

Chapter 12

In Search of Promised Gold: Mahilall's Voyage from India to the South African Shores

Satish Balgobind

Shanta Balgobind Singh

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9469-6552>

Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, it represents the journey embarked on by Mahilall from India to South Africa lured by talks of obtaining gold and becoming rich, and secondly a reflexive understanding of the life history of one of Mahilall's grandsons, Thelochan Balgobind, in the context of upward social and economic mobility and tracing his family 'roots' in India. One of the core issues in this endeavour in trying to find their roots was to link up to kin in the remote village of Bihar viz. Haripurwa, and to compare their lifestyles with those who remained behind. The use of this personal reflexivity focuses upon Mahilall's grandson's family's history and that of the wider Indian community. His life history is an example of the accomplishments of many Indians families in South Africa who have achieved success over adversity. As a person born and brought up in South Africa, though of Indian descent, he displayed a remarkable preference for individual initiative, which was probably lacking among the people of his forefathers' generation. Details of such stories, particularly of the early years in South Africa, are largely unknown and untold. Therefore, it is important that this knowledge is preserved so that our roots and early struggles are not forgotten and are understood as an integral part of the history of South Africa. Furthermore, it is also important to record the perseverance, and resilience of our forefathers against the adversities that they faced for future generations to reflect and appreciate years from now.

Keywords: Voyage, Roots, India, Forefathers, South Africa

1 Introduction

This research is about the experiences of Mahilall leaving India in search of wealth. Furthermore, it is about Mahilall's grandsons and family members and their quest of tracing their ancestral roots back to the villages of India. The reflection on one's life history is not only an indication of the accomplishments of many Indians families in South Africa who have achieved success over adversity, but is also very important to one's sense of identity. The period 1860 to 1911 is an important and integral part of the history of South African Indians as it was during this turbulent period when over 150 000 indentured labourers were imported to work mainly on the sugar plantations belonging to the colonial planters. Within this group of indentured labourers was the researcher's paternal great-grandfather, Mr Mehi Sahu known as (Mahilall), who was lured into coming to South Africa – 'the land of gold'.

Mehi Sahu known as (Mahilall), came to South Africa as an indentured labourer at the age of twenty-five on the 14 August 1883. It is alleged that Mahilall escaped from Haripurwa, Nepal, about eight kilometres north of the border with India. On the copy of the ship's list of Indian Immigrants, retrieved by Mahilall's grandson Thelochan from the National Archives of South Africa, the ship's name was Sophia Joahim. His colonial number was given as 29 953 and his caste was identified as Sonar (occupational type). He migrated from the northern parts of India, from the village Haripurwa,¹ which is 2 to 3 kilometres from the district of Sarlahi. Sarlahi is a bordering district of Nepal in India (according to mythology this is a land of Mithla the birthplace of Sita, from the religious text 'Ramayana'). The following account of the life of Mahilall was derived via three sources: *Firstly* interviews and discussions (both person and telephonic) held with family in South Africa and India when Mr Thelochan Balgobind (hence referred to as TB) (grandson of Mahilall) traced his forefathers and extended family to the villages of Haripurwa, Nepal; *secondly*, from the archival documents, newspapers, photographs, videos and literature of the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal

¹ Haripurwa village is located in Bajpatti Tehsil of Sitamarhi district in Bihar, India. Bajpatti is the nearest town to Haripurwa village. It is one of 58 villages in Bajpatti Block, along with villages like Madhuban Basaha and Bhagwanpur Chaube. The nearest railway station of Haripurwa is in Sitamarhi (Census 2011, Statistics South Africa).

(formally University of Durban Westville); and *thirdly* from recorded interviews conducted by the co-researcher with Mr Thelochan Balgobind from May 2009 to May 2010 and Mr Satish Balgobind.

2 The Promise of a Land Full of ‘Gold’

Mahilall escaped from the villages of Haripurwa when he injured his sister-in-law in a fit of rage when he got home and realized that the food was not cooked after a hard day of work in the rice fields. Due to fear of being reprimanded by his brother he went to the village of Sitamarhi. Starving, dirty and tired, he was enticed with food by a man who worked as an agent for the British Government in recruiting people to go to the British Colony of South Africa. When the British recruiter learnt that Mahilall was Sonar by caste, he persuaded him not to go back to the hardships in the village of Haripurwa and lured him by saying that he could have unlimited supply of free gold in South Africa. Mahilall was told that the British people in South Africa needed Indian labour because the local African population was not skilled enough to work. The agent further conspired with him that the Indians were accustomed to working under the British Raj and would not encounter any difficulties. Besides, for the work that Mahilall did in South Africa, he was promised that he would be paid a monthly salary in gold. He was expected to serve a five-year contract and could thereafter return to India or Nepal, a wealthy man, or remain in South Africa. All expenses, relative to his return to Nepal at the expiry of contract, would be borne by the British Government. Mahilall was told that all he needed to do in return was to build the South African economy and teach the local African population. Such an honourable gesture, all expenses paid and the promise of gold, was too appealing for Mahilall to resist.

3 All Expenses Paid to Calcutta

The following day, together with newfound friends, Mahilall (hence referred to as he) boarded an all-expenses-paid train to Calcutta, where they met other recruits and thereafter boarded a ship to South Africa. He never went to school and was illiterate, except for his knowledge of Hindi, and did not know where South Africa was. In addition, he had never seen the sea before. Although Mahilall was excited, at the same time he was anxious and stressed. He prayed to Bunde Matha, Kali Matha and Hanuman Baba (different Gods in the Hindu

religion) to help and guide him, the same Gods that were worshipped back in Haripurwa. He had no money, not even a single rupee, nor food or clothing. The agent was going to provide all of this. The train journey from Sitamarhi to Calcutta (now renamed Kolkata) was a long one. He felt a sense of loss in leaving behind his beautiful mountainous country, Nepal.



Figure 1: Map of India Indicating Nepal and Kolkata

Accompanied by their British agent upon arrival to their destination they were accommodated at a massive compound belonging to the British Government and provided with rations. Other recruits, both male and female, were also at the compound. Many had infants with them and were mostly from the state of Bihar. All had a story to tell and they bonded well. A great deal of camaraderie developed. They seemed to feel much more comfortable in a crowd. Food and

clothing were shared amongst one another. Mamilla and the others spent several days at this compound. He was no longer as fearful, but missed his family back home and prayed that his sister-in-law was not badly hurt.

3 Aboard the Ship Sophia Joakim

On Saturday 9 June 1883, they boarded the ship Sophia Joakim at the port of Calcutta, now known as Kolkata, very early in the morning. This was after going through a lot of bureaucracy, which the British were famous for. They were all herded together like cattle and made to join several different queues to be processed. Some inspectors examined their bodies for scars, etc., which was recorded in a big book, in meticulous handwriting by important-looking British officials. Mahilall had a scar on his right temple. The British agents also noted the names, age, gender, caste, height and next-of-kin. Finally, a colonial number was given to each person. Mahilalls was 29 953 and his serial number was 253. A total of 418 adults set sail. The first few days were fine. Thereafter, most of the people got sick for the entire duration of the journey with upset tummies, diarrhoea, high temperature, and disorientation. Some medical assistance was given, but they mostly attended to one another. The sea was rough and the passengers were expected to do duties in the kitchen, toilets and on deck. In a strange way, these difficulties and ill health brought them closer. Unfortunately, *en route* to South Africa, three of the recruits died and were then buried at sea. These deaths caused much stress among the recruits, as they feared dying at sea. As Hindus and Muslims, the recruits took to prayer for comfort. They questioned if they had done the right thing and yearned to go back to India and Nepal. However, the recruits were in the middle of the Indian Ocean and could do nothing but pray.

4 The Arrival of the Ship in Durban

On Tuesday 14 August 1883, the recruits finally saw land. There were shouts of joy and ululation aboard the ship. Passengers were thankful that their prayers had been answered and that God had brought them to their destination safely. The ship anchored just outside the Durban harbour entrance for the night, while the officials planned the arrival of passengers. The next day they disembarked after 68 days at sea. It was a respite from the cramped, uncomfortable conditions that they had to endure. Passengers hugged one another and offered a

prayer for their safe arrival in South Africa and for the well-being of the people left behind in India. Durban looked beautiful and was surrounded by lots of vegetation. The Indians were pleased to meet the local Natives (Africans), and said their *namastes* (a greeting) with clasped hands.

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ORANGE NASSAU BUILDING, 188 SCHOEMAN STREET, PRETORIA
PRIVATE BAG 2894, PRETORIA, 0001
TELEPHONE: (+2712) 314-6911, FAX: (+2712) 323-2730

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SOUTH AFRICA
NASIONALE ARGIEF VAN SUID AFRIKA

COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS
(Information extracted from Register: G)
(Please note that the information below is based on an interpretation of the handwriting from the register)

	Name of Ship	:	Sophia Joachim
	Date of Departure	:	09 June 1883
	Date of Arrival	:	14 August 1883
2.	Name	:	Mehi Sahu
3.	Father's Name	:	Toti Sahu
4.	Sex	:	Male
5.	Caste	:	Sonar
6.	Age	:	25
7.	Height	:	5ft 4,5"
8.	Next of Kin	:	Nuckchedi: Brother
9.	Zillah	:	Nepal
10.	Pergunah	:	Asibhoo
11.	Village	:	Hurpoorwa/Hurpurwa
12.	Colonial No.	:	29953
13.	Bodily Marks	:	Scar at temple

Certified a true copy.

HEAD: DURBAN ARCHIVES REPOSITORY

CERTIFIED A TRUE COPY OF
THE ORIGINAL

MARLAN NAIDOO
COMMISSIONER OF OATHS
PRACTISING ATTORNEY, P. S.A.
907/R MARITIME HOUSE
143 SALMON GROVE
DURBAN 4001

Figure 2: A Copy of the Ship's List from the National Archives of South Africa on the Arrival of Mehi Sahu to South Africa

Thereafter the passengers from the ship were all quarantined on the dockside while medical officers checked them. They remained at the dockside

for a few days, after which British farmers gathered at the harbour to pick up their new immigrant labour force. Mahilall² was upset and kept looking for the promised gold, but none was in sight. He could not even ask anyone about it because he did not speak their language. For the British farmers the Indians were cheap, skilled Indentured labourers. The Indians were made to thumb-print their five-year labour contracts, which they could not understand as they were not schooled in English. Like cattle, they were all grouped together and the farmers searched for the well-fed, healthy Indians among them. During the more than two months at sea, the Indians were poorly fed and none of them looked healthy, but the British still had their pick.

4 Mahill Working on the Waterloo Sugar Estate

Mahilall (29 953) was allocated to the Waterloo Sugar Estate near Verulam. He was disappointed, as he had come in search of gold, but was forced to work as a labourer in a sugarcane field. However, he was a skilled farmer and was confident that he would survive his five years of Indentured labour. The Indians were loaded onto lorries and transported to various destinations in Durban. On arrival at the Waterloo Sugar Estate, they were put into compounds that were sparsely furnished. Most of them slept on the floor. Rations of food were provided. The land and terrain looked good for farming. Mahilall repeatedly questioned, 'Where was the promised gold?' He felt cheated, tricked and violated! During most of the five years at the Waterloo Sugar Estate, the business was managed by George Johnstone. Life on the estate was tough, tiring and difficult to endure. They had to work from sunrise to sunset for a subsistence wage. (The area of Waterloo still exists today on the Umdloti Beach road, and is dotted with low-cost housing.)

While working on the estate, Mahilall became familiar with the geography of the surrounding areas, viz. Cottonlands, Verulam, Ndwedwe, New Glasgow, Mount Edgecombe, etc. Once his Indenture had expired on

² It is important to note that when registering their official documents/papers, the British Colonists in South Africa, misspelt/misrepresented or misunderstood the names/surnames of the Indian passengers. As a result, first names became surnames and children in the same household had different names. For example, Balgobind was the first name of one of Mahilall's sons, but became the surname of the entire family.

Monday 20 August 1888, he decided to stay on in South Africa (Indians were given the option to remain in South Africa or return to India). By then he was settled and had taken a liking to the country. Also, he had many friends and felt comfortable, even though he missed his family back home. Besides, he had met a beautiful young South African-born lady of Indian origin, Bechuni Kalichurn, whom he married. She was introduced to him by a close friend, Doorgha Maharaj. His marriage was officially registered on Friday 8 March 1895. Bechuni's parents, Abictakh Kalichurn (Reg. no 11 086), then 26, and Sickputtia Doorga (Reg. no 11 087), then 21, came to South Africa from India as a married couple. They belonged to the Gararee caste and had lived in Dhoomrawo, Belhury, in the town of Arrah, near Patna in the State of Bihar. They were both employed in Natal by farmer C.J. Sawyer in Cottonlands. They arrived in South Africa from Calcutta on Saturday 13 February 1875, on board the ship Plassey, which carried 645 adult recruits.

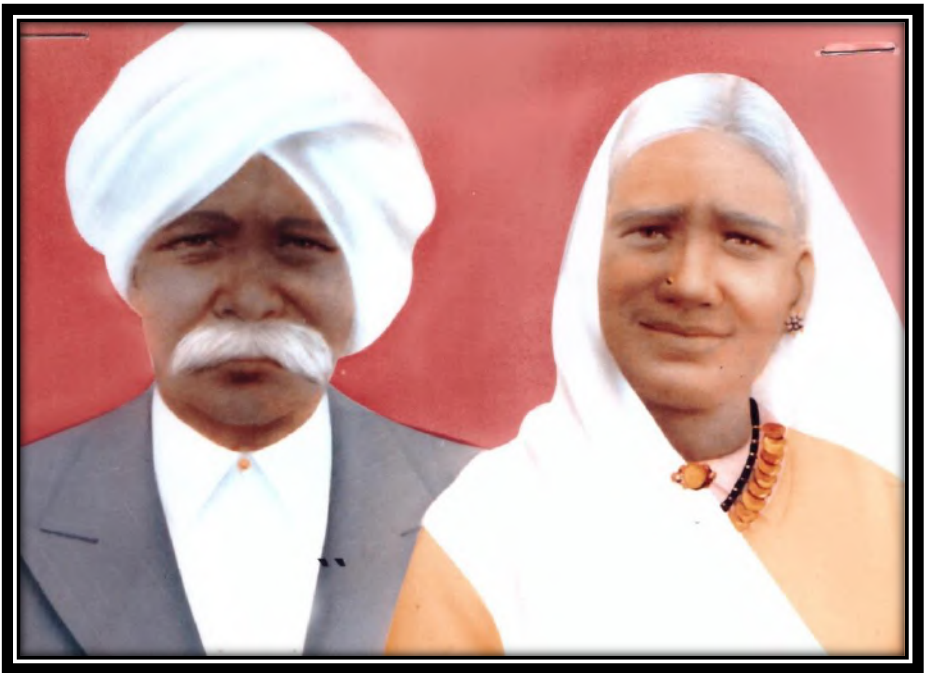


Figure 3: Mahilall Toti Sahu and wife Bechuni 1934

Having married Bechuni, Mahilall needed to entrench his roots firmly in South Africa. During this time, he befriended a person called Mr Tom Murugan, who owned about 600 acres of land in New Glasgow, about 13 kilometres from Verulam, on the Ndwedwe Road. Mr Murugan leased some of his land to Mahilall to live and farm on. He and his wife built their wood, iron and mud home there and they farmed sugarcane and vegetables. They harvested the crops themselves and transported the cane by ox wagon to a sugar mill in Mount Edgecombe and sold the vegetables at the Verulam open air market and to the British farmers (the Verulam market still exists and is a landmark of Verulam).

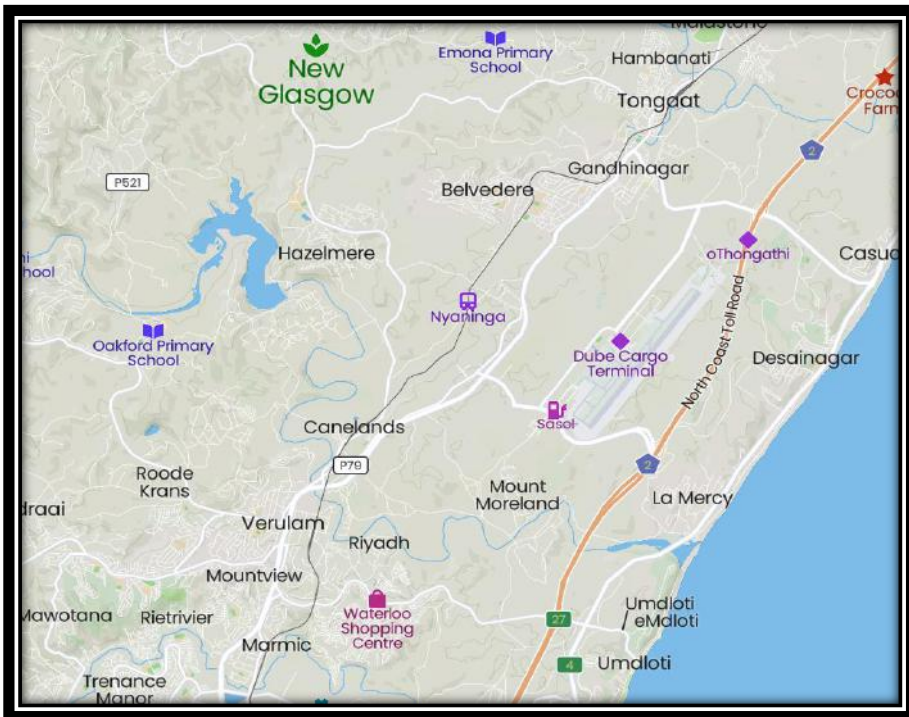


Figure 4: Map Indicating New Glasgow, Verulam and Waterloo

Initially they had no sanitation and used the sugarcane fields, but later they built pit latrines. Water was sourced from a well with a *bhanga* (an

apparatus which comprised a bamboo pole slung over the shoulder with a bucket (*baltee* in Hindi) at each end. This was then deposited in a drum from which the family drew their water. Firewood had to be gathered daily. They had no stove and had to cook their food on a *choola* – a fireplace made on the ground, with bricks on either side and two strips of metal across to support the pot. A metal or bamboo hollowed pipe, called a *phuknee*, was used to blow and fan the flames, while a *chimta* was used as a tong to attend to the wood/coal. It was also used to turn the roti on the flat, rounded skillet called a *thawa*. Life was tough, but the Indians were strong and survived. Mahilall often thought about his family in Nepal, especially his brother Kesar, but could not communicate as there was no means to, nor was there a postal service in Nepal.

4.1 The Children of Mahilall

Mahilall's marriage to Bechuni produced 14 children – 10 sons and four daughters. The sons were Rattan, Ramlakkan, Jhingoor (Ramnarain), Roopnarain, Ramdaw, Dulan, Balgobind, Seepurshad, Seegobin and Nundkishore. The daughters were Ramkalia (Brathmanie), Golabiah, Basmuthie and Phoolmathie. The children came in quick succession, usually 12 to 18 months apart and were all born in New Glasgow. A local midwife, referred to as *dhaie* in Hindi, delivered the children with no professional help. Although they were very poor, they had a lot of joy in bringing up their 14 children. Lunch and dinner times were special. All the children would sit cross-legged in a straight line on a grass floor mat, called a *chatai*, while they were served by their Mum. The meals were usually mealie rice, dhal, and vegetables from the garden. They raised their own chickens and eggs were plentiful. All the food was cooked on the open fire or *choola*. Livestock, such as goats and cattle were also raised. As with many homes in the vicinity, the floors of their house were smeared with cow dung, which formed a smooth surface once dried. The female children helped with this particular chore once a week while the males were tasked to collect the cow dung. All the children were taught good values and were fluent in speaking Hindi. They were told the stories of the Ramayan and other holy scriptures. As children generally do, they would sometimes fight among themselves over trivial matters like household chores, etc. Mahilall was a rather strict father and instilled discipline in his children, while Bechuni, pampered them. The children would regularly accompany their parents to the local temple.

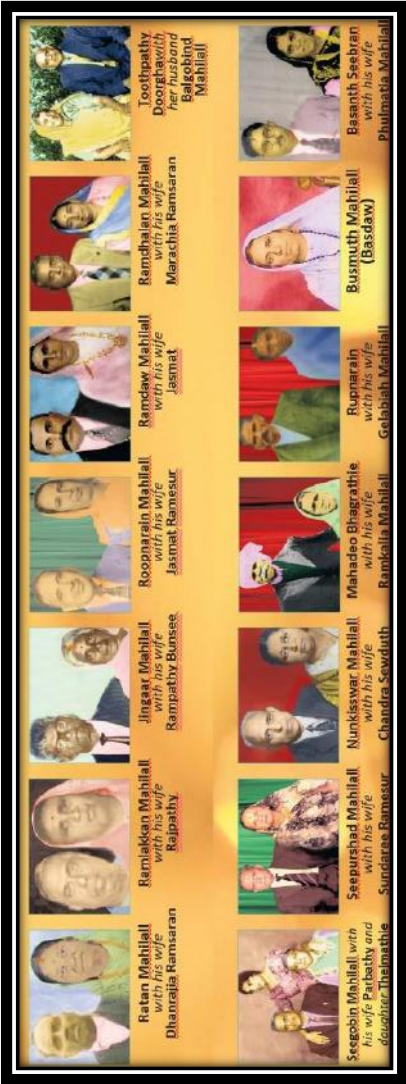


Figure 5: Mahillal and Bechuni’s 14 Children with their Spouses. The Union Resulted in over 2 000 Offspring; 2nd; 3rd;4th and 5th Generation Indians in South Africa

The family worshipped Indian Gods and conducted Kali Pooja, worshipped Mother Bundhee and Hanuman Baba. These were the same rituals that were performed back in Nepal. Once every three years they would slaughter a goat for the Goddess Kali and the local community joined in the feasting and festivities.

4.2 Attending School and Learning

As Mahilall's children grew, the boys were drawn into the farm and eventually became accomplished farmers. The males assisted with keeping and maintaining the daily routine and providing the necessities for daily living in the home while the girls did the household chores. Although the New Glasgow Primary School was partly built with wood and iron and was nearby, very few of the Mahilall children attended and even if they did, it was just for a year or two. The school held classes for pupils up to Standard 6 (Grade 8 today). It comprised five classrooms, an office, staffroom and an outside kitchen area. Lunch was served daily to about 250 pupils and was either brown bread with jam and coco or mealie rice kitchree. Some of the prominent members of the staff were the principal, MS Moodley, vice-principal, Vincent Moonsamy, teachers Laljith Rattan, Inderjith Rattan and Gooran Roopnarain. Some of the locals attended Cottonlands Primary School, which opened much later and was a distance away. Today both of these schools are in an abandoned condition.

4.3 Marriage of the Mahilall Children

As the 14 Mahilall children grew, they needed to find marriage partners (this was common practice within the Indian culture then). This was a difficult task, because generally Indians married within the same caste. People of Mahilall's Sonar caste³ were very few (currently in the context of the wider social stratification of Indians in South Africa, the class situation becomes dominant rather than caste). Nevertheless, they all eventually got married. As a result,

³ Although in India itself in general, caste is gradually being overshadowed by the class factor, the dynamics and pace of this change are different from what occurred in South Africa. Caste stratification in India is still surfacing in various contexts, whereas in South Africa it has almost been overtaken by class.

some of Mahilall's daughters-in-law were either sisters or cousins. The married girls moved to their in-laws' homes while the boys initially remained and worked on the leased farm and eventually branched out on their own. While their husbands were out in the fields, the wives would prepare lunch, usually roti and curry, and take it to them in the field every day. All 10 daughters-in-law had specific tasks allocated to them by Bechuni. Some would make the meals, others cleaned the vegetables, some fetched water, chopped wood, milked the cows or attended to the stables of oxen, donkeys and horses. As the Mahilall sons married they constructed their own wood-and-iron homes, all in a straight line, in New Glasgow. At least 10 such homes were constructed over a period of time. The homes were very simple with no electricity, water or sewer. All were made of wood and iron, with mud floors initially, maintained by the application of cow dung.

Mahilall died at the age of 75 at his residence in New Glasgow on 25 May 1937. He died as a farmer and a free Indian Immigrant after serving his five-year indenture ship from 1883 to 1888. His wife Bechuni died a week later at the age of 65. Balgobind, one of Mahilall's sons, was the first generation born in South Africa. Balgobind married Toothpathy Doorgha in 1925.



Figure 6: Balgobind and Wife Toothpathy with Children and Grandchildren 1956 (2nd and 3rd generation)

Balgobind and Toothpathy had 13 children, 12 of whom were born in New Glasgow and one in Red Hill, Durban. Two of these children died when they were very little. The surviving children comprised six boys and five girls. The eldest was Namdass, the second Thelochan (the researcher's father), the third Prem, fourth Domathie, fifth Sathy, sixth Kunchan, seventh Dolly, eighth Premilla, ninth Ashok, tenth Satish (the researcher's uncle), and eleventh Manju. At the time of writing this research, four of the sons, Namdass, Prem, Sathy, Thelochan, and one daughter, Domathie, had passed away.

5 Balgobind's Business Mind and Family

Balgobind Mahilall was a business entrepreneur. He found that while he and his brothers worked like slaves in the field, they ended up paying transport consultants large amounts of money to transport their harvested sugarcane to the mill in Mount Edgecombe. Balgobind initially used an ox wagon to transport the cane but this was not feasible. Paying the consultants was a huge financial burden. Balgobind then acquired a lorry, and transported the cane by himself to the mill. He also charged others to move their cane as well. In this way he developed his cartage business. He assisted all his brothers by carting their sugarcane. His meticulous handwritten records of the various tonnages produced by each of his brothers and friends are still in the Mahilall family possession. He also found that people walked long distances from New Glasgow to Verulam to do their shopping. He filled this gap by starting a taxi business. His Jeep taxis could only accommodate a few passengers, so he started a bus business, which grew steadily. By 1945, Mahilall Motor Transport had expanded to serve not only the Verulam/ New Glasgow area, but the greater Cato Manor, Booth Road, Wiggins Road, Second River, Cato Manor Road, Trimbourne Road, Newlands and Malagazi. MH (Mahilall & Haripersadh) Transport was later born, serving the community of Cato Manor at large. He also provided employment for the youngsters in the family, especially his nephews. Many worked as bus, lorry and taxi drivers and conductors.

Balgobind was the first person to start a bus service to Newlands, Makobeni, Naicker's Store, Beharie's Store, and Malagazi. For the Newlands run his application for a certificate (license) was turned down as the corrugated municipal road was not vehicle-friendly and unstable. Balgobind challenged this and asked the authorities to point out the defective section of the road, to him. This they did. He then put together a team of farm labourers, used his farm

tractors and fixed the road at his cost. The authorities had no option but to grant him the certificate and that started the bus service to Newlands, and the Narainsamy Temple. Balgobind's involvement in business brought along with it many related problems. He fought most of his court cases by himself, even though he had only two years (Class 2) of schooling. One such case made history and is today studied at all South African universities as a reference (Mahilall v Singh, Natal Provincial Division, Pietermaritzburg, Friday 13 April 1945) where Balgobind Mahilall was involved, as purchaser, with Mr Singh, in a dispute over the purchase of a Dodge bus for £500.

When Mr Singh delivered the bus to Balgobind, he had removed the seat cushions. As this was not part of the agreement, Balgobind asked Singh to remedy the problem. He even paid a few instalments in terms of the sale agreement. Frustrated, Balgobind eventually stopped paying. Singh forcefully removed the bus from his (Balgobind's) possession on Sunday 19 March 1944. Balgobind then took the matter to the High Court in Pietermaritzburg, which ruled in his favour with costs. Balgobind's attorney at that time was Mr F Bekker and Singh's Mr C Nathan & Co. The presiding Judge was a J Carlisle. Balgobind also inducted his younger brother Nundkishore into the bus transport business. Initially the buses transported people in the non-white areas between New Glasgow, Verulam and Indedwe. In 1947, he moved from New Glasgow to Red Hill in Durban and also transferred his business to Durban. Thereafter his buses commuted from Durban to Cato Manor. In 1952, Balgobind and his family moved to Spencer Road in Clare Estate, Durban. Balgobind fell ill at the young age of 54 and passed away on 30 December 1962. Balgobind's brother, Nundkishore's children and grandchildren are still involved in the same transport business. They reside in Silverglen. To acknowledge Balgobind's major contribution to the family and society at large, Satish (his youngest son) had a road, which he developed, in Verulam, named after his father. Today, Balgobind Place, off Primrose Drive, in South Ridge, is testimony to his contributions to the Indian community. He was a pioneering businessman in the transport field, not only in the Verulam/ New Glasgow area, but he also spread his wings to other parts of KwaZulu-Natal.

Balgobind's sons have taken after their father. The eldest, Namdass, was a schoolteacher; the second, Thelochan, was the proprietor of Payloader Hire Specialists; the third, Adarshpram, was a medical doctor, who settled in Australia; the fourth, Sathiaperkas, was the proprietor of Speedy Earth Movers and Speedy Plastics. The fifth, Ashok, is the proprietor of Rocket Earthworks;

and the youngest, Satish, is the retired Regional General Manager (KZN and Eastern Cape) of Mnet/Multi-choice. He is also the founder of a community radio station Hindvani. All have made their mark in society through sheer hard work. The five daughters, Deomathie (late), Kunchan, Dolly, Premilla and Manju, are all married and settled in their respective homes.

5 Thelochan's Life and His Quest to Find his Roots

Thelochan was 28 years old when his father Balgobind died. Thelochan was born on 3 April 1934, being the second generation of his family to be born in South Africa and the third generation from India. Thelochan lived in New Glasgow until the age of thirteen. When Thelochan was fifteen years old he witnessed the Afro-Indian riots in January 1949. This was a bitter racial conflict that occurred between the Indians and Africans in Durban, resulting in deaths and the destruction of thousands of homes and stores by arson and looting. In 1954, at the age of 20, Thelochan's introduction to his beautiful bride followed the typical pattern of an arranged marriage. His aunt introduced him to a 15-year-old girl, Sonmathie Boodhram, from a rural area, Esenembe on the North Coast of Durban. While the conversation referred to the first meeting as an 'introduction', it was in essence an arrangement which the young girl could not refuse. It was a normative practice of the mid-20th century when arranged marriages were the role and responsibility of parents and their extended families. This was a practice that was reproduced from the Indian subcontinent as a way of demonstrating an affiliation to a value system that remained uncompromised almost nine decades after Indians had first arrived in South Africa.

Such an introduction was, however, not a carte blanche endorsement of a free and unmonitored courtship. Thelochan was allowed to visit his bride-to-be, but socialization with her was not necessarily a private affair. Family pride and discipline were expressed in the ways in which young girls were reared through careful control and being chaperoned for any event outside of the family property. After a year-long association with Sonmathie, a traditional Hindu wedding on 18 December 1955 allowed them the privileges that married couples have. Being only 16 when she entered the large family of 21 people, and not knowing how to cook, Sonmathie learnt from her mother-in-law and relied on her eldest sister-in-law Hirmathie (husband's eldest brother's wife) whom she regarded as her 'backbone'. She took care of her husband's younger

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sisters and brothers.

Thelochan and Sonmathie have five children – one son and four daughters. His first child, a son, Santosh was born on 22 November 1956. His daughters, Sharitha (Shirley), was born on 14 October 1958, Shanta on 8 March 1961, Arleen on 6 March 1967 and Samantha (Lou-Lou) on 9 May 1972. (Santosh married Ashitha and have three children, Vikash, Shanil and Sapna. Sharitha married Anand Jayrajh and have three children, Avishkar, Shakthi and Preethi. Shanta married Surendra Singh and have three children, twin sons Rajiv Kumar and Ameet Kumar and daughter Rhea, (Rajiv is married to Sarieta, Ameet to Kuvanya and Rhea to Thirshan). Arleen married Sudesh Ramlall and have three children, Kusheel, Sumeet and Pooja. Samantha married Sudesh Sidhlall.



Figure 7: Thelochan Balgobind's Wife Sonmathie on her 80th Birthday with her Children and their Spouses and Grandchildren in 2019 (2nd, 3rd and 4th Generation Indians in South Africa)

After staying in Clare Estate for eleven years as a married man, at the age of thirty-two, Thelochan moved with his wife and three children to Merebank in 1966. The year 1967 marked a major financial transformation in

the life of TB. He bought his first payloader at the age of 33. Coincidentally, during this period in Natal, the Government brought about housing schemes in Chatsworth. Building contractors required machines to excavate the land⁴.

Thelochan had a little prior experience in the transport business (when his father provided a bus service in Verulam and Durban), embarking on this venture, and taking on the contracts from building contractors, provided to be a huge success. The purchase of one payloader resulted in the purchase of another payloader until he built up a whole fleet of 100 within the extended family.⁵ In 1977, he opened a payloader business in Mauritius and contributed to the development of the sugar terminal and harbour in Mauritius. He was also on the Government advisory committee for the Mauritian airport. In Mauritius he established friendships with people from all over the world and also met the then Prime Minister of Mauritius Sir Ramgoolam.

5.1 Mahilall's Grandson Thelochan's 'search for his roots' – Start of Establishing Familial Contact in India

Having an incredibly enquiring and adventurous mind, Thelochan toured the world and has been to the many wonders of the world, not once but to some several times. From an early age (when he was 15 or 16 years old) it was a deep-felt desire, a quest of Thelochan to explore his cultural connections and to contact the people and place where his ancestors lived in India. In the interviews Thelochan stated, *'none of Mahilall's fourteen children ever thought of going to India and tracing their roots; those children in turn had big families also, at least an average of ten children, I don't know why I was the chosen one'*. In 1971, Mahilall's grandson, the late Thelochan Balgobind, accompanied by his wife Sonmathie, his sister Deomathie and her late husband Sukhraj Kasipersadh, set out for Nepal in search of the Mahilall family roots. They were

⁴ TB moved away for at least three reasons: a lack of space; the new area was attractive to the emerging Indian middle class; and it was close to greater economic opportunities for someone like himself. It was here that he purchased his first payloader which placed him in convenient distance to the booming building industry throughout Durban.

⁵ The size of his operation got Thelochan and other proud family members to talk about his business as being the biggest in the African continent.

successful and were welcomed with open arms. The whole village turned out to meet them. There was great joy and celebration.

In his quest to discover his roots and understand his heritage, Thelochan encountered a host of difficulties. His forefathers came to South Africa as indentured labourers therefore their names, village and district address were entered on their emigration passes. However, the search became complicated, because the names of places and their spellings had changed over the centuries; villages had been incorporated in different districts and there were different villages with similar names. The changes in the subcontinent from partition and the formation of India and Pakistan, the accession and integration of the princely states into these two new nation states, and the latter separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, means that it is necessary to recognize that historic India, which embraced the entire Indian subcontinent, does not exist today as it did in the past. The different parts of the subcontinent are not now regions within India, but separate nations whose relations are now of an international character (Lal 2006:30). Fortunately, Thelochan's ancestral village was not affected by these changes and in 1971, his dream to trace his ancestors materialised.

Reaching the actual village was an arduous task:

... firstly, you have to get to India, having a passenger list with you. It states there on the passenger list the village, state, full address, everything. All that was captured on the passenger list even the caste. You have to go to the biggest place first, the nearest city, and there you go to the government office, they know everything. You keep repeating the same thing in every city, until you get nearer and nearer, closer and closer.

His desire to know more about his Indian links led him through a journey of many small villages on India-Nepal border. He travelled through many villages before reaching Haripurwa. Thelochan indicated to me:

Finally, we reached it, upon reaching the remote village in the early evening; we called for the head man. Even our caste is on the passenger list, with my caste indicated the family group. In India, and in the village, the caste system is very strong. The villagers called the family from the caste group that was listed on the passenger list. When we mentioned the grandfather's name, they had an inkling. They had

an uncle who had disappeared from the village without any trace that their father used to tell them about. Information was verified with stories, caste and names. So, from there the headman tells that that is the relative now. We finally got it. Even the spot where my grandfather lived was on the passenger list and these people were still living on the same spot. We stayed there overnight and checked the happenings in the village. We stayed there a couple of days and investigated further to confirm that we were in the correct location. I was satisfied that I was in the right place, I was always cautious of people but after talking to the elderly people of the village I realized that the disappearance of my grandfather from the village was a much talked about incident in the area.



Figure 8: Thelochan (left) with Cousin Chanderdew (right) and Relatives from the Village of Haripurwa on his First Visit to India in 1971

The village people were harmless, timid and very calm. They had no pride, were down to earth. They brought in a clean sheet and spread it on the floor for us to sit. They were all very inquisitive, have very inquiring minds; they wanted to know more and more. They don't even know where South Africa is. On my second trip to the village I took an

atlas and maps and I took one of those inflatable globes, which I subsequently left at the school. The living conditions were very poor; they lived in mud houses, with hardly any provisions. The village houses had neither running water nor electricity. Before departing we gave them some money, my cousins were still living at the time. I left some money for the school funds and the temple funds.



Figure 9: Thelochan (right) with Arun Kumar Shah (left), Sonmathie third from left and Relatives in Haripurwa 1985

Since 1971, Thelochan has made 30 trips to India. He has been to Haripurwa ten times and to Bihar five times. In 1978, he took his mother Toothpathy to her ancestral village in Arrah. In October 2008 (despite being diagnosed with mesothelioma and unwell), Thelochan made his last trip to India. He took three of his male cousins (paternal uncle's sons) and made the arduous trip to the village. They asked Thelochan to take them to their ancestral village in order to visit and experience their relatives and ancestral village.

5.2 Satish's Visit to the Ancestral Village in India with Thelochan

Following the breakthrough made by Thelochan, Satish Balgobind (co-author of this paper), the youngest brother of Thelochan decided to visit his forefather's village in Nepal. On 24 October 1993, Satish, accompanied by his wife Susheela, his brother Thelochan and sister-in-law Sonmathie, undertook a trip to their ancestral village of Haripurwa. They flew from New Delhi to Kathmandu where they stayed in a hotel overnight. The next day they hired a four-wheeler vehicle (the terrain through which they had to travel was treacherous, having to pass through many gorges) and travelled down the Himalaya Mountains to their ancestral village of Haripurwa. Upon reaching their destination, the entire village turned out to meet them (prior to their departure Thelochan had communicated to the 'new-found family' in India their intention to visit the village with members of his immediate family from South Africa). The relatives from South Africa stayed the night of 25 October 1993 in the village of Haripurwa. At the time of this study, Satish Balgobind was 68 years old and the second generation of Indians to be born in South Africa. He was a retired, married man who had been to university in South Africa. When Satish was asked to describe his current economic status, he was very modest and indicated that he is within the middle-income group and achieved this through hard work, commitment and honesty. In the researcher's opinion Satish would fall into the higher-income category due to his economic status within the South African Indian community. The reason that he wanted to meet his family in India was because he had an enquiring mind, genetic factors and he always displayed a keen interest in his origins as a South African Indian.

The first contact that he had with his relatives from the village induced a feeling of immense joy and inner satisfaction. He was so proud that he had finally contacted his relatives. He was also humbled by their simplicity and the love shown to them. *'They didn't leave our sight. They actually bowed at our feet, and asked a million questions. They are all very poor but big hearted. The humility of our people was overwhelming. How do we repay them for the love and affection bestowed on us'?* Although their lifestyle was very simple and Satish was able to identify with them in terms of their 'Indianness', i.e. culture; religion, festivals and weddings; he was of the opinion that *'there was no comparison to the lifestyle that we as South African Indians enjoy. We may maintain our value system but we are really spoilt in South Africa; there is too*

much focus on massive houses, cars, wealth. In the village this is not an issue. The common thread between us is our religion and religious practices. There was a commonness in the worship of the same 'Gods' and belonging to the same caste'.



Figure 10: Satish (Beard and Glasses) with Brother Thelochan, wife Susheela and sister-in-law Sonmathie with Relatives from the Village of Haripurwa 1993

When the researcher asked the question: In South Africa, despite unbearable racialised conditions, we had and have greater privileges than our relatives in the rural village? His response to this was: *'This is not true; the people of India have democracy; India is the largest democracy in the world. They do not need privilege; all they need is the opportunity to work and they are content and happy. Parents in the village depend on their children for financial support'*.

In identifying with India, he points to fact that he would always like to maintain his 'Indianness', even in South Africa. *'I am a proud South African Indian'*, He described India as a 'magnet' and had he been younger he would have loved to settle there. *Having found his relatives in the villages of India this*

has increased his desire to visit India more often in order to build the bond between the two families'.

Satish keeps in contact with his relatives via email and the social media, i.e. Facebook. On the flipside, when asked what were some of the adverse impact in contacting your relatives? The response was, '*they will usually ask you for money or some form of assistance*'.



Figure 11: Satish and Susheela (right) with Thelochan and Sonmathie (left) Standing before Religious Deities⁶ Worshipped in Haripurwa 1993

Subsequently in December 1994, Mr Thelochan's son Santosh at the age of 38, accompanied by his wife Ashitha went to the village of Haripurwa to try and identify with his ancestral roots. Despite the very primitive and basic rural lifestyle in the village, there was a "sense of excitement and satisfaction" when he met with the family villagers, "their warm welcome and ability to want to make their guests as comfortable as possible with the little resources that they had was impressive". Santosh was able to identify with their recently discovered

⁶ The religious deities depicted in this photo are the same as the deities worshipped by some Indians in South Africa.

relatives from the village by their religious customs and manner of dress and by the previous visits of his father. To date contact is maintained with relatives from the village via email, telephone and the occasional visit when they are in India.



Figure 12: Thelochan (seated back right) with his Brother Satish (seated back left eating from one plate) and Indian Relatives in Haripurwa in 1993

6 Conclusion

South African Indians, having been in the country for approximately 162 years, have been forced by political conditions during colonialism, apartheid and post-apartheid years to endorse their identities and cultures as Indians. It includes the self-motivated yearning as well as a feeling of ‘belonging’ for many of the people of the Indian population to explore their origins back to the villages of India. The image of India as a place of origin remains a recurring characteristic in the current discourses on the Indian Diaspora. Mahilall came to South Africa lured by the promise of obtaining gold and becoming rich. Despite the disappointment encountered upon arrival in South Africa, Mahilall and his family made a success of their lives. Today within the Mahilall fraternity there

are doctors, lawyers, cardiologists, professors, chartered accountants, dentists, oncologist, businessmen and women, actuaries, bankers, IT specialists, lecturers, corporate business executives, industrialists, pharmacists, orthopaedic surgeons, artisans, office workers, journalists, farmers, and many more. They have all worked very hard to achieve this. Everything was accomplished through hard work and perseverance. Those referred to above, are the offspring of one of Mahilall's ten sons, Balgobind. Similarly, the families of the remaining nine sons and four daughters have made their mark in society. The Rattan, Roopnarain, Sahu and Seegobin families are well known in Verulam. The Ramdaw and Ramluckan families have made their mark in the Newlands/Bakerville Gardens areas. The Nundkishore Mahilall family in Silverglen, the Seepursadh, Ramnarain (Jinghoor), and Dhulan families have all firmly made their mark in greater Kwa Zulu-Natal. All of the families have elements described above among their respective families.

Thelochan demonstrates his endeavours since his young days of 25 years to find out who he was, where he came from, which actually prompted him to trace his forefathers in India and contact his relatives abroad. It is the story of an intrepid, determined and lucky searcher who completed his investigation successfully and located distant relatives and achieved a sense of belonging, introspection and success in undertaking this journey – a sense of accomplishment in achieving a dream that few people would embark on in their lifetime. As a third-generation descendant of an indentured labourer, he demonstrated the resolve, endurance and perseverance that migrants all over the world had to show. From a poor, working-class background to an upper middle-class position was rooted in the work ethics and subsequent successes of numerous other descendants of indentured labourers. It was his belief and faith in what his family history had taught him that sustained his enthusiasm not only to succeed for himself and his own nuclear family, but to carry along an extended family as well. This commitment is part of an age-old tradition that is still characteristic of the extended family system among people of Indian origin. Not only did TB trace his roots to India, in 1998, he sponsored his grandnephew from the village Arun Shah to stay in South Africa. He wanted to observe how the South African Indian people lived. Thelochan paid for his airfare and provided him with hospitality and money. In 2008, one of TB's nephews in Haripurwa, Santosh Kumar, obtained the American green card and required money to go to America. Thelochan and his brothers Ashok and Satish provided for his sponsorship. Santosh Kumar now lives in America and in turn sends

money to his home village in India in order for them to prosper economically by doing small-scale farming, planting rice and sugarcane. Since 1971, Thelochan made 30 trips to India. He has been to Haripurwa ten times and to Bihar five times. In 1978, he took his mother, Toothpathy, to her ancestral village in Arrah. In October 2008, being his last trip to India he took three of his male cousins (paternal uncle's sons) to the village.

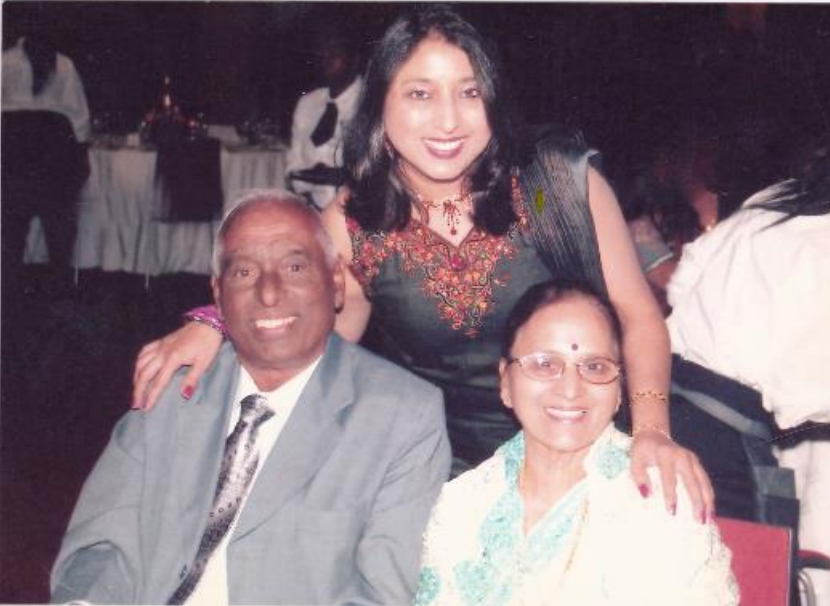


Figure 13: Mr Thelochan and Sonmathie Balgobind (seated) with Prof. Shanta Balgobind Singh at the Global Organisation for People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) Gala Dinner, International Convention Centre, Durban on 31 March 2010 (Thelochan Balgobind Passed Away on Wednesday 18 August 2010).

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Mr. Satish Balgobind

Retired Regional General Manager (KZN) of Multichoice

Founder of Hindvani Community-based Radio Station

balgobindsatish@yahoo.com

Professor Shanta Balgobind Singh

Criminology and Forensic Studies

School of Applied Human Sciences

Howard College Campus

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Durban, South Africa

Singhsb@ukzn.ac.za