

## Indentured Labour Migration and the Making of an Indian Diaspora in South Africa, 1860-1911

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### *Abstract*

*This article provides an overview of indentured labour migration to Natal. The arrival of European settlers and subsequent establishment of sugar plantations led to agitation for, and eventually importation of, indentured labour from India. This article examines the involvement of indentured workers in the Natal economy, which went beyond the sugar industry; the working and living conditions of indentured migrants; worker resistance and accommodation; and political repression following the granting of self-government to white settlers. The arrival of indentured migrants, and free Indians in their wake, laid the basis for an Indian diaspora in South Africa. The arrival of Indians complicated 'race' relations in the colony as the policies of segregation pitted Europeans, Africans, and Indians against each other. Formal political resistance during this period was led by Mohandas K. Gandhi and the merchant-dominated Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Some of the political, social and economic issues that emerged and were contested in the colonial period were not satisfactorily resolved and linger to the present.*

### Introduction

The annexation of Natal on the south-eastern coast of Africa by the British in 1843 led to substantial numbers of Europeans settling in the colony over the next few decades. These settlers experimented with a variety of crops, and eventually found success with sugar. The production of sugar was hampered by the lack of capital and a cheap and reliable workforce. Settlers attracted capital from Britain to solve the former problem, and indentured workers from India to ease the labour crisis. Indentured migration to Natal was part of a new global circulation of labour that evolved after the abolition

of slavery in most of the British Empire from 1 August 1843. This created a labour crisis on colonial plantations where considerable sums of money were invested in the production of sugar. Around 1.3 million Indian contract workers were sent to nineteen colonies, including Mauritius from 1842, Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad from 1844, St. Lucia from 1856, Granada from 1858, Natal from 1860, and Fiji from 1879 to meet the demand for cheap agricultural labour (Meer, Y S, 1980: 3).

The decision to import indentured labour had profound long-term consequences for the colony of Natal and eventually for the Union South Africa which came into being in 1910. Indentured migrants were followed by free Indian migrants from the 1870s who came in search of opportunities as traders, retail workers, and craftsmen. The number of free Indians swelled rapidly as most of the indentured migrants who completed their contracts chose not to re-indenture. As Indian traders, market gardeners, and hawkers came to play a visible and prominent role in the local economy, Whites viewed them as a threat to their political and economic dominance of the colony and implemented measures to restrict Indian entry into Natal, and to carefully regulate the activities of those Indians who were within the colony. This article provides an overview of indentured labour migration to Natal, focusing on the reasons for their importation into the Colony, their working and living conditions, their reaction to these conditions, and the short and long-term ramifications of the presence of Indians in the colony.

### European Settlement of Natal

English settlers established an unofficial trading station at Port Natal from 1824. Though the British were reluctant to extend their foreign commitments, they were forced to intervene when the Boers, which literally translates to 'farmer' from the Dutch and referred to migrants of French / Dutch origin, migrated northwards from the Cape to escape British rule. The Boers reached Durban in 1838. The British feared that the Boers would seek the protection of a foreign power and threaten their own hegemony in the region and annexed Natal in 1843 (Welsh, 1971: 7-8). There were around 5000 Boers in Natal by this time. Most had taken ownership of farms as Natal had been under-populated during the rise of the Zulu state system. After the defeat of the Zulu leader Dingane by the Boers in 1838, Africans began returning to land claimed but not occupied by trekkers. The African population in Natal increased from 10,000 in 1838 to over 50,000 by 1843. Following British annexation there was an exodus of Boers from Natal, with only 67 families remaining in 1847 (Slater 1975: 259).

The departing Boers disposed of their land to land speculators and lo-

cal merchants with the result that 4 million acres of the best agricultural lands were owned by Land Companies and other absentee landlords by 1850 (Slater 1975: 259). The London-based Natal Land and Colonization Company, for example, owned 657,000 acres (Guest and Sellers 1985: 7). Land speculators tried to settle immigrants on their land in the hope that agricultural success would boost land prices and develop an export trade. One of the earliest schemes was undertaken by J.C. Byrne who brought 5,000 settlers to Natal between 1849 and 1852 (Slater 1975: 259). The settler population increased from around 8,000 in 1857 to 17,821 in 1869 (Thomson, 1952: 3). Many of the settler farmers failed because of problems such as unsuitable farm implements, their land being situated far from the main water supply and markets, or inadequate labour supply, and moved to Durban or Pietermaritzburg, the two emerging major urban centres in Natal (Thompson, 1952: 3).

Settlers experimented with cotton, coffee, tea, wattle, indigo, legumes, and arrowroot. While farmers in the Midlands turned to wool or dairy farming, most coastal farmers turned to sugar, which became the colony's pre-eminent export staple (Guest and Sellers, 1985: 10). The value of sugar exported by Natal increased from £2 in 1854 with 6 mills at work, to £32,005 in 1860, at which time there were 27 sugar mills; and to £94,372 in 1864, with 58 sugar mills at work (Osborn 1964: 48, 61, 68). Sugar accounted for 61.2 percent of the total gross value of arable farming in the country in 1875 (Ballard and Lenta, 1985: 126).

### **The Labour 'Shortage' in Natal**

English farmers faced a labour shortage even though there was a large African population in the colony. Africans had access to land and cattle and were not prepared to enter into a subservient labour relationship. A settler complained in the mid-1850's:

When Natives have been in service for four or five months, however pressing may be their Master's circumstances, however earnest his entreaty for them to remain at their post, they will be off for six weeks or two months together to re-visit their native kraals and resume their native habits. No doubt this habit is attended with serious inconveniences. The farmer is perhaps deserted at the most critical time; or if the settler be engaged in trade no sooner does the kaffir become expert at it than his time is up and he is gone (Watson 1960: 74).

The Zulu had access to several sources of land. One of these was the locations that the British established for them, which comprised almost one million acres of land and housed over 200,000 Africans in the mid-1890s (Lambert, 1985: 290). Initially, settlers lacked the capacity to transform Africans into a wage-earning proletariat and the British treasury was not prepared to provide resource to subjugate Africans (Kline, 1988: 2-8). The colonial power utilised the existing distribution of power in Zulu society to achieve control and extract surplus (Marks, 1985: 27). British judicial and administrative machinery oversaw pre-colonial African institutions (Etherington, 1989: 172). Africans were governed by customary law through chiefs, while a hut tax and customs duties on goods imported into Natal meant that the Zulu paid for their own governance (Etherington, 1989: 175). The location system maintained peace for around three decades without encumbering the colonial treasury. This policy was the brainchild of Sir Theophilus Shepstone who was Secretary for Native Affairs in Natal from 1853 to 1875. He saw his policy as both controlling and 'protecting' the Zulu from encroaching white settlers. His policy was later applied in other colonial settings as 'indirect rule' (see Guy, 2013).

African converts to Christianity, known as 'kholwas', who lived on missions, responded with vigour to the growth of colonial markets. African farmers were industrious and supplied maize, vegetables, milk, fruit, fish and wood to rural Whites as well as to the urban centres, Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Africans also rented Crown Lands, that is, land that belonged to the government. There were approximately 20,000 squatters on Crown Lands by the 1880s (Lambert, 1985: 289). Speculators rented land to African farmers while they waited for an increase in immigration and a rise in land prices. Five-sixths of White-owned land was farmed by African tenant farmers in 1874 (Guest and Sellers, 1985: 8). The extraction of rent, while profitable to landlords, placed them in conflict with White commercial farmers.

Settlers began agitating for labour shortly after their arrival in the colony. A meeting in October 1851 criticised the locations policy for allowing Africans to 'live their idle, wandering, and pastoral lives or habits, instead of settling down to fixed industrial pursuits' (Kline, 1988: 21) and resolved that to 'successfully raise tropical productions it is absolutely necessary to introduce foreign, free, coloured labour' (Osborn 1964, 131). In subsequent years, there were suggestions to import convict labour, English agricultural workers, African labour from Mozambique, and Malay workers from Java. None of these schemes materialized. Settlers petitioned Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner over British territories in South Africa, to 'introduce a limited number of coolies, or other la-

bourers from the East', when he visited Natal in 1855 (Thomson, 1952: 9). Grey was aware of the success of Indian labour in Mauritius and recommended that Indian labour be imported to 'promote the wealth and security of the Colony and render it of value and importance to Great Britain' (Brain, 1985: 201).

Following several years of negotiations, the Indian government agreed to the scheme. Natal Laws 13, 14, and 15 of 1859 outlined the rules governing Indian labour. Indians were to indenture for a period of three years, subsequently extended to five; they were to work for nine hours per day for six days a week; be paid a minimum of 10 shillings per month; while food, medical treatment, clothing and lodging were to be provided by employers (Meer YS, 1980: 4).

### The *Truro* arrives

The arrival of 342 Indians at Port Natal aboard the *Truro* on 16 November 1860 ended the long struggle for cheap labour by planters. The first impressions of planters were not favourable. James Saunders, owner of the plantation Tongaati and one of the largest employers of Indian labour, wrote:

They squatted dejectedly in small groups... outside the kaffir huts in which they had spent the night of their arrival on the estate, like martyrs awaiting the lions. Exhausted by their long, hot, and dusty march from the Port, discouraged by their strange, and uncomfortable quarters, and cowed by the taunts, handling, and laughter of the savage-looking kaffirs, they seemed a frail and miserable sample... wretched clumps of humanity (Watson, 1960: 81).

Natal stopped importing indentured workers in 1866 because of the economic recession in the colony. By this time, 19 shiploads had brought in 6,445 Indians (Bhana, 1991: 86). When the economic situation improved, Natal applied to resume indenture but the Indian Government refused this request because of complaints of abuse from the first group of indentured migrants who had returned to India in 1870 (Pachai, 1971: 12). Their complaints included poor quality and inadequate rations, terrible housing and sanitary conditions, non-payment of wages, pitiable medical treatment, long working hours and flogging at the hands of employers, managers and Sirdars (Henning, 1993: 41). Desperate for labour, the Natal Government appointed a Commission of Enquiry in 1872 to investigate conditions on the plantations. The Commission corroborated some of the complaints and rec-

ommended that employers keep a wage book, increase the number of women migrants, the government assume the responsibility of medical services, and that land be granted in lieu of return passages (Henning, 1993: 48). The Commission also recommended the appointment of a Protector of Indian Immigrants who would visit estates at least twice a year, attend to Indian complaints, and publish an Annual Report (Pachai, 1971: 13).

Indenture resumed in 1874 after the Natal Government implemented these recommendations. The 1872 Commission was one of several commissions during this period. Other commissions included the Shire Commission (1862), Wragg Commission (1885-1887), Reynolds Commission (1906), Clayton Commission (1909), and Solomon Commission (1914). While each of these commissions suggested concern on the part of the authorities, the fact that enquiries were held throughout the period of indenture also indicates that the inhumane aspects of the system were perpetuated.

Between November 1860 and July 1911, when the *Umlazi XLIII* brought the last shipload of indentured migrants to Natal, 152,641 Indians, comprising 104,619 men and boys and 48,022 women and girls, arrived in Natal (Beall, 1990: 147). 58 percent of migrants remained in the colony after serving their indentures (Swan, 1984: 241). The list of immigrants includes several hundred castes. Although the Government of India had wanted a 60:40 male : female ratio, the average for the period as a whole was 70:30 (Bhana, 1991: 20). Around 65 per cent of migrants were in the 18-30 age group (Bhana, 1991: 20). The immigrants were primarily from three areas: Madras Presidency, United Provinces of Aghra and Oudh, and Bihar in the Bengal Presidency. Two thirds of indentured migrants departed from Madras and the rest from Calcutta (Bhana, 1991: 4). Natal differs from colonies like Fiji, Trinidad, and Guyana which had more migrants from north than south India.

Although the majority of migrants were middle-to-low caste groups there were some upper-to-middle level castes like Moodley and Chetti (traders), Brahmins (priests and landholders), and Rajput (landowners). In addition to agricultural castes, there were castes like Boyas (hunters), Odda (earth workers), Dosadh (village watchmen), Kumhars (potters), Lohar (blacksmiths), Musahar (rodent carchers) and Teli (oil pressers) (Bhana, 1991: 71-78). It should be borne in mind that functional castes did not necessarily follow traditional jobs as many people had become landless peasants, agricultural workers or village service labourers under colonial rule, while some migrants changed their caste during the journey (Bhana, 1991: 114).

**‘Push’ Factors**

The decision to emigrate was forced on many Indians by demographic and economic dislocation resulting from the wars that shattered the Mughal Empire, and the administrative reorganization of India under the British Empire. There are recorded instances of falsification or slanting of the reality of indenture to attract migrants. Henning (1990: 17) states that some dishonest recruiters resorted to ‘kidnapping, misrepresentation, fraud, deception’ to attain their quota of migrants. For example, Rangasamy, who gave evidence to the 1872 Coolie Commission, stated that he had come to Natal in 1862, and a recruiter, Aperoo Modilia, who lied about conditions in Natal and then boasted: ‘Oh, I said they will get 10 pounds, but they will get nothing but sand’ (Meer YS, 1980: 138). Although there were claims of misrepresentation, it would be fair to suggest that a substantial number of Indians exercised their freedom to sell their labour, and were likely aware of the conditions in the colonies. Patterns of chain migration (family or village) and the many examples of indentured migrants returning to India after completing their indentures, and thereafter re-indenturing to the same or some other colony, is testament to this.

Indians considered the act of crossing the sea, the ‘kala pani’ (dark waters), as defiling and the decision to emigrate was not taken lightly (Clarke, 1986: 9). An 1882 report from India noted that many Indians feared that ‘they will be converted into Christians, both Hindoos and Mohammedans, and the Hindoos will be fed with beef and the Mohammedans with pork, the thread of the Brahmins and the heads of the Hindoos will be taken off and they not be able to keep their caste’ (Emmer, 1986: 195). Despite such concerns, demographic and economic circumstances forced many Indians to emigrate. Many Indians likely saw indenture as a short-term measure to escape their difficulties but for most it became permanent migration.

Migrants from Uttar Pradesh came mainly from the eastern part where there was high population density, a depressed economy, dwindling property rights, and high rentals. Railway extension destroyed riverine trade marts. Faizalabad, Benares, Ghazipur and Janipur were reduced to local trading centres (Lal, 1980: 58). In Bihar, unfavourable competition from British manufactured goods crippled the local hand spinning and weaving industries (Joshi, 1963-4: 30). With 70 per cent of the population dependent on agriculture, the periodic natural disasters resulted in massive internal and external population movement (Bhana, 1991: 40). In Madras Presidency, the 70 per cent who were dependent on agriculture were affected by natural disasters and the system of land tenure. Under the Zemindari system, tax was imposed on the owner of an estate, who paid the government tax and kept the

balance (Bhana, 1991: 37). Moneylenders and wealthy individuals speculated in land. Absentee landlords evicted tenants, and increased rent and demanded rent in cash rather than kind. This led to rural instability as the number of the landless increased (Lal, 1980: 61). The 1882 Famine Commission reported that two-thirds of peasants were in debt (Bhana, 1991: 65).

Natural disasters further impoverished millions of Indians. Between 1850 and 1900, 9 famines and other natural disasters were recorded in the Madras Presidency (Bhana 1991, 38). These calamities, combined with British policies, forced many into cityward migration where they were enticed by recruiting agents (Clarke 1986, 10).

**Indentured Workers in the Colonial Economy**

Indian migrants played significant role in the colonial economy. Sugar was the primary source of agricultural income for the Natal Government. Sugar production involved both unskilled agricultural work as well as skilled industrial work. Unskilled work consisted of cultivating and harvesting sugar cane while skilled work included crushing of the cane, its boiling in the mill and production of sugar. The hierarchy of skill was racially differentiated as Indians and Africans performed the unskilled work, and Whites, imported from Mauritius, did the skilled work (Bhana, 1991: 87). Indians formed the backbone of the labour force on sugar plantations during the colonial period, as shown in Table 1.

Year	Indians	%	Africans	%
1860-61	436			
1875-76	5,292	42	7,457	58
1887-88	6,043	72	2,387	28
1895-96	6,632	77	1,989	23
1907-08	10,924	82	2,484	18

(Source: Brain, 1985: 210)

Around 60 percent of indentured Indians were allocated to the sugar industry (Osborn, 1964: 133). Sugar plantations were located mainly along the fertile coastal belt, which included areas such as Lower Tugela, Inanda, Umlazi, Alexandra and Lower Umzimkulu, but there were a number of estates within Durban itself. These include Springfield, Clare Sugar, Bankhead, Merebank, Cato Manor, Clairwood, Umgeni, Virginia, Effingham,

Northbank and Westhill (Osborn 1964: 259-271). Indians settled in these areas as Durban became urbanised and these areas came to constitute de facto segregated 'Indian' areas long before the era of apartheid (racial segregation).

Indians were involved in non-sugar enterprises as well. The growing of tea requires special skills in planting, cultivation, picking and processing, and employers specifically requested for labourers with experience on the tea estates in Darjeeling and Assam (Bhana, 1991: 88). Tea production increased from 300,000 pounds in 1891 to 3,278,464 pounds in 1908 (Brain, 1985: 213). The Clayton Commission of 1909 reported that the tea industry employed 1,722 Indians; 6,149 were indentured in general farming (non-sugar), and 606 were indentured on wattle plantations (Meer YS, 1980: 637).

The coal mines in Northern Natal was a significant employer of indentured labour. Coal was the second largest source of Natal's foreign income from 1901 and the largest from 1906. The price of coal was low and Natal mines relied on cheap labour to remain competitive with Transvaal mines (Beall and North-Coombes, 1983: 54). According to the 1909 Clayton Commission, 3,239 Indians were employed on the coal mines. Between 1900 and 1910, Indians comprised around 40 percent of the labour force in the coal mines (Meer YS, 1980: 637). Indentured labour was four times cheaper than African labour (Beall and North-Coombes, 1983: 55).

Indentured labour was instrumental in extending Natal's railway network. The Natal Government Railways (NGR) was in fact the largest single employer of indentured labour, being allocated in excess of 8,000 workers. The NGR employed 949 Indians in 1885 comprising 506 indentured and 443 free workers (Wragg Commission, 1885: 100). These figures increased to 1,860 Indians (665 indentured and 1,195 free) in 1890, and 2,028 Indians (1,215 indentured and 813 free) in 1896 (Heydenrych, 1986: 15). Indians did such work as gatekeepers, pointsmen, signalmen, breaksmen and pumpsmen, as well as gangwork as labourers in the traffic department, as plate-layers on the line and as assistants to artisans in the workshops, while a few Indians were employed in the Durban office for messenger work, collecting tickets, copying letters and addressing envelopes. JF Manistry, Superintendent of the Indian and Native Labour Department, NGR, opined that Indian labour could not be replaced for practical and financial reasons. He regarded African labour as 'erratic' and therefore unreliable, while White labour was too expensive. He estimated that if each Indian was replaced by a White person, the wage structure would increase three fold (Wragg Commission, 1885: 101-104).

The Durban Municipality hired large numbers of Indians in its health

and sanitation department. In 1913 the municipality had in its employ 1,602 Indians. The vast majority were unskilled general labourers and did things like street sweeping and grass cutting, while others worked as night soil men, scavengers, and in the street lighting department. They were housed at the Magazine Barracks in Durban, which was especially constructed for them and which allowed the authorities to regulate and control their movement (see Vahed, 2001).

Emigration Agents also recruited Indians with special skills to work in hospitals, hotels, private clubs and dockyards. They were usually recruited in urban areas in India, could speak some English, and commanded a higher salary because of their skills (Bhana, 1991: 91). Indian boatmen were brought from Madras. The African Boating Company and other landing and shipping agents in Durban employed 422 Indians in 1909 (Henning, 1993: 88). F.L. Johnson, proprietor of the Royal and Alexandra hotels and the Prince's Café in Durban, employed 20 indentured Indians in 1885. They were chosen for their skills as house servants, cooks and waiters. Johnson told the Wragg Commission (1885: 131), 'I could not do without them.' An observer recorded that 'the most noticeable feature of Durban is its coolies. They make capital servants - cooks more especially. They cook an excellent curry and give an oriental aspect to life. Indian waiters are found in all the hotels and are preferable to the average run of English stolidities' (By a Lady, 1972: 21).

### Work and Living Conditions

Indentured Indians faced difficult working conditions. A song recorded in Mauritius could apply equally to Natal's indentured workers:

*Having heard the name of the island of Mauritius,  
We arrived here to find gold, to find gold,  
Instead, we got beatings of bamboos,  
which peeled the skin off the back of the labourers  
We became Kolhu's bullocks to extract cane sugar,  
Alas! we left our country to become coolies (Lal 1980-81: 69).*

The contract which governed indentured labour in Natal appeared fair on paper but abused in practice; 'conditions were harsh at best and inhuman at worst' (Tayal, 1978: 520). While conditions obviously varied from planter to planter, as late as 1906, the Reynolds Commission, which investigated conditions on the Reynolds Brothers Estate, Esperanza, on the south coast, found that Indians worked a seven and one-third day as opposed to the

six day week; pregnant women worked until they were seven months pregnant and were not given rations until they returned to work; the sick had to walk several miles to a doctor; rations were less than prescribed and of a poor quality; prostitution and alcohol abuses were rife; housing conditions were appalling; and there was much abuse by sirdars and overseers (Henning, 1993: 87). Desai and Vahed (2010: 101-148) discuss the appalling treatment of the indentured in detail.

For Tinker (1974: 6), social and economic life on estates amounted to 'a new system of slavery.' Some of the brutal conditions on plantations explain why Tinker was moved to this conclusion, as does the fact that he was left-leaning activist who was writing at a time of global activism against the Vietnam War, civil rights in the USA, apartheid against South Africa and dictators in South America. Recent studies, however, (like Lal, 2000; Desai and Vahed, 2010, for example) move away from seeing indenture as simply an extension of slavery and give agency to the indentured both for making the decision to emigrate, and through resistance and accommodation, making new lives for themselves in the colonies.

Overall, there was little organised resistance against employers. Why was this the case? One explanation is that most migrants were politically 'unsophisticated' and those who displayed leadership were usually co-opted as sirdars (Tayal 1978: 546). The odds were stacked against open resistance, for, ranged against the indentured was the power of employers, overseers, and sirdars, and a legal system that was often in the control of those with direct links to settlers (Tayal, 1977: 546). A series of controls conspired to keep a lid on protest. Formal control included draconian laws that viewed contractual offences as criminal acts and sanctioned legal action against Indians for laziness and desertion. Indians could not go more than two miles from the estate without an employer's written permission, even if they wanted to lay a charge against that employer. They were prevented from leaving the estate in one body, could not live off the estate, and were required to refuse any work assigned to them, demand higher wages, or leave the employer. Most protest was consequently individualistic, comprising of acts like absenteeism, desertion, feigning illness, destruction of property and suicide (Swan, 1984: 243). The suicide rate for indentured Indians in 1904 was 469 per million as compared to 89 per million for free Indians (Henning, 1993: 67).

Some of the indentured did engage their employers and overseers in physical confrontation, notwithstanding the often tragic outcomes. The Deputy-Protector reported in September 1884 that during his visit to Ill-ovo he learnt that one of the employees had 'got Mr. Hall down on his back and was about to pound him with a *knobkierrie* but was prevented

by another white man' (Desai and Vahed, 2010: 157). Daljeet, an indentured employee, told the Protector in 1885 that his employer J. Saville of Camperdown had punched and kicked him because he was not satisfied with his work. Daljeet hit Saville three times with a wooden mallet before being overpowered by the white overseer. Saville's son then 'handcuffed my [Daljeet's] hands to the roof in the mealie meal room, tightening it until I stood tip-toe and I was in this position until 2am.' Daljeet was freed by his friends and went handcuffed to the Protector to report the incident. He was punished for raising his hands against Saville, whose abuses were not addressed (Desai and Vahed, 2010: 157)

The most significant open resistance took place in 1913, and that strike is discussed below.

### **Racialisation of the State**

Settlers were divided about the importation of indentured labour. Some settlers felt that the addition of 'oriental vices' would make 'the remedy worse than the disease' and that Indians would reverse the civilising influence of Europeans on Africans (Thomson, 1952: 9). The Durban Superintendent of Police, R.C. Alexander, warned in 1893 that 'Indians are... about as prolific as rabbits, and about as destructive to the welfare of Europeans' (Swanson, 1893: 411). During the 1890s, the council tried to exclude Indians from property rights, suppress Indian festivals, and confine them to a location (Swanson, 1983: 413). Up-country pastoralists and small-scale cultivators, who relied on African labour tenants, opposed indentured labour because the government subsidised one-third of the annual cost of the scheme (Thomson, 1952: 26). From 1874, the subsidy was paid to the Indian Immigration Trust Board, which had been established in that year to control Indian immigration. Opposition to indenture remained strong and one of the first acts after Natal achieved Responsible (self) Government from Britain in 1893 was the withdrawal of the annual subsidy, leaving employers to meet all expenses (Smith, 1950: 6).

The government and settlers considered Indians to be transient workers who would re-indenture at the end their five-year contract, and return to India at the end of ten years when they were entitled to a free passage. However, only small numbers re-indentured while around 60 percent remained in the colony (Bhana, 1991: 20). Indians were a significant new addition to Durban's population as they differed in terms of race, culture, religion, and so on, from that of Africans and Europeans. Indentured labour had adverse consequences for the indigenous African population. According to Fatima Meer, these foreign workers undermined the negotiating power of Africans

and depleted their capital resources because they were compelled to sell livestock to meet tax demands imposed by the settler state. Meer concludes that 'whatever the Africans' perceptions of Indian indentured workers was in 1860, included in it must have been the suspicion, if not the knowledge, that they had been brought in by the white colonist to replace the Africans and to be used against them in ways perhaps not immediately understood' (Meer, 1985: 54).

By the 1890s, Whites 'saw in the Indians 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). They acted against Indians once Natal achieved self-government in 1893. The new government viewed town planning, public health, trade arrangements and other public issues in racial terms (Swanson, 1983: 421). The Natal government wanted to compel Indians to re-indenture or return to India upon completing their contracts, to prevent further Indian immigration, and to subordinate non-indentured Indians so that whites would feel secure against the 'Asiatic Menace'. This was an empire-wide trend and was replicated in places like Australia, New Zealand and Canada. As Lake and Reynolds (2008:4) point out, 'the imagined community of white men was transnational in its reach but nationalist in its outcomes, bolstering regimes of border protection and national sovereignty'. Scientific racism privileged white over black, and settlers sought to establish colonies in which whites were hegemonic and black people tolerated to satisfy certain menial roles in the economy (Veracini, 2010: 46-47).

The Natal government passed several laws to render Indians as second-class citizens. The *Indian Immigration Law* of 1895 stipulated that all non-indentured Indian males over 16 and females over 13 had to pay an annual tax of £3. Act 8 of 1896 stipulated that in the case of non-Europeans, franchise was limited to those from countries with a tradition of parliamentary elections. Indians were denied the vote in Natal because India lacked such a tradition. The *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1897 stipulated that immigrants had to pass a literacy test in a European language on landing in Natal. This law was used to bar entry to non-Europeans (Swanson, 1983: 415-418). The *Dealers Licenses Act* gave town councils the power to deny business licenses for such reasons as 'sanitation', which was subjective and arbitrary, or if the applicant was unable to keep books of account in English. There law was used to confine Indians to particular areas of cities (Bhana and Pachai, 1984: 36). The status of Indians was captured by Gandhi in a letter to the Natal Parliament on 19 December 1894:

The man in the street hates him (Indians), curses him, spits

upon him. The Press cannot find a sufficiently strong word in the English dictionary to damn him with. Here are a few samples: 'The real canker that is eating into the very vitals of the community'; 'these parasites'; 'Wily, wretched, semi-barbarous Asiatics'; 'a thing black and lean and a long way from clean, which they call the accursed Hindoo'; 'he is chock-full of vice, and he lives upon rice.... I heartily cuss the Hindoo'; 'squalid coolies with ruthless tongues and artful ways'. The Press almost unanimously refuses to call the Indian by his proper name. He is 'Ramsamy'; he is 'Mr. Sammy'; he is 'Mr. Coolie'; he is 'the black man' (in Desai and Vahed, 2016: 34).

### Indian Political Resistances

Formal Indian politics in the colonial period was dominated by the trading elites who focused largely on problems that affected them, such as trade restrictions, the vote, and immigration. With the help of Mohandas K. Gandhi, who was brought to Natal by a Muslims trader to assist with a private legal matter, merchants formed the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1894 to resist against racist legislation. The strategy of the NIC was primarily constitutional and comprised petitions to government and sympathetic colonial officials (see Desai and Vahed, 2016). The elitism of the NIC was commented upon by contemporary observers. 'A Sympathiser', for example, wrote that:

It is hopeless to expect the NIC to move in any matter.... Will it ever be more than a name? It can if it would only interest itself in the people whom it presumes to represent, and by allowing all Indians to participate in its deliberations.... I hope the Congress will shake off its lethargy and make itself a power among and for the Indians (*Indian Opinion*, 28 October 1906).

While the majority of working class Indians laboured under the burden of the three-pound tax, Gandhi was mostly preoccupied in the Transvaal from 1906 where he launched a passive resistance campaign against a law requiring Indians to register. The Transvaal movement fizzled out after initial excitement and between 1909 and 1913 comprised mainly of negotiations between Gandhi and the South African government (Swan, 1985: 197-199). The Union of South Africa, which came into being in 1910 when four provinces, Natal, the Cape Colony, Transvaal, and the

Orange Free State, united, made clear that Black people would remain second-class citizens in the new country.

The political void in Natal was filled by an emerging educated class that had attended mission schools. They included lawyers, teachers, civil servants and accountants and numbered around 300 in 1904. The post-1903 economic depression in Natal resulted in higher taxes and fewer civil servants, and this new elite became vocal in demanding change because they were affected by the three-pound tax and also restrictions in inter-provincial migration which prohibited them from moving to other parts of South Africa in search of work (Swan, 1984: 244). In 1908 P.S. Aiyar, a South Indian who had arrived in Natal via Mauritius, and who edited a newspaper titled *African Chronicle*, formed the Natal Indian Patriotic Union (NIPU), which highlighted the terrible impact of the tax on working class Indians. NIPU collapsed within a year due to lack of resources (Swan, 1985: 206). The Colonial Born Indian Association (CBIA) was formed in March 1911 to protest specifically against restrictions on inter-provincial migration (Swan, 1985: 207).

While these political organisations were emerging and folding, indenture ended on 1 July 1911. Lord Harcourt, Secretary of State for the Colonies, informed Lord Gladstone, Governor General of South Africa, of the decision on 4 January 1911. Harcourt stated that the decision was taken because 'the divergence between the standpoint of the colonists and that of the Indians has created an unsatisfactory position and that Indians have no guarantee after expiration of their contract they will be accepted by the Union as permanent citizens' (Desai and Vahed, 2010: 365).

The most spectacular resistance by the indentured occurred in 1913 when Gandhi incorporated the tax amongst the list of grievances of Indians that he had presented to the South African government and mobilized amongst the indentured. The origins of the strike date to a visit to South Africa by the moderate Indian lawyer and politician, G.K.Gokhale, in November 1912. The tax was in the forefront of Indian grievances in Britain, India and South Africa at this time. Gokhale discussed it with the South African government and gave South African Indians the understanding that it would be repealed. When the South Africa government denied having given any such undertaking, Gandhi considered it ethically proper to organize resistance to pursue its repeal.

Gandhi and his supporters initiated a strike by around 4,000 Indian miners at the coal mines in mid-October 1913. The government initially ignored the action in the hope that the strike would fizzle out as it became difficult to feed and maintain this large group. Gandhi tried to force the government's hand by crossing illegally into the Transvaal on 23 Octo-

ber. However, the situation changed when around 15,000 workers in the sugar industry joined the strike at the end of October. The decision of Indian workers to join the strike is an indication of the depth of suffering caused by the tax which forced large numbers to re-indenture as it was the only means to avoid paying it. About 65 percent of indentured Indians were serving their second or subsequent term at the time of the strike (Beall and Northcoombes, 1983: 73). Planters became desperate because the year's crop still had to be cut and it was rumoured that Africans were going to join in the strike. This, together with the violence associated with the strike, police brutality, and the use of mine compounds as prisons led to widespread negative coverage in India and England (Desai and Vahed 2016: 212-227).

The extensive coverage that the strike was receiving in India resulted in the colonial government intervening and facilitating negotiations between the South African government and Gandhi. The findings of the government-appointed Solomon Commission and subsequent communication between Gandhi and the South African government resulted in the Indian Relief Act of 1914 which abolished the tax, facilitated the entry of wives and children of Indians domiciled in South Africa; recognized marriages contracted according to religious rites; and made provision for free passages to India to all Indians who gave up their right to domicile in South Africa. Essentially, Indians remained second-class citizens in South Africa (Desai and Vahed 2016: 241-255).

### Concluding Remarks

This article examined the migration of indentured Indians to Natal in the period between 1860 and 1911, and the immediate and longterm consequences of this movement of labour. Indentured migrants were followed by passenger Indians. While the passengers tried to distinguish themselves from the indentured, and claim rights as British subjects, the settler government promoted segregation based on race, treating Indians, Africans and Europeans as discrete groups. Indians and Africans were considered not only different but also inferior. The privileged class position of Indian traders was neutralised by their having to confront racism, which placed them in the same situation as Indian workers. Middle class Indians responded by formulating strategies of resistance based on race. The formation of a racial organization, the NIC, fostered and kept alive this separate racial political identity. This forged a 'made-in-Natal' Indian identity. When Imam Bawazeer, a Muslim priest and close political associate of Gandhi, was departing for India in 1915, he remarked: 'We are all

Indians in the eyes of the Europeans in this country. We have never drawn distinctions between Mahomedans and Hindus in public matters. Mahomedans, like the Hindus, look upon India as our Motherland, and so is it a matter of fact....' (*Indian Opinion*, 3 December 1915).

Not only were Indians in confrontation with whites, but the situation also placed them in competition with Africans. They were subject to different conditions of reproduction. African labour was freer and, on sugar estates, Africans were used to oversee and whip Indians. The Indian middle class felt that they had to keep their struggle separate from Africans since they used Queen Victoria's 1858 Proclamation as the basis of their demands and when that did not work, got the Indian government to intervene on their behalf. These developments – Indian and African being subject to different policies and access to resources, the de facto segregated residential areas, competition in the workplace, and separate political action – are what Partha Chatterjee terms 'the rule of colonial difference' (in Veracini, 2011: 2; Desai and Vahed 2016: 41) and it would have long-term consequences that linger to the present.

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