families living together in one house. The house was characterised by half zinc, half asbestos, little stone, and zinc roof, basically the house was dilapidated. There was one big tap and a toilet outside the house that was used by four families who we resided with.'

The Subjee family stayed in one room divided by a curtain; the parents slept on one side of the curtain, whilst the nine siblings slept together on the floor on the other side. The Subjee family is an example of how Indian families lived in harsh conditions in Sophiatown. During the day their bedroom was a dining room and kitchen; at night it served as a sleeping area. The family also had to wake up earlier than their neighbours because they had to take turns to bath, whilst the others waited outside.

In comparison to Morris Street, the house in Victoria Road was an improvement; it was extended for storage purposes. It was a straight room standing on cement facing the street, with a front portion that also faced the street. They stayed

alone in the building, and other people stayed in the backrooms. As a family they enjoyed privacy. They still had one toilet and a single tap outside, but the house was much better than the one in Morris Street. The door of the toilet was made of zinc, and the toilet always exposed the user's legs, which made it easier for them to identify if there was someone in the toilet. Also, the door never closed properly, so a wire was used to close it.

According to Mr Subjee, there was no electricity, and no plugs at night, instead they lit candles. Food was cooked by using the primus stove, and the cold winter was made warm using the 'mbaula' coal stove.<sup>11</sup> In addition, it was not uncommon, according to the 'Memorandum on a Housing Scheme for Indians submitted by the Johannesburg Indian Tenant Protection Society', to find poor Indians living in appalling conditions (WITS, Historical Papers, Indian Affairs Box 199). Also, it was not unusual for a small room to be occupied by a large family of eight or more people. In addition, the 'Conference on Western Areas Removal Scheme' revealed that the average number of families per stand in Martindale was 8.5 (WITS, Historical Papers, AD 843 Mc 2.5–2.7.8, SAIRR: Indian Affairs Box 199). To substantiate this, Mattera (1987:2) also states that only a few homes had electric power and the majority of the residents of Western Native Township used coal stoves and paraffin appliances for cooking, lighting and heating. For the Subjees, coal was affordable and lasted longer.

In describing the physical environment of Sophiatown, Mattera (1987:74) stated that, because of the mixture of classes staying in Sophiatown, there were often high walls between poor and rich families. Furthermore, Mattera (1987) states:

In Sophiatown, no one chose their neighbours, so that alongside the Mabuzas or the Xuma's or the Makhenes or the Rathebes lived the miserably poor and the wretched [*and their children*]. All the rich could do, at the time, was build high walls with broken glass cemented on top of them to keep out the thieves. (p. 74)

## Conclusion

Indian people played significant roles as members of a cosmopolitan Sophiatown society in an age of segregation and apartheid. Similar to the black, mixed race and Chinese people, Indians occupied geographical spaces often squalor and lacking pivotal services, such as electricity and access to water. The implementation of the *Slums Act* of 1934 in relation to Sophiatown creates the bases for a critical analysis of the living conditions in Sophiatown. Indeed, parts of Sophiatown could easily be perceived as slums, whilst other physical structures met the requirements of 'appropriate living standards'. Indian people inhabited these structures, and their cultural and religious beliefs were detrimental in shaping the idolisation of Sophiatown as a cosmopolitan society. Sophiatown, similar to District Six, was a symbolic bedrock and blueprint of freehold location that attempted to resist apartheid's social engineering endeavours. Furthermore, Indians navigated through the difficulties of life in poverty-stricken conditions in large and small families.

<sup>11</sup>.Mbaula is a tin furnace used to cook or as a heater.

Their interactions with other members of the community comprised cordiality and, in some instances, conflict.

Thus, community networks shared by Indians and community members resound a clear indication that the history of Sophiatown requires increased robust interrogation if the story of Sophiatown is to be complete and holistic. This article provided an informed understanding of Sophiatown, encapsulating the experiences of Indian children to an inclusive and intimate analysis of shared spaces and identity formation in the home, workplace and community. Discourses and academic deliberations have neglected the contributions and agency of Indian people by focusing a vast majority of literature on expounding the experiences of black people. This article deconstructed the dominant trajectory of Sophiatown with major focus on interviewee's experiences in an attempt to highlight the importance of an inclusive approach in the formation of discourses and nuances on historical processes in Sophiatown. Although an inclusive approach has been attempted with a focus on Indian people, the role played by Chinese, mixed race and white people in constructing the holistic landscape of Sophiatown requires robust interrogation.

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## Authors' contributions

The author is the sole contributor to this article.

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