

Exceptionally skilful use of biographical sketches

Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *Inside Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914*

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This appropriately titled and beautifully written book explores the lives of 152 266 indentured labourers that came from India to work on the sugar plantations of Natal over the period 1860 to the end of indenture in July 1911. They were part of approximately 1,3-million indentured Indians that went to fourteen British colonies over the period 1838-1916.

The authors state that they drew inspiration from the works of Brij Lal on Fiji and Marina Carter on Mauritius and the British Empire in the writing of this book. They also note that this study differs from invaluable and pioneering works such as that of Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indian emigrants to Natal 1860-1902 A study based on ships lists* (Promilla, 1991). This is because they go beyond the numbers who emigrated, the employers, rules and regulations, and have given a “voice” to the indentured in reconstructing the social history and biographies of individuals. A discerning point throughout this book is that this journey of contestation between the British Raj, the white employers, and the indentured was one of collaboration, resistance and confrontation. They were not only made by history, but also makers of history.

To cite an example, the founder of the M.L. Sultan Technikon, Sultan Pillai Kanna Muluk Mahomed, indentured number 43374, completed his indenture in 1895, renamed himself as M.L. Sultan, went into business and established the M.L. Sultan Charitable and Educational Trust in 1949 to promote cultural, educational, spiritual and economic activities among Indians irrespective of creed, caste or religion. He clearly had a vibrant life of his own!

Countering the argument that studies of this nature have little relevance for present-day South Africa, by digging into the rich and varied lives of the indentured, the text clearly shows how they have influenced the present and future. The authors bring the history of Sam China, of the Sam China Football Cup fame, to life. He was indentured number 1856, abandoned his right to a free return passage to India and opened a business in the diamond fields of Kimberley. His life is covered in the chapter “The many faces of leisure and pleasure: from China to Ganja”, that explores the indentured spending their leisure activities in football, boxing, cricket, drama and song, and the Lawrence sisters embracing classical European music. The authors argue that these leisure activities helped forge “Indianness” and also exposed the emergence and formation of class differences amongst the indentured, with middle-class Indians in 1918 persuading the magistrate of Durban to prohibit the supply of liquor to women in public bars.

The study consists of 21 chapters based on primary sources housed at the KwaZulu-Natal Archives in Pietermaritzburg, Durban and Pretoria, and the Killie Campbell Library. Chapters 2 to 4 examine the migratory chain of these indentured, starting with the first ship – the *Truro* – arriving in Durban in November 1860. Included in the discussion are the agents of recruitment (such as Emigration Agents in Madras and Calcutta), and the reasons for migration (such as the British re-organisation of the Indian economy, compounded by a famine-struck India). Diaries are skilfully used to illustrate that there was little room for caste or custom on the journey, and to capture scenes of life aboard the ships. It is also revealed that, through migration, women broke the bonds of traditional Indian patriarchy and subordination. This is particularly clearly revealed in the case of the “troublesome” Votti V. Somayya, who was held down by no man economically, socially or sexually (pp 18-22). This section of the work also discusses the dispersal of the indentured to various parts of Natal, their allocation to British settlers, and their ill-treatment, leading to the Coolie Commission of 1872 (which made light of these abuses).

The indentured realised that the rule of law was the law of white colonists and was geared to protecting the employers. This is aptly described in Chapter 5, “The

interpreters of indenture". This chapter examines the role of the dispensers of justice from magistrates, interpreters, supreme court judges and protectors – the latter compiling 196 volumes of reports. We read of Aboobaker Amod, the first Indian trader in Natal, telling the Wragg Commission (1885-1887) that the Indian interpreters were not educated and accepted bribes. Dabee Bramdaw (1881-1935) was an interpreter and public servant from 1913-1929. He used his education and position to get involved in community affairs and pursue business interests, whilst successfully confronting the legal system that he served. His community involvement included his being the founding member of the Arya Samaj in South Africa, his involvement in soccer, and his being the first Indian to pass the referees examination. An often cited Protector in this study is J.A. Polkinghorne (1903-1911). Although the effectiveness of these Protectors was frequently compromised by the political alliance of the Governor and the planters, Polkinghorne challenged the power of planters in the case of the investigation of working conditions at the plantation *Esperanza*, covered in Chapter 7. Polkinghorne realised that, although he had massive evidence against the Reynolds brothers Thomas and Lewis, the 1906 Reynolds Commission was loath to take action fearing halting of the supply of labour. He prevailed in 1908 when the government indicated that indentured labourers would not be allowed at *Esperanza* until Charlie Reynolds, who was in charge of indentured labour, was removed.

Caste and family matters amongst the indentured are covered in Chapters 9 to 10. Here, the life of Charlie Nulliah is used as an example of differing identities impacting on the indentured. In his case, these competing identities included caste, class, religion and ethnicity. Nulliah policed the boundaries of Telegu/Tamil identity, sought to build a broader Hindu identity as trustee of the Hindu Temple, attempted to unite Indians under the banner of the NIC, and still found time to have an altercation with the troublesome Votti cited above. Illustrating how different aspects of the same character and social history recur in this book, Nulliah is again focussed on as a successful indenture owner and businessman in Chapter 17 (pp 333-335).

Chapters 11 to 14 explore how religion and its religious leaders (Hindu, Christian and Muslim) gave the indentured a sense of being and comfort, cushioning them from the most terrible aspects of indenture. As they moved into businesses, the indentured played an active role in establishing temples, churches and mosques. Prominent and outstanding religious figures profiled in this section include the Reverend Bernard Sigamoney, with his multiple identities in religion, cricket, trade unions and politics. We read also of the reformist Hindu Professor Bhai Parmanand, who contested Hinduism based on rituals and "superstition", and the Muslim spiritual leaders, such as Badshah Pir and Soofie Saheb, who concentrated on building Islamic institutions.

Chapters 17 to 19 trace the economic strength of Indians – free and passenger – and the action taken against them by whites to curb this. The passenger Indians were mainly Muslims. They paid their own passage and mainly arrived between 1880-1910. The indentured could return to India at their own expense after five years, or remain in the colony for a further five years to claim a free passage home. Until 1891, they could forego this free passage in return for a plot of land. The settlers were reluctant to give this as they feared Indian economic competition and settlement, and valued them only for their labour. Once again, Charlie Nulliah appears as a prominent businessman. We also encounter the Bodasings on the North Coast as landowners,

and Verulam as a hub of farming activity. These landowners are also revealed to have been a great support base for Mahatma Gandhi.

Whites acted against what they saw as the growing threat posed by Indian businesspeople by the passing of legislation restricting the entry of Indians, resulting in 5 500 Indians being refused entry into Natal between 1897 and 1901. Dealers' licences were denied, and the most effective measure was that Indians who did not re-indenture, had to pay an annual £3 tax under the Indian Immigration Law of 1895 (which came into effect in 1901). This was a way of forcing them to return to India. A total of 1 853 migrants returned to India in the five years from 1896 to 1900; 7 720 returned during the five years after the tax came into effect (1901-1905); and 18 913 time-expired Indians returned between 1906 and 1910 (p 339). Whites felt threatened by the numbers game, as in 1901 the Indian population was composed of 47 599 free, 9 000 passenger and 25 366 indentured Indians (p 338). Quoting various sources, the authors argue that this tax ensured a continued labour supply, limited the number of free Indians, and was both a reindenturing and repatriation device (p 395). Indians attempted to escape the oppression of this tax by opting to work on the Benguela Railway in Lobito Bay in Angola in 1907. Meeting harsh conditions in Angola, they returned to Natal in March 1908. The government insisted that they had forfeited their right to remain in Natal and had to return to India. Indenture was terminated from 1 July 1911. After this, employers sent agents (Sirdars) to India to recruit workers, and also looked at alternative forms of labour in Africans.

Desai and Vahed shed new light on the 1913 strike against the imposition of the £3 tax and demonstrate that the strike was not entirely dominated by Gandhi and his non-violent resistance. In doing so, they explain the widespread support for the 1913 strike as a case of rebel consciousness, and make the case that these rebels should be recognised as having their own history. Relying mainly on *The Natal Advertiser*, the authors outline worker rebellion against the tax. This spread to plantations on the southern and northern coasts of Natal during the peak harvesting season of September to December 1913, and mobilised significant protests in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. In Pietermaritzburg, there were divisions along class lines, with the colonial-born favouring striking and the older merchant class opposing it. The authors note that these strikers lacked centralised leadership, and acted on their own accord, drawing from past histories of collective and individual resistance to power and authority. Thus, Desai and Vahed argue, their contributions should not be minimised in exploring the passing of the Indian Relief Act of 1914, that abolished the tax and other discriminatory measures against Indians.

The book has a lovely set of photographs and an extensive bibliography. Hopefully an index will be included in the next edition. Sociologist Ashwin Desai and historian Goolam Vahed are to be commended for putting together this class-based analysis of indenture, which will raise the consciousness of those of the opinion that the "Indian" intelligentsia, men of religion, business people, and worker resistance came from "middle-class" backgrounds in South Africa. Having grounded their work in the social history of the times, and with the biographical sketches that they have reconstructed, they have presented both the specialist and the more general reader with a gem of a book.

Abdul Samed Bemath
Johannesburg