Searching the Diasporic Roots – A Genealogical Journey into Family History

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how a genealogical approach can be creatively used to trace one's ancestry despite decades of isolation from his/her place of origin. This emerged from the author's initial curiosity to explore his ancestral origin in the northern parts of India decades after the arrival of his grandfather as an indentured migrant to South Africa. Rummaging through his deceased father's documents, the author came across identity documents of his grandparents who were indentured to a sugar plantation on the coastal belt of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. With the help of a historian, a search through the archives' depository, and a year of memory recall (oral history research) with elder members of his extended family, the author was able to formulate a family structure of his paternal roots. Through rigorous internet searches on the geographical location of the villages of origin of his ancestors, the author constructed a hypothetical map of his ancestral roots in the Indian sub-continent. Equipped with this information, the author undertook a journey to India and through trial and error eventually reached his final ancestral destination. This paper recounts the author's experience before, during and after finding his roots, and locates this search within a wider global interest in family history and diasporic roots. This article highlights how curiosity can become a source of encounter with the 'unknown' and how this can result in constructing a genealogy which was supposedly lost.

Keywords: Indians, Identity, Roots, Diaspora, Genealogy, Indenture, South Africa

Introduction

Indentured labour in South Africa under British colonialism had a profound effect on the Indian diaspora alienating them from their ancestral umbilical cord. Although there were two strands of Indians that came to the shores of the then Natal colony from the 1860s onwards, indentured Indians of different ethnic and faith groups dealt a major blow in every facet of their lives as compared to their merchant class counterparts. The merchant class, due to their economic well-being and by virtue of being better educated, managed to keep in touch with their kith and kin in the ancestral village. They were able to communicate via the postal service since they were located in the urban centers and being financially better off; they could afford making periodic journeys to the motherland to be reunited with their family of origin. For the indentured Indian, given the gloom and hardship of plantation life, scattered in remote parts of the colony made contact with their forebears an impossible assignment. However, some indentured Indians through the help of their merchant class counterparts were able to write letters to their families and used them as postal conduits. Often their shops which had a formal address were used for occasional contact with their family. These letters were written in their vernacular language. Given the slow pace of mail service which was dependent on ships calling to and from India and delays in the delivery of mail to remote parts of the colony, keeping contact with family was discontinuous and protracted. As a result of that, the first generation of indentured Indians virtually lost contact with their family roots and post indenture they have come to see the colony as their permanent homeland.

This paper helps to construct how the author was able to trace his roots through rummaging his late father's personal documents in finding a lead to track his third generation relatives in a remote part of India. The structure of the paper commences with a conceptual framework on tracing ancestral roots followed by an account of recounting the history of the first generation of indentured Indians in the country. This is followed by a reflexive account which constructs the authors experience before, during and after establishing contact with his ancestral family. The paper documents the author's experience in the different phases of tracing his roots which helps him construct a family tree of his family lineage both in South Africa and India.

Conceptual Framework

It is quite some time since the social scientists have started to link contemporary genealogical work with the rich histories of kinship that have long been dominated by anthropologists. A growing field in the study of family history is genealogy as an identity-work and for purposes of cultural identification. Sociological interest in family history research is growing, but there are many areas left unexamined (Barnwell 2015:1-2).

Tracing one's descent falls into the field of genealogy. Historically, genealogy as a method of studying family history was derived from German philosophy, particularly the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), but is most closely associated with the French academic Michel Foucault (1926-24) (Crowley 2009:2). Genealogy studies are based on research plans to answer family history-related questions. As a research tool it uses vital, tax, church, census, military, legal, cemetery, and property records, plus personal papers, books, magazines, and the Internet as sources of information. They locate and interpret original records and other sources that utilize first and second-hand knowledge. These accounts according to Jary and Jary (2000:241-242) are important where it is common for the older members of society to be the genealogical experts.

The concept of genealogy was amplified by Michel Foucault. Sembou (2011:1) asserts that a simple definition of Foucauldian genealogy would be a type of history. Moreover, Foucauldian genealogy is a history of tracing 'origins' and, as such, it questions the idea of origins or deeper meanings. It unearths the forced relations operating in particular events and historical developments. Foucault describes genealogy as an 'effective history' (Sembou 2011:2). It debunks the assumption underlying conventional historiography that there are 'facts' to be interpreted; rather, facts are themselves constructed out of the researcher's 'will to truth'. Hence it is a specific type of truth.

In the epic book titled *'The Order of Things, An Archaeology of the Human Sciences'*, Foucault (1966) examines the organizing principles of human perceptions and knowledge. It implies that genealogy examines the 'history of the present'. Genealogy for Foucault is an explanation of where we have come from; its purpose is to tell us how our current situation originated. Notwithstanding the focus of genealogy, one may argue that all history has these features. Some of Foucault's archaeologies can be said to have had

similar features, but their purpose was to look at epistemic shifts discretely in themselves, without insisting on this practical relevance (Kelly 2010).

The study of family histories is a methodological tool that helps to document past family structure and heritage. This can be noted in de Kadt's (2004) study on the case history of German settlers in KwaZulu-Natal during the colonial period. She asserts that each family has a starting point which compilers of texts intend to preserve information about the past for people of today, to keep alive their memories, to bring picture of the past to life, to retain a legacy and broadly strengthening a sense of community (de Kadt, 2004:98-99). In a similar vein, Rosenthal (2002:175) postulates that biographical research works with life stories have been written down or narrated in interviews. He argues that since the 1970s, family history studies have established itself in the social sciences and the humanities. It applies concepts that are both theoretically and methodologically sound and focuses on individual biography that aims to make sense for particular experiences of phases in the context of an individual's entire life.

There is also an argument that family history research helps to satisfy ones need to search for their roots in a post-modern and uncertain age. It helps to develop a sense of security and identity which Tanya Evans and Patricia Curthoy (2013:285-286) call an ''insight into self-hood''. By exploring ones family tree one gets submerged into history since it helps to transform it and make it personal. Family history studies provide a key sense of identity and enable to historicise their past so that they could understand the present better (Evans & Curthoy 2013:285-286). This is especially so in light of the fact that the family as an institution is not static. As an institution it may be slow to change, but individual families by their very nature are continually changing, accommodating new members, adjusting to the loss of old, responding individually and collectively to birth, maturation, and decline (Ulrich 2008:70). It is in this context that recording of family history is an invaluable method to ensure that future generations are afforded an opportunity to identify with the past.

In the study of family history, class and gender are important factors that need to be noted. Rich families are always able to record, safeguard and treasure artefacts that have some meaning to their ancestry as compared to poor families. In poor families, Evan's study (2012:209) on the use of memory and

material culture in the history of the family in colonial Australia reveals that the poor families hardly accord any importance to the safe keeping of material artefacts. This may be due in part to the cycle of poverty that has a debilitating effect on their lives hence holding onto these artefacts is hardly a priority as compared to the challenges imposed on them to eke out a daily living. Evans (2012:208) also noted gender differences in the way males and females responded to the safe keep of artefacts as part of their history. Females more than males kept clothing as artefacts over generations as compared to their male counterparts who tend to keep diaries, portraits, paintings and a large number of objects of obvious economic value.

It may also be noted that history about ordinary people is seldom written. It is often the opulent, famous or even the notorious that make the annals of history. Schmidt and Braga Garcia (2010:289-290) contend that the history of ordinary people and their experiences are often lost and doomed to oblivion, either because the sources have been disposed of, or because they have been omitted from textbooks, the media, and official files. With ordinary people one may find relics arranged in drawers or pushed aside in small hide-away places, to keep dreams alive, to engender memories and to keep hopes. The history preserved by these people contains human experience over time which helps to maintain a link between the present and the past, based on historical investigations carried out by the people themselves.

In line with Foucault's methodological approach in the genealogical tradition and guided by the works of several authors on family history studies mentioned earlier, a case history is constructed by examining key documents on the origins of the author's grandfather in 1860. This entailed an examination of birth certificates which contained important details about the author's grandfather's place of origin which was verified with archival records on the origins of indentured Indians in South Africa, oral reports on the area where his grandfather was indentured and lived, documentation of oral history solicited from two daughters who are still living and memory recalls from the authors childhood passed on by his father.

Waetjen and Vahed (2013) cite in their work as to how birth and death certificates, marriage certificates and pass certificates for indentured Indians contain important information about their origin. This information can be used to further corroborate the family lineage through digitized copies which is to be found in a Documentation Centre archive at the former University of Durban-Westville. The original collections of these documents are all housed

in the Durban Archives Repository. Given the advancement made to digitize these documents, one can with ease trace their family of origin in India. In this study, information obtained from the Durban Archives Repository helped the author to undertake a rigorous Internet search and examination to locate the map of India before and after partitioning which helped to delineate the locality. This was corroborated with information appearing on the birth document.

Recounting the History of the First Generation of Indentured Indians in South Africa

The first batch of immigrant Indians were indentured labourers who reached the colony of Natal on 16 November 1860 on the ship, SS Truro. A total of 342 indentured Indians were on board. Thereafter, between 1860-1861, five more ships brought in a total of 1,360 men and women (Sulliman 1997). These were first of the 152,184 'human cargo' to be shipped to the shores of Durban over 51 years comprising 62 percent males, 25 percent females and 13 percent children (Ministry of External Affairs, 2000). They were subjected to a contract which included free transport from India, an agreement to work for 10 shillings a month for three years (later extended to five years), free food, accommodation and medical attention (Burrows 1952).

In so far as their ethnic and religious composition was concerned, two-thirds were Tamil and Telegu speaking Hindus originating from Mysore and surrounding areas. The remaining from what is now known as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Kolkata, Malabar, Madras and West Bengal. Only 12 percent of the total population of this cohort of immigrants was of the Islamic faith, while some two percent were Christians. In so far as literacy was concerned, many have had no formal education but managed to sustain strong memories of their customs, traditions and rituals which they preserved diligently (Ministry of External Affairs, 2000; Vahed 2001:194). Their settlement patterns spread across the city, the colony and outside of it. In the city they settled largely on the periphery of white owned estates such as Riverside, Cato Manor, Clairwood and Magazine Barracks. In so far as the colony was concerned, they were largely settled on the coastal belt of Natal to work on its fertile land for agricultural purposes. Hence they were settled in white owned estates on the

coast in towns such as Isipingo, Umzinto and Umkomaas to the South of Durban. To the North of Durban they settled in towns such as Verulam, Tongaat, and Stanger (Maharaj 1994) and as far as Richards Bay. In other parts of Natal, some indentured Indians settled in the Province's capital in Pietermaritzburg and hinterland towns of Dundee, Newcastle, and Ladysmith.

Around the 1870s a second group of free passenger Indians began streaming into the colony in search of economic opportunities. They followed on the footsteps of their indentured counterparts who were by now the trailblazers of the Indian presence in the colony. Within this group there were a fair number of Gujarati speaking Hindus but a large proportion were Muslims originating from the Gujarat districts of Surat, Kholwad, Rander, Kathor, Baroda, Bardoli and Navsari (Randeree 1997:70). They constituted about 10 percent of the total Indian population and comprised mainly traders (Ministry of External Affairs, 2000). These Muslims were mistaken by the colonial whites to be Arabs due to their pronounced dress code and features. Nonetheless, both religious groups enjoyed enormous trading opportunities, privilege of movement in the city to pursue their business interests and ventured both into remote towns of the colony and the Transvaal where they set up trading posts. Many of them owned family businesses that engaged the services of better educated extended family members as compared to their indentured Indian counterpart. The latter group was less educated and lacked capital to make any significant investment in business (Bawa 2006). Accountants, lawyers, teachers, priests and other professionals supplemented the already established Indian business community both in the colony and in the Transvaal (Ministry of External Affairs, 2000).

In contrast, the social and economic condition of the early generation of indentured Indian was subjected to widespread exploitation. Long hours of work on daily food rations, living in cramped regimented dwellings constructed of stone and zinc, or wattle and daub, poor sanitary and health conditions, the absence of medical care facilities, racial prejudice and physical abuse took its toll on the well-being of these so called *'strange looking people'* from Asia. Social and health related problems in the form of suicide, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illnesses, violence, infidelity, desertions, tuberculosis, diseases, infanticide, death related to burns were some of the many hardships encountered by the early settlers (Meer 1980) that militated against the preservation of family life, values and maintaining ties with their ancestry.

Socio-cultural and religious dilemmas were also a major source of challenge. Given the diversity of languages spoken in the colony (Tamil, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Telugu, Urdu, Kokani, and Meman—a dialect of Sindhi) **(**Mesthrie 1991) it restricted social interaction within certain linguistic groups and at the same time excluded others. Where certain linguistic groups were in the minority it is not surprising that they would be isolated from the dominant ones. Being in a strange land and stripped of social networks and religious and community support structures, further added to their social isolation.

Given the unequal ratio of males over females, which in 1885 was 2:1 (Palmer 28-29:1957) for the entire indentured population, it further added to being isolated as the prospect of forming intimate relationships became remote. Although some arrived as a family unit, many were single males, socially engineered by the colonialist masters so that they may remain unencumbered for a longer duration of time to sell their labour. It was perceived that family life and accompanying familial responsibility would distract them from providing undivided commitment to their colonial master's pursuit of economic gains. Females were often obliged by economic necessity and sometimes fear to cohabit with a number of men simultaneously without the protection of marriage for the explicit purpose of male sexual gratification (Meer 1972). Provision for the recognition of marriages whether contracted in India or in South Africa was non-existent. In the absence of such institutional mechanisms to recognize marriages it was not uncommon for men and women to form short-term unions and separate as soon as quarrels occurred. This situation was exacerbated when the coolie agent in assigning labourers arbitrarily paired any male or female together and assigned them for indenture as husband and wife (Palmer 28:1957). In many instances formal consent was provided to the coolie agent out of convenience in order to overcome the fear of loneliness which accompanied this form of labour arrangement. Getting men to accept responsibility for children born within a relationship was often difficult due to the denial of paternity. The limited number of women among the many men often escalated into competition for companionship resulting in violence, suicide and murder (Palmer 1957).

While their initial recruitment had been for work in the plantations, Indian labor was also later deployed to the railways, dockyards, coal mines, municipal services and domestic employment. Although they were not happy

with the racist laws and taxes, only about 23% of Natal Indians had returned to India by 1911, when the much abused indenture was finally terminated. Many of the Indians had acquired little plots of land and became kitchen gardeners and hawkers, retailing their produce to the White and merchant communities in adjacent suburbs and towns. In a nutshell; the indentured Indian had to overcome many challenges. Finally, they had to wage a relentless fight against the evils of colonialism and later apartheid that they completed in partnership with all oppressed people in the country (The Indian Diaspora 2000:77-87).

Oral Historical Account from Family Members on their Ancestry

Interestingly, despite studies on families have advanced significantly, there has not been a strong body of sociological research devoted to the study of family history, despite its increasing prominence as a popular pastime in recent decades. Scholars are now beginning to recognize the value of personal, 'small,' and 'micro' histories for fleshing out official or dominant narratives. Similarly social scientists are beginning to link contemporary genealogical work with the rich histories of kinship that have long been the domain and fascination of anthropologists (Barnwell 2015:1). It is in this context that this section is constructed from narratives derived from oral history on the family genealogy.

`During my early childhood, my father, Houssain Ahmed used to visit the grave site of his mother and father at the Muslim cemetery in Verulam, north of Durban. It was a ritual that continued throughout his living years especially on a Thursday evening, during important religious occasion and in the mornings of the two *Eid.*[1] My father used to offer prayers at the gravesite and little did I know what this prayer was all about. In my teenage life this ritual continued and one day I asked my father why I had to accompany him and participate in this ritual. His response was, 'so that someday you will

[1] Muslims, world over celebrate two religious festivals during the year known as *Eid*. The first is *Eid-ul-Fitr* which is celebrated after observing the month of Ramadaan during which period Muslims fast and the second known as *Eid-ul-Adha* which they commemorate in memory of Abraham and his son Ishmail.

remember your roots'. I did not take him seriously at the time but followed this ritual with him until his demise on 10 January 2007 at the age of 87.

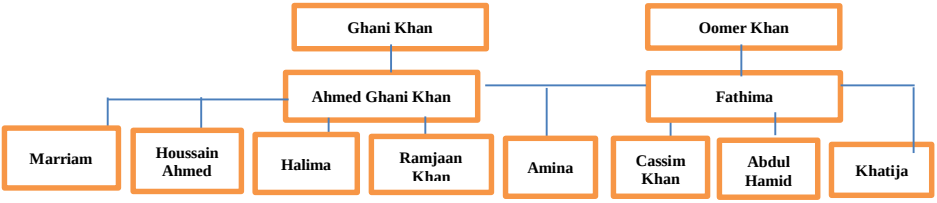
It was during the 1987 floods that ravished many parts of KwaZulu-Natal that my father was distressed about my grandfather's grave site being lost due to the identification stone being washed away when the Umdhloti River burst its banks. His distress centred on the fact that this was the only landmark that reminded him of his heritage. He made every attempt to locate the exact site of his fathers and mothers gravesite but to no avail. Nonetheless he continued to visit the gravesite and prayed for his parents besides a palm tree which survived the flood and served as a landmark. At this time I was 27 years old and pursuing a Master's degree in sociology part time and was curious to know my ancestry.

My father narrated that my grand-father's name was Ahmed Ghani Khan (indentured number 143171) and my grandmother was Fathima. Ahmed was indentured on a sugar cane plantation in New Guelderland, Stanger, owned by a George Stewart. According to the ships' records my grandfather arrived in May 1910 on board the Umzinto XLVIII. He was of Pathan descent from the village of Kamihoji in Bahraich and boarded the ship in Calcutta (now Kolkata). He was 19 years old when he arrived and died at age 60 in 1941. My grandfather met his wife on another farm in New Guelderland. Details on how they met and married are not known.

Fatima was a colonial-born, meaning that she was born to parents who had arrived as indentured migrants. She was the daughter of Oomer Khan and Kallu Sukkhan according to records provided by my colleague Goolam Vahed. The records revealed that Oomer Khan, indentured number 93488, arrived in May 1902 on board the ship Umzinto XXVII. Khan was 26 years old when he arrived. On the ship's list, his Zillah (district) is given as Sindh (Bombay), but his village is given as Bhagadad, suggesting that he or his ancestors were likely from Iraq and had possibly settled in Bombay. Khan was assigned to work on a farm owned by Theodorus Colenbrander and Gerhardus Soebang in New Guelderland, Stanger. My maternal grandmother, Kallu Sukkhan, indentured number 77041, was 22 when she arrived in Natal in March 1899 on board the Congella XXIX. She was from the village of Tilhura in Bareilly. According to the ship's records, she was a single woman migrant and was also assigned to Theodorus Colenbrander and Gerhadus Soebang in Stanger. Both being single

and Muslim, in a context where there was a shortage of women, it is no surprise that Oomer Khan and Kallu Sukkhan married. One of the ways in which family researchers can gain additional information is through a search of the estate papers. Unfortunately, there are no estate papers for either Oomer Khan or Kallu Sukhan as they did not leave sufficient assets.

Lineage in South Africa



A vivid memory that my father had of Oomer Khan which stands perpetuity at the Verulam Muslim cemetery was a mango tree which he had planted and a concrete bench he had constructed around it. In so far as the second generation is concerned, which is depicted in the family tree above, with the exception of Amina and Khatija, all other siblings from my paternal side are deceased. Apart from the scant records about my grandparent's origin, none of my siblings including myself have any recollection of them. Hence the only memories we have are those from oral history about the paternal first generation from stories narrated by my father.

My father recalled that when he was around five years old (c. 1925) they moved into a house on a plot of land in Umdhloti Drift which his father purchased. On this land, his father cultivated vegetables which he sold to the residents in the neighborhood, on foot. There were a few others in the neighborhood that engaged in this type of economic activity and often provided support to each other in carrying out this informal economic activity. Through the proceeds from the vegetable garden, he succeeded in purchasing two other properties in the town center in Verulam and another adjacent to the existing house in Verulam. His father managed to send him to school at Umdhloti Drift and he attained a standard six qualification, which was a very high qualification for that time. On completion of his education he took up employment at the Verulam Box and Timber Company as a machine operator. Whilst in the employ of this company he had a traumatic experience when he lost his left

index finger. Thereafter he took up apprenticeship with Bobbys Coach Works in Clairwood as a coach builder and qualified as an artisan. During his work life, he attempted to study law through correspondence but could not complete his degree due to family and work commitments. Nonetheless he succeeded in completing a few law courses.

My father was the eldest son in the family and he had seven other siblings, three brothers and four sisters. As my father was born in 1920, it can be assumed in the absence of proper documentation that his parents married in 1918 or 1919. My father lost his father when he was a very young man and had to take full responsibility for his younger siblings and his mother. Despite his mother being illiterate, she became the custodian of the different properties which his father had left behind.

Around the late 1960s, he together with his youngest brother Abdul Hamid purchased a clothing factory known as Super Clothing in Grey Street. The factory, due to competition from other emerging enterprises was a dismal failure, resulting in huge financial losses. It was forced to liquidate and the family home that they occupied was mortgaged. Due to their inability to sustain payment the property was liquidated. Despite this financial set back, my father was able to build another house on an adjacent property which became the family abode together with his younger brother Abdul Hamid who jointly owned it. My father was responsible for ensuring that all four of his sisters were married. His two brothers Ramjaan and Cassim left the family home at an early age. There was a family dispute over the property which my grandfather left and my uncle Ramjaan took possession of two properties in central Verulam which he sold to set up a lucrative taxi business. Cassim Khan met his wife Zaithoon from Riverside and moved to Chatsworth in the 1960s, severing all family ties. He was the only son who was excluded from his mother's bequest due to a mental illness that resulted in periodic absence from the family home. Later, in the early 1980s my father bequeathed his portion of the property which he owned jointly with Abdul Hamid to Cassim. Khatija, the youngest sibling, although married, continued to stay at the family residence due to a promise made by my father to his mother to care for her after my grandmother's demise.

Tracing the Genealogical Roots

Upon the demise of my father I had to clear his locker where he stored his documents. I came across his birth document and that of his father's. His father's name was Gunni Khan as it appeared on the birth certificate was wrongly spelt by the colonialist. His name was in fact Ghani. He originated from a village called Bahraich, in Northern India. I was excited to make this discovery and Googled the map of India to see whether this village existed. Much to my surprise I noted that this village was located on the southern part of the Nepal border and within the province of Uttar Pradesh close to the capital of Lucknow. I was surprised to learn that my ancestry was rooted in North India as I assumed that my forbears originated from the South of India just like all indentured Indians in South Africa.

Having located the exact locality on the map, I discussed my discovery with my sister Zubeida Houssain who had the opportunity to visit the farm in Guelderland in Stanger with my father three years before his demise. I was informed that Mr George Stewart junior had no recollection nor had any artefacts or records about the farm and its early inhabitants. Nonetheless I persevered by discussing the paternal ancestry through my two aunts Amina and Khatija. Both of them had very little memory recall as they were infants when they lost their father and mother but provided a similar anecdote that my father had related to me. I tried searching for a map of Bahraich village specifically, but with little success. At this stage my curiosity heightened and with the map depicting the capital of Lucknow coupled with the birth certificate of my father and the indentured document of his father I decided to make a journey to India in search of my ancestral roots.

It was in January 2014 that I made the journey to Lucknow in the midst of the Indian general elections. I was cautioned by family and friends not to make this journey due to the history of internecine political violence between Hindus and Muslims which was common at a village level. Despite these caution, I braved my way to Lucknow. My first stop was at the Lucknow University where I hoped to find maps of Bahraich. The geography department was least helpful and they informed me that the maps have changed after the demarcation that took place in 1948 during Partition. I did not relent. I befriended two PhD students from the sociology department who spoke Hindi, Urdu and English to accompany me to make the journey to Bahraich. At first the students were reluctant due to being caught up in possible political conflicts that usually played out at the village level. With much persuasion, the students agreed to make the journey with me.

We left early morning on a hired vehicle to Bahraich traversing many small villages (Maharu, Mallipur, Gonda & Jamunha). The journey was a tense one. I was disturbed to see a large number of peasants accompanied by children toiling on the remote farms, scantily dressed with many having their heads clad with brightly colored turbans to ward of the sun rays. The roads were of poor quality with tractors and trucks dominating the better part of the journey. At each village, we made a stop asking the locals how to get to Bahraich due to the poor road signage. Some provided us with clear directions on how to get to the next village that will lead us to Bahraich. Others guessed, resulting in us

losing direction, whilst a few had no recollection on how to get to this village. Time was running out and we had already travelled some three hundred kilometers. Finally we reached Bahraich. I was excited to have arrived on the land of my ancestors but at the same time felt anxious as to whether I will be able to locate them.

In Bahraich, I called at the nearest post office. A very stern looking, unfriendly post official attended to me. I presented the documents that I had on me and the map to him requesting directions to the village named Kamihoji. He looked at me suspiciously and commented to his colleague in Hindi that he '*wondered what this people wanted in the height of the election*'. The students let me know that I will not get any information from him as the post official was already suspicious about us. He referred us to the local municipality a few streets away from the post office. At the municipality there were queues of people waiting to be attended to by the municipal officials and we became anxious about time and not knowing when we will be attended to. A guard stood at the entrance of the municipal office and beckoned people with a long stick *(lathi*) to stay in queue. We did not know as to whether we should pass the queue and enquire as to whether there was a planning department at the municipal office. The students addressed him in Hindi, explaining that I was from South Africa and wanting to find my ancestral relatives (*rishtedar)* in the village. He beamed with excitement and said in Hindi *'aja bhai'* (come brother). I was touched by his reception and we were directed with his *'lathi'* to the reception area. The reception area was sparsely furnished with dusty antiquated furniture. A burly, unshaven middle aged man sat at the desk and wanted to know what we wanted. The students explained to him and requested to be directed to the section that dealt with plans and maps, which later turned out to be the district planning department.

We climbed the stairs to two floors to the district planning office that stored maps. The office was poorly ventilated and smelt foul, but contained maps of the area on dusty shelves which was neatly arranged. Fortunately, the person that helped us was an elderly official who attended to the GIS (Geographical Information System) for the district municipality. We explained what we were looking for and he shook his head and said in Hindi '*yeh gow me Musalman nahi melinga'* (in this village you will not find Muslims) and his forehead creased as he was thinking. We presented the documents provided by historian Professor Goolam Vahed which identified the village as Kamihojhi. He pulled out another faded map from the shelve that contained the 1948

boundaries and informed us that upon independence Bahraich was divided into smaller districts and most Muslims are to be found in an area called Shrawasti some thirty kilometers from the municipal office. He then explained to us that the spelling of the village Kamihojhi was wrong and it was instead Kanibhoji. I realized that this once again was the error of the colonialists who recorded information incorrectly. Nonetheless, we learnt that Kanibhoji was a village located in the village Shrawasti.

We drove towards Shrawasti and on the way we made several stops to enquire from locals to make sure that we were on the right course. The last ten kilometers to Shrawasti comprised gravel and the driver meticulously navigated the vehicle in between cows, donkey driven carts, bicycles, motor bikes and cattle. It was a bumpy and dusty ride until we reached Shrawasti with only one street, incomplete formal houses and houses constructed of mud and thatch alongside it. We met an elderly man on the roadside and showed him my grandfather's indenture documents. On the document we least realized that parts of it were written in Urdu. The man read it loudly and frowned. He later stated that we should drive for a short while and we will arrive at a small settlement called Kanibhoji and we should request to see the tribal leader also known as *Pathan*. On our way we noted houses with green, red and orange flags. I enquired from the students what the significance of these colored flags was. I was told that the green flag denoted a Muslim home, the red a Hindu and orange a Sikh. This was one of the ways to identify homes as there were no addresses and people are identified by their religious affiliation based on the color of the flag. We stopped at a house with a green flag and enquired as to where we could find the *Pathan*. We were told to drive further until we arrived at a big tree alongside the road and to find out there abouts.

At the tree we stopped and got off the dusty vehicle. The students spoke in Urdu with a young male stating that we would like to meet the village elder (tribal leader). The man shouted loudly *'saab!saab! koi mehman agiye*' (Sir!sir! some visitors have come). A tall, lean man, dressed in a white long shirt known as *Kurta* adorned mostly by Muslim men trotted on a walking stick to support his limp leg, made his way to the tree from the corner of an incomplete brick and mortar house. He introduced himself as Hashim Ali *(Pathan*).The young man who received us, hurried to several houses, collected chairs and placed them in a circle typical to a *Panchayat* (where people met

seated in a circle for a village meeting). The students greeted the elder and introduced me stating the purpose of our visit. As we sat in a circle, we had to contend with swarms of flies and bleating sheep that echoed from around the mud and thatch homes whilst the tribal leader perused the documents which we provided him. In a short while we were surrounded by a large crowd who were curious to know our purpose.

Mr Hashim Ali studying the documents of my grandfather

Encounter with Family Members in the Ancestral Village

Mr. Ali became engrossed with the documents we provided him with. He read out aloud the Urdu notes on the document several times and he frowned as if he was recollecting his thought. Suddenly he smiled and wanted to know whether there was a '*moulana'* (Muslim priest) in my family. I beamed and nodded. The tribal leader stated that he recalls several years ago a priest from South Africa came to find his relative in this part of the village and was not sure whether it was the same family but he knows that there was a photograph

taken with him and his relative, but he will find out in a moment. He requested the young man, who seemingly appeared to be his assistant to locate a person by the name of Iqbal. Whilst we waited, he requested one of the boys to bring cool drinks. We were served in plastic cups and he laughingly stated that we need to bear with the flies.

As he chatted with me through the students two men appeared panting for breath through the group of people that stood in a circle. The tribal leader mentioned in Urdu who I was. The two men cried with ecstasy and embraced me. I was overwhelmed with joy but at the same time felt anxious as I did not know how to relate to them. As they embraced me they went on saying with tears rolling on their reddish cheeks *mera rishtedar, mera bhai* (my relative, my brother). I had a sinking feeling of not knowing how to respond to their emotional state and for a moment I was moribund with my eyes becoming moist with tears. One of them who I learnt was Iqbal ran into his mud and thatch house and returned with a photograph. I was amazed. The photograph was taken some 15 years ago with my first cousin who was studying in Pakistan to become a *Moulana* (priest). *Moulana* I recalled, when he returned to South Africa after having spent 14 years in the continent mentioned that he met with the family, but nobody back home took him seriously or bothered to find out further.

I was then ushered to the Khan homestead which was not far from the tree where I was greeted by hordes of my ancestral relatives. At the homestead, there was excitement and both Iqbal and Jamal rushed into the house and brought a bed for me and the PhD students to sit on. I realized that it served a dual purpose, both as a lounge suite and a bed to sleep on. It also made me realize the depth of poverty amongst my ancestral relatives.

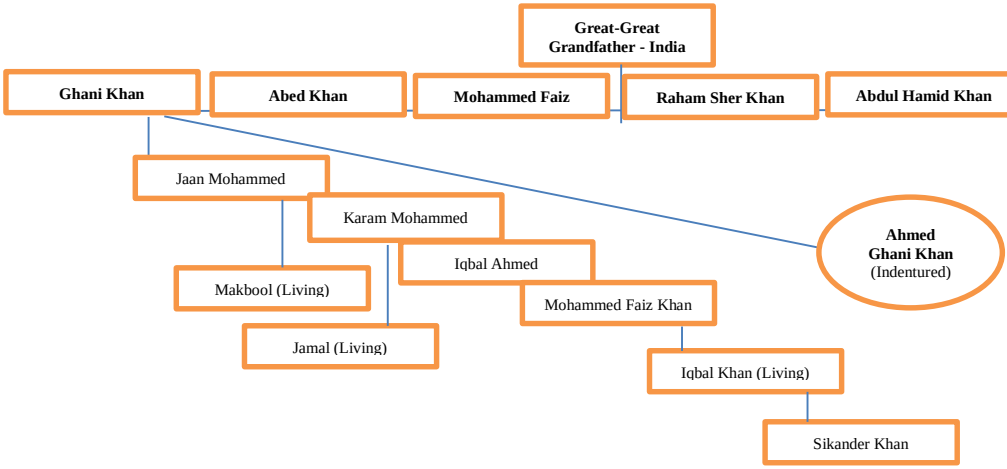
The students did an onerous task as both interpreters and scribe at the same time whilst I was still recovering from my emotional state of mind during the encounter. When one was serving as an interpreter the other was taking notes. Through the notes compiled by the student, I was able to construct the ancestral family genealogy.

My two relatives Jamal Khan on the right and Iqbal Mohammed on the left

In mapping my family lineage in India I have come to understand that my great, great, grandfather's father had three wives who begot five sons . One of them was Ghani Khan. My great grandfather had five sons of which one, Ahmed Ghani Khan was my grandfather who was indentured. There are four living descendant's from this lineage. Makbool Khan the son of Jaan Mohammed Khan, Jamal Khan the son of Karam Mohammed, Iqbal Khan the son of Mohammed Faiz Khan and Sikander Khan the son of Iqbal Khan. This lineage took much time to comprehend given that it extended through four generations, but drawing a family tree of the lineage in India made this much easier to comprehend.

The bed in floral image and some of the Khan family members

Lineage in India



Conclusion

The paper highlights through the case study of the author's family as to how indentured Indians in South Africa have been stripped of their ancestral lineage. It also speaks of the plight of the first generation of indentured Indians and the circumstances that have contributed in them severing ties with their kith and kin in their ancestral homeland. While this is the case, there is still hope to trace their roots using a genealogical approach in their pursuit. However, not everyone will be fortunate enough, such as the author to trace one's roots. It is through sheer coincidence that the author was able to locate important links through birth documents of his grandparents, archival material through the assistance of a historian and oral history from his parents and the author's surviving relatives in the country. For the many Indians of indentured heritage, that has no such access to artefacts that bears testimony to their origin, will have to live with their ancestral roots shrouded in mystery.

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