

Epilogue

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The life and times of indentured Indians in South Africa is chronicled by various authors in this edited volume. It brings to life for the present generation descendants, the pain and suffering endured by their forbears. Many descendants are not aware of their humble ancestry and their evolution in becoming South African citizens. This volume adds to the many efforts made by scholars to document the system of indenture and the effect it had on the socio-economic and political life of the indentured, including contemporary South African Indian society, and South Africa more generally.

Indenture was not only peculiar to South Africa but also implemented in the Caribbean, Uganda, Jamaica, Trinidad, British Guyana, Kenya, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Fiji and Mauritius. Following the ban on slave trade, indenture was an ingenious ploy to attract cheap labour for the colonial capitalist in the context of the industrial revolution that characterised this era. It was not only the British that were complicit in this form of labour extraction. The French and Dutch also perpetuated this so called ‘civilised’ deployment of labour from the Indian sub-continent.

The Indian sub-continent under British rule was a catchment area to recruit indentured labourers. Famine and poverty under British rule were rife which was one of the reasons why unsuspecting Indians were lured to sell their labour on a fixed term contract. Indians were required to pay high taxes to the British, and the jobs available to them did not offer sufficient remuneration to cover these taxes nor to pay for basic food and shelter. Based on the promises made by recruiting agents for a better life, the indentured least expected to sell their labour under inhumane conditions.

It is more than one and a half Century since the arrival of indentured Indians to the shores of South Africa. Their legacy continues to exist in the role they played in sustaining their socio-cultural and religious identity. This is marked by many religious institutions, cultural organisations, welfare societies and educational institutions which stood the test of time for posterity, until today. These accomplishments are testimony to the resilience of the indentured to withstand the atrocities meted out to them and the quest to survive in this colonised part of Africa.

In the evolution of indentured Indians in South Africa many shocks and imbalances confronted them. Apart from colonialism, apartheid had a devastating effect on the stability, social cohesiveness and sense of community, as a result of forced removals and relocation to low income housing estates. These racially defined housing estates, accommodated the vast majority of Indians from indentured ancestry. They were uprooted from settled communities and relocated into sterile housing estates with the bare minimum of socio-cultural, educational, welfare, religious and community facilities. Apartheid fractured the livelihood and well-being of the indentured which they worked hard for since their arrival. From colonialism to apartheid which was implemented in 1948, 88 years of effort to advance as a community was in vain. In the low-income housing estates many had to redefine themselves in houses suited for nuclear families, thus rupturing the institution of family life, economic opportunities and a sense of belonging as a community.

The housing estates were overcrowded, lacked social organisation and cohesiveness characterised by high levels of unemployment. It became a nursery for social problems such as gangsterism, drug and alcohol abuse, high rates of family breakdowns, poverty and many other malaises. Notwithstanding, the communities in these housing estates reconstructed themselves in all forms of social, economic and political life. Many have invested substantially in their quality of life, by upgrading and extending their homes, benefitting the present generation from the indentured ancestry.

During the apartheid era, indentured Indians were part of the resistance politics for liberation. Social movements of different sorts organised themselves and formed alliances with other political groupings. In this period the indentured Indians were at a crossroads whether to participate in the Tricameral Parliament, the official legislature of South Africa (1984 – 1994), which allowed political participation through the House of Delegates supposedly representing Indians. In elections for this system, Indian voter turnouts were

dismally low, as most Indians boycotted the elections. Despite this poor voter turnout, the House of Delegates secured seats in the Tricameral Parliament in 1984. In its term of office until the first democratic elections in 1994, the House of Delegates leveraged the apartheid regime to provide housing, welfare services, schools, public amenities and facilities. There is a view that despite the illegitimacy of the House of Delegates, it succeeded in catalysing some advances and development initiatives for the majority of indentured Indians who found themselves on the lower strata of the community.

The House of Delegates disbanded just before the first democratic elections in 1994 and the Minority Front representing Indians was formed. The Minority Front secured no seats in parliament with the majority of the Indians voting for the African National Congress and other political parties. Attempts to sustain the Minority Front in the post-apartheid era met with little success. Currently there are no political parties specifically championing the interests of the Indian community at a National level.

It is 28 years since South Africa became a democracy and there is widespread discontent with the ANC-led governments of these years. Unemployment, crime, poverty, lack of service delivery and social malaise are some of the characteristics pervading South African society. Indians of indentured ancestry in the mass low-income housing estates are most vulnerable, as government resources are directed towards the development of Black African communities.

Post-apartheid new human settlements are emerging as part of the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) predominantly for the Black African communities. Indians, largely from the indentured lineage who seek housing have no alternative but to take up housing opportunities in these settlements. This Indo-African mix in the new human settlements will determine the form of identity that will emerge amongst the indentured sometime in the future. The same is true, for the few that live in informal settlements.

Amongst the indentured, there are many that have made enormous socio-economic advancements, through education and commerce. Some have palatial homes, live in elite gated communities, own luxury cars, send their children to private schools, higher educational institutions and indulge in comfortable lifestyles. Many of their children are seeking careers abroad to escape the socio-political instability in the country. They constitute the middle and upper classes from indentured lineage. Those that live in low-income housing estates, constitute the lower classes and are often stigmatised by their

more affluent counterparts. They struggle to make ends meet, have not broken away from the shackles of intergenerational poverty, send their children to overcrowded public schools with dwindling standards of education, live in overcrowded homes with little opportunity to pursue careers so that they could break the cycle of poverty which was carried over from their ancestors.

The new political dispensation is fraught with uncertainties and disregard for the contributions that the indentured have made to the economy and South African way of life. The state until today, has reneged on promises to acknowledge the arrival of the indentured to the shores of KwaZulu-Natal, by erecting a monument where the first group of human cargo arrived. The monument was mothballed, due to a lack of a clear conceptualisation of the project, limited public participation and bureaucratic torpor.

History on the evolution of indentured Indians, is an ongoing project as there is so much to document and stories that need to be told to the current and future generations. Although the anecdotes may be emotionally disturbing, the trials and tribulations of the pioneer generations should serve as a source of inspiration for the 21st Century descendants. For those that have been left behind, there is still hope to aspire to where their counterparts are.

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