



## **INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA: PERSPECTIVES FROM 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**



**Prof. Shanta Balgobind Singh (ed), 2022**



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*Indians in South Africa:  
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# *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

*As I gaze through the telescope into the starry night sky, I wonder; 'Who am I?' in this universe. In this macroscopic world – I am a microscopic being, on this journey of life, living and growing in this great school of earthly experience, ... teachings from our forebears forever etched and revolving and evolving, generation after generation ... trying to make a difference in the lives of the people whom we trace.*

Professor Shanta Balgobind Singh



# Foreword:

## Indians in South Africa

**Ela Gandhi**

Many may look upon the title, 'Indians in South Africa', as though we are referring to a homogeneous group when we speak of Indians in South Africa. Far from it. A deeper look will reveal that there are those of Indian origin who arrived in South Africa even before the 1860 indentured workers arrived. These were slaves captured by colonial powers, and brought to this country. Then there were the 1860 indentured workers from India, and other indentured workers from other parts in the East, who arrived thereafter. These were lured to come to South Africa only to find themselves being sold to various people for various types of menial jobs, and remained enslaved to the purchaser with little if any rights for five years. Thereafter they could return to India, or remain and be re-indentured or try to eke out a living under stringent British colonial legal conditions. Both these groups struggled under terrible conditions and the many stories of their sufferings, trials and tribulations have been written about extensively in many books and articles. So, I will not repeat them here.

In addition to these two groups, there were Indians who had some money and came to South Africa to do business. Again, they had great difficulty to build businesses under colonial rule, but also great resilience and foresight which saw them being able to survive and educate their children. Others came as professionals to provide a service to local people. They too, had many challenges in terms of the racist colonial policies and the legalised racist attitude that prevailed in the country at the time. Nevertheless, through hardship, they toiled, so that their children could obtain education.

The key to the initial social development of the Indian groupings, therefore, was education. Many schools were built by people of Indian descent through their own hard work and savings. These include the Sastri College and the M.L. Sultan Technikon among many others. Both provided vital education and skills training. But there were also many primary schools that were built as



government aided schools. Among the early ones, was the Nateest School that still exists in Phoenix Township today. In addition, many skilled teachers provided private education to the many youth who were unable to gain admission to the few high schools that existed at the time. This was known as the Congress School and admission was free, and voluntary service was provided by a number of dedicated teachers. So, clearly, education was an important aspect of life of the community that originated from India.

The next generations began to prosper as their skills and education levels rose, but the limited scope of employment and lack of access to some jobs reserved for whites only, prevented some from accessing employment of choice or even studying for highly qualified jobs such as engineering. Some with great talent obtained bursaries to travel overseas where they were able to train as well as get employment. These were South Africans of Indian origin who migrated and continue to live in various countries of the world. But a large number stayed on in the country while some became engrossed in the struggle for liberation, sacrificing careers and family life. Some died in the struggle. Others suffered many years of incarceration together with fellow comrades. Yet, they remained loyal to the struggle and free future South Africa.

Proportionately a large number of people of Indian origin were involved in the struggle for liberation. But of course, as with every community, there were those who became government agents and played a nefarious role in tracking, torturing and eliminating people who were participating in the liberation struggle. As in the July uprising in 2021, there were some Indians who did show racist tendencies and were violent, while by far, the majority of the South African Indian population was peaceful but also fearful. Despite the fear, evidence indicates that there were Indians who assisted those who were wounded and took them for medical attention and dropped them off closer to their homes, fearful of entering the townships where the population was entirely of another race group. These are the effects of racially segregated townships in which South Africans were forced to live since colonial times. As effects of history, we are compelled to continue to live in these segregated conditions.

Culturally, and in terms of religion, there was a strong effort made by our forefathers to keep the Indian traditions and languages alive, as well as the various religions they belonged to. At great personal sacrifice, people-built temples, churches, and mosques and worshipped in their various traditions. Like other South African communities, the Indian community too, is diverse in terms of language and religion, and other stratifications related to class, caste, and

gender. As with the Christian faith, the Hindu and Islamic faith have different denominations.

In the last twenty-five or more years, the centrality of the English language as the de facto South African lingua franca, has resulted in other languages being side-lined, and so today, the youth mainly speak English. Very few read, write or understand their own traditional languages. In addition, no substantial effort has been made by many to learn the isiZulu language of the majority of the people in the KwaZulu-Natal province, either by the people or by the government. This is a factor that further alienates one group of people, whose mother tongue is isiZulu, and those who only know English. Similarly, the traditional Indian religious heritages have become a less important aspect of the life of the youth in most religions, with the exception of the Islamic faiths, where the traditions are still being followed rigidly by all, and handed on from generation to generation.

So, in the first number of years post-1994, there was recognition of the contribution of the people of Indian descent in the national liberation struggle, and a variety of forms of anti-apartheid activism in the local communities. As a result, many Indians were appointed in many governance positions in the public and private sectors. But, over the last number of years, the numbers have dwindled. Even so, a process is unfolding where the racial boundaries between the different groupings in KZN are being blurred, as we see more and more cross-cultural marriages and the children of such marriages following their own traditions. Gandhiji, many years ago, had predicted in a speech at the Johannesburg YMCA on 18 May 1908:

If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen?

But, while this was said in 1908, since then, many divisive strategies were adopted by the then colonial and later apartheid governments to create a wedge among the different race groups. One such system of separation, was the group areas act, through which the race groups were separated into different geographic areas in which each race group was placed like pawns on a chess board. They were not allowed to attend schools together and in many other ways contact between the races was minimised, if not prohibited. Any intimate relationship between white and black was prohibited by law and was regarded

as immoral. Education was so strangely racist, that every child became aware of race from an early primary school level, where children were taught about the different race groups in South Africa. Being differentially allocated to the different race groups, white schools received proportionately the lion's share of resources available, which in turn caused additional forms of alienation and antagonism.

This was manifested in the 1949 riots between Indian and African communities. This was soon after the Nationalist party came into power in the 1948 elections. As in July 1921, the security services failed to protect the population and killing, looting and inciting to violence, were allowed to continue with impunity. It was the African and Indian leadership of Chief Albert Luthuli and Dr Monty Naicker and others who went from area to area addressing the communities to stop the mayhem, that brought about a calm after the storm. It was this initiative that brought an end to the carnage that was taking place. Again in 1985, the African community in eNanda was deprived of water, roads, schools and municipal services. Outbreaks of cholera and typhoid were experienced and when these infections were carried by workers to the white areas, then only did the municipality intervene by bringing tankers of water for the people and attending to their health needs, albeit half-heartedly and also not fully committed to the refuse removal from the area.

While this was happening in eNanda, adjacent to eNanda, the Phoenix Township was developing, providing housing for the Indian community displaced by the floods in the Springfield area where the uMngeni river swelled and broke its banks causing hundreds of Indians living on the banks in informal housing to be affected. Their homes and belongings were destroyed by the flood. The housing was small and congested, but comprised of bricks and tiles, giving the appearance of affluence. The community also had tap water and sewer toilets in their homes. They had tarred roads and government schools built by the House of Delegates, comprising of Indians, which was part of the Tricameral parliament (1984 – 1994).

Despite there being African residents residing in eNanda too, some unknown forces began spreading resentment towards the Indians who were living in eNanda, many of whom have lived there for generations. So, over 5 days in August 1985, over 10 000 Indians were forcibly made to flee from their homes and sought shelter in community halls in Phoenix. The apartheid security forces were conspicuously absent. The House of Delegates again intervened, and built homes for these internally displaced refugees, and accommodated

some, while others found new homes elsewhere.

And then, as is well-known, in July 2021 there was a spate of violent and looting incidents throughout KwaZulu-Natal, that also spread to parts of Gauteng. Like everywhere else in the Province of KZN, there was no police protection and people were forced to protect themselves. Indians in Phoenix, Chatsworth and elsewhere too, had to fend for themselves. Once more, even though we were liberated, no protection was provided to the community. A result was that some angry attacks did take place and some lives were lost. An estimated 350 people were reported to have died and there has been as yet no account of how or where they died. The 35 people who died in Phoenix became the centre of attention on social media. In the commentary of some politicians, and in some reports in mainline newspapers, Indians were accused of being racist and instigating violence. The community was once more made to feel vulnerable and terrified. Those with means, were able to seek shelter elsewhere. But the rest of the 800 thousand-odd families in these predominantly Indian residential areas were left to their own means.

South Africa is liberated. Indians played a role alongside others in this liberation. The liberation movement spoke of building a South Africa which belongs to all those who live in it. Yet there is a small yet powerful faction that continues to raise racial, ethnic, and exclusionary nationalist innuendos causing uncertainty and fear among vulnerable groups such as refugees, immigrants, and Indians who were born and lived in South Africa for generations and who have never had the opportunity to even visit another country outside South Africa. This is their only home. The patriotic grandmothers who had faced gun toting police during the liberation struggle now have to live in fear of their's and their children's lives.

It is important therefore to tell the story of Indian South Africans, and that some of these important factors, also be expressed. While there are stories of some who have been able to achieve much after the liberation and the opening up of opportunities for them to excel in their field of expertise, the stories of being mugged, assaulted and even killed – irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, or class –, are a blot on the emerging democratic order in South Africa.

These realities are not only experienced by the South African Indian community but sadly by all communities. eNanda is said to have the highest crime rate and rate of gender-based violence in the country. So, this violence is not limited to racially based violence, there is xenophobic violence, criminal violence and also gender-based violence that are plaguing our country and is a

*Ela Gandhi*

blot on the high regard South Africa once enjoyed in the world. Now is the time when South African Indians must unite with peace loving people of all the other race groups in our country and abroad, in order to turn things around and bring about peace and prosperity in this country which we know as our motherland. There is much to do in order to protect our country against all forms of violence, to protect it from environmental degradation and to assist all our people to be able to lead a better life.

This is a challenge we all face. Like Martin Luther King Jnr. said, in the last chapter of his famous book of 1968, *Where do we Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*

*Our hope for creative living in this world house that we have inherited lies in our ability to re-establish the moral ends of our lives in personal character and social justice. Without this spiritual and moral reawakening, we shall destroy ourselves in the misuse of our instruments* (p. 183).

**Hon. Doctor Ela Gandhi**  
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# Preface

The referenced histories of a free people about themselves, narrativise data from empirical facts and experiences from within their own lived, historically-specific existence and experiences. Those most closely to the facts, are best positioned to appraise and know the story. Sometimes, we have little stories, larger stories, how smaller stories impact larger stories, and also story events capturing real-live lived experiences and reflections. There are also his-stories and her-stories, stories about youth and old age, and also stories of difficult and trying times, but also stories of resistance, struggle, resilience, effort, self-advancement, and freedom. The same is true of *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

Shanta Balgobind Singh and her research team, together with some exceptional leaders from local communities, have brought together an incomparable array of perspectives on Indians in South Africa, 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It makes an invaluable contribution to the research of, by, about, and for Indians in South Africa as well as Indians of the Diaspora. Here are some seminal perspectives from and on the global South, in historically-specific interactive snap-shots from the KwaZulu region, Fordsburg in Gauteng, with the historical home-country, India, but also with the former colonising forces from the global North.

Within the ebb and flow and socio-economic formations' competitiveness and conflicts, and the interactions of global power blocs, these events also impact the movement of people out of necessity or for purposes of opportunity. As is well-known amongst the formerly colonised peoples of the world, expectations are created and sometimes thwarted in experience. Involvements in forms of social conflict and catastrophe not of one's own choosing, sometimes also reveal how surface cohesiveness and neighbourliness belie deeper levels of forms of discontent, resentment and animosity. And, in the developing national or local communities as part of the larger South, and southern African narrative, the thematisations in *Indians in South Africa*, make a very important contribution. It is one thing to ask the difficult questions, and another to answer them satisfactorily. *Indians in South Africa* does both. The humanities and social sciences in both South Africa, and India, amongst others, are all the richer for it.

Prof. Johannes A. (Jannie) Smit  
Chair: Humanities Institute  
University of KwaZulu-Natal



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Currently she holds the Portfolio of Series Editor for the Coffee Table Publication *Tell Your Mother's Story*, a flagship project of the Oral History Association of South Africa, which is an agency of the National Department of Sport, Arts and Culture. Dr Archary is also the Research and Development Officer at the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam. Kogie is mother to the three Parthab brothers; Deshaj, Haren and Keshvir.

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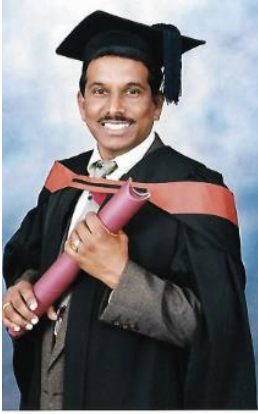
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**Parasnath (Roy) Raghubir** is a South African who was born and grew up in Ottawa Estate where the rich culture of Sugar Cane Farming was situated. Presently he resides in Verulam. He has just turned 60 and is a Maintenance Planner with 40 years of experience, ironically working for Illovo Sugar SA Mill situated at Merebank. His primary school years was completed at Jhugroo State Aided School and thereafter at Mt. Edgecombe Secondary School where he completed

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# Editorial



# Chapter 1: Editorial

## Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Shanta Balgobind Singh

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### Introduction

During the Dutch colonial era, the first Indians arrived in South Africa in the seventeenth century, in 1684, as slaves. According to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1995) there is no consensus on how slavery should be defined. Nevertheless, there is general agreement among historians, anthropologists, economists, sociologists and others who study slavery that most of the following characteristics should be present in order to term a person a slave: they were objects of the law; they belonged to someone else; had few rights; were deprived of personal liberty; and were limited in their capacity to make choices with regards to occupation and sexual partners. A conservative calculation based strictly on archival records, shows over 16 300 slaves from the Indian subcontinent have been brought to the Cape during the early of parts of Dutch colonisation. For instance, in the decades 1690 to 1725, over 80% of the slaves who were brought to the Cape, were Indians (South African History Online, or SAHO 2021). To note is that according to SAHO, South Africans of Indian origin comprise a heterogeneous community distinguished by different origins, languages, and religious beliefs. The practice of transporting slaves to the cape, continued until the end of slavery in 1838.

After the British colonised South Africa in the 1800s, Indians were brought from their home country (which was also colonised by Britain at the time), to work on the sugar plantations, railways and in the mines of colonial Natal (now known as the province of KwaZulu-Natal), between 1860 and 1911. Between November 1860 and 1911 (when the system of indentured labour was stopped) nearly 152 184 indentured labourers from across India arrived in Natal.

Thus, the forebears of today's Indian South Africans, were either enslaved and brought to this country, or came to South Africa, as part of the British Indentured labourer system.

Following the period of slavery, then, since 1860, Indians came to South Africa in two categories, namely as indentured workers since 1860, and later as 'free' or 'passenger' Indians – Indians that also came to South Africa during this time, but as prospective business entrepreneurs, or governance officials. While their initial recruitment had been for work in the sugar plantations, Indian labour was also later distributed to the railways, dockyards, coal mines, municipal services and into domestic employment (SAHO 2021). Indenture spawned harsh laws that governed every aspect of the migrants' lives. They had to work for five years for the employer to whom they were assigned. Overwork, malnutrition and squalid living conditions formed the pattern of daily life for most agricultural workers. Indentured Indians had few ways of resisting (Lal 2006: 243). The colonial administration sought to curb the activities of the Indians by enacting a whole compendium of discriminatory laws against them, with a view to boxing them in and curbing their enterprise, economic and educational progress. Their economic activities faced difficulties because of discriminatory laws. Yet, by June 1886 there were already more 'free' Indians in the Natal Colony than indentured Indians. They were free from their contracts, but not free to join the political process, or to vote as equal citizens of their adopted country (*The Indian Diaspora* 2000:78). After serving their indentures, the first category of Indians was free to remain in South Africa or to return to India. By 1910, nearly 26.85% indentured men returned to India, but most chose to stay and thus constitute the forebearers of the majority of present-day South African Indians (SAHO 2020).

The question arises: Why study Indians in South Africa and the history of generations past? Indians in South Africa played an integral part in the development, the liberation of the country from colonial and apartheid rule, and continue to contribute substantially to the life of its people in certain geopolitical areas. History is the story of who we are, where we come from, what we have contribute to South Africa, and how it potentially reveals where we are headed. Studying history helps us understand how events in the past made things the way they are today. With lessons from the past, we not only learn about ourselves and how we came to be, but also develop the ability to avoid mistakes and map better paths and create better more significant ways and means for our societies. It is the story of the human in time, an inquiry into the

past based on evidence. History enables people to discover their own place in the stories of their families, communities, and nation. They learn the stories of the many individuals and groups that have come before them and shaped the world in which they live. These stories provide us with a sense of identity. History matters because it helps us as individuals and as societies to understand why our societies are the way they are and what they value.

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 collated, written down, shared with the general public and be 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 and foremothers against the adversities that they faced, for future generations to reflect and appreciate years from now.

This *Alternation* Special Issue, *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, then seeks to contribute, even though still partial, and so elucidate the role that Indians played in South Africa since the beginnings of indenture in 1860 to the present day in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the 1860s, the Indian community has succeeded, progressed and contributed to every sector of South African life.

The book documents a sample of narratives of people of Indian origin and their experiences, challenges and successes in South Africa. Main issues, of the book are divided into 5 sections, and are briefly outlined as follows:

The primary focus of **Section 1: Historical Issues on Indian Indenture**, is on the ways in which indentured Indians settled in South Africa; various socio-economic and political challenges experienced and how the Indians developed as a community, locally and nationally.

**Section 2: Women during Indenture**, elucidates the contribution of women from Indenture to Democracy.

**Section 3: The Contemporary Period**, addresses the key issues facing South Africans of Indian Origin during the contemporary period, successes of Indians, current perspectives on indentureship, the legacies and evolvement of indentureship as evidenced in the language, literature, food, and the media, in their diverse senses of identity, by the descendants of the Indentured Indian, and the role of Indian women during and post-Indenture period.

**Section 4: 'Untold Stories/ Personal Stories'**, is about a sample of 'untold stories' and a personal odyssey of descendants of Indenture in tracing



their roots back to India, and recounting their personal experiences, from 21<sup>st</sup> century spatial vantage points. The reflexion on one's life history is not only an indication of the accomplishments of many Indian families in South Africa who have achieved success over adversity, but is also very important to one's sense of identity. According to Ashton and Hamilton (2003:27),

the past that inspires genealogists, local historians, and collectors, is not random but connected to their personal identity, most often their genetic heritage ... the family is the principal site for exploration and teaching about the past across all cultures.

**Section 5: The 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam,** is about the history and establishment of the foundation, and its constant initiatives to educate and enlighten the community on the history, progress and contribution of the Indentured Indians. The organisation also endeavours to generate an identity for Indians and its greater diaspora in South Africa.

## **Background**

In South Africa, researchers have approached the topic of Indian indentureship and settlement in comparable ways (Bhana & Pachai 1984; Meer 1980; Sawant 1994; Henning 1993; Badassy 2005; and Desai & Vahed 2010). In an incisive account that exposed the realities of the hardships that Indian indentured labourers had to endure, Meer (1980) summarised the role of the Sardar and the colonial employer as 'exploitative and manipulative'. Bhana and Pachai (1984) later strengthened Meer's (1980) analysis by also noting that,

The indentured Indian had a harder time adapting and adjusting to new realities and circumstances. The documents recapture incidents of misery that accompanied indenture. The conditions were harsh and restrictive in many cases, not too far removed from slavery.

In the **Foreword**, of *Indians in South Africa*, **Dr Ela Gandhi** provides a synopsis of the trials and tribulations of Indians in South Africa. She contends that the indentured Indians believed that the key to overcoming their challenges was to educate their children. Many schools were built by people of Indian origin through their own hard work and savings. These include the Sastri

College and the M.L. Sultan Technikon both of which provided vital education and skills training. But there were many primary schools that were built as government aided schools. The following generations therefore began to prosper as their skills and education levels rose. But, the limited scope of employment and lack of access to some jobs reserved for whites only prevented some from accessing employment of choice or even studying for highly skilled jobs such as engineering, etc. Some with great talent obtained bursaries to travel overseas where they were able to train as well as get employment. These were South Africans of Indian origin who migrated and continue to live in various countries of the world. But a large number stayed on in this country and some became engrossed in the struggle for liberation, sacrificing careers and family life. Some died in the struggle; others suffered long periods of incarceration but remained loyal to the struggle.

## **Section 1**

### **Historical Issues on Indian Indenture**

Building on milestone event, **Professor Shanta Balgobind Singh's** chapter, **'Indians in South Africa: Reflections on the Historical Evolution of Indians, 1860's to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'**, provides a brief description of the people of Indian origin, socio-economic and political evolution amongst the different generations of Indians, shocks and disruptions of family, kinship and community life, and the different political strategies used over time to meet the needs of the community, and the politics of indigenous collaboration, and collective resistance to the colonial and apartheid regimes. The chapter identifies the third generation to be more advanced in quality of life and opportunities for development, with the advancement in technology, cyber communications and a western way of life. Despite the success of this generation, they have left behind a segment of their counterparts who live in dire straits. Their hopes are narrowed in the *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, low cost housing estates. It is perhaps in the sixth generation that the community may enjoy stable political, social and economic advancement in the country.

**Chapter 2, "“Master Coolie” Conditions in India, Unjust Justice and Abuses of Indenture in South Africa'** by **Mr. Jaisingh Surujbullee Singh** is a tribute to Indentured Labourers – our Forebears. The aim of this study

is to chronicle the conditions in India that hastened migration of the rural community to the different colonies of the British Empire. The reason for this traditional methodological approach in writing up this paper is to highlight the unjust justice and abuses that the Indian indentured labourers suffered at the brutal hands of the colonial planters. Conditions in India certainly hastened migration. The East India Company was established during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and was granted permission to trade in India by Emperor Jahangir. By the first century of its presence in India, the Company had its armies in India as people like Robert Clive were more interested in establishing a new colony and less interested in trade. At this point in time, India had experienced the role of inefficient, greedy kings, endless inter-kingdom wars and now the effects of colonisation and subjugation. If the old order was ruthless, then the new masters would prove to be even more so (Bowen 2003).

**Chapter 3, “White Gold” on a Rusty Spoon – Some Reflections on Indenture in South Africa** by **Professor Sultan Khan**, indicates that the labour of indentured Indians brought from India to work the sugar plantations of the then Natal Colony, was an exacting experience as life on these desolate estates were sub-human in nature, extracting every ounce of energy to feed the sugar mills with their labour. The chapter recollects the experience of the indentured in the different facets of life leaving behind a legacy that the present generation need to be proud of. Their genealogical roots were founded by hard work, determination, and the will to succeed, which has won the current generation a place of freedom on the African soil. The chapter also highlights the contribution indentured Indians made in the multi-national sugar industry currently located in South Africa. Many from the indentured lineage are now in their 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation, who have a vague notion of the sacrifices that their forebears have made. It is works like this that documents the life and times of indentured Indians as reminder that sugar production dubbed, ‘white gold’, was served on a rusty spoon, in their early evolution, whilst the world savored this with silver and golden spoons, unbeknown to them, that this white gold was produced in the context of slavery.

**Chapter 4, ‘Fordsburg: The Building of a Community for People of Indian Origin’** by **Professor Pragna Rugunanan** engages *A Place in Johannesburg called Fordsburg*, a neighbourhood that has historically been associated with the ‘Indians’. Romantically characterised as noisy, aromatic and colourful, this enclave, as in the case of Johannesburg itself, has a history forged in the industry of gold mining. The purpose of the chapter is to document the

history of people of Indian origin since the early 1890s in the neighbourhood, Fordsburg, in Johannesburg. This was an area, that served as a point of entry into Johannesburg, where many people of Indian origin came to reside. Fordsburg, initially constructed as a white immigrant working class community, quickly became home to previously indentured laborer's who relocated to the then Transvaal. The neighbourhood and its geographical location play significant roles in the annals of history of the people of Indian origin, their families and their identity, in overcoming the racism and discrimination experienced since their arrival in South Africa. It is impossible though, to only focus on people of Indian origin, within this early history of their location to Johannesburg or even Fordsburg. Their history is interspersed by and intermingles with the histories of a variety of nationalities who were all trying to eke out a living in early Johannesburg, from the 1890s. Against this backdrop of early history, a first-generation resident provides his reflections and recollections of how the Indian community evolved, and made Fordsburg their own, in character, in compassion for other racialised groups, and in solidarity with each other. The chapter provides insight into how early indentured laborer's claim a sense of belonging to contested spaces in a country they are excluded from, because of their race.

## **Section 2**

### **Indian Women during Indenture**

In **Chapter 5**, titled '**South African Women of Indian Origin: From Indenture to Democracy**', **Dr Devi Rajab** postulates that little is known about the role of women in the Indian resistance movements to colonisation and apartheid, as they fought alongside their men to change the course of his-tory (Rajab 1999). In 1996 when the Indian Government honoured a young 16-year-old martyr of the South African freedom struggle, Ms. Valliammah Munusamy Moodaliar who died soon after her imprisonment for resisting apartheid, few South Africans knew her story and the situation hasn't changed in any significant way. For large periods of our history in this country, Indian women were largely invisible. Perhaps it is true to say that among their counterparts of white and coloured women, Indian women were the most occupationally stagnant group under apartheid rule (Walker 1991). Though higher education records paint a different picture, their qualifications didn't always translate into job opportunities or positions of high status and although they fought alongside

their men in the *Satyagraha* struggles, the taboos of culture, religion and other societal norms kept them locked in the restrictive duties of domesticity (Walker 1991). That Indian women played a valuable and crucial role towards the liberation of their people cannot be overlooked. In relinquishing their traditional role to don the mantle of resistance, they sacrificed their material comforts for a higher order so succinctly captured in the words of the great Valliamah – ‘who would not want to die for one’s own motherland?’

In keeping with this theme, **Dr Kogielam Keerthi Archary**’s chapter, titled **‘Reflective Memories – A Chronicle of the Liberation Struggle Experiences of Cde Rae Pillay, a South African *uMkhonto we Sizwe* Female Soldier of Indentured Indian Diasporic Heritage’** is unfolded. This chapter captures the story of Cde Rae Pillay in her capacity as a military wing soldier who fought for liberation against the atrocious South African apartheid system. The article highlights the tenacity of Cde Rae, born 4<sup>th</sup> August 1944, to Mr. and Mrs. T.V.R. Pillay, by narrating her story with the searchlight focussed firmly on her reflective memories. She soldiered on in her commitment to the armed political struggle despite her serious later disability. The broader reason for engaging further research on this protagonist is to focus on the contribution of the female descendant of the indentured Indian labourers to the Colony of Natal. The chapter delves into the experiences of Cde Rae, a South African Indian of indentured heritage, who made the choice to fight the inequalities that she and the non-white communities experienced. It depicts the fight she fought – initially as a grassroots worker – and then later as an armed liberation fighter on the run. When the brutal state authorities identified her as a struggle fighter, she was informed by the struggle leadership that she needed to exit the country and go underground. Cde Rae was an *uMkhonto we Sizwe* soldier and is currently identified as one of two South African women of Indian heritage who fought the struggle as an underground soldier (Pillay 2021).

### **Section 3**

#### **The Contemporary Period**

**Chapter 7** by **Dr Jayanathan Govender** titled **‘Indian Problem, Indian Menace and Indian Ubiquity: Indian South Africans at the Intersections’**, is of the view that as sophisticated as colonization was, it was its own *ouroboros* – the gnostic symbol expressing the unity of all things, material and spiritual, which changes form in an eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation. Indian

indenture entered into such a cycle, a cycle from near slavery, to diaspora, to global transmigration. From problem, to menace, to ubiquity, suggests two critical features of Indian indenture: the first is that the history of Indian indenture proves positive social change, economic development, and integration in the country of destination; and the second is that no other diasporic group in history has settled in more countries of the world, proving the claim of Indian ubiquity. Indian indentured workers experienced the extreme attitudes of the colonisers. Over time, towards the end of indentureship, the appearance of descendants, and increased migration flows, there was a softening of attitudes, not necessarily translating into either absolute tolerance nor accommodation. Rather, the colonizers were forced to politically accommodate Indians as part of society, who qualified for citizenship post indenture. This chapter then celebrates Indian indenture in South Africa. This development raises a question for the future – what would the leading countries of the world of tomorrow look like and what about the future of democracy?

**Chapter 8 by Professor Shanta Balgobind Singh titled, ‘Identity and Indian Culture – Reflections of Indian Television Viewing amongst South African Indians in Durban and Johannesburg, South Africa’,** reflects on media and the sense of identity of the contemporary South African Indian. South African Indians remain an important part of the country’s culture and diversity. Indians came to South Africa many centuries ago, bringing with them a myriad of rich cultural practices, unique cuisine, traditional religion and sacred traditions. South African Indians retain a sense of cultural and social connection to India, and a concept of primary local and secondary ancestral identity is prevalent among people of Indian descent. Indian television and cinema viewing played a central role in connecting the South African diasporic community with their land of origin in the Indian subcontinent. In the late 1980s, videocassette recorders (VCR) resulted in the virtual demise of the Indian cinema industry and during the late 1990s DVDs played a significant role in encouraging Indian entertainment and culture within the diaspora. These three approaches of entertainment and cultural contact with India were however restricted to specific themes and events in the Indian sub-continent, sometimes promoting particular values, ethnic and political orientations, which viewers had very little control of. The advent of Bollywood DSTV has however provided the South African diasporic community with a wide range of bouquets to select from. The chapter examines how the various Indian programmes screened on television has become household topics of conversation which

impact on and influence the shaping of various Indian family's culture and sense of identity in Durban and Johannesburg.

In **Chapter 9, Dr Gerelene Jagganath**, discusses '**Hindu Youth Perceptions on Vegetarianism and Veganism in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal**'. The study provides insight into Hindu youth perceptions of vegetarianism and veganism, within the context of a growing interest in these dietary choices among youth globally, as well as in South Africa. While vegetarianism and veganism as lifestyle choices should not be conflated, they are significant dietary trends among youth in contemporary society and have been treated as such for the purposes of this chapter. Indian, and specifically Hindu youth trends in post-apartheid South Africa, appear to be marginalized in local youth studies. Further, finding local literature and statistics pertaining directly to Indian youth is equally challenging. Foregrounding the choices of Hindu youth, it needs to be realised that meat eating was the dominant dietary choice among Hindu youth in Durban. Yet, currently, vegetarian/ vegan and non-meat food product alternatives are increasing in popularity and are increasingly considered in the food preferences of the sample, particularly for reasons relating to health, spirituality and ethics.

**Chapter 10 by Professor Brij Maharaj**, is titled '**Indians in South Africa – Pariahs in the Apartheid and Democratic Eras ...?**' He analyses how the indentured Indians and their descendants in South Africa during the colonial, post-colonial and contemporary eras, have primarily played the role of middle-man minorities, sandwiched between the white elite and the African majority, and how they were often portrayed as scapegoats and villains in times of economic and political crisis. For the greater part of a century, South African Indians were regarded as aliens in the country of their birth, and until 1961 the apartheid policy was that they should ultimately be repatriated to India. Historically, Indians enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared to that of the African majority primarily because of community survival strategies, and better access to education in the apartheid hierarchy. Frequently obscured was the fact that the majority of Indians belonged to the working class. Indentured labour resulted in the lowering of wages paid to Africans which set the foundation for the incipient tensions, suspicions and conflicts between these groups, which continues in the post-apartheid era. Drawing generously from his published and unpublished research and public commentary on race and segregation for more than thirty years, this chapter, i) briefly evaluates apartheid policies which restricted access to land, housing, and trading opportunities; ii)

reviews Indo-African tensions in the apartheid era; and iii) analyses the anti-Indian discourse emerging in the democratic era.

## Section 4

### ‘Untold Stories’ of Indenture and ‘Tracing Roots’

**Mr. Anand Jayrajh’s Chapter 11** is about his personal odyssey ‘**On the Trail of My Ancestry**’. He recounts his search in trying to trace his roots to India. This chapter postulates that many South Africans of Indian descent can trace their ancestral roots to the Indian Indentured labourers who were brought to the Colony of Natal from India during the period 1860 to 1911. They were brought here as bonded labourers under a contract of indenture (referred to by the labourers themselves as ‘*Girmit*’), mainly to toil on and develop the sugar plantations of British Colonial masters who held sway in this part of Southern Africa. Due to the lapse of and through the passage of time, as well as the unavoidable and inevitable effects of the generational gap, a broad section of these South Africans lost contact with their kith and kin and descendants of their ancestors in India and have no idea as to who they are in terms of geographical origin. What follows, is a description of a personal odyssey in pursuit of discovering his ancestral roots in India. For those who are passionate about their ancestry, it is hoped that some will gain inspiration from this narrative to embark on similar quests of their own, if they have not already done so. Such ventures by individuals would most certainly be unique in their own right and unravel varying individual experiences and emotions. In the process they will most likely find some common threads embroidered therein.

The purpose of the final chapter titled ‘**In Search of Promised Gold: Mahilall’s Voyage from India to the South African Shores**’ by **Mr. Satish Balgobind** and **Professor Shanta Balgobind Singh** 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*, it is 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 village of Haripurwa in the remote region of Bihar, and to compare their lifestyles with 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 Indian 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 on, and appreciate years from now.

## **Section 5**

### **The 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam**

**Mr. Naran Rajbansi and Mr. Roy Raghubir** write about the '**History and the Establishment of the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Veru-lam**'. 2010 was the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the arrival of Indian Indentured Labourers in the then Colony of Natal in 1860, and in particular, one of the places that the Indentured Labourers had settled was in Verulam. Mr Jaisingh Suruj-bulle Singh, a resolute and unwavering historian and stalwart came up with a proposition that an organisation be initiated and instituted. This would then lend itself to commemorate and acknowledge our forebears whilst appreciating their arrival in South Africa, by generating an identity for the Indians and its greater diaspora in South Africa. Hence, after dialogs and deliberations with prominent affiliates of the community, a meeting was convened as a way forward. The Indentured Labourers Foundation of Verulam was founded, and is also affiliated to the Oral History Society of Verulam which houses much information on Indenture. On the 7 December 2008, at a public meeting, the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam was accordingly established. It originated as a public initiative to be viewed as a continued undertaking to constantly educate and enlighten the community on the history of the Indentured labourers whilst preserving the rich heritage, legacy and culture which these pioneers brought to the shores of South Africa. The Foundation's history is a narrative recreation of the events that shaped and solidified the organization's values and characteristics. Since its inception, the challenges that the Foundation has

overcome and how it has galvanised the community, constitutes and Indian cultural trajectory, within the parameters of its scope which further defines the characteristics of success on the firm foundations on which it was built.

## Conclusion

This edited volume of *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, reflects on the life and times of Indentured Indians from the 1860s to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It draws on a series of themes that has impacted on the socio-economic and political wellbeing of the Indentured. Indenture, by its very nature, can be dubbed a more ‘civilised’ version of slavery’ which the British colonialists have masterminded’ to extract capital through exploitative labour practices. The Indentured Indian arrived on the shores of South Africa, least expecting the brutality that was meted out to them in desolate and strange parts of the Natal Colony. It was inhumane, and stripped them of their self-dignity and self-worth. Through resilience, the pioneer Indentured survived the hardships meted out to them. With their paltry income, they invested in social, community and educational life in order to secure a better livelihood for themselves and above all to sustain their religious and cultural identity. Beyond preserving their self-identity, they have contributed substantially to all facets of South African ways of life. They survived both colonialism and apartheid through resistance and they have become part of the diverse tapestry that characterise South Africa as a Rainbow Nation. Being part of the Rainbow Nation, a significant number have not found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, though.

To date, many Indentured Indian descendants, have not recovered from the disadvantages experienced by their forebears. Confined to township life and the periphery of cities and towns, raise important questions as to whether this generation will have an equal opportunity to advance in life, given the precarious state of the country at present. These peripheral groupings of Indians, are most likely to remain marginalised as the very desperate seek shelter in informal settlements, Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) low cost human settlements, or are forced to rent in backyard buildings in the townships and suburbs in small towns where unemployment and poverty conditions are rife. Those living in predominantly Black African human settlements, are more than likely to risk their culture, identity and opportunities for self-advancement. There is also an inherent irony in the evolution of the

Indentured, as the descendants of the formerly indentured groups and classes, continue to be divided by class – the poor on the one side and those with excessive wealth, on the other. The sugar cane fields that were once cultivated by the Indentured are now being turned into world class real estates with leafy green golf courses, which provide for the ambience of the sugar plantation which is now no more. This class has gained much from the sacrifice of their forebears and are winners in the political-economy of indenture, whilst many continue to experience intergenerational setbacks due to the post-apartheid government's inability to deal with poverty and service delivery. Of concern is the advancement of those caught in intergenerational poverty, inherited from their forebears, which raises the question as whether the 'Indian problem' continues to exist in 21<sup>st</sup> Century South Africa, 162 years since the arrival of the first indentured labourers.

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# **SECTION 1**

## **Historical Issues on Indian Indenture**



# Chapter 1

## Indians in South Africa: Reflections on the Historical Evolution of Indians, 1860s to the 21st Century

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### **Abstract**

The South African Indians were first brought as slaves to the Cape Colony in the seventeenth century. They were mixed with other captives from Sri Lanka, South-East Asia, and Macao, among other diverse places, and their common religion, Islam, would later lead to their being classified as ‘Cape Malays.’ However, historians tend to date the origins of a recognizable Indian community to their arrival in Durban on 16 November 1860 on the ship S.S Truro, which carried the first indentured laborers who would work on the cane fields of the Natal Colony (Hand & Pujolràs-Noguer 2018). In South Africa researchers have approached the topic of Indian indentureship and settlement in many ways. While their initial recruitment had been for work in the plantations, Indian labour was also later distributed to the railways, dockyards, coal mines, municipal services and domestic employment. Even though 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. Indians in South Africa remain an important part of the country's culture and diversity. Since the 1860s, the Indian community in South Africa has succeeded, progressed and contributed to every sector of life in the country. This chapter provides a brief description of the people of Indian origin, social, economic and political evolution amongst the different generations of Indians, shocks and disruption of family, kinship and community life and the different political strategy used over time to advance the needs of the community and the politics of collaboration and resistance to the colonial and apartheid regimes.



The chapter identifies the third generation to be more advanced in life, with advancement in technology, cyber-communications and a western way of life. Despite the success of this generation, they have left behind a segment of their counterparts who live in dire straits. Their hopes are narrowed in the Reconstruction and Development Programme housing estates. It is perhaps in the sixth generation that the community may enjoy stable political, social and economic advancement in the country.

**Key words:** Indians, South Africa, race, indenture, South Africa

### **The Arrival of Indians within a South African Context**

South Africans of Indian origin comprise a heterogeneous community notable by diverse origins, languages, and religious beliefs. The first Indians arrived as slaves in South Africa during the Dutch colonial era, in 1684. A conservative calculation based strictly on records shows over 16 300 slaves from the Indian subcontinent were brought to the Cape. In the decades 1690 to 1725, over 80% of the slaves were Indians. This practice continued until the end of slavery in 1838. They made up the majority of slaves that came from the Far East and were by the 1880s totally integrated into the Cape White and Coloured communities.

A next wave of migration from India began in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when thousands of Indians were brought to work on the sugar plantations in South Africa. On 16 November 1860, a group of 342 Indians, comprising men, women and children, arrived at the port city of Durban on board the S.S. Truro. They were the first of 384 such arrivals of ‘human cargo’ containing as many as 152 184 people that were shipped to South Africa over the next 51 years. Of them 62% were men, 25% women and 13% children. Two thirds of these emigrants were from the then Madras Presidency, Mysore, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal (The Indian Diaspora 2000:76). The initial purpose of importing Indians was to tend the sugarcane and sisal plantations of the British settlers. Their settlement and distribution across the Natal colony were staggered and subject to the economic conditions of the entire British Empire and its relationship to other imperialist forces. Between 1874 and 1911, a further 364 ships brought with them approximately one third of Natal’s total immigrant Indian population (Henning 1993).



**Figure 1: Map of India (Source: Google Maps)**

In 1869, the first batch of ‘passenger Indians’ arrived in Durban. The appellation ‘passenger Indians’ refers to Indian immigrant traders, artisans,

teachers, and shop assistants alert to new opportunities in the Natal colony, who paid their own passage. These ‘free Indians’ came from India, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other places. However, emigration was stopped in 1914. Between the two categories of Indian settlement, it was marked by distinct caste, class, religious and cultural differences. Hence, the assertion that Indian presence in the country is homogenous by nature can be debated.

In South Africa, researchers have approached the topic of Indian indentureship and settlement in a variety of ways (Bhana & Pachai 1984; Meer 1980; Sawant 1994; Henning 1993; Badassy 2005; Desai & Vahed 2010) that exposed the realities of the hardships that Indian indentured labourers had to endure. Meer (1980) summarises the role of the Sardar and the colonial employer as exploitative and manipulative. She points out that,

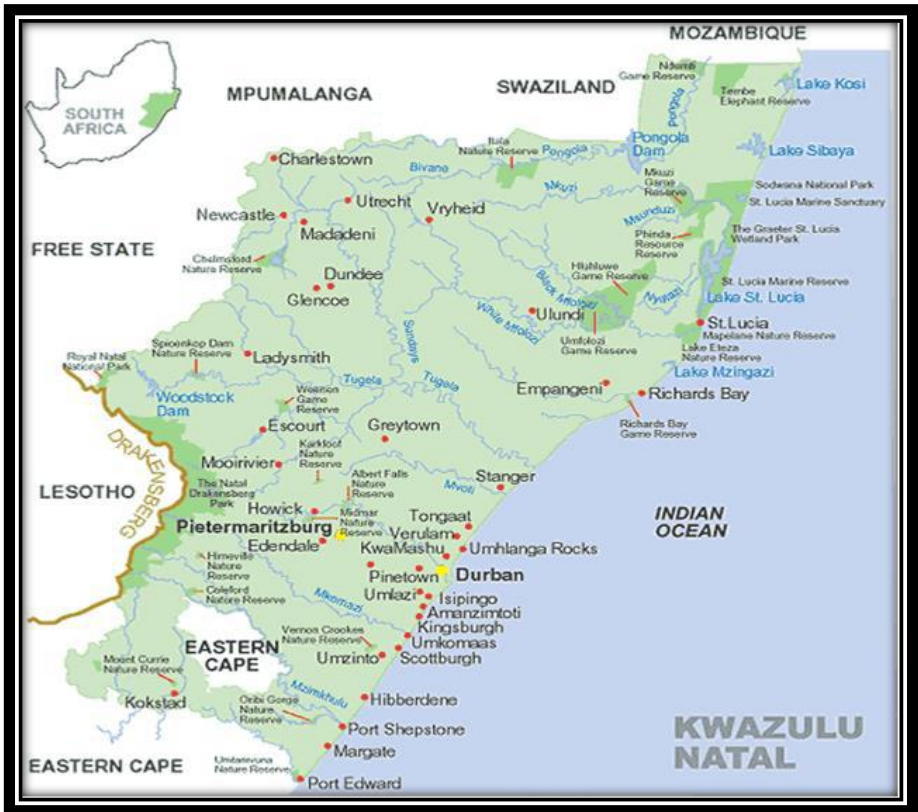
opportunities for the frugal comfort were few for the standard practice was to work the labourers from dawn to sunset, Sundays included. Having provided the workers with rations and secured their labour, the planters were insensitive to all else. Their main concern was to economize labour. They saved on rations by reducing them to half on the slightest pretext, by replacing the portion of the stipulated rice with mealie meal, and meeting their complaints by arguing that mealie-meal was better for them, and by refusing rations to non-working women and children, though they were entitled to these by law. They saw their workers as a crucial but vexatious part of the estate’s productive equipment, draining for all sorts of unnecessary concession at their expense. They refused them permission to leave the estates, begrudged them their wages and devised ingenious means to deprive them of these, with justice through a rate of fines.

Bhana and Pachai (1984) later strengthened Meer’s (1980) analysis by also noting that,

the indentured Indian had a harder time adapting and adjusting to new realities and circumstances. The documents recapture incidents of misery that accompanied indenture. The conditions were harsh and restrictive in many cases, not too far removed from slavery. There are complaints of low wages, long hours, low rations, and inadequate

attention to social and medical needs and of beatings. The system worked heedless of human feelings.

The indentured labourers had to endure this misery until their contract expired after five years.



**Figure 2: Map of KwaZulu-Natal indicating predominately Indian Areas**  
(Source: Google Maps)

While their initial recruitment had been for work on the plantations, Indian labour was also later deployed to the railways, dockyards, coal mines, municipal services and domestic employment. Even though 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 community. In a nutshell, the Indian ancestors had to overcome many challenges. Initially, they had to submit themselves to hard labour and servitude without due appreciation. That was followed by mindless racial oppression and abuse (*The Indian Diaspora* 2000:77-87).

Post-indenture

After 1917, the majority of the labourers remained in the country and became landowners on Durban’s east coast and the hinterland, engaging in diverse economic activities. Being free from the brutality expressed through indenture, they eventually started to settle into family life. This is illustrated by the birth rate within the community.

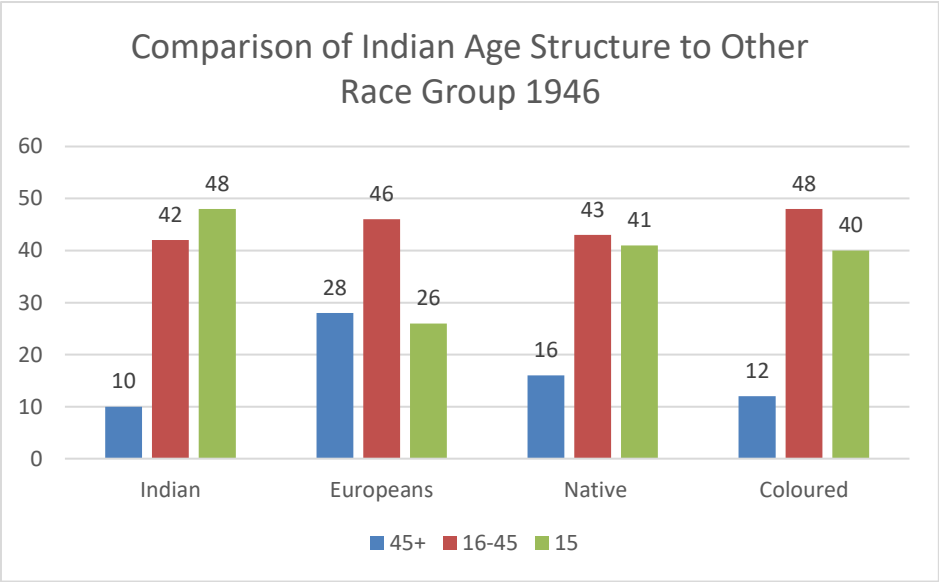


Figure 3: Indian Age Structure Compared to other Race Groups in 1946  
(Source: Adapted from Burrows 1947:7)

By 1936 there were 219 925 Indians in South Africa, half of whom were born in the country. A later census undertaken by Burrows (1947) illustrates that this generation of Indians reproduced themselves phenomenally within a short period of time, as depicted in the Graph above.

When the graph is analysed, it illustrates that 48% of the Indian population were below 15 years old, with 42% falling in the 16 to 45-year category and 10% at 46 and above. This statistic illustrates the youthfulness amongst the community. When compared to the whites, Indians had a rapid birth rate whose youthful population exceeded the whites by 22%. With such population growth, families had to seek the comfort of adequate food, shelter and clothing. Clairwood, Riverside, Cato Manor and small towns such as Verulam, Tongaat and Stanger were settlement areas to the north and south of Durban, and Pietermaritzburg to the west. Some even drifted into the hinterland to find livelihood opportunities.

Given the attrition of the birth rate amongst whites, youthful, energetic and enthusiasm to advance beyond the exploits of sugar cultivation experienced by their ancestors, this second generation sought to do much better than their forbears. They increasingly engaged in unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled work in the various economic sectors emerging in the colonial economy. With African labour being more readily available for unskilled work by 1946, only 22% of the Indian population participated in the agricultural economy. A vast number participated in semi-skilled and skilled work activities within the economy. Some of the sectors that provided employment were the domestic sector, transport, industry, mining and commerce.

**Table 1: Occupational Structure for the Periods 1936 – 1951**

Occupation	1936	1946	1951
Other	1.9	13.8	14
Transport	4	5.5	5.8
Personal Service Domestic	11.5	9.4	8.6
Commerce	15.4	13.8	14,4
Mining	1.9	1	1
Industry	23.1	30	30
Agriculture	34.5	24.4	22,,9

**(Source: Adapted from Burrows 1947:13)**

The decline in agricultural activity and the constant employment opportunities presenting itself in the industrial sector can be noted from Table 1. Indians excelled in blue-collar work such as processing chemical, stone and clay, leather, printing, vehicle maintenance and boat building, furniture, textile industries, artisanal trades and operation of mechanical means of production, forming a stable source of labour for the burgeoning white capitalists. Their intelligence, dexterity and commitment to work were recognised by the capitalist class as a reservoir of skilled labour to support their capitalist needs; hence, increasing dependence on their labour. The plight of domestic workers, which comprised a large segment of the indentured women dominated this sector.

With some degree of economic stability through participation in the colonial economy, the once indentured had become more aware of the need to advance themselves. In a quest to advance themselves, emphasis was placed on the educational needs, social welfare, community amenities, places of worship and political and economic organisation. The economic organisation for this generation can be viewed from the sale of their labour in order to seek value for money. For instance, Indians joined labour movements such as the Natal Liquor and Catering, Furniture Workers Industrial Union, South African Typographical Union, Amalgamated Engineering Union and several workplace committees. Participation in organised labour activities and conscientisation on just labour practices made this generation more aware to sell their labour at a cost so that they could eke out a living free of poverty and economic insecurity. This period was characterised by a quest for social, economic and political advancement.

## **Political Conscientisation and Asserting Indian Presence in the Colony**

Although the indentured were regarded as docile compliers of the whims and fancies of white masters, there are instances when they challenged the atrocities meted out to them. Some were humiliatingly beaten in public to deter others from standing up to their masters. Many had their food rations cut as a punitive measure. Despite this indignity the indentured rose to the occasion when Gandhi arrived in the colony in 1893. Gandhi enjoined all Indians to non-violently protest against discriminatory legislations levelled against them. His non-violent approach managed to abolish many discriminatory laws, which lessened

the punitive measures taken to regulate movement and penetration of Indians in the colony. Within a year of Gandhi's arrival, the Natal Indian Congress was formed to champion the political life of Indians. The Natal Indian congress led to the formation of the Transvaal British Indian Association (TBIA – 1903), the Cape British Indian Council (CBIC – before 1917), and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC – 1919) (SAHO – 2021a). Upon Gandhi's departure from the colony in 1914, the Natal Indian Congress began to fragment, with various factions emerging to represent the Indian question. For example, the Colonial-born Indian Settlers Association amalgamated with the Natal Indian Congress to form the Natal Indian Association. The Natal Indian Association was dominated by the wealthy class, divided by religion and ethnic affiliation and known to take a soft approach against the colonialists for enacting harsh laws preventing their movement and settlement in the colony. The Natal Indian Association took less decisive measures to pressure the colonial government, resulting in matters concerning the deteriorating effects of political, economic and social marginalisation on the Indian community. It was characterised by letter writing, petitions, delegations and promises that never materialised to address the challenges affecting the Indian community.

Amidst the power wrangle and virtual collapse of the Natal Indian Association, the Indian question had a shot from a group of young intellectuals and radicals who enlightened themselves on the politics of the day and questioning the social order in the country and out of it. This grouping was called radical due to their militant position for change to improve the plight of Indians. The Indian working class were conscientised on the factory floor on their contribution to the political economy of their labour work to advance capitalist interest. This awareness mustered much support for actions to be taken in improving working conditions. They formed the Anti-Segregation Council and ousted the 'old guards' to provide new vitality to the Indian question (Kuper 1960:48-49), continuing in the name of the Natal Indian Congress. Despite this, the way in which this era of Indian politics was played out was on a two-pronged rod. Opposition to the *Pegging Act* in 1943, which forbade Indian penetration in the colony led to a disagreement by the Association and Congress on the approach to be used in challenging this law. The Organisation operated as a conservative group comprising elites with an approach founded on negotiations, conciliation and compromise, whilst the Congress was more radical comprising businessmen, intellectuals, professional men, and trade unionists from both the passenger and indentured classes (Kuper 1960:51). The congress perceived that



their political course can only be fulfilled if they formed alliances with other liberation movements. Female participation in the politics of Indian presence in the colony was hardly felt. It was only in 1956 that the congress opened its membership to women considered intellectuals and enlightened. The participation of women in some quarters was scorned at due to the patriarchal nature of the Indian family system.

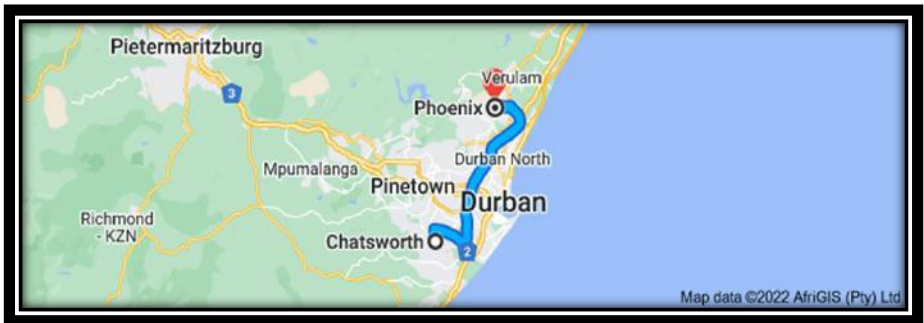
Whilst the political conundrum dominated this era, the devastation of the *Groups Areas Act* (RSA 1950) presented a major setback for the Indian community when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party came into power in 1948, which pursued racial segregation more aggressively.



**Figure 4: Distance between Durban Metropolitan Area with Chatsworth and Phoenix (Source: Google Maps)**

With the dawn of the era of apartheid, segregation was enforced by the forced removal of Indians located near and those owning properties on land designated for whites only. By the 1950s, Indians were well settled into family, work and community life in certain geographical areas.

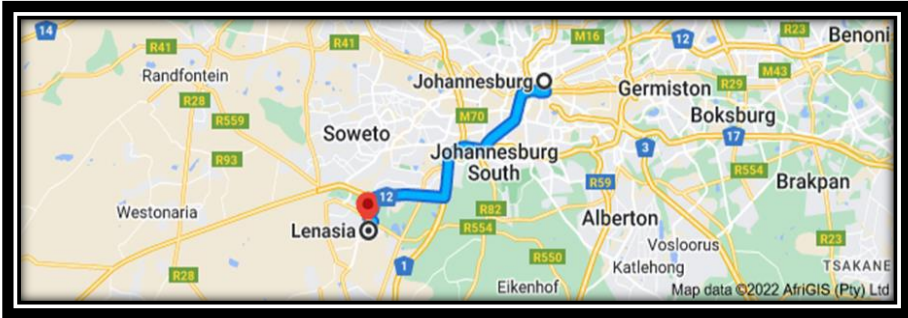
In Durban, the largest settlements of Indians in Riverside, Cato Manor, Mayville, Magazine Barracks, Block AK central Durban, the Bluff and Clairwood were uprooted and resettled in the township of Chatsworth. Chatsworth was the first racial settlement established in the city, in terms of apartheid's Group Areas Act. Communities were separated from temples, mosques, burial sites, and community facilities, all of which are known to contribute to community social organisation and associational life (Maharaj 1994:3).



**Figure 5: Two Predominantly Indian Areas, Chatsworth and Phoenix  
Approximately 50 km (Source AfriGIS (Pty) Ltd)**

In Johannesburg, *The Group Areas Act of 1950* resulted in the establishment of the area that was needed to house the Indian population forcibly removed from the south-western part of Johannesburg. In Johannesburg, Indians had been living in various suburbs in and around the area in varying numbers, for decades. In towns such as Turffontein little pockets forming small communities had taken root, while in others there were larger communities, such as in Fordsburg, Doornfontein, Vrededorp, Sophiatown, Newclare and other areas. During apartheid, these people were asked to move to racially segregated Indian areas provided for them like Lenasia, Laudium and Azaadville.

Lenasia, often called Lenz, is a suburb south of Soweto in the Gauteng province, South Africa, originally created to house Indians. It is part of the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. Lenasia is approximately 35 kilometres southwest of the Johannesburg Central Business District and 45 kilometres south of the Sandton Central Business District.



**Figure 6: Map Showing the Distance Between Johannesburg and Lenasia about 30 km (Source AfriGIS (Pty) Ltd)**

Just before the *Groups Areas Act* RSA 1950 (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: 1995), the 1949 Durban riots placed a damper on the future of Indians in the country. The riots were racially perpetrated between Black Africans and Indians, with over 142 people being killed. Among them were 87 Africans, 50 Indians, one white and four unclassified people. A further 1 087 persons were injured – 541 Africans, 503 Indians, 32 whites and 11 Coloureds. Buildings that were completely destroyed in the riots included 247 houses, 58 shops and one factory, while other properties that were damaged numbered 1 000 houses, over 600 shops and two factories (SAHO 2022b).

The apartheid regime's notorious *Group Areas Act* was first implemented, not surprisingly, in the Natal Colony, causing great trauma of being uprooted, displaced and resettled into monolithic and socially sterile public housing estates in different parts of South Africa's towns and cities (Khan 2013:153). According to the South African Institute for Race Relations Survey in 1981, some 23 227 families' social, economic and political assets were uprooted, displaced and resettled. However, those of the indentured classes experienced the greatest trauma of being uprooted, displaced and resettled in

different parts of South African towns and cities (SAIRR Survey 1981:220). Indian families were the greatest victims of forced removals in Natal. In Durban, the largest settlements of Indians in Riverside, Cato Manor, Mayville, Magazine Barracks, Block AK Central Durban, the Bluff and Clairwood were uprooted and resettled in the township of Chatsworth. The wealthy bought land in segregated racial suburbs and built their own homes, amenities or rented apartments. This resulted in a class divide within the community, with the majority of the working-class Indians being confined to a township labour reserve.

## **Post Relocation and Resettlement**

Relocation to townships, renting apartments and owning property came with its own challenges. Those confined to township life had many socio-economic and political challenges to surmount. Township life meant physical hardship such as transport costs, increased travel time and a breakdown in social networks, community organisation and lack of social cohesiveness. The biggest impact was the size of the households to accommodate large families, the aged and the disabled. Many were council renting housing schemes and due to unemployment, many fell arrears in their rental. The cost of energy and water also extended the household budget. Victims of relocation were once again challenged to fulfil their socio-economic needs. Amenities such as places of worship, community halls, creches, preschools and vernacular venues were absent, presenting a threat to social, cultural and communal life. It is in this context that the third generation of Indians were raised.

In 1961, Indians became a permanent part of the South African population administered by a Department of Indian Affairs managed by a white minister. This was met with mixed reactions and the South African Indian Congress opposed the formation of the department as it meant to pursue segregation and control. The South African Indian Organisation, on the other hand, supported a collaborative relationship with the Nationalist government. Hence both the South African Indian Council and Congress were divided on the basis of participation and collaboration and resistance. Notwithstanding opposition to the co-option of Indians into the apartheid structure, further attempts were made by the government to ensure this. This time round it was through government-appointed representatives (SAHO Online 1 2022c). Those who served, collaborated with the government for certain privileges,

concessions and rewards for themselves and the community. As far as the representatives making headway in addressing the challenges faced by Indians, not much was achieved for the ordinary person. The South African Indian Organisation virtually witnessed no significant improvement on the plight of majority of the Indians. In response, the Natal Indian Congress was revived in 1971 to challenge participation in elections that do not support universal franchise and a unitary state. The revival of the Natal Indian Congress was at the expense of many of its leaders being incarcerated, banned, going into exile and under house arrests. Given the grassroots support within the working classes, the Natal Indian Congress continued to enjoy significant support to raise issues concerning the community and broader socio-political and economic issues which it attempted to address.

The power of ordinary people played out heavily against the Nationalist government in its attempts to set up a tricameral parliament with three different houses for whites, Coloureds and Indians. The South African Indian Council agreed to participate through elections so that the Indian House of Parliament is represented. This resulted in a political furore, with the mass mobilisation of Indians taking place in townships, towns, suburbs and cities. A well-organised political conscientisation process spread throughout these spaces. A national campaign was undertaken not to vote in the Tricameral elections. To provide a glimpse of the campaign, opposition to the Tricameral government, which sought to co-opt the Indian vote, was accorded strong opposition within the community. Fatima Meer, a staunch anti-apartheid activist, had the following to say at the NIC branch in Ladysmith on 1 August 1984:

We don't want this constitution ... our reasons for not wanting it in terms of two categories. We don't want it for ideological reasons, and we don't want it for practical reasons. Ideologically we do not want this constitution, because it is a constitution which is straight-jacketed within the framework of apartheid. It is a racist constitution. We are being asked to vote as a race, as Indians; we are being asked to vote for Indians and then we are asked to sit in an Indian house and talk about Indian things.

Meer also strongly articulated her thoughts on race relations defining coloured, Indian and African as blacks.

We are South Africans, we are not simply Indians, we are not simply Coloureds; we are also a black people, part and parcel of the disenfranchised oppressed black majority of this country.

NICs position on the Tricameral Government brought the community closer to the mass democratic and liberation movement that was forming within the country. According to Bhana and Pachia (1984), some 297 040 Indians out of a population of 350 000 eligible voters registered to vote in the SAIC elections. However, on the day of the election, only 10,5% of the registered voters cast their ballot. They observed that in the Indian suburb of Fordsburg, Johannesburg, the percentage poll was 1,75%. Despite this humiliating turnout, the Minister of Internal Affairs declared that the government would look upon the SAIC 'as the only representative body that exists today on a national level that would serve the interests of community' (Bhana & Pachia 1984). In 1982, Amichand Rajbansi became the Chairperson of the South African Indian Council in the Tricameral Party.

The success of the anti-SAIC needs to be attributed to the many youth in the townships and suburbs who offered political conscientisation by door knocking in different Black localities. Many were arrested by the state security branch and humiliated. University students mobilised themselves in neighbourhoods and conscientised their communities on the political atrocities of the apartheid government and the need to look at the global political picture of the political happenings in the country. With the advent of television in this period, the state-controlled audio-visual media often misrepresented the atrocities meted out to shack dwellers and the homeless in cities and towns. The *Fiat Lux*, an official state-owned magazine, provided insights into resources invested for Indian community upliftment.

Notwithstanding the political contestations in Indian politics, the SAIC endorsed development plans based on the notorious *Group Areas Act* (1950). Newlands to the northwest of the city and Phoenix was zoned for Indian residential areas. Phoenix was developed in 1985, with 22 050 housing units made up entirely, or in part, of single detached houses, semi-detached houses, duplex units and blocks of flats of between one and three storeys, mainly for sub-economic and lower-income residents (Bailey 1987:153-159). Phoenix, was home for Mahatma Gandhi where for decades black Africans lived in harmony. Some Indians have rented out parts of their farms for African housing and provided much-needed services to the area. The ravishes of the violence

claimed the lives of 52 people. It was concluded that the violence was planned, premeditated, and involved deep collusion between state, African landlords and poverty-stricken African tenants (Hughes 1987:333). The Indo-African riot killed 52 people (*New York Times* 1985), and homes and shops were looted and set alight. Gandhi's home and a school that bore his wife's name were also destroyed. Almost 1 500 families were displaced and housed in the new Phoenix township (Moodley 2020).

More recently, on 15 July 2021, there was a nationwide riot resulting in 354 deaths. In Phoenix alone, 36 people were killed, including 33 black Africans. When compared to national death tolls, the Phoenix area constitutes one in ten deaths (*Africa News* 2021; Nonyukela 2021). This mayhem, which has been dubbed as the 'Phoenix Massacre the Indian Minister of External Affairs' raised the issue of safety of people of Indian origin with the South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, who provided an assurance that the government would try and bring order at its very best (Wikipedia 2021).

## **The Born-Free Generation**

In the 1980s, apartheid rule became ungovernable, due to mass rent, service delivery and consumer boycotts. There were also boycotts of products manufactured by companies with a poor track of labour relations. On 20 August 1983, the United Democratic Front was formed in Cape Town after a meeting with 565 delegates (SAHO Online 2022d). The UDF functioned as an umbrella organisation with a broad range of affiliates, including over 300 youth organisations, more than 80 civic associations and nearly 50 student organisations. Trade unions and women's organisations also constituted part of the UDF. This was a new liberation organisation which had a more militant cultural emerging, which led to the conglomeration of many civic, youth, student, worker, women, and faith-based organisations and other organisations. In Natal, the relationship between Inkatha and the UDF was politically strained, resulting in thousands of people being killed through ongoing violence between the two organisations. The apartheid state responded violently by suppressing the general unrest in the country, resulting in arresting large numbers of people under its security legislations. Most leaders of the UDF were arrested, restricted and in some instances murdered between 1984 to 1987. Despite this repression, the UDF had almost 2,5 million registered members. In a bid to curb the political

violence, the apartheid state began conscripting young white males into the military, which met with objections from the End Conscription campaigners. Within the Indian community, volunteers were solicited for paramilitary training.

This period was a time when the third generation of Indians were growing up amidst political turmoil. Whilst the resistance politics was gaining ground in the Indian community, the collaborative Tricameral Government began to win favours for the Indian community. New, low-income housing estates, upgraded schools, teaching resources, community amenities, infrastructure, markets and many other facilities were solicited from the state. Although no study has been undertaken on the extent of favours won for the Indian community by illegitimate political representation, support for the SAIC was a precondition to qualify for these basic human resources, according to some observers.

The first multiparty agreement on the desirability of a negotiated settlement was the 1991 National Peace Accord, consolidated later that year by the establishment of the multiparty Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). This period was characterised by negotiations for a democratic government. It was also a battleground for different political formations to represent citizens' views in the country as talks continued on the transition to democracy and mechanisms to achieve this. New political parties emerged to participate in the first democratic elections. As far as the Indian community is concerned, the Minority Front led by Amichand Rajbansi was formed in 1993, and in the first democratic elections received 13 333 votes, with no representation in the National Assembly (Wikipedia 2022). Many Indian political stalwarts engaged in liberation politics secured lucrative ministerial posts at different levels of government. This led to a major brain drain in the community, with little leadership to champion the socio-political and economic interests of the Indian community. Seven Indians were elected to serve in Nelson Mandela's cabinet, together with three deputy ministers (Pradhan 2009:134). In 1994, 42 Indians were appointed in different high-ranking political positions and portfolios, whilst a significant number also held key political positions at different levels of government.

As mentioned earlier, before the first democratic elections, there were internecine political violence in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Many in the rural area were afflicted by this violence and they migrated closer to suburbs and towns, squatting on valuable land. Many of these informal settlements were



erected adjacent to designated Indian suburbs. In Cato Manor, houses built for Indians were invaded by those fleeing from poverty and political violence (Gigaba & Maharaj 1995). The burgeoning informal settlements led to a decline in property values, which the Indian community had strived towards over three generations. The housing crisis amongst the Indians was not ameliorated, resulting in many taking up housing opportunities in the government-sponsored Reconstruction and Development Programme, which predominantly comprise poor black Africans and Indians. The pace of housing development has not been up to speed since democracy, whilst many rented outbuildings, flats and backyard shacks in established residential suburbs. Amongst wealthier Indians, relocation to gated communities has been a trend, given the current surge in crime rates.

The context outlined in this section provides insight into the background around which the current generation is growing up. Dubbed ‘born-frees’, this generation is characterised by wide gaps in wealth and social advantage. Amongst the more affluent, good education, stable family life and access to economic resources have advantaged them, compared to their counterparts. Many have migrated abroad and across provinces to eke out a better quality of living. Amongst the disadvantaged, much is needed to assist them to advance them in the socio-economic spheres of life. A new generation amongst the disadvantaged will grow up in the Reconstruction and Development suburbs around the cities and provinces that are predominantly black African.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided insight into the evolution of Indians since their arrival in the country since colonial times. The socio-economic and political life of the indentured Indians was characterised by exploitation, social engineering and marginalisation. Despite these impediments, the community has advanced itself in the different spheres of life simultaneously through collusion and resistance. A bifurcated political approach won favours for the development of the community and at the same time provided a political voice against the system of colonialism and apartheid. Organised political voice against an unjust system contributed to a new heritage of pride for the sacrifices made by their forbears. It is at the altar of resilience brought upon by exploitation, abuse and dehumanising experiences that they developed a sense of hope in a

democratic society.

There are winners and losers in the history of Indians and there are those that are still on the margins of poverty, due to the impact of vicious socio-economic and political policies of the past which continues to leave a trail of fractured families and kinship ties and a sense of community. Since the time of their forebears, the Indian community faced a variety of socio-political shocks in its evolution. The scars of these shocks and imbalances in its evolution have deep roots and segments of its community have not recovered from the past. Remnants of the baggage of the past continue to remind them of their forbears. In the democratic society, Indians enjoy all liberties as citizens. Despite these, there are insecurities about the social stability of the country, due to occasional race-related violence. This insecurity has been transferred to the present generation of Indians, although they enjoy full citizenship and liberties. The present generation may be classed as the 'cyber-aged' generation, who are technologically savvy and equipped to meet challenges as they are growing up in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whilst this may be so, many descendants in this generation are at risk, as the country has not developed as anticipated for them to experience the rewards of the investments made by their ancestors in this alien land. Although the Indian community in South Africa has succeeded, progressed and contributed to every sector of South African life since the 1860s, for many descendants, the Indian enquiry will not be answered until the generations to come are nurtured to overcome the intergenerational trans-mission of their historical disadvantage.

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# Chapter 2

## ***‘Master Coolie’ Conditions in India, Unjust Justice and Abuses of Indenture in South Africa***

**Jaisingh Surujbullee Singh**

### **Abstract**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a combination of factors coerced the indigenous peasantry in India to migrate to the mainly British tropical colonies across the world, with the hidden hope of a better life. They decided to forsake their Janmabhumi (Motherland) and obtain ‘Girmit identity’ (Paranjape 2009), becoming subjected to a new life full of formalism and officialdom. The Indus Valley World Civilisation dates back to 3500 B.C. ‘Four influences predominated the thousands of years of intellectualism and physical fusions that have resulted in the creation of the Indian Nation viz. Dravidian, Aryan, Islamic and British.’ (Meer 1980:1). Superstitious beliefs from Medieval times became akin to indigenous religious traditions and practices. However, India conceded to the rise of Indentured labour and on 7 August 1860, the Legislative Council of India gave consent for the emigration of labourers to the colony of the then Natal in a system that had become popularly known as ‘Indenture’ (Du Bois 2012). By that stage, indentured workers were already going to places like Mauritius, Trinidad and British Guiana. The traditional methodology of conventional research, which includes intense and extensive reading, analysing various accomplished accredited works and thereafter compiling this narrative was utilised by the author.

**Keywords:** Coolie, Girmit, Indenture, Kala Pani, Slaves

## **1 Introduction**

This paper entitled ‘Master Coolie’ Conditions in India, Unjust Justice and Abuses of the Indentured in South Africa is a tribute the Legend of the Indentured Labourer – our Forebears. The aim of this study is to chronicle the conditions in India that hastened migration of the rural community to the different colonies of the British Empire. The reason for this traditional methodology approach in writing up this paper is to highlight the unjust justice and abuses that the Indian indentured labourers suffered at the brutal hands of the colonial planters. Conditions in India certainly hastened migration. The East India Company was established during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and was granted permission to trade in India by Emperor Jahangir. By the first century of its presence in India, the Company had its armies in India, as people like Robert Clive were more interested in establishing a new colony and less in trade. At this point in time, India had experienced the role of inefficient, greedy kings, endless inter-kingdom wars and next the effects of colonisation and subjugation. If the old order was ruthless, then the new masters would prove to be even more ruthless (Bowen 2003).

## **2 Factors that Hastened Emigration**

There are many factors that hastened emigration to unknown and distant British Colonies. They travelled over the ‘Kala Pani’ (Dark Waters) and ‘Pagla Samoondar’ (Mad Sea).

### **2.1 The Industrial Revolution and its Impact on a Conquered India**

The Industrial Revolution in England transformed the economy of Britain and had devastating effects on a conquered India, particularly the textile weavers, but which found a ready market for the British textile industry. Textiles produced in India became very expensive, as the weavers had to buy raw cotton at high prices and their textiles were highly taxed. ‘Prior to this, India had the world’s largest textile industry’ (Gupta 2008:xiv), but now thousands of ruined weavers migrated to the cities to live in slums and work as daily wage labourers, as no-one in the country – the Nawabs, Rajahs, the Company, or the wealthy – gave any thought to the peasantry of the rural villages or the weavers dying in the hellish slums of the cities.

The system of traditional land tenures, Zamindari, and land revenue were slowly but surely stifled, resulting in the displacement of thousands of agricultural workers and peasant small farmers facing increasing debts. Deeply religious and sentimental, the Indian would do anything to fend for his family, even cross the Kala Pani<sup>1</sup> to earn an honest living, thus giving rise to the Emigrant Coolie, although he did not have a migratory mindset.

## **2.2 Inefficient and Greedy Rajahs (Kings)**

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, India experienced the impact of inefficient and greedy kings and endless inter-kingdom wars. There was no peace, no rule of law, and very little economic prosperity.

From early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British, initially much earlier through the East India Company, began conquering a large part of India and would eventually build the ‘biggest colony of the British Empire’ (Marshall 1998). India felt the negative effects of colonisation and subjugation.

## **2.3 Agricultural Restrictions**

The growth of food was discouraged and the production of indigo, tea and opium were encouraged and exported to China, earning a great deal of revenue for the British, while Indians suffered, not being able to produce food.

## **2.4 Major Famines**

Famines were a regular phenomenon. There were twelve major ones and several minor famines between 1770 and 1850. All surplus food was exported by the Company and during such natural disasters there was no reserve supply, resulting in starvation and disease. Floods further aggravated the situation.

## **2.5 Lagaan and Confiscation of Properties**

In spite of the abject poverty of the bulk of the peasantry, the Company

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<sup>1</sup> Kala Pani (Black Water): When used in the diaspora, *Kala Pani* refers to the large-scale migration out of India in the 1830s when hundreds of thousands of Indians left the subcontinent to work in the sugar colonies as indentured labourers, or ‘bound coolies’.

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ruthlessly subjected them to heavy taxes: *Lagaan*<sup>2</sup>. The Company usurped the property of tax defaulters, properties of religious institutions like the temples of the Hindus and mosques of the Muslims were also confiscated in the effort to destroy their respective religions.

Properties were looted, allegedly on the grounds of improper titles. For centuries, the Rajahs had given their subjects traditional rights to live in their kingdoms, but no legal procedures were followed for such rights and no legal documents were available to claim legal rights over these properties. Between 1852 and 1857, over 20 000 estates were confiscated and gradually the Company was displacing the old Indian aristocracy. Another dirty trick played by the British was to get Hindus and Muslims serving in the army to bite the cartridges of the new rifles as the paper covering had to be bitten off before loading, and which were greased with fat from cows and pigs: this was taboo to both groups, respectively.

Christian missionaries were allowed to preach to the soldiers in the army, openly criticising (indigenous) religions and offering to convert them (Gupta 2008:xvii).

Full of revulsion, many soldiers deserted the army and roamed the country without employment.

## **2.6 The Indian Mutiny**

In 1857, the Native Bengal Army revolted against the Company: The Indian Mutiny, and the spirit of nationalism spread to many areas. When the mutiny was finally suppressed in 1858 and the 'Fires of the revolt' were finally quenched, India woke up to discover that 'she had a queen' (Gupta 2008:10) in Victoria, and was 'officially the Jewel in the Crown' (Gupta 2008:10).

Control of India now passed from the English East India Company to the British Imperial Government. This followed mass executions, confiscation of properties and thousands being imprisoned without trial, compelling many Indians to flee their homeland with the grim truth that 'nothing could be worse than the situation at home' (Gupta 2008:10). The world now saw the reality of

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<sup>2</sup> *Lagaan* – Tribute, as in the payment to a feudal lord of a portion of a serf's harvest.

British Imperialism in India: clearly it was not a benevolent or moral rule at all.

## **2.7 The Zondi Zulu Clan Rebellion**

Locally, in South Africa, there was a war against British imperialism (1879) in which the Zulu were subdued, and a short uprising by the dissident Zondi Zulu clan, against the imposition of a one pound tax promulgated by the Natal authorities in 1905 to push more Africans into wage labour. Led by the Zondi Chief, they were routed by the Natal army in 1906 and like in India, the leaders, Bambatha and Dinizulu were soon subdued. ‘Bambatha was beheaded and his head was displayed as a trophy as an ominous warning to other would be rebels’ (South African History Online 2021a).

## **2.8 Abolition of Slavery**

In 1833, slavery was abolished in the British colonies, giving rise to a labour crisis. At this time, sugar dictated a large share of the world’s economy. J.R. Saunders stated in the *Natal Mercury*, ‘For our sugar growing prospects, the Indians are indispensable.’ On 7 August 1860, the authorities in India gave consent for the emigration of labourers to the colony of the then Natal.

## **2.9 Role of Arkatis (Touts): First Contact, Commission, Enticements and Role of Recruiter**

Williams Collins, the Postmaster-General of Natal, was appointed as the Coolie Immigration Agent and he was sent to India to make preliminary arrangements for immigrants to come to Natal. He appointed emigrant agents in Calcutta and Madras to represent the colony of Natal. India appointed a protector of emigrants who was tasked with the responsibility and control of all indentured emigration. Subagents were appointed as assistants who appointed recruiters. These recruiters appointed unlicensed touts called Arkatis to canvas would-be-emigrants. Whilst there were reasons to emigrate, the Arkatis played a crucial role in the system. The touts earned commissions for each person they recruited. The Arkatis, in order, to establish contacts, frequented markets, stations, bazaars, melas, etc. The would-be emigrants had to be males aged 35 years and females aged 30 years to qualify for selection. Once the contact was established,

the Arkatis handed his find to the recruiter, who in turn took them to the depot. The chief depot in Calcutta was near the Hoogly River, one of the mouths of the sacred and mighty Ganges River. The West India depot was situated in Garden Reach on the south bank of the same river. Those in South India were sent to Madras.

The Arkatis established the first contact with the would-be emigrants by using their local knowledge to determine:

- who was in desperate need of financial assistance;
- who was in debt;
- who owed lagaan (tax);
- who had experienced disgrace in family or community;
- who had fallen foul of the law;
- who was credulous enough to take for granted the false promises made by the touts;
- widows seeking emancipation;
- who was unable to afford a dowry;
- who was unable to pay back money advanced to them;
- who was promised of greater earnings and opportunities;
- the threats made to the doubters and the reluctant;
- the child labourer: Sanichari: 49 660; and
- the adventure seekers: Mehi Sahu Mahilall 29 953.

## **2.10 Enticements By Arkatis**

### **2.10.1 Natal (South Africa)**

The streets are lined with gold – chili trees bore gold ... land of the *devas* (Gods) (De Verteuil 1989:1).

### **2.10.2 Trinidad**

Hugh mounds – veritable mountains of sugar – simply to sift the sugar’ for which they will be well paid ‘and carry a broad canvas belt to store the gold he would earn at the rate of one shilling a day (De Verteuil 1989).

### **2.10.3 Mauritius**

Stoop to collect gold under rocks (De Verteuil 1989:1).

De Verteuil (1989:1) concludes that the prospect of high wages, freedom from starvation and war, from possible reprisal by the British or the money lender, the recruiters promises of easy money, and social upliftment in a foreign land where money was no problem, enticed many an emigrant.

## **3 Promises made to Emigrants by the Colonialists**

Some promises made to the Indentured Labourers:

- Free passage to the then Colony of Natal and return to India after indenture: Optional;
- Medical attention to be provided to them in the depots, ships and place of indenture;
- Free accommodation and food rations;
- Wages were 10 shillings per month rising by one shilling per month after every year;
- Ten-year indentured period (three years at first and later increased to five years);
- They would work six days per week; and
- They were allowed half an hour for breakfast and one hour for lunch every day.

## **4 Arrival: Life in the Depots**

On arrival, the new recruit had to take a bath, was issued with new clothes, submit to a medical inspection to establish that they were fit to handle farming implements and fit for a three-month voyage on a ship. According to Hindu etiquette, a lady must not talk to a stranger without a medium<sup>3</sup>, nor must they be

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<sup>3</sup> Sri Ramacharitamansa, the Ramayana of Goswami Tulsidas (1986:619): According to Hindu etiquette, a lady must not talk to a male stranger without a medium.

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subjected to a medical inspection. This was against the grain of customary laws in India. There were stringent measures to segregate single men and women.

The immigrants were then placed in temporary barracks (wooden lazarettes) and tents on the Bluff as the wood and iron barracks were not ready. The walls were high to prevent anyone from escaping. Their quarters were cramped and congested and they were exposed to diseases in the unhealthy living conditions. They remained in these barracks for almost three months before being allocated to the owners of the different estates.

## **5 The Estates**

Labourers were housed in estates belonging to the planters. The immigrants had to construct huts made of dried cane and mealie stalks put together, wattle and daub thatched roofs and they were expected to make improvements in their own time. Huts were also made of tin packing cases or grass – full of holes allowing wind and rain to penetrate. The workers were advanced ten pounds towards the cost of these dwellings and which they had to repay during their term of indenture to the planters. Labourers were also housed in ‘Coolie Lines’ or rows of corrugated iron buildings divided into tiny rooms by wooden partitions. No sanitation or bathing facilities were provided; rooms were too small and congested; there were no windows for ventilation; no privacy as the partitions were lower than the ceilings; floors were lower than the outside surface and as a result water flowed inside and caused dampness. Fires were lit on the floor for cooking and there was danger of a fire breaking out during cooking. Poisonous fumes from the fire led to several deaths.

The Protector said in a report:

*I do not know of any estate on which the horse stable is not better than the Coolie huts (De Verteuil 1989).*

Similar housing conditions also prevailed in Trinidad, prompting author Anthony de Verteuil, in his study of Eight East Indian Immigrants to state,

*At mealtimes the spicy smell of Indian cooking could tempt the appetites, while on the other hand the wind sometimes brought the odour of faeces from the nearby fields (De Verteuil 1989).*

## **6 The Workload and Preparation of Meals**

The labourers were awakened by the Sirdar at around 3:00 am on larger plantations. They prepared breakfast and lunch and walked to work in the fields, which could be up to four miles away, and then walked back to the barracks late in the evening and prepared the evening meal when they were absolutely fatigued. The working hours were from dawn to dusk, six days a week. Many employers compelled the labourers to work on Sundays and during full moon in the harvesting period.

## **7 Non-Payment of Wages, Withholding Ration**

There was the practice of non-payment of wages and withholding food rations in contravention of their contracts. Labourers were not allowed to leave within a radius of one mile from the estates without the written permission of the employer. In the then Province of Natal they paid one shilling for permission. Trinidad attempted to lay down regulations forbidding Indian immigrants from leaving estate without the permission of the planters. However, the Imperial Government at once took alarm at such restrictions of the labourers personal freedom and disallowed what the anti-slavery group had dubbed 'the new slave code of Trinidad' (Laurence1986:23).

In Trinidad, absence from work without the planter's permission was a criminal offence carrying penalties of a fine or imprisonment,<sup>13</sup> and if they were found more than two miles away from their estate on weekdays without a pass, they were liable for arrest without a warrant, except that each immigrant came to be entitled to 'two seven-day passes each year' (Laurence1986:25).

## **8 Reynolds Bros**

The Reynolds brothers owned acres upon acres of sugar plantations in the Umzinto area.

*The problems at Reynolds were well known to the authorities and came under the purview of the Wragg Commission in the mid-1880s (Desai & Vahed 2010:132).*

Charlie Reynolds, known as the butcher of Umzinto, supervised Indians at Umzinto Estate of Reynolds Brothers. Protector Louis Mason visited the Es-

tate on 13 July 1886. He told the Wragg Commission:

*I had the Indians mustered as usual. To the end that my conversation with them might be perfectly free and that the men might be relieved from any influence to the presence of their superiors might have, I desired Mr Reynolds and his overseers and Sidar to withdraw. He declined to do so and the Indians being asked questions in their presence did not seem inclined to speak freely on even minor matters.* (Desai & Vahed 2010).

Charlie Reynolds defended his actions on the grounds that Mason had an ‘obnoxious’ effect on Indians. I have more men punished within a month after one of those obnoxious visits of the Protector than for six months when he has not made a visit. Commissioners were impressed with the knowledge which Mr Reynolds possessed concerning the habits of the Indian labourers and with the sympathy which appeared to guide his arrangements for their comfort and welfare (Desai & Vahed 2010).

As far as the Commission was concerned, the Legislature did not intend to place in the hands of the Protector a power which could not but annoy employers, would inevitably lower them in the eyes of his servants, and would lead to insubordination and the concocting of many false complaints. As Warhurst observed, the Protector had been firmly put in his place while Reynolds received continued unsolicited testimonials (Desai & Vahed 2010).

Charles Reynolds continued to abuse his workers, aware that he had a powerful ally in the form of the state. Despite reports of unnatural deaths through suicides, burns and assault by overseers, the Wragg Commission concluded with Reynolds Bros that the Protector’s actions resulted in a loss of respect and consequent insubordination against the employers. The Commission came to this conclusion, even though visits to the estate on 22 and 24 June 1885 recorded horrendous conditions. The water was infested with human excrement, venereal disease was rampant, and assault common. There was no findings against Reynolds Bros and maltreatment continued unabated (Desai & Vahed 2010).

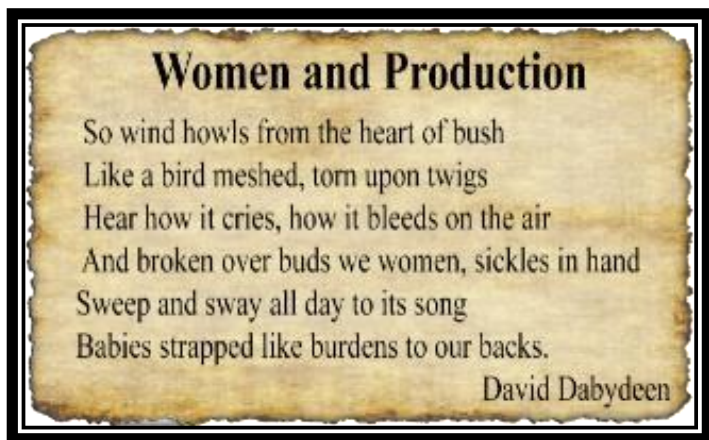
*Charlie Reynolds acted with impunity, emboldened by the knowledge that he could escape flagrant breaches of the system. Durban Magi-*

*strate Herbert Miller assisted Mason in an inquiry in November 1900 ... despite many complaints the Commissioners concluded that there was no evidence of systematic abuse and that most workers appeared to be quite content and satisfied with their work and treatment (Desai & Vahed 2010).*

## **9 Abuse of Women**

Women were treated particularly harshly. Protector Polkinghorne presented evidence showing that those with suckling children were in the fields for eleven hours. When he raised this with a white overseer, he was told that Indians had never been 'so well treated as at present, and if they were to be treated better he would have to leave' (Desai & Vahed 2010:139). Overworking women was a long-standing practice. In 1879, Dr L.P. Booth stated the deleterious effect of women working long hours in the cane fields hoeing and weeding,

*In the crowd of women are always some in the earlier stages of pregnancy, some suckling babies, and many who have left a number of little children behind them in their huts, so that not only is the health of these women subjected to risks, which need not be particularised at a time when they required all care and consideration but the children are left to injure themselves ... and to scramble up to adult life as best as they may (Desai & Vahed 2010:13).*





Protector Polkinghorne described the impact of physical work on women workers,

*With cane cutting, the work is of the dirtiest nature as the canes are usually burnt and consequently the clothing and skin of the Indian becomes covered with the burnt trash, and consequently they arrive back in a filthy condition. It can easily be imagined what is the state of women with children who arrive back late in this condition when water has to be fetched, food cooked and children attended to after the toil of the day ... Seeing that they have to turn out at dawn and they also had to get what fuel they can (Desai & Vahed 2010).*

They engaged on Sundays to gather fuel for the week, but in some barracks at least firewood was very difficult to procure and the Indians therefore had to depend on dried cane chiefly, which burns out very quickly. The Commission heard that the women were forced to work until the seventh month of their pregnancy. In some cases, because women were denied rations when they stopped working, in breach of their contract, they worked until the ninth month, gave birth and immediately returned to employment.

Vellay Munami (94 999), ill and pregnant, was forced to exacting task work. She was just 19 years old when she was placed at Reynolds Bros in September 1902. The Protector noticed during one of his visits that she was pregnant and ill and instructed the manager to send her to hospital. However, she was made to work the whole of the following day before receiving medical attention, and lost her baby through a miscarriage. As soon as Vellay returned to Esperanza, she was put back to work in the fields, despite Dr Rouillard prescribing a minimum of 21 days' rest. The excuse of the manager, Tracey, was that Vellay did not have a 'note' from the hospital to be put off work. Polkinghorne replied that common humanity should have suggested this to the manager.

This was not an isolated incident. Reynolds Bros flouted section 17 of *Law 25 of 1891*, which required of women to do light fieldwork and not be made to carry heavy loads of sugar cane. Dr Rouillard reported to the Protector in August 1904 that Chinnamati was suffering from spinal disease as a result of persistent exposure to poor sanitary conditions. Despite her debilitating disease, she was 'assaulted by a Sirdar when she stated that she was unable to work when she was already suffering from the present disease' (Desai & Vahed 2010).

Reynolds Bros provided a meagre diet. Essential items such as dhal, salt and ghee were often not supplied for half the year. The Protector reported in 1904 that the Company was not supplying dhal, which constituted half the monthly protein content of the diet and when food was provided, the quality was often so poor that workers took ill. Dr Conran, medical officer for part of 1905, certified that a sample of food he tested was bound to produce illness. Dysentery, enteritis and other diarrhoeal diseases resulting from polluted water, poor diet and lack of adequate shelter ranked as causes of death on the estate. Men who were ill but could stay upright were forced into the female gang where they received half pay.

Dr. Hill reported that housing at Umzinto was ‘appalling’ and that the barracks failed to meet rudimentary standards. Many were condemned as unfit for human habitation. Overwork, malnourishment and squalid living conditions contributed to the high death rate. McLaren, an employee at the estate hospital, told the Commission that Reynolds Bros’ workers were,

usually weak individuals. You would make no mistake in picking out Messrs Reynolds Indians in the hospital as they are a needy looking lot. Despite marshalling evidence of maltreatment from many sources, Polkinghorne was concerned that little would be done because Reynolds Bros’ reach was long. He felt that the case, notwithstanding the evidence, was slipping away (Desai & Vahed 2010).

## **10 Unjust Justice**

Polkinghorne was distraught and wrote to the colonial secretary on 20 September 1906,

*To me it is the shame and injustice of it all, that such a state of affairs should be allowed to continue and that as a statutory officer I should be compelled to allot Indians to the Company under the circumstances .... Subsequent to the inquiry, reports of ill-treatment persisted (Desai & Vahed 2010:13).*

C.W. Petchell, an engineer with the Company (Reynolds Bros) conceded that some employees worked from 3:00 am until 04:00 pm the following afternoon, then returned for night shift. Extra men took the place of

men as they dropped out. Another supervisor, F. Mellon testified that in the mill, workers could start as early as 02:00 am and finish around 07:00 pm. They were not provided with food nor allowed to eat while crushing cane in the boiler (Desai & Vahed 2010:13).

E.B. Gaultier, head sugar boiler at Old Esperanza Mill, told the commission (Polkingshorne) that the same 70 men worked the morning and night shifts. He recounted a conversation with the employee who told him that he worked for Reynolds Bros. In the time of Ashton (former manager), the boys used to hang themselves in the cane (Desai & Vahed 2010:13).

## **10.1 Henry Shire**

*On 17 January 1862 ... 22 workers walked off Henry Shires melkhout kraal estate in Umhlanga ... Workers complained of irregular payment of wages, flogging from Shire and Sirdar Ramsamy, the poor quality of rations and long working hours. Sirdar Ramsamy did not let Shire down. Faced with a biased magistrate in Verulam and an interpreter who did not fully understand their language .... The workers left the estate en masse and turned up at the magistrates office in Durban 'in hope that the magistrate of this court, where there is a properly qualified interpreter – could and would grant redress for their grievances. (Desai & Vahed 2010:13).*

Instead, they were imprisoned for 14 days for leaving the estate without Shire's permission, an additional 14 days when they refused to return to work, and a further seven days when they hired an attorney to petition the Governor.

## **10.2 The Shire Commission**

The authorities eventually relented and constituted the Shire Commission. A litany of abuse was laid at the door of the Commission. The Commission reported on 10 April 1862 that Shire extended the workday, deducted wages unlawfully, placed workers on half diet, and used Africans to administer beatings. The Commission, however, decided to take a 'favourable view' and not punish Shire, because he had 'great difficulty in obtaining work from his coolies'. This made him 'exceedingly irritated' and accounted for his actions. The Commission was emphatic, however, that the authorities should not accede

to workers request to be transferred, as they were entitled by law, as this would set a 'bad precedent'. The findings were a clear signal to employers that they could act with impunity, and for the workers it became clear that they could not rely on the law.

## **11 Mahatma Gandhi's Movement**

The Shire report may have muted collective protest, but the spirit of resistance had been raised. Mohandas (later Mahatma) K Gandhi's Passive Resistance Movement from 1906 onwards was strongly supported by Migrant Indentured Labourers who were not exposed to make such sacrifices in their rural India. The response of this labouring class was simply remarkable. Gandhi was in South Africa from 1893 to 1914, and it was here that he mastered his political resistance strategies.

## **12 The Coolie Commission**

The Coolie Commission of 1872, however, subsequently prohibited the practice of flogging. That did not mean an end to human rights abuses by the plantation masters and their boss boys, who included Indian Sirdars. An unrepentant Thomas Reynolds said, 'that to do away with flogging was to show ignorance in how white people needed to deal with native races'. (<https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/opinion/feature-justice-for-indentured-indians-remains-elusive-38004489>)

## **13 1906 Reynolds Commission**

Two of the three commissioners accepted the veracity of Polkinghorne's evidence. The Commission, however, was loathe to take action against Reynolds Bros., despite the mass of evidence marshalled by Polkinghorne against the company. The colonial secretary advised Polkinghorne on 17 August 1907 that he did 'not consider it necessary to interfere with the management as long as the present improvement is maintained'.

## **14 Poverty in India**

Premchand, a novelist from India, in his novel of Peasant India, titled *Godan*,

gives an on-the-spot account of what enticed the poorest of the poorest to consider emigration. In the Hindi language, Godan is a donation of a cow to a Hindu priest. Godan by Premchand is one of the most famous novels written by the stalwart writer.

Why should one touch the soles of a Zamindar's feet?

*... During the twenty years of her married life, she had fully realised that even if she lived a niggardly life, stinted on every foot and clothes, scraped together every elusive anna, it was difficult to liquidate the rent of the Zamindar.' And what was her age?' (36) ... canker of poverty. Why so much obsequiousness for a life which did not provide even the daily bread? Her mind would often rebel against such a state of affairs (Premchand 1939).*

**‘Would emigration, with all those promises, not entice such a family to seek greener pastures?’**

## 15 Conclusion

The conditions in India, the unjust justice and abuses of indenture in the Colony of Natal are not just ideological perspectives, but lived experiences that require further research. The opportunity to engage oral history interviews with nonagenarians exists and thus the need by academia and research faculties to immediately engage the elder custodians who may possess primary knowledge and known truths, as experienced by their ancestors. The value of the spoken word and the shared telling and retelling of happenings may introduce new information that adds to the body of knowledge that exists.

Some researchers regard the mass migration of indentured labourers from India as ‘Female emancipation’ (Emmer 1986:248); ‘A new system of Slavery’ The export of Indian Labour overseas: 1830–1920 (Tinker 1974); ‘An imperial re-allocation of Labour’ (Kale 1998); ‘Indenture was an Alternate Form of Slavery’ (Gandhi); ‘Nothing more than hard-working serfs in a feudal Colony Fighting for Justice’ (Naidoo 2010) and ‘An incarnation of Slavery’ (Singh 2020, cited in Rajbansi 2020:85). The appendices that follow include global statistics, maps, poems, pictures, and reproduced original documents that add to the collection on paraphernalia on indentured Indians in South Africa.

There is much oral history research that can be undertaken to uncover what descendants of the indentured labourers have in their possession.

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(<https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/opinion/feature-justice-for-indentured-indians-remains-elusive-38004489>)

## **Annexures**

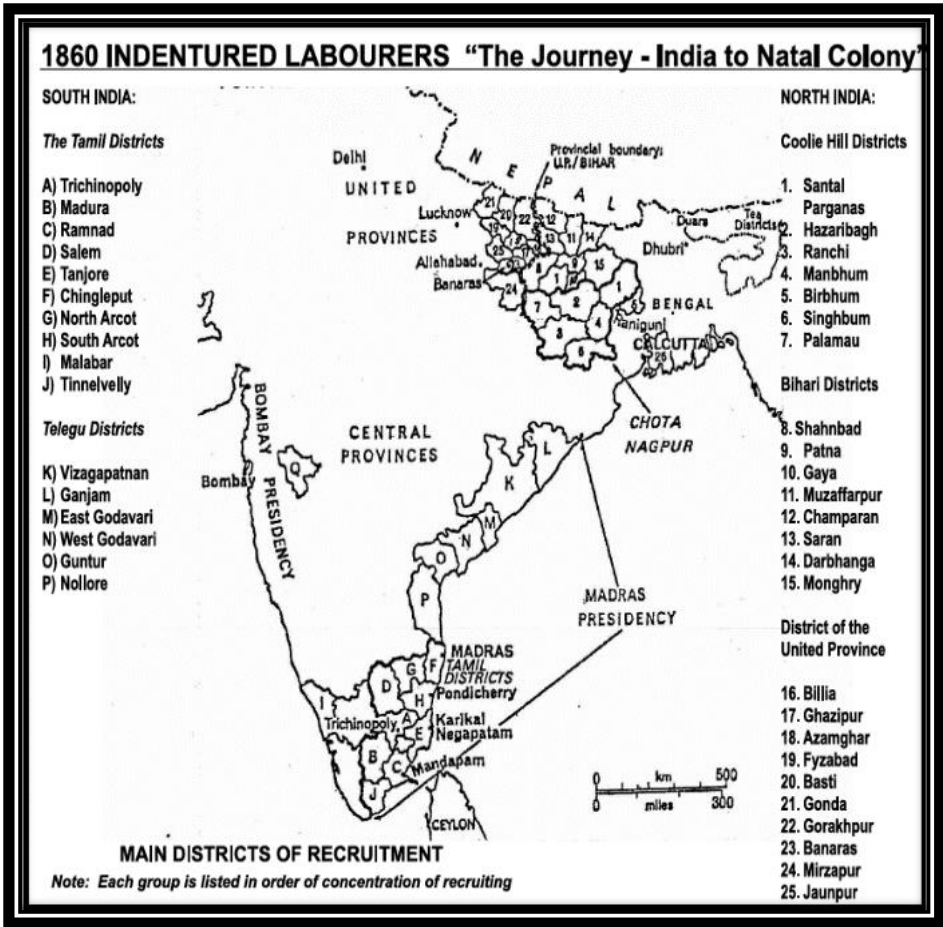
### **Annexure 1: Global Statistics 1834 to 1924**

<b>Emigration: Worldwide – From India</b>			
Mauritius	1834–1912	453 063	
British Guiana	1838–1917	238 909	
Natal – South Africa	1860–1911	152 184	
Trinidad	1845–1917	143 39	
Reunion	1829–1924	118 000	
Fiji	1879–1916	60 969	
Guadeloupe	1854–1885	41 326	
East Africa: Kenya, Uganda	1995–1901	39 771	
Jamaica	1854–1885	36 420	
Dutch Guiana: Surinam	1873–1916	34 000	
Martinique	1854–1889	25 509	
French Guiana	1804–1876	19 296	
Seychelles	1899–1916	6 319	
*St Lucia	1858–1895	4 350	
*Granada (W.I.)	1856–1885	3 200	
St Vincent	1861–1880	2 472	
Danish Colony: St Croix	1863–?		
*St Kitts	1861–1865	?	
Ceylon	1876 ?	337	
Malay States	1844	910	?
*(British Caribbean)			
Reference : Hindu Trinidad:- Steven Vertovec; The National Archives. Kew, Richmond, Surrey			

***Source: Rajbansi (2021:45)***

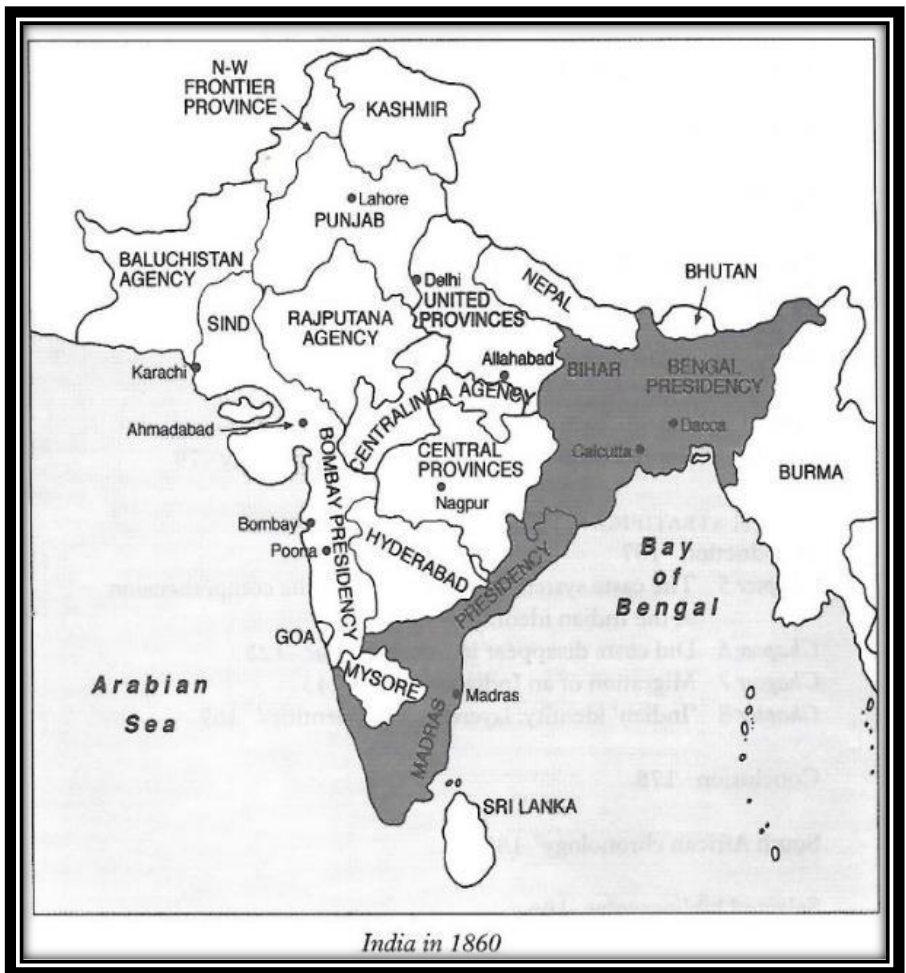


Annexure 2: Maps – A Journey to the Unknown


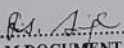



Map: C.G. Henning (1993) and Ebr Vally (2021)

### **Annexure 3: India in 1860**

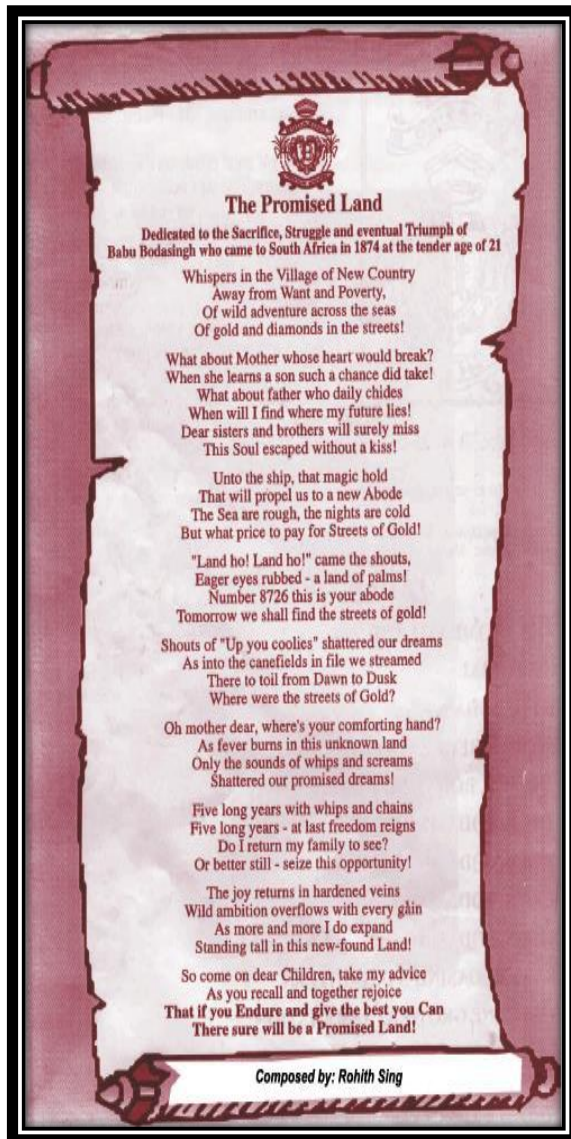


## Annexure 4: A Reproduced Version of a Ship List

 <b>VERULAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY</b> (Estd 2000) (036-932 NPO) Founder : VERULAM DOCUMENTATION CENTRE	
VERULAM MUNICIPAL LIBRARY (basement level) 10 GROOM STREET VERULAM 4339 e-mail: verulamhistoricalsociety@gmail.com NPO 036 932	
<u>COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS</u>	
REGISTER NO.:	58575
FORENAME:	MAHESH SINGH
FATHER'S NAME:	JAWAHIR SINGH
AGE:	23 YEARS
SEX:	MALE
CASTE:	THAKUR
HEIGHT:	163 CM
ZILLAH (DISTRICT):	SULTANPUR
THANNA:	RAIPUR
VILLAGE:	PURWAR JAGAPUR
NAME OF SHIP:	PONGOLA XIX
PORT OF DEPARTURE:	CALCUTTA
ARRIVAL DATE:	APRIL 1895
GENERAL REMARKS:	
INDENTURED TO:	A. MICHEL, LA LUCIA & MUCKLENEUK SUGAR
.....  SHAIL MAH VERULAM DOCUMENTATION CENTRE 18 AUG 2009 ..... DATE	
	

*J.S. Singh Collection*

## **Annexure 5: Bodasing Dynasty Brochure**





## **Annexure 7: Sugar – The Indian Connection**

- The Sanskrit word for sugar is *shakara*, which also means ‘gravel’ or ‘sand’.
- Sugar developed in India where people originally chewed raw sugar cane for its sweet juice.
- In India, a method was discovered to convert sugar juice into granulated crystals (or sugar grains). This happened sometime during the Gupta Dynasty around 350 AD, the Golden Age of Indian civilization.
- The early method of refining was to pound or grind the sugar cane in order to extract the juice.
- The juice was boiled or dried in the sun until it formed into sugar grains (a process known as crystallization).
- Travelling Buddhist monks carried crystallization methods into China.
- Indian sailors spread the use of sugar along the various trade routes through to Europe (where it was known as ‘sweet salt’).
- At first, sugar was a luxury enjoyed only by the rich.
- Later, with better methods of producing sugar, even the poor were able to afford it.
- With increasing use of this product, sugar became an important commodity in the world's economy.
- When slavery was abolished, the British colonial planters were deprived of cheap labour. When they looked around for other forms of cheap labour they realized that the indenture system would help boost sugar production.
- Thereafter, the indentured labour supplanted slavery.
- It is important to note that this very commodity, namely sugar, which had its origins in India, was ultimately responsible for the movement of the Coolie from India to different parts of the British Empire, including the then Colony of Natal.

***Source: Rajbansi 2021:14***

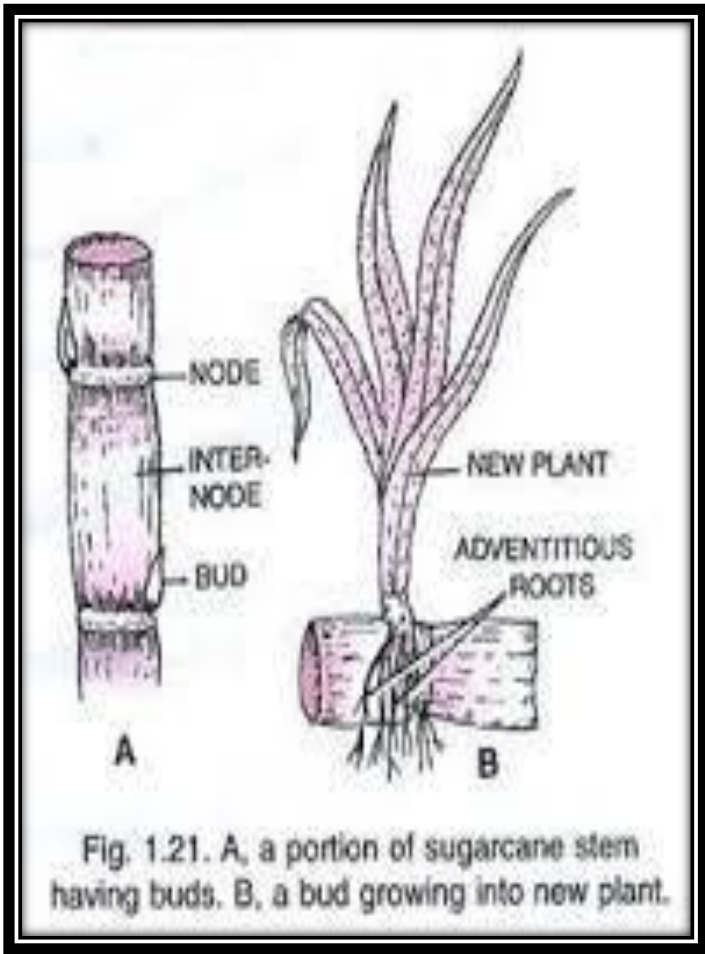


Fig. 1.21. A, a portion of sugarcane stem having buds. B, a bud growing into new plant.



## **Acknowledgements**

I have relied heavily (for the stark realism of this narrative of the Great Indian Migration) on several authors for their painstaking, committed research and empathy for the most unusual movement of human beings in the world. If there is any error of historical fact or interpretation, the error is solely mine. Please forgive this fledgling scribe for inadequately failing to acknowledge some researchers in this episode:

- To Prof. Goolam Vahed: Co-author of *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story 1860-1914* (2010) and *Many Lives.150 years of Being Indian in South Africa*, for reading my script to ensure that the relevance of my subject is not lost.
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# Chapter 3

## ‘White Gold’ on a Rusty Spoon – Some Reflections on Indenture in South Africa

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### Abstract

Colonialism with its capitalist agenda was extended to the better parts of Africa and other countries in the globe since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was a quest to expand the economic interest of the colonisers through brutal measures against the will of the colonised. Capital resources was extracted through slavery until its abolishment in 1833, which was later transformed into indenture, a form of arrangement that engaged capitalists and the indentured in a voluntary arrangement based on a contract of servitude for a defined period of time. South Africa is one such country that was colonised by the British empire where the system of indenture was implemented by hiring labour from India to work the sugar plantation of the then Natal Colony. For the first generation of indentured Indians this was an exacting experience, as life on these desolate estates were sub-human by nature, extracting every ounce of energy to feed the sugar mills with their labour. This chapter recollects the experience of the indentured in the different facets of life leaving behind a legacy that the present generation need to be proud of. Their genealogical roots were founded by hard work, determination, the will to succeed, which has won the current generation a place on the African soil. The chapter also highlights the contribution indentured Indians made to the multi-national sugar industry currently located in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Indenture, Colonialism, Apartheid, Plantations, Sugar, Labour

## **1 Introduction**

The system of indentured labour in South Africa was one of the British colonialists' strategy to extract labour to serve the sugar cane industry, primarily on the coastal belt of KwaZulu-Natal. The system was designed as a contract between colonial whites and the indentured to serve their masters' capitalist needs. It was a weathered form of slavery based on a voluntary contractual labour relationship – a more civilised version of slavery, which was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833. The thriving sugar business demanded more labour to cultivate and, considering that the indigenous Black Africans chose not to participate in sugar cultivation, placed a premium demand for indentured labour in Natal. The first batch of labourers arrived in 1860 and hordes followed over a period of 51 years. Indentured Indians became the trail-blazers of the sugar industry, which in present times has transformed into a multi-billion-rand industry, ranking as one of the highest producers in the world. Dubbed 'White Gold', the enterprise was founded at the altar of family life, kinship ties, social networks, and relationships on the bare backs of the indentured forebears.

Recollecting the history of indentured Indians is characterized by one of sorrow and pain. Abuse, inhumanity and loss of dignity are some of the experiences that they had to endure in a quest for prosperity in a strange land with the bare minimum of resources. On the other hand, the history of indentured Indians elicits a sense of pride, courage and motivation to survive and prosper, which the current generation owe to the sacrifices made by their forbears. Many contributions made by the indentured Indians stand posterity since their arrival.

This chapter recollects the early experiences and efforts of indentured Indians to secure a space in this alien land, their socio-economic conditions, and the quest to maintain their sense of identity as a community. It provides a brief synopsis on key areas that affected their evolution as a community, given the inhumane treatment meted out by the British capitalists. Thereafter, a brief insight is provided on the multinational sugar industry in South Africa, which was founded on indentured labour.

## **2 Reflection on the Early Evolution of Indenture**

The S.S. Truro was the first ship to sail to the shores of the Natal Colony on 6 November 1860, carrying with it 342 indentured Indians (Sulliman 1997:107). Over 51 years, 152 184 'human cargo' was shipped to the shores of Durban, comprising 62% males, 25% females and 13% children (India Ministry of

External Affairs 2000:76). The vast majority were Hindus, with 12% Muslims and about 2% Christians. The indentured catchment areas were the South of India, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. They comprised different castes and the languages spoken were Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Punjabi, and Gujarati. Given the diversity of languages spoken in the colony (including Tamil, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Telugu, Urdu, Kokani, and Meman – a dialect of Sindhi), interaction was at a minimum (Mesthrie 1990). This diversity restricted social interaction amongst certain linguistic groups and at the same time excluded others from forming social networks and relationships. In the absence of social interactions, the indentured felt isolation in the vast fields of sugar cane with very little contact with their fellow indentured. Being in a strange land and stripped of social networks and religious and community support structures further exacerbated their social isolation (Khan 2012:136).

Their settlement patterns in KZN spread across the city, the colony and outside of it. Riverside, Cato Manor, Clairwood and Magazine Barracks were some of the settlement sites on the periphery of the city. On white-owned sugar estates located in Isipingo, Umzinto and Umkomaas were some of the settlement areas to the south of Durban. To the north of Durban, towns such as Verulam, Tongaat and Stanger were settlement areas (Maharaj 1994:3). These settlements were mostly on the coastal belt of Natal due to its fertile land for agricultural activity.

The physical living conditions were dehumanising, as they were accommodated in what came to be called the ‘coolie’ huts made out of stone, zinc, wattle or daub. This meant the cost of living space came at a premium. The homes were overcrowded, poorly ventilated, lacked sanitary amenities and were often exposed to adjacent polluted water streams. In urban centres, sub-quality houses were provided by the local and central government, whilst on the plantations by different sugar estates. These basic necessities were lacking, making the domestic environment not conducive to healthy living. These formal settlements came to be known as barracks, which was overcrowded, and lacked fresh air, as the houses were too small for the number of people that it accommodated (Meer 1980:9-10). Living in barracks hardly provided a conducive environment to raise a family.

The social and economic conditions of the indentured labourer were characterised by inhumane treatment. Exploited by long hours of work on daily food rations, poor sanitary and health conditions, absence of medical care facilities, lack of educational facilities, absence of family life and economic

opportunities, racial prejudice and physical abuse took its toll on the well-being of these so-called ‘strange-looking people’ from Asia in an alien land. 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 indentured (Meer 1980).

### **3 Family Structure**

The institution of family is known to extend itself to a sense of community. Amongst the first generation of indentured Indians, the male-female ratio, which was 3:1, made settling into family life a challenge. For the colonialist, as long as the indentured remained unencumbered, it made them readily available to sell their labour at their masters’ call and convenience (Khan 2013). The underrepresentation of females (Palmer 1957:28; Meer 1972:37; Chetty 1980:30) reduced the opportunity for many unencumbered indentured males from aspiring towards a family life. However, the male population decreased drastically when many returned to India post-indenture through the repatriation scheme (Padayachee 1999:199). It is estimated some 23% had returned to India by 1911 when this system of slavery was abolished (India Ministry of External Affairs 2000).

Although the repatriation scheme reduced the gap between males and females, there was still a paucity of eligible females to consummate marriage. This resulted in marriages taking place outside one’s religious and ethnic groups. For instance, marriages registered in 1872, 12 years after the arrival of indentured Indians recorded the highest percentage of marriages between Muslims and Hindus. A total of 67% of marriages were recorded (Meer 1980) and the secondment to colonial farms showed scant respect for the heterogenous composition of the indentured, which in part may have been attributed to the prevalence of high levels of interfaith marriages. Cross-religious marriages came with challenges of its own to preserve religious and cultural identity. Later, strong attempts were made to preserve religious and cultural identities, making marriages across religion and language lines almost taboo (Desai & Vahed 2007). Not only did Muslim marriages across religious lines attract opposition; inter-caste marriages were strongly discouraged in general (Khan & Singh 2015). Recognition of marriages, whether consummated in India or South Africa, was non-existent. Hence it was not uncommon for the formation

of short-term unions and separations in times of marital conflict. This was exacerbated when the Coolie agent assigned unencumbered indentured males and females as husband and wife who accepted this arrangement to overcome the fear of loneliness and emotional insecurity. Responsibility for children born out of this relationship was often difficult to uphold, due to the denial of paternity (Palmer 1957:28).

Those who completed their indenture, known as free Indians, settled into some form of family life. Given the choice between re-indenture, a free passage home to India, or freedom through a small plot of freehold land was part of the labour deal. Many settled for the last, although not in all cases the promise of land ownership was honoured (Burrows 1952:2-3). Some were forced to use their savings to purchase land from their former white masters, especially in the rural small towns, whilst others opted to continue living on white-owned farm estates in the service of their former masters, or on a lease basis. The prospect of land ownership, however, provided a new sense of hope, as they now had access to the means of production to eke out a living and establish a family home. It may be asserted that the ownership of land was a means of emancipation from the exploits of the colonialists and set the foundation for the emergence of family and community life. The growing economy of the city offered opportunities to indentured households through market gardening, fishing, hawking, and various crafts (Meer 1975:2).

The family structure was characterized by an extended unit related by descent with a patriarchal head, which Kuper (1956:16) refers to as the *Kutum*. The *Kutum* comprised a patriarchal head with his wife and children, but also his unmarried brothers and sisters and his married brothers' wife and children. Included in this family unit were parents. With access to natural capital through land acquisition and social capital derived through the *Kutum*, it provided the necessary socio-economic resources necessary for the establishment of family life, participation in the colonial economy and building a sense of community. This co-residence contributed to family and social cohesion. The household defined the social and economic responsibilities of its members. Resources were pooled in a common family budget, which allowed families to overcome their financial woes. Within a short period of time, the indentured reproduced themselves. To illustrate: in 1921, there were 141 649 Indians in the colony, compared to 136 838 Whites (Extracted from Burrows 1952). This increase in the population size presented a threat to the colonialists, as they feared that the Indian would undermine their socio-political and economic hegemony in the

colony through reproducing themselves rapidly.

The oppression meted out to the indentured made them succumb to the exploits of the colonialist. The hardship meted out on the plantations made them politically docile. Challenging issues on their well-being risked brutal reactions and sanctions. The arrival of Gandhi in 1893 provided a breath of political fresh air to champion the socio-political and economic well-being of Indians in general.

#### **4 Religious Life**

Post-indenture, much effort was made to construct family and community life. Religious associational life began to take form through the establishment of places of worship and vernacular schools. This was contrary to the proselytization taking place by Christian missionaries who believed that the indentured were 'heathens' (Desai & Vahed 2007:228). By and large, indentured Indians resisted attempts by Christian missionaries to 'save' them from moral degeneration by preserving their faith. This entailed making great sacrifices to create conditions for the advancement of their perceived 'heathenism' (Gopal, Khan & Singh 2014:32).

The Festival of Chariots, Kavady and Diwali celebrations amongst the different groupings of the Hindu faith may be considered by far the most important form of religious expression in the absence of organised forms of religion in these early years of indenture. However, within a short space of time the indentured established places of worship. The Shree Emperumal Temple (1875), Shri Vaithianatha Easvarar Alayam (1883), Shree Gopal Hindu Temple (1893), Durban Hindu Temple (1898) and many more stand posterity on early attempts to promote cultural, social and religious associational life<sup>1</sup> (SAHMS Centenary Supplement 2012:4). With the mushrooming of temples, religious diversity was streamlined through a national synod to promote unity and religious cohesiveness through the formation of the Hindu Maha Sabha in 1912.

The indentured Muslims followed suit, with their Hindu counterparts by observing the Islamic New Year (Muharrum) as a form of expressing their

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<sup>1</sup> The first temple to be built was in 1869 made of wood and iron in Rossburgh. South African History Online. (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/indian-community>)

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faith. They carried pagodas through the streets of towns and cities, followed by elaborate celebrations. Such an occasion was joined by their Hindu counterparts, which became an expression of a sense of community and belonging (Vahed 2002:3). Hadrath Badsha Peer, who arrived amongst the first batch of indentured, is revered for his spiritual guidance<sup>2</sup>. In 1895, Hadrat Soofie Saheb, another spiritual luminary, built 11 mosques, vernacular schools, cemeteries and orphanages amongst the indentured Muslims. The Riverside Soofie Mosque and Mausoleum is now a provincial heritage site. The tombs of both spiritual personalities in Durban continue to be frequented by some sections of the Hindu faith during times of calamity, distress and personal misfortune, due to a belief in their mystic attributes (Khan 2013:151). The establishment of the Grey Street Mosque in 1881, although built by traders, was frequented by many indentured Muslims who settled and traded in the city. It is observed that religious norms and values were defended by indentured Muslims through confrontation with their colonial master. Objections to working in a piggery, shaving of beards, celebration of religious festivals, avoidance of non-halal foods, maintaining personal hygiene, and the preference of women to adorn the purdah are some of the Islamic etiquettes and norms which this group won over from their colonial masters to ensure their social reproduction and cohesion (Khan 2014:88).

## **5 Socio-Economic Conditions Post-Indenture**

Post-indenture there was drift to the periphery of towns and cities in search of better economic opportunities. Some indentured made great strides in the economy. Between 1885–1872, the indentured set up 68 stores in the city of Durban (Meer 1980:315). Migrants to the city settled in peripheral areas such as Riverside, Bluff, Cato Manor, Magazine Barracks and Clairwood where they assimilated through social networks and contacts. Many settled in small towns in the colony. The lack of adequate housing, infrastructure, lack of skills for

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<sup>2</sup> His official name was Sheik Allie Vulle Ahmed, who came to be known as Hadrat Badsha Pir (King of the Guides), due to a belief that he possessed mystical powers and his stature in providing spiritual support to the first generation of Muslims in the country. He is known to have originated from Chittoor, Madras and is highly revered by indentured Muslims in the country and a mausoleum stands perpetuity in his honour in the City of Durban.

formal employment were sources of poverty and social disorganisation pervading the community. Settling down to family life led to a natural population increase and resulted in a larger household to support financially.

The industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the establishment of the Natal railway in 1860 to support the emerging capitalist enterprise of the colony. Large numbers of indentured Indians were employed. In 1872, 63 were employed, whereas in 1886 it increased to 814 (Meer 1980:498). Although sugar cultivation remained the major employer of indentured labour, demands by tea and coffee estates, domestic servants, the Durban Corporation, shipping agencies, coal mines and Railways became increasingly significant (Rajaval 1994:42-43). The demand for indentured labour to oil the emerging Natal economy can be seen in the coal mining sector, through which the railway network was serviced. In 1897, 342 were employed in the coal mines, which number increased to 3 200 by 1909 (Rajaval 1994:46). The colonialist's socio-economic advancement became dependent on indentured labour.

Poverty and social problems in the urban centres required a concerted welfare response from the community. Many individuals and families were in distress characterised by overcrowded housing conditions, poverty and low subsistence levels, high infant and maternal mortality rates, high birth rates and large family size, high incidence of disease, and widespread illiteracy. In the city of Durban, a social-welfare response was made by the Indian Women's Association in 1913, inspired by Mohandas Gandhi, which led to the formation of the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society<sup>3</sup>, which offered various forms of social welfare service (Khan 2016:144).

Market gardening was an important economic activity amongst the indentured, who sold their produce in the urban centres and the city. Many were

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<sup>3</sup> The Durban Indian Child Welfare inspired and provided support for the establishment of the Pietermaritzburg Indian Child Welfare Society on the West of the province in 1932, followed by the Verulam, Tongaat and Stanger and District Indian Child Welfare Society in 1939 in the north of Durban. Inland, the Dundee and Dannhauser Indian Child Welfare Society was formed in 1939, followed by the Newcastle and District Indian Child Welfare Society in 1944. To the south of the province, the Umzinto and District Indian Child Welfare Society was established in 1942, followed by the Port Shepstone Indian Child Welfare Society in 1945 (Natal Indian Council for Child Welfare, 1950).

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engaged in hawking, going door to door in white settlements to sell their produce. Whites were infuriated by street cries and a constant knocking at their doors by the vendors. However, this was outweighed by the advantage of cheap produce that the Indian hawkers supplied to white households, restaurants and hotels (Adamson 1932:56). Others set up street stalls on premises such as the Grey Street Mosque. In the city of Durban, an open-air market known as the ‘squatter market’<sup>4</sup> in Victoria Street became a hub of business activities. Some 2 000 indentured farmers in and around Durban sold their produce in this market, which later was formalized in 1910 and today is known as the Warwick Avenue Precinct (Vahed 1999).

The early economy of Durban was a site of competition and contestation from different interest groups. The Durban Town Council harassed the indentured with different pieces of legislation to regulate and derive revenue from trading practices. There were contestations between passenger Indian traders<sup>5</sup> and both Muslim indentured and Hindu traders for a space in the city’s economy. The passenger Indians dominated the economy and placed the indentured on the periphery, resulting in their social condition deteriorating. Given the availability of capital and skills amongst traders, the indentured Indians were economically disadvantaged to pursue their economic wants (Khan 2013:151). However, a small section of the indentured community

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<sup>4</sup> Non-farmers sold “from a basket, or by placing goods in small lots upon a sack” while they squatted cross-legged on the street; hence the name “Squatters Market” (Vahed 1999).

<sup>5</sup> The arrival of Muslim passenger Indians in the 1870s from areas in India such as Surat, Kholwad, Rander, Kathor, Baroda, Bardoli and Navsari, added a new sociological dimension for those of the South Indian diaspora. The new arrivals were largely business entrepreneurs and were regarded as Arabs by the colonial masters by virtue of their distinct dress. They enjoyed enormous trading opportunities, privilege of movement in the city and to remote towns in the colony and Transvaal, where many of them set up trading posts. In 1885, the number of retail shops owned by this community in the city of Durban increased by 60 per cent, compared to those of South Indian extraction. They traded with the indigenous Africans, indentured Indians and whites to a certain degree. Indentured Indians had access to food and other items from their homeland in Indian and met their dietary needs beyond the food rations provided by the colonialists (Khan 2009:88-89).

engaged in capital-intensive agricultural activities<sup>6</sup>. This competition and contestation to share in the city's economy created a wedge on religious, ethnic and class lines, which led to them organising themselves through formal structures to preserve their financial interest. The Indian Farmers Association (IFA) and later the Indian Market Stallholders' Association (IMSA), Indian Agricultural Union, the Natal Indian Farmers Association (NIFA), Indian Market Stallholders' Association (IMSA), amongst a few, were formed to mobilise and give voice to the economic interest of the indentured (Vahed 1999).

## **6 Education**

Very little attention was devoted to the educational needs of children born of the indentured lineage. Early initiatives were made by Christian missionaries comprising Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (Kumar 2016) to provide education. The missionaries were the first to establish schools for Indians. The first school was built by the Roman Catholic Church in 1867, which housed 30 pupils. By 1883, 21 mission schools were established in different parts of the colony for primary-level education. These schools were open to both indentured and African children. Efforts were also made by parents to teach their mother tongue (South African History Online, 2022), as there was much anxiety about the proselytising propaganda of missionary teachers. The indentured resolved not to send their children to schools established under the control of missionaries and made a conscientious attempt to pursue the educational needs of their children.

In as far as literacy was concerned, many had no formal education but managed to sustain strong memories of their customs, traditions and rituals which they preserved diligently (Khan 2015:231). The responsibility for the education of children of indenture was devolved to the owners of estates. Education of children from indenture was made compulsory for the owner of the estate where at least 20 children between the ages of 5 and 12 could be provided with elementary education at their cost. Only a few estates extended this generosity. The education system focused primarily from a utilitarian point

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<sup>6</sup> M.L. Sultan is known to be one of the wealthiest farmers who bequeathed his financial resources to the M.L. Sultan Technikon and other educational institutions (Vahed 1999).

of view in preparation for particular occupations in life. The colonialists, however, felt that even primary education would cause the children of ex-indentured to forsake the arduous life of their fathers for more congenial occupations that were preserved for whites. Hence investment on education was considered a waste of money (Adamson 1932:64). Notwithstanding this attitude, various attempts were made by the indentured to set up schools on crowded premises and converted buildings. These schools were private initiatives by the community, which depended on school fees, use of mission and other premises on rent or rent-free and partial subsidy derived from the colonial government<sup>7</sup>.

Given the shortage of schools, an attempt was made to set up evening schools in areas such as Umgeni, Tongaat, Verulam, Isipingo, Clare Estate, Umzinto and Pietermaritzburg. Due to the travelling distance to these schools from remote estates, the curfew implemented on the movement of the indentured until 9.00 pm and the tiring day on the estates, attendance at these schools dropped and later abandoned. Notably, the first government English-medium Indian school was opened in 1896. The community's contribution to the educational needs can be noted for the period 1910–1928, when £50 000,00 was invested in education, compared to the £22 843,00 spent by the colonial government (South African History Online, 2022).

The education of female children was hardly a priority for the colonialists. Between 1888–1899, two schools were built in Durban and Pietermaritzburg (South African History Online, 2022). Indentured women were seen as a liability, as the estates wanted only strong, healthy men who could toil the fields. In time, the value of women in the agricultural economy was noted and a gendered division of labour was introduced on the plantations. Field tasks such as hoeing, weeding, multi-cropping between fields, cutting plant cane and sowing them in furrows in the blazing sun was a back-breaking and extremely tedious task. Given the fact that the planting and harvesting seasons overlap as new fields are rotated annually, this economic activity was undertaken regularly. This division of labour was subjected to control measures and wage deductions for underperformance due to illnesses. Women pushed themselves to work, whether sick, pregnant, or even in labour. When unproductive, they were subjected to food rations (Beal n/d).

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<sup>7</sup> By 1885, the total amount in grants given to Indian education was £626.5s.0d, compared to £68 paid out in 1874.

## **7 Indenture and the Political Economy**

The economic worth of the indentured was only valued as far as capital was extracted through labour. The physical, psychological and social wellbeing of the indentured was of secondary importance to the capitalists as long as it brought monetary gains from this global white gold economy. In keeping with colonialist capitalistic interests, the desire to subvert the ban on slavery found voluntary indenture as an ingenious way of extracting labour through legal means underwritten by a contract. It was based on a principle of willing buyer and seller of labour defined by specific arrangements, which made this form of labour morally acceptable. Despite these contractual arrangements, the working and living conditions were in sub-human environments.

The sweat, pain and misery of the indentured have contributed to building a sugar empire by the white sugar barons in the colony. In 1852, Edmund Morewood started the first commercial sugar cane enterprise (Sokhela 1999:6). Over time, white-owned sugar estates began to emerge rapidly as its monetary value was increasingly recognized. With industrialisation, the mode of production was refined through technology, global and regional trade networks, which made the Natal Colony the preserve of white capitalists, in collaboration with multinational investors in the sugar enterprise. Sugar Estates engaged in monopoly capital to form giant sugar holdings such as the Hullets of Hullet, Marshall Campbell of Illovo, Reynolds brothers Umzinto and Crookes brothers in KwaZulu-Natal are some of the largest sugar magnates in the country (Koen 2015). Tongaat Hullett, for instance, has since indenture continued cane growing, sugar milling and refining throughout the Southern African region. Home-grown sugar barons have also extended themselves to neighbouring Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia, Swaziland, Malawi, to mention but a few. South African sugar producers has ranked consistently in the top 15 out of approximately 120 sugar-producing countries worldwide (South African Sugar Association n.d.).

Amongst the indentured, Babu Bodasing was the first to set up a plantation in 1866 (Fiat Lux 1966:10). It was not until World War I in 1915 that interest in cane growing began to be of economic interest amongst Indians. By 1930, there were about 500 farmers engaged in commercial cane cultivation. This presented a competition with white farmers and calls were made for the regulation of the sugar-producing industry. The government implemented a quota system, which regulated the amount of cane produced. Additionally, the

industry was beginning to feel the pressure of emerging Indian and African entrepreneurs. The Indian response was the formation of The Natal Indian Cane Growers Association, took up issues of interest on behalf of Indian cane growers, whilst the Africans were represented by the Natal and Zululand Black Cane Growers Associations (Sokhela 1999:9). The Natal Indian Cane Growers Association provided agricultural support to small-scale Indian farmers. However, post-democracy, these fragmented, race-based agents in the sugar industry had to undergo major reforms and welcome a newly shaped corporate style industry, including all the producers, irrespective of race. In memory of the contribution made by Indians in the sugar industry. The Cane Growers' auditorium was built by the association on the M.L. Sultan Campus of the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in 1959. Today these two associations are integrated into the corporate world of sugar production under one umbrella body.

South Africa's leading destinations for sugar are Malta, Angola, Namibia, Botswana and Swaziland. More recent trends in sugar exports shows a phenomenal growth. In 2019, South Africa shipped sugar worth 492,42m USD, an increment of 29,38% from 2018's total African sugar export of 380,588m USD. The annual change in value of South Africa sugar between 2017 to 2018 was 38,469 pc (South African Sugar Market Insights n.d.).

The table below provides a snapshot of regional performances in sugar production in KwaZulu-Natal. A total of 14 mills crushed 19 million tons of sugar in the 2019 season, compared to approximately 17 million tons in 2011. For the seasons 2011/2012 to 2018/2019, the standard of production was constant. Some of the best-performing markets in 2019 for South African sugar per kg were from exports to Portugal, Zambia, Lebanon, Turkey and the Netherlands.

The industry itself is worth R18bn, with 20 711 small-scale growers and 1 126 large-scale growers. It provides 85 000 jobs, 350 000 indirect jobs and livelihood to some one million people in the rural parts of KwaZulu-Natal. The coordination of the industry is undertaken by the South African Sugar Association established in 1927. The role of the Association is to support the industry with various forms of skills, cane testing service, industry affairs, internal support, manage the SA Sugarcane Research Institute, sugar cultivation training and arranging finance. Additionally, it engages with regional and international stakeholders on sugar cultivation.

**Table 1: Sugarcane crushed by mills (tons)**

SUGARCANE CRUSHED: 2011/2012 TO 2018/2019*								
REGION	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19*
<b>NORTHERN IRRIGATED</b>								
Malelane	1 658 943	1 556 390	1 685 846	1 655 413	1 718 777	1 327 829	1 312 874	1 597 041
Komati	2 358 719	2 075 805	2 360 039	2 330 859	2 183 539	1 713 307	1 896 859	2 362 678
Pongola	1 176 158	1 189 869	1 320 453	1 185 297	1 250 826	907 586	1 159 182	1 257 740
<b>Total Northern Irrigated</b>	<b>5 193 820</b>	<b>4 822 064</b>	<b>5 366 338</b>	<b>5 171 569</b>	<b>5 153 142</b>	<b>3 948 722</b>	<b>4 368 915</b>	<b>5 217 459</b>
<b>ZULULAND</b>								
Umfalazi	1 130 078	1 029 298	1 121 817	1 105 047	1 076 588	772 047	1 030 416	1 234 114
Felixton	1 705 537	1 464 812	2 088 930	1 877 159	1 571 884	1 556 670	1 670 459	1 793 981
Amatikulu	1 142 650	1 164 581	1 268 101	1 003 230	650 603	377 301	1 138 088	1 256 000
<b>Total Zululand</b>	<b>3 978 265</b>	<b>3 658 691</b>	<b>4 478 848</b>	<b>3 985 436</b>	<b>3 299 070</b>	<b>2 706 018</b>	<b>3 838 963</b>	<b>4 284 095</b>
<b>NORTH COAST</b>								
Darnall	876 867	915 110	1 064 473	860 544	0	834 418	866 923	1 037 171
Giedhow (KwaDukuza)	1 078 925	1 109 374	1 507 969	1 257 948	938 523	1 227 606	1 238 956	1 310 350
Maidstone	808 565	906 131	1 059 728	849 936	869 646	950 180	975 136	1 152 095
<b>Total North Coast</b>	<b>2 764 357</b>	<b>2 930 615</b>	<b>3 632 170</b>	<b>2 968 428</b>	<b>1 808 169</b>	<b>3 012 204</b>	<b>3 081 015</b>	<b>3 499 616</b>
<b>MIDLANDS</b>								
Eston	1 141 932	1 252 853	1 359 680	1 124 488	875 337	1 085 777	1 247 157	1 229 689
Noodsberg	1 088 697	1 425 584	1 467 088	1 326 214	1 083 751	1 356 427	1 375 221	1 485 659
UCL Company	643 533	746 706	696 049	712 257	587 168	721 550	800 773	811 667
<b>Total Midlands</b>	<b>2 874 162</b>	<b>3 425 143</b>	<b>3 522 817</b>	<b>3 162 959</b>	<b>2 546 256</b>	<b>3 163 754</b>	<b>3 423 151</b>	<b>3 527 015</b>
<b>SOUTH COAST</b>								
Sezela	1 989 673	1 668 931	2 062 966	1 755 129	2 054 759	2 069 201	2 091 272	1 909 484
Umzimkulu	0	772 576	969 830	711 983	0	174 711	584 861	594 019
<b>Total South Coast</b>	<b>1 989 673</b>	<b>2 441 507</b>	<b>3 032 796</b>	<b>2 467 112</b>	<b>2 054 759</b>	<b>2 243 912</b>	<b>2 676 133</b>	<b>2 503 503</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16 800 277</b>	<b>17 278 020</b>	<b>20 032 969</b>	<b>17 755 504</b>	<b>14 861 401</b>	<b>15 074 610</b>	<b>17 388 177</b>	<b>19 031 688</b>

**(Source: South African Sugar Association – 2022)**

Historically, the Board of the South African Sugar Association was predominantly dominated by whites. In the new political dispensation, the board comprises 57% blacks and 43% whites in compliance with the country's equity policy. The Association provides support to 21 000 small-scale black growers. Currently it is diversifying the industry by exploring the production of ethanol, plastics, aviation fuel and various other products (South African Cane Growers 2019–2020).

## 8 Conclusion

The history of the multinational sugar enterprise today is indebted to the founda-

tions left behind by the indentured Indian for it to be a global actor in the sweet-bitter business of white monopoly capital. White capital was extracted from the pain and suffering of unsuspecting workers who sought to venture into an alien country with nothing but clothes on their backs to toil the blazing fields in order to eke out a living. Although they endured enormous hardships, the indentured was not distracted from the spirit of hope and the desire to succeed. The chapter outlines the evolution of the early indentured Indians and challenges that they had to surmount despite the adversarial conditions on the sugar plantations. They made attempts to preserve family life, sustain their religious and cultural identity, invest in the education of their children and become resilient to the exploits of the white capitalists. Post indenture they had to fend for themselves, taking up opportunities in the wage economy. Participation in the wage economy provided them with an opportunity to sell their labour, to the extent that they could derive value for money. Being dependent on wage labour provided stability in the household income, which allowed them to sustain themselves according to their needs. For many of the descendants from the indentured Indian lineage, there is a need to pride themselves on the contribution that their forbears have made to secure their current lifestyle and advancement in contributing to a multi-billion-rand sugar economy. Many from the indentured lineage are now in their 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation, who have a vague notion of the sacrifices that their forbears made. It is works like this that documents the life and times of indentured Indians as reminder that sugar production, dubbed ‘white gold’, was served on a rusty spoon in their early evolution, whilst the world savoured this with silver and golden spoons, unbeknown to them that this gold was produced in the context of slavery.

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# Chapter 4

## Fordsburg: The Building of a Community for People of Indian Origin

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### Abstract

This chapter explores the construction of migrant communities in a neighbourhood called Fordsburg, in Johannesburg. The purpose of the chapter is to give a brief historical overview of people of Indian origin since the early 1890s. Fordsburg was an area, a point of entry into Johannesburg, where many people of Indian origin came to reside. Fordsburg, initially constructed as a white immigrant, working-class community, quickly became home to previously indentured labourers who relocated to the then Transvaal. The neighbourhood and its history is significant to the building of communities for people of Indian origin in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Fordsburg, Indian enclaves, construction of community, identity, belonging

### 1 Introduction

Fordsburg, a neighbourhood, has historically been associated with the ‘Indians’ of Johannesburg. Romantically characterised as noisy, aromatic and colourful, this enclave, as in the case of Johannesburg itself, has a history forged in the industry of gold mining. The purpose of the chapter is to document the history of people of Indian origin since the early 1890s in a neighbourhood called Fordsburg in Johannesburg. This was an area, a point of entry into Johannesburg, where many people of Indian origin came to reside. Fordsburg,

initially constructed as a white immigrant, working-class community, quickly became home to previously indentured labourers who relocated to the then Transvaal. The neighbourhood and its placement are significant in the annals of history of the people of Indian origin, their families and their identity, in overcoming the racism and discrimination experienced since their arrival in South Africa. It is impossible to focus only on people of Indian origin, within this early history of their location to Johannesburg or even Fordsburg. Their history is interspersed in the histories of nationalities trying to eke out a living in early Johannesburg from the 1890s.

This chapter forms part of a bigger study from my doctoral research, which was a sociological exploration of identity and community amongst immigrant and migrant communities in Fordsburg. The thesis sought to understand how communities are (re)constructed, not only from a historical perspective, but how identities and belonging are shaped through these communities. My study wanted to trace the construction of identity from the earliest established communities to the diverse groups and nationalities that comprise Fordsburg today, and in so doing, try to unpack the glue that holds these communities together. Essentially, I was intrigued by how diverse migrant groups came to construct a sense of community, and through decades, waves of migrants groups have recrafted their own identity in Fordsburg, but together they have contributed to the overall character and construction of the community in Fordsburg (Rugunanan 2016). My study concludes that communities are not safe, cohesive ‘neatly bounded constructs forged in our imaginations’ (Rugunanan 2016:34), but instead are infused with the ugly and beauty of everyday living.

Previous research on Fordsburg appears in the work of Brodie (2008), Beavon (2004), Tomlinson *et al.* (2003), Cachalia (1983), Van Onselen (1982a; 1982b) and Callinicos (1981), making brief reference to Fordsburg from a historical point of view. More contemporary research focuses on migrant communities in the post-2000 era. Jinnah’s (2013) study focuses on the Somali community and their livelihood strategies in Mayfair and Fordsburg, while Mahomed’s (2005) research determined that the successful economic regeneration of Fordsburg was because it developed into an ethnic enclave. Mahomed’s (2005) and Toffah’s (2009) study are developed within the disciplines of urban settlements and planning. Research focusing on migrant communities in Fordsburg is by Rugunanan *et al.* (2012), who investigated how the traders at the Oriental Plaza claimed a sense of identity, citizenship and

exclusion. Yengde (2014) began to focus on the emerging lifestyle and changing habits of Indian labour migrants in the Fordsburg flea market, while Munshi (2013) touches on the Bangladeshi community in Fordsburg.

## **2 Methodology**

My research is the first comprehensive study that explores a (re)construction of ‘community’ not only from a historical perspective, but also from a sense of identity and belonging that have developed from the era of the earliest communities to the diverse groups and nationalities that comprise Fordsburg today. I used a social constructivist research paradigm to carry out the research. Social constructivism provides an analytical lens for how meaning is created and experienced by members and how they understand their world (Creswell 2009). Weber’s concept of *Verstehen*, which considers the everyday realities of people encapsulated within specific ‘historical settings’ (Neuman 2006:87), provides an apt insight into how communities are constructed. Five ethnic groups: Egyptians, the Bangladeshi, Indians, Pakistanis and Malawians and the sixth group, the South African Indian traders in the suburb of Fordsburg, were interviewed. The research took place from 2011 to 2014. For the broader study, I used a case-study approach (Berg 2004:251), as Fordsburg is a diverse neighbourhood, a historical landmark in Johannesburg, where indentured labourers travelling from Natal made their home. The study included 82 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals, representatives of organisations and local government officials, and informal interviews with some individuals were also conducted. Secondary research included documents, photographs, artefacts, direct and participant observation techniques to triangulate inferences. This chapter is an output of my doctoral research and provides a historical account of the founding of Fordsburg, and the communities that came to inhabit this young neighbourhood in the fledging city of Johannesburg. It purports to narrate how early communities established, contested and challenged concepts of belonging and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011) within a South African context where forms of citizenship and nationalism were contested. The chapter shows how the then ‘Indian’ community rooted itself into Fordsburg by establishing schools, places of worship and livelihoods. This is all based on archival research. The chapter then provides an empirical account of how a community member, born in Fordsburg in the 1930s, takes us through events in his life, illustrating how communities

created a sense of belonging to a place when spaces were contested. The people who live in the communities proceed to shape the community's character by the livelihoods they craft within it.

### **3 The Founding of Fordsburg**

My story begins with the accidental discovery of the gold reef in 1886 on the farm Langlaagte, on the Witwatersrand that would herald a city, Johannesburg, which continues to this day to serve as a beacon of hope for migrants from across the continent and beyond. Fordsburg was proclaimed in 1888, shortly after the founding of Johannesburg in 1886. Lewis P Ford and Julius Jeppe bought parts of the Langlaagte farm on which Fordsburg was established. Fordsburg was laid out on the western side of early Johannesburg with Jeppetown on the eastern side (Beavon 2004:53).

The search for gold was a catalyst for the birth of Fordsburg, constructed as a white working-class settlement, becoming attractive to a community of immigrants from across the world eager to make their fortunes in the emerging city of gold. The area became home to a diverse group of immigrants, infused with a mixture of cultures and nationalities, focused on serving the economic needs of the emerging thriving gold mining industry. Immigrants from across southern Africa, Europe, Britain, North America, the Middle East and New Zealand (Brodie 2008:52) came to Johannesburg. In addition, a variety of 'African tribes' were also interspersed with migrants from 'Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, France, Belgium, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Russia, Greece and Romania ... Chinese, Syrians and Australians, and even Americans' (Brodie 2008:53). The second group of people were associated with the secondary and tertiary industries that emerged to support the burgeoning mining industry. This group included lawyers, traders, shopkeepers, ox-wagon drivers, etc. (Callinicos 1981:9). Interspersed amongst these groups of people, we can infer are people of Indian origin, because as early as 1887, there is evidence of 'racial prejudices against dark-skinned people ... manifest[ing] itself in a geography of segregation' (Beavon 2004:41). Already we see that land ownership became a controversial issue when the Gold Laws of the ZAR (*Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek*) restricted any person of colour, i.e. African, Indian, coloured, Malay, Chinese and children of 'mixed-race' marriages from owning land. Prime business sites and residential areas were set aside for privileged whites (Sahistoryonline n.d.).

For people of Indian origin, residential settlements were already designed along racial and ethnic lines. As the town grew rapidly, people were segregated into racially defined ‘locations’ or formal ghettos (Parnell & Beavon 1996:14) where they were ‘allowed’ to live. These ‘locations’ were created along racial and ethnic categorisations of the pre-apartheid government at the time. The ‘locations’ were known as ‘Coolie Location’ (Indian or Asian location), ‘Malay Location’ (mostly Muslim Cape Malay) and ... ‘Kaffir Location’ (African location) and these existed alongside the ‘white’ Brick-fields (Brodie 2008:127). Thus, even early Johannesburg was ‘constructed around these ordained racial spatial divisions’ (Rugunanan 2016) where people could live and trade along with their fellow racial kin (Tomlinson et al. 2003). Thus, the people of Indian origin, coloureds and African people lived mainly in the ‘Coolie Location’ or along the marshy grounds of the Fordsburg Spruit (Mandy 1984:13), or among the ‘jumble of shacks made from scrounged materials’ belonging to African, Indian and coloured people who lived in the ‘Malay Location’ (Beavon 2004:10).

In 1887, stands went on auction in the Main Street in Fordsburg. There was little indication of how the land was to be used, whether for commercial or residential purposes. By 1896, 6 000 people were occupying Fordsburg (Beavon 2004). The close proximity to the gold mines (Robinson, Crown Mines, Village Deep) and to the centre of Johannesburg made Fordsburg a particularly convenient place to live. After the South African War (1899–1902), miners brought their families to live in Fordsburg in small worker cottages, suggesting the idea of longer-term settlements and permanence. Fordsburg in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century consisted of workers mainly employed in service-related industries that supported the mines, giving the neighbourhood a working-class atmosphere.

One of the distinguishing markers that colour the neighbourhood and remain true today, is the mixture of residential homes, small shops, small industries, workshops, eating places, with the exception of bars. In 1887, to accommodate the growing number of migrated Indian traders, an area of six blocks of houses to the west of Fordsburg was founded (Jinnah 2013). The closeness of Pageview and Burghersdorp to Fordsburg meant that Indians and Afrikaners shared similar working and living spaces (Brink 2008:10). The spillover of Indians from congested Pageview into Fordsburg resulted in the movement of Afrikaans-speaking people out of Fordsburg and into other areas. This ‘recycling of communities’, a feature that tends to reappear in Fordsburg

throughout its history, is very much evident today, when the majority of people of Indian origin, have either been forcefully moved out, or have rented and sub-let their homes to other nationalities.

By 1915, Fordsburg could be characterised as a diverse community made up of ethnically distinct English, Afrikaans, Jewish, Lebanese, Indian, Chinese, coloured and African people (Brodie 2008). This brief contextual background shows that Fordsburg was anything but a white immigrant suburb; instead, each wave of migrants cast their own identity on the overall character of Fordsburg. For the purposes of this chapter, attention will be given to the history of people of Indian origin

#### **4 The Indian Community**

During the period 1860 to 1911, approximately 150 000 immigrants from India arrived in South Africa to work on the sugar plantations in Natal, today KwaZulu-Natal, as indentured labour (Bhana & Brain 1990:15). Unable to find employment in India, this group of indentured labourers entered into labour contracts guaranteeing them employment on the sugar plantations of Natal. This group consisted mainly of Telegu, Tamil and Hindi-speaking Indians. The second group of Indians consisted of free Indians or ex-indentured immigrants who could return to India or were free to settle in southern Africa/Natal. The opportunity for business and trade gave this group the impetus to travel to Transvaal (one of the provinces in South Africa) and to Johannesburg in particular. The third group, non-indentured migrants or ‘passenger’ Indians (mostly Muslims from Gujarat), made their way to the Transvaal, paid their own way, and arrived from 1870s onwards (Brodie 2008). This group consisted of a mixture of artisans and traders, teachers, and interpreters, with the majority being traders and hawkers (Bhana & Brain 1990:23). The Indian community in the Transvaal comprised all three groups of Indian immigrants.

Both Cachalia (1983) and Bhana and Brain (1990) thus categorise Indian migrants of this era as ‘trading class’, ‘wealthy merchant’, ‘hawkers’ and ‘petty entrepreneurs’. Characteristically, all of these groups had a strong entrepreneurial flair. The majority of the ‘passenger’ Indians were relatively wealthy Muslims, while most of the formally indentured Indians were Hindus (Brodie 2008; Kuper 1960). However, the high ‘registration’ fees required to start a business effectively excluded most Indians from setting up their own businesses (Tomaselli & Beavon 1986:182). Given the restrictions, many



resorted to hawking activities. Those ‘free’ Indians, mainly Muslim, sold fruits and vegetables, while the more established ‘passenger’ Indians ran enterprises in the wholesale market of fresh produce. The poorer group of ‘free’ Hindus moved into flower selling (Joshi 1941), while Gujarati Muslims and Memon traders from western India operated retail outlets (Bhana & Brain 1990:86). The hawkers and pedlars, who were primarily Gujarati Hindus, lived in close surrounding areas of Burghersdorp, Fordsburg and Vrededorp.

Since 1886, people of Indian origin were subjected to discriminatory laws such as the *Transvaal Law 3 of 1885* of the then Transvaal Republic, more commonly known as the anti-Indian law, restricting access to residence and trading rights for Indians. After the South African War (1899–1902), the then governor of the Transvaal did not repeal the laws, but instead sought to implement additional laws such as the *Gold Law of 1908* and the *Precious and Base Metals Act*, which prohibited all people of ‘colour’ (or ‘non-white’) from owning land (Parnell & Beavon 1996). Other laws such as *The Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance* and the *Asiatic Registration Act* controlled further immigration of Asians into the Transvaal, deported illegal residents and forced every legal Indian in the Transvaal to carry a registration certificate at all times (Brink 2008:22). Trying to control the movement of Indian people even further, the *Transvaal Land and Tenure Act of 1919* established separate living and trading places (Tomaselli & Beavon 1986:182). Despite the combined legislative practices and enactments, the policing of these Acts was spurious since many ‘Indians effectively owned ‘white’ property through a nominee’ (Benjamin 1979:87).

Many of the passenger Indians came to South Africa with the intent to leverage business opportunities. However, they were not wealthy, as they did not enter South Africa with capital. Among the merchants who first established themselves in Natal and then moved to Transvaal were among a wealthier group of traders (Cachalia 1983:6). Other Indians found work in the catering industry, or as employees in established trades or as petty traders, hawkers, waiters, labourers and *dhobies* (laundryman) (Bhana & Brain 1990; Cachalia 1983). The 1896 Census shows that there were 3 398 Indians in Johannesburg, comprising 1 572 Muslims and 1 826 Hindus (Bhana & Brain 1990:84). Males outnumbered females by eight to one.

The success of the Indian traders was quickly noted and credited to the extended family system, hard work and kinship networks (Bhana & Brain 1990: 83). The following quote by a white man captures the Indian traders’ ethic:

All seven days in the week are working days for the Indians and they work from sunrise to sunset. On Sundays they write up their account books and hawkers settle their accounts. Others either keep the shop open on holidays blatantly or station a man outside to smuggle customers in ... (Bhana & Brain 1990:84).

As people of Indian origin began to set down firm roots in Fordsburg, the need for education became a priority. The development of schools in Fordsburg from the 1900s to the 1970s attests to the importance of education in the community, transmission of language and culture and the rooting of communities.

## **5 Education**

Prior to the 1900s, children of migrants and the local citizens had the choice between Dutch-medium (government) education or an English-medium (private) education. A number of schools were opened in the 1890s to serve predominantly white English and Afrikaner children. The Fordsburg Church School was opened in January 1891 and by 1892, listed 91 pupils and three teachers on its roster (Brink 2008). In 1903, the Goede Hoop School in Fordsburg was completed at a cost of £2 000. There were 315 pupils in this school (Stals 1986:50), established to provide mother tongue tuition for Afrikaans-speaking children. Through the combined efforts of a group of Muslim traders, a school for Indian children was established in 1913 and began with 136 pupils (Arkin 1989:107), indicating the presence of a significant Indian population in Johannesburg. The government provided one of Johannesburg's first Indian schools in 1914, the Johannesburg Indian Government School, commonly known as the Bree Street Indian Government School ('BIGS') (Brink 2008:12). The school, situated on the corner of Bree and Malherbe Streets, across from the Oriental Plaza, still exists and today houses the Johannesburg Muslim School. Until 1939, the school only provided primary education, but when additional classrooms were built, the school then became known as the Fordsburg Indian High School (Carrim 1990). During the period 1948–1968, residents from Pageview sent their children to primary and secondary schools in Fordsburg (Carrim 1990).

The Shree Transvaal United Patidar Society in Fordsburg was established by Mahatma Gandhi in 1912, with the Patidar Hall built in 1918 for

the Hindu community. To ensure the transmission and continuation of the Hindu language, culture and tradition, the Shree Bharat Sharda Mandir school (SBSM) was founded in 1936 under the patronage of the Patidar society (Maharaj 2012). The school was housed in the Patidar Hall in Fordsburg and rooted within the Hindu faith; the words *Sharda* (learning) and *Mandir* (temple), appropriately translates to ‘temple of learning’. A broader educational forum, the Shree Transvaal Hindu Educational Society, constructed a formal structure to house the SBSM school in 1948. In 1955, a training college for South African Indian teachers called the Transvaal College of Education was opened in Fordsburg (Rugunanan 2016). These establishments indicate a strong presence of people of Indian origin in Fordsburg.

Since 1913, schools catered for different race and religious groups. Although Fordsburg was demarcated as a white area, provision was made for a school for Indian children within the neighbourhood. Today, these schools still actively contribute to the community, albeit with a changing demography.

## **6 Religious Places of Worship**

The landscape of Fordsburg is filled with religious structures, attesting to the diversity of groups in early Fordsburg. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, members of the Muslim, Hindu, Catholic and Jewish communities established places of worship and culture in Fordsburg. Itzkin (2000) attributes this religious tolerance to Gandhi’s influence as he promoted mutual respect and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims. The Patidar Hall had the dual purpose of hosting weddings and accommodating several prominent overseas visitors; the school and hall became an integral component of the community where culture, language and religious practices could be imparted and sustained.

The sister neighbourhoods of Fordsburg, Mayfair and Vrededorp have nestled within them numerous mosques. The Hamidia Mosque is situated at 2 Jennings Street, Newtown. The Hamidia Islamic Society, a leading Muslim organisation in the Transvaal, was established in 1906 to look after the welfare of Muslims. On 10 January 1908, Mahatma Gandhi (a Hindu) led a gathering of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Chinese who burnt their passes in defiance of the new discriminatory laws (South African Tourism n.d.). Various nationalities of Muslim migrants still make use of this religious space today. The Hamidia Mosque, together with the Gandhi memorial, a cauldron similar to the one used to burn the passes, is a symbolic space remembered for its

contribution to the passive resistance movement, but that space was not confined to Muslims only; the unifying factor was the solidarity of the immigrants against discrimination.

The landscape of early Fordsburg bears testimony to its diverse community. There are a variety of mosques, churches of different denominations, and even a synagogue built in 1906, which shows evidence of a Jewish presence. A formal place of worship for Hindu immigrants, a temple, is missing from this history. Beavon (2004) records that a Hindu temple was burnt down during the bubonic plague in 1904, but no further information of the temple could be traced. Together with education and religion, sport also served to unite people. While living spaces were segregated, sporting activities reached across colour lines to build communities. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Rangers Football Grounds in Mayfair South provided access to sporting facilities for whites and Indians. This club was formed by a group of British miners in 1889. Brink (2008) notes that teams with people of Indian origin from Fordsburg and Mayfair also used the facilities.

The chapter, up to this point, sketched the establishment of Fordsburg in 1888 and provided a historical background of the communities that came to inhabit it. While it was designated as a whites-only neighbourhood, other races and nationalities quickly moved in, such that Fordsburg takes on the ambience of a 'Little India', a predominantly Indian area. Fordsburg became the entry point for people of Indian origin into South Africa.

Pertinent to my study were the interviews with South African nationals who stayed in Fordsburg or who had businesses in the area. Here I draw on the narrative of one key informant, a Mr Patel (August 2013, interview) who played a role in the resistance to apartheid. His recollections provide insight into how communities were forged through solidarity against the discrimination meted out to them and the role people of Indian origin in Fordsburg intrinsically played in the anti-apartheid movement. Mr Patel's insights also give authenticity to the lives of people of Indian origin who came to inhabit Fordsburg from the 1930s.

Mr Patel's parents came from India in the late 1920s. His elder brother was born in India, but Mr Patel and his siblings were all first-generation residents born in Fordsburg. In 1933, the family relocated from Bree Street to Pioneer Avenue in Fordsburg, where Mr Patel lived until 1963. Mr Patel fondly recounted the period 1940s and onwards and remembers that most of the Indian community in Fordsburg lived in Bree Street, but that his family had moved to Pioneer Avenue. Directly behind Pioneer Avenue, the residential complex for

working and lower middle-class whites was established, called Octavia Hill Flats. Mr Patel remembers the diversity of the people living in Fordsburg, comprising a mixture of white families, six Indian families (of whom all were tailors), a Lebanese family, a coloured family and two Chinese families. Mr Patel narrates the story of a Lebanese family in the area whose business became the biggest carpet manufacturer in southern Africa. Fondly, he recalls that the area was called the ‘Gaza Strip’.

Mr Patel confirmed that people of Indian origin prioritised education and the area where Mr Patel grew up in produced half a dozen doctors, two teachers and an aeronautical engineer who studied in London. The importance of education and establishment of educational institutions in Fordsburg, discussed in early sections of the chapter point to the significance of the role of education in the communities for people of Indian origin.

The building currently housing the Johannesburg Muslim School in Bree Street was initially known as the Helpmekaar Skool (Afrikaans phrase meaning ‘help one another’). Mr Patel recalls that this school only provided education up to Standard 8 (currently Grade 10). A matric certificate (Standard 10/Grade 12 with exemption) was an essential requirement for university education. Parents of Indian origin took up the fight for the right to a matric qualification. They won this right in 1947 when the government of the day established the Johannesburg Indian High School in Fordsburg to provide this matriculation qualification. Parents of Indian origin were cognisant that a Standard 8 education only, as it was known while the Nationalist Party was in power, would deprive their community of future professionals and of uplifting communities out of poverty. The first matriculation class consisted of only a dozen pupils and included Ahmed Kathrada, who would later become an ANC stalwart and Robben Island prisoner (Mr Patel, Interview August 2013).

From 1946 to 1970, Fordsburg became a hive of political activity, reinforcing the rise of resistance across the country against the then apartheid government. The Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) mobilised and organised Indian people, not only in Fordsburg, but in central Johannesburg, Sophiatown and throughout the former province of the Transvaal. A turning point emerged in the form of the 1946 passive resistance campaign. The pre-nationalist Smuts Government had enforced the *Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act 28 of 1946*, which restricted the areas of residence and trade, and curtailed the rights of Indians to acquire property (Mandela 1994:118). The Act crudely became known as ‘The Ghetto Act’. In compensation for these restrictions,

Indians were offered a ‘form of dummy representation’ in Parliament through white representatives (Mr Patel, Interview August 2013).

Mr Patel documents that the highly politicised Indian communities in Fordsburg, Vrededorp, Sophiatown, Johannesburg, and the former Natal Province rejected the Act. In his autobiography, Mandela (1994:118) notes that the Indian community in South Africa was ‘outraged’ at the Act and launched a two-year passive resistance campaign starting in 1946, where 2 000 Indian men, women and children went to prison in defiance of this law. The passive resistance campaign in 1946 reminded Mandela of the 1913 passive resistance campaign organised by Mahatma Gandhi. Many of those protesting and arrested came from Pageview and Fordsburg. The campaign’s significance was an important moment of reflection for Mandela. He says, ‘for two years people suspended their lives to take up the battle ... no fewer than 2 000 volunteers went to jail’ (Mandela 1994:119). Mr Patel highlights the political consciousness of the Indian people and the role played by the Indian community in Fordsburg in establishing an approach and philosophy of non-violent struggle.

## **7 A Time of Chivalry**

On the social front, Fordsburg was also remembered for its chivalry, romance and gangsterism in the 1950s. Until the early 1960s, there were few forms of recreational entertainment for people of Indian origin, coloured and black people. They were limited to cinemas and sports fields. Other forms of entertainment sprouted in the form of dance halls, gambling dens and shebeens all around Fordsburg. They provided important spaces for social interaction, meeting places and amusement. The dance halls and shebeens were in the basement of Mangalam Flats on Central Road; this same basement served as the World War II ex-soldiers club too, and thus became an important venue for social interactions (Mr Patel, Interview August 2013).

Other residents remember with nostalgia that Fordsburg was very vibrant during the 1960s and into the 1970s. They recount that it was a very mixed society, with blacks, Indians and coloureds participating in the entertainment. People congregated around Planet Hotel, which hosted jazz sessions. Members of the community used to dress up when coming to the movies, with the men in their tuxedos and the women in elegant regalia for an evening out on the town (Rugunanan 2016). The residents’ memories evoked a sense of nostalgia for the time; they remembered events as a time of chivalry

and happy moments. One of the residents reminisces that black and coloured people living in Soweto, Sophiatown, Newclare, and Coronation regularly used to visit Fordsburg. In Pageview and Fordsburg,

we had Indian, coloureds all living together and we lived happily and everyone was for each other. If something happened at someone's house the whole town would be there to assist. That was the difference. We were united. And when we lived here, we were one unit (Interview, Rugunanan 2016).

Despite racial differences, the Indian, black and coloured people exuded a sense of community and social cohesiveness despite being segregated by law.

Mr Patel recalls that, in the early 1950s, 'I, myself, was a bit of a bugger, dagga smoker and, of course, I told you there was this club, the ex-political prisoners club, dancing, all sorts, billiard tables and snooker'. Around this time, Mr Patel became acquainted with a known gangster. He recalls and quickly qualifies that although he did not see it for himself, the gangsters used to operate a protection racket. Indian merchants used to run their businesses in Fordsburg, and one merchant would borrow from another to repay a loan. Sometimes the financier would hire the services of someone with a dubious character to try and extract the money from the person owing (Mr Patel, Interview August 2013). So, even while there was a time for chivalry and romance, the socio-economic circumstances led to a hidden economy of crime that reinforced a repetitive cycle of poverty from which people could not escape. One of the residents pointed out that class differences did not exist as much as the prevailing conditions of overcrowding and lack of space. It was always the prevailing sense of community that was in their uppermost thought – the memories of togetherness and belonging of Fordsburg featured prominently. This common situation probably fostered a high degree of tolerance and cohesiveness within the community.

The study by Glynn (1981) provides three predictors of an actual sense of community: first, expected length of community residency; secondly, satisfaction with the community; and thirdly, the number of neighbours one could identify by first name. The three predictors aptly describe the sense of a community in the long-time residents' memories of Fordsburg; the participants interviewed were either first- or second-generation community members; the

discussion reflects the satisfaction of the community; and lastly, the close proximity of the houses, neighbourhoods, common memories and shared experiences reflect a ‘belonging’ people had for one another. Thus a sense of community existed in Fordsburg during this period.

Fordsburg was forged, fashioned by the political constructs of capital and the state and, almost unnoticed, took on an Indian identity, something created by apartheid South Africa. The areas surrounding Fordsburg, for example, Mayfair, were partly demolished and reconstructed as a white only area, but Fordsburg itself, with a significant white and Indian population, remained largely unaffected. There were attempts to force Indian people to move, for instance, the state closed the Johannesburg Indian High School in an effort to force people to Lenasia where it was relocated. It is recorded that in 1967, the community of Fordsburg opposed the closure of the Johannesburg Indian High School (Unknown 1984). Indian families who chose to remain in Fordsburg were forced to send their children by railway transport to attend high school in Lenasia. With time, the strategy of the state worked with the majority of the Indian families relenting and moving out of Fordsburg. However, part of the reason was also that the overcrowded living conditions became untenable.

## **8 Conclusion**

The chapter began with a historical overview of people of Indian origin’s entry into Transvaal. Their stay in a neighbourhood called Fordsburg, constructed in 1888, shortly after the proclamation of Johannesburg in 1886, is narrated against the neighbourhood’s early development as it evolves from a white working class neighbourhood to a ‘mini India’. By no design, the neighbourhood takes on an ‘Indian’ identity, illustrative of the number of people of Indian origin living there. As the community sets down roots, the people of Indian origin are agentic in constructing places of learning, worship, sport and recreation. Against this backdrop of early history, a first-generation resident continues his reflections and recollections of how the Indian community evolved and made Fordsburg their own, in character, in compassion for other racialised groups and in solidarity to one another. The chapter provides insight into how early indentured labourers claim a sense of belonging to contested spaces in a country they are excluded from because of their race.



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## **SECTION 2**

### **Women during Indenture**



# Chapter 5

## South African Women of Indian Origin: From Indenture to Democracy

**Devi Moodley Rajab**

### **Abstract**

The contribution of South African Indians in the struggle against apartheid is not widely known in contemporary South Africa today, particularly among the youth. Even less recognised is the part played by Indian women in the struggle. Little is known of their role in the Indian resistance movements, as they fought alongside their men to change the course of history (Rajab 1999). In 1996, when the Indian Government honoured a young 16-year-old martyr of the South African freedom struggle, Ms Valliamah Munusamy Moodaliar, who died soon after her imprisonment for resisting apartheid, few South Africans knew her story and the situation has not changed in any significant way. For large periods of our history in this country, Indian women were largely invisible. Perhaps it is true to say that among their counter-parts of white and coloured women, Indian women were the most occupationally stagnant group under apartheid rule (Walker 1991). Though higher education records paint a different picture, their qualifications did not always translate into job opportunities or positions of high status and although they fought alongside their men in the Satyagraha struggles, the taboos of culture, religion and other societal norms kept them locked in the restrictive duties of domesticity (Walker 1991). That Indian women played a valuable and crucial role towards the liberation of their people cannot be overlooked. In relinquishing their traditional role to don the mantle of resistance, they sacrificed their material comforts for a higher-order principle so succinctly captured in the words of the great Valliamah, ‘who would not want to die for one’s own motherland?’ This chapter looks at women from indenture to democracy.

**Keywords:** Women, Indian, Struggle, Indenture, Democracy



## **1 Introduction**

Given the impact of over 160 years of settlement in South Africa, how have Indians fared generally and more specifically, how have Indian women contributed to the land of their adoption? Who are they and how have they adapted to the various multicultural contexts of life in Africa? This paper is an attempt to trace the journey from indenture to democracy through profiling the lives of Indian women in the struggle and beyond. A series of interviews were conducted by the writer to profile women in politics, law, medicine, academia, arts and culture, and from various linguistic and religious groupings within the community. An analysis of the interviews of South African women of Indian origin reveals a significant metamorphosis over the years closely aligned to the politics of the day. How they are viewed constitutionally, according to some political commentators, should provide some insights into possibilities and contradictions of Mandela's vision of a multicultural democracy.

## **2 Chrysalis: Early History**

Against the backdrop of indentured labour, unlettered brave women carry with them an innate spirit of resistance from the country of their birth to the country of their adoption.

Indian women first entered the struggle in 1913 by way of an open invitation from officials of the Satyagraha Association to join their men in retaliation to the Searle judgement which invalidated all non-Christian marriages. By a stroke of a pen, all Hindu, Muslim and Zoroastrian marriages were declared null and void. This meant that all married Indian women in South Africa were reduced to the status of concubines, whilst their progeny were classified illegitimate and deprived of all their rights of inheritance. Understandably the cause was an emotive one on the grounds of the social and moral implications for Indian families (Reddy & Meer 1996). The honour of India's womanhood had been insulted. The ruling started a storm of protest, especially since it imposed additional legal disabilities on Indian women, who were roused in great numbers to join Gandhiji's passive resistance campaign. In uncharacteristically strident behaviour the women relinquished their traditional roles as homemakers to join the struggle against their oppression. And in doing so they had the support of their menfolk and families.

The contributions of these brave women have to be seen in the context of the historical and social period in which they lived. Set against this backdrop their struggle takes on an even greater importance. That these women resisters helped to transform the Satyagraha into a powerful mass resistance movement in which 10 000 people from a small community went to prison and 60 000 workers went on strike in what was described as the largest general strike in South Africa at that time, is truly remarkable (Walker 1991). Although Indian women had become involved in Gandhi's passive resistance of 1913, they did not attempt to form any long-term women's organisations or play an overt political role again until the 1940s (Walker 1991).

In 1946, the new leadership challenged the harsh, segregationist *Asiatic Land Tenure and Representation Act* (the so-called *Ghetto Act*) that was passed by the government. This law established separate areas of land tenure in Natal towns and placed severe restrictions on Indian settlement. This gave rise to a wave of anger in the Indian community, which fed into a campaign of passive resistance. The campaign had an important impact on Indian women, initiating a new political activism in their ranks (Reddy & Meer 1996). Dr Goonam, a young medical doctor, was the main organiser, and in March 1946, a well-attended meeting of Indian women was held. Goonam, Fatima Meer and Mrs NP Desai were the speakers. The women pledged their support for the initiative and many women volunteered. As they emerged from 'pots to politics' they displayed a remarkable versatility in the roles that they were called upon to play (Rajab 1999).

### **3 Pioneers**

As a new generation gives utterances to their fears and aspirations in the land of their indenture, community life is paramount and the Gandhian spirit of upliftment and resistance prevails.

#### **3.1 Dr Kesavaloo Goonam (1906 – 1998)**

Dr Goonam was one of the early stalwarts who lived through two World Wars and fought a third symbolic one in the country of her birth. Goonam was born in May Street, central Durban in 1906, some 50 years after the arrival of the first batch of indentured settlers. Her mother came from Mauritius and her

father from India, but she always regarded herself as being a part of Africa, although the strains of the Indian influence added to her identity as a South African of Indian origin. Her later travels to England and Scotland for professional training added yet more dimensions to this interesting character. As one of the earliest women to qualify as a medical doctor, Goonam was well ahead of her time.

She lived in an era when Indian women had limited education and were largely relegated to marriage and domesticity, although they did appear sporadically, with the endorsement of their fathers and husbands, to participate in anti-apartheid activities. Goonam's politicisation was inevitable, as she was raised in the midst of resistance against repression. Starting with the threats of repatriation of indentured labourers to the gradual erosion of privileges with the withdrawal of the franchise in the early nineteenth century – issues which framed her formative life – and the increase in anti-Indian legislation, she found she had no choice but to stand up against the European governments of the day. As a teenager she lived through the indignity of her family home being expropriated by the Durban City Council, and her sense of the deep injustices prevalent in South African society was roused during her education and life overseas in various parts of the 'Empire'.

There were clearly many dimensions to this multifaceted woman. There was the political activist, the professional medico, and the socialite who did not conform to traditional Indian cultural expectations. In Edin-burgh, where she trained as a medical doctor in the mid-1930s, she thrived on the civil freedoms that existed for all races but, with a principle that marked so many early Indian leaders, she was drawn back home out of a real sense of having to return something to the community which had provided for her to study overseas. Part of her attraction was that she spoke Tamil eloquently and although her community was wary of her emancipated ways they were in awe of her and her ability to address large gatherings in the vernacular. Frustrated by apartheid's laws, Goonam joined a group of her colleagues from Edinburgh to form the Bellair Club where they could party in peace, partly to cushion themselves from the indignity of being constantly refused admission to hotels and restaurants and other public places. They purchased a rambling cottage on three acres of land where, in between being sent to prison, directing political campaigns and practising medicine on a social welfare basis, she relaxed – dancing and playing bridge with the likes of Dr. Monty Naicker, Dr. B.T. Chetty and other stalwarts of the movement.

When she returned from the UK in 1936, having qualified as a medical doctor, she advocated strongly for birth control and the legalisation of abortion to address the problems of overpopulation. She made inroads into other communities, despite racial reservations at the time. Ironically, she was well received among the lower-income group of the white community. Anecdotally, she once visited a white family and heard the little child say: ‘Oh Mummy, “the coolie doctor” has arrived’. This became the title of her autobiography, which is the first struggle autobiography of an Indian woman ever to be published.

## **4 Stalwarts**

In the febrile light of day, against a harsh and unsympathetic climate, these women grew out of the pioneers’ example and became iconoclasts. As freedom fighters they were ideologically diverse. Some were moralists, some were pragmatists, and some could be seen as ameliorators. All were nevertheless heroes of the community. Among this group the most prominent were Fatima Meer, Shanti Naidoo, Amina Asvat Cachalia and Rajes Pillay (Rajab 2010).

### **4.1 Fatima Meer (1928 – 2010):**

#### **The Voice of the Dispossessed**

As a political leader, academic, writer, human rights and gender activist and lifelong Gandhian, Fatima Meer’s name resonates with the liberation struggle and the downtrodden. A close friend of Mandela she was tasked to write his biography. Fatima published more than 40 books on a wide range of socio-political subjects, and was acknowledged both locally and internationally with a bounty of awards in recognition of her anti-apartheid work. Ranked by our citizens as 45<sup>th</sup> of the 100 Great South Africans in 2004, she is one of our country’s most distinguished 20<sup>th</sup>-century leaders and icons and a champion of the underclass. Her death in 2010 was a nation’s loss.

Fatima’s political life started early when, as a socially conscious 16-year-old in 1944, she helped raise funds for famine relief in Bengal. In 1946, together with thousands of Indians, she joined the passive resistance campaign while still a high school student and established the Student Passive Resistance Committee, which propelled her into the public eye. Although

short and petite, she became a powerful public figure. She was poised, intelligent, quick-witted, intense, strong-willed and energetic. Fatima's battles were fought on many levels. In 1949 the outbreak of race riots among blacks and Indians in Durban hampered relations between the communities and affected the solidarity among non-white peoples in their battle against apartheid. The race riots were one of the turning points in Fatima's life, and she spent the better part of her life working tirelessly to improve race relations, promoting justice, reconciliation and non-violent action.

Her activism was further sparked when she led the historical women's march on the Union building on 9 August 1956 against the unfair pass laws for black women. As a result of her activism, she was banned. Fatima's modus operandi against oppression was well thought-out and multifaceted. Realising the importance of institutional foundations for a political cause in defiance of her banning orders, she established many organisations such as the Institute for Black Research, and various skills training centres for impoverished shack dwellers, domestic workers and black youth. It is significant that the citation for the conferment of her honorary degree from the University of Natal in 1998 stated that 'Meer was among the first South Africans to have ever existed, a dutiful citizen before citizenship was enfranchised for her'.

## **4.2 Shanthie Naidoo (1935 – )**

When one meets Shanthie Naidoo, one does not expect a meek and fragile person. Instead, one expects to find a strong, angry, belligerent woman who was able to bear the brunt of solitary confinement and long banning orders under which even the bravest would shudder. Granddaughter of Thumbie Naidoo, Gandhi's lieutenant in South Africa, and daughter of Roy Naidoo, who became Vice-President of the Transvaal Indian Congress, Shanti and her siblings come from a politically charged background. At our first meeting, she carried her history in a large plastic bag filled with old photographs and press cuttings roughly assembled over the years. In addition to cuttings on her father, she showed me pictures of the strong women in her family from the supplement to the Gandhi-founded *Indian Opinion* of 29 October 1913, 'Brave Women Passive Resisters: Sentenced at Newcastle to three months imprisonment with hard labour'. All the women were sari-clad, bearing children from babies to toddlers. Among the group of grim-faced, mainly Tamil women were her grandmother, mother and aunts.

Shanti clearly remembers the day she was arrested under the *Terrorism Act* in June 1969 where the police tried to break her spirit to provide evidence against 22 ANC members. They included Winnie Mandela, Ruth First, Lilian Ngoyi, Joyce Sikakane, Barbara Hogan, and Dorothy Nyembe. She spent a total of 371 days in solitary confinement interspersed with interrogation. This was almost immediately followed by a five-year banning order in 1971. In relating her story, Shanti cries and it becomes very clear that decades later, the pain and torment still linger. When asked, however, whether she would have chosen to live her life any differently, she states that her life was her very purpose,

If I had not done what I did, and others not done what they did, then the trial of 22 people would have taken place – but because we all refused to give evidence it fell apart. Our unity was our strength, and our conviction was our weapon.

### **4.3 Amina Asvat Cachalia (b. 1930 – 2013):**

#### **Activism in the Blood**

‘Whilst I am proud of my Indian roots, I never joined the struggle as an Indian. I was just one of the millions who had been stripped of dignity and human rights and who decided to fight for liberation’. Amina Asvat Cachalia is a woman well worth remembering and honouring. A lifetime spent establishing or serving institutions fighting for a democratic order and the rights of women, her Order of Luthuli presidential award appropriately commends her ‘contribution to the struggle for gender equality, non-racialism and a free and democratic South Africa’. Lodged between the greatness of a Gandhi and a Mandela, married to a stalwart and born of an activist father, this personality seems to have been influenced by patriarchy to reach great heights despite her gender and the restrictions of her era.

Amina Cachalia is no ordinary woman. Amina was born in the rural town of Vereeniging in 1930, the youngest daughter of Ebrahim and Fatima Asvat. The family was politically conscious and played a meaningful role in the Gandhian struggles at the turn of the century. ‘When I was 15, I became involved in politics in a kind of natural way. As an Asvat, there was a predisposition towards political activism in our home’. Her political activities were enhanced and formalised when she met her future husband, Yusuf

Cachalia, who was a prominent figure in the South African Indian Congress and who played a leading role in the Defiance Campaign in 1952.

With the clampdown in the aftermath of the Rivonia Trial of 1962, the Cachalias both received banning orders, together with other political activists. Both were placed under house arrest, and prohibited from social gatherings, membership of organisations and from entering publishing or educational institutions. They served three consecutive banning orders amounting to 15 years of house arrest. To underscore this, a few years earlier when Amina was jailed along with 28 other women for 14 days in a Boksburg prison for organising the 1952 Germiston march, the apartheid laws which had sought to separate races were defied in the women's cells. 'For once, all the races could live together, even though it was under a prison roof. I spent very night and every day with [those] women, serving our sentence, in the Boksburg jail', Cachalia reminisced. In fact, she remembers that as the youngest and one with a heart condition, the women took turns to take special care of her. Despite the social isolation, the Cachalias were forced to endure throughout much of their marriage, Amina feels no bitterness or hatred. 'They did terrible things to us', she says. 'For instance, a dead cat was hung on the handle of our front door'. Yet she prefers to dwell on the good times, when comrades met, had parties and fun. She did what she had to do and is content now to enjoy her children and grandchildren. Amina was elected a Member of Parliament of the National Assembly in the first democratic elections in 1994. She was also offered an ambassadorial posting, but graciously turned it down because of family commitments. Until her death in 2014 she continued to serve in organisations that focused on the upliftment of women and the nurturing and protection of children.

## **6.4 Rajes Pillay (b. 1944 – 2020):**

### **Ode to an Unknown Soldier**

Rajes Pillay's life story is an ode to the Unknown Soldier – broken but unbowed. She may be described as a low-profile freedom fighter about whom few people in the country knew. Drawn from a desire to combat injustice, her involvement was a personal journey made out of a deep sense of morality and what she considered to be fair play. Pulled in by the headwinds of resistance which grew beyond her control, and then left her trapped in the purgatory of exile for a decade and a half, she languished between Swaziland, Mo-

zambique, Zambia and Angola. As her words prove, the life of resistance is a grim experience not to be glamourized – that of floor-bound mattresses, constant moving and a daily battle to motivate oneself and one's compatriots as to the nobleness of their end goal. In keeping with the exile experience, the country and community to which she returned was a very different, occasionally alien, place. She was a most unlikely candidate to embark on this journey and did not fit the usual stereotype of a vitriolic freedom fighter. Hers was not a battle of climbing platforms to raise her voice with impressive speeches or of burning flags and marching against government officials. Instead, it seems that apartheid knocked against her ribs and forced her into exile.

The much-sought day of liberation, once bright with possibilities, ended up offering little for exiles like Rajes, whose country now sought capitalist accumulators of the rainbow nation, not past activists. Much afflicted by the psychological scarring of a life constantly on the run, Rajes has been in and out of mental institutions since this interview in 2010. Rajes was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1944 in a large and sprawling estate where her maternal parents lived. Her father was a comfortably well-off, respected businessman in Kimberley. 'When I completed matric in 1960 the *Separation of the Universities Act* was passed and Indian students were forced to study at ethnic institutions run by the government. There was a lot of debate around whether one should go to universities within the country under protest or seek an education outside of South Africa. Those like us who could afford to do so did'. After 3 years doing her A levels in the UK, Rajes returned home.

What makes a young woman begin to defy authorities in the face of obvious danger to herself and her family? For Rajes it began early, initially as a general awareness that things were unjust. As a young girl she watched how her father as a listed person was constantly harassed by the Security Branch police each time he sought permission to leave the province on account of his membership in the Coloured People's Congress in Kimberley and a senior member of the Kimberley branch of the Natal Indian Congress. Many other influences in Rajes's life shaped her political thinking. 'London was also a factor in my politicisation', she says pensively,

*... because I enjoyed the freedom of living in an open society where all views could be expressed without fear of reprisals. Our ANC stalwarts were also free to organise protests in London where it was*



*a part of the culture for people to speak openly against the establishment. As a student I also enjoyed the activities that brought all nationalities together through the Commonwealth Students Union. We were very active in a lot of fields such as raising money for underdeveloped countries and distributing food and clothing through Oxfam.*

When Rajes returned to South Africa in the early 1960s, having encountered this freedom, she had great difficulty with life under the apartheid regime where everyday life meant standing in different queues, attending separate institutions, being restricted to certain beaches and benches and being muffled by censorship. Her head-on collision with the Special Branch came shortly after she had joined SACHED (SA Council of Higher Education) and became secretary to the SRC in 1963. Later she joined the Natal Indian Congress movement as a volunteer and her formal training as an activist began. Her political socialisation matured in the 1970s with friendships among comrades who shared a common vision and enemy. One of the friendships led to a chance request from an exiled ANC activist for covert information and assistance – directories, detailed maps and money to be left at secret addresses. An initially naive Rajes agreed without fully comprehending the ramifications of her involvement which, over the following years, became deeper and deeper. Gradually, she became a conduit between covert ANC sympathisers in the country and operatives living outside the borders, arranging for money transfers and the transfer of state documentation. To her horror she received news in 1979 from the underground ANC structures instructing her to leave the country immediately – her last contact had turned out to be a mole within the South African Police. Rajes had no alternative but to flee into a life in exile. Rajes was first sent to the independent but porous Swaziland via Piet Retief on the back of a furniture truck. Her first job in Swaziland was that of a Refugee Counsellor. She recalls that on her first day, the South African army bombed and flattened a house occupied by exiles in an area called Two Sticks, and she had to counsel the survivors.

For Rajes this was just the beginning. Several other sporadic bombings caused refugees to come flooding into the office to seek relief. She supported these traumatised people as best as she could by arranging funerals, births, scholarships and travel with assistance from the United Nations. Always sensitive, she became increasingly affected by the trauma and death

surrounding her and, over the years, she was hospitalised on several occasions. Rajes's involvement in the armed struggle was almost inevitable. The life of exiles in Swaziland was difficult. They were hounded like rodents by the South African army which had infiltrated Swaziland's borders with impunity. As a result, many exiles were kidnapped, shot at or bombed. Rajes spent 12 years in exile in Swaziland. By the late 1980s, the paranoid, claustrophobic atmosphere – both real and imagined – meant that few exiles in southern Africa were unscathed emotionally. The toll on Rajes was especially marked, resulting in her being sent for medical and psychiatric treatment to Holland. For Rajes the two most important incidents that happened to her when she came back home were, firstly, to see that her former husband had returned home safely and, secondly, to see the old, hated South African flag go down and the new one go up. 'Then I knew that it was all worth the struggle'.

## **5 Women Under Apartheid: Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges**

### **5.1 Professor Devi Bughwan (1926)**

Professor Bughwan was an important educationalist, influencing a generation of students at a time when there were few female role models in our society. She was the first, long-serving Head of the Department of Speech and Drama at the University of Durban-Westville. But the true measure of her was that at a time of entrenched racial differentiation, she was able to give her community pride by proving that we could beat Europeans at their own game – she was the first Indian woman to hold a doctorate in English, and served on the SABC advisory board – the bastion of all things English. Devi worked within a system outside of protest politics unlike struggle stalwarts who boycotted these establishments or went into exile. Yet she held her own and fought for her rights within a system that she never allowed to define her. She made inroads into speech and drama, education, theatre, radio and academia and broke down many barriers.

### **5.2 Soromini Kallichurum (1931 – 2002)**

She was a pioneering woman in the medical field in the 1960s and 1970s who

broke down barriers to succeed in a world that had long been considered a male stronghold. Over a distinguished career of 40 years, she became an internationally recognised anatomical pathologist and an authority on lung diseases in the black population. She was also a role model to a generation of South African medical students and academics. In 1983 she became the first person of colour and female dean of a medical school in the country when she led the Natal Medical School (later Nelson Mandela Medical School), a rare honour bestowed upon an Indian. Later she was the first woman to be appointed President of the South African Interim Medical and Dental Council. Kallichurum was also the first woman to serve as a member of the Medical Research Council and, after the advent of democracy, became the first President of the Health Professions Council of South Africa, in which she played a transformative role. The remarkable thing about Professor Kallichurum was that she was able to move up the ranks in the medical profession at a time when blacks were not given many opportunities.

## **6 Women Post-Apartheid Freedom**

Post-apartheid freedom has, however, allowed for a renaissance among women achievers in the Indian community. The trailblazers in this regard who have made their mark on the global stage include Judge Navi Pillay as Africa's first United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Advocate Shamila Batoyi, who has recently been appointed as the National Director of Public Prosecutions by the President of South Africa. In the science field, Professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim is an award-winning infectious diseases epidemiologist whose research on the application of Tenofovir gel for HIV prevention among women is globally recognised. In addition, there are several women on the bench, in business and the arts, who are emerging to take their rightful place in society.

This paper is an attempt to tell their stories and chart some areas of the development of such women, from indenture to contemporary times. It is by no means a demographic representation of their achievements, but rather a qualitative profile of contemporary women of Indian origin. I have tried to capture a portrait of who they are and what they have achieved as individuals, mothers and community leaders in the realm of civic, public and private life. This is an attempt to create a profile of a community that has contributed significantly to the country of its adoption.

In a small way, we provide an alternative view to what Ralph Ellison refers to as ‘historical amnesia prevalent among a people wishing to forget their origins in their desperate need to be assimilated into the country of their adoption’. This condition often results in people either filing away or forgetting aspects of their past, and reconstructing new identities without a clue of their indigenous heritage. In line with this thinking, some may dismiss the subject of this work as an ethnic glorification of women. On the contrary, in this case, ethnicity may be considered a bearer of culture and an expression of historically evolved memories through which individuals give meaning to their worlds.

In profiling the lives of high-achieving women, one needs to acknowledge the importance of those women who work unobtrusively behind the scenes to develop their communities, care for the indigent and prop-up families. They are our teachers, nurses, social workers and housewives, the true backbone of our society, whose contributions have an impact on the national good of the country. At a more visible level, I was particularly moved by several internationally recognised scientists working in the field of HIV/AIDS medical research, heading multi-million-dollar funded NGOs to fight our scourge. Others excel in law, engineering and architecture; in commerce, politics and the arts. Almost all these positions have opened up for women only since the advent of our new democracy.

They include, amongst others, the first Indian woman Dean of the Faculty of Law, Professor Managay Reddy; the first Indian woman brigadier in the Defence Force, Neelambal Moodley; Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Wits University, Professor Leila Patel; the first woman Speaker of Parliament in the ANC government, Professor Frene Ginwala; the first Indian woman editor of the *Mail and Guardian* and latterly the *City Press*, Ferial Haffajee, and among many others the first woman Deputy Minister of Housing, Maggie Govender. The remarkable aspect of their achievements lies in their motivation to succeed despite being held down for decades. Now under the new government, despite the threat of quotas, Indian women are allowed to blossom as never before.

From my interviews with the various women I noted that all the women, regardless of age, profession, religion, political affiliation or social standing, unanimously saw their identities as being clearly rooted in South Africa. Even though many were educated and lived abroad under apartheid’s restrictive laws, they still considered themselves as South African nationals.

‘This is our home. We are South African first and Indians after’, they claim unequivocally. When asked, ‘What does it mean to be a South African Indian?’, the responses span a post-modernist impression of dual continents – the smells and tastes, sights and sounds of these worlds emerge into a kaleidoscopic fusion of one’s cultural identity. For South African Indians, India remains a place of cultural renewal; a place to probe roots and go on holidays or pilgrimages. Bollywood films, music and, more recently, cricketers, are great drawcards of the youth. Saris, pots and pans and *objets d’arts* are sought after. However, there is no interest in Indian politics or history. Identity and allegiance are proudly linked to South Africa.

There appears to be a very clear definition of a South African Indian. According to Professor Fatima Meer, this constructed identity has ‘imbued Indian South Africans with a sense of pride in their ancient culture so that far from developing feelings of inferiority, they cultivated their own brand of ethnocentrism’. However, there is another view to this perspective, which many of the participants in this project echoed, namely the relevance of the replacement of race with culture. They feared that the assertion of an Indian cultural identity over a national identity would interfere with their true place as fully-fledged citizens of the country.

While the older generations may still nurture cultural links with India, a new breed of fourth- and fifth-generation women born exclusively in the Republic have no ties with India other than adopting the popular notion of culture previously mentioned. Many cannot speak an ethnic Indian language, though they may practice the rituals of their religion with little understanding of their context or meaning. Though they consider themselves to be Africans, few can speak an African language well other than a local, much-watered-down kitchen Zulu, although many can speak Afrikaans moderately well (Mesthrie 1995). Interracial marriages between whites and Indians, previously restricted by apartheid’s Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, are more prevalent as Indian women are choosing partners from all racial groups with, a particular preference towards white partners. Unlike their mothers, Indian women in contemporary South Africa are pursuing careers even before marriage. In fact, a career is now being viewed as augmenting one’s marriage chances. In many households today, women experience more freedom than their parents’ generation because they contribute financially to the family on par with their male counterparts. More than any other force, this economic practice has changed the traditional status of women considerably (Rajab 2011).

## **7 Conclusion**

In my observations of the women profiled in this book, I noted that they differed in the degree of support which they received from their spouses and their marital families. By and large professional women had a heavy dual career obligation which they were forced to meet, regardless of their status as judges or as medical practitioners. Added to this, the expectations from the larger community to attend social and religious functions, funerals and weddings were very much a part of their lives. The gestalt of the Indian professional woman's life, in comparison to her Western counterpart, appears to be much more heavily filled with obligations and duties. As a minority group, Indians were forced to create their own world of temples, mosques, vernacular schools and residential living, by which they demarcated themselves from others and created a small, cohesive community. Now in the new South Africa, economic and social opportunities are creating an emergent wealthy class, thus fragmenting a once homogeneous community.

However, the Indian extended and nuclear family structure is still very strong and it is this aspect that provides the social glue for the cohesiveness of the community in which there is a strong sense of self-help. Though the divorce rate has increased dramatically in the Indian community, the support emanating from the larger extended family and community seems to keep the minority group intact. The changing status of Indian women over a period of 160 years has been a remarkable journey of triumph over struggle. In the process a metamorphosis of great historical and sociological impact is clearly discernible when a grandmother picking tea leaves under the hot African sun has produced more than a pot of tea for her masters. She has laid the fertile foundation through her industrious efforts and mighty will to produce daughters in the corridors of the highest institutions in the land. From a 16-year-old Valiamma who gave her life for the cause, to a Navi Pillay, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, South African Indian women can proudly claim that they are conquerors and not slaves.

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# Chapter 6

## Reflective Memories: A Chronicle of the Liberation Struggle Experiences of Comrade Rae Pillay, a South African *uMkhonto we Sizwe* Female Soldier of Indentured Indian Diasporic Heritage

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### Abstract

Reflective memories shared during oral history interviews serve to rewrite a country's history, especially if the respondent was an active and involved armed forces participant during the liberation struggle for freedom – in this instance – the freedom of South Africa. Reflective memories add value to qualitative studies as new and undocumented information is communicated in a trusted milieu. The case study approach is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context. For this paper, the complex issue being considered is the liberation struggle. The case-study approach is an established research design whereby the general purpose is (a) to describe an individual situation, e.g. a person (in this instance, the respondent identified is Rajaluxmi Pillay *aka* Rajes or Cde Rae Pillay, with the *nom du plume* of Maadhu); (b) identify the key issue of the case (in this instance, her contribution to the liberation struggle); and (c) to either analyse the case using relevant theoretical concepts or, alternatively, the researcher recording the contents of the interview unmediated, that does not analyse, mediate or interpret them, but rather present these reflective memories thematically. The latter option of presenting the reflective memories in an accredited publication format is selected. In an oral history interview with Cde Ivan Pillay, he attested that Cde Rae is one of only two known South African *uMkhonto we Sizwe* female soldiers of indentured Indian diasporic heritage.



**Keywords:** Apartheid, Indenture, Indian diaspora, liberation struggle, military wing of *uMkhonto we Sizwe*, South African Indian

## 1 Introduction

This article chronicles the story of Cde Rae Pillay in her capacity as a military wing soldier who fought for liberation under atrocious South African apartheid conditions. The aim of this article is to highlight the tenacity of Cde Rae, born on 4 August 1944 to Mr and Mrs TVR Pillay, by narrating her story with the searchlight focused firmly on her reflective memories. She soldiered on in her commitment to the armed political struggle, despite her serious later disability.

The broader reason for engaging further research on this protagonist is to focus on the contribution of the female descendant of the indentured Indian labourers to the Colony of Natal. The primary reason for this research is to chronicle the episodes experienced by Cde Rae, a South African of indentured Indian heritage who made the choice to fight the inequalities that she and the non-white communities experienced. This paper depicts the fight she fought – initially as a grassroots worker – and then later as an armed liberation fighter on the run. When the brutal state authorities identified her as a struggle fighter, she was informed by the struggle leadership that she needed to exit the country and go underground. Cde Rae was an *uMkhonto we Sizwe* soldier and is currently identified as one of two South African women of Indian heritage who fought the struggle as an underground soldier (Pillay 2021).

British history records that the *Slavery Abolition Act* was gazetted in 1833. In order for the British empire to survive economically and to replace that system of cheap labour, Britain looked to her colonies for this available workforce. India, being one of the jewels in the British crown, seemed like a country whose population would suit the need of its imperial master. On 16 November 1860, the first batch of these labourers landed in the Port of Natal, South Africa. They lived under colonial rule in their new home, but chose not to return to India after the period of indenture was over. Their descendants lived and worked under various political regiments, the most dehumanising and treacherous system being apartheid.

Eighty-three years after the first batch of indentured Indian labourers arrived in South Africa, Cde Rae was born on 4 August 1944 in Pietermaritzburg, but grew up in Kimberley in the Northern Cape. Her dad, T.V.R. Pillay, had five daughters when his wife died whilst being pregnant with the sixth. He

was a man of indentured Indian heritage from the Tamil-speaking community. After his wife's death, he remarried and Cde Rae's mother hailed from Pietermaritzburg. Cde Rae was one of eight children and her parents worked really hard in that community to raise them. Cde Rae's sisters met their partners by arranged marriages and were even married off from the age of 16. Her parents ran a fresh produce business in Kimberley. The Pillay's supplied the local markets and this was extremely difficult as the Afrikaner market master gave them a very difficult time with prices and with the business. For the researcher, personally, what was interesting is the fact that there was this Indian community living in an Afrikaner stronghold and they made a success of being there during the fifties and sixties. Initially, the interview revolved around Cde Rae and her early years growing up in Kimberley. Her earliest memories of the area were interesting. She recalled that there was a Hindu temple in the area and all weddings, festivals such as Deepavalli (a festival of lights) and religious activities took place here. It was a meeting place and all gathered to help with whatever needed to be done, e.g. such as making fresh flower garlands to adorn the bridal couple and/or used to beautify the temple and the statues that were inside. Ladies gathered to make sweetmeats (savoury and sweet tasting, mainly sugar-coated edibles) which are tasty Indian desserts that were handed out to friends and family. Communal living meant that all helped, attended and participated. These gatherings were happy times, but they were far and few in between as this was a very small Indian community. Of interest, though, was, 'How did this community arrive here?' It was established that the diamond mines were an attraction and this resulted in South Africans of Indian origin venturing here and then becoming a part of a multiracial community where even the Chinese had set up home.

## **2 Literary Review**

Across the globe, there is sparse but available literature on Indian indenture-ship. Not all the stories, experiences and episodes are recorded even though many national and international researchers and writers have written extensively on different aspects of Indian indenture. The South African History Online (SAHO 2019a) portal does have some historical documentation about Rajes Pillay. However, the literature review revealed that there is a severe lack of information, documentation and academic research on female South African armed wing liberation struggle activists of indentured Indian ancestry. South

African Indian women took their place in the resistance struggle and even though the exiled veteran MK comrade played her part and sacrificed to ensure they delivered, the Indian lady in her sari (a 7-metre length of material – wrapped/ draped around a woman's body) walked the distance and that resistance gave momentum and support to the liberation struggle as a democratic South Africa was envisioned. This venture of looking at what a South African comrade of indentured Indian origin has contributed in terms of the liberation struggle and life in exile was as interesting to research as it was to compile it into an academic article.

The South African Native National Congress (SANNC) was founded by John Langalibalele Dube (1912). According to SAHO (2019b), the constitution of the SANNC had several basic aims, centred around defending and uplifting the Black people of South Africa. In 1923, this organisation, SANNC, became known as the African National Congress (ANC). An oral history interview was conducted with Cde Rae – a female comrade who was a card-carrying member of the African National Congress – initially on 18 September 2012 at her Reservoir Hills home. Women in most societies throughout the world, over time, have been involved in struggle issues. Indian women in South Africa are not new to this phenomenon and women in general 'as a group, are specially targeted to get involved in specific protest campaigns while special upliftment programmes were also initiated to improve their positions' (Clarkson 1997).

As there are limited academic works on this aspect available, this article attempts to answer some of the questions regarding the information on the topic of female South African Indian contributions to the armed wing of the liberation struggle by reflecting on the story of Cde Rae.

### **3 Thematic Concepts**

The following concepts are referred to in the article as the themes revolve around them. The researcher provides her understanding of these concepts as they apply to the article.

#### **3.1 Indenture**

Indentured labour was not free labour. The workers who, either voluntarily or involuntarily went to distant places had no right to a negotiated wage or to the

choice of employment and the category of work. The regulated movement of indentured workers from the Indian sub-continent to the Colony of Natal was abolished in 1911 after the Indian government legislated this into an Act.

### **3.2 South African Indian**

The term ‘South African Indian’ refers to South African citizens whose ancestry dates back to the period of colonisation and Indian indenture. They proudly see themselves as South Africans, born on African soil, but at the same time, those who follow Indian traditional customs, celebrate certain Indian religious festivals and dress accordingly. The Indian community is a blended, multi-cultural community, as elements of other cultures are prevalent within the parameters of the South African Indian life.

### **3.3 Military wing of *uMkhonto we Sizwe***

*uMkhonto we Sizwe* is the military wing of the African National Congress. It was disbanded post the new dispensation that was negotiated to bring about democracy in South Africa.

## **4 Methodology**

A qualitative case study is a detailed study of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organisation or phenomenon and is often used in historical, social and educational research. Collective contributions add value, content and knowledge to change the trajectory of history when attempts are made at rewriting a country’s history, in particular, post-colonialism and post other political systems. In terms of rewriting South African history, research into a number of political and social systems are required. For this paper the focus is on the political ideology of apartheid and the armed liberation struggle while the South African Indian diaspora as a result of Indentureship is briefly referred to as the interviewee was of indentured Indian heritage. Reflective memory lends itself to portraying issues of the political struggle as experienced by the interviewee.

This article includes the contents of the oral history interview, discussions as well as written contributions that were incorporated from Dr.

Sinithi Qono, a liberation and freedom struggle activist. The case study qualitative approach is used to chronicle reflective memories and these findings are presented here in a thematic context.

Two examples where reflective memories were used in this paper are, (a) a local community-based ex-freedom fighter sharing her personal memories; and (b) assembled written knowledge related to the freedom movement attained from a South African female of Indian heritage who reflected on her interactions with Cde Rae and then provided some points of action in terms of the way forward. Such contributions call for qualitative case study methods that shape the production of new knowledge and lend interpretation for future generations. These examples of oral – literate based conceptions of history and heritage facilitated through qualitative orality – literacy approaches increases awareness of the value of these and other alternative approaches.

Using oral history, qualitative and case study methodology, it was possible for the researcher to investigate what a unique Indian female in South Africa had experienced, politically, during the struggle years, especially from the 1960s until she returned from exile in the 1990s. She went into exile, underwent underground training, carried an MK47. Cde Rae was almost killed by a hand grenade. In terms of the case study methodology, Dr Sinti Qono, a Verulam resident and retired lecturer in Journalism (Durban University of Technology), was approached in 2012 by the researcher as to who would be a suitable candidate for this research on Indian women who went into exile during the liberation years. Dr Sinithi Qono is the sister of Cde Paul David and Cde Phyllis Naidoo who were known activist liberation fighters who made immense sacrifices for a free and democratic South Africa. During the early 60s, Dr Qono left South Africa with a passport, lived and worked in many countries during her time in exile and returned post-1990 whilst the new dispensation was being negotiated. Dr Qono identified Cde Rae Pillay as a suitable respondent for this research. As a qualitative study, Cde Rae, a surviving MK soldier, had her legendary, yet simple story to tell. Her reflective memories are presented unmediated in a thematic format. She was able to triangulate the relevance and value of historical practices and principles that gives credence to its relationship with the liberation struggle. The researcher prepared an open-ended questionnaire beforehand. This research instrument was used to gain insightful information in terms of her experiences during the struggle times. The duration of the interview was not predetermined. The interviews were not tape recorded, as the respondent was satisfied with answering questions and the researcher

writing them down. The researcher chose not to tape record the interview as she was not sure about the reaction of the respondent as the interview was centred around liberation politics. The researcher felt that this could be sensitive, especially if the veteran remembered the painful memories.

## **5 Interpretation of Results**

The respondent provided her reflections on her own life, and the researcher recorded them in this article unmediated, that is, not analysing, mediating or interpreting them. In terms of the interpretation of the results, a noninterpretative, thematic approach has been used in this research. These unmediated reflections are, however, organised under various themes. These themes have been further explored under sub-themes and presented under Appendix 1, titled, Reflective memories of Cde Rae Pillay.

## **6 Conclusion**

What saddened Cde Rae as she reflected on the country during the interview is that especially from the sixties to the nineties, the rate of crime and all atrocities committed against mainly women and vulnerable young children as well as fraud and corruption in our democracy had escalated. She believed that this was never the culture of the ANC and was appalled by what was happening. Cde Rae's vision was that we should become united as a South African population. The barriers to this at the moment are the crime, corruption, lack of resources and the world recession. This conclusion informs how Cde Rae felt upon returning to the country in 1990. The curtain comes down – 2020, speaks about her demise and finally Heritage Month – 2021, shares information about a publication in honour of Cde Rae Pillay.

## **Post-Apartheid South Africa**

Upon returning to post-Apartheid South Africa, she found that the country had changed so much. Technological innovations were a part of everyday life. She adjusted to life back home by being a part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). She lived at her home in Reservoir Hills until 2020, until she was admitted to a frail care centre for assisted living. Post the passing of

Cde Rae Pillay on 29 December 2020, numerous informal conversational discourses and formal brainstorming sessions were held between the researcher and Dr Sinthi Qono, who proposed the idea of an online publication on the contributions of Cde Rae.

### ***The Curtain Comes Down – 2020***

When she became ill and needed assisted care, she was moved to a care facility where some of her close family and friends visited, when possible. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, visitors were not encouraged. She was always happy to see and meet her family and friends until her death on 29 December 2020.

### ***Heritage Month – 2021***

As a tribute to her life, during 2021, Kogie Archary, Indu Moodley and Sinthi Qono compiled a publication titled, *Beyond Borders From Swaraj to Swaziland, Rajes Pillay's journey from exile to freedom*, which was submitted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The publication was launched on 25 September 2021, using a virtual platform. Due to its objective relevance, the Introduction and Conclusion with reasons for why the publication was compiled, as authored by Dr Sinthi Qono in *Beyond Borders From Swaraj to Swaziland, Rajes Pillay's journey from exile to freedom*, have been included in this paper, but due to copyright infringement rules and regulations appears in Appendix 2.

### ***Synopsis by Sinthi Qono***

Sinthi Qono submitted the following write-up, which concluded the online publication.

Preserving our struggle history is an activity of the Arts. It is history in the making. In preserving our struggle history, we are recognising the processes of concrete development which took and take place in our country. These developments started from time immemorial, but more recently, in our country, it would be 1654 when the first recorded Europeans are said to have entered what is today called the Cape Province. The writing of the history of colonial wars between 1654 to legalised apartheid has been undertaken by many historians. These must be put in line with our written and recorded anti-

apartheid and anti-imperialist works. There are also written and technological recordings on the mechanisms of the apartheid regime, its atrocities and its close alliance with imperialism and other western capitalist states. This must also have its place in the preservation of our history so that it is never forgotten just as much as the NAZI atrocities, the worst of its kind in the last century, in Europe must never be forgotten.

The soldiers of *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), the fighters in exile and inside the country, are the most recent of our struggle fighters making history in our country. Many are known and many are unknown.

There is no conclusion to our history, nor to world history, because there is no end to social consciousness and human activity. Underlying these concepts is the socio-economic structure of each and every society, of which many a thesis has been written and will continue to be written. The myths and deities in the different Greek states around the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC were integrated into a loosely coherent system and remembered through festivals and observances. They held a powerful attraction and were worshipped throughout Greece for centuries. At this very early stage of our world history, we witness humanity preservation deified heroes for centuries. Around the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, Christian Emperors closed down these shrines. However, up to modern times, a few Greek saints retain some attributes of bygone deities. Similarly, all religions of the world had and still have their coherent systems of worship. The heroes and villains of over 2 000 years ago are preserved in the Bible and handed down to mankind to this day, albeit, aided by spirituality. William Shakespeare (1556–1623) whose many all-round genres, for example, plays, poetry sonnets, comedies and tragedies are read, researched, quoted, revered and brought to life to this day. Socrates, Plato, Heraclitus and many others are household names among social scientists worldwide. These philosophers emerged many centuries BC. Similarly, the natural sciences would not be a reality without Galilee, Newton, Darwin and many others who were born from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Human activity of bygone centuries continues and has become institutionalised, for example, the Vatican City, the papal authority, the religious states, as opposed to secular kingdoms, monarchies and other lower institutions. Much knowledge, material and spiritual values and activities as well as the means of creating, using and advancing them, without any of our modern technology available, have been handed down to mankind over millennia and centuries. This should give us incentive and encouragement to do



something far in advance of what we already have. We need to create a lasting system that would encompass our struggle history in a coherent, chronological ‘online package’. Today, one can access any information online, but what we need is something more serious and in tone with past struggles. It must be available to history learners and scholars across the class divide.

This publication has been written for the following reasons:

1. To remember, honour and keep alive the struggle history of Rajes Pillay, the great *uMkhonto we Sizwe* soldier who died on 29 December 2020.
2. To lobby for the preservation of the struggle history of all those who fought against the settlers, colonialism, and apartheid in our country.
3. To lobby for their (as in ‘2’) research in the process of their (struggles) emergence and development in connection with historical conditions determining them.
4. To contribute to our positive cultural history. On Human Rights Day, on 21 March 2021, our President Cyril Ramaphosa indicated that our country has a strong human rights culture. Hence our contribution.
5. To lobby for the creation of a chronological and coherent system to preserve our struggle history.

(Archary *et al.* 2021: 96-97)

## **Acknowledgements**

### **Competing interests**

The researcher declares that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

### **Data Availability**

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the researcher .

## **Ethical Consideration**

The respondent was informed timeously of the aims and objectives of the project. She consented and it was clearly stated that the information received would be for research and academic purposes. Cde Rae was comfortable and the interview took place at her Reservoir Hills home.

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## Appendix 1

### Reflective Memories of Cde Rae Pillay

Arranged thematically, this section is the main body of the article and contains the unmediated reflections of Cde Rae Pillay. These themes – Northern Cape, a multi-racial community; Leaving and living in London; Rebel with a cause ... liberation struggles; Going into exile, leaving South African shores and In Africa, the Angolan Government – were identified from the interview in terms of the respondent's reflective memories and appear in *Celebration, preservation and promotion of struggle narratives with a focus on South African women of Indian heritage* (Archary & Landman 2021: 4 - 7).

### Northern Cape, a Multi-racial Community

From a young age, Cde Rae was part of a multi-racial community and this is where she started becoming aware that there were differences in how people interacted with each other.

Cde Rae went to the local co-ed coloured school, which had a Christian ethos. She walked to the Perseverance Primary School with Muslim, Malay and Coloured children. During the break they were given soup that was prepared by Mrs Dudley. It was while she was a pupil here that she became aware of differences. There were Indian and African teachers and Cde Rae thereafter attended the William Prescott High School. The Indians in Kimberly became part of the Liberation Struggle, which was part of a nationwide struggle. In the mid-fifties, her father was given a 30-day permit to travel to Durban and if he was not back within the stipulated time, the Afrikaner policemen were waiting for him. Cde Rae, at that point, around 11 or 12 years of age, started hating them, as she could see and experience what they were doing. In 1961 the Chinese were given white status. They could now freely travel to Stellenbosch and other areas but Indians were not permitted to do so. Dr Letele, who was a recognised face in the unity movement during the fifties, worked very closely with her father and this was the reason that he was targeted by the security forces. They had many visitors to their home and their house was a hive of activity. Many prominent politicians visited and even stayed over. The senior Mrs Pillay prepared food and entertained, as this household became a meeting place for comrades passing by. This hospitality was extended to all in the struggle. The Muslim taxi operator, Nordine, transported the visitors to and

from the homes of the different activists. Cde Rae and her siblings were a part of this, as they had to give up their beds and sleep on apple boxes in order to put up the comrades (Archary & Landman 2021: 4 - 5).

## **Leaving and Living in London**

In 1958, Cde Rae left for London.

Reflecting on the past, memories that come to mind are some of the decisions that they took. Cde Rae was 13 when her father died. Her mother had to take charge of the family and the business. It was very difficult, especially in those times. It was decided that Cde Rae and her brother would travel with their mother to England. They lived there for three years. She completed her post-high school education in London. While she and her mother were in London, they met Dr Yusuf Dadoo. Mrs Pillay was a professional in the Tamil language, which she taught for a short while in the International Language School in Kensington, London. However, due to no formal school education, Mrs Pillay did not enjoy this stint there and left, returning to South Africa with her son. In 1963, Cde Rae was 19 and studying towards her A levels. In London, student meetings were held in her flat. She met Brian Bunting, who had emigrated around the same time. He was the editor of *Seshaba*, a magazine of struggle literature. In London she felt the ‘international impact’ of apartheid, especially when she went to Foyle’s Bookstore. In 1967, she returned to South Africa. She wanted to use and continue her education and became a member of the Student Representative Council (SRC) of the Natal Campus. She had ‘foreign student’ status. Cde Rae was friends with Paul David’s sister, Phyllis Naidoo. She was married to MD Naidoo, whose individual and combined contribution must be remembered. Coincidentally, Paul David and Phyllis Naidoo are Sinthi Qono’s siblings (Archary & Landman 2021:5).

## **Rebel with a Cause ... Liberation Struggles**

Cde Rae was a revolutionary and she befriended many liberation activists during her time in exile.

Cde Rae became friends with Abdul Khalek Docrat, who was an immigrant from Rangoon in Malaysia, and it was during these times that she became aware of the ‘mechanics’ of what took place. She engaged in reading

and together with George Sewpersadh they got books from the outside to promote literary studies in liberation struggles. From 1967 to 1972, she worked for Republic Bank where she unionised staff. However, there was very little that the unions could do at that time, as they were not as powerful as they are today. Docrat, who was with the National Union of Distributive Workers worked with her. In 1972, she worked for Game and despite her workmanship she was overlooked for promotion because ‘she was very political’. She spoke to staff at different levels about what was happening in the country. Eventually she left Game to work for a bottle store. It was while she was here that the security forces followed her because they had records of her from her student days. She was now instructed by the ANC to leave this job or be faced with imprisonment. She left. During this period, she was an underground cadre in touch with the ANC. The ANC was in need of certain logistical support and she was sent money via a courier. One of the couriers later turned out to be a spy. During 1974 and 1975, she was introduced to the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference. At this time, she met Sam Moodley, Leela Pillay and GR Naidoo, who was editor of the *Post*. She came into contact with Reuben Philips, a senior Anglican Church leader, as it was believed that the church could and should help. She became involved in raising money for the ‘affected people’ as comrades were called and she completed other work that was assigned to her. She worked with Ebrahim Ebrahim, Mac Maharaj, Sunny Singh, Poomani Moodley and Tim Naidoo, to name just a few. She was tasked with getting press releases for the activists who had been released from jail as Cde Rae was in contact with the *Leader* and *Graphic* newspapers (Archary & Landman 2021:6).

## **Going into Exile, Leaving South African Shores**

In 1979, in the cold of night, Cde Rae left our South African shores.

As she reflected, what came to her mind was ‘fear’ as she recounted the days to her leaving. She just got ‘the call’ in 1979 to leave. She and her accomplice arrived at the meeting place only to find blaring sirens of the police. She now found herself on the run again and was forced into hiding. Two weeks later they left with no clothing or food, except for two oranges. They managed to get a lift with a furniture removal truck, which took them safely to the border. She vividly remembers that around 2:00 am they were scared and tired as they passed the Pongola border, which was a common border. They hid underneath the furniture and arrived at their destination only to find that the car that was

meant to pick them did not pitch. They had to walk and she admits she was lucky to be alive at the end of it, because if you were spotted you were shot by the Swazi defence police. It was a 12-hour walk from the Swaziland border to Manzini. The difficulty was that there was no water, no food and no protection from the elements. They walked through the rain. They walked and walked over the koppies and hills, not knowing if they would reach their destination and her companion did mention, 'Well if we don't make it, at least we tried'. It was a treacherous path that they walked but her conviction was strong. Upon arriving in Manzini she made contact with Comrade Stanley Mabizela of the ANC and he attended to matters. She reported to the police station and was questioned by officers. Her photographs were taken. She could not say much, as any information ventured by her would be used to the detriment of the struggle. She stated that she was harassed by the South African Security Service and was 'wanted by the police' and needed refugee status. It was granted, but she was advised that being an Indian female she would be better off if she stayed at the mission station where there were other Indians. She moved in, even though only men were living there. Here she met Joe Pillay, Ivan Vis Pillay and Krish Rabilall. It was very difficult as there was neither special food nor attention. Cde Rae met Bishop Zwane of the SA Council of Churches Leadership and he introduced her to Moses Mahbida, who found her a job for R80 a month in Swaziland. While she was in Swaziland she was involved in refugee counselling amongst other tasks. Her family travelled to where she was living for her wedding. She was involved fulltime in ANC work. She was paid enough to get by and while in exile she worked with Shadrack Maphumulo and Judson Khuzwayo. She was part of the refugee committee. In 1981, she was instructed to leave for Angola for military training and when that training was completed she returned to Swaziland (Archary & Landman 2021:6).

## **In Africa, the Angolan Government**

According to Cde Rae,

In 1983 ... I was deployed to fight against the forces of the Angolan opposition political movement, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) on the Eastern Front, at a time when UNITA was in political and military alliance with the South African Defence Force.

Further to this, she stated that,

... during the course of these operations, many MK troops came to the conclusion that no serious struggles were taking place in South Africa and that their lives were being wasted in Angola in a civil war. They wanted to be sent back to South Africa to fight. When they demanded a national conference of the ANC to discuss this and other issues, including their demand for democratic elections for the ANC's national executive committee, this was not accepted by the leadership, headed by O.R. Tambo.

Cde Rae was a part of the struggle, where the Angolan people, unlike the Portuguese colonists, positioned their offence on three fronts (SAHO 2019c). Cde Rae mentioned that 'the Angolan government was at the heart of the struggle'. When she had an accident, she returned to Angola for treatment. Here she was admitted to the Cuban station, and under them, she was in the special unit organisation for women – it was a treatment centre, as they were in a 'war situation'. Her hand was becoming gangrenous and she mentioned, 'I lifted my arm up in Amandla stance, with fist clenched and asked for my hand to be saved'. She was in this Cuban unit in Angola for six months and even though her hand was saved, the scars are still visible. In 1985, the situation became rigorous in Swaziland with the bombs attacks and there was a fear that people like Cde Rae, who had refugee status, may be targeted, as it was feared that they may be shot. She left Swaziland in 1985, as many refugees were withdrawing because of the situation there. The Mozambique-Inkomati Accord was signed and the bargaining chip was the ANC (SAHO 2019a). She was in Zambia from 1985 to 1990. Whilst here she was unemployed. She met other refugees who had been in exile for much longer. She did voluntary work for the ANC such as attending meetings, welfare work, collecting money and distributing food and clothing (Archary & Landman 2021:7).

## **Appendix 2**

Online Publication

*Beyond Borders from Swaraj to Swaziland, Rajes Pillay's Journey from Exile to Freedom* (Archary et al. 2021).

### **Introduction**

The unsung hero is a cliché and like most clichés we do not ponder over their meanings. Unsung hero has a philosophical setting. History is all the more fragile and weaker if there are too many unsung heroes. Let us establish what is required to be a 'sung' hero.

World War II resulted in the loss of 25 to 27 million soldiers and others in the former Soviet Union (USSR). Ravaged by the war and still in the infancy of socialism, it would have been a tall order to ask the USSR to honour each and every soldier lost in the war, not even counting the unknown perished lives. The African National Congress (ANC), without much in its pocket, became the first ruling post-apartheid South African party. Given the fact that the resources of the country during apartheid were shared among 4 million people (pittance to the homelands and to other minorities), and now had to be shared among 50 million people, it would be a great challenge for the ANC to honour its fighters as the party would have wanted to.

In Algeria, another unspeakable colonial tragedy took place. The country lost over one and a half million of its people, around 20 per cent of its population at that time. In a similar planned takeover of South Africa, the French had considered Algeria as one of its provinces. This was one of the bloodiest colonial wars. From where and how do we start honouring heroes; children, women, families, soldiers (FLN – *Front de Liberation Nationale*)?

One more example would be Vietnam. The entire country was not only riddled with bombs and bullets, but by Napalm, which killed and continues to kill many of the country's population. The country and the region continue to this day to ask for assistance to clear their land of these bombs, etc. Many more examples over the centuries, raging on to this day can be mentioned. In other words, what a nation can do for its unsung heroes is finally determined by its economic relations.

Was Rajes an unsung hero? Her fellow combatants, friends and others will disagree. They cherished and loved her and considered her as one of our greatest heroes. Those unknown to her, perhaps scholars researching the anti-



apartheid struggle, would not know that there was a Rajes in the struggle. Yet, towards our struggle history, Rajes had contributed to numbers, being a soldier of *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), the military wing of the ANC; she added value to MK; she was one of few who was prepared to carry a gun; she was prepared to fight not only the white minority regime in South Africa, but also the might of imperialism; Rajes contributed positively to our history.

History is a philosophical category which portrays the process of development. It is cast in stone, written, recited and everything else which modern technology, miraculously, brings with it. It is also carried down through commemoration, celebrations, honouring not only struggle activists but also successful entrepreneurs, scientists, sportsmen and women, entertainers and many more. They contribute to our development, to our history. Rajes, thanks to the Satyagraha Awards, was awarded for her honourable contribution to our struggle against apartheid. Rajes earned herself the country's special pension which made it possible for her to live a comfortable life.

Together with her fallen and fellow fighters, Rajes did not want to be rewarded. That was not in their will, their character. From where then did the cliché 'unsung hero' originate? They did not want to be 'sung'. The majority of our fighters fought for a just state, a state that would shed the shackles of colonialism, neo-colonialism and apartheid. That did not happen.

The laws of connection and interaction of the global playing field took centre stage. After 1989, our fighters were sorely disappointed with these historical events. It affected, detrimentally, the hopes and dreams of all progressive forces to this day. The balance of forces had tilted in favour of reaction. Rajes was no exception. She was prepared to go back into exile and fight against reaction. The plight of the unsung hero worsened. Socialism had retreated.

History uncovers the general laws of knowledge. Recognising and recording our unsung heroes would create the basis of this knowledge. Further, derived from this historical process would be the logical development of our thought and overall consciousness.

Rajes is a hero. Together with others, she planted a tree, the fruit of which we eat today. Albeit the fruit are somewhat rotten; we hope the tree will soon recover. Rajes often wondered why after two decades and more of our democracy, children still use pit toilets at school, including primary schools. The positive economic road which we had chosen in 1994 changed for the worse after a few years. The National Democratic Revolution became blurred. This

meant that a few years into the millennium to date, our economic and social development plummeted, aggravated severely now, by the pandemic. These situational forces brought much trauma to Rajes who had regularly voiced her opinion. This trauma affected our entire country, region and continent.

Every economic and social formation has its corresponding material and technical basis. Our country has many natural, particularly mineral resources which could feed into this basis or requirement. With our small- and medium-scale enterprises and with our own resources, a start can be made. Not doing this in a centrally planned and organised manner will result in failure. This is what Rajes fought for. Imagine electrifying the entire country without a centrally planned programme! Small and medium enterprises must engage in a comprehensive mechanisation of the production processes leading to positive automation. Physics and chemistry must be encouraged at schools so that learners use this knowledge for the development of our national economy to bring it to a higher and modern level. In other words, Rajes and her fellow fighters believed in a path of development which would ultimately lead to a system with no unemployment, no hunger, proper housing for all and a society with a caring and progressively educated world outlook. Solomon Mahlangu was hanged on 6 April 1979 by the apartheid regime. He reportedly said the following:

**Tell my people I love them and that they must continue the fight, my blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruit of freedom. *Aluta continua!***

(Archary *et al.* 2021: 6-7).

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## **SECTION 3**

### **The Contemporary Period**



# Chapter 7

## Indian Problem, Indian Menace, Indian Ubiquity: Indian South Africans at the Intersections

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### Abstract

As sophisticated as colonization was, it was its own ouroboros – the gnostic symbol expressing the unity of all things, material and spiritual, which changes form in an eternal cycle of destruction and recreation. Indian indenture entered into such a cycle, a cycle from near slavery to diaspora to global transmigration. The idea of Indian ubiquity is now real. Indian culture is a palimpsest. Old language and new reasoning appear in simultaneity. It purveys the brutalized Indian life-story mythically as the greatest of human adventures.

**Keywords:** Indian, South Africa, Migration, Indenture, Diaspora

### 1 Introduction

From problem, to menace, to ubiquity suggests two critical features of Indian indenture: the first is that the history of Indian indenture proves positive social change, economic development, and integration in the country of destination; and the second is that no other diasporic group in history has settled in more countries of the world, proving the claim of Indian ubiquity. Yet, Indian indenture was received with extreme attitudes by the colonizers. Yet over time, towards the end of indentureship; the appearance of descendants and increased migration flows, there was a softening of attitudes, not necessarily translating either as absolute tolerance nor accommodation. Rather, the colonizers were

forced to politically accommodate Indians as part of society, who qualified for citizenship post indenture.

Gandhi's South African struggles argued for rights under the dual category of citizen/subject (Majumdar 2013). Combined with *Satyagraha*, the new method that involved truth and nonviolence, as well as by petitioning authorities of the Crown in India and Britain, the colonized respectfully argued for their rights. The labels of 'problem' and 'menace' was evident to the colonizers only after the contract period of indentureship ended and when descendants were entitled to rights as citizens. Accordingly, 'problem' and 'menace' came to the realization of the colonizers rather late, i.e. when the allocation of legal status to Indians was required for the purpose of government. The Indian problem translated into three options for the colonizers: should Indians be allocated to their own areas of residence and trade; or better, remove Indians permanently, since they were 'aliens'; or better yet, 'squeeze' them out and force them to return to their homeland (Aiyar & Stuart 1925).

Indian ubiquity was a very different label – more likely a self-label. Referring to an article on Indian migration in the Kolkatha-based newspaper, *The Statesman* (Reporter 1980), Lal, an academic from the Australian National University, acquiesced that both poor and educated class Indians could be found all over the world (Lal 1998). 'Indians are ubiquitous', declares the article. These communities have their own Little India; curry shops selling tandoori chicken, tikka masala, idli and dosa; CD/DVD outlets; and temples and mosques celebrating Diwali, Eid and Dussehra.

However, *The Statesman's* article appeared in 1980. It had no fore-knowledge of what was to come later. The combination of rising of colonialism and capitalism led to the recognition of abundant cheap labour in India. This opportunity was hardly wasted by Empire, given the prospects for economic and military domination of extensive parts of the world. There is a Shakespearean irony here – as Empire's colonization project expanded, so did the deepening of Indian diaspora world-wide. Moving away from the dramatic ironies in the literature of Empire, diasporic theory would invariably encounter conceptual, transitional and integrational problems. Diaspora was not an event, but a dynamic system of transference, assimilation and prosperity within the host cultures.

Accordingly, *The Statesman's* article and Lal's observation regarding Indian ubiquity are both a negligible celebration of the diaspora and a lack of recognition of progress by the diasporas beyond Little India and curry shops.

The diasporas metamorphosized into citizenry of the host countries over time. In the first instance, theory did not account for value-add of migration, adaptation to, and adoption of the host country by migrant groups. Historical accounts confirm that many made the move to accept new offers at the ending of indenture. They chose land ownership, agricultural activity, government and service sector jobs. Which Indian township did not boast of some ‘teacher’; ‘office uncle’; ‘newspaper man’; ‘cook’; or ‘barman’?

In the second instance, theory did not account for human capability and for the role of household micro-economics, which embodied personal growth, cooperation, altruism, religious optimism and the universal idea of one humanity. There is a clear identifiable stage of Indian progress past the teacher and newspaper man. These are the scientists, professors, statesman and stateswomen, CEOs of global companies, and Lords and Ladies of the Late Empire.

In the third instance, new migration and diaspora theory are suggested. Globally, many types of migration are on the increase, in particular forced migration and displacement. There is an array of groups such as political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities, and overseas communities seeking out new existence in targeted countries. (That is a body of work beyond this study.) In the case of Indian South Africans, there is anecdotal evidence of how globalization has influenced young people and families to seek employment and a new life in the ‘big five’ English-speaking countries, i.e. the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK (Singh 2008). Consequently, a sense of triple identity developed, i.e. when Indian South Africans migrate to one of these countries, they continue to adhere to a South African identity, since South Africa is their country of birth, as well as to India, for apparently deeply sentimental reasons.

The purpose of this chapter is to unravel the under-theorization of diaspora relating to Indians world-wide. There is a gap in the conceptual understanding of how Indians of indenture progressed historically, developmentally and globally to the current phase known as new migration. The under-theorization has led to discontinuities of understanding acculturation, identity, political participation and diasporic globality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Towards this goal, the chapter engages in a critical analysis of Indian diaspora, with particular reference to South Africa. The structure of the chapter begins by describing the error of under-theorization; then borrows from Amartya Sen’s theory of human capability in order to view human mobility as freedom to choose where to live, rather than simply respond to one-dimensional



push-and-pull factors. The hope is to stimulate the conceptual space for theory and a richer understanding of human mobility. The chapter then attempts to combine intersectionality with the lens of cosmopolitanism towards a new conceptualization of Indian identity. In order to support the theoretical reorganization of Indian diaspora, the chapter needs to engage with some critical historical experiences, as well as engage with gendered indenture so well captured in literacy criticism. Finally, the chapter concludes by opening the conceptual pathway to diasporic theory.

## **2 Under-theorisation, Identity and Conflict**

Mahmood Mamdani's compelling analysis of the colonial legacy underscores why democratization experienced lingering limitations in post-independence Africa (Mamdani 2018). Colonial rule is understood in three ways: 'direct', 'indirect' and apartheid. Mamdani argues that this terminology translated into benign instruments of despotism. Direct rule denied rights to subjects on a racial basis; indirect rule included subjects into customary or traditional rule, native councils, Bantustans<sup>1</sup> and the infamous Tricameral Parliamentary system; and apartheid, which was understood by leftist's politics as 'colonialism of a special type'<sup>2</sup>. Apartheid, Mamdani shows, was actually the generic form of the colonial state in Africa (Mamdani 2018). The colonial authorities mastered the art of cultural politics. They infused a form of authoritarianism into cultural forms where they existed, which had the knock-on effect of producing tension between urban and rural, and in particular, between ethnic groups. Apartheid was basically decentralized despotism, as witnessed in the system of Bantustans.

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<sup>1</sup> A Bantustan refers to the territories set aside for black inhabitants of South Africa and (the then) South-West Africa (now Namibia), as part of the policy of apartheid.

<sup>2</sup> South Africa was not a colony, but an independent state. Independence to South Africa by Britain in 1910 was not a victory over colonialism. Power was transferred not to the masses of South Africa, but to the white minority; hence, colonialism of a special type, in which the oppressing white minority occupied the same territory as the oppressed majority, living side by side with one another.

Without lessening the state of tensions in other areas of the country including Sophiatown in Johannesburg and District Six in Cape Town, KwaZulu-Natal is a classic case study. The design of decentralized despotism appears to prevail in the province to this day, which plays out in violent, economic and political contestations between black African and Indian communities living side by side. The province has experienced three waves of inter-communal violence: the infamous 1949 Cato Manor riots proved to have been instigated by white security forces (Manson 1981); the 1985 Inanda-Phoenix riots, having violent causal roots in both the anti-apartheid struggle and anti-Indian sentiments, appear to still define the present state of Indo-African relations (Thiara 1999); and the July 2021 civil unrest and turmoil in Durban, a political tale involving the former state president that brought with it a new wave of vicious race relations (Elumalai et al. 2022).

Mottiar and Bond suggest that in the light of state failure, protest activities and protest victories in Durban has been an important mechanism through which citizens have made gains in the struggle for improved socio-economic conditions (Mottiar and Bond 2012). The very high levels of demonstrations, also known as ‘service-delivery’ protests, suggest a high level of social discontent among citizens. The discontent can turn violent, simmer on the backburner, and even turn xenophobic. Herein also lies Mamdani’s ‘decentralized despotism’, where a backward-looking localism forms the agenda, rather than a progressive, forward-looking form of protest to assert political and economic rights. This localized backwardness lives and lurks in the Durban region, waiting for another trigger from decadent and opportunistic forces.

The concept of social distancing is a useful instrument for understanding group conflict, immigration and social and spatial organization (Pettigrew 1960, Jackson 2010). A 2011 study indicates dramatic changes may be taking place in South Africa (Durrheim et al. 2011). White respondents showed declining levels of prejudice, the opposite of the historical attitude to the so-called ‘colour bar’, and a negative change in attitudes of black African respondents towards other groups.

One of the critical projects of the post-1994 government has been social cohesion. Social cohesion is earnestly pursued as a means to achieve a just and equal society, to quell xenophobic attitudes and violence, and to encourage a united nation. In the South Africa context, social cohesion is seen as both a social compact between government and citizens on the one hand, and as a policy instrument for nation-building on the other hand. However, over time,

social cohesion has come to take on a different meaning. Some studies argue that social cohesion is formulated to serve a deep political purpose. The social cohesion project appears to produce a version of nation that supports a narrative seeking to solidify the African National Congress's hegemony (Abrahams 2016). The electoral performance of the African National Congress over the last twenty years shows a decline in voter support, with particular reference to Indians and Coloureds (Chipkin 2016). Declining support in this racialized manner means that the projects of nation-building, non-racialism and social cohesion are threatened. Having to deal with party battles, state failure and lack of international support as previously afforded to it, the African National Congress is in danger of losing its historic hegemony.

Without appearing either totalizing or unduly pessimistic, there is certainly a need for more theorizing on the position and future of Indians in South Africa. A better, intersectional view, peering within the Indian community, as well as higher view of its location within the nation, is required. Bill Freund takes an interesting perspective – Indians he claims, exhibit a mixture of attitudes (Rabe 2003). They view South Africa from a unique position, experiencing it both as outsiders and as insiders (Hull 1996). Freund accounts for Indian attitudes as having a vigour, plasticity and ingenuity of their cultural and material response to their circumstances. Indians, argues Freund, have applied their attitudes to ontologically shape their own spaces, as well as to view the broader world. In line with Freund's insider-outside theory, Amartya Sen postulates a theory of justice that provides a basis of reasoning and human development.

### **3 Amartya Sen: Capability Theory and Theory of Justice**

Sen theorizes that development is a process of expanding the real freedoms of people (Sen 2014). In this approach, the expansion of freedom is viewed as both the primary end and the principle means of development. Sen calls the end and means of freedom as the 'constitutive role' and the 'instrumental role' of freedom in development. The constitutive role of freedom relates to the importance of the substantive freedom in enriching human life. The substantive freedoms include elementary capabilities like being able to avoid starvation, undernourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, as well as the freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech and so on.

The instrumental role of freedom concerns the way different kinds of rights, opportunities, and entitlements contribute to the expansion of human freedom in general, and thus to promoting development. The following types of instrumental freedoms must exist in order to promote development, namely, political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security (Khasnabish 2013).

In the theory of justice, Sen is concerned with how will-power is set against the structural condition of a society (Sen 2008). Based on what the migrant, diaspora or minority choose as value – ‘reason to value’ – they have will-power and choice that are part determinants of capability. Sen’s theory of capability offers to migrants, diaspora and minorities the idea of strength, in the face of unequal power relations, as well as due to the lack of resources, migrants and minorities succeed through a paradigm of choices. Sen’s theory of justice offers what he calls conglomerate theory, i.e. having both practical value as well as promoting transcendence (ibid.). Herein lies the intrinsic and extrinsic value of Sen’s theories of capability and justice, which come to the liberation of migrants, diaspora and minorities.

#### **4 Intersectionality and Indenture**

Indian indenture can benefit from intersectionality as method (of analysis), as well as by application to investigate the cross-cutting dynamics of Indian indenture. Intersectional studies can serve as an academic frame and instrument to intervene in a world etched with fault lines of inequalities. There is a need to foreground some aspects of social dynamics and relations, where these have previously received undue emphasis, to the point that they constitute the starting point of inquiry (Cho et al. 2013). Intersectionality zeroes in on some issues that have occupied privileged places.

Intersectionality presents the study of indenture with opportunities to breach old school, single-dimensional notion of Indian indenture. Indian indenture cannot be confined to the time of its official disbandment. Indenture has resulted in new societies, overlapping identities, complex social relations, multiple diasporas, literacy criticism and cultural connotations. Associated with these new developments are new forms of experiences, place in society and human rights.

Intersectionality in research focuses on uncovering processes of differentiation and systems of inequality across a range of issues, including gender

rights, colonization, religion, immigration, and political behaviour (Al-Faham et al. 2019). Intersectionality opens new opportunities for renewal and partnership building in social movements and grassroots organizations. Intersectionality has been central to the study of inequality, identity and power relations in recent history (Rodriguez et al. 2016), making it a compelling instrument for the pursuit of indenture studies.

Accordingly, using an intersectional lens, this chapter is able to comment confidently on a wide of issues relating to Indian indenture, including a cosmopolitan perspective of Indian identity, diasporas in history, engendered indenture in literature and finally, Indian diasporic pursuits in South Africa.

## **5 Cosmopolitan Indian Identity**

Being Indian can mean different things to different people and to Indians themselves. The cosmopolitan view is all-embracing of all humans belonging to one community, irrespective of social or political boundaries (Padmanabhan 2012). By extension, religion, common sense and science contributed to one human family with numerous nations, tribes and branches (Aravamudan 2011). Cosmopolitanism may be understood as the moral and political extensiveness of people, organizations and institutions (Delanty 2012). To be cosmopolitan means to be open, rather than closed. The idea and preference are inclusivity, with an emphasis on it representing an alternative to the status quo. Accordingly, cosmopolitanism is sometimes considered idealistic and even elitist. Notwithstanding such criticism, hegemonic perspectives are obligated to consider the difference of the other from one's own immediate perspective. Clearly there is an obligation to address social injustice and those challenges that separate some groups from the mainstream.

The cosmopolitan argument accounts for 'unity on diversity' which framed cultural thinking pre- and post-independent India (Aravamudan 2011). Unity in diversity is also an influencing principle in current social, political and cultural discourse outside of post-independent India, where so-called people of Indian origin (PIO) are located. This principle survives in discourse to this day in the places around the world where Indian indenture was imposed by Empire.

Secularly minded leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, framed state policy on the principle of unity in diversity (Gottlob 2007). Historical experience was grounded in the coexistence of different cultures and ethnic groups over many centuries. The other was always part of a politically united

India, resulting in a common India. In embracing a common India, Nehru was known for referring to India as a tolerant society, even encouraging different racial and ethnic groups. Of course, Nehru's conception of Indianness and India did not always find common ground.

Indian society was and is far more dynamic and complex culturally. One way is to view it in continuum, episodically being overpowered by waves of occupations. The term 'palimpsest' is probably best placed to make sense of India as a country that withstood several periods of imposed alternative cultures, yet still remaining true to its original purity. Original purity is used here in the typical sense without definition or content. Rather, purity is compared to an umbrella in the case of Dumont (in (Mickevičienė 2003). The umbrella is the shelter for all things, not accentuating the definition or content of a thing, but on the interplay of relations of purity and impurity. Hence a thing may be less pure (rather than outright impure) or, for that matter, less good (rather than outright evil). The argument here is compelling. According to Dumont (ibid.), the opposites of pure and impure construct the caste system – manifested by hierarchy, separation and division of labour, which gives them (i.e. the manifestations of the caste system) their *raison d'être*. Each of the manifestations of caste preserves the purity of the purer ones from the polluting effects of the impure. Thus, the whole is founded upon the opposing effects of pure and impure. Nevertheless, how the caste system operates in reality does not end here. Pure and impure states are both permanent and impermanent. Regulated by a system of rules, a transgression of the caste system (say untouchability) is fixed by the power of ritual, thereby regaining the state of purity. Dumont and other supporters are not without critics. In the final analysis, the caste system has been found to be routinely contradictory, undemocratic, and a barrier to development.

## **6 Diasporas in History**

Cohen (Chotard 1999) describes diasporas as communities with shared identities such as language, religion, custom or folklore that have settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, and that maintain some sort of loyalty and emotional links with the old country. The earliest use of the term diaspora applied to Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersions. Historically, the term represented the archetypical politico-religious experiences of Jews recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Having experienced famine and defeat under several

regimes, Jews took refuge in Egypt. Shelter, hospitality and prosperity<sup>3</sup> under the regime inevitably morphed into enslavement due to fears of Jewish eclectic capabilities and growing numbers. The ecclesiastical liberator of the Jews was Moses<sup>4</sup>, unschooled in the ideology of slavery, had to be ordained with special powers enabling him to convince the Jews of the day to emancipate themselves not only from physical servitude, but primarily from the state of mental and spiritual servitude.

The term ‘diaspora’ was increasingly used in the literature to connote groups that lived at distances from their ancestral homelands, more popularly known as countries of origin. Writing on the journal *Diaspora*, the editor observes that the term ‘diaspora’, that described Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersions, is now ascribed to immigrant, expatriate, guest worker, persons and communities in exile, overseas community and ethnic community (Kadekar *et al.* 2009).

According to the United Nations’ International Organization for Migration [IOM], in 2020, there were 281 million migrants world-wide; making up 3,6% of the global population; of which 164 million are migrant workers; with remittances amounting to USD 702 billion transferred globally by migrants and diaspora in 2020 (Migration 2022). Internationally, no universally accepted definition for ‘migrant’ exists. Accordingly, the umbrella term ‘migrant’ in lay terms means a person who moves away from his or her place of residence, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes categories of people, both legal (migrant workers, international students) and illegal (smuggled migrants).

Diaspora as academic discourse is understood as forced dispersal, immigration, displacement and transnational communities (Agnew 2005). An important pre-occupation of people of the diaspora is memory. Indentureship in South Africa, as can be assumed in other parts of the world, are storehouses of colonial oppression, gender discrimination, unhygienic working and living conditions, trauma and of course conflicts, rebellion and resistance. Memory among the descendants of immigrants is a memory of suffering, endurance,

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<sup>3</sup> Through the generosity of Joseph, once a slave, clothed in a multi-coloured coat, rose within the administrative ranks of the Pharaohs.

<sup>4</sup> The prophet Moses was traditionally credited with writing the Torah and with leading Jews out of slavery from Egypt and across the Red Sea to the Promised Land.

struggle and survival – the stuff of subaltern experience.

Memory of indenture appear poignantly in post-colonial literature in Africa, India and elsewhere. Within the ‘detritus of indenture’ the terms ‘*girmit*’<sup>5</sup> (agreement) and the term ‘*girmitiyas*’<sup>67</sup> used by Mishra (Mishra 2007, Kishore 2010), captured as the so-called *girmit* ideology came to not only representing indenture, but also the subaltern experience characterized by the ethos of tyranny. So too the term ‘*kala pani*’<sup>8</sup> appears in formal speech and in literature, a reminder of the role of the oceans in history. Then there is ‘*jahaji bhai/behn*’<sup>9</sup> (Mukherjee 2011) and ‘*jahaji-hood*’<sup>10</sup> (Pirbhai 2010), vocabularies of Caribbean origins. The former spells the relations of brotherhood and sisterhood experienced on the ships, and the latter of the relations in the plantations. Sometimes these relations are forced to recount the memory of the perilous journey over the *kala pani*.

The innocence and beauty of the surface and the depths of the oceans have been vulgarized by colonial narrative, imperialism, slavery and of course, indenture. The oceans functioned as the repository of the dead, a natural convenience swallowing the evidences of inhuman, suffocating conditions and atrocities on the ships. Death during ocean crossings was an expensive cost for colonial agents of indenture and sugar plantation owners. For the dead, no relatives or known members of a community mourned them. The only memory of the dead were recordings in shipping logs.

## **7 Engendered Indenture in Literature**

Diaspora research indicate multiple characteristics; secondary outcomes; benefits and deficits to countries of destination and origin. On the one hand, migrants adapt to new societies, and on the hand, they appear to maintain links,

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<sup>5</sup> The term was applied in Fijian sugar plantations.

<sup>6</sup> The term was used in the South African sugar plantations.

<sup>7</sup> Popularized by Gandhi in South African. The term also appeared in the title the work: *The Girmitiya Saga – Gandhi’s South African Sojourn*, by Giriraj Kishore, Niyogi Books and Konark International. (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Black water, i.e. ocean.

<sup>9</sup> Ship brothers/sisters.

<sup>10</sup> Expressing indenture’s bondage and shared experiences, cultural affinity and spiritual fraternity.



i.e. material, relational and cultural links, as well as imagined links. Imagined and/or mental links are crucial diasporic characteristics, to the extent that diasporas come to constitute invisible nations residing outside of their countries of origin (Beine et al. 2011). The mental links come into play in the discussion of people of indenture in South Africa, with particular reference to religion, language, identity, gender and civil life.

Govinden and others reveal through their writings that (the South African) Indian identity, however problematic its singular designation, is constructed against the 'detritus of indenture' (Govinden 2009). In 'celebration' or 'commemoration' of Indian indenture, Govinden (in (Stiebel 2011) examines local works of Indian fiction entering the post-apartheid literary world, yet also claiming the space of plantation literature. Examples include Neelan Govender's *Girmit Tales* (Govender 2008a) Rubendra Govender's *Sugar Cane Boy* (Govender 2008b), and Aziz Hassim's *Revenge of Kali* (Hassim 2011), among others.

South African Indian women have been literarily engaging in a 'refusal of amnesia' by dealing with the apartheid past in a 'personal way' (Govinden 2000). Among these Indian women writers are Jayapraga Reddy, Agnes Sam, Farida Karodia, Zuleikha Mayat, Fayiza Khan, Dr Goonam, Phyllis Naidoo and Fatima Meer. The writings of Ansuyah Singh and Muthal Naidoo are also significant literary milestones. The writings not only concern local discursive issues; they resonate with neo-colonial domination, racial oppression, dispossession and cultural fragmentation, finding and defining 'home', crises of identity, and living with differences.

Hiralal argues against the traditions of the historiography school where Indian women were portrayed one-dimensionally as oppressed, chattel and did reap any betterment to their lives (Hiralal 2014). Other impressions, belonging to the neo-slavery school, characterized women as merely victims of an oppressive labour system. This being true, but according to Hiralal, these portrayals are limited. New evidence on indentured labour in Natal demonstrates the multiple challenges men and women endured on board the ships, the conditions under which they laboured and how some women challenged their employers and spouses against ill-treatment. Yet, even these accounts focus on individual acts of resistance, which were limited to absenteeism to suicide. According to Hiralal, little or no attention is paid to women engaging in violent acts of resistance, such as arson, poisoning and murder. The indentured system did indeed empower women with aspects of

economic and social freedom, as well as the opportunity to transgress traditional gender roles.

## **8 Challenges of the Diaspora**

While many may look upon the topic ‘Indians in South Africa’ as though the reference were to a homogenous group arriving in South Africa as a homologous cohort, a deeper look will reveal that there were those of Indian origin who arrived in South Africa well before the celebrated 1860 indentured workers arrived. A significant number were captured slaves that were brought into the country in 1654. There were also the 1860 indentured workers and, among others, so-called ‘passenger Indians’ (or free Indians) who arrived from 1860 onwards. The latter were traders, artisans, teachers, and shop assistants.

After the *Natal Coolie Law, Law No. 14 of 1859* (Du Bois 2012) had been passed, the law made it possible for the Natal Colony to introduce Indians as indentured labour, with labourers having the option to return to India at the end of the five-year period. In the case of the latter, a free passage would be provided back to India. The indenture contract also provided for the labourers to re-indenture for a further five-year period, which entitled them to settle permanently in Natal. Upon completion of their indenture, they were also entitled to a gift of crown land and full citizenship rights. However, the last set of rights was later withdrawn in order to discourage the settlement of Indians. The system of indenture was contractual, but workers often found themselves on the receiving end of slave-like treatment on the plantations, which did not have communications links with colonial administrators; lacked a system of oversight of plantation operations; and extreme powerlessness left workers, both men and women, to the mercy of plantation owners and its system of authority.

Indentured women from India were understood to be from wanting backgrounds. Many were abandoned by partners and families under the putrid conditions of poverty and impositions of colonization. Many were widowed or destitute sex workers attempting to escape a prolonged life of despair and desperation. Empire had no intention of women indentured labour, since they did not encourage the prospect of permanence of the indentured system, nor the idea of reproduction of the workforce. Unfortunately for Empire, the Government of India had developed a set of rule and regulations intended to safe-guard and regulate the exportation of Indian labour. Accordingly, for every one hundred men, forty had to be women.

Many historians argued that indentured labour was a replacement for slavery which was ended in Britain in 1833. Joshi (in (Govinden 2008) argues that it was a substitute for slavery and forced labour. ‘... they were half-slaves, bound over body and soul by one hundred and one inhuman regulations’ (ibid.). Herewith was another of Empire’s cruel experiments (based on the prevailing theory of race) – the imposition of boundedness after boundedness on men and women, on this occasion from India, who were presented as a different subject for social engineering. It *may* have been that Empire was inflicting a brutal test on a people that Empire knew were descendants of an ancient civilization, bearing a highly sophisticated culture and scientific knowledge systems not matched elsewhere in the world. The outcomes of this vulgarity are evident in continuum and still in the making today. The outcomes show that no matter how much a people of civilization and sophistication were robbed of their essence, in time, the buried qualities re-emerged to transcend even the *Weltanschauung* of most modern societies hosting the diasporas.

On the other side of indenture, i.e. ‘passenger Indians’ (or free Indians) with resources who came to South Africa hoping for prospects promised by colonial agents and other business opportunities, also experienced resistance and found themselves on the receiving end from two communities, namely white settlers and local Africans. White settlers were threatened by competition in the markets posed by the free Indians, while Africans, prompted by the wedge driven by the settler state to encourage separation, felt that Indians would elbow them out of their own country (Hughes 2007)!

The experiences of women members of free Indians contrasts sharply with indentured women in terms of indentureship and class. Indentured women were thoughtlessly denuded, physically punished, sexually abused and did not share the privacy and practices of human dignity. Women of passenger Indians experienced challenges of tradition, religion, caste and gender hierarchies even before they could migrate. Women travelling unaccompanied by a family member of male escort on a ship was unthinkable. Very few women accompanied men partners or as members of a family due mainly to gender role differentiations and concerns for migration expenses and living in affordable new settings. Women of passenger Indians did not receive much attention until historians and literary critics documented the histographies of ‘well-to-do’ families post-migration (Hiralal 2016). Within the growing body of work, women no longer become an adjunct to men in migration histories, but independent categories of analysis.

## **9 Consolidating Post-indenture Community Life**

### **9.1 The Indian Working Class**

In the book, *Insiders and outsiders*, Bill Freund answers the research question: How and why did Durban become the city that it is (Freund 1995)? Freund focuses on the Indian working class as a particular analytical challenge at coming to grips with the question. Despite suffering discrimination and heavily burdened by poverty, in contrast to the African population, Indians did not face the same barriers post-indenture (1911). Indian labour was mobile, did not have to carry a pass<sup>11</sup> and, crucially, could join trade unions. These ‘freedoms’ or ‘privileges’ translated into unrestricted participation in the labour market. Under such circumstances, and supported by early capitalism, Indian labour not only benefited Durban as a city, but the local service, manufacturing and agricultural sectors.

Freund’s study of the economic history of Indians in Durban, consolidates a stunning conclusion:

- not the state or capital, i.e. city officials or entrepreneurs, nor some external force provided the content for the Indian working class;
- memories of racial exclusion and discrimination morphed the branching off from the working class, a new generation of Indian radicals that occupied decisive spaces in political and intellectual life; and
- given the remarkable ethnic dichotomy, working class Indians constructed and separated a distinctive perspective from the ambiguities and constrictions of the time.

Freund’s only conclusion is that the Indian working class have ontologically responded with a mixture of attitudes – ‘they look out to South African society from a unique position, experiencing it both as outsiders and as insiders’ (Freund 1995). Freund’s study is an excellent example towards explaining many of the challenges faced by the Indian diaspora in South Africa. In particular, the social concepts of accommodation, integration, cohesion are also understood from the discipline of economic history, thereby supporting diaspora studies from the perspective of intersectionality.

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<sup>11</sup> The Pass Laws was a system used to control the movement of Black, Indian and Coloured people in South Africa.

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## 9.2 Cooperation Post-indenture

The Indian working class is credited in economic history, to the point of producing today's business leaders, entrepreneurs, political leaders, intellectuals and religious philosophers who occupy the public space. What of the community and the personal? Is the outsider-insider complex sufficient explanation for achievements of the Indian working class? What does it mean to lead the life of an Indian? These questions lie at the periphery of identity, class and ethnicity. They can be thought of as politically constructed, socially constructed, or as imagined. Given the issue of space and relevance, this analysis will be skipped. In its place, an analysis of cooperation will be featured. Cooperation during post-indenture hinges on two influences: that of Indian society and the Indian family system. Indian society is collectivistic and is thought of as promoting social cohesion and interdependence (Chadda and Deb 2013). The traditional Indian joint family system follows more or less similar principles of collectivism, translating to social capital.

Many Indian political instruments have been fashioned alongside the idea of collectivism. For example, the Cooperative Movement began with the enactment of the *Cooperative Credit Societies Act 10 04 1904* (Verma 2004). The Indian government is committed to cooperative development, which has inherent advantages in tackling the problems of poverty alleviation, food security and employment generation. Cooperatives also fill in the space at delivering goods and services in areas where both the state and the private sector have failed. Cooperation is also institutionalized at the local level of Indian society, vis-à-vis the *panchayat* system. The Panchayati Raj<sup>12</sup> functions as the system of local governance in which gram panchayats<sup>13</sup> are the basic units of local administration.

It is therefore not difficult to extrapolate the idea of cooperation in the collective Indian psyche. Given Indian history and the consensus of how to govern the world's largest democracy, the principles of panchayat, i.e. direct participation has also extended to the necessity of self-help and social ethics. The Indian psyche is not only organized around the rational notion of the practice of cooperation, but is framed in ancient texts, philosophies, sciences and traditions.

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<sup>12</sup> Panchayati Raj is a form of government at the village level where each village is responsible for its own activities.

<sup>13</sup> Village council.

The Vedas<sup>14</sup>, for example, has influenced the Indian society deeply. Of course, the Vedas are contested, manipulated and sometimes misunderstood. In this version of the Vedas, (a) the world is in constant flux (Saṃsāra); (b) there is no substantial meaning in it; (c) this world is, in the final analysis, an illusion; and (d) the best course for humans is the state of Vairagya, a turning away from the world (John and BPh 2018). While the mythology may appear negative and pessimistic by nature, the alternative truth to life (so to speak) is far grander, noble and celestial. However, in practical terms, the effect of the mythology has enabled the people to think freely, given the varieties of schools of subject fields and schools of philosophy.

The survival of people of indenture was heavily reliant on cooperation and coexistence. There is evidence from diaspora studies that compromise and cooperation are the very heart of the developmental process. This is true of all social structures, i.e. in both integrated and divided alike (Premdas 1996). Accordingly, framed on the logic of cooperation, the cultural, religious and educational achievements of post-indenture can be understood.

### **9.3 Culture, Religion and Education**

Indian culture in the diasporas did not sit well with colonizers and Empire. Indian customs of marriage, purdah, officiality of priests and so on were as a matter of fact not recognized as traditional law or tolerated in practice. European hegemonic order vis-à-vis the colonial state and the missionary movement was to imposed on every ethnic group, cultural identity and traditional practice. The ultimate intention was to rid colonial people of their identities, cultures and diversities. Social engineering, removal of indigenous children from their parents and traditional families were routinely subjected to re-education at residential schools. More brutal treatment of first nation peoples included dispossession of their lands, forcible life in the reservations, or the most extreme measure – extermination. South Africa experienced such unthinkable episodes. Cape San societies, who were only hunter gatherers in disposition, were the first peoples of the Western Cape region who had undergone unconscionable violent subjugation of a genocidal nature (Adhikari 2010). This feature, that is, where both indentured workers and local societies coexisted and came under the same oppressive regime, had the effect of extending and deepening suffering and

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<sup>14</sup> Collection of Sanskrit hymns, 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

memory of sufferings. The aim was simply to replace thinking human beings with unthinking bodies compliant solely to the iron will and giddy fancies of colonial masters.

Julius Nyerere remarked that ultimately development is about what goes on in the head of the citizen for it is under one's hat that there exists the greatest underdeveloped part of the world (Nyerere 1973). Nyerere's observation of the role of individual psychology in development concurs with the World Bank's World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society and Behaviour (Bank 2014). The World Development Report 2015 focuses on decision-making and behaviour of individuals at making better choices regarding economic development. Accordingly, the report advances specific interventions that target the psychological domain.

Both Nyerere and the World Bank appear to presage the capacity of Indian diasporas to make good social choices. Both observations appear to be based on the framework of a thinking and highly discriminative<sup>15</sup> culture. Such being the case, the Indian diaspora in South Africa must be credited for transferring, maintaining and promoting significant aspects of Indian culture in South Africa. In every geography of Indian presence, based on language and religious traditions, Indians have integrated into the local cultural matrix their symbols, artefacts and practices. Certain cultural practitioners and activists have successfully integrated Indian and local cultures, including dance, celebrations and religious observances. Respective Indian High Commissioners in Durban have maintained cultural and international relations with local traditional leaders and clans. For Cohen (in (Vertovec 2004), religion cements and binds the 'diasporic consciousness'. However, some diasporas adopting religions like Judaism, Sikhism, Bahais, Rastafarianism, including to some extent Hinduism, tend to sacralise their respective homelands. Notwithstanding the anomalies in the relationship between diasporas and religions, they tend to implicate one another.

South Africa is richly distributed with multiple Indian religious organizations that provide religious programmes and religious-backed institutional facilities such as educational colleges, non-governmental organizations, health and welfare centres, food programmes, employment creation projects, and so on. Some religious bodies are specialized in building primary and high schools

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<sup>15</sup> The recognition and understanding of the difference between one thing and another (discrimination between right and wrong).

in rural areas, usually neglected by government. Crucially these programmes perform socially useful work, as well as build social cohesion. There are also admirable Indian religious bodies that perform emergency work during conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies in the African continent and in parts of the world that are usually not knowledgeable to ordinary publics.

Formal education in west societies developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century recognizing the need to provide basic education for children consisting of basic proficiency in reading, writing, math, and algebra, as well as some work skills. Anthropologists suggest that all societies educate, train, and mentor their children. This also applied to Indian indentured workers and the Indian diaspora. In the absence of formal schools, the Indian diaspora in South Africa, undertook independently to socialize their children into the norms and expectations of their parents. Children were required to learn language, skills, and values.

Unfortunately, the role of schooling and education in development of the Indian diaspora has not been properly studied in South Africa, thereby making it impossible to establish an empirical causal relationship between the two variables. However, some evidence from Indian sociolinguistics indicate that people of indenture possessed knowledge in the form of traditional folk tales, proverbs, riddles and songs (Mesthrie 2018), prompting the genesis of education pursuits among children of the diaspora. There is also anecdotal evidence of learned priests who were literate in religious traditions, who sparked ideas of education of children. Early communities thereby organized language schools teaching Tamil, Hindi and Urdu at community-built temples and Mosques.

The transition from these language schools to formal primary schooling has unfortunately not been deserving of formal study. Rather, what is known is the existence of community-based schools, initiated by trust and material support of peoples of the diaspora. Given that both the colonial and apartheid states did not fully concern themselves with education provision for indigenous and diasporic people, evidence of historical continuity is difficult to ascertain. However, what is known once again from anecdotal evidence is that the apartheid state came to be convinced to share the provision of schooling with communities, at least where community schools were in existence. Pursuant to the attitude of self-help, the organization established by Gandhi in 1894, the Natal Indian Congress, helped to establish health, child and family welfare bodies and an educational programme known as the Congress School.

From the foregoing it is understandable why Indians were apparently



known for their thrift, investing their savings in small businesses and in the education of their children as such. The operative word is investment, i.e. education was an economic concept, the expectation of value in the future, not limited to the individual, but in the form of distributive generational wealth gains. Generational wealth formation is an important economic concept in today's developmental discourse.

## **9.4 Indian Political Participation, Ethnic Conflict, and the Circle of Exclusion**

The participation of Indians in the anti-apartheid struggle, followed by formal politics are historical milestones writ large in South African history. The political *raison d'être* of Indians was to be found in the opposing ideologies of colonization and apartheid discrimination to the promise of a new democratic system that upheld a non-racial society that recognized and respected the equality and dignity of all people. Indians believed and hoped for true integration into society that ensured their political, economic, social and cultural status and identity as equal citizens, where race is de-institutionalized for any purpose, including administration, public policy and laws of the land.

During the political negotiations of 1991 and subsequently, known as the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), the African National Congress, which received the popular support of a large section of Indians, did not manage to win key ideological positions – among them, non-racialism. Instead, the concept of multiculturalism and a multicultural society was proposed in order to garner unity among the major political and splinter political entities. Even the notion of a united black or African coalition was not possible due to contestations of blackness and Africanness. Indians also shared divided allegiances within the black and African political discourses. Indians were further divided outside of the African National Congress, sharing support for the National and Democratic Parties.

Ethnic conflict between Indians and indigenous Africans are rooted in indenture history. Two major riots occurred subsequently; the first in 1949, after which the state concluded that the riots were 'unexpected' and 'unforeseen' (Webster 1974). The second occurred in 1985, which occurred within the context of severe political resistance in the former Transvaal and the Cape, followed by state-sponsored political assassinations in Durban. Inanda (an African township) and Phoenix (an Indian Township) are geographically

situated opposite each other. This specific event was construed solely as a racialized confrontation between Africans and Indians (Hughes 1987). African-Indian tensions have been fuelled further by anti-Indian rhetoric and rioting in Durban in July 2021. Rather than improvements in race relations after 1994, events like the 1949 1985 and 2021 riots remain an African-Indian antithesis (Thiara 1999). It is clear that a multicultural society that does not address the material conditions that fuel racial and class antagonisms, such as that apparently between African-Indian will not succeed as a democratic political system positioned in the present neo-liberal context. The net effect on Indians will be to arrive full circle from the exclusionary dictates of indenture, and suffer the politics of exclusion ejected from the majority who are not understanding of class relations and the counterforces of corrupt politics.

## **10 Conclusion**

The chapter celebrates Indian indenture in South Africa. Indentured people found themselves in different troubles, yet transcended them. The diaspora of today is known as transnationalism – an interesting concept for developed economies, who need to regulate trans-migration. Crucially transnationalism is thought of as globalization from the bottom, having implications for economic development, and social and cultural integration. This development puts out an important question for the future – what would the leading countries of the world of tomorrow look like and what about the future of democracy?

Indian indenture was a labour solution for Empire, yet Empire treated people of indenture brutally and unconscionably. They saw indentured workers as a problem to be exploited and ultimately eliminated. Indian indenture germinated new race relations in the previous Natal and now in the current KwaZulu-Natal. The race divide is manifested in the history of riots in Durban and ongoing crises of public-sector service delivery demonstrations, endemic poverty and deep, pervasive unemployment. African-Indian race relations can easily deteriorate to crisis levels in the face of the failing state. The politics of posturing and blaming are useless rancour, unworthy of the memory and dignity of outstanding revolutionaries whose hard winning of democracy is disrobed.

A major concern of the chapter was the incompleteness of theory explaining surviving and transcending indenture. The stock of literary knowledge on gender in indenture outstripped theory as well. Indenture gave way to diasporas, and diasporas to transnationality. These developments, which

are associated with globalization must also be theorized in the South African and African contexts. Despite these theory setbacks, Sen's capability theories of capability and justice accounted for agency and development. Sen's theories may also strengthen the conceptual understanding of transnationalism and globalization. Freund's methodology and economic analysis of Indian indenture was most useful at understanding development of the City of Durban. The analysis has broader implications for other economic sectors, including the state sector. The chapter also made crucial reference to cooperation as a theoretical device for development. Perhaps cooperation may be extended across to the perilous area of African-Indian relations in the Durban area.

Indian indenture is well known for self-help approaches, promoting of education, welfare interventions and the general spirit of humanity. Altruism, empathy and extending charity are inherent characteristics of Indian communities. Religion appears as the platform of social action and social consciousness. Accordingly, absorbing blame, not unlike the aphorism – 'take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also' – appears to characterize the attitude of these communities.

The discussion on culture, religion and education sets out the contributions of indentured and diasporic Indian people over time and within the limits of their development. Their achievements provided the foundations for future and the current generations. Had they not imagined the economic dimensions of education in the way they did, future and current generations would have been poorer. The political dimensions of the diaspora require careful thought towards improved African-Indian relations and fuller political participation, lest Indians re-arrive at the point of a new form of exclusion. On a different, but related subject, there is a great potential for diasporic transnational engagement as part of a global project.

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# Chapter 8

## Identity and Indian Culture – Reflections of Indian Television Viewing amongst South African Indians in Durban and Johannesburg, South Africa

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### Abstract

South Africa Indians remain an important part of the country's culture and diversity. Indians came to South Africa many centuries ago, bringing with them a myriad of rich cultural practices, unique cuisine, traditional religion and sacred traditions. South African Indians retain a sense of cultural and social connection to India, and a concept of primary local and secondary ancestral identity is prevalent among people of Indian descent. Indian television and cinema viewing played a central role in connecting the South African diasporic community with their land of origin in the Indian subcontinent. In the late 1980s, videocassette recorders (VCR) resulted in the virtual demise of the Indian cinema industry and during the late 1990s, while DVDS played a significant role in encouraging Indian entertainment and culture within the Diaspora. These three approaches of entertainment and cultural contact with India were, however, restricted to specific themes and events in the Indian subcontinent, sometimes promoting particular values, ethnic and political orientations over which viewers had very little control. The advent of Bollywood DSTV has, however, provided the South African diasporic community with a wide range of bouquets to select from. This paper examines how the various Indian programmes screened on television has become household topics of conversation which impacted on and influenced the shaping of various Indian family's culture and sense of identity in Durban and Johannesburg, South Africa.

**Keywords:** Identity, culture, South Africa, television, Indians

## **1 Introduction**

South Africa is home to the largest population of people of Indian origin. Indian South Africans are South Africans who descend from indentured labourers and migrants who arrived from British India during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The current South African population is approximately 1,545 million (Statista Research Department:2022). The majority live in and around the City of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal making it one of the largest 'Indian' populated cities outside of India; and Johannesburg, Gauteng. They transported their rich heritage of enjoyable spices, culture and art with them. They also brought their humbleness, service mankind, traditions and dedication to hard work. Now, more than 161 years along, these fundamental principles continue within the Indian community and have progressed to incorporate doctrines from the other diverse cultures in South Africa.

English is spoken as a first language by most Indian South Africans, although a minority of the Indian South African population, especially the seniors, still speak some Indian languages. These languages include Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Punjabi, and Gujarati. Indian South Africans are predominantly Hindu, but Muslims, Christians and Sikhs also came to South Africa from India from the early 1860s. The Indian South Africans are divided along with the following major religions; Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. This community is further divided into lines: Hindu (includes four broad linguistic groups: Hindi, Tamil, Telegu and Gujarati) approximately 41,3%; Muslim 24,6%; and Christianity 24,4%.

Indian music, dance and other cultural festivals are celebrated throughout South Africa. Hindu festivals include Diwali/Deepavali, the festival of lights, the Tamil festival. Thai Poosam Kavady. and Muslim festival. Eid al-Adha. Indians of diverse faiths exist together and over the years have come to appreciate others' beliefs.

Indian television is viewed by many South African Indians, and there are various selections of top Indian programmes and movies available to entertain the preference of a range of spectators. The globalization of digital media and the introduction of cable channels such as Zee TV, B4U, Al Jazeera, NDTV and Star Life have created a new impetus and has encouraged South African Indians to take stock of their culture, customs, fashion, cooking and rituals. It has also become a driving force for People of Indian Origin (PIOs) to travel back to India to view the locations that have been included into the

making of the programmes and movies. Furthermore, some South African Indians participate in pilgrimages within the diasporic spheres that facilitate a sense of belonging with the Indian continent. This study examines how the various Indian programmes screened on television have become household topics of conversation which impacted on and influenced in the shaping of numerous Indian family's culture and sense of identity in Durban and Johannesburg, South Africa. Interviews with both males and females in these different locations explore the impact that the viewing of the different programmes' bouquets/ soapies<sup>1</sup>/ movies on the Indian television channels has on their lives as an Indian population.

## **2 Digital Satellite Television in South Africa**

These are different ways of broadcasting a signal. Satellite television broadcasts from a satellite in space from which one receives via a satellite dish that is mounted to one's house. The first digital television implementation in South Africa was a satellite-based system launched by pay-tv operator, MultiChoice, in 1995. On 8 August 2008, MultiChoice launched South Africa's first HDTV channel (DSTV channel 170). The South African-based MultiChoice DSTV is the main digital satellite television provider in Sub-Saharan Africa, broadcasting principally in English, but also in Portuguese, Hindi, German and Afrikaans. This provided various bouquets offering general entertainment, movies, lifestyle and culture, sport, documentaries, news and commerce, children, music, religion and consumer channels to MultiChoice subscribers.

DSTV Indian is South Africa's only 24-hour Indian television entertainment subscription, catering to the viewing preference of both North and South Indian communities. Saffron television is a locally produced channel that which was launched on DSTV in September 2008. It offered a platform for the South African Indian community to showcase its cultural events and to tell its stories through projects like the South African Indian Journey that remembered 150 years of the Indian community in South Africa, which was in 2010.

In the early history of Indians in South Africa, from 1860 onwards, entertainment and leisure time activities were virtually non-existent. This was largely due to Indians, especially those of indentured backgrounds, being

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<sup>1</sup> A 'soapie' is a serialised drama, usually dealing with domestic themes and characterised by sentimentality and generally broadcast on radio or television

confined to remote parts of the province of KwaZulu-Natal and in certain parts of Gauteng Province. Compared to their merchant counterparts, who were confined to the urban centres of both provinces, they had some access to leisure time and recreational activities due to easy access facilitated by public transport, telecommunications and financial affordability to spend on leisure time activities. For the indentured Indian, life on the remote farms removed them from any self-indulgence they may have desired.

DSTV Indian offers a diverse and wide-ranging selection of prime Indian entertainment to suit the preference of viewers, including the prime Indian entertainment package especially for Bollywood enthusiasts. Each package is available as an individual stand-alone subscription, but is also available as an addition to an existing DSTV premium package to suit the convenience of the subscriber.

### **3 Inspiration for this Study**

The inspiration for this paper came about after several family get-togethers over the past few years when the researcher would hear her siblings, aunts (and even uncles), debate, discuss, become emotional and even predict the outcome of different movies, ‘soapies’ or serials they watch on television. They would discuss food, fashion and entertainment. At times the discussions would become so intense and poignant that one would assume they were discussing a real-life situation within the immediate family. Furthermore, when an aunt of the researcher died a few years ago, her uncle, who lived alone, stated that *‘had it not been for the Indian programmes on television he does not know how he would have passed his days alone’*. These comments provided the researcher with the impetus to pursue in a more formalised investigation the impact that cable channels (both North Indian and South Indian) such as Zee TV, B4U, Al Jazeera and NDTV had on Indian families in Durban, South Africa, and whether this impacted on their sense of belonging to the Indian subcontinent. This paper also examines how the various Indian programmes screened via Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) have emerged, become household topics of conversation, and impacted on the social and political lives of its viewers and various Indian families in Durban. The main purpose of this research is to focus upon the links between being South African and being Indian South African in a post-apartheid context, and how People of Indian Origin identify with India as their land of origin. In order to comprehend the identification of South African Indians with

Indian cinema and television programmes, one must first understand the initial arrival and inhabitation of Indians in a foreign land, South Africa. It helps to demystify that India-South Africa relations go beyond economic trade and have consequences for the complex diasporic community in the emerging democracy in the South of the African continent.

#### **4 Research Methodology**

This study was conducted in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, which has the most diverse Indian population in South Africa concentrated in this area, and has the most substantial Indian population in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa as a whole also has a substantial Indian population, with over 1,3 million people of Indian descent (Census 2011). Therefore, Indian influences have contributed to the multi-cultural diversity of South Africa. This study is based on a four-pronged approach and draws from a variety of methodological orientations. Firstly, e-mail communication and telephonic interviews with staff of Multichoice in Johannesburg and KwaZulu-Natal were conducted in January 2014. Secondly, 100 questionnaires consisting of both qualitative and quantitative questions were given to respondents in three different areas in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, the South, North and Central areas and in Johannesburg. 67 of these questionnaires were completed. Thirdly, interviews and discussions with both males and females in different locations in Durban and Johannesburg focused on Indian television programmes and whether these have grown in popularity and appeal since their initial introduction. Fourthly, in 2022, family and friends were asked via WhatsApp how Indian television impacted their lives. The WhatsApp ‘interviews’ also probed the impact that the viewing of these different programmes on the North and South Indian bouquets had on their lives of the lives of the Indian population in both provinces. This study adopts the descriptive research design with the aim of describing the impact of viewing Indian television ‘soapies’/series/movies on the sense of identity and culture on South African Indians. The design was considered appropriate as it assisted in understanding the views of South African Indians on their culture and identity.

#### **5 Contextualisation of Identity**

According to Parekh (2006), identity refers to how one understands and defines

oneself. The sense of identity informs one's values, guides choices, and gives life a sense of direction and coherence. It is a product of the conscious or unconscious interaction between the range of alternatives offered by the wider society and self-understanding. In a traditional society or one that is relatively stable, self-understanding is generally in harmony with the way society encourages thinking of oneself. Multiple types of identity come together within an individual and can be broken down into the following: cultural identity, professional identity, ethnic and national identity, religious identity, gender identity, and disability identity. It is the qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance, and/or expressions that characterise a person or group.

In South Africa, DSTV provides a variety of global flow of information and images. By far the most rapidly developing DSTV channel is Bollywood, which not only targets one of the world's largest populations in India, but also its diasporic communities that are scattered across developed and developing nation states. Bollywood DSTV has become an important source of contact for diasporic communities to their homeland, as it helps to maintain their sense of identity to a certain extent. For transnational Indian communities who at some point in time might want to return to their homeland, Bollywood viewing is more meaningful to keep in touch with their homeland. In respect of diasporic communities who have some degree of permanence in their host countries, Bollywood viewing is likely to have varying impacts on their identity.

Although DSTV in South Africa is a relatively a new appendage to the number of media offerings in the country, it is a broader array of communication technology that offers a way to reinforce long-distance identities. A distinct feature of DSTV, apart from its diverse spectrum of arts, culture, news and entertainment, is the language medium which it uses to communicate with the audience. The vernacular amongst the South African Indian diaspora has almost disappeared, but it continues to remain an important source of identification, particularly as a representation for both religion and identification in keeping with the North/ South Indian affiliation that is prevalent in the home society.

Diasporic communities are caught between social and psychological processes that shape their identity. They either have to assimilate within the host communities' norms and values and integrate the dominant culture of the host country. In so doing they undergo a process of acculturation where they have to unlearn many of their beliefs, culture and ideologies and begin to accept those of the dominant culture. The extent to which they resist domination of their culture by that of the host society will to an extent determine their social position

in the host country. Often, according to Govender (2012:10), the diasporic community are confronted with the challenge of determining where their 'home' is. Home is defined as either those from whom they originate or that of their host country. Govender (2012) asserts that within the diaspora individuals are 'either here or there'; they are torn between the host country and that of their land of origin. The longer their presence in the host country and the number of successive generations that are produced, will determine the extent to which they are acculturated and assimilated within the dominant culture of the host country.

However, over generations, through modernisation taking place in the country, the Indian diasporic community has taken on some of the western values that came with it. This has been inspired by the mass media, which projected images of westernisation in its different forms to a large extent.

During apartheid, the Indian diaspora were given certain concessionary spaces within the mass media. With regard to the audio media, they were provided with limited airtime that aired aspects of Indian culture through the state-controlled media. This audio media prohibited the airing of any programmes that will be a potential threat to the hegemony of the white ruling class at that time. In terms of the visual media, the television only became a household communication media in the 1970s. Here again, television viewing was highly regulated, with no provision made for the airing of programmes that will be of interest to the Indian diaspora. In all respects, television programmes consisted of the dominant political ideology of the apartheid government.

Access to transnational media that contain purely Indian bouquets has placed Indo-South Africans in a dilemma. As compared to the past, there has been a degree of acculturation in respect of their cultural identity due to a lack of exposure to Indian audio-visual media. In the post-apartheid era, with heightened exposure to Indian visual media, the likelihood of raising a sense of consciousness on their Indian sense of identity cannot be dismissed. However, exposure to such transnational media may also be seen as undermining their loyalty to South African society. On the other hand, it can also foster loyalty to their host country. Notwithstanding such diversity in responses, Dickinson (2007:160) notes a rejection of dual citizenship with India, which is underscored by the desire of Indo-South Africans to be primarily South Africans. Considering that within the diaspora it is the rich that have access to DSTV, it may be postulated that they are more than likely to develop some affinity for their home of origin, whereas those that cannot afford such subscriptions have no alternative but to be exposed to the state-run television network that portrays

images and programmes that represent a ‘Proudly South African’ sense of identity in the interest of nation building.

According to Tere (2012:2), Bollywood films may be perceived to be the ‘opium of the Indian masses’, as viewers depend on this medium to help them escape to a world of fantasy. In a very unambiguous way, cinema shapes the cultural, social and political values of people within a country to a large extent. In many respects, the same can be said about diasporic communities who are exposed to a wide genre of films spanning a multitude of issues. However, studies on the effects of Bollywood films on the lives of the diasporic communities are scant. Nonetheless, a study undertaken by Kaur and Yahya (2010) on the effects of Zee TV on the cultural, social and political values of Singaporean Hindu communities provides some insights.

For the expatriate, viewing Indian films provided an opportunity for keeping up with the familiar social conditions existent in the land of origin. It helped to facilitate the constant affirmation of social norms in the host land which did not necessitate assimilation of other cultural values as offered by western films. While the expatriate claimed a modern, educated mindset in not adhering to social taboos, they nonetheless were able to recognize the social issues being discussed and maintained connection with their home society through the Hindi language medium. Thus, watching Hindi cable entertainment was an avenue of rediscovery of contemporary life in India for Indians who have been long settled in diasporic communities globally (Kaur & Yahya 2010:271). For Bhatia (2011:5), Bollywood has been crucial in bringing the ‘homeland’ into the diaspora as well as creating a culture of imaginary solidarity across the heterogeneous diasporic community.

Before the advent of Hindi cable channels, Indian culture in the study was considered old fashioned and boring. By viewing the way, it was celebrated in the homeland, the diasporic community experienced a sense of rejuvenation in wanting to participate in the traditional Indian way of doing things (Kaur & Yahya 2010:276). Cable television succeeded in unifying the Indian diasporic communities with their counterparts in the subcontinent by raising a common sense of consciousness expressed through the appreciation of Hindi music and the display of talented artists and musicians (Kaur & Yahya 2010:278).

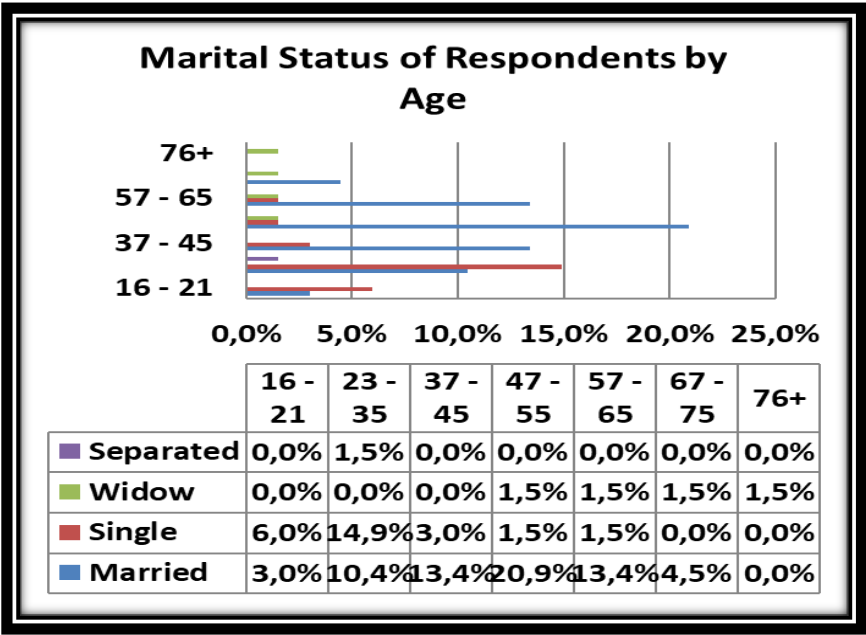
## **6 Discussion of the Findings of these Research Questionnaires**

From the questionnaires received, females comprised almost two-thirds of the



study sample, whilst males comprised a third. The majority of the male and female respondents were between the ages of 22 to 65 years. The table below indicates the marital status of the participants. Given the religious composition of the diaspora, the study sample comprised an almost fair distribution of faith groups. For all three faith groups the age range was between 22 to 65 years, which is in keeping with the demographic trends within the diaspora.

Table 1: Marital status of Respondents by Age



On the question as to whether watching DSTV has increased the understanding of viewers about the Indian way of life, 78% responded in the affirmative, compared to 22%, who felt that it did not. Of the 78% who responded in the affirmative, the most common response was that the programme ‘increased their political, religious and economical understanding of India’; ‘created awareness about culture and their belief system’; ‘helped better understand family relationships’; ‘increased tolerance about other faith

groups'; 'provided understanding about different religious events'; 'hardships and challenges'; 'insight into environmental issues' and 'understanding different language groups'. It will be noted from these responses that viewing Indian DSTV has heightened respondents' individual sense of awareness, which otherwise they did not have. This may partly be attributed to the South African diasporic community with the advent of DSTV now having a greater opportunity to view a wide range of programmes and channels with increased levels of frequency. These affirmative responses also illustrate that over time, the South African diaspora has undergone a process of acculturation which was only now emerging with a sense of revitalisation about their ancestral homeland through frequent exposure to Indian DSTV.

In respect of how respondents perceived South Africa having been exposed to Indian DSTV programmes, only 5% responded that their perceptions had changed. Some of the responses are that *'it has brought me closer to my motherland'*; *'India has lots to offer in terms of my belief'* and *'makes me proud of being an Indian'*. In contrast, an overwhelming majority indicated that exposure to Indian DSTV had no impact on their perception about their ancestral homeland. Strong responses such as *'it does not affect me at all. My upbringing was not like Indians in India caught in culture and religious issues'*; *'India has much to learn about modern ways of living. South African Indians are way ahead'*; *'my history is different and I think Indians in India are caught and too steeped in culture and not in universal values'*; *'proud to be a South African Indian, we have good cultural morals'*; *'South African Indians are different from Indians in India'*; and *'we have progressed in all aspects'* attest to respondents' affinity to being South Africans. More than one third (37%) of the respondents qualified their perception of their diasporic country as *'proudly South African'*, which strongly suggests the respondents' loyalty to the diasporic home.

With regard to whether viewing Indian DSTV has had any impact on the respondent's cultural life, a 67% response rate was obtained. Of this, less than a third (31%) felt that Indian DSTV impacted positively on their cultural life, compared to just more than a third (36%) who felt it had none at all. For those who felt that Indian DSTV impacted positively on their cultural life, the most popular responses are captured as *'am able to enhance and relate the Hindu culture and beliefs'*; *'I am more informed about my festivals and other religious practices'*; *'I feel closer to my culture especially since all the Hindu religious days are highlighted'*; *'I respect my culture more. I have learnt more*

*about my Indian culture*'; *'improved on my Hindi language*'; *'we see how the priest in India do the prayers*'; and *'made me want to interact more in doing religious activities*'. Such positive responses affirm a strengthening of cultural bonds derived through Indian DSTV viewing. For those respondents who felt that viewing Indian DSTV had little or no impact on their cultural life, the most popular responses were *'we South African Indian live a very different life*'; *'not really. I can relate due to my strong orientation to culture from my family*'; *'not much. I believe in prayer. I pray but keep to what's necessary. I have learned a little that it pays to have faith in the God above no matter what name you may call him by*'; *'not much as we still practise our culture in South Africa. It is sometimes a bit different from ours*'; and *'it has not as I have my own cultural roots here in SA*'. These responses suggest that respondents have formed their own sense of identity within the diasporic community and are unfazed, despite being exposed to a similar culture through DSTV viewing.

Interestingly, when looking at similarities between the South African and Indian way of life, some differences are noted. Of the 45% of responses to this question, 18% felt that there was no similarity, whilst 27% felt that there were some. Those who felt that there were no similarities commented, *'not really. We do not practice the dowry system. There is no class system in South Africa. As Indians there are cross culture marriages*'; *'no. Lifestyles are completely different*'; and *'no our culture seems less diverse*'. In contrast, those who felt that there were similarities commented that *'some similarity in terms of the temples and prayer*', *'yes emphasis on close family ties*'; *'yes the foods, languages and some family lifestyles and to some extent their cultures*'; and *'yes. We are not far removed. Minor differences in details*' are some of the responses obtained from respondents. It will be noted that the responses that respondents provided contain quite diverse perceptions on similarities and differences in the Indian way of life.

The impact that DSTV had on the respondents has largely been on reinvigorating their cultural and religious way of life. Generally, respondents in the study have seen themselves as more advanced and modernised compared to their counterparts in the ancestral home society. Although it may appear that the South African diaspora is unfazed by the impact of DSTV on their sense of identity at this point in time, one cannot firmly hypothesize as to what it will be in the future. This in part may be attributed to DSTV being a relatively new feature within the diaspora and as such the full impact of it has not come to light.

## **7 What Impact does the Viewing of Indian Television have on You?**

The response to this was diverse. The participants stated (verbatim tabulation of responses):

I am made aware of the cultural social, religious, political, latest fashion and trends, news and entertainment on Bollywood which is my favourite.

Truthfully speaking, I have visited India on many occasions. I believe that only the rich live in good conditions like we view.

Watching NDTV and Al-Jazeera has given me in-depth understanding of India-political, religious and economical aspects and insights into different cultures.

Although I have visited India many times there is always new things that amaze me.

Exposure of the Indian country, way of life generally and economic and scientific growth, besides some other things are good to know.

Yes, I can associate with the Indian culture and beliefs. It inspires me to be a better person.

It gives a better understanding about Indian culture. We get to learn more about their religion, the different type of food. It has made me aware of the influence cultural practices has on people especially those in rural India. I like the Indian food channel. Teaches me more or different spices, food, Indian eats. I have learnt how to cook Indian food. Love it.

There are lots of things that are portrayed in these programmes like dowry and the birth of the child, cast system etc are all still rife practised in India. The programmes are a way to educate the Indian people about not practising these acts.

To the question of the participants affiliation to being South African the following are the responses received:

I am a proud South African Indian with my own culture and faith. I have my own religious beliefs and see myself as different to the

Indian subcontinent.

I can identify with the Indian programs I watch but see myself as being a South African of Indian heritage.

I enjoy the India programmes but consider myself a South African citizen.

I feel a sense of loyalty to my country because our forefathers worked hard to develop the country. India is the country of my forefathers, but now South Africa is my home.

I feel very lucky to be South African Indian as the lifestyle is completely different from ours.

I identify more with South African culture.

I think India has too many caste and class problems.

It does not affect me at all. My upbringing was not like Indians in India caught in culture and religious issues.

Personally, as SA Indian I lead a middle-class life and am more than happy. My only heartache is that we in SA have to worry about the future of our children and siblings-there is not much hope considering the Blacks feel like they need it all due to being suppressed in the past.

We share very similar traits as our Indian counterparts. Just in a more modern environment.

The aspect of the adherence to culture was posed to interviewees and the following were some of their responses:

Although I am religious and perform all the cultural activities we will always be connected with India one way or the other.

Am able to enhance and relate to the Hindu cultural activities and beliefs and why they are done/cultural knowledge improvement.

Culture forms discipline and happiness within family. I am reminded of my rich and righteous culture, practising rituals, celebrations and festivities.

I feel closer to my culture. esp. since all the Hindu religious days are always highlighted.

I listen to more eastern music and movies-it has improved my Hindi language.

I sometimes watch when I visit my sister or mum. I enjoy the

programmes and realise that the cultural life experienced in India is not very different to that practised in South Africa.

In a positive manner. Sometimes we as South Africans do not celebrate all the cultural events. By viewing the programmes, we are enlightened with some background knowledge. In a way it reminds me of the way we live in South Africa. We are slowly moving away from our culture and roots. It has just enhanced my love for Indian culture and strengthened my Indian Identity.

We South African Indians live a very different Life. Some of the programmes did however encourage me to become more spiritually orientated.

I am a South African born into a Hindi family and I have my culture instilled in me, however we learn more things on these bouquets. The programmes assist in educating us and relating us to certain cultural programmes by being informative as well as making us aware that certain practices does exist in South Africa as well.

In South Africa we do not practise the dowry system. There is no obvious class system as Indians. There are cross-cultural marriages.

The focal point is my belief system in God. Be righteous, humane, practice the principles of God, be good, do good, think good be sincere, peaceful, humble and have self-control.

Respect for elders, fashion enjoyment, way of life, insight into Indian culture.

The Diwali festival has shown me that every religion has something unique about it.

I feel a lot of mother in laws learn to be like the Indian mother in laws (the researcher found this a bit hilarious because mother in laws are depicted in the programmes as being stern and domineering. Being a mother-in-law myself I generally joke with my daughters-in-law that I will behave like the ones depicted in the 'soapies').

## **8 Viewing of Cultural Festivals and its Impact**

The India Indians do celebrate cultural festivals with much more

passion than us. We are living in a western society and seem to be more westernised.

No, I believe that one should believe in god no matter which form you pray. I believe that prayer should be simple and devotion strong. Too much prayer in my opinion can confuse one. Too much prayer to different Gods are confusing the youth making them turn to Christianity.

Most of the celebration in India are celebrated over a period of 5 days or more It will be difficult for us South Africans to do the same because of the lifestyle we live and time constraints.

Culture has been lot now day especially by the young, watching India celebrate cultural festivals seem exciting and enjoyable thus I'd like to practise the same. Festivals especially Holi, Deepavali. although we practise it here it is more celebrated in India and bigger.

I feel I have lost my cultural values and watching the Indian movies do inspire me to want to practise some of the cultural values.

The programmes are very influential and festivals celebrated largely in SA example Diwali is very largely celebrated here just like India as well recently Holi has become colourful in SA. Although we do celebrate the festivals we don't do it in a grand way and each family celebrates in their own homes instead of coming together-there's more fun and laughter.

## **9 Conclusion**

Identity development and progression are impacted by a variety of internal and external factors like society, family, loved ones, ethnicity, race, culture, location, opportunities, media, interests, appearance, self-expression and life experiences. The viewing of Indian television is a relatively new recreational activity amongst the South African diaspora and its full impact is perhaps only partially known through this study. This research has shown that the identity of the younger generation of South African Indians is not influenced by Bollywood DSTV although the older generation find a revival of their sense of identity through culture, religious beliefs and festivals. Females are more likely to be influenced by Bollywood DSTV on aspects relating to food, clothing, fashion and family structure. Males identify with sporting personalities especially

cricket and certain film personalities. Bollywood DSTV presents an exotic image of India wanting them to visit as tourist especially amongst the younger respondents. The older respondents in the study want to feel their sense of their roots and heritage. As part of a community with whom they share a common geographical and ancestral heritage, language, religious beliefs and practices, and cuisine, they become an integral part of an in-group formation with a distinctive consciousness about preferred values and socialization patterns. While South Africa has undeniably become their home, India continues to represent their ideals in terms of their longing for socio-religious continuity. South African Indians retain a sense of cultural and social connection to India, and a concept of primary local and secondary ancestral identity is prevalent among people of Indian descent.

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# Chapter 9

## Hindu Youth Perceptions on Vegetarianism and Veganism in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

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### Abstract

Historically, a dearth of local literature exists on diets and food choices of the South African Indian community. While some detail of the culinary influences of the local cuisine is documented in historical literature on Indians in South Africa, perceptions of dietary trends and food preferences of the different generational levels are not explicit in local studies. Iconic cookery books such as *The South African Indian Cookbook* (Makan 1989) and *Indian Delights* (Mayat 1982), tend to showcase the preservation of traditional recipes among previous generations of Indians and more recently a plethora of websites, blogs and other social media platforms engage classic and more contemporary, evolving culinary tastes but there are sparse sociological studies on the dietary choices and food preferences within the Indian community, particularly that of Indian youth. This paper focuses on Hindu youth in KwaZulu-Natal, the province in South Africa that is home to the largest number of South Africans of Indian descent. The study is based on a sample of 36 Hindu youth residing in Durban, between the ages of 18 and 35 years. Much of the impetus for this paper was to provide some insight into contemporary youth perceptions of vegetarianism and veganism, among a segment of South African youth who are culturally aware of these practices.

### 1 Introduction

The study attempts to contribute some insight into Hindu youth perceptions of vegetarianism and veganism within the context of a growing interest in these dietary choices among youth globally, as well as in South Africa. While vegetarianism and veganism as lifestyle choices should not be conflated, they are significant dietary trends among youth in contemporary society and have been

treated as such for the purposes of this paper. Indian, and specifically Hindu youth trends in post-apartheid South Africa appear to be marginalized in local youth studies. Further, finding local literature and statistics pertaining directly to Indian youth is equally challenging. The researcher chose to foreground Hindu youth in this paper as an opportunity to contribute towards the discourse on *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

South Africa's Indian population represents the smallest population group in the country, numbering approximately 1,54 million people (Statista 2021) or 2,5% of the overall national population. The Indian community can be culturally divided into four broad groups along linguistic lines: Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Gujarati. They are divided along the following major religions: Hindu (41,3%), Muslim (24,6%) and Christian (24,4%) (Kumar 2020). Defining 'Hindu youth' numerically is not possible, as the percentage of Hindu youth that constitute the 41,3% of Hindus nationally is not available. However, we do know that they form a small segment of the large 3,47 million youth population that resides in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (StatSA 2019). For this study, the National Youth Policies of 2009, 2015 and 2030, which define young people in South Africa as those aged between 14 and 35 years (NYP 2020–2030), have been adopted.

This paper consists of two key sections. Section A, which focuses on the historical background of vegetarianism and veganism; the South African context; as well as contextualizing the two concepts and contextualizing youth trends. Section B presents the research methodology including the sample, the research questions and findings; followed by the conclusion.

## Section A

### 2 Historical Background

The beginnings of vegetarianism can be traced to the Vedic Period (1700 to 1100 BCE) of Indian history. Concepts such as *samsara* (flowing of the stream of consciousness; the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth), *atman* (self; breath), *karma* (a cycle of rebirths determined by our actions) and *ahimsa* (compassion for all living beings) emerged between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE to influence norms and attitudes at the time and laid the foundation of Indian culture (Sen 2015). Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious philosophies and practices have significantly influenced and encouraged Western practices of vegetarianism – and eventually veganism – since at least the first centuries BC

onward (Stuart 2006). It was the ancient Jains and their apostle Mahavira, 2 500 years ago who preached an extreme form of non-violence, which involved an elaborate vegetarian code that saw the beginnings of veganism. His contemporary, the Buddha, also decried animal sacrifice and violence, but his pragmatic thinking allowed monks to eat any food put in their alms bowl, including cooked meat. The concept of vegetarianism that originated in India also began influencing dietary practices in the Western World as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Greek travellers extolled the austere lifestyles and good health of the ascetics they met in India and developed their own tradition of vegetarianism, called *Pythagorean*, which influenced early Christian thought. Pythagoras was a highly influential thinker and an early follower of this ideology who promoted the idea of the soul; hence all vegetarians in these parts of the world were referred to as Pythagoreans until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Vegetarianism on ethical and religious grounds can be traced as far back as the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and was based on the doctrines of metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls. Egyptians were the first to expound transmigration or the belief that the human soul was immortal and upon death was reborn into the body of the same or other living species (Crowley 2016; Sen 2020).

Vegetarianism in 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe was advocated by Leonardo da Vinci, who believed that there was no distinction between the murder of humans and animals. However, it was only after the spread of Darwin's theory of evolution that vegetarianism gained strength again in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Darwinism refuted the idea that human beings were different from other animals; hence there was no reasonable justification for meat consumption. In this period, certain Christian groups also favoured abstaining from meat based on the belief that animals should also be worthy of pity. It was only then that the term 'vegetarianism' came to be used (Amato & Partridge 1989). Religious practices that preach respect for life and adopt nonviolence principles, such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, the Hare Krishna movement, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church, were also fundamental to this growth since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Hargreaves *et al.* 2020). Globally, India is often referred to as the land of Gandhi, spiritualism, and yoga – beliefs and practices closely associated with some form of vegetarianism. Vegetarianism in India has continued to be both a powerful norm and practise, central to a person's claim to high status in the largely caste-based Indian worldview. As a desired attribute of so-called upper caste groups, vegetarian norms are so

desirable that they enforce periodic ritual abstinence even among frequent meat-eaters (Husnain & Srivastava 2018). Although India has the largest population of vegetarians worldwide, the estimated percentage is anywhere between 23% and 37% (Ramesan 2021), it is a predominantly meat-eating nation. Indian history is diverse and complex by nature.

Its historical value systems rooted in religion have led to varied rates of meat consumption, despite the profound changes in Indian society over the last century. Historical factors also feature significantly, sometimes to an even greater extent than religious traditions and this is evident in the distinct regional characteristics of meat consumption, which continues to prevail across India today (Lange 2016). Indians who arrived in South Africa either as indentured labourers or passenger Indians, brought with them cultural norms and practices from the ‘Motherland’, some of which have waned and disappeared over time; some of which were reconfigured in the new context; and some of which were preserved and remain relatively intact. Vegetarianism in South Africa, as in other parts of the Indian diaspora, was no exception and evolved according to the social, economic and political challenges of the new landscape.

### **3 The South African Context**

One of the best-known historical figures and most ardent proponent of vegetarianism and veganism in South Africa, was Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a lawyer, founder of the Natal Indian Congress, political prisoner, leader of the Indian community in South Africa, and political activist against the white South African Government and the British Government in India.

Altogether Gandhi spent twenty-nine years in South Africa and during that very formative period he made a return to the religion of his ancestors as he developed a critical appreciation of Hinduism through a deepened knowledge of its religious classics. The Bhagvad Gita (a holy Hindu scriptural text) became for him an infallible guide of conduct. He had come to realize that he must find God by the path of devoted service described in the Gita. The non-attachment to possessions, even to life itself, also enjoined in the Gita gave Gandhi his fearlessness and he became persuaded that to be free to serve without a conflict of duties, he must impose upon himself complete chastity, even within marriage, known to Hindus as the Brahmacharya. Fasting

and restriction in diet now played a more important part in my life'. Having heard of cruel practices to increase the milk yield of cows in Calcutta, he gave up milk. At this time, he found that fresh fruit and nuts provided an ideal diet. As he was making progress in religious awareness and simplicity of life, Gandhi records that his passion for vegetarianism was increasing as was his wish to spread its message. The two communities with which he was closely involved in South Africa – the Phoenix Settlement, and later Tolstoy farm, a meeting place for his followers in Satyagraha (passive resistance), were both vegetarian and he gave support and financial help to vegetarian restaurants. In an address which he gave to the London Vegetarian Society years later in 1931, he advised vegetarians to beware of laying too much stress on any health advantages of their diet, at the expense of revealing its true moral basis (Gandhi 2011).

In an article written by Mistry (1965) it is stated on the ethnic groups of Indians in South Africa (based on 1951 census figures), that although a great majority of Hindus were non-vegetarian, some communities among them such as *Brahmins*, *Patidaars*, *Banias*, etc., especially among Gujarati-speaking Hindus, were mainly lacto-vegetarian by custom. The author also mentions that,

... anthropological characteristics, dietary habits, marriage and other social customs and rituals, economic status, etc. among the ethnic groups differ(ed) considerably from one to the other and so observations based on one or two ethnic groups should not be generalized and considered valid for the Indian population as a whole. This is particularly true for the study of diseases like diabetes mellitus, coronary heart disease, etc., which are known to be affected by heredity, diet and affluence (Mistry 1965:694).

In a study on the history of Gujaratis in South Africa, Vahed (2010: 618) also elaborates that meat was an important marker of identity among Hindus since the late 1890s, implicating both class and caste. In an interview with Dr Desai, a retired professor of Indian languages at University of KwaZulu-Natal, she elaborates how 'these so-called upper caste groups were 100 percent vegetarian. They were more concerned about vegetarianism than the other groups .... The higher caste also considered themselves more religious ...'.

Gujarati traders regularly returned to India and their cuisine remained relatively intact, while the food of the indentured labourers (who arrived in the 1860s) had changed. The 152 184 labourers who arrived in KwaZulu-Natal were to have an enduring influence in shaping the cuisine and cultural heritage of Durban and South Africa. According to a legal notice from 1874, the labourers were to receive rations of *dholl* (yellow spilt peas), dried fish, oil and rice. Not all promises were kept, however, and the newcomers found themselves in dire conditions. They adapted to the unfamiliar territory and circumstances, as well as to the food. When rice was scarce, dried maize was crushed to create mealie rice (Govender-Ypma 2022). After completing their indenture, many rented land to grow fruit and vegetables for the local market. In 1885, the Wragg-Commission noted that Indians dominated the food produce market. Those who did not turn to the food market, became entrepreneurs and opened stores and hotels, while others made a living through gardening, hawking and fishing. Many workers were forced to re-indenture to avoid tax. Durban became famous for its ‘bunny chow’. This popular takeaway, which is a bread and curry dish, is made by hollowing out the centre portion of the bread, filling it with curry and then capping it with the portion that was cut out.

There are many stories as to how, when and where the popular takeaway originated. One story is that it originated in a ‘*Bania*’ (a name used for the Gujarati speaking people) restaurant, in Grey Street, Durban. Another story states that migrant workers needed to hold their vegetable curries in a form of container and resorted to using their bread to hold their lunch together (SA History Online 2011). It is in such documented histories that elements of a vegetarian diet are suggested. The narratives of older generations also indicate how the consumption of meat was rare in this impoverished indentured community. Fasting in observance of Hindu prayer rituals, cultural festivals and communal traditions also involved abstinence from meat eating. Post-indenture, the predominance of a diet that increasingly included meat in the Indian community became more apparent. Recent literary works such as *Legends of the Tide: The Seine-netters and the roots of the Durban fishing industry* (Govender & Chetty 2014) for instance, traces the beginnings and challenges of the Durban fishing industry from 1865 to the present day. The book foregrounds the early subsistence livelihoods of Indian fisher folk who gave Durban a taste of shad and sardines. This group of fishermen in 1865, chose not to renew their indenture contract and became subsistence fishermen on Salisbury Island (Author Unknown 2018). The history of the Indian community in Durban,

KwaZulu-Natal, illustrates the practice of both vegetarianism and non-vegetarian (meat eating) norms.

#### **4 Contextualizing Vegetarianism and Veganism**

Eating is a highly social activity and anthropological research indicates that commensality (the act of eating together and sharing meals) for instance, fulfills a variety of social functions, including strengthening and maintaining relationships and teaching and reinforcing cultural beliefs and values. When people negotiate food choices (within or outside the household) and adopt a diet that varies from the norm, it can affect their social relationships with others. Vegetarianism can be considered a social identity, as it reflects the motivations, feelings, and attitudes of those who choose to adopt it (Rosenfeld & Burrow 2017).

Vegetarianism is a broad term that is inclusive of a diverse and heterogeneous range of dietary practices that refrain from flesh foods (meat, poultry, seafood) and their products. These practices are classified according to how restrictive they are. A vegetarian diet refers specifically to a diet based on vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and sometimes egg or dairy products. This food practice has been known for many centuries but the number of consumers following a vegetarian diet and the demand for vegetarian food have recently increased significantly in many countries (Del Campio & Lopes del Campio 2019). Four types of vegetarian diets have been identified by Hargreaves et al (2021), including, flexitarian or semi-vegetarian; pesco-vegetarian or pescatarian; ovolactovegetarian; and strict vegetarianism. A further three sub-classifications of vegetarian diets (raw vegan diet; frugal or frugivorous diet; and macrobiotic diets), are also acknowledged by the authors. Ovo-lacto-vegetarians, for instance, refrain from all types of meat but consume products of animal origin, such as eggs and dairy products, while pescatarians, avoid all meat, except fish and seafood. Vegan diets can be defined as diets avoiding all flesh foods and animal-derived products, whereas vegetarian diets are similar to vegan diets but include eggs (ovo) and/or dairy (lacto) products (Wiebe *et al.* 2016). The vegetarian diet includes plant products and excludes all or some animal foods (mostly meat), whereas the vegan diet is a diet based solely on vegetables, fruit and cereals and excludes all animal-based products (Modlinska *et al.* 2020:1).

Plant-based diets have risen in popularity across the western world,



with vegan restaurants and products experiencing a meteoric rise in sales. Plant-based products appeal to both vegetarians and meat-eaters alike by mimicking the taste, look, and texture of real meat (Johnson 2022). But global meat consumption also continues to increase, with burgeoning urban middle classes across Africa, Asia and Latin America powering the demand. Meat is a resource-intensive protein source (OECD-FAO 2020), and increased demand for meat in developing countries is likely to place even more pressure on an already strained food system. In Western and other cultures where meat and other animal products are traditionally a core component of a meal, a family member or social group that chooses to become vegetarian/vegan, poses an affront to this central aspect of the shared food experience, and may cause others to see their behavior as deviant (Higson 2019). A local study by Sedupane (2017) examined the experiences of Black South African vegetarians from the Rastafarian and Seventh Day Adventists communities in Cape Town. This foremost sociological study on Black South African vegetarians, illustrated that men from this group reported having encountered greater hostility from their families, and greater societal challenges in general, about becoming vegetarian than women did.

## **5 Contextualizing Youth & Dietary Trends**

Socially, culturally and psychologically, youth is regarded as a period when changes in lifestyle and food habits can be influenced in positive or negative directions (Brooks & Begley 2014). Both within and outside of the household (as youth begin to socialize outside the home more often, over longer distances and for longer periods), they are likely to show more independence in decision-making around food. They may consume a greater proportion of food outside the home (for instance, at larger, extended family gatherings, street food and fast food, or meals in institutional canteens) and sites such as schools, gyms, restaurants and workplaces may exert an influence over young people's food choices (Glover & Sumberg 2020).

In South Africa, meat consumption is ranked the 9<sup>th</sup>-highest globally per capita beef consumption and 11<sup>th</sup>-highest per capita poultry consumption (OECD-FAO 2021). South Africa has an adult obesity rate of 28% (OECD-FAO 2020) and a high burden of heart disease, so implementing food system solutions that aim to combat these diseases should be a public health priority (Puoane *et al.* 2002). The concurrent problems of (a) high food insecurity and

(b) rising diet-related diseases associated with high meat consumption, both make South Africa an ideal developing country for exploring market pathways to a more healthy, sustainable, and equitable protein supply (Szejda *et al.* 2021). The authors of the study draw a distinction between plant-based meat (food made from plants using proteins such as soy, wheat and pea protein amongst other plant-based components) and cultured meat (laboratory-created meat using the cells of real meat that does not involve the raising and slaughter of animals) in their study, on the familiarity of such products among different generational levels of South African consumers. The study findings suggest that both plant-based and cultivated meat could be viable market-based options for improving the food system in South Africa, as consumers across all segments of society, and especially among the younger population, indicated a broad acceptance (Szejda 2021:2). They found that young people tend to be more eager to adopt emerging technologies and drive change in consumption patterns. As generational cohorts change over time, adoption of plant-based and cultivated meat is therefore highly likely to increase (Stumpe 2022).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, science has observed several health benefits potentially associated with the reduction in meat consumption. Such benefits have strengthened the practice of vegetarianism around the world, and attracted more and more followers (De Souza *et al.* 2017). According to the World Health Organization, conditions such as heart disease and cancer have now superseded infectious diseases such as cholera and measles to become the biggest drain on economies in Africa. Much of the continent is already feeling the effects of the climate crisis, a common reason for reducing meat intake, as more regular and unpredictable droughts and floods wreak havoc for farmers and regularly claim lives. Many of its advocates, however, argue that veganism is not a new trend, it is simply a return to traditional African diets. Interestingly, the African continent is also considered at the helm of some of the challenge's veganism hopes to ease. South Africa is considered to be at the forefront of this movement, with veganism flourishing in Cape Town and Johannesburg (Pujol-Mazzini 2020) and clearly visible in restaurant menus, as well as eateries and markets frequented by young people. According to publishing trends of cookery book sales noted in South Africa, a Euromonitor International report from November 2019 called 'Strategic Themes in Food and Nutrition', indicates that while less than 5% of South Africa's population is vegetarian, around 20% of the population is at least trying to limit their meat intake (Schimke 2020). At this stage, one could claim that while meat consumption in South Africa is on

the increase, there is also a rising interest in a vegan lifestyle and a rising incidence in the consumption of vegetarian and vegan products, particularly among the younger generation.

## **Section B**

### **6 Research Methodology**

Until recently, the researcher, as a social anthropologist, prioritized a predominantly qualitative approach to data collection, engaging participant observation and in-depth interviews as the basis of her research methods, and the use of questionnaires and surveys as supplemental data. However, Covid-19 has thrown a methodological curve-ball to the traditional, in-person methodologies characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork, in which anthropologists pride themselves and know so well. While the fieldwork for this study was conducted towards the end of social distancing protocols in South Africa, the researcher found it more conducive (albeit awkward) to access the student sample involved, by conducting an online questionnaire as the primary methodology instead, using a smaller number of interviews to corroborate and support the findings. Long (2020:3) states ‘... when dealing with a situation as unprecedented as the Covid-19 pandemic, it is surveys, not ethnography, that can best provide a conceptual framework for understanding emergent social realities’. A questionnaire is used in the social sciences as a research instrument that consists of a set of questions that aim to collect information from a respondent. The online questionnaire is typically a mix of close-ended questions and open-ended questions and was administered via an e-mail link. As respondents can answer at leisure and without the pressure to respond immediately, responses may be more accurate. The use of questionnaires in surveys allows for the generating of data most cost-effectively and efficiently (Bihi 2021).

The researcher adopted an emic perspective (studying the behaviour/s of interest through the lens of a member of the culture), and draws upon her positionality as a South African Indian of Hindu heritage, born in KwaZulu-Natal. As an ‘insider’, the researcher had in her lifetime attended a multitude of cultural festivities and social events and engaged in or observed (and overheard) many ad hoc conversations (particularly at Hindu weddings and religious ceremonies where the meals provided are vegetarian), relating to the challenges of families where there was one or a few vegetarian members. Such conversations gave a wealth of insight into the food preparation (separate cooking

utensils and ‘two versions’ of the same meal) and dietary choices across generations, to the extent that over a period of time, it was no longer simple to guess or make assumptions about who was vegetarian in the family, as more nuanced configurations of ‘vegetarian’ became apparent. For instance, a few decades ago, entire households practising vegetarianism was not uncommon in certain segments of the larger Hindu community in KwaZulu-Natal. Gradually this changed and it seemed that it was predominantly the older generation (parents and grandparents) that either continued or adopted vegetarianism (some later on in the life cycle for spiritual or health related reasons). More recently however, the researcher has observed that while the older generation of vegetarians continue this practice, more Hindu youth are beginning to adopt vegetarianism, regardless of their family background. It is no longer uncommon for a vegetarian youth to emerge in a predominantly meat-eating family. While there are neither studies nor statistics to support this claim, it has provided one of the motivations to conduct this study and hopefully encourage future studies hereafter.

## **7 The Sample**

The sample comprised 36 Hindu, South African Indian youth from Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. Most of the youth (50%) belonged to the age group, 20 to 29 years (N=18); 40% belonged to the age group, younger than 20 years (N=14) and 10% belonged to the age group of 30 years and more (N=4). Purposive sampling was adopted for the study and 75% (N=27) of the respondents were selected from a local Hindu Youth Organization for their cultural background, familiarity with vegetarianism and veganism, and exposure to such dietary practices. The remaining 25% of the participants (N=9) were youth known to the researcher, who were interviewed telephonically before participating in the survey. The sample consisted of mainly female respondents (N=26) and significantly fewer male respondents (N=10). The specific dietary preferences of the respondents were estimated at 60% non-vegetarian (N=22); 35% vegetarian (N=12); and 5% pescatarian (N=2).

The pescatarian diet prioritizes fish and seafood as the primary source of protein and almost 3% of people globally have adopted this diet. They share much in common with vegetarians as they eat fruit, vegetable, grains, nuts, seeds, eggs and dairy, but refrain from meat and poultry (Pagan 2021).

The sample also included 2 Hindu youth leaders, who were interview-

ed in person. Interviewee One (DP) is a spiritual leader and youth coordinator in South Africa (Environment Initiative) who also represents youth globally at the United Nations (promoting ethical and spiritual sustainability, in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN), and the other, Interviewee 2 (PH) was a student leader of a Hindu organization, a SaveSoil (a global environmental movement) ambassador and PhD candidate, based at a local university. The study was conducted between May and July 2022.

## **8 Research Questions & Findings**

The questionnaire was based on seven key questions and comprised two sections. Section one constituted the first five questions, which required of respondents to choose from a list of answers. Comments included by the respondents were assimilated in the findings presented below. Section two comprised the final two questions that required written input from the respondents in the form of explanatory detail. Excerpts of some written responses and a content analysis of the most frequently used words by the youth sample are also included in this latter section. Although what was not the favoured anthropological research technique by the researcher initially, the online questionnaire did yield both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **8.1 Section One**

The most common responses to questions 1 to 5 were the following combination of answers:

#### **Q1. What do you think, from your experiences, is/ are the key influence(s) in someone becoming vegetarian?**

##### ***Family background, Religion/ Spirituality, Health/ Medical Reasons***

The perception of the sample of youth indicated the key influences to becoming vegetarian, was that of family background, religion or spiritual affiliation and health or medical reasons. Belonging to a family who practised vegetarianism was seen to be the foremost reason why youth would follow such a diet. This was closely linked to religious and spiritual values embedded in the family. However, the following comments confirm that youth are also independently adopting vegetarianism and/ or influencing those in their social circle, to adopt vegetarianism:

I am the only vegetarian in my household and it seems like my mother will also become vegetarian soon.

I have been vegetarian for a few years in a family that eats mainly meat. My friends are mostly vegetarian. No one in my immediate family is interested but my late grandparents were very religious and practised vegetarianism. Maybe it skips a generation ....

I think it's easier to be vegetarian. There are definitely more options available and meat substitutes as well now than when I was growing up. Restaurants also have more inclusive menus for vegetarians. Support from family is beneficial but not the only support anymore.

I think iron deficiency might be something normal for vegetarians (my vegetarian friends seem to have this in common).

**Q2. What do you think, from your experiences, is/are the key influence(s) in someone becoming vegan?**

***Family Background, Health/ Medical Reasons***

The sample perceived that it was one's family background that exposed youth to the vegan diet, worldview, and the range of vegan food choices available – this would be unknown to other households where such foods were not considered as important to the daily diet. They also perceived such a decision as 'drastic', motivated (even compelled) by health or medical reasons as a key influence in determining a vegan lifestyle. The excerpts below provide further insight:

I think veganism is popular and has become a trend but it is extreme and not sustainable in poorer countries where economic factors outweigh ethics.

If I wanted to be vegan, it would be a last resort based on medical reasons.

**Q3. What do you think is/ are the key reason(s) why people opt for a non-vegetarian diet?**

***Personal Dietary Preference, More Food Options***

The predominantly non-vegetarian sample of Hindu youth understood this as personal dietary choice. They perceived a non-vegetarian diet, to mean having more food options socially (at family gatherings and with peers at restaurants/

takeaways). They also believed that such a diet was far more ‘nutritionally balanced and sustainable’.

*It is easier to fit in when your family are mainly meat eaters.*

**Q4. Among your family/ friends/ colleagues, have you noticed a change in eating preferences in the past 3 years?**

*Yes (72%)*

*No (28%)*

A significantly large number of the youth (72%) noticed a change in dietary preferences within their familial and larger social circles in the past few years. The influence of climate change is evident in the comment above. A smaller number (28%) were not aware of any noticeable change in diet among family and friends.

The increasing awareness of climate change and how cattle farming is the largest contributor of Nitrogen found in the atmosphere, I do think more people especially youth are favouring meat-free diets and overall healthier lifestyles.

**Q5. This change in eating preferences leans more towards ...? (in order of importance):**

- Healthier eating for fitness reasons
- Vegetarianism/veganism
- more interest in soya and plant-based products; an interest in eating more vegetable than meat

The aforementioned changes were noted as follows: firstly, that the change was mainly towards eating food that was healthier for fitness reasons (increasing awareness of health problems associated with a predominantly meat-eating diet was noted, as well as an awareness that a balanced diet was preferable among youth who were ‘fitness fanatics’ and involved in regular sporting activities).

This was followed by a noticeable change towards vegetarianism/veganism, specifically where youth had noticed that within their families, a rising interest in ‘eating healthy and ethically’ for both physical and spiritual

reasons, were being adopted more among younger members of the family who cited environmental and animal cruelty as reasons for changing attitudes and, to a lesser extent, a change in interest towards including soya and plant-based products as well as eating more vegetable in one's diet than meat (more family and peer discussions and 'information sharing' about these products were noted). The responses to this question provided was a strong indicator that changes in diet (predominantly towards eating healthier and towards vegetarianism/ veganism) were being considered and adopted among Hindu youth, their families and peers.

## **8.2 Section Two**

The last two questions served a twofold qualitative function, namely to provide brief excerpts which the researcher presents as youth narratives below, as well highlighting the most frequently used words of the respondents.

### **Q6. What would you consider to be the benefits of a vegetarian/ vegan lifestyle?**

- A vegetarian or vegan diet has multiple health benefits. It is widely known that meat or fish or animal products are usually considered unhealthy and are primary causes of cardiovascular diseases in many people. A vegan or vegetarian diet would prevent people from suffering these stated diseases. It is also a good way to lose unwanted body fat or simply keep in shape. Vegan and vegetarian foods are also capable of remaining preserved for longer periods compared to animal-based foods.
- Easier digestion. More vegetables included in diet which leads to an increase in vitamins. No moral dilemma.
- I don't think there are many benefits to be quite honest – I think a balanced diet is healthier than eating veggies and taking a ton of supplements because your diet doesn't offer them – perhaps some people feel more religious, but I feel like the message of why you're supposed to be vegetarian gets lost and people just do it because they think they'll be more blessed?
- Too much meat would be considered unhealthy. A balanced diet is important.
- Emotional and spiritual gratification. Cost-effectiveness (although some



vegetarian/ vegan products are much more expensive than non-vegetarian products, overall it is cheaper if you plan your meals properly). Knowledge (one becomes more informed about alternatives to non-vegetarian products and how many other options can be found if persistently searched for)

- The meat industry also contributes to climate change so living a vegetarian/ vegan lifestyle will help the environment. Many slaughter-houses nowadays inject animals with hormones which are unhealthy for human consumption.
- According to Sanatana Dharma – the eternal truth and teachings of Hinduism – one should always practice *ahimsa* (non-injury). Anyone that leads a vegetarian lifestyle is able to practice this most important quality of *ahimsa*, as outlined in our scriptures, since they not do eat meat and therefore do not contribute to the slaughter of animals for consumption. The practice of non-injury is hugely beneficial for the protection of our animals – it is important that we show love and care to all God's creations – and is also absolutely essential for our spiritual progress. By following a vegetarian/vegan diet, instead of a non-vegetarian diet, our bad karmas will lessen since plants have a lower level of conscious and eating a plant will lead to less bad karma than eating meat since animals have a higher level of consciousness. Vegetarian and vegan foods are considered to be satvic or pure foods because they have high vibrational energies.

The excerpts above indicate a range of differing responses, to the benefits of a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle. The keywords highlighted above (which appeared more than once in the response analysis), indicate the sample's awareness of cultural issues (religious and spiritual factors); health and nutrition aspects (balanced diet and lifestyle diseases); moral/ethical dilemmas (bad karma and slaughter of animals for consumption); economic issues (expensive products) and environmental (climate change) concerns, relating to such a lifestyle.

Interviewee 2 (PH, a student leader) elaborated on animal slaughter for consumption and its influence on our bodies:

Animals are often killed in very traumatic ways and experience much fear and anxiety prior to their death. This fear causes many terrible

toxins to be released into their blood and humans that consume meat then also unknowingly consume these negative toxins which can cause many harmful diseases. What we put into our body should be very carefully scrutinized. Many feel that there are preferences when it comes to diet choices but I believe that this is only due to a lack of knowledge. The fact is that our body is a temple and whatever we put into our body should be absolutely pure. Our body is not made to digest meat and both spiritual teachers and health experts alike have reiterated this.

**Q7. What would you consider to be the challenges of a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle?**

- Soya prices are quite expensive. There's not much vegan products available and vegetarian/vegan meals aren't always available at restaurants/ take-outs.
- Not enough protein as they have to take supplements. Not much varieties available, personal preferences limit the varieties.
- I personally feel that maintaining a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle tends to be more difficult compared to a non-vegetarian lifestyle because the food items tend to be more expensive and also in a non-vegetarian household it becomes difficult to cater for just one person (vegan/ vegetarian). Many gatherings usually cater non-vegetarian food to provide for the majority of people since the majority of our population are not vegan and vegetarians. This is a disadvantage to the people who are actually vegan or vegetarians and who wish to attend these specific gatherings.
- My family tried eating vegetables for an extended fast and it made us really ill - think if you're not used to eat veggies all the time, it can cause a lot of stomach problems, pain and you may think it's lame or overreacting but it's quite depressing – it feels very restrictive.
- Lack of vitamin B12. Not suitable for anaemic people. Maintaining strong discipline and restraint of the senses.
- Time (not many people have the time to commit to the lifestyle, to research products, to seek out the products, and still be satisfied). Options (one who has not really searched for alternatives, etc. may feel that there are not many options available and this, I feel, is the main challenge towards adopting the lifestyle). Influence (social influence,

among others, play a key role in the type of lifestyle may people adopt, and sometimes having a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle leads to social exclusion, etc.).

- Pressure from other people who do not take your lifestyle seriously. Those following vegetarian and vegan diets are constantly on the receiving end of negative attitudes and have to really have strong conviction in their diet because others around them will constantly question them, comment on their diet and sometimes try to convince them eat meat. Ignorance and mis-information are big challenges that prevent more individuals from adopting vegetarian/vegan diets. Even when a certain individual wants to adopt this diet, their family members or peers may discourage and question them based on the misconceptions that they have for these types of diets. This is very sad.
- There should be more healthier options for meat meals. Many meats are processed. Vegetables are good for your health and the farming industry and local economic growth. People should have a balanced diet of healthy meats and vegetables to prevent health issues. There should be more variety and not just soya. I will not have strength in the gym if I did not eat a lot of protein from meat.

The youth responses to the challenges of a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle, indicated relevant social aspects (citing discipline and restraint; catering at gatherings; social exclusion; external pressure; negative attitudes; misconceptions and misinformation as negative variables); economic factors (expensive lifestyle; lack of food options; farming and local economic growth); and nutritional issues (fasting is difficult; additional supplements; strength to exercise requires a diet with meat). The social pressures of becoming vegetarian/vegan is strongly indicated in the keyword responses and the excerpts present these challenges on both practical and emotional levels. More negative connotations associated with the challenges of such a lifestyle were indicated in the youth responses. Sedupane (2017:46) aptly states:

People make a conscious decision to become vegetarians prompted by different motives, from health to animal welfare and even religion. Beyond it being a dietary practice vegetarianism forms part of one's identity and worldview. Since this worldview is not shared by the larger society, vegetarians face a lot of opposition from significant

others and society at large in developing and maintain their identity. However, vegetarians arm themselves with knowledge in order to grow in their identity as well as to be able to defend it.

Choosing to be vegetarian/vegan can be likened to the pattern of stigmatized individuals in Goffman's (1963) interpretation of social deviance theory, where he asserts that such individuals are likely to become accustomed to social tensions because of their identity and develop ways of coping, in this instance, by engaging in open communication with others about their diet and lifestyle (Lindquist 2013). An excerpt from Interviewee 1 (DP, spiritual youth leader), elaborates how youth vegans in particular are taking a firm stance as food and environmental activists:

Youth leaders have become activists in promoting veganism. They advocate for change, strongly condemning animal slaughter in the food chain and destruction of the environment by mankind. Globally, they are leading by example and their voices are impactful. In South Africa, there are far fewer ambassadors but the awareness for change is growing ....

## **9 Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to provide some insight into contemporary youth perceptions of vegetarianism/veganism among a sample of Hindu youth in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. Local historical data and sociological studies on Indian youth are lacking and what is available, tends to subsume youth and generational differences within larger household and family dynamics. The study attempted to examine dietary choices among Indians in Durban historically (since their arrival from India as indentured labourers in 1860), as well as more recent trends relating to vegetarianism and veganism among Hindu youth. The following perceptions were made apparent by the study:

1. They perceived family background, religion/spirituality and health or medical reasons as the key determinants in a youth's motivation for adopting a vegetarian diet. While family background was considered a primary influence, youth also elaborated that they were also becoming vegetarian on their own accord (independently of their family history).

2. They perceived the motivations to become vegan, as being based specifically on family background and health or medical reasons. Youth narratives indicated this decision as drastic.
3. They understood being non-vegetarian/meat eating in diet as a personal choice influenced by practical reasons such as convenience in social gatherings, more food options and a more balanced diet.
4. Most youth have witnessed a distinct change in food preferences and diet in the past few years towards eating healthy for nutritional purposes, towards vegetarianism/ veganism and including more alternative products (soya and plant-based) so that more vegetable products (than meat) were included.
5. The youth related the benefits of a vegetarian/vegan diet to the following keywords: multiple health benefits; weight loss; easier digestion; emotional and spiritual well-being; cost effectiveness; helping the environment; ahimsa; high vibrational energy.
6. The youth related the challenges of a vegetarian/vegan diet to the following keywords: expensive; not sustainable; not many options; need to supplement with vitamins; discipline; social exclusion; negative attitudes; misinformation

While a large portion of the youth sample followed a meat-eating diet, a significant component of the sample practised a vegetarian diet. The findings suggest that while meat eating was the dominant dietary choice among Hindu youth in Durban, vegetarian/vegan and non-meat food product alternatives were increasing in popularity and were increasingly considered in the food preferences of the sample, particularly for reasons relating to health, spirituality and ethics. Overall, the youth indicated considerable awareness of the benefits of a vegetarian diet (socially, spiritually and nutritionally) as well as the challenges of adopting a vegan lifestyle, which they considered admirable, yet expensive and extreme. They also indicated that family history and background were no longer the main variable motivating a shift to a vegetarian/vegan diet among young people. While these findings indicate a notable change in awareness and practice relating to food choices among the youth, they cannot be generalized to Hindu youth in KwaZulu-Natal, nor South Africa. As studies on Indian youth in South Africa are scarce and Hindu youth even more rare, the study is meant to contribute towards the discourse on South African Indian youth and food.

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# Chapter 10

## Indians in South Africa – Pariahs in the Apartheid and Democratic Eras ...?

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### **Abstract**

In South Africa in the colonial, post-colonial and contemporary eras, the indentured Indians and their descendants have primarily played the role of middle-man minorities, sandwiched between the white elite and the African majority, and were often portrayed as scapegoats and villains in times of economic and political crisis. For the greater part of a century South African Indians were regarded as aliens in the country of their birth, and until 1961 the apartheid policy was that they should ultimately be repatriated to India. Historically, Indians enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared to that of the African majority primarily because of community survival strategies, and better access to education in the apartheid hierarchy. Frequently obscured was the fact that the majority of Indians belonged to the working class. Indentured labour resulted in the lowering the wages paid to Africans and set the foundation for the incipient tensions, suspicions and conflicts between these groups, which continues in the post-apartheid era, and is the focus of this paper. Drawing generously from my published and unpublished research and public commentary on race and segregation for more than thirty years, this paper i) briefly evaluates apartheid policies which restricted access to land, housing, and trading opportunities; reviews Indo-African tensions in the apartheid era; and iii) analyses the anti-Indian discourse emerging in the democratic era.

**Keywords:** Indenture, Apartheid, Race-Conflict, Anti-Indian, Scapegoats

## **Introduction**

The history of South African Indians and their origins can be traced back to the agricultural labour requirements of colonial Natal in the mid-nineteenth century. The oppression of Indian indentured labourers and their descendants, and their resistance and support for non-racialism during the British colonial and apartheid eras, is well known and documented (Desai & Vahed 2010a; 2010b). Tinker (1974) has appropriately referred to indentured labour as a 'new form of slavery'. In 1884 the British Consul in Paramaribo stated that 'the Surinam planters ... found in the meek Hindu a ready substitution for the ... slave he had lost' (Emmer 1986:187). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, indentured labourers would be viewed as victims of human traffickers.

In South Africa indentured labour contributed significantly to the economic development of the country, but Indians were only acceptable to whites in a servile status. The passenger or commercial, merchant and professional Indian class were perceived as an economic threat to whites in the province of Natal, and this was reflected in racial prejudices of the most revolting kind, which were transformed into policies limiting their access to land, housing, and trading opportunities. The Indian trading class enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared to that of the indigenous Africans. However, Indians were not a homogeneous group, and experienced various divisions and tensions, particularly between the traders and the working class (Maharaj 1995; 1997).

The divisive nature of colonial social organisation inevitably generated practices and outlooks which were antagonistic and opposed to any form of interracial interaction. Historically, Indians enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared to that of the African majority primarily because of community survival strategies, and better access to education in the apartheid hierarchy. Frequently obscured was the fact that the majority of Indians belonged to the working class. Indentured labour resulted in the lowering of the wages paid to Africans (Meer 1985; Kaarholms 2016), and set the foundation for the incipient tensions, suspicions and conflicts between these groups (Hughes 2007), which continues in the post-apartheid era, and is the focus of this paper. Drawing generously from my published and unpublished research and public commentary on race and segregation for more than thirty years, this paper i) briefly evaluates apartheid policies which restricted access to land, housing, and trading opportunities; reviews Indo-African tensions in the apartheid era; and iii) analyses the anti-Indian discourse emerging in the democratic era.

## **Apartheid Context**

As they attempted to adjust in an alien and hostile environment indentured labourers and their descendants encountered conflict initially with the colonial and apartheid governments, and subsequently with the indigenous majority. There was a significant degree of coalescence between race, class and ethnicity as the colonial authorities had defined and maintained ethnic categories, and structured inter-ethnic relations through discriminatory regulations and institutional practices (Maharaj 2018).

The Indian question in South Africa featured prominently on the national agenda for the greater part of the last century. Politicians from diverse parties were unanimous on one issue - the Indian population in South Africa should be reduced to the minimum possible. The main mechanisms to achieve this were denial of political rights, limited employment opportunities and restrictions on their ownership and occupation of land, and promoting repatriation to India (Maharaj 1995; 1997). In its 1948 election manifesto, the National Party (1947:4) argued that the Indians were,

... a foreign element which cannot be assimilated in the South African set-up ... We accordingly have in mind the repatriation of as many Indians as possible, a first step towards which will be a thorough investigation of the feasibility of large-scale repatriation, enlisting the co-operation of India and (or other countries). This matter is of such urgency that South Africa should be prepared for a substantial sacrifice in order to finance such an undertaking.

In South Africa a number of processes have been responsible for the inequitable distribution of political power and wealth, but the dispossession of land is the most important for black communities. The land question revolves around the fact that Africans were dispossessed of their land in terms of the 1913 Natives Land Act (Bundy 1979; Beinart & Delius 2014). However, the legal segregation of Indians preceded that of urban Africans by more than 30 years. The whites of Durban were more concerned about the 'Asiatic menace' than the 'Native problem'. Natives were perceived as a passive threat, but Indians were regarded as a 'sophisticated and active menace to their own position in colonial society, competing for space, place, trade, and political influence with the imperial authority' (Swanson 1983:404).

In 1871 the Durban City Council (DCC) adopted a policy to create separate Indian locations. It represented the 'first concerted attempt at group area segregation in Durban and one of the first in a major South African town' (Swanson 1983:405). The scheme failed because the governor refused to consent to it. White demands for the compulsory segregation of Indians in Durban continued into the 20th century.

An assessment of segregation measures which preceded the Group Areas Act (1950) reveals a trend from isolated, localised measures in the 1880s to progressively more systematic, comprehensive national legislation in the 1940s, especially the Ghetto Act (1946). The central state was reluctant to introduce statutory residential segregation because of international repercussions, particularly its relations with India. As far as was possible it preferred voluntary residential separation. This was evident with the establishment of the Lawrence Committee (1940) and the abortive Pretoria Agreement (1944). Even the Pegging Act (1943) was a temporary measure for three years, during which period the state anticipated that the problem would be resolved satisfactorily (Maharaj 1995).

Following the ascent to power of the National Party (NP) in 1948, the Ghetto Act provided the foundation for the Group Areas Act (GAA) of 1950, which exercised nation-wide and comprehensive controls over urban land with respect to ownership, occupation, residence and trading. The DCC's collaboration with the national government resulted in the group area proclamation of 6 June 1958, in terms of which Durban was zoned a 'white' city. As a result, about 75 000 Indians and 81 000 Africans would be uprooted from settled communities (Maharaj 1997).

The nature of colonial social organisation was based on strict racial lines. This inevitably generated practices and outlooks which were antagonistic and opposed to any form of interracial interaction, and racial stereotypes were entrenched. A telling indictment against the political leadership of the period was the failure to mobilise across racial barriers:

A study of the working-class areas of Durban would surely reveal that even by the 1930s there was a considerable intermingling of African and Indian workers. Much of this was superficial - on the race track, in the cinema, or in the bus - but some was more durable, in terms of worker or home relationships. This urban intermingling might have become the basis for a political movement, if the Indian leaders had not remained so completely middle class, whether they were moderates or radicals in

their ideology (Tinker 1973:525).

Working class Indians competed with Africans in the urban labour market, especially in secondary industry, where there was a huge demand for unskilled labourers. Indians had a comparative advantage over Africans in that they were more highly urbanized (Freund 1995). With their experience, Indians dominated in the semi-skilled and supervisory jobs which whites rejected (Kirk 1983). Consequently, the incipient conflict between these two groups resurfaced episodically which increased the vulnerability of the minority group. The incipient conflict between Africans and Indians erupted in January 1949 in Cato Manor.

### ***1949 Cato Manor Riots***

The Cato Manor riot was ignited by an assault on an African youth by an Indian shopkeeper in the Indian central business district on 13 January 1949. Africans sacked and looted Indian stores. The riots were most intense in Cato Manor. After two days of bloody rioting 50 Indians and 87 Africans were killed, and 503 Indians and 541 Africans were injured. Thousands of Indian stores and dwellings were destroyed or damaged (Ladlau 1975: 17 - 18).

The history of settlement in Cato Manor is very complex, especially in terms of its race-class configuration, types of legal and illegal tenure, and the extent to which the right to live in the area has been 'fiercely and often violently contested' (Edwards 1994:415). After completing their period of indenture, many pioneering Indians settled here and began developing the area. With the passage of time the area grew by leaps and bounds.

This was not unrelated to the fact that being located outside the jurisdiction of the Durban City Council (DCC), they were able to erect substandard dwellings at low cost. With the extension of the city's boundaries in 1932, Cato Manor was incorporated into Durban. However, it remained a chronically neglected area in terms of services and facilities, with overcrowding, inadequate health and sanitation services, and rampant disease (Edwards 2003).

In addition to Indians, the area had a large African population. Africans began to move into Cato Manor in the early 1940s as they were ejected from areas like Overport and Puntans Hill by the DCC. Many Indian farmers realised that they could make more profits by allowing Africans to build shacks on their lands, and many of them became 'shack lords'. Often Indians would let a huge plot of land

to an African for a nominal site rent. The tenant would then sub-lease to hundreds of others who would build shacks and pay rent. As a result, a large class of African 'tenant-landlords' came into being, who had a vested interest in the continued existence of Cato Manor (Maharaj 1994).

This group also operated 'shack shops' in Cato Manor, and experienced a great deal of insecurity and competition, as reported by the newspaper, Fighting Talk: 'They lead an insecure, harassed existence squeezed by the authorities on one side and by competition with Indian traders on the other. These illegal traders and 'tenant-landlords' form the social soil for the anti-Indian attitudes that one finds in the area'. Notwithstanding the competition and tensions, Indian businesses in Cato Manor provided opportunities for African workers and their families to escape from the austerity of direct local state control. The traders 'provided the basic infrastructure of the squatters' slums: the bus services and retail outlets - the services which could be provided because of the particular position of Indian people as a 'buffer group' in the racial hierarchy of urban segregation' (Hemson 1977:103).

The apartheid state viewed the violence as a racial conflict between Indians and Africans, and argued that this justified its policy of racial separation. This view was reinforced by evidence submitted by individual Africans to the Van Den Heever Commission of Inquiry, especially 'monopolisation of those branches of trade and transport serving African areas' (UG 36 – 1949).

However, while there was Indian-African tension, the riot was a 'complex phenomenon, fed by white prejudice and Government policy as well as by the aspirations of an embryonic African bourgeoisie' (Ladlau 1975:19). Although the riots appeared to be unplanned, structurally, they were predetermined by the nature of the South African social formation, where Indians were perceived to be occupying a 'middleman' buffer position between whites and Africans. Social anthropologist, Hilda Kuper, argued that like Jews in other countries, Indians were being used as 'scapegoats' by the dominant ethnic groups:

Sufficiently wealthy to serve as a bait for greed, too few to be feared and, in the main, ideologically opposed to counter aggression with physical violence, their ethnic difference and cultural diversity serve as excuses for discrimination and oppression (*The Star* 4/6/79).

It was rather unfortunate that prominent African leaders in Natal have from time to time attempted to threaten Indians by referring to the 1949 riots (Moodley

1980). Indo-African tensions burst into the open again in 1985 with the Inanda riots.

### ***The 1985 Inanda Riots***

Inanda was a peri-urban area located to the north of the city of Durban which had developed without any formal authority structure, similar to Cato Manor in the 1920s. In the absence of a formal authority structure the relationship which came to be established between landlord - retailers (mostly Indian) and tenant-consumers (mostly African) was one in which the landlord cum-retailer wielded a significant amount of power in the area, and especially over the condition of their tenants (Maharaj & Desai 2009).

The state also deepened lines of fracture between Indian landlords and tenants by forcing them to provide services or evict tenants. This was done at a time when the State was touting a plan to expropriate Indian owned land. It is significant that the state did not call on African landlords to provide services. The State was keen to draw Inanda into the KwaZulu Bantustan which was governed by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The cost of consolidation would involve paying compensation to 326 Indian landowners (Meer 1985).

Indian and African landlords and retailers did not develop an 'alliance of interests'. Rather the relationship was competitive and often antagonistic. There was also no real community of interests between Indian and African tenants. (Meer 1985; Hughes 1987). Often Indian tenants were seen to be favoured in their relationship with Indian landlords.

By the mid-1980's relations between Indian landlords and African tenants was becoming increasingly tense. At the beginning of 1984, newspapers reported that Indian landowners were being molested, threatened and victimised by African tenants. Under banner headlines like 'Inanda timebomb' Indian tenants complained that they were being assaulted (*Herald* 26/2/84).

The spark for the violence was the assassination of a prominent United Democratic Front (UDF) leader, Victoria Mxenge outside her house in the African township of Umlazi. Protesting the assassination, a school strike and boycott spread out of Umlazi and engulfed Kwa Mashu, Clermont, Lamontville and Inanda in quick succession. Inanda became a battlefield between warlords aligned with the IFP and supporters of the UDF (Desai 2014).

In Inanda gangs of youth began threatening Indian shopkeepers, landlords and residents. The threats gave rise to mass panic. When, on 6 August 1985, two



Indian-owned shops and houses were looted and burnt, hundreds of Indians left Inanda and sought refuge in the adjoining Indian township of Phoenix. By the end of the week 42 Indian-owned shops and businesses and as many houses were destroyed, whilst 2000 Indian refugees pondered their future in Phoenix (Maharaj & Desai 2009).

As Indian refugees made their way into Phoenix, tensions and anger heightened in the sprawling township. On Friday, 9 August 1985, armed groups massed on both sides of the Inanda/Phoenix group area divide 'spoiling' for a fight. Whilst the confrontation did not materialise, both sides followed each other in ransacking and ultimately destroying the Gandhi Phoenix Settlement - a shrine of peace (Hughes 1987). The media and many in the Indian community billed Inanda 1985 as a repeat of the 1949 riots. Indian property was largely targeted in Inanda. African warlords rapidly moved in to take control over Indian-owned land, and that there was never any attempt to re-instate or compensate the Indian land-owners.

## **Democracy and the Betrayal of non-Racialism?**

While memories of these violent conflicts continued to linger, they were overshadowed by the birth of post-apartheid South Africa. Many of the conflicts were blamed on apartheid's creation and maintenance of racial divisions. With Nelson Mandela leading the building of a new society in which racism was to be a thing of the past and non-racialism would be the abiding trajectory, it was expected that Indo-African tensions would subside and a new South Africanism would emerge as the dominant strand in South Africa. The South African Constitution laid the foundation for a democratic, non-racist, non-sexist society democratic country, and also embedded dignity and human rights (Maharaj & Desai 2009).

Notwithstanding constitutional commitment to non-racialism, an incipient anti-Indianism has been infiltrating South Africa's democracy. Disappointingly, the non-racial dream is rapidly turning into a nightmare as the ruling ANC political party is torn asunder by ethnicity, tribalism, racism, (and above all, corruption), unimaginable when the democratic South Africa's founding document was penned. As Justice Malala has pointed out, 'it has become fashionable in our political discourse to spout with impunity racist rhetoric about South African Indians' (Malala 2022:8). While there are exploiters in all racial, tribal, ethnic and cultural groups, threatening one minority community is tantamount to a form of persecution. More sinisterly, the anti-

Indian vitriol appears to be emerging from the deep under-belly of the ANC. A few examples will suffice.

### ***Strong Brave Men to Confront Indians***

In early 2002, internationally renowned playwright and composer, Mbongeni Ngema released an inflammatory anti-Indian song, *AmaiNiya*, in the Zulu language in which he called for,

strong and brave men to confront Indians. This situation is very difficult, Indians do not want to change, whites were far better than Indians. Even Mandela has failed to convince them to change (Itano 2002:1).

The song was condemned by the South African Human Rights Commission, and was subsequently banned from the airwaves.

There was support for Ngema's views as encapsulated in the following letter to the *Sowetan* newspaper, which had an African readership:

I was disgusted by the banning of Mbongeni Ngema's beautiful song, which laments the oppression of blacks by Indians. It is a known fact that most Indians are worst racists than whites ... The Indian people are opportunists and the real racists in South Africa and the rest of Africa. Our people are treated like dogs when working for Indians. In most workplaces Indians treat black people like nothing. They do not think blacks have brains to shape their own destiny. In Parliament today and in government parastatals, you find more Indians than black people holding senior positions. In KwaZulu-Natal total racism is meted out to blacks by Indians (Mokoena 2002:16).

Another view from within the Indian community (albeit a minority one) was that rather attacking Ngema there was need for honest reflection and introspection:

Instead of making hypocritical indignant accusations of racism in the light of Mbongeni Ngema's attempt at getting some dialogue going, Indians should rather honestly ask themselves why is it that Africans generally despise them so much ... Indians must extricate themselves

from their little enclaves and start integrating themselves as South Africans and stop marginalising themselves. Africans, on the other hand, must give them a chance and stop treating them like foreigners in their own country (Thaver 2002:9).

Bronwyn Harris, a former project manager at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation at the University of Cape Town, contended that Ngema's song was xenophobic, and also raised questions of identity and citizenship: '*AmaNdiya* does not only portray negative stereotypes that are drawn on racial lines. It also creates prejudice through the language of xenophobia. By presenting 'Indians' as outsiders from India, the song raises questions about belonging within South Africa. This moves beyond race alone because it introduces concepts of citizenship and nationality. It implies that 'Indians' are not South African, and, therefore, have less legitimate claim to their citizenship than others' (Harris 2002:1).

Professor Achille Mbembe similarly warned of the 'creeping pogrom': xenophobia and 'national-chauvinism is in permanent need of scapegoats. It starts with those who are not our kin. But very quickly, it turns fratricidal. It does not stop with 'these foreigners'. It is in its DNA to end up turning onto itself in a dramatic gesture of inversion' (Mbembe 2015:1).

### ***Struggle for the Warwick Market***

Since 2009 the David and Goliath battle between the eThekweni Metro and those whose livelihoods depended on the Early Morning Market (EMM) in Warwick Avenue has made international headlines. The EMM had an umbilical connection with the descendants of indentured labourers. The bureaucratic and political leadership in Durban violated all regulations pertaining to democratic consultation and public participation as well as the common human decency demanded by the South African Constitution, as it favoured mall developers over the poor and disadvantaged whose livelihoods depended on the Warwick Market. Outdated laws were dusted off the shelves to restrict the market operations and frustrate those who engaged in honest labour, in order to favour 'tenderpreneurs'. In true Gandhian, passive resistance tradition, the traders resorted successfully to legal action and interdicts to keep the market open (Maharaj 2020).

At the height of the struggle to save the EMM, at a meeting convened

by the Durban Metro on 10 July 2009 at the International Convention Centre, cries of '*Hamba khaya! Hamba uye eBombay!*' (Go home! Go to Bombay!) reverberated in the presence of senior ANC officials, including Mayor Obed Mlaba and Deputy Mayor Logie Naidoo. According to eyewitness, Dr Lubna Nadvi: 'The most shocking aspect of the meeting was the racialised language used by management ... [City Manager] Dr Sutcliffe referred to the ... Indian market on more than one occasion, attempting to create the impression that those who were fighting to keep it, were actually pro-Indian and by implication anti-African' (Nadvi 2009:3). Some have viewed this as a classic apartheid divide and rule ruse.

According to another eyewitness and civil society activist, Trevor Ngwane, 'many people left the ICC thinking that the main social benefit of getting rid of the market was getting rid of the Indians and that the proposed mall would provide business opportunities to long-denied Africans' (Ngwane 2009:16).

Councillor Majola, who was chairing the meeting, quoted an old 'ANC strategy and tactics document' stating that the struggle was about liberating blacks in general and Africans in particular. A senior city official was less restrained: '*Kufanele sibakhiphe iqatha emlonyeni*' (we must remove the piece of meat from their mouths)<sup>1</sup>.

This was further confirmed by a Wikileaks report on the 17 July 2009 public meeting organised by the eThekweni municipality: The Chairperson of the eThekweni Business and Market Committee Faso Majola said in Zulu that 'Indians only want to protect their interests in the Warwick area and they don't want township people moving in'. The Head of eThekweni Business Support and Markets Philip Sithole declared that: 'Let us take the food from the mouths of the Indians! Now is the time for Africans to be in power! We will remove them all and replace them with blacks!'<sup>2</sup>

The *Daily Maverick* commented that 'South Africa has regressed to being a society where dangerous threats can be made openly against an entire community and nobody interrogates them' (Munusamy 2013:1).

While the Municipality subsequently distanced itself from such comments, Trevor Ngwane warned that the 'ANC administration in Durban should

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<sup>1</sup> The Mercury, 22 July 2009 (<http://historymatters.co.za/anc-administration-sows-seeds-of-racial-discord>)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.wikileaks.org/origin/256\\_0.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/origin/256_0.html)

refrain from sowing dragon's teeth as they appeared to be doing at the meeting. In their eagerness to win the argument, they retraced their steps away from South Africa's non-racial vision. Respect and fairness should be accorded to everyone, irrespective of country of origin or historical origins of our ancestors' (Ngwane 2009:16).

The Durban Metro tried to drown out voices of opposition and tied this to the resurrection of old apartheid stereotypes of sharp business practices and sowing racial divisions between traders, but non-racial solidarity was thriving at the EMM. In face of determined resistance, rather than want to listen to other voices, the city used its own propaganda machine and resources to intensify its campaign of vilification and self-validation. There was no disagreement about the upgrading of services and infrastructure in the Warwick area. The opposition was to forced removal and relocation (reminiscent of the apartheid era) and the outcome will always be the same – the banishment of poor, black people to even greater levels of impoverishment (Maharaj 2017).

### ***Julius Malema's Diatribe***

In October 2010, when he was the leader of the ANCYL, Julius Malema, referred to '*amakula*' (a derogatory term for Indians) when addressing a meeting in Thembelihle, 'where service-delivery protests have been lent a sharper edge by perceptions that Indian residents of nearby Lenasia are treated better by the government'. More recently, speaking on the EFF's 4th anniversary celebrations in Durban, Commander-in-Chief Malema referred to Indians as exploiters:

We also want to call upon our fellow Indians here in Natal to respect Africans. They are ill-treating them worse than Afrikaners will do. We don't want that to continue here in Natal. This is not anti-Indian statement, it is the truth (Patel 2017:1).

*The Times* newspaper questioned Malama's motives, and warned about its ominous consequences:

What is Malema's intention in using such language - perhaps to incite a Rwandan-style genocide? We are no rainbow nation. That much is clear. And the glibness with which supposed leaders manipulate race

and dispossession to fight their causes will surely come back to haunt us all. We have already witnessed the shocking atrocity of foreigners being attacked and killed in South Africa. This time, if we are not careful, it will be our people who are targeted<sup>3</sup>.

Former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela posed a critical question: ‘As we confront alleged and perceived racism, sexism, disability discrimination and other forms of bigotry today, shouldn’t we ask if we have truly transcended the legacy of our unjust past, where the hierarchisation of difference was not just the order of the day, but also a legal requirement?’ (Madonsela 2018:1).

Arguing in the *City Press* that there was an ‘Irresistible comparison with Idi Amin’, ANC veteran Mavuso Msimang succinctly summarised the implications:

History, it must be stated, is replete with examples of dire consequences that befall societies when ethnicity is recklessly used for opportunistic short-term ends. In the late 1960s, Ugandan dictator Idi Amin expelled tens of thousands of Asians from the country on the pretext that they were involved in economic sabotage. He was widely cheered for this by people who saw it as giving them the opportunity to take possession of shops abandoned by the expelled citizens. Before long, Amin turned to indigenous Ugandans and conducted an ethnic purge that resulted in at least 100 000 deaths during his nine-year rule. This is only one of many examples of ugly ethnicity-based atrocities around the world (Msimang 2018:1).

The *Sowetan* warned that Malema’s remarks are ‘reckless’ and emphasized the role of Indians in the non-racial struggle for democracy:

For decades, even before we became a free country, there was a concerted effort to forge us into a united nation, in spite of our cultural and ethnic diversity. The founding fathers of the post-1910 Struggle rejected the colonial project which sought to divide indigenous blacks into ‘tribal groups’. In the 1940s, subsequent generations fought against

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/editorials/2011/10/20/manipulation-of-race-for-gain-has-no-place-in-this-sa>

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attempts by the apartheid regime to drive a wedge between indigenous blacks and black people of Indian origin as a way of breaking the backbone of a broad alliance against oppression. From the 1960s to the 1990s black people of Indian ancestry fought side by side with other comrades to attain freedom. Some, like Sulaymaniyah ‘Baba’ Saloojee, Ahmed Timol and Lenny Naidu, laid down their lives. We should never lose sight of this historical fact: the tree of freedom was nourished with the blood of fighters of all races<sup>4</sup>.

Malema was right that there were racists in the Indian community. But there are also racists in the white, coloured, Chinese, Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi and other communities. However, Malema has decided to tarnish most Indians as racists. In doing so he also emerges as a bigoted, prejudiced and promoting hate speech – conduct unbecoming of someone who aspires to be a president of South Africa. Malema is basically a demagogue – ‘a political leader who seeks support by appealing to popular desires and prejudices rather than by using rational argument’<sup>5</sup>.

There is a view that Malema’s attacks on Indians coincided with challenges he had with regard to income tax. He claimed in 2012 that he was being harassed by ‘a small clique of Indians in bed with Afrikaners’ and fingers were pointed at Minister Pravin Gordhan (Momoniati 2022: 8).

## **July 2021 Looting and the ‘Phoenix Massacre’**

Between 9 - 14 July 2021 there was an outbreak of mass looting and destruction of property across KwaZulu-Natal and to a lesser extent, Gauteng, during which the state security agencies appeared to be struck by paralysis. This failure to respond was attributed to the internal factional politics of the ANC. The looting and mayhem have been variously attributed to support for the release of former president Jacob Zuma (sentenced to 18 months in prison for contempt of court for not complying with a subpoena to appear before the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture); radical economic transformation; rebellion of the poor against poverty and inequality, ethnic mobilisation, and insurrection.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2018-06-18-malemas-remarks-are-reckless/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.econlib.org/archives/2014/05/demagoguery\\_exp.html](https://www.econlib.org/archives/2014/05/demagoguery_exp.html)

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The events of the week of 12 July 2021 were devastating in terms of the loss of lives, looting, violence, damage to property, loss of jobs and international reputational repercussions, especially investor confidence. About 340 people lost their lives nationwide. The looting and riots were an attempted insurrection against a legitimate government. The SAPS and metro police were largely invisible, and when they did respond they appeared to be largely overwhelmed – no tear gas or water cannons and ran out of rubber bullets and communities had to fend for themselves.

As the anarchy unfolded across the affected regions, communities mobilised and took to the streets to protect their families and property, through community policing forums and neighbourhood watches and in a few cases, private security companies. It subsequently emerged that vigilante and criminal groups engaged in activities that led to the loss of at least 33 black and three Indian lives in Phoenix. This took centre stage in the national news and was presented as a racist discourse.

The *Daily Maverick* reported that: ‘Many Indian and Black residents in Phoenix and surrounding areas in KZN, have largely agreed on one thing – if the police and the SANDF had reacted sooner, much of the suffering now being experienced by communities of all races could have been avoided’ (Erasmus & Hlangu 2021:1).

Significantly, Malema visited Phoenix on 18 September 2021, and adopted a reconciliatory tone (perhaps because he was on a local government election campaign trail):

I don't want tension, I want peace, and those who don't want peace are enemies of the EFF ... innocent people lost lives here in Phoenix but that must not be attributed to every Indian you come across, because to do that amounts to self-hate. There are lots of Indians against that ... I am here to say despite what happened, we belong together and we will overcome all these challenges together. I am happy to see the EFF here (Matiwane 2021:1).

In oral testimonies to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) investigation into the July 2021 looting and riots victims who were attacked in Phoenix and lost loved ones relived their experiences:

Eyewitnesses described harrowing details of what took place between



12 and 15 July. Their testimonies highlighted the fragmented relationship between residents in Phoenix and the surrounding townships Bhambayi, Ntuzuma, Inanda, Amaoti, Zwelisha and KwaMashu. As each witness took the stand, traces of unresolved racial and social fragmentation made the testimonies tense. The experiences of survivors, as well as the emotional impact on their families, finances, physical and mental states, were put before the public. Some witnesses identified officials in the police and emergency departments who did not do their jobs .... Witnesses of the Phoenix violence questioned the lack of policing, and wondered how both organised and spontaneous vigilantism spiralled into three days and nights of terror for African people. Witnesses testified to being shot at, assaulted and called racist names (Xolo 2022:1).

In a submission to the SAHRC investigation on behalf of the Social Cohesion Group (a group of civic leaders and professionals) KZN MEC Ravi Pillay condemned the killings in Phoenix ‘without qualification’ but objected to the demonization of the entire community:

We believe that the labelling of the entire Phoenix community and through the characterisation of the events in Phoenix as a ‘massacre’ has demonised the entire Indian community because of the actions of a few. We are of the view that the commission should make a conscious effort to distinguish between the actions of the perpetrators of violence from those of the community as a whole ... Acts of violence and killing occurred in Phoenix, but unlike similar incidents in other areas it took on a particular racial form [which must be] condemned without qualification .... The phenomenon of impunity and state capture laid part of the foundations for the unrest and could be construed as some of the underlying causes (Goba 2022:1).

In his submission to the SAHRC, President Ramaphosa said two million jobs were lost as a result of the looting (which he termed an ‘attempted insurrection’) and economic losses exceeded R50bn, and were ‘nothing less than a deliberate, coordinated and well-planned attack on our democracy, intended to cripple the economy, cause social instability and severely weaken or even dislodge the democratic state’ (Erasmus 2022:1).

## **Evaluation and Conclusion**

It is evident from this chapter that descendants of indentured labourers continue to be treated as pariahs in the land of their birth. Historian Hugh Tinker has questioned whether descendants of indentured labourers ‘create their own difficulties by their own way of life, and by remaining separate from the host society; or do their troubles arise mainly from excess chauvinism or racism in the country of their adoption? Do they offend because they are, visibly, both pariahs and exploiters in alien societies? Or are they scapegoats, singled out for victimization because their adopted country (or its government) needs an alibi for poor performance in the national sphere?’ (Tinker 1977:138-139).

One possible reason for the anti-Indian hype, according to the late Professor Fatima Meer, was that ‘when the majority community is beset by want, anxiety, dissatisfaction and fear, it tends to exhibit a lack of compassion and tolerance for minorities. It may become dangerously hostile when the minority community next to it ... is prospering and on the rise socially, economically and politically’ (Meer 2000:59).

Their resilience in overcoming adversity was emphasised by senior ANC member Mr Phumelele Stone Sizani in a Parliamentary address on 16 November 2010, the 150th anniversary of the arrival indentured labourers: ‘These Indians, like African slaves and workers in America, came from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, but were united by their spiritual traditions which nourished their self-respect, self-worth and self-esteem, culture of self-help and self-reliance’<sup>6</sup>.

However, as racism, tribalism, ethnic chauvinism, xenophobia, cronyism and the celebration of mediocrity become pronounced in South Africa, and the ruling elite blatantly flout democratic principles forged on the anvil of struggle, the passive descendants of indentured labourers increasingly feel disillusioned, marginalised and excluded from the rainbow nation, and anxiously retreat into their religious and cultural cocoons. Some pray that subliminal connections with India become stronger.

A major problem has been a dearth of astute, credible leadership in the community, who can genuinely represent the working class and the poor. The

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pa.org.za/hansard/2010/november/16/proceedings-of-the-national-assembly-tuesday-16--2/indentured-labourers-of-indian-origin-in-south-afr>

various deprecatory comments and racial slurs since the year 2000 may well be an appropriate warning to the South African Indian community to awake and arise from their apathetic slumber. As the government fails to deliver to the poor, the search for scapegoats will begin.

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**SECTION 4**  
**‘Untold Stories’ of Indenture and**  
**‘Tracing Roots’**



# Chapter 11

## On the Trail of My Ancestry (A Personal Odyssey)

Anand Jayrajh

### Abstract

Many South Africans of Indian descent can trace their ancestral roots to the Indian Indentured labourers who were brought to the Colony of Natal from India during the period 1860 to 1911. They were brought here as bonded labourers under a contract of indenture (referred to by the labourers themselves as '*Girmit*') mainly to toil on and develop the sugar plantations of British Colonial masters who held sway in this part of Southern Africa. Due to the lapse of and through the passage of time, as well as the unavoidable and inevitable effects of generational gap, a broad section of these South Africans lost contact with their kith and kin and descendants of their ancestors in India and have no idea as to who they are. What follows herein is a description of a personal odyssey in pursuit of discovering my ancestral roots to India. For those who are passionate about their ancestry, it is hoped that some will gain inspiration from this narrative to embark on similar quests of their own, if they have not already done so. Such ventures by individuals would most certainly be unique in their own rights and unravel varying individual experiences and emotions. In the process they will most likely find some common threads embroidered therein.

**Keywords:** Ancestral Roots, Odyssey, '*Girmit*', India

### 1 Introduction

The majority of South Africans of Indian descent can trace their ancestral roots to the Indian Indentured labourers who were brought to the Colony of Natal from India during the period 1860 to 1911. They were brought here as bonded labourers under a contract of indenture (referred to by the labourers themselves as '*Girmit*') mainly to toil on and develop the sugar plantations of British

Colonial masters who held sway in this part of Southern Africa. There were a few immigrants who came to work in or were later absorbed into some other spheres of economic or industrial endeavour such as mining, construction of railway lines, domestic helpers, hotel and restaurant waiters and so forth. These were largely few and far between.

Generally, a labourer entered into a contract of indenture for a period of five years and thereafter he or she could renew it (if he or she found a willing employer) or return on a free passage to India. There was also a dispensation where, after serving a period of 10 years of indenture, a labourer could, in lieu of a free passage back to India, obtain a piece of land which he or she could utilize personally as a freed person. Records show, however, that not many indentured labourers were in fact granted land. After the termination of the indenture and for various reasons, rather than return to India, many chose to remain in Natal (which, in 1910, was incorporated as one of the four provinces in the Union of South Africa). Their descendants now form part of a segment of South African nationals who are referred to as ‘the Indian diaspora’.

Due to the lapse of and through the passage of time, as well as the unavoidable and inevitable effects of generational gap, a broad section of these South Africans lost contact with the kith and kin and descendants of their ancestors in India and have no idea as to who they are. There is an emerging trend where members of this diaspora are looking increasingly at the prospects of tracing their ancestral roots.

What follows herein is a description of a personal odyssey in pursuit of discovering my ancestral roots. In passing, I must state that I have come across those who do not give two hoots about this topic – so perhaps this account may not be of interest to them. For those who are passionate about their ancestry, it is hoped that some will gain inspiration from this narrative to embark on similar quests of their own, if they have not already done so. Such ventures by individuals would most certainly be unique in their own rights and unravel varying individual experiences and emotions. In the process they will most likely find some common threads embroidered therein.

## **2 Personal Background to the Quest for Ancestry**

When my siblings and I were growing up, my parents used to tell us, as did other elders in the wider family circle, that our forefathers arrived in this country from India ‘as cane cutters’ to work on the sugar plantations. This was the

oft familiar and common tale that did the rounds amongst the South Africans who are the descendants of Indian indentured labourers.

As I attained [*what I believe and hope*] maturity, my interest was piqued as far as my ancestry was concerned. I began to read up on the stories of the Indian indenture and conduct enquiries about my own ancestry which revealed some facts of personal interest to me. I thought that it might be a good idea to visit the place of my ancestors to salve my emotional curiosity and satiate my quest to trace my ancestral roots. Before I embark on describing my quest, I thought that it may perhaps be instructive to introduce myself and set out some brief background about my ancestry.

I was born on 06 February 1949 at 19 Matheran Road, Avoca at the residence of my maternal aunt [my mother's sister, Suminthra Selagan] in the then Province of Natal [present-day KwaZulu-Natal] to Jayrajh and Parbhawathee Bhagwatidin. A month prior to my physical arrival on Mother Earth, in mid-January 1949 '*Indians*' in Durban were the victims and targets of a riot where they were allegedly set upon by mobs of African because of racial tension that had built up. [*The cause and effect of that riot is a story for another day and beyond the scope of this narrative*]. Because of the unrest, my mother had gone to stay temporarily at her sister's house during this turbulent time. That is when I decided that it was time to emerge from the comfort of my mother's womb and check out what was happening in the world outside.

Although many South Africans of Indian descent are now fourth, fifth and even sixth-generation descendants, I am actually a second-generation descendant on both my paternal and maternal sides.

## **2.1 Paternal Lineage**

### ***Bissesur and Hunsa [Paternal Great-grandparents]***

According to official records, steamship S.S. Poonah arrived at Durban from Calcutta on 29 July 1878 bringing along 509 immigrants. On board was Bissesur [No 18408] aged 35 (*who was the son of Nunkoo*). He was accompanied by his wife Hunsa [No. 18409] (*daughter of Jeebodh*) age 30, daughters Oomraia [No. 18410] aged 9 and Maharajee [No. 18411] aged 5 and an infant son Bhagwandin [No. 18412], [*my paternal grandfather*] aged 1 year 6 months.

According to the ship's list they came from the following place in India [*located in in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh*]: Zillah (Province):

Sooltanpore (*sic*) [Present Day Sultanpur]; Thanna (District): Daspore (*sic*) [which I subsequently discovered is actually Dostpur]; Village: Odympore.

/To my mind, an unfortunate feature of Indian Society is the emphasis placed on the ‘caste system’ which I find personally repugnant. Nevertheless, and for the records, the ship’s list indicates that they belonged to the ‘Kunbi’ caste/.

According to records, on 02 August 1878, my great-grandfather Bissessur and his family were originally assigned to J E Churchill of Prospect Hall Estate, Umgeni. About three months later he was transferred to Durban Corporation on 05 November 1878. This may very well be indicative of the fact that perhaps he did not work on the sugar cane plantations. Approximately four years later, on 23 September 1882, he was transferred to T C Milner. I do not know in what capacity he worked for the latter employer. Just over six years after his arrival in Durban, Bissessur was issued, on 01 December 1884, a ‘*licence to quit the Colony*’. The very fact that I am writing this article is indicative of the fact that he did not in fact ‘*quit the Colony*’. In 1901 he held Licence to operate as a ‘Retail Dealer’ at Stratford Road.

### ***Bhagwandin and Sookanie [Paternal Grandparents]***

When Bissessur’s infant son referred to above, namely Bhagwandin [No. 18412], attained adulthood he married Sookanie and they were my paternal grandparents. From the information given to me by my father they had two sons and six daughters (*one of whom died in a tragic accident when her dress caught fire as she was burning some leaves she had gathered in the yard of the place where her family lived*). The name ‘Bhagwandin’ somehow morphed into ‘Bhagwatidin’.

He worked for Hajee Mohamed Hajee Dada & Company in the early 1890s and then worked for McNamees [Furniture Business] until March 1896. From copies of licences dated in the 1920s available, it appears that he was issued with licence to operate a ‘Tea Room’ at 783/785 Umgeni Road, Stamford Hill. According to articles in the *Natal Mercury* in 1918, he served as secretary of Shree Thakurwara and Dharamshala Hindoo Temple in Depot Road. My grandparents died before I was born, so I never had the opportunity of getting to know them personally.

One of the two sons was my father Jayrajh Bhagwatidin, born on 02 December 1921. He attended Depot Road School and obtained a Primary School Certificate. He worked as a waiter at Warner Beach Hotel in his youth.

He married Parbhawathee and had children Sithara Jasoda (daughter), yours truly Anand (son), Surendra Nath also known as Suresh (son), Sanjith Choudhree (son) and Nimmi Jasmin (daughter). My father was a skilled upholsterer

## **2.2 Maternal Lineage**

### ***Bissessur and Jitni [Maternal Great-grandparents]***

Some 19 years after my paternal great grandparents had arrived in Natal, the S.S. Umzinto (Ship No. 252) departed Calcutta on 08 March 1897 and anchored in Durban on 1 April 1897 with 458 immigrants. On board was Bissessur [No. 66024] *[my maternal great-grandfather]* aged 23 (son of Badloo), his wife Jitni [No. 66025] *[My paternal great grandmother]* aged 17, (daughter of Chothan) and son Sookhoo [No. 66026] *[my maternal grandfather]* aged 1 year 4 months.

Records show that Bissessur was assigned to Tongaat Central Sugar Company owned by E. Saunders. According to the ship list, they came from the following place in India *[also located in in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh]*: Zillah (Province): Basti; Thanna (District): Baansi; Village: Bahlol *[Likely Bahbol]*.

*[For the records, and reiterating my views about the caste system above, the ship's list indicates that they belonged to the 'Kahar' caste].*

Sookhoo married Marjadhee and they were my maternal grandparents. They lived in Tongaat and had five sons and five daughters. One of the daughters was my mother Parbhawathee who, as already stated above, married Jayrajh Bhagwatidin. Sookhoo made a living as a taxi operator plying his trade between Tongaat and Leopold Street Taxi Rank in Durban.

*[Co-incidentally both my paternal and maternal great-grandfathers bore the name Bissessur]*

Having written something about my ancestry, I now turn my attention to write



about the quest to visit my ancestral land in Uttar Pradesh, India.

### **3 On the Trail of My Ancestry [A Personal Odyssey]**

As time passed, I became imbued with the desire to trace my ancestral roots in India. I had visited India on a few occasions, but did not embark on any mission to do so. This was largely because of, amongst other factors, time constraints and the fact that I felt that I had not gathered sufficient information for that purpose. I married Sharitha [Shirley] Balgobind in 1980 and we had three children, namely Avishkar Anand Jayrajh [*son*], Shakthi Anand Jayrajh [*son*] and Preethi Jayrajh [*daughter*].

#### ***Fast Forward a Couple of Decades***

When the wedding of my daughter and youngest child, Dr Preethi Jayrajh, was scheduled for April 2014, she and my wife conspired to go to India to ‘*do wedding shopping*’. They then roped me in and tied me down to the plot. However, the thought of tagging along with them in the bustling gullies, alleyways, byways, nooks and crannies, shopping centres and marketplaces of Mumbai, lugging shopping bags around in the heat of the day neither appealed to me, nor did it sit too comfortably on my unadorned head. I decided that I would seize the opportunity to visit Uttar Pradesh on the long-cherished mission to trace my ancestral roots. Turning on my charm offensive, I successfully sold the idea to them. I then set about planning the venture, gathering as much information as possible, plotting out an itinerary and making the necessary bookings for the escapade. What follows is a summary of what transpired during that mission which I would like to share with anyone willing and patient enough to read this account.

#### ***13/11/2013 (Wednesday) 6.45 a.m. Durban/ Dubai/ Mumbai [India]***

My wife Sharitha (Shirley), daughter Preethi and I departed from King Shaka Airport in La Mercy, Durban on Emirates Airlines flight bound for Dubai and then on from there to Mumbai. (*Mission: Preethi’s Wedding shopping for April 2014; Sub-plot: My Mission – on My Ancestry Trail*).

***14/11/2013 (Thursday) Mumbai***

We arrived at Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, Mumbai where our pre-arranged driver Sonu Singh met us and took us to a hotel near Churchgate Station.

***15/11/2013 (Friday)***

We visited Bhuleshwar, a bustling and crowded part of Mumbai. There, as previously experienced, I had a good 'taste' of what the shopping mission would be like.

After breakfast, I bade farewell to Shirley and Preethi, leaving them happily to do what they enjoy extremely well and that is shopping. Driver Sonu Singh took me to the airport to catch the morning flight on Jet Airways to Lucknow.

***16/11/2013 (Saturday) 08.55 On to Lucknow***



**At Lucknow**

### **11:55 Lucknow**

I arrived at Lucknow around midday and was taken to Clarks Avadh Hotel which I had booked earlier through the internet. I did a short tour of Lucknow in the afternoon.

In the evening I was privileged to witness a glamorous wedding in an open-air entertainment area below my hotel room window which was situated a few floors above. The music and cacophony carried on till late at night, but this did not seem to have bothered anybody.

### **17/11/2013 (Sunday) 05:00 Lucknow/ Ayodhya/ Basti/ Bahbol**

Early on Sunday morning I left Lucknow with driver Viren Singh at the wheel. We travelled 135 kilometres east along route 27 to Ayodhya. I made quick visit to Raam Janm Bhoomi *reputedly the birthplace of Lord Raam, the hero of the Hindu epic Ramayan*].

Unauthorised vehicles are not allowed to enter the complex. The driver had to park some distance away and wait at his vehicle whilst I trudged a kilometre to the complex. Upon reaching the vicinity of the birthplace, I discovered that visitors are obliged to walk through a winding metal caged tunnel to reach the 'shrine' where Raam is said to have been born. The area is heavily guarded by the army. This is as a result of communal tension between Hindus and Muslims that culminated in the destruction of the Babri mosque in December 1992.

The 'shrine' located at the spot where the birth [or 'avatar'] was supposed to have taken place is situated about 30 m away from the caged walkway which we were not allowed to leave. Barely having a glimpse of the small shrine, visitors are hurried away by the impatient and imperious soldiers. Thus, the opportunity for any ardent devotee to savour the moment is generally stifled, compromised and dissipated. I left the place wondering whether it was worth all the effort I spent over 1½ hours visiting the place.

We then crossed River Sarju and continued our journey eastward to Basti about 70 kilometres east in an attempt to locate Bansi and Bahlol, which appear on the Ship list on my Maternal side. When we reached Basti we took the off-ramp from the NH27 highway in an endeavour to locate a place which was cited as 'Bansi' (*and which I was pronouncing 'Bunsee' with fully nasalised 'n'*) on my ship list.

As luck would have it, we met a few local gentlemen at a *chai-shop* (tearoom) located in primitive wood and thatch hovel-like structure just off the

off-ramp from the NH27 Highway.

I was able to converse in Hindi and after some discussions and enquiries one of the gentlemen advised us that there was a place called 'Baansi' (long 'a' and *half nasalised 'n' and probably derived from the word 'Baans' meaning Bamboo*) which was about 50 kilometres away and would take about an hour to reach.



### **The Gentlemen who gave directions to Baansi**

After about 1½ hours traversing terrible road conditions along Route 28, we reached Baansi to the north-east of Basti and began enquiries to locate Bahlol. We met a group of people and once again, as luck would have it, a youngster on a motorcycle advised me that he does come from a village known as Bahbol and gave us directions. He was going somewhere else and could not escort us there.

We then travelled on to Bahbol and on reaching there I made some enquiries. A crowd of curious but friendly locals usually gathered around us whenever we reached any village. Bahbol was no exception. We met another

youngster on a motorcycle. This youngster called for an elderly villager who enquired about the caste of the people we were looking for. *[It seems that villagers in India are still obsessed with the caste system]*. I advised him that according to the ship list in my possession it appears that my ancestor belonged to the caste 'Kahar'. He advised us that he knew some Kahar people nearby. We were then led to a house nearby where a Kahar family was said to reside.



### Villagers at Bahbol

A man was roused from his midday nap. I have no idea whether or not he took kindly to my untimely intrusion into his siesta. He invited us to sit in his modest cottage and I explained to him my mission to locate any descendants of my ancestors. He informed us that he and his family came from elsewhere and could not help us to identify or locate any people. *[This was understandable as my maternal grandfather Sookhoo departed India and arrived in Natal about 116 years ago]*.

I left some papers with the youngster with the motorcycle and gave him my email and contact details and requested him to contact me should he come across any information which may be of interest to me. I have not heard from him since]. *[I found the place of my maternal ancestors but not my people. It was a remote area accessible by a narrow road full of potholes.]*

After our visit to Bahbol, we travelled south along Route 28 and joined Route 128 for Sultanpur about 170 kilometres away in search of the place where my paternal grandfather hailed from. I had not booked a hotel in Sultanpur in advance, so we had to try to reach there as early as possible to check into a suitable one. The road to Sultanpur (*as were most of the roads that we travelled during this adventure*) was really terrible, with potholes with some mega ones up to 1 metre in diameter. We could not travel more than 30 km per hour, and it took an average of 3 hours to cover 100 km. On the way to Sultanpur we had to take a detour through winding backroads because the main road was closed for reasons unknown to me. When we re-joined the main road, we crossed the mighty Ghagra River over an immensely long bridge.

It took us longer than I had anticipated to reach Sultanpur, our destination for that day. When we eventually reached it was already dark. I could not find a decent hotel. There seemed to be a wedding scheduled for the weekend and all good hotels nearby seemed to be fully booked. I began wondering what I had let myself into. As it was already late, I had to settle for and make do with whatever I could find and was available within the short time available. I eventually found and booked in at a tacky and Spartan boarding house known as *Garden View* just to rest for the night, at the cost of 1 500 Indian Rupees.

*[I discovered that the driver's employer had not arranged for his accommodation, and he was going to spend the night in the vehicle. I felt sorry for him and let him share my room].*

### ***18/11/2013 (Monday) 05:00 Sultanpur/ Dostpur/ Odypur***

We left Garden View Lodge early next morning and set off southwards seeking a place that appeared on the ship-list of my paternal side, namely Thanna Daspore [Dostpur] and Village Odypore [Udaypur Sakarwari - *(I booked in and checked out when it was dark, so I was unable to establish whether or not the lodge was appropriately named).*

I could not find a place called ‘Daspore’ shown on the ship’s list I had in my possession. However, I discovered that there was a place named Dostpur some 60 kilometres from Sultanpur. I surmised and gambled that this is the place referred to in the ships list. The roads, as usual, were absolutely and frustratingly terrible.

[It seems that the Government of India is either oblivious and blissfully unaware of the difficulties its citizens endure because of the atrocious roads or being aware, the politicians avert their vision. I could not fathom why the Government of India cannot build decent roads when transport is the one of the major lifeblood of the nation – not that I can say any better for our own government back home/].

When we reached Dostpur, once again, as luck would have it, we met a local schoolmaster named Ajay Shukla, to whom I explained my mission. He volunteered to help me and took me to meet a few people. As stated earlier, wherever we stopped a crowd of curious but friendly locals usually gathered around us. Ajay took us to the home of an old gentleman who informed us that he was a retired college lecturer. He was more concerned about my caste and did not seem to be particularly interested in my mission. I informed him that my ancestors were Khoonbee. He informed us that the Khoonbees were farmers and also known as Varmas. We then proceeded to another part of the area (*followed by a crowd*) where we met another old man who was also unable to assist or give me any useful information.

On our return we stopped at a *chai shop* where Ajay met Baijnath Jaisul whom he knew and told him about my mission. This gentleman then contacted someone on his mobile. He informed us that there was a place called Udaypur [Coordinates: 26.2673N, 82.3804E] about 10 kilometres from Dostpur. I surmised that this was most likely the place shown as ‘Odypore’ on my ship list.

Ajay then contacted a local leader Mr Sultan Alli (*a Sarpanch – village head*) who was attending a meeting. Mr Alli requested Ajay to wait until he had finished his meeting, and he would thereafter come to meet us. [*Ajay took us to his residence, a typical village home with buffaloes housed within his quarters. His wife was preparing their little daughter for school. He told me that he runs a private school nearby and took us there to see it. It was a modest building which still appeared to be work-in-progress. He informed us that he needed funds to complete it and requested me to seek help on his behalf in South Africa*].



We met with Sarpanch Sultan Alli, who accompanied us to a small farmstead in Udaypur to meet a Varma family. There we met a family who seated us in the courtyard. I informed them of my mission. *[Some of the ladies of the household came and touched my feet which made me feel somewhat awkward and uncomfortable. However, this was part of tradition and which needed to be respected].*

The elder Mr Ramnaresh Varma informed me that many years ago, long before his time, his ancestors had come from another area and the original owners settled them there and left the place. He did not know where they are now. We also met his son Jitendra Varma (*his other son Ramsuresh Varma lives in Mumbai*) and two sons of his brother Ramkhelawan Varma, namely Sailendra Varma and Devendra Varma.

I took photos with members of the household, gave the elder some money and left, with a retinue following us to our vehicle.



**The Retinue that followed us when we left the Varma Homestead**



[I am sure that I found the area where my paternal ancestors hailed from but was unable to establish whether or not the people I met were related to me]. [I have heard tales by South Africans of Indians descent who say that many of the locals in India are cautious about visitors from our country visiting India to seek their roots because they fear that claims may be laid for shares in inheritance. I am not particularly sure about this theory/].

### ***Dostpur to Varanasi***

We then set out for Varanasi [Coordinates: 25.3176° N, 82.9739° E] approximately 150 kilometres from Dostpur along customarily deplorable roads. [*I was relieved that I was using a hired vehicle as I would never allow mine to be abused like that.*]

I booked in at a luxurious Hotel Hindustani International and gave the driver some money to book into another cheaper hotel. [*Whether he booked in at a hotel and stayed there or kept the money and slept in his vehicle, I will never know*].

That afternoon we travelled to Sarnath about 15 kilometres away, travelling over the customarily deplorable roads, where I visited the place where Lord Gautamma Buddha is said to have delivered his first sermon. On the way back at dusk I saw a colourful wedding procession with the groom seated tall on a well-decorated horse accompanied by a live music band and ladies carrying portable battery-operated lights on their heads.

That night I arranged with the driver to take me to Ganga Aarti. However, he had to leave me a distance away and I had to trudge through the crowd to reach the *arti* ceremony. I managed to catch the tail end. [*Varanasi shocked me with the filth around a place that is deemed to be holy.*]

In the evening I was again privileged to witness from my hotel room window another glamorous wedding reception in the hotel courtyard below. I realised that this was the same wedding procession I had encountered on the road earlier. The music and noise carried on till well after midnight.

### ***19/11/2013 (Tuesday) Varanasi/ Allahabad [Prayagraj]/ Lucknow***

We left Varanasi at 5.30 a.m. and travelled to Allahabad (*now known as Praya-*

graj) [Coordinates: 25.4358° N, 81.8463° E] which we reached at 7.30 a.m. This is the confluence [*Sangam*] of the Ganga and Jumna Rivers.

*[The boatmen quoted me 5 800 Indian Rupees (over ZAR 1 000,00) to take me to the confluence in their flimsy and tacky boats. In any case we still had a long way to go to Lucknow and decided not to venture out onto the river as time was of essence].* Once again, traversing atrocious roads, we arrived at Lucknow. Clark Avadh Hotel was booked out, but the manager assisted in obtaining another hotel for me for the night.

### ***20/11/2013 (Wednesday) Lucknow /Mumbai***

I left hotel at 4.30 a.m. Viren Singh took me to airport and I took the 6.45 a.m. flight via Delhi to Mumbai where I was reunited with my wife and daughter, who were more excited about relating their shopping experience and I was unable to get any word in edgewise to relate my escapade, which up to now has remained in the hollow recesses of my mind.

## **11.4 Conclusion**

This was a personal odyssey and just an example of many that have been enacted by others in search of their roots. I do hope that this account will whet the appetite of those with a similar passion and ambition to trace their ancestral roots but have not yet done so. Fortunately, the ship lists of just over 152 000 Indian indentured labourers who came from India during the period of importation, are available.

If one could locate the indenture number of an ancestor from the ship lists, then one will be able, at least, to locate the village from which one's ancestor came from.

*[These ship lists can be obtained at the Durban Archives Repository, which is presently situated at 14 De Mazenod Rd, Greyville, Berea, 4001, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa].*

## An example of an extract of Ship's List obtained from the KwaZulu-Natal Archives



### KWAZULU-NATAL ARCHIVES

INQOLOBANE YOKUGCINA IMIBHALO EYIGUGU YAKWAZULU-NATAL • KWAZULU-NATAL ARGIEF

#### DURBAN ARCHIVES REPOSITORY

14 De Mazenod Road • Private Bag X22 • Greyville 4023

Tel (031) 309 5681 • Fax (031) 309 5685 • e-mail: dbnarchives@kznedu.kznti.gov.za

ENQ: B E MNTUNGWA

REF: D14/6/11

#### COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Register Number     | : 18408                                    |
| 2. Name                | : Bissessur                                |
| 3. If married, to whom | : Hunsu                                    |
| 4. Father              | : Nankoo                                   |
| 5. Age                 | : 35                                       |
| 6. Sex                 | : Male                                     |
| 7. Caste               | : Khoonbee                                 |
| 8. Caste               | : Kunbi                                    |
| 9. Height              | : 163 cm                                   |
| 10. Zillah             | : Saultanpore                              |
| 11. Thanna             | : Daspore                                  |
| 12. Village            | : Odypore                                  |
| 13. Date of arrival    | : July 1878                                |
| 14. Employer           | : Prospect Hall Estate Umgeni Durban Sugar |

Certified a true copy

  
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*On the Trail of my Ancestry*

**Mr. Anand Jayrajh**

Attorney, Verulam

KwaZulu-Natal

South Africa

[info@jayrajh.com](mailto:info@jayrajh.com)

# Chapter 12

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

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Shanta Balgobind Singh

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### 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,<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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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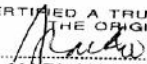
**NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SOUTH AFRICA  
NASIONALE ARGIEF VAN SUID AFRIKA**

**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.

  
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CERTIFIED A TRUE COPY OF  
THE ORIGINAL  
  
**MARLAN NAIDOO**  
COMMISSIONER OF DATIS  
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. Mahilall<sup>2</sup> 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

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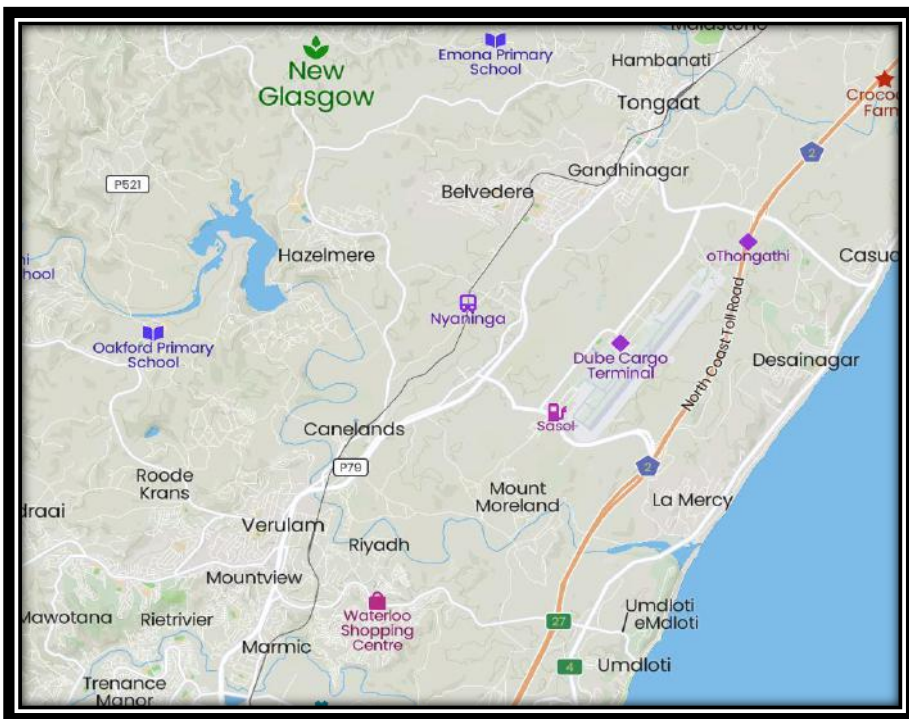
<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that when registering their official documents/papers, the British Colonists in South Africa, misspelt/misrepresented or misunderstood the names/surnames of the Indian passengers. As a result, first names became surnames and children in the same household had different 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).



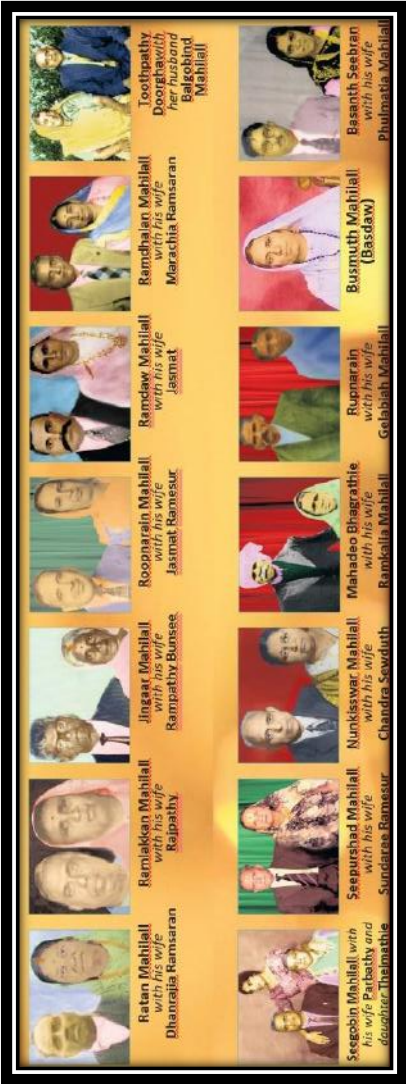
**Figure 4: Map Indicating New Glasgow, Verulam and Waterloo**

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; 2<sup>nd</sup>; 3<sup>rd</sup>;4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 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 caste<sup>3</sup> 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,

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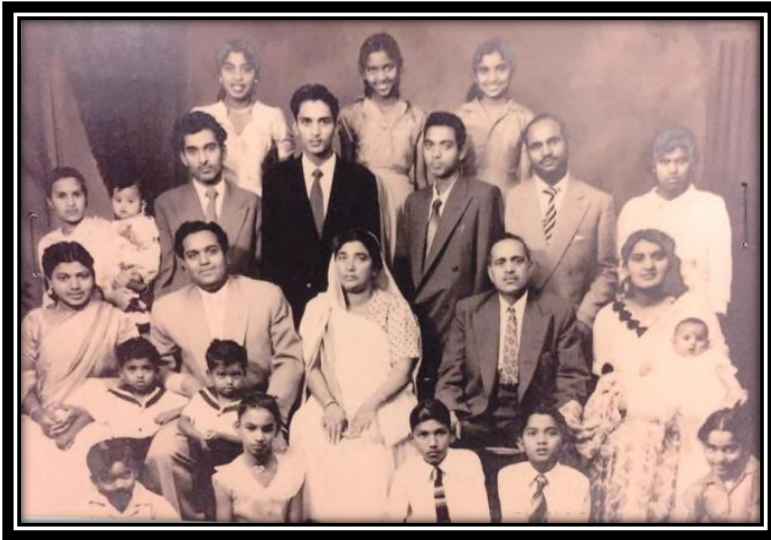
<sup>3</sup> Although in India itself in general, caste is gradually being overshadowed by the class factor, the dynamics and pace of this change are different from what occurred in South Africa. Caste stratification in India is still surfacing in various contexts, whereas in South Africa it has almost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

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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 (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 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-20<sup>th</sup> 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

## *Satish Balgobind & Shanta Balgobind Singh*

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 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday with her Children and their Spouses and Grandchildren in 2019 (2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> 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 land<sup>4</sup>.

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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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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 Deities<sup>6</sup> 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

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

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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 lure 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 account-tants, 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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**SECTION 5**  
**The 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation,**  
**Verulam**



# Chapter 13

## History of the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam

Compiled by  
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Roy Raghubir

This chapter comprises an extract from the Constitution of the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam, herein referred to as ‘The Foundation’. It is an abridged version, for background information purposes, for the book, *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.



### Abstract

During the period 1860 to 1911, the British Colonial Government of the then Colony of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) and later the Government of the Union of South Africa (now Republic of South Africa) recruited workers from India under a system referred to as “indenture”. These labourers were imported under the pretext of well-paid jobs and an ostensibly good life. However, historical records show that they were virtually enslaved to clear the uncultivated coastland of Natal of bush and forest and work on the sugarcane fields and the

coal mines of northern Natal. They often worked from pre-dawn to dusk under harsh conditions and were housed in substandard servants' quarters and barracks. Generally regarded with disdain and treated as third-class citizens, virtually every facet of their lives was controlled and governed by derogatory, oppressive, suppressive and restrictive draconian laws. They were deprived of decent life, often consigned to living in squalid conditions and facing great hardship in developing themselves and progressing in society. However, notwithstanding the arduous conditions, the humble 1860 Indentured Labourers struggled against incredible odds and overcame many obstacles to deliver to their descendants a legacy of which they can justly be proud.

## **1 The Establishment of the Foundation**

It was the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the arrival of Indian Indentured Labourers to the then Colony of Natal in 1860 and in particular that one of the places that the Indentured Labourers had settled was in Verulam. Mr Jaisingh Surujbullee Singh, a resolute and unwavering historian and stalwart, came up with a proposition that an organisation be initiated and instituted. This would then lend itself to commemorate and acknowledge our forebears whilst appreciating their advent by generating an identity for the Indians and its greater diaspora in South Africa. Hence, after dialogues and deliberations with prominent affiliates of the community, a meeting was convened as a way forward. The Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam is also affiliated to the Oral History Society of Verulam, which houses much information on Indenture.

On 7 December 2008, at a public meeting, the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam was established. It originated as a public nature to be viewed as a continual undertaking to constantly educate and edify the community of the history of the Indentured labourers whilst preserving the rich heritage, legacy and culture which these pioneers brought to the shores of South Africa.

## **2 Reasons for the Foundation's Establishment**

- To commemorate the arrival of Indentured Indians to South Africa and to place their lives in perspective whilst recognising the role they played in the history of South Africa, and at the same time pay homage to their

great character and resilience, and express gratitude to them for the rich heritage they bequeathed to the present generation, more especially to their descendants. It is imperative that all South Africans understand the history of their country and the role played by all race groups.

- Appreciation of the arrival of our forebears and the positive impact they had on our country's development programmes whilst acknowledging their contributions:
  - ❖ Rescuing the then Colony of Natal from severe economic depression; and
  - ❖ Leaving a very rich heritage in the fields of religious beliefs, education, amongst others;
- To generate the opportunity of awareness of the existence of the Indian community ... paving the way to pay homage and commemorate the contributions, sacrifices and achievements of the legacy that our forebears had initiated in contributing to our Rainbow Nation through courage, valour, perseverance and determination;
- To create an avenue for our future progenies whilst maintaining the vast enhancement of ancestral life through the virtues, morals and values and education as its priority whilst contributing immensely to the economy of South Africa hence, aspiring to substantial positions;
- To afford one much food for thought whilst inspiring and stimulating the community to share a story with his or her own family, relative or friend, creating a sense of awareness, enlightenment, appreciation of the contributions made by them;
- To constantly endeavour to relate anecdotes and the inspirational attitudes and values of ancestral, familial and communal life whilst paying homage to these inhabitants, our forebears, of our motherland – India and the reasons for us being here today;
- To continually be reminded of the humble and unpretentious beginnings and the strides they have made in bringing us to the current situation we are today, creating inspiration to tread beyond these adversities and linger in the minds of every member of the Indian diaspora.
- To appreciate the plight of our forebears at the mercy of the British subsequent to 1860, the encounters experienced during the voyage and treatment meted out to them at the dockyard before being located in strategic regions to commence their employment.

- To recognise the value of women during indenture, who were considered to be subservient to men, with continued pressure to fewer privileges, inferior levels of education and in decision making. As workers they were ultra-exploitable, being used for the most arduous and least skilled tasks and having to struggle against their oppressors.
- To pay homage to and to rekindle the contributions and accomplishments of the legacy our forebears had created in South Africa, contributing immensely to the economy of our Rainbow Nation through courage, determination and resilience, as well as to the large-scale farming of sugarcane in the then “Natal” and contributing to the intensity in the economy of our country;
- To bring about social cohesion and transformation and to reflect where we as South Africans are today, and celebrate our progress, sacrifices and our role in the struggle for a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa; and
- To generate a sense of realism to acknowledge that we are worthy descendants of the indentured labourers, who gave dignity to the labouring class. It is incumbent upon us to acknowledge their rightful role, lest they be reduced to a footnote and be lost in the dimness of antiquity. We should ensure that their sacrifices remain indelibly etched in history. It is imperative to keep the flame burning so that posterity can continue in turn to keep it alive. Let their memories evolve with time and perpetually remain relevant (Jaisingh S. Singh).

### **3 Values of the Foundation**

#### **3.1 Accountability**

- The Foundation holds itself accountable for the quality and enduring results of its work and for the commitments it makes to their participants, community, sponsors and one another.
- The Foundation is driven by principles that endorse and stimulate innovation through processes and leadership, hence, becoming successful at crafting and sustaining innovation proficiency.
- The Foundation is compelled by an alignment of honesty, integrity, ethics, perseverance and determination which supports the organization as a whole to achieve its core mission by providing a common purpose for the desired outcome.

- The Foundation maintains the highest standards of professional and ethical behaviour and values transparency, with a high level of honesty and integrity in our communication, relationships and actions.

### **3.2 Respect**

- The initiation and formation on the basis of core principles of a bond that stem from mutual appreciation, respect recognition, open communication, and teamwork of the value system that the Foundation and the community that it serves to shape together with sensitivity and respect.
- The Foundation's core values serve to constantly guide both the organisation and the community in achieving their mutual goals, in a manner that is based on an ethical and ideological framework.

## **4 Expectations and Anticipation of the Future of the Foundation**

The Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam, as an NGO – active and progressive, would continue relentlessly – meeting the challenges of the aims and objectives of the Foundation and its implicit commitment to implement our mandate to create awareness in the greater community, of the legacy of our forebears.

The Foundation would relentlessly strive to empower, encourage and inspire our youth to join the Foundation so that they could apprise and acquaint themselves with the work that is being done and in time pick up the cudgels and to steer this huge ship to a broader community of the Indian diaspora (Jaisingh S. Singh).

The Foundation anticipates the continued existence of the Foundation will be in the proficient hands of our youth and looks upon them to acknowledge and accept the challenges of time and period to sustain this well-oiled organisation in the years to come whilst looking upon them to initiate paradigm shifts to magnify the Foundation's footprints.



## **5 Board of Management**

### **5.1 The First Board of Management: 2008**

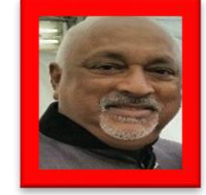


Jaisingh S. Singh (*President*), Dr Kenny Naidoo (*Deputy President*), Bobby Perumal (*Treasurer*), A. Munian (*Assistant Treasurer*), Mohan Supersad (*Secretary*), Anesh Narrandes (*Assistant Secretary*), Dr Kogi Parthab (*PRO*), Narain Murugas, Anand Jayrajh, Savithri Singh, Woma Thotaram, Shirley Jayrajh, Maggie Achary, Saro Moodley, Anishha Raghubir, Rathilal Jaglal, Romilla Jaglal, Satish Ramsewak and A.H. Bux.

## 5.2 The Current Board of Management: 2019 to 2022



Mr Jaisingh S. Singh (President); Mrs Maggie Archary (Dep. President); Mr Roy Raghubir (Gen. Secretary); Mrs Shirley Jayrajh (Treasurer); Mrs Womadevi Thotharam (Asst. Treasurer); Mrs Anisha Raghubir (Curator); Dr Kogie Archary Parthab (Research and Development); Mr Bobby Perumal (1st Treasurer); Mr Anand Jayrajh (PRO) Mr Naran Rajbansi; Prof Shanta Balgobind Singh; Mr Nash Singh, Kimenthri Aveyan.



## **6 The Constitution**

### **6.1 Name and Separate Identity**

The NAME of the organization shall be 1860 INDENTURED LABOURERS FOUNDATION, VERULAM (herein referred to as ‘the Foundation’ or ‘the Organisation’).

### **6.2 Separate Identity**

The Foundation shall have an identity and existence distinct from its members and office-bearers and continue to exist as such notwithstanding changes in the membership or office-bearers.

### **6.3 The Logo of the Foundation**

The Foundation was officially launched at a formal function and the First Cultural Concert held at Verulam Frail & Day Care Centre. The Official logo designed by internationally renowned cartoonist, Mr Nanda Soobben, was officially unveiled by him.



### **6.4 Geographical Area of Operation**

The 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation, Verulam was accordingly established to operate in the greater Verulam and surrounding areas within the jurisdiction of the Inanda Magisterial area with the view to affording and enabling the present and future generation a forum to applaud, salute and remember the sacrifices made by these pioneers collectively and individually.

### **6.5 Vision**

The Foundation implicitly commits to implement the mandate of the organisation by amplifying the significant role of our forebears by maintaining the legacy of their vast enhancement of ancestral life through the virtues, morals and values and creating an avenue for their progeny's hereafter.

### **6.6 Mission**

To create and inspire an efficient and effective platform that aligns strategically with the Foundation's values to herald, inspire and prepare our future generation to uphold, promote and commemorate the arrival of our forebears to South Africa.

## **6.7 Aims and Objectives**

The Aims and Objectives of the Foundation shall be to:

- Provide a forum and platform to the residents of the greater Verulam and surrounding areas to collectively and individually recognize the role played in the history of South Africa by the pioneering Indenture Labourers who emigrated to the Colony of the then ‘Natal’ from India during the period 1860 to 1911, and pay homage to them, commemorate their great character and resilience, and express gratitude to them for the rich heritage.
- Foster, build and promote harmonious co-existence, both among the diverse linguistic, religious and cultural sectors of the descendants of the indentured labourers themselves, as well as all South Africans and the greater global community.
- Encourage, foster and inculcate amongst the residents of greater Verulam and the surrounding areas an interest in and educate them about the history of the indentured labourers for the purposes of improvement, development and advancement of not only themselves individually but society at large.

## **7 Our Pledge as South Africans**

In as much as the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation Verulam is involved in the preservation and commemoration of the history and heritage of the Indentured Labourers, the organisation and its members collectively pledge loyalty to South Africa as the land of their birth right. The present-day descendants of the indentured labourers may look to India as the source of cultural and religious inspiration and take immense pride in the historical heritage bequeathed to them by their ancestors, but as South Africans citizens. They owe national allegiance first and foremost to South Africa. History teaches us to learn from our past, assess our present and chart our future in such a manner that we avoid making the mistakes of the past. *Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika. ‘Blessed am I that I am born to this land’* (Rabindranath Tagore).

## **8 Type of Organization**

- Non-Profit Organisation: NPO No.: 101-803-NPO

- A-political
- Non-religious

## **9 Resolutions**

The following Resolutions were passed at the conclusion of the Conference held on Saturday 17 November 2018:

- 1.10.1 It reaffirms the work that the 1860 Indentured Labourers Foundation Verulam, is doing in keeping the history, legacy and heritage of Indian Indenture alive and is further encouraged to continue in the fulfilment of the aims and objectives of its constitution.
- 1.10.2 Pursuant to the Resolution, the 1860 Indentured Labourers' Foundation Verulam hereby makes a request that the Department of Basic Education, as well as all institutions of Education and/or learning respectively to take all necessary steps in order to include the history of indenture in the Colony of Natal as an integral part of its overall History syllabus/syllabi at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.
- 1.10.3 In implementing Resolution 2, the Foundation is to cooperate with organisations which espouse similar aims, and objectives.

## **10 Amafa Heritage Award**

AMAFA HERITAGE, KwaZulu-Natal, as custodian of heritage in KwaZulu-Natal, has recognised the value of local heritage knowledge held by the Foundation and has enlisted services of its members to identify heritage sites in Verulam. Hence, a site at the corner of Wicks Street and Ireland Street (In front of the BP Garage) has been identified officially for the construction of a Commemorative Wall depicting the Indian Indentured Labourers to the then Colony of Natal.

The Commemorative Wall would be constructed above the current "Welcome" structure. The Monument would depict an Indian woman, man and child with the background of a ship and sugar cane. Models dressed in the form of Indentured Labourers would be used to design and amplify the originality of the commemorative plaque. The size of the monument: 2.2 m x 1.2 m. The architecture would be carved in bronze. The site was allocated by eThekwin Municipality.



The Foundation was nominated by Glenhaven Secondary School and the Trustees of the Shree Gopal Lal Hindu Temple Trust for the AMAFA Award. The Foundation, having being recognised for its sterling work on Indenture, was the recipient of this prestigious AMAFA Heritage, KZN Award in 2013. The Award was conferred at a formal function held in Pietermaritzburg on 20 September 2013.

## **11 Key Milestones and Notable Past Events of the Foundation**

### **11.1 Publications**

<b>No</b>	<b>Publication</b>	<b>Year</b>
1	“Girmit” Commemorative Brochure. 150 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the arrival of Indentured Indian labourers in Natal, South Africa.	2010
2	Newsletter: <i>The Searchlight</i> .	2013
3	Brochure: <i>The Searchlight</i> .	2015

4	Commemorative Brochure: 10 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its Establishment & The Centenary of the Birth of Nelson Mandela. “From Indenture to Mandela & Freedom”	2018.
5	Newsletter: <i>The Searchlight</i> .	2020
6	1860 is #160 ... 2020. A Publication of Conference Proceedings Editor: Dr Kogie Archary. ISBN No. 978-0-620-89359-6	2020
7	The Legend of “Human Cargo”. The 160 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the arrival of Indentured Labourers in Natal, South Africa. Editor Naran Rajbansi. ISBN No.: 978-0-620-90871-9	2021
8	The Historical Mission of the Foundation. Compiled by Naran Rajbansi.	2021

## 11.2 News Medias

No	News Media		Topic	Date
1	<i>Post Natal</i>	Author		
2	<i>The Rising Sun</i>			
3	<i>Sunday Tribune</i>	Anand Jayrajh	When Slavery was abolished by England ...	11/10/2020
4	<i>Post</i>	Anand Jayrajh	1860 Commemorative Supplement Bow of Honour to the Indenture	11/11/2020
5	<i>Coastal Weekly</i>			
6	<i>The Mercury</i>	Premier of KZN: Sihle Zikalala	“We need each other”: The unity of social cohesion amongst South Africans	16/11/2020

7	OHASA Conference	Dr Kogie Archary	Presentation of paper: <i>aspects from the work of the Foundation</i>	
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### 11.3 Audio Medias

No	Host	Guest	Date
1	Radio Hindvani 91.5 FM	Mr J.S. Singh turned 90 on 15 September 2020	
2	On-Line Virtual #160	Year Commemoration: Live streaming Ms Hlengiwe Mavimbela <i>MEC Arts, Culture, Sports &amp; Recreation.</i>	12/11/2020
3	Lotus FM	Mr JS Singh: Turned 90 on 15 September 2020.	2020
4	eNCA	Dr Kogie Archary: <i>Women's Day Launch.</i>	10/08/2020
5	Hindvani 91.5	Mr J.S. Singh.	2020
6	Hindvani 91.5	Dr Kogie Archary: <i>Interviews i.r.o. Women's Day program, launches and 160th Anniversary Commemorations.</i>	2020
7	Hindvani 91.5	Anand Jayrajh: <i>Walk the Talk Show.</i>	03/12/2020
8	Lotus FM	JS Singh <i>The Lunch Break Show: 14h30.</i>	03/12/2020
9	Lotus FM	Naran Rajbansi: <i>"Human Cargo" – A glimpse into the history of South African Indians.</i>	24/11/2020
10	Lotus FM	Dr Kogie Archary: South African Indian women and their role in the liberation struggle.	Weekend Lift off @ 08:15



11	Lotus FM	Mrs Maggie Archary: <i>Weekend Lift-off.</i>	2020
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## 11.4 Collaboration With SABC Lotus FM

No.	Presenters	Links
1	Dr Devi Rajab	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/954779">https://iono.fm/e/954779</a>
2	Prof Ashwin Desai	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/956302">https://iono.fm/e/956302</a>
3	Dr Hemant Nowbath	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/960007">https://iono.fm/e/960007</a>
4	Dr Dhana Sagree Govender	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/960050">https://iono.fm/e/960050</a>
5	Dr I.S. Vawda	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/954392">https://iono.fm/e/954392</a>
6	Mr KR Sitaram	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/955661">https://iono.fm/e/955661</a>
7	Dr Kiru Naidoo	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/955398">https://iono.fm/e/955398</a>
8	Mr Anand Jayrajh	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/950633">https://iono.fm/e/950633</a>
9	MPL Maggie Govender	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/951688">https://iono.fm/e/951688</a>
10	Professor Rehana Vally	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/955239">https://iono.fm/e/955239</a>
11	Dr Kogie Archary	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/963195">https://iono.fm/e/963195</a>
12	Yashica Padia	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/952482">https://iono.fm/e/952482</a>
13	Mrs Maggie Achary	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/955877">https://iono.fm/e/955877</a>
14	Mr Naran Rajbansi	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/959994">https://iono.fm/e/959994</a>
15	Mr JS Singh	<a href="https://iono.fm/e/e">https://iono.fm/e/e</a>

## 11.5 Forthcoming Projects/Key Events Shaping The Foundation 13

No	Project	Timeline
1	The History of the Indentured Labourers to South Africa to be included in the curriculum of Primary, secondary and Tertiary Institutions	Application have been made with positive response from the Department of education
2	Naming of Streets after Indentured Labourer No. 1 Davarum.	Awaiting confirmation

3	Renaming of Verulam Market: “1860 Labourers Market Verulam”	Awaiting confirmation
4	Book Publication: 1860 is #160 ... 2020. A Publication of Conference Proceedings. Edited by Dr Kogie Archary. 2020	Released
5	Book Publication: The Legend of “Human Cargo”. Editor Naran Rajbansi	Released
6	Currently in the process of publication: <i>Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860's to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</i> , Editor: Prof Shanta Balgobind Singh	To be released soon

## 11.6 Timeline: Organize Events into a Timeline

Dates	Events and Happenings
07/12/2008	The Foundation was established at a Public Meeting held at Verulam Child & Family Welfare Society Premises.
16/12/2009	The Foundation was officially launched at a formal function and the 1st Cultural Concert held at Verulam Frail & Day Care Centre. The Official logo designed by internationally renowned designer/artist, Mr Nanda Soobben, was officially unveiled by him. A painting by Belgian artist Dhaena relating to indenture was presented by Mr Krish Brijanund.
02/05/2010	A 2 <sup>nd</sup> Cultural Concert focusing on South Indian performing arts was held at Verulam Frail & Day Care Centre ( <i>Coordinated by Mrs Maggie Achary and Mr Bobby Perumal</i> ),
21/08/2010	A 3 <sup>rd</sup> Cultural Concert focusing on North Indian performing arts was held at Verulam Frail & Day Care Centre ( <i>Coordinated by Shirley &amp; Anand Jayrajh</i> ).
16/11/2010	A plaque commemorating the 150 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first shipload of indentured labourers was unveiled at the Verulam Frail & Day Care Centre – attended by Mr J.S. Singh.

16/12/2010	An official function was held to commemorate the 150 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the arrival of the SS Truro (Which brought the first shipload of Indentured Labourers from India to the Colony of Natal). The proposed publication and release of Commemorative Brochure “Girmit” (which was in preparation) was announced and formally launched by Guest of Honour Mr. Anil Kumar Sharan the Consul General of India.
03/11/2011	The Commemorative Brochure “Girmit”, the publication of which was announced at the function on 16 December 2010, was officially launched at the Verulam Public Library.
16/11/2011	*Outreach Programme was held at Dianthus Primary School, Brindhaven, Verulam.
07/11/2012	*Outreach Programme was held at Acacia Primary School at Trenance Park, Verulam.
15/12/2012	History Tour of Verulam was arranged and conducted culminating in a formal function at Deo Singh’s Kraydeb Conference Centre in Everest Heights, Verulam. The Guest of Honour was the Consul General of India Mr Vinod Kumar Sharma ( <i>Coordinated by Shirley &amp; Anand Jayrajh</i> ).
20/09/2013	The Foundation was awarded the AMAFA Heritage Award at a formal function held in Pietermaritzburg. The Foundation was nominated for the award by Glenhaven Secondary School and Shree Gopal Lal Hindu Temple.
16/11/2013	*Outreach Programme was held at Glenhaven Secondary School, Brindhaven, Verulam. Author Mr Rubendra Govender was the Guest Honour.
05/12/2013	Death of Tata Nelson Mandela. An Obituary was carried in the newsletter <i>Searchlight</i> .
15/11/2014	A formal function was held at the auditorium of the Consul-General of India. Guest of Honour was Mr. Harsh Vardhan Singh Negi the Head of Chancery in the Office of the Consul-General (154 <sup>th</sup> Year of arrival of S.S. Truro). (Coordinated by Shirley & Anand Jayrajh).
11/09/2015	*Outreach Programme was held at Trenance Park Secondary School (155 <sup>th</sup> Year of arrival of S.S. Truro).

15/11/2015	A stage play “God gave me this life” produced and directed by Vivian Moodley and featuring Pranesh Maharajh was held. The play carried a dramatic & poignant message about suicide. (Coordinated by Anand Jayrajh).
During 2015	AMAFA Heritage Site locations – AMAFA enlisted the services of the Foundation headed by President Mr Jaisingh S. Singh to locate and document heritage sites in and around Verulam. This project was duly completed and a fee was paid by AMAFA for the services. (Coordinated by Mr J.S. Singh whose wealth of local history & knowledge proved extremely valuable). A mini-brochure <i>Searchlight 2015</i> was published.
12/03/2016	A Forum “Youth Initiative and Participation” was convened at Glenhaven Secondary School
07/03/2016	A Youth Conference was held at Dianthus Primary School. (Coordinated by educators and Foundation members, viz. <i>Shaneel Mathura and Sharm Ramhdani</i> ).
14/10/2016	*Outreach Programme was held at Mt. View Secondary School (Coordinated by <i>Mr. Anisha Raghbir</i> ).
16/11/2016	*Outreach Programme was held at Waterloo Primary School (Coordinated by <i>Mrs Anisha Raghbir</i> ).
06/09/2017	*Outreach Programme was held at Golden Steps School (Coordinated by <i>Mrs Anisha Raghbir</i> ).
12/11/2017	A Conference “Woman Power-Inspiration from Indenture” was held at the Verulam Frail & Day Care Centre. (Coordinated by <i>Dr Kogie Achary-Parthab, Roy Raghbir and Mrs Preshella Hariparsadh</i> ).
16/11/2018	A Welcome/Launch dinner as a prelude to the Conference on Indenture to be held the next day – scheduled to be held at Coastland Umhlanga Conference Hall “African Fire” (Coordinated by <i>Shirley and Anand Jayrajh</i> ).
17/11/2018	Conference on Indenture with the theme “From Indenture to Mandela and Freedom” held at Sastri College Education & Convention Centre to commemorate the 10 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Foundation and the centenary of the birth of Nelson Mandela. (Coordinated by <i>Shirley and Anand Jayrajh</i> ).

16/11/2019	Cultural Programme was held at the Verulam Day and Frail Care Centre ( <i>Coordinated by Anisha and Roy Raghubir</i> ).
00/02/2020	First EXCO meeting.
09/08/2020	Inaugural Virtual Book Launch 1860 is # 160 ... 2020.
14/05/2020	Annual General Meeting: This meeting was held by utilising the WhatsApp application Cell phone conference.
09/08/2020	Inaugural Virtual Book Launch of 1860 is #160 ... 2020: Ms Ela Gandhi was the Guest of Honour. celebrating National Women's Day.
15/11/2020	On- site Photograph of Intended Monument.
15/11/2020	The eThekweni Municipality allocated a site at the entrance to Verulam at the corner of Wicks and Ireland Streets
17/11/2020	2 <sup>nd</sup> Virtual Book Launch – <i>The Legend of Human Cargo</i>
17/11/2020	Dr Kogie Archary attended and delivered papers: OHASA Conference in Rustenburg, North-West Province. “ <i>An Overview of Women and Minorities, for Inclusion in the New School Curriculum</i> ”
26/11/2020	eThekweni Municipal Libraries hosted a Function to commemorate the 160 <sup>th</sup> Arrival of the Indentured Labourers in the Colony of Natal. The Foundation Verulam has been invited to place the book, <i>The Legend of Human Cargo</i> on exhibition at the International Exhibition Convention Centre.
17/11/2022	Proposed date for the unveiling of the monument.
03/07/2022	Foundation Laying Ceremony of the Commemorative Wall at the corner of Ireland and Wicks Streets.

The date 16 November 2020 heralds the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrivals of indentured labourers in the then Colony of Natal, post-1994, renamed to KwaZulu-Natal, one of the provinces in South Africa that is home to the Zulu Nation. The origins of South African Indians can be traced back to the agricultural labour requirements of colonial Natal in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **11.7 Members of the Board of Management at the Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony in Verulam 17 July 2022**





## **12 Conclusion**

The Foundation's history is a narrative recreation of the events that shaped and solidified the organization's values and characteristics. Since its inception, the challenges that the Foundation has overcome have galvanised the trajectory within the parameters of its scope, which further define the characteristics of success on the firm foundation on which it was built. This compelling exhibition of characteristics and values defines and generates a sense of pride and egotism of the magnitude of the organisations involvement in recognising and paying homage to the Indentured Labourers who arrived at the Colony of the then Natal. The Foundation can, with intensifying sense of enthusiasm and passion, take pride of its achievements since its inauguration. These illustrious and celebrated accomplishments is a compelling narrative that highlights what the Foundation has set out to do whilst ascertaining the qualities and doctrines

leading to success in the past and assisting to shape the decisions and strategy for future realization. Key events and milestones throughout its existence have been well encapsulated in this historical marathon of the Foundation.

**Mr. Naran Rajbansi**

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# Epilogue



# 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. Apart-heid 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 21<sup>st</sup> Century descendants. For those that have been left behind, there is still hope to aspire to where their counterparts are.

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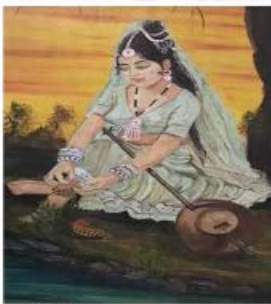
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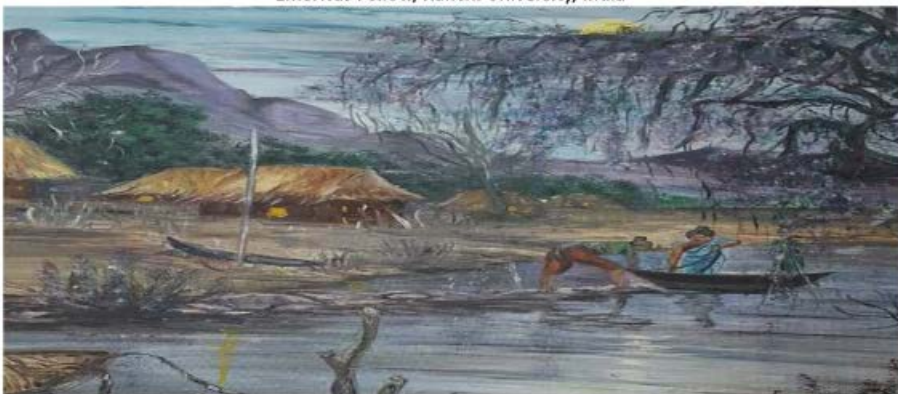






*The book speaks volumes of the saga of atrocities and hardships encountered by South Africans of indentured origin at the hands of their British colonial masters. Contributors of the articles have empirically presented multiple facts and facets of distressing life conditions of these indentured labourers. It is a grand story of success of a community over all adversities spanning 162 years. Anthropologically, it also tells that when a whole culture complex is transplanted to an unknown geo-political and ecological set up, despite gross changes in it, it still retains its basic tenets.*

**Professor Vijoy S. Sahay**, Former Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Allahabad, Emeritus Fellow, Ranchi University, India



*This book focusses on the history of indentured labourers and their descendants in South Africa. The story is told in a unique way, comprising individual histories straddling time and places, authors looking back and contributions focusing on contemporary issues such as the struggle for liberation.*

*Specifically, the part on women and the untold individual stories are considered an addition to the literature. Indians in South Africa represents a rich collection of contributions rarely found in one book.*

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