

The “coolie curse”: The evolution of white colonial attitudes towards the Indian question, 1860–1900

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Introduction

*Father, Mother and Me,
Sister and Auntie say,
All the people like us are “We”,
And everyone else is “They”*
Rudyard Kipling, 1926.

Between 1860 and 1911 a total of 152 184 Indian immigrants came to Natal. Of those, 23 percent returned to India by the time indentured immigration ceased in 1911.¹ Indentured Indian immigration was introduced by the colonial government of Natal in response to calls for labour from coastal sugar planters who were frustrated by the fluctuating availability and reliability of African labour. Up until the late 1870s the Indian presence was considered purely in terms of labour, although by that time indentured Indians were being employed in several enterprises besides sugar planting. There were also many contract-expired Indians engaged in private enterprise as well as a growing number of immigrants who had paid their own passage to Natal and set up shops and businesses. In this respect, Veracini’s reference to a “triangular relationship” between whites, Africans (indigenous peoples) and Indians (imported labour), is challenged by the fact that a distinction needs to be made between Indians who were indentured, those who were free (had completed their indentures), and passenger Indians who came on their own

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1. S. Bhana, *Indentured Indians in Natal 1860–1902: A Study Based on Ships’ Lists* (University of Durban-Westville, Durban, 1987), p 21.

accord.²

The transition of the majority African population from a precolonial existence as pastoralist-cultivators to one of marginalised rural dwellers subjected to hut taxes and obliged to sell their labour to white settlers to survive lies, as Bundy has remarked, “at the core of South Africa’s social history”.³ Inherent ethnocentrism⁴ and racial prejudice on the part of white colonists towards other racial groups was an established reality in the various outposts of the British Empire.⁵ In Natal the supremacist attitudes of whites towards the African population, which found expression in the derogatory term “kaffir,” was given statutory profile by Theophilus Shepstone, the architect of the location system which segregated land ownership.⁶ Shepstone was also instrumental in denying Africans a political voice in the affairs of the Colony by means of the passage of Law 11 of 1864, thereby ensuring white racial domination over the indigenous Zulu.⁷ Within that context, it was inevitable that Indian immigrants,

2. L. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism* (Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2010), p 18.
3. C. Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988), p 1. Hut tax was introduced in Natal in 1849 at seven shillings per hut per annum. In 1875 it was doubled to fourteen shillings. C.H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development* (CUP, Cambridge, 2005), p 55.
4. T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1996), p 281.
5. J. Belich, “The Rise of the Angloworld: Settlement in Australasia and North America 1784–1918”, in P.A. Buckner and R.D. Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World*, (University of Calgary Press, Calgary, 2005), pp. 39-57.
6. D. Welsh, *The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Colonial Natal* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1971), p 12; A.A. Costa, “Chieftaincy and Civilisation: African Structures of Government and Colonial Administration in South Africa”, *Journal of African Studies*, 59, 1, 2000, p 18.
7. N. Etherington, “African Economic Experiments in Colonial Natal, 1845–1880”, in B. Guest and J.M. Sellers (eds), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1985), pp 278–279. In a letter in the *Natal Mercury* on 20 July 1875, John Crompton, a member of the Legislative Council when Law 11 (1864) was passed, admitted that its purpose was to deny Africans the vote. See N. Etherington, *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in SE Africa* (Royal Historical Society, London, 1978) p 14.

whether indentured or passengers, would be subjected to similar discriminatory attitudes and measures of racial domination from white settlers, and treated as “exogenous others”, as Veracini has noted.⁸ Indeed, the notion of “settler society,” as Coombes has pointed out, has been the subject of much scrutiny in terms of cross-cultural and intra-national comparison.⁹ In observing that settlers remained staunch in their “sense of identification with the mother country” and maintained “Europe as their myth of origin and as a signifier of superiority”, Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis highlight one of the factors that made it virtually impossible for Indians to be recognised and accepted by whites as co-settlers.¹⁰

Occupational differences amongst white settlers and the existence of three distinct regions within the colony – coastal, midlands and northern – meant that there was no uniform attitude to the Indian presence. The development of a distinctive colonial attitude towards Indian immigrants was neither sudden nor uniform but gathered momentum with the increase in and dispersal of the Indian population throughout Natal. Secondary sources such as Buchanan’s *Natal Memories*; Gordon’s *Dear Louisa*; and Palmer’s *Forty Years in Natal*,¹¹ have nothing to say about the Indian question. Despite the fact that his political career began and ended with issues involving Indians in Natal,¹² John Robinson, editor and owner of the *Natal Mercury* and first prime minister of Natal, devoted only two pages to

8 Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, p 26.

9 A.E. Coombes (ed.), *Rethinking Settler Colonialism: History and Memory in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006), pp 2–3.

10. D. Stasiulis and N. Yuval-Davis (eds), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (Sage, London, 1995), p 20.

11. B.I. Buchanan, *Natal Memories*, (Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1941); R. Gordon, (ed.), *Dear Louisa: History of a Pioneer Family in Natal 1850–1888* (A.A. Balkema, Cape Town, 1970); W. Palmer, *Forty Years in Natal* (P. Davis & Sons, Durban, 1891).

12. On his election to the Legislative Council in 1863, Robinson was appointed to a Select Committee to investigate Indian immigration. When he resigned in 1897, his ministry was preparing discriminatory legislative measures aimed at the Indian community.

matters concerning Indians in his 400 page *Recollections* of the colony.¹³ Hattersley, “the historian of Natal and of British settlement”, as Ken Smith has noted,¹⁴ ignored Indians in all his works except one and then confined himself to a single observation. In *Portrait of a Colony*, Hattersley stated that Indian indentured immigration “brought wealth and prosperity to the coastlands at the cost of immensely complicating the racial and social problems of the colony”.¹⁵ That statement, aside from being prejudiced, is also inaccurate in that it was not only the coastlands that benefited from indentured Indian labour.¹⁶

More than two decades elapsed before white colonists in Natal began to question the consequences of Indian immigration. The 278 percent increase in the size of the Indian population between 1876 and 1886 transformed white opinion. Appreciation of the role Indians played in the economy of the Natal Colony mutated into alarm at the social and political threat which the growing Indian population was seen to pose to white settler security. Abetting that process was the increasing urbanisation of both white settlers and Indians. Almost half the white population resided in either Pietermaritzburg or Durban by the late 1870s,¹⁷ while the Indian population of Durban grew from 665 in 1870 to 3 309 by the end of the 1880s.¹⁸ By the 1890s the “Indian question” had ceased to be a polemical issue amongst whites. Unanimity prevailed on the need to grapple with what was perceived as a “threat” to white settler interests. The attainment of responsible government status in 1893 was partly the result of political campaigning which portrayed the resolution of the Indian

13. J. Robinson, *A life time in South Africa: Being the Recollections of the First Premier of Natal* (Smith, Elder & Co. London, 1900), pp 75–77.

14. K. Smith, *The Changing Past* (Southern, Johannesburg, 1988), p 126.

15. A. Hattersley, *Portrait of a Colony* (University Press, Cambridge, 1940), p 67.

16. By 1881 there were 71 different employers of indentured Indian labour in the Pietermaritzburg area alone. See *Government Notice*, No. 422, 1881. After 1880, calls for Indian labour emanated from Natal’s northern counties.

17. Natal Archives Depot, Pietermaritzburg (hereafter NAD), CSO 646, 2149, 18 June 1878, Lieut-Governor Henry Bulwer – Colonial Secretary, C.B.H. Mitchell, p 3.

18. Durban Mayor’s Minute, *Natal Mercury*, 11 August 1893.

question as an outcome of that political milestone. But from another perspective, the responsible government dispensation secured and safeguarded what Partha Chatterjee has termed “the alienness of the ruling group”.¹⁹

Although limited to the 1860–1872 period, Thompson’s pioneering thesis (1938) on indentured immigration provided a platform for future researchers.²⁰ Subsequent works which focused on Indians in South Africa include those by Palmer (1957), Choonoo (1967), Pachai (1971), Huttenback (1971 and 1976), Ginwala (1974), Arkin (1981), Brain (1983), Swan (1985), Bhana (1990, 1991, 1997), Bhoola (1996), Essop-Sheik (2005), and Desai and Vahed (2010), amongst others. While these works explore various aspects of the Indian experience in Natal, none of them is directly concerned with the evolution of settler attitudes towards Indians in Natal.²¹

Towards an indentured labour dispensation

Cries for labour and capital dominated the fledgling white community during the 1850s. With sugar emerging as the crop most likely to form the cornerstone of Natal’s prosperity, the need for a reliable labour force preoccupied the minds of many pioneer sugar planters from the outset. As early as 1852, a few coastal planters petitioned the colonial administration to introduce indentured Indian labour.²² Despite a large indigenous population in excess of 100 000, the Native Affairs Commission of 1852–53 found that an abundance of land located within the African reserves meant that the needs of a subsistence economy did not require Africans to seek regular

19. P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993), p 18.

20. L.M. Thompson, “Indian Immigration into Natal 1860–1872”, MA dissertation, University of South Africa, 1938.

21. D.L. Du Bois, “Sir John Robinson, the *Mercury* and the Indian Question in Natal 1860–1897”, MA dissertation, University of Natal, 1990, tracks the evolution of the attitude of a leading colonist, editor and first prime minister to the presence and role of Indians.

22. R.F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest: The Founding of the South African Sugar Industry 1848–1926* (Brown, Davis & Platt, Durban, 1964), p 204.

employment from colonial farmers. As Shepstone put it, “it was not reasonable to expect that a nation of warriors and hunters should at once become steady labourers”.²³ Thus, indentured labour came to be seen as the panacea for the labour problem. But there was never unanimity amongst the fewer than 50 coastal planters on this, and at best indentured labour was viewed as a last resort.

Yet it was an idea which gained traction thanks largely to two individuals – James Renault Saunders, a Victoria County planter who hailed from Mauritius, and George Robinson, editor of the *Natal Mercury*. Saunders’ experience of indentured labour in Mauritius distinguished him from other sugar pioneers. In Robinson he found an eager ally. From 1855 the *Mercury* actively promoted the need for Natal to embrace a dispensation of indentured Indian labour. When Sir George Grey, British High Commissioner in Southern Africa, visited the District of Natal, as it then was, in 1855, the proponents of indentured labour implored him to lobby on their behalf for the introduction of such labour. In expressing himself in favour of such a dispensation, Grey nonetheless warned that “numbers of coolie families would remain as settlers after their terms expired”.²⁴ His reference to the longer term social consequences of labourers becoming settlers went unremarked in the colonial press. The thinking on the subject, as Governor John Scott expressed it, was that the example of diligent application by indentured Indians might gradually persuade Africans to enter the service of white farmers on a more regular basis.²⁵ Writing to the Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Lytton, in 1859, Scott referred to the indentured immigration scheme as “an experiment” which he envisaged as being on a small scale.²⁶ As Mabel Palmer has pointed out:

... only the smallest fraction of the population in Natal seems to have realised that continuous immigration was certain to lead to the establishment of a permanent Indian community ... So greedy for cheap labour were the planters that the Government and the

23. *Natal Witness*, 23 March 1855.

24. *Natal Mercury*, 9 November 1855.

25. NAD, CO 179/46, Despatch 71, 6 August 1857.

26. NAD, GH 1212, Despatch 51, 28 June 1859.

*Press were blind to the inevitable results of the immigration policy.*²⁷

By 1859, the need for reliable labour had reached a critical level. An editorial in the *Mercury* indicated: “We want coolie labour; it is essential to the successful progress of our colonial enterprise.”²⁸ Three Bills on indentured labour were introduced into the Natal Legislative Council on 31 May 1859 and were promulgated as Laws 13, 14 and 15 within three weeks. Only Law 14, which stated that Indian labourers would be introduced “at the public expense”, provoked a modicum of debate outside the council chamber. The *Natal Star* asserted that the introduction of Indian labour was “to propitiate the sugar-growing interest”,²⁹ but the *Mercury* claimed that the success of coastal enterprise would be for “the general good of all”.³⁰

Essential to progress

The first indentured Indians arrived in November 1860. The description of the women and children amongst them as being “dead stock” because planters wanted strong men to tackle the dense coastal bush,³¹ aptly summed up the colonial view of the immigrants. They were seen purely as units of labour. To his credit, John Robinson, who had succeeded his father as editor of the *Mercury*, did try to adduce the view that a “trusteeship” should be exercised by employers towards their contracted labourers. He felt that there should be a balance between the economic benefit derived from indentured labour and social responsibility for their welfare. He also sounded a warning: “Coolie enterprise is, to a certain extent, a revolution in the structure of colonial society.”³² However, Robinson’s concerns were ignored and lost in the economic surge that saw the sugar enterprise accelerate in growth with the number of mills in production doubling from 27 in

27. M. Palmer, *The History of Indians in Natal* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957), p 26.

28. *Natal Mercury*, 5 May 1859.

29. *Natal Star*, 3 March 1860.

30. *Natal Mercury*, 28 July 1859.

31. *Natal Mercury*, 6 December 1860.

32. *Natal Mercury*, 21 March 1861.

1860 to 56 by 1863. In 1864, sugar exports reached a record £94 372, up from £19 415 in 1861.³³ The only debate around Indian labour was its cost – some £19 to £21 per labourer – a price planters termed “oppressive and excessive”. (In comparison, the cost to planters in British Guiana was only £15 per head).³⁴ Some relief for employers came in the form of Law 20 of 1863 which institutionalised the principle of state aid for indentured immigration. Planters would make five annual payments of £2 and 10 shillings per labourer to the government. The difference in the cost of importation, some £4, would come from the taxpayer.³⁵

In 1863 the first signs of the social revolution of which Robinson had warned, appeared briefly. A very small number of the first batch of indentured Indians succeeded in gaining early release from their five year contracts by making a £5 commutation payment to their employers as was permitted under Law 14 of 1859. Where they should live as free settlers and how they should occupy themselves was the subject of fleeting public debate in the *Mercury*. Robinson suggested residential segregation in the vicinity of the present day Greyville racecourse from where he rather presciently suggested the Indians could supply white colonists “with vegetables and dairy stuff ... at far cheaper rates than we now enjoy”.³⁶ James Saunders, a fellow member of the Natal Legislative Council, deplored the idea of “helping coolies to acquire land” and argued that they should be kept economically dependent on white colonists by having to offer their services to small farmers around Durban.³⁷ Other critics cringed at the prospect of what they termed an “Indian location” which would become a “sink of all sorts of abomination”.³⁸ The idea of the Indian as a settler was taboo from the beginning.

Humanitarian concerns for indentured Indians were simply not part of the colonial mindset. Efforts by the Coolie Immigration Agent,

33. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest*, p 66–68.

34. *Natal Mercury*, 31 October 1861; and 20 February 1863.

35. *Natal Parliamentary Papers*, 241, Select Committee Report, No. 15, 1863.

36. *Natal Mercury*, 27 November 1863.

37. *Natal Mercury*, 15 December 1863.

38. *Natal Mercury*, 26 February 1864.

Henriques Shepstone, to seek redress for repressive treatment being meted out to Indian labourers on some estates, proved futile. As Leonard Thompson has pointed out, no matter how diligent the agent was in the conduct of his duties, he was impotent in the face of the indifference of the magistrates “who dared not flout the interests of the prosperous sugar planters, the social lions of their districts”.³⁹ The value of Indian labourers was gauged merely in terms of material gain. “Coolie immigration is deemed more essential to our prosperity than ever”, stated a *Mercury* editorial in 1865.⁴⁰ The economic downturn which followed the end of the American Civil War reversed that opinion. Plunging world sugar prices threatened bankruptcy. Indentured labour suddenly became a liability and many employers asked to be relieved of their contracts. No fresh imports of labour were made after 1866 until July 1874. Although hardship, hunger, crime and violence afflicted many of the more than 5 000 Indians who were then residing in Natal,⁴¹ white colonial interest in the welfare of Indians was minimal as the decade of the 1860s ran its course.

By 1870, only a small number of Indians were still under indentured contract. Most Indians in the colony were working independently as hawkers, fishermen, tailors, laundrymen, cooks, artisans, tradesman, mechanics and market gardeners.⁴² Moreover, they were no longer confined to the coastal areas but were dispersing across the colony. The white view that Indians would remain a source of cheap, settled labour after the expiry of their contracts was quickly shown to have been naïve. The initial response of colonists, however, was not in recognition of the contribution of Indian settlers to the economy but rather one of disdain at their presence. A *Mercury* editorial of 14 March 1871 reflected this aptly:

We have little nests of coolies scattered about everywhere, without surveillance, without regulation, without oversight of any kind. In town, cottages are being rented and occupied by coolie families to the frequent inconvenience and annoyance of neighbours. Neither as

39. Thompson, “Indian Immigration”, pp 100–101.

40. *Natal Mercury*, 19 January 1865.

41. *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1868, p R2–4.

42. Thompson, “Indian Immigration”, pp 111–112.

regards cleanliness nor morality are these places defensible.

The Durban Town Council toyed with the idea of setting up a separate area for Indians but no such development took place.

From early on in the evolution of the Indian question, as it came to be known, the *Mercury* attempted to distinguish between classes of Indians and to advocate greater tolerance towards those “more enlightened and intelligent individuals from whose more refined habits and conformable disposition no danger need be feared”.⁴³ But such thinking did not find broad acceptance amongst whites. Instead, as the economy recovered from its setback, the focus on Indians was purely on their worth as labourers in the sugar fields. Arguments in the Legislative Council revolved around the cost of importing indentured labour and who should bear it.⁴⁴ J.R. Saunders, one of the Victoria County representatives, was quite sanguine in his views: “Each shipload of coolies brings with it, indirectly, importation of capital and capitalists,” he stated.⁴⁵ The thinking of the Coolie Commission set up in 1872 is particularly reflective of the terms in which Indians were regarded. Despite reports of maltreatment and abuse by the 228 Indians who returned home aboard the *Red Riding Hood* in 1871, and the “severe rebuke” Natal received from the British authorities as a result,⁴⁶ the commission sanctioned the renewal of the indentured system subject to a few changes: flogging was abolished; medical services were to be improved; and a Protector of Indian Immigrants would replace the Coolie Immigration Agent whose title Indians found offensive.⁴⁷ However, as Desai and Vahed point out, the “Protector was an important cog in the indentured enterprise, less to ‘protect’ the indentured than to project the ‘impartiality’ of the state”.⁴⁸

43. *Natal Mercury*, 14 March 1871.

44. *Natal Mercury*, 19 and 21 October 1871.

45. Letter to the Editor, *Natal Mercury*, 17 August 1871.

46. *Natal Mercury*, 17 September 1872.

47. Coolie Commission Report, *Natal Government Gazette*, XXIV, 1373, 17 September 1872, p 307.

48. A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2010), p 95.

“Coolie-ism”

The re-introduction of indentured labour in July 1874 was to prove a watershed in the evolution of the Indian question. The almost tripling of the Indian population between 1876 and 1886 triggered a sense of alarm amongst settlers.⁴⁹ In terms of a dictum laid down in March 1875, the rights and privileges accorded to “any other class of Her Majesty’s subjects resident in the colonies” were to be granted to indentured labourers who had completed their contracts.⁵⁰ The numbers of free Indians was augmented by the arrival of what were termed “passenger” Indian immigrants. These were non-indentured Indians who paid their own passage to Natal. In terms of imperial norms, all subjects were free to travel anywhere within the British Empire.⁵¹ “Passenger” Indians were also called “Arabs” by whites because of their religion (Islam) and Middle Eastern dress. Most were from Gujerat on India’s west coast. As early as 1875, one such “Arab,” Aboobaker Amod, advertised his business, which was located in West Street, Durban, in the *Natal Almanac & Yearly Register*. Durban valuation rolls for 1879–1880 showed that his extensive property portfolio had 26 tenants.⁵² It was the threat that this class of Indians posed to small white colonial traders that in time, constituted the core of anti-Indian hostility.

By the second half of the 1870s, white attitudes towards Indians generally were still largely positive.⁵³ Calls from upcountry and midlands farmers for indentured labour were growing. In the Pietermaritzburg

49. According to the *Blue Books for the Colony of Natal*, 1876 and 1886, the Indian population increased from 10 626 to 29 589, while the white population grew from 21 045 to 37 437.

50. Secretary of State to the Governor General of India, 24 March 1875, cited in Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1877, p 5.

51. At that time, however, the British territories of Basutoland and Zululand excluded Indians.

52. S. Bhana, “Indian Trade and Trader”, in Guest and Sellers (eds), *Enterprise and Exploitation*, p 240.

53. NAD, CSO 686, No. 846, 7 February 1879. The request by Indian merchants to be formed into a Reserve Corps for the Town Guard was well-received by Major Huskisson, the military commander of Durban.

area alone there were 71 different employers of Indian labour by 1881.⁵⁴ The *Mercury* termed the spread of Indian labour “a colonial movement” which was uniting midland and coastal planters.⁵⁵ The enterprise of free Indians had also become an indispensable part of colonial life. Without Indian cultivation, “maize would be at a famine price and vegetables would be strangers to our table”, noted the Inanda Planters’ report of March 1878, adding that some Indians were employing African labour “to a considerable extent”.⁵⁶ Likewise, Indians held a virtual monopoly on the supply of fresh fish in Durban.⁵⁷ When the Durban daily market opened in 1876 the *Mercury* hailed the occasion as the beginning of a “new commercial epoch” which would see Indians as “the principal vendors”.⁵⁸

As Sir Garnet Wolseley, Natal’s administrator in 1875, remarked, “without them the commerce of Natal would languish and its revenue would be seriously reduced”.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, in tracing the evolution of white colonial Natal’s Indian question in the late 1870s, we find evidence of the first real signs of discord and disapprobation. The term “coolie-ism” was used to express disapproval of the inroads Indians were making into the hitherto exclusively white settler preserve of commerce. “The coolie trades people are getting too big for their shoes”, stated a report in the *Mercury*.⁶⁰ Alcohol abuse, complaints of “vice, uncleanness and disorder”⁶¹ and the outcry from white storekeepers who found themselves unable to compete with Indian traders, began to constitute a focal point of confrontation. On 24 July 1884 the Natal Legislative Council unanimously endorsed a motion to appoint a commission of enquiry (the Wragg Commission as it came to be known) to report

54. *Government Notice* No. 422, 1881.

55. *Natal Mercury*, 30 August 1879; and 30 January 1880.

56. *Natal Mercury*, 4 March 1878.

57. Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1877, p 6.

58. *Natal Mercury*, 8 January 1876.

59. R.A. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa: British Imperialism and the Indian Question 1860–1914* (Cornell University Press, London, 1971), p 33.

60. *Natal Mercury*, 12 May 1877.

61. *Natal Mercury*, 4 March 1878.

on Indian immigration laws and regulations with a view to devising means of bringing the Indian population under more effective control. Almost 25 years after the arrival of the first Indians the small, usually far from cohesive white community mustered sufficient unanimity in the political sphere to confront the consequences of a labour dispensation which it embarked upon as “an experiment”, as Governor Scott put it in 1859.

Having thwarted an invasion of the Natal Colony by Zulus, colonial society felt besieged by Indian immigrants in their midst. Besides the boatloads of “passenger” Indians disembarking in Durban, every year several thousand indentured labourers concluded their five year contracts and settled in the colony. In 1883, for example, not a single Indian out of the 4 548 who completed their five year contacts was re-indentured for a second term.⁶² In time, the rapid growth in numbers of free Indians throughout Natal fuelled opposition which evolved into abhorrence amongst some sections of white society.⁶³ There was really only one reason why Indians elected not to re-indenture or to return to India and it was economic. They found that they could earn more money as entrepreneurs or by hiring their labour to the Durban Corporation, the Harbour Board, the railways and later the coal mines of Northern Natal. As a sparsely populated, developing colony, Natal offered boundless opportunities. The perverse reality was that the more Indians availed themselves of these opportunities, the more it provoked resentment among whites.

The Indian question, or the “coolie curse” as it was then called, manifested itself in many ways as far as white settlers were concerned: dangers of social integration; cultural differences; crime; commercial competition; noise; political concerns; squalor; pollution of streams; exploitation of fish stocks; vagrancy; property ownership; and the

62. Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1883, *Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, p FF47.

63. In 1885 there were 2 000 free Indians in occupation of land within four kilometres of Durban. An additional 3 327 resided in Durban County, 11 881 in Victoria County and 2 584 in Alexandra County. See Wragg Commission Report, in Y.S. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour in Natal 1851–1917* (Institute of Black Research, Durban, 1980), pp 313, 315.

itinerant traders known as *dukawallahs*. Lumped together this all amounted to the fact that Indians were not welcome as settlers. As if something which had been pent-up was suddenly released, from the beginning of the 1880s, letters to the press, reports and editorials critical of Indians became markedly prominent. “That it will become more and more a burning question here cannot be doubted. No controversies are so embittered as those which deal with race dominancy”, stated a *Mercury* editorial.⁶⁴

The process of racialising the presence of Indians must be viewed within the larger imperial context of colonial attitudes towards people of colour. Works such as Robert Knox’s *The Races of Men* published in 1850, postulated that “race is everything” and that human character, both national and individual, “is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs”.⁶⁵ Charles Dilke in *Greater Britain* (1868) was quite prescriptive in his views on race: “Nature seems to intend the English race of officers to direct and guide the cheap labour of the Eastern races.”⁶⁶ Notions that Europeans were ingenious, inventive and governed by law while Africans were crafty, lazy, careless and subject to the arbitrary will of their tribal leaders,⁶⁷ permeated colonial thinking. As an editorial in the *Mercury* in 1870 put it:

*The proper destiny of the Anglo-Saxon in South Africa is to be the guardian, the guide, the controller of the coloured people around him. He is to impart to them his civilisation without raising them to his level.*⁶⁸

Adding to that context, Antoinette Burton has noted:

*... it is a testament to the power of a common racial heritage that ... the domestic underclasses and white ethnic minorities who were prominent in the colonial enterprise could and did become the imperial “overclasses” by virtue of their essential Britishness.*⁶⁹

64. *Natal Mercury*, 9 January 1883.

65. S. Dubow, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), p 27.

66. Quoted in the *Natal Mercury*, 17 February 1870.

67. Dubow, *Illicit Union*, p 26.

68. *Natal Mercury*, 17 February 1870.

69. A. Burton, *Empire in Question* (Duke University Press, Durham, 2011), p 28.

As the era of the mineral revolution (diamonds and later gold) evolved from 1870, South Africa increasingly commanded attention as a region for expanded British settlement and influence. The attempt at confederation and the conquest of the Zulu kingdom attest to that.⁷⁰ Earlier notions of trusteeship and paternalism⁷¹ gave way to the embrace of white supremacy which found aggressive expression in Sir Bartle Frere, who was appointed British High Commissioner in March 1877. In his view, Cetshwayo, the Zulu king, was attempting to reconstruct the “brutalizing system of Chaka” and thus posed a serious threat to British supremacy in the region.⁷²

Much of the municipal history of the late nineteenth century concerns the efforts of white colonial society to impose its will and standards on the emerging class of settlers whose presence it resented. Sanitation and town planning bylaws served as the means to discriminate against Indians and to segregate them from whites. Across the colony, whether in Umzinto or Tongaat, Durban or Pietermaritzburg, Marburg or Weenen, the same complaints emanated either about the “insanitary habits” of Indians and the condition of their dwellings, or the commercial competition of Indian storekeepers and the *dukabwallahs*. However, there were prominent colonists like future prime minister, Harry Escombe, who initially defended the competition that Indian traders provided. Speaking in the Legislative Council in 1884, he contended that Indian competition was beneficial because it lowered the price of goods. Furthermore, by turning previously unproductive pieces of land into profitable areas, Indians had become “a useful and exemplary section of the community”.⁷³ Less affluent white settlers seemed to have no quibbles with Escombe’s view; they were loyal customers of Indian

70. S. Dubow, “How British was the British World? The case of South Africa”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37, 1, March 2009, p 5.
71. S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906–1908 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1970), p 5; J Lambert, *Betrayed Trust: Africans and the State in Colonial Natal* (University of Natal Press, Scottsville, 1995), pp 12–13.
72. J. Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1994), p 48.
73. *Debates of the Legislative Council of the Colony of Natal*, VII, 1884, pp 328–329.

traders. In 1885, 22 white families in Durban were actually tenants of Indian landlords.⁷⁴

In 1882 the *Times of Natal* expressed alarm at the proliferation of Indian shops around the colony and called on the Legislative Council “to improve the laws so as to prevent the increase of coolie occupation of the soil and industrial competition against the white population”.⁷⁵ By 1885 the scale and depth of resentment towards Indians as a group was well-illustrated by the demands listed in a petition presented to the Legislative Council by the Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Commerce. The petition demanded an end to public funding of indentured labour; the repatriation of unemployed and contract-expired Indians; the levying of special taxes on free Indians and their dwellings; residential segregation; and banning Indians from trading in liquor.⁷⁶ Growing white resentment resulted in a blurring of focus on who among the Asiatics was the most threatening. The Wragg Commission noted in 1887 that “Arab” traders who knew the ways and habits of Indians and selected their stock accordingly, were not only driving small white storekeepers out of business but were doing the same to ex-indentured Indians. The business acumen of “Arab” traders is well-illustrated by changing ownership of shops licences in Durban. In 1885, 40 of the 66 (Indian) business licences were “Arab”-owned.⁷⁷ A similar trend manifested itself in the Durban property market: by 1884 four “Arabs” owned 40 properties valued at £16 000, whereas 78 ex-indentured Indians owned 96 properties valued at just £17 605.⁷⁸

By the mid-1880s, Natal’s Indian dilemma had become something of a paradox: white resentment at the Indian presence was reaching new levels of intensity at the same time that the need for Indian labour was reaching new levels of necessity. Remarks from a correspondent who signed him or herself as “True Natalian” reflected the bind that

74. *Natal Mercury*, 8 April 1885.

75. *Times of Natal*, 13 April 1882.

76. *Natal Mercury*, 15 July 1885.

77. Wragg Commission Report in Meer, *Documents*, p 363.

78. M. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985), p 4.

many white colonists felt. A letter published in the *Mercury* questioned why Natal had fought the war of 1879 if, as a colony, instead of being invaded by Zulus it was being taken over by Asiatics.⁷⁹

Wragg and the Working Men’s Association

Three years elapsed between the passage of the motion endorsing a commission of enquiry into the Indian question and the publication of the commission’s report. As a subject, the Indian question took something of a back seat during this time (1884–1887). A severe economic downturn, an unpopular governor (Havelock), and the annexation of Zululand tended to push it aside as a polemical issue. However, the snap election called by Governor Havelock did produce a new anti-Indian element in the legislature in the form of Cecil Yonge who hailed from Pietermaritzburg. He made it clear that he regarded his election as a mandate to tackle “the Coolie Question”.⁸⁰ Yonge at once introduced a Bill in the Legislative Council which proposed rescinding the annual £10 000 payment towards indentured labour from the public purse and the repatriation of Indians upon the completion of their contracts. But at its second reading Yonge withdrew it. With the Wragg Commission’s Report still being awaited, it was considered inappropriate to pursue his proposed legislation. Nonetheless, the *Mercury* endorsed Yonge’s intentions:

*It is not difficult to foresee that the coolie ‘colonist’ is doomed ... The real objective of which Mr Yonge and others have at heart is to save the country from occupation by Asiatic settlers.... There can be little doubt as to the popular verdict.*⁸¹

The release of the Wragg Commission’s Report in September 1887 proved a disappointment. As the *Mercury* opined, much of it was “ancient history” in that it regurgitated the obvious.⁸² It did, however, recommend that the use of public revenue for indentured immigration should cease. That, however, hardly addressed the issue of the ongoing arrival of “passenger” immigrants and “Arabs.” Thus, as an exercise,

79. *Natal Mercury*, 6 December 1882.

80. *Natal Witness*, 23 August 1886.

81. *Natal Mercury*, 26 November 1886.

82. *Natal Mercury*, 27 September 1887.

all that the Wragg Commission achieved was to crystallise the nature and extent of the Indian question. Its recommendations were ignored by the colonial executive. That, in turn, enabled John Robinson to assert that until Natal had a responsible government dispensation it would not be able to deal decisively with the Indian question. The reality, however, was that Indian immigration could not be limited only to labour. Imperial policy did not permit discrimination amongst immigrants. Labourers were free to become settlers. But that was not a view generally espoused by white settlers. In the words of the *Natal Advertiser*, the “coolie should have an existence in Natal as a labourer and not as a colonist”.⁸³

The *Advertiser* had posed the following question in 1883: “Has it ever seriously entered the minds of the inhabitants of Natal that they are being egged out, ousted, browbeaten and defeated in the labour and trading market by the dark-skinned immigrants from India’s coral strands?”⁸⁴ Although the *Advertiser* exaggerated the scope of its claim, Robinson did acknowledge in his *Recollections* that the “poorer classes of settler” were “elbowed out of the minor walks of trade and agriculture – shopkeeping, market-gardening, hawking, rough labour of all kinds”. Nonetheless, he asserted that “the skilled artisan, the cultivator and the stock-breeder, the clerk and the shopman, with other superior classes of employee,” seemed “likely” to sustain “steadfast opposition” to the “Asiatic invasion”.⁸⁵

It was in response to this perceived threat that the Working Men’s Association, later known as the Labour League, was formed during the latter half of the 1880s. It constituted the first organised white opposition to the Indian question. But, as Maynard Swanson has argued, its formation tended to reflect a “panicked state of mind which dwelt on the substance of things feared and the vision of things unseen”. In particular, he cited the inability of colonists to effect decisive legal

83. *Natal Advertiser*, 7 October 1887.

84. *Natal Advertiser*, 1 December 1883.

85. Robinson, *A Life Time in South Africa*, p 76.

changes as leading to agitated outbursts against the Indian presence.⁸⁶ But the formation of the Working Men’s Association exposed the lack of cohesion among whites on the Indian question. Large white wholesale businesses like Randles Brothers & Hudson enjoyed close commercial ties with “Arab” businessmen,⁸⁷ whilst according to Escombe, poorer white settlers welcomed the commercial competition in goods and services which Indians provided.⁸⁸ This situation raises questions about Shula Marks’ observation that white colonial society was of a “tightly knit nature” and marked by a “high degree of uniformity and conformity of opinion on most issues”.⁸⁹

The Working Men’s Association made its mark in the media by what the *Mercury* called its “violent denunciations” of the Indian community.⁹⁰ In contesting a by-election in Durban Borough in 1888, the Working Men challenged the political establishment to scrap the annual government subsidy of £10 000 on the importation of indentured labour. Compelled to respond, Henry Binns, chairman of the Indian Immigration Trust Board and himself a sugar planter, conceded that the subsidy could be removed because duties paid on rice and other commodities would compensate for it.⁹¹ The by-election succeeded in fanning the Indian question into a “burning issue,” as the *Mercury* put it, with a distinct rift emerging between the sugar planters and small white business interests and workers.⁹² The result of the election was a narrow victory for the Working Men’s candidate, J.F. King. With their impetus renewed, the association extended its interests to the collieries in Northern Natal out of

86. M.W. Swanson, “‘The Asiatic Menace’: Creating Segregation in Durban 1870–1900”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 16, 3, 1983, p 420.

87. V. Padaychee and R. Morrell, “Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy 1875–1914”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 1, March 1991, p 27.

88. *Debates of the Legislative Council of the Colony of Natal*, VII, 1884, pp 328–329.

89. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, p 10.

90. *Natal Mercury*, 4 May 1888.

91. *Natal Mercury*, 19 May 1888.

92. *Natal Mercury*, 22 May 1888.

concern for the loss of white jobs to Indians.⁹³

A major conference of the colony’s tea, sugar and coffee planters and the Durban Chamber of Commerce was held on 13 July 1888. Its unanimous resolve in favour of the continuation of indentured labour served to underline the dilemma Natal faced.⁹⁴ In political terms it showed that two camps had arisen amongst colonists: racial hardliners who saw continued Indian immigration as inimical to the idea of a white Natal, and pragmatists whose economic and business interests required the ongoing importation of indentured labour (calls for indentured labour from all parts of the colony at the time remained high). Yet both camps opposed the idea of settler status for Indians. Four years after calling for a commission of enquiry into the Indian question, no progress had been made in dealing with it. As Cecil Yonge complained, the attitude of the Natal government seemed to have become one of “let slide and trust to Providence”.⁹⁵ It was a vexed situation in which colonists had become hostages of their own making.

Their reactions were characterised by bouts of insecurity and paranoia triggered by any news which intensified negative perceptions of the Indian question. The arrival of the Indian-owned ship, the *Taif*, in December 1889 with 374 non-indentured “Arabs” on board, produced howls of outrage.⁹⁶ News about the “careless sanitation habits” of Indians; the spread of venereal disease among them; the fact that by 1889 they held 124 business licences in Durban – double the number held in 1885 – and the proliferation of Indian-owned shanty houses, all served to alarm and to harden the colonial mindset

93. The concerns of the Working Men were largely misplaced on the employment of whites on the collieries. They were not competing as labourers but were employed exclusively in skilled and supervisory capacities. By 1906 there were only 185 Indians who could be classified as skilled. See R. Edgcombe and B. Guest, “An Introduction to the Pre-union Natal Coal Industry”, in Guest and Sellers, (eds) *Enterprise and Exploitation*, p 339.

94. NAD, CSO 1192, E.L. Acutt, with enclosure, 16 July 1888, Natal Coast Planters’ Conference.

95. *Natal Mercury*, 26 November 1889.

96. *Natal Mercury*, 9 December 1889.

towards Indians.⁹⁷ Fuelling this mindset was the ongoing arrival of boatloads of Indian immigrants: 3 369 in 1889; and 4 408 in 1890.⁹⁸

Unable to arrest the tide of Indian immigration white public representatives devised greater legal restrictions on Indian settlers. This direction bears a similarity to the experience of Africans at that time. The installation of the codified Native Law in 1891 amounted to what Norman Etherington has termed “regimented despotism”.⁹⁹ Law 21 of 1888 required all non-indentured Indians in Durban and Pietermaritzburg to register on the basis that they belonged to an “uncivilised race”.¹⁰⁰ Ostensibly, the aim of the law was to place free Indians in the same category as Africans in an attempt to control crime. But its real purpose was to discriminate against Indians as settlers and to deny them the same rights to which whites were entitled as British subjects. Law 20 of 1890 prohibited the sale, barter or supply of liquor to Indians. Consumption of liquor by Indians was restricted to licensed premises only. This was further tightened in 1896 when consumption had to be in glasses only and not in bottles.¹⁰¹ Even the environment seemed to be under attack by the “coolie curse”. The *Mercury* complained of “the wholesale destruction” of young fish by Indian fishermen, citing the Umgeni lagoon, and claimed the “ruthless Indian is fast sweeping its waters clean”.¹⁰²

A watershed

The year 1890 was a watershed as far as agitation on the Indian Question was concerned. It was an election year which saw exhaustive discussion of the Indian question within the context of Natal seeking a responsible government dispensation which would allow

97. W.P.M. Henderson, *Durban: Fifty Years' Municipal History* (Robinson, Durban, 1904), p 139. The *Natal Advertiser* claimed in an editorial on 8 October 1890 that “Sammy is rooted and grounded in the faith of filth”.

98. Reports of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1889 and 1890/1891, *Supplements to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, pp A30, A2.

99. Etherington, “African Economic Experiments”, p 279.

100. *Natal Government Gazette*, XL, 2326, 30 October 1888.

101. Section 36 of Act 38 of 1896.

102. *Natal Mercury*, 10 June 1890.

it to enjoy a degree of autonomy over its own affairs (the Cape had gained responsible government in 1872). Led by John Robinson, the pro-responsible, known as the Forward Party, argued that such a dispensation would enable Natal to deal decisively with the Indian question. It saw Robinson currying favour with the Labour League and abandoning his hitherto moderate stance towards Indians. At a mass rally in Durban he referred to Indians as “pernicious on social, political, commercial, financial and especially on sanitary grounds”.¹⁰³ In turn, the *Mercury* claimed that the imperial government cared little for the social future of Natal.¹⁰⁴ Letters to the press grumbled about the “swarming and swamping process” which was how Indian immigration was regarded. The *Witness* stated that it was “ridiculous” that because a man happened to be born under a certain flag he was free to roam wherever he pleased and to “domicile himself wherever inclinations may dictate”.¹⁰⁵ Ironically, the election turnout was poor – a 46 percent poll.

Complaints about the Indian as a settler continued unabated. Durban’s mayor, Benjamin Greenacre, wanted Indians segregated to their own residential quarter. Similarly, Pietermaritzburg’s chief magistrate, Charles Barter, was highly critical of the condition of Indian dwellings and stated that the Indian “still wallows in his native stench and filth”.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile the colonial legislature tinkered with the laws relating to Indians by revising them and consolidating them into what became Law 25 of 1891. Although dismissed as disappointing, Law 25 did depart from previous legislation in that it stipulated that no Indian could leave Natal until a full ten years of indentured service had been completed and that all Indians should return to India on completion of that service. Predictably, the India government objected to this provision and insisted that it be struck out before royal assent was granted.

103. *Natal Mercury*, 9 September 1890.

104. *Natal Mercury*, 26 September 1890.

105. *Natal Witness*, 17 July 1890.

106. *Natal Mercury*, 7 August 1891; *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1891/1892, p B57.

By 1893 the size of the Indian population threatened to overtake that of the white colonials: 41 208 to 43 742 respectively. Across the colony the presence and role of Indians was ubiquitous. As the Protector noted, “nearly all fishing, market gardening, and hawking of fruit and vegetables” was in the hands of Indians while they extended their cultivation of maize, tobacco and beans.¹⁰⁷ The negative side to this, as far as whites were concerned, was expressed by Durban’s Superintendent of Police, R.C. Alexander, who wrote that “Indians are becoming as prolific as rabbits and almost as destructive to the welfare of Europeans”. He cited Indians as being responsible for 42 percent of the contraventions of Durban’s bylaws and 57 percent of the criminal offences dealt with by the police, despite constituting only 24 percent of the population.¹⁰⁸ With Natal’s Constitutional Amendment Bill having been gazetted in April 1893 a further election was held to elect the government for the newly expanded Natal Legislative Assembly. Despite considerable attention focused on the Indian question during the election campaign, apart from the usual denunciations of Indians as settlers, no concrete proposals were put forward by candidates. There was, however, voter sensitivity concerning the presence of 73 Indian voters on the roll in Durban County. One candidate challenged his opponents to resign if they won election as a result of Indian votes. Subsequently all six Durban County candidates signed a declaration to discourage Indian votes.¹⁰⁹ At the time there were only 365 Indians on the entire colonial voters’ roll out of 10 000 registered voters.¹¹⁰ Although these Indian voters clearly presented no threat to the prevailing political order, the reaction in the case of Durban County reflected the extent to which rancour and insecurity beset white settlers.

A slew of statutes and Gandhi

The Robinson ministry took office in October 1893. As Natal’s first prime minister, Sir John lost no time in tackling the Indian

107. *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1892/1893, pp T4, A34.

108. Mayor’s Minute, *Natal Mercury*, 11 August 1893.

109. *Natal Mercury*, 18 September 1893.

110. *Natal Government Gazettes*, 15 and 22 August 1893.

question. In the space of three years he succeeded in passing six major pieces of legislation affecting Indians. But for all his ministry's legislative efforts to control, regulate and restrict, it failed in the one area in which there was unanimity of opinion amongst colonists, namely, to return labourers to India at the end of their contracts and to curb Asiatic colonisation of Natal. At the outset, a delegation was sent to India to confer with the India government regarding the return of indentured labourers to India at the completion of their contracts. It came to nothing. In the words of Lord Elgin, the viceroy and governor-general of India: “I have little sympathy with the views that would prevent any subject of the Crown from settling in any Colony under the British flag.”¹¹¹ As the *Mercury* remarked, “We fear the sum total of the agreement is simply that the coolie can please himself whether he stays or goes”.¹¹²

The first of four pieces of legislation passed in the first year of the Robinson ministry was Act 22 which extended the powers of municipal corporations in regulating sanitary conditions in Natal boroughs. The crux of this law was that it empowered town councils “to abate all nuisances” such as the overcrowding of premises; carrying on trades producing noise and smells; keeping livestock in living apartments; and depositing refuse in streets.¹¹³ The second salvo was Act 37 of 1894 which terminated the annual state subsidy of £10 000 for importing indentured labour. The subsidy had been controversial since its inception in 1859. But in promoting this legislation, Harry Escombe, the attorney-general in the Robinson ministry, served up a cocktail of mixed messages and disingenuousness. First he claimed that the removal of the subsidy would end “every cause of strife or discord throughout the Colony with respect to Indian immigration”. He then suggested that the law would result in a reduction of the number of Indians entering Natal. No such trends occurred. In fact the Indian population grew by a further 7 762 in the three years following the passage of Act 37. At the same time, Escombe claimed that the government was “alive to its duty towards those who ... rely

111. NAD, GH 817, Elgin – Governor Hely-Hutchinson, 17 September 1894.

112. *Natal Mercury*, 16 November 1894.

113. *Natal Government Gazette*, XLVI, 2688, 17 July 1894.

on a stream of Indian immigrants”.¹¹⁴

The third part of the anti-Indian legislative volley was a proclamation issued in July 1894 confirming bylaws of the Pietermaritzburg Town Council related to Law 21 of 1888, in terms of which non-indentured Indians were required to register with the Council and to wear badges of identification. This proclamation serves as a poignant indicator of the extent to which the colonial mind was opposed to accepting the Indian as a settler and fellow colonist. The enforcement of this measure proved ineffective. The fourth piece of legislation not only ignited imperial controversy but resulted in a historic crossroads in the life and career of M.K. Gandhi. What became Act 25 of 1894 cut to the very heart of the Indian question – the political exclusion of Indians. If Indians were to settle in Natal, the white colonial minority was determined that terms and conditions would apply. For Robinson, as the most prominent white colonist, this legislation marked a 180 degree shift in his thinking over the years. Whereas in the 1870s he had been amenable to wealthy “Arabs” like Aboobaker Amod having the vote, by 1882 he had modified his stance to one in which educational qualifications would be required for enfranchisement. In 1894 he proposed the outright exclusion of Asiatics from the franchise.

In April 1894, after having worked on a legal case in Pretoria for nearly a year, Gandhi was in Durban preparing to return to India, when he noticed a report in the *Mercury* concerning a Bill to disenfranchise Indians. The report proved a watershed in his life.¹¹⁵ At once he changed his plans and for the next 20 years remained in South Africa as a champion of the cause of Indians. In seeking to amend Natal’s franchise legislation the Robinson ministry adopted a strategic approach. It did not seek to remove from the roll any Indian who was already registered as a voter. Instead, its main thrust was aimed at Indians who had yet to arrive in Natal. “We only seek to protect ourselves from ... the risk of having the European electorate

114. *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal*, XXII, 1894, pp 163–164.

115. S. Narayan (ed.), *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1*, (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1968), p 206.

swamped”, said Robinson.¹¹⁶ From 27 June until 11 July 1894 when the Bill was unanimously endorsed by the Colonial Assembly, Gandhi unleashed a campaign of opposition the likes of which had never been seen before in Natal’s politics. First, in a telegram he demanded that the Bill be postponed to allow more time for public debate. That was ignored. Then he presented a petition signed by 500 Indians asserting that India indeed possessed elective representative institutions. That too was ignored. On 29 June he conveyed a personal letter to Robinson imploring him to re-think the Bill. That was also ignored. On 1 July he met with Governor Hely-Hutchinson to discuss the issue. On 3 July he presented the governor with a further petition calling on Queen Victoria not to authorise the franchise amendments. On 4 July, Gandhi again wrote to Robinson and presented him with a questionnaire on the franchise issue. Finally, on 10 July Gandhi produced a petition signed by 8 889 Indians for presentation to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, which refuted the view that Indians had never exercised the franchise and condemned the granting of self-government to Natal for making Indians less free.¹¹⁷

The petition did not reflect grass-roots political mobilization. As Maureen Swan has argued, “it is reasonable to assume that most of the signatories did not know what they were signing”.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, Robinson seized upon it as proof of the danger posed by giving Indians access to the vote (at the time there were only 10 279 electors on the roll). But Gandhi did not let up. On 11 July, in a letter published in the *Mercury* he claimed that the Bill and all it stood for was planting seeds of jealousy and animosity between whites and Indians. In its response the following day the *Mercury* stated that if Indians were as well educated and fully acquainted with the English language and institutions as Gandhi, “the aspect of the question would be a totally different one; but, as it is, Indians of his stamp are numerically few”. There the exchanges ended, for the moment.

116. *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal*, XXII, 1894, pp 577–578.

117. NAD, Natal Parliamentary Papers, 172, 1896, Document 90.

118. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, p 75.

On 22 August 1894 Gandhi inaugurated a permanent political organisation – the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) – whose task was to protect Indian interests and to oppose discriminatory legislation.¹¹⁹ However, as various authors including Joy Brain, Maureen Swan, Bhana, Desai and Vahed point out, the NIC reflected mainly the interests of the Indian merchant trading elite.¹²⁰ Significantly, Gandhi never questioned the fact that the franchise was a qualified one and not universal. Whilst it is true that oscillations in expression of anti-Indian sentiments did occur, what is beyond doubt is that by the 1890s those sentiments had coalesced to the point where the Indian question was a general concern. An editorial in the *Mercury* exemplified that psychological state and reflected the “inherent ethnocentrism” which Tim Keegan has argued as being fundamental in shaping settlers’ racial attitudes:¹²¹ “The evils attendant upon the immigration of coolies ... are too generally appreciated for contradiction.”¹²²

The second half of 1894 saw Natal’s Indian question elevated to imperial prominence. A pamphlet that Gandhi had published, titled *The Indian Franchise: An Appeal*, came into the hands of the *Times of India*. On 27 August 1894 the *Times* accused Natal of outrages against Indians, thus sparking an angry response from the *Mercury* which accused the Indian newspaper of “unblushing falsehoods”.¹²³ Whilst some of the accusations by the *Times* may have been exaggerated or were inaccurate, the questions it raised about the status of Indians

119. Prior to the formation of the NIC an organisation called the Indian Association of Natal had existed. It made a submission in February 1877 at the trial of Captain Murdock McLeod who was charged with the murder of an Indian. See NAD, CSO 586, 1026, February 1877.

120. J. Brain, “Natal’s Indians 1860–1910”, in A. Duminy and B. Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1989), p 262; Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, p 38; S. Bhana, *Gandhi’s Legacy: The Natal Indian Congress 1894–1994* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1997), pp 9–13; Desai and Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture*, p 372.

121. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*, p 281.

122. *Natal Mercury*, 29 January 1895.

123. *Natal Mercury*, 14 November 1894.

in Natal were valid. Gandhi bounced back with an open letter to the Natal press and the Legislature in which he claimed that hatred was the basis of white opposition to Indians. The *Mercury*'s response was candid and unapologetic. Conceding that strong prejudice existed towards Indians, it argued that this was the fault of Indians “because of his actions and mode of life ... the Indian ... has done nothing to make himself more acceptable as a colonist”.¹²⁴

High noon

Nearly eighteen months elapsed before the Colonial Office provided a clear answer to the Robinson ministry on how it viewed the franchise law, Act 25 of 1894. Initially, Ripon, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, declined to recommend royal assent on the grounds that it was an affront to the people of India. But by the time he had left office in June 1895, he made no suggestions on the way forward. His successor, Joseph Chamberlain, offered constructive advice but was slow. This hiatus proved unhelpful in assuaging colonial tensions. Besides the colonial newspapers trading blows with the London *Times*, the issue of the franchise seized the colonial mind. Between October 1895 and the end of the year the fate of Act 25 was the main topic of debate and several public meetings were

held across Natal. The silence of the Colonial Office on the matter proved damaging to the Robinson Ministry which was accused of keeping the colony “in the dark in regard to the turn of events”.¹²⁵ A “mutinous air” prevailed towards the Colonial Office.¹²⁶ Adding to the tension was Gandhi and his NIC. Gandhi had sent out nearly 1 000 letters to friends of Indians in England in an attempt to pressure Chamberlain to decline the law.¹²⁷ However, late in November 1895, a despatch arrived from Chamberlain asking that Natal prepare fresh legislation on the issue (meaning a more subtly-worded version) so

124. *Natal Mercury*, 7 January 1895.

125. *Natal Advertiser*, 8 October 1895.

126. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, p 65.

127. *Natal Advertiser*, 26 September 1895.

that royal assent was guaranteed.¹²⁸

While waiting to hear the outcome of the Franchise Act, the Robinson ministry had not been idle. If its attempts to exclude Indians politically had been dealt a setback, it was not deterred in its efforts to make them feel unwelcome as colonists. Since the India government had rejected the idea of Indians being compelled to return to India after serving ten years of indentured labour, the Robinson ministry decided that the way around this was to discourage settlement by means of the imposition of a residential tax. Act 17 of 1895 became the fifth of the ministry’s measures against Indians. Those Indians who failed to re-indenture or who failed to return to India after two indenture contract terms, would be required to pay an annual tax of £3. Escombe’s statement left no doubt as to the stance and intention of the Natal government: “Indians are to come here appreciated as labourers but not welcomed as settlers and competitors.”¹²⁹ A petition signed by sixteen Indians denouncing the legislation was submitted by the NIC. It claimed that the ultimate goal of the Natal government was “the extinction of the Indian as a free man”.¹³⁰ Editorially the *Mercury* deprecated the NIC’s claims, arguing that Indians signed the indenture contract of their own free will. “It is surely only fair that the Colony should be allowed to make the terms of the contract for Indian labour and have the power to enforce that contract.”¹³¹

Although Chamberlain saw no reasons to disallow the Act, he did not act with alacrity in recommending its approval which was granted only in August 1896. As a high point in the Natal government’s crusade against Indians as colonists, it nonetheless proved ineffective because “passenger” immigrants and “Arabs” were excluded from its application. The *Witness* stated in an editorial that the Act was aimed at the wrong Indians. “It is the Indian who comes as the voluntary immigrant who is the real terror and must be kept out of

128. NAD, GH 176, Chamberlain to Hely-Hutchinson, Natal No. 41, 26 November 1895.

129. *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal*, XXIII, 1895, pp 66–67.

130. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, p 64.

131. *Natal Mercury*, 10 May 1895.

the country.”¹³² In May 1896, the re-drafted and refined franchise legislation as per Chamberlain’s request, became Act 8 of 1896 and received the grudging approval of the Colonial Office in August. The distinction between the 1894 and 1896 legislation was that the latter addressed the matter of the disability of Indians not having representative institutions in India. By seeking an order from the Governor-in-Council exempting them from the operation of the Act, Indians could enjoy franchise rights. The Act was also aimed only at new Indian immigrants and not at the few whose names already appeared on the voters’ roll.¹³³ Historically, it failed to deter Indian settlement as reflected by emigration figures from 1901 when Act 17 became applicable.¹³⁴

Colonial agitation against the influx of Indians flared anew from August 1896 and reached a climax in January 1897 when, after a controversial visit to India and a period of quarantine outside of Durban harbour, Gandhi stepped ashore at Cato’s Creek. It began when news that the Tongaat Sugar Company was bringing in eleven Indian artisans was greeted with outrage by white artisans in Durban. Press comment was critical with support for the Durban artisans coming even from as far afield as the *Cape Argus* in Cape Town.¹³⁵ Although the Tongaat Sugar Company withdrew its requisition, the issue did not abate but triggered a chain reaction of anti-Indian meetings and outpourings that persisted for six months. In September, a European Protection Association was formed in Pietermaritzburg. Its main aim was to boycott all Indian trade and business and to expel Indians from Natal. In December a similar body called the Colonial Patriotic Union was launched in Durban. The Indian question became so inflamed that Escombe sent a telegram to Robinson, who was on leave in England, urging him to meet Chamberlain to discuss the

132. *Natal Witness*, 19 January 1897.

133. There were only 142 Indians out of 2 243 registered voters in Durban and 82 Indians out of 1 599 on the voters’ roll in Pietermaritzburg in 1895. See *Natal Government Gazette*, XLVII, 2751.

134. There were 639 Indians who left Natal in 1901 compared to 448 in 1900 and 503 in 1899. See E. Bradlow, “Indentured Indians in Natal and the £3 Tax”, *South African Historical Journal*, 2, November 1970, pp 42–44.

135. See *Natal Mercury*, 18 August 1896.

possibility of Natal adopting similar legislation to that of New South Wales in Australia where a law excluding “the coloured races” was awaiting Queen Victoria’s assent.¹³⁶

The simmering anti-Indian hostility was further fuelled by news of Gandhi’s alleged statements in India concerning conditions in Natal. Unfortunately, the contents of Gandhi’s pamphlet, called the Green Pamphlet, were distorted and exaggerated. That aside, Natal’s name was rubbished by the Indian press which led to outrage in the colony. Even though Gandhi attempted to correct the distortions which the *Times of India* had disseminated,¹³⁷ in the colonial mind he was regarded as symbolic of the “coolie curse”. Information in the Durban Mayor’s Minute for 1896 added to the fear and fury that was gripping the white population. Indian property ownership in the Borough was up to 200 plots valued at £80 000.¹³⁸ In October the power of the burgeoning free Indian community was demonstrated when “Arabs” outbid everyone else at a property auction and bought, for £9 000, a site immediately adjacent to the much esteemed Durban Club in Smith Street.¹³⁹

Between 26 November 1896 and 13 January 1897 four mass meetings on the Indian question were held in Durban, attended each time by some 2 000 colonists. At no other time in Natal’s colonial history did whites display such a degree of consensus and agitation. Well-attended meetings were also held in Pietermaritzburg and in several other towns. With support for Natal’s colonists coming from other parts of South Africa, the *Mercury* had already suggested that a conference of South African states be convened to formulate united action on the Indian question.¹⁴⁰

136. J.T. Henderson (ed.), *Speeches of the Late Right Honourable Harry Escombe* (P. Davis, Pietermaritzburg, 1903), pp 324–327.

137. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, p 64.

138. *Natal Mercury*, 5 August 1896.

139. *Natal Mercury*, 27 October 1896.

140. *Natal Mercury*, 1 December 1896.

Pointed and pointless

Gandhi’s return to Natal could not have been more ill-timed. After five months in India addressing meetings and writing articles, he boarded a ship, the *Courland*, which arrived off Durban on 18 December 1896. To make matters worse, the Natal government slapped a three week quarantine period on the *Courland* and another vessel from India, the *Naderi*, because they had sailed from Bombay which had been declared plague-infected.¹⁴¹ The presence of the two ships anchored off Durban with 611 free Indian immigrants (including Gandhi) aboard, simply provided a further rallying point for anti-Indian hostility.

On 30 December, the *Advertiser* carried a prominent advertisement headed: “Wanted: Every Man in Durban.” It announced the holding of a mass meeting to discuss the Indian immigration issue and to plan a demonstration at the Point when the two ships disembarked their passengers. On 4 January 1897 some 2 000 colonists turned up in pouring rain to a mass meeting in the town hall. Emotions ran high and alarm bells began jangling in both government and press circles. A meeting with Escombe failed to assuage the intentions of those involved in planning the demonstration and on the evening of 7 January a second mass meeting was held in Durban. Again some 2 000 colonists attended and the mood was even more agitated than before. All were adamant that the Point demonstration should go ahead. The Robinson ministry found itself under huge pressure while Gandhi came in for a roasting for thinking that he could carry on “with impunity” against the colony.¹⁴² Enthusiastic meetings were also held in Newcastle, Dundee, Verulam, Ladysmith and

Pietermaritzburg. Telegrams of support were received by the Patriotic Union in Durban from around the colony. Meanwhile, the Natal government was sending urgent telegrams to the India government. Robinson attempted to use the threat of plague to persuade the India

141. Bombay was declared plague-infected on 19 December 1896 – the day *after* the arrival of the two ships. The quarantine was, therefore, unnecessary and unreasonable.

142. *Natal Mercury*, 9 January 1897; 6 and 8 January 1897.

government to halt all immigration of free Indians to Natal – to no avail.¹⁴³

The demonstration at the Point went ahead on 13 January. A crowd of some 2 000 colonists assembled peacefully at 1pm. After listening to speeches by Escombe, Harry Sparks of the Colonial Patriotic Union and a Dr McKenzie, by 2.05pm the meeting was over and the crowd dispersed quietly. But later that afternoon when the two ships disembarked their passengers, Gandhi was the target of a hostile reception. Accounts vary as to exactly what happened to him, but he did receive something of a roughing up.¹⁴⁴ In a further communication with the India government, Robinson attempted to cite the Gandhi incident as further underlining the need to halt the emigration of free Indians to Natal – again to no avail.¹⁴⁵ In his report to the Colonial Office, Governor Hely-Hutchinson expressed grave concern at what might occur if the anti-Indian feeling did not dissipate. He doubted whether Escombe could repeat his calm handling of the 13 January Point demonstration should agitation be renewed.¹⁴⁶

The Point demonstration proved the climax of anti-Indian agitation. Although the Colonial Patriotic Union continued to hold meetings and to form new branches, as a political force it was ineffectual. But the political heat which the five months of agitation had generated did not disappear. With Escombe having succeeded Robinson

143. NAD, GH 1034, Robinson – Governor, Minute No. 3, 8 January 1897; NAD, GH 293, Telegram from Viceroy of India to Governor of Natal, 20 January 1897.

144. The *Natal Advertiser* (14 January 1897) claimed that mud and fish were thrown at Gandhi and that he was “mobbed” and subjected to “kicks and cuffs”. But a correspondent who signed himself “Eye Witness”, claimed that Gandhi was neither kicked nor fisted but was pelted with “a couple of handfuls of mud and fish” (*Natal Advertiser*, 15 January 1897).

145. NAD, GH 1034, Minute No. 4, Robinson – the Governor, 14 January 1897.

146. NAD, GH 1282, Natal Secret Despatch, Hely-Hutchinson – Chamberlain, 15 January 1897.

as prime minister¹⁴⁷ there was great pressure and expectation that legislative measures would be enacted by the colonial parliament to deal decisively with the Indian question. Escombe did not disappoint. By 1 June 1897, four new pieces of legislation discriminating against Indians as settlers and thereby safeguarding white dominance were promulgated. In brief, they concerned a new immigration law which ratcheted up the criteria required to enter the colony: prospective immigrants would have to satisfy a language proficiency schedule and be in possession of at least £25 in cash.¹⁴⁸

The second legal volley amended the law on health risks and quarantine. The third and most controversial concerned the issuing of dealers’ trading licences. Its purpose was, in Escombe’s words, “to get at the Asiatic trader”.¹⁴⁹ It empowered local municipalities to manage the process and denied the Indian trader any recourse to a higher authority in the event of a licence application being rejected. The fourth piece of legislation, the Uncovenanted Indians Protection Act, required contract-expired or free Indians to carry a pass which would indemnify them from wrongful arrest and distinguish them from indentured Indians who had absconded from their employers. Escombe’s claim that the idea of the pass was to spare Indian settlers “from the indignity of arrest” was a canard because of the personal questions to which applicants for the pass were subjected and the fact that white settlers were not required to carry passes.¹⁵⁰

147. After 35 years of public service Robinson’s health was failing. He resigned as prime minister on 12 February 1897.

148. Martens argues that this legislation must be placed in a global context. Firstly, because Escombe derived the idea of an education test from an immigration Bill debated in the US Congress in 1896. Second, in that the education aspect of Natal’s Immigration Act of 1897 was adopted by Australian colonies in 1897 and 1898 and Australian governments from 1901 until 1958 to exclude non-white settlers. See J. Martens, “A Transnational History of Immigration Restriction: Natal and New South Wales, 1896–97”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34, September 2006, pp 333, 340.

149. *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal*, XXV, 1897, p 102.

150. *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of the Colony of Natal*, XXV, 1897, p 360.

Conclusion

By 1900 the population statistics pronounced a verdict on the pointed and determined legislative efforts to decrease and discourage Indian immigration to Natal: 64 951 whites to 70 369 Indians.¹⁵¹ None of the anti-Indian legislation of the previous decade had succeeded in diminishing or deterring Indian immigration. Gandhi placed the situation in an appropriate context when, in a letter published in the *Mercury*, he asked: “Having invited the Indians to the Colony, how can responsible colonists curse them? How can they escape the consequences of the introduction of Indian labour?”¹⁵²

As a topic of agitation the Indian question faded away. Escombe’s ministry was short lived. By October 1897 he was out of power, the harbour question having superseded the Indian question as a topic of prominence in the politics of Natal. The Indian presence continued to agitate the colonial mind in the first decade of the twentieth century, leading to further discriminatory legislation and official inquiries such as the Reynolds and Clayton Commissions. Anti-Indian sentiments were also a feature of the politics of the Union of South Africa. But white emotions never again attained the widespread stridence which galvanized Natal from November 1896 and peaked in the first two weeks of 1897.

Natal, Robert Huttenback wrote, “was the first colony to deal in a substantive way with the problems engendered by the actual residence of non-whites”.¹⁵³ In that Natal’s white settlers attempted to remake a social order based on British norms and values lends credence to James Belich’s theory that whereas an emigrant joined someone else’s society, a settler remade his own.¹⁵⁴

151. *Statistical Year Book: 1900*, p.3. The number of Africans was listed as 794 650.

152. *Natal Mercury*, 5 September 1895.

153. R.A. Huttenback, *Racism and Empire: White Settlers and Coloured Immigrants in the British Self-governing Colonies* (Cornell University Press, New York, 1976), p. 195.

154. Belich, “The Rise of the Angloworld”, in P.A. Buckner and R.D. Francis, (eds.), *Rediscovering the British World*, p.53.

Abstract

Neither by accident nor design, Natal became home to over 50 000 Indian immigrants during the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the request of fewer than 50 sugar planters, colonial Natal embarked on a labour dispensation which was initially envisaged as “an experiment,” on a small scale, as Governor John Scott saw it. Appreciated for their contribution as labourers to the success of sugar production, Indians nonetheless, were resented by white colonists as settlers after they had completed their indenture contracts. That resentment was heightened by the influx of traders and non-indentured Indians into Natal after 1875 and found expression in published opinion and in discriminatory legislation. By the 1890s Natal’s anti-Indian legislation became an imperial controversy which also proved life-changing for M.K. Gandhi. This article attempts to track the evolution of white settler attitudes to what was termed the “coolie curse.”

Keywords: Natal Colony; indentured labourers; settler; sugar industry; indenture system; franchise; Gandhi; Escombe; Robinson.

Opsomming

Gedurende die tweede helfte van die negentiende eeu het Natal die tuiste van meer as 50 000 Indiese immigrante geword. Op versoek van minder as 50 suikerboere het koloniale Natal begin met ‘n arbeidsbedeling wat aldus die mening van Goewerneur John Scott slegs as ‘n “kleinskaalse eksperiment” beskou was. Nieteenstaande die waardering vir hulle bydrae as arbeiders tot die sukses van suikerproduksie, was blanke koloniste nogtans verbitterd teenoor Indiers as setlaars nadat hulle inboekstelsel kontrakte verstryk het. Hierdie misnoë was verder aangevuur deur die instroming van handelaars en ongekontrakteerde Indiers in Natal na 1875, en was ook duidelik verwoord in gepubliseerde opinie asook diskriminerende

wetgewing. Teen die 1890s het Natal se anti-Indier wetgewing ontaard in ‘n imperiale kontroversie wat selfs die toekoms van M.K. Ghandi beïnvloed het. Hierdie artikel poog om die evolusie van blanke setlaars se houding ten opsigte van die destydse sogenaamde “coolie curse” te ontleed.

Sleutelwoorde: Natal Kolonie; gekontrakteerde arbeiders; setlaar; suiker bedryf; inboekstelsel; stemreg; Gandhi; Escombe; Robinson.