

**“A Man of Keen Perceptive Faculties”:  
Aboobaker Amod Jhaveri, an “Arab” in Colonial Natal,  
circa 1872-1887**

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**Introduction**

Indians arrived in South Africa in two streams. Between 1860 and 1911, a total of 152 184 indentured labourers were introduced into colonial Natal mainly to work on the sugar plantations, though some were employed in other sectors of the economy. This initial flow was supplemented by entrepreneurs from Gujarat on the west coast of India, who began arriving from the early 1870s. They were termed “passengers” because they migrated outside of official arrangements between the governments of India and Natal. They came voluntarily at their own expense and were subject to the ordinary laws of the Colony. Indians of passenger origin comprised around 20 per cent of the Indian population in 1910.<sup>1</sup> There were significant differences of class, language, region and ethnicity among Indians. While the broadest distinction was between indentured and passenger migrants, the classification “passenger” did not refer to a unitary group with identical migratory experiences. The literature generally refers to passengers as “traders”, and while there were some large capitalists like Aboobaker Amod Jhaveri, Dawud Mahomed and Dada Abdoolla, the majority came as small itinerant traders, hawkers, salaried managers, or shop assistants, who were often locked into dependent relationships, lived in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, and earned a pittance. Deep divisions among Indians

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1. M. Swan, *Gandhi. The South African Experience* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985), p 6.

resulted in differential access to political and economic resources in Natal. Aboobaker stood out during the formative decades. He is generally regarded as the first passenger migrant to have settled in Natal, and made a significant contribution in every sphere of Indian life – religious, economic and social – during his brief stay. This short biography is an important lens through which to view the 1870s and 1880s, also in order to gain insight through his life into issues such as the migratory experiences of early traders, their association with indentured Indians, networks among traders, as well as the relationship between passengers, white settlers and colonial authorities.

### “Arab” or “Indian”?

The main distinction among Indians was between higher caste Gujarati-speaking Muslim and Hindu passengers from Northern India and indentured Indians and their descendants. Unlike their indentured counterparts, wealthier traders were able to maintain caste and ethnic exclusivity. Their special circumstances enabled them to keep their social distance from working-class Indians. They saw migration as temporary and maintained links with family members in India by visiting their ancestral villages, marrying their sons and daughters in India, and remitting money to build mosques, *madrassahs* and schools.<sup>2</sup> George Mutukistna, a free Indian, told the Wragg Commission in 1885 that caste feeling had largely disappeared among indentured Indians in Natal. The “little feeling of caste, which exists in Natal,” he added, “is kept up by the Indian merchants, who think themselves better because they are rich and think that, by observing caste distinctions, they can set themselves apart from the Natal Indian people”.<sup>3</sup>

White settlers and officials in Natal referred to passengers as “Arabs”. The Wragg Commission of 1885-1887, appointed to investigate the conditions of Indian migrants, stated in its preamble that “Indian Immigrants, as used in this report, do not mean or include those persons who in Natal are designated ‘Arab Traders’”.<sup>4</sup> Whites were at first unsure how to deal with passengers, and applied the nomenclature “Arab” to distinguish them from indentured workers. Traders themselves affirmed this distinction to demand equality with whites in terms of Queen Victoria’s 1858 Proclamation asserting the equality of British subjects in all parts of the Empire. Ebrahim Camroodeen of *M.C. Camroodeen and Co.*, for example, complained to the Immigration Department that “no

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2. F. Ginwala, “Class, Consciousness and Control: Indian South Africans, 1869-1946.” PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1974.

3. Y.S. Meer (ed), *Documents of Indentured Labour. Natal 1851-1917* (Institute for Black Research, Durban, 1980), p 393.

4. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, p 314.

distinction is made between common and better class Indians".<sup>5</sup> In a confidential report to the Durban Town Council in 1885, Police Inspector Richard Alexander observed that "Arabs will only associate with Indians so far as trade compels them to".<sup>6</sup> Ginwala (1974), Swan (1985) and Freund (1995) have cogently underscored this distinction between passenger and indentured migrants.

Working conditions on plantations and the resistance offered by workers have been well-documented by Swan. Hard work, long hours, inadequate medical facilities and appalling living conditions were the norm. The majority of indentured and ex-indentured Indians were poor, and eked out a living as unskilled workers or market gardeners, though a small educated elite, mainly Christian, and some skilled workers, achieved economic mobility by obtaining employment as clerks, teachers, or civil servants.<sup>7</sup> Distinctions between passenger and indentured Indians were not straightforward. Traders were closely bound with their indentured clientele and increasingly so because of the racist colonial policies. The result, as Aboobaker's experience proves, was that he was able to comment in detail on the needs and life of typical poor labouring Hindus.

Traders like Aboobaker were drawn to Natal by commercial opportunities created by indentured Indians. "The Arabs", as F.A. Hathorn, Chairman of the Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Commerce, told the Wragg Commission, "were attracted to Natal by the coolie trade, and if coolies had not been imported we should not have had the Arab element here".<sup>8</sup> F.L. Jonsson of the Royal Hotel told the Wragg Commission that Indian traders in Mauritius were alerted to trade opportunities when Natal's Indians began supplying goods to friends in Mauritius around 1870.<sup>9</sup> Passenger Indians dominated Indian trade and society

5. V. Padayachee and R. Morrell, "Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy, c 1875-1914", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 1, 1991, pp 10, 73-102.
6. Natal Archives (hereafter NAB): GH 1589, R. Alexander, "Progress of Arabs and Indians in the Borough During the Past Twenty Years", Special Report to the Colonial Secretary, 21 February 1885.
7. See B. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders. A History of the Indian Working Class* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995); Ginwala, "Class, Consciousness and Control: Indian South Africans, 1869-1946."; M. Swan, "The 1913 Natal Indian Strike", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10, April 1984, pp 239-258; Swan, *Gandhi. The South African Experience*.
8. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, p 445.
9. For a general discussion of passenger migration to Natal, see: S. Bhana and J. Brain, *Setting Down Roots. Indian Migrants in South Africa, 1860-1911* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1990); J. Brain, "Indentured and Free Indians in the economy of Colonial Natal", in B. Guest and J. Sellers (eds), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony. Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Colonial Natal* (Natal University Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1985), pp 199-234;

within a decade of Aboobaker's arrival. The Wragg Commission reported in 1887 that "Arab stores are now found in every part of the Colony and their owners appear to be pushing out those Indians who entered the Colony under the Immigration Laws and who, at the end of five years' service, opened small shops".<sup>10</sup> There were ten Indian stores in Durban when Aboobaker arrived, all owned by "free" Indians, as Indians who had completed their indentures were known. The number of retail licences issued to free Indians in Durban peaked in 1880 when they held 30 of the 37 Indian licences. There were 20 536 Indians in Durban at this time. This was followed by a decline even as the Indian population increased. In 1885, there were 40 "Arab" and 26 "Indian" stores. The Indian population had increased to over 30 000 by this time.<sup>11</sup> Tayal estimated from the 1904 census that the average income of ex-indentured Indians was £12-18 per annum, while that of the 1 800 traders was £300.<sup>12</sup>

Police Superintendent Richard Alexander told the Wragg Commission that "men who came here some 20 odd years ago as indentured Indians and worked themselves into a good business and position before the Arabs arrived ... are now scarcely able to keep their businesses afloat". Alexander stated that approximately eighty "Arabs" had settled in Durban between 1880 and 1885. During this period, 24 "old Indian firms" had been bought by "Arabs". The buildings occupied by "Arab" storekeepers were "mostly the property of European residents who receive very high rents for the same". Indian traders carried food and clothing for their Indian clientele, and also catered for what was known as the "Kaffir" trade. Alexander concluded that "some of the [Indian] headmen inform me they are very happy and comfortable in our town".<sup>13</sup> The Wragg Commission attributed the success of passengers to the fact that their "friends and partners in India can watch the market and purchase at the moment of greatest profit and advantage"; they knew the "ways and habits of Indian Immigrants and choose their stock by the aid of such knowledge"; their subsistence needs were "fewer and involve much less expense than those of their white competitors", and they ran their businesses "without skilled white assistants requiring high wages".<sup>14</sup>

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Padayachee and Morrell, "Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy, c 1875-1914".

10. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, p 314.

11. NAB: GH1589, 247, Police Inspector Richard Alexander to Wragg Commission, 30 June 1885.

12. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, p 13.

13. NAB: GH1589, 247, 30 June 1885.

14. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, p 585.

### **Aboobaker: the man and the myths**

Aboobaker Amod Jhaveri was the first passenger migrant to arrive in Natal. Born in Porbander, Kathiawad (Kattywar), a peninsula of Gujarat, in 1852 to Amod and Amina Jhaveri, Aboobaker entered the world of commerce at a young age, hawking in the streets of Porbander. Nagidas Modi, an ageing resident of Porbander, told Aboobaker's grandson Mahomed Jhaveri (during the latter's visit to Porbander in the 1940s) that, according to village folklore, Aboobaker was in the habit of taking a short nap on the footpath outside the mosque after his midday prayers. One day a *fakhir* (fortune-teller) noticed scissor-type lines on the soles of his feet and prophesised that Aboobaker would become extremely rich but die young. Aboobaker's family was on friendly terms with a wealthy Vanian family who had business interests in Calcutta and Mauritius. Tired of hawking and eager to travel, Aboobaker persuaded them to employ him in their Calcutta operations in 1867. He proved extremely diligent and was transferred to the company's Mauritius branch, *Ajam Goolam Hoosen and Co.*, in 1869. From there he was sent to the Transvaal in 1870 to explore business opportunities. According to family legend, he was disturbed late one evening by a loud knock. Aboobaker provided food and accommodation to the three tired-looking Afrikaner men and a woman whose wagon had broken down. This favour was not forgotten and he subsequently received a letter of thanks from one of the men, Paul Kruger, future President of the Transvaal!<sup>15</sup>

Around 1872, Aboobaker moved from the Transvaal to the north coast of Natal. He opened stores in Tongaat and Verulam where large numbers of Indians had settled, and another at 434 West Street, Durban, in 1875.

Aboobaker Amod was a Memon. Memons are descendants of the trading-class Lohanas from Lohanpur in Multan, Sindh, who trace their origins to Sayad Kadiri of Baghdad, fifth in descent from one of Islam's greatest saints, Abdul

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15. Interview: Khatija Jhaveri, 15 March 2004. Ms Jhaveri is the great-granddaughter of Aboobaker Amod. These stories were told in public by Mohamed Jhaveri, Aboobaker's grandson, at the opening of the Juma Masjid State-Aided School in Durban in 1957. The Jhaveri Trust financed the building of the school and Mahomed Jhaveri was chairman of the Trust Board. This speech was included in the first brochure of the school published at the end of 1957. As the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli has pointed out, life-stories are not objective, but "artificial, variable, and partial". However, this does not make them any weaker. While we may be unaware that some statements are factually incorrect or improbable, these "wrong statements may still be psychologically true. This truth may be as important as factually reliable accounts". Narrative truth refers to the manner in which a story enables one to enter the subjective world of the respondent and see the world from their point of view, even if this does not match reality. A. Portello, "What Makes Oral History Different?", in Robert Perks and Alastair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge, London, 1998), pp 63-78, 68.

Kadir Jailani (?-1165). Memons believe that in 1421, Kadiri was ordered in a miraculous dream to set sail for Sindh and guide its people to Islam. He had a great influence with Markab Khan, chief of the Samma dynasty (1351-1521), who embraced Islam with seven hundred Lohana families. Kadiri changed their name to *Muamin* (“believer”), which became Memon over time. Memon capitalists traded with East Africa from the eighteenth century, and had a strong presence in Zanzibar and Mauritius before making their way to Natal. They took earthen pots, silk and shoes to East Africa, and returned with timber, coconuts, wax, ivory and grain.<sup>16</sup> The *Gazetteer* of 1899 described Memons as “hardworking and quiet, but rather stolid, shrewd and energetic, jovial, pleasure-loving, and hot tempered”.<sup>17</sup> Memon capitalists are rumoured to have brought large quantities of gold and silver to Natal.<sup>18</sup> They spoke Memonese, an unwritten dialect of Sindhi, with elements of Persian, Gujarati and Arabic, and were considered by fellow-Muslims as “devout and charitable”.<sup>19</sup>

### The businessman

Aboobaker’s businesses flourished virtually from the time of his arrival in Natal. He was the first Indian trader to be listed in the *Business and Residential Directory of the Natal Almanac and yearly register, Durban*, when his West Street store appeared in 1877. He chartered ships to transport goods from India and England. Though Aboobaker purportedly started as an employee of *Ajam Goolam Hoosen & Co.*, he opened *Aboobaker Amod & Co.* around 1875 in partnership with his cousin Hajee Mahomed Haji Dada. He very quickly earned the respect of the authorities and was the only passenger Indian to give meaningful evidence to the Wragg Commission of 1885-1887. He explained his business operations to the Commission:

I came from Mauritius, having been in business there. I am well acquainted with the whole system of Indian immigration. I am well acquainted with the general condition of the Indian population here. I have had a great deal to do with estates, as a general storekeeper. I came here from Mauritius, because business is much better here than in Mauritius. I have got a house of business in Calcutta and an agency in Bombay. I have ships of my own and I charter others; I import my own merchandise, and as it has been well bought by my own people, and as I have less expenses in Natal, I can undersell the white

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16. *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Kathiawar* (Government Central Press, Bombay, 1884), pp 198-200.
  17. *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Kathiawar*, p 223.
  18. Padayachee and Morrell, “Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy, c 1875-1914”, p 91.
  19. *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency Musalmans and Parsis* (Government Central Press, Bombay, 1899), pp 50-51.

merchants here. I have purchased dried fish from the Indians located on Salisbury Island. I exported eight and a half tons of fish to Mauritius from the island, and I had no complaints about it. I am of opinion that this trade might be very largely developed for home consumption and export; as things are now, we have to import dried fish from the Cape for us in Natal. Facilities should be given for curing fish near the breakwater, as it is spoilt by carrying to the Island.<sup>20</sup>

Aboobaker's rapid success suggests that stories about his poverty-stricken childhood are a myth. A more plausible explanation is that he was associated with trade and commerce in India, and came to Natal with the backing of an influential commercial family in Bombay with international business connections. We know, for example, that Aboobaker's partner in Bombay was his cousin Hajee Ismail, who, in 1887, sent word of Aboobaker's death to Natal. The achievements of Aboobaker's family members support this contention. Aboobaker was joined in Natal by his cousins Dada Abdoolla (1854-1912), Abdul Karrim (1847-1918), and Moosa Jhaveri (1848-1926), who were the sons of his father's brother, as well as Hajee Mohamed Haji Dada, Hajee Abdoolla Haji Dada, and Hajee Habib Haji Dada, the sons of his father's sister. These families were very successful in Natal. Hajee Mahomed arrived in 1880 and became a junior partner in the firm of *Aboobaker Amod & Co.* He subsequently opened *Hajee Mohamed Haji Dada & Co. General Merchants and Direct Importers* with its head office in Durban, and branches in Calcutta, Bombay, Delagoa Bay, Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria and Wakkerstroom. His brother, Hajee Habib, settled in Pretoria in 1890. His *Pretoria Shirt & Clothing* was one of the leading clothing manufacturing companies. *Dada Abdoolla and Co.* was exceptional with its fifteen branches in Durban, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Heidelberg, Potchefstroom, Rustenburg, Zeerust, Umzinto, Umzimkulu and Mauritius by 1890. Dada Abdoolla also owned two ships, the *Merritt* (which sailed in the coastal waters of the Cape Colony, Natal, and Portuguese East Africa) and the *Courland* (which carried passengers between Bombay and Natal).<sup>21</sup> These families were responsible for bringing Gandhi to Natal and were intimately involved in politics during Gandhi's stay in Natal from 1893 to 1914. They were also involved in establishing mosques and *madrassahs*. The arrival of Aboobaker's family members also shows the importance of family migration in augmenting the numbers of passengers in Natal.

Aboobaker and other large traders diversified almost immediately into real estate, as this was one means for them to earn interest-free income. They built homes, warehouses and shops that they rented out. Aboobaker's businesses

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20. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, pp 389-391.

21. B. Britton, *Gandhi Arrives in South Africa* (Greenleaf Books, Maine, 1999), p 223.

were very successful and he purchased properties in Durban, as well as Verulam and Blackburn on the North Coast. By 1880, he was landlord to 26 tenants, and owned property valued at £11 000 in Durban. His property at 114/118 Field Street, for example, comprised fourteen rooms that were let out to workers. In December 1877, the Sanitary Inspector ordered him to discontinue letting these “old broken down shanties” for occupation until he had effected repairs. The Inspector reported that he “at once complied by removing the whole away as well as about 2 feet of earth”, and built rooms in accordance with by-laws. He built “a row of eight brick lodging rooms, each an area of 1 000 feet, well ventilated, with the floor nine inches above ground, a roof ten feet high, and with a fire place and chimney”. Six more rooms of similar size were built on the opposite side. Rooms were let out at 10/- per month. “Such rooms are urgently required”, Inspector Daugherty said, “as there are scores of Coloured persons huddled together in their friends’ houses for want of housing to live in. From what I know of Aboobaker, I have every reason to believe he will keep the place clean and at once comply with any order he may receive from the Corporation”.<sup>22</sup> Aboobaker also owned a 2 500 square feet property in West Street. The then Inspector of Nuisances, R.C. Alexander, reported in 1877 that there were sixteen apartments, enclosed by buildings on either side, and a brick store in front on West Street. The rooms did not have windows, light, or ventilation. There were three kitchens and one privy.<sup>23</sup> Aboobaker’s estate consisted of considerable property – 434-438 West Street, 11 Plowright Lane, 114/118 Field Street, 154/164 Grey Street, 192/214 Grey Street, 506 West Street, Erf. Q in Cemetery Lane, Avondale Road, 11 Grey Street, as well as property in Verulam, Pretoria, Mozambique, Heidelberg and the Bluff.<sup>24</sup>

### **The family man**

Aboobaker’s experience of migration differed in a very important respect from other passengers. The majority came single, either because they were not married or could not afford to support their wives until they had a reliable income. A Government Report of 1926 confirmed that there was a large discrepancy between the numbers of married Indian men and women in South Africa, and attributed this to “the custom among resident Indians of keeping their wives in India, where they are visited by their husbands at intervals. Thus a commercial or business domicile is maintained in the Union, but a domicile of

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22. Durban Archives Repository: 3/TBD, 5/2/5/3/3, 28 May 1878.

23. Durban Archives Repository: 3/TBD, 5/2/5/3/2, 4 September 1877.

24. Transvaal Archives (hereafter TAB): 3A/DBN, Transfer List, Borough Surveyor’s Office, 1899.

home and family, that is, true domicile, in such cases is retained in India”.<sup>25</sup> Aboobaker migrated to Natal with his wife Rabia. Their son, Ismail, born in Durban in 1876, is considered the first colonial-born passenger. According to an affidavit by Aboobaker’s brother, O.H.A. Jhaveri, in 1913 when permission was sought for Ismail to return to Natal, “Raboobee was present at the birth and assisted in his delivery”. Aboobaker’s great-granddaughter, Khatija Jhaveri, established that there has, historically, been a close relationship between the Jhaveri and Raboobee families. Aboobaker’s wife Rabia died shortly after giving birth to Ismail, and Raboobee assisted with Ismail’s delivery and was his wet-nurse.<sup>26</sup>

Raboobee is an interesting figure in her own right. She had arrived as Rabia Bee Bee, under indenture number 2397, from Madras on the *Rajasthan* in January 1864 with her parents Sheik Mustan (2395) and Hyath Bee (2396). She married Goolam Hoosen, indentured migrant 1230, in April 1867. After completing their indentures, they joined the Railway Department. Raboobee worked in a clerical position for over a decade. With her savings, she bought a property and opened a business in Victoria Street around 1885. She subsequently opened businesses in Field Street and the Indian Market. Raboobee (1855-1916) was one of the first Muslim businesswomen in Durban. Goolam Hoosen did not join the business, but continued to work for the Railway Department. In 1895, Raboobee and Lubchminia were the first subscribing female members of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC).<sup>27</sup> This is probably a reflection of Raboobee’s close link with the Jhaveri family, who were responsible for bringing Gandhi to South Africa and were instrumental in founding the NIC. Following Rabia’s death, Aboobaker sent Ismail to India in 1881 to be brought up by relatives. Ismail was educated in India and returned to Natal permanently in 1913, almost two decades after his father’s death.

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25. *Special Report 39 The Indian Population of the Union, 1926* (Government Publishers, Pretoria, 1926), p 6.

26. Interview: Khatija Jhaveri, 15 March 2004.

27. Shortly after the NIC was formed, there were reports in the press that it was controlled by a cabal that threatened white power. Gandhi provided the *Natal Advertiser* with the NIC’s constitution, membership list and first annual report, and stressed that “sympathetic” whites had been invited to meetings. Despite this, the police spied on NIC meetings held to raise money and recruit members. Informers Ismael Ramjan and Albert Mutukrishna provided the police with reports of each meeting. Ramjam Ismael told Captain Lucas on 16 October 1895 that he had attended a meeting in Verulam on 15 October 1895 where about fifty Muslim men had gathered. NIC President Abdul Karim thanked Gandhi for working extremely hard on behalf of the NIC, and stated that as a result of his efforts, membership was growing rapidly. Two Indian women, Raboobee and Lubchminia, had also joined Congress during the previous month. Source: NAB: CO 179/192/19929, Governor - Colonial Secretary, 19 October 1895.

### **Postmaster-General**

Aboobaker was highly respected by the local authorities and was appointed Durban's first "Indian Postmaster-General" in 1881. Indian traders complained to the Indian Immigration Trust Board in December 1880 that the cumbersome postal distribution system was causing long delays in their mail. Letters were hand-delivered to the Protector whose interpreter Baboo Naidoo distributed them to recipients. The Trust Board acknowledged that the complaint was valid, and passed a resolution on 11 February 1881 that "taking into consideration the large Indian population in the Colony, and the amount of Indian correspondence passing through the Post Office, provision should be made to ensure the proper delivery of their letters as is the case with European inhabitants". However, the Board did not want to incur expenditure "legitimately belonging to the Postal Department". The latter, in seeking to avoid additional expenses, appointed Aboobaker as its "Indian Postmaster" in February 1881 to "take charge of all letters for the Indians, to deliver to applicants in town, and address and re-post all for those in any parts beyond Durban".

Several Hindu traders were unhappy with the new arrangement. Govinden Chetty, for example, questioned Protector Louis Mason through his attorneys Goodricke & Son on 26 February 1881 "by whose instruction Mr Aboobaker Amod enjoys the privilege of reading his correspondence before the others". Chetty and other traders had complained that "the practice of sending the letters of Indian Merchants of this town to Mr Aboobaker for delivery is causing great inconvenience and sometimes loss". They were "desirous of getting their letters at the Post Office, and nowhere else". At a meeting on 10 March 1881, the Trust Board agreed that the system was "open to abuse" and that the arrangement did not fully meet the requirements of the Indian population. However, despite the protests and the resolution by the Board, the system remained in place during 1881. The number of letters averaged 120 per month. On 26 January 1882, Protector Mason suggested that the Postmaster should re-employ Baboo Naidoo, who had previously held this position, at an increased salary of £10 per month. Postmaster C.I. Crookes rejected the idea, because Naidoo was also a trader, "as being a trader appears to be the objection against Aboobaker, is it not equally so against the present application?" Crookes also accused Naidoo of excessive drinking: "the curse of the Colony (drink) is not altogether unknown to him". The delay in appointing a replacement was due to the difficulty of finding a suitable person. The Postmaster explained to the Colonial Secretary on 20 January 1882 that letters for Indians arrived on a "to pay" basis, which meant that the recipient had to pay the postage upon receipt

of the letter. Since few Indians were capable of writing, it was not easy to find a person capable of collecting the postage and accounting for it accurately. Aboobaker was eventually relieved of his duty when the Postmaster appointed A. Chetty in July 1882.<sup>28</sup>

The status of Indian marriages was of concern to Colonial officials and employers who were seeking a stable labour force. Many single migrants who formed relationships on board ships, at immigration depots, or at places of employment, were not considered “married” in Natal. Law 12 of 1872 required Indians to register existing and new marriages with the Protector. Very few did so, because Indians probably feared that registering their marriage with a Christian Protector would mean that customary laws regarding divorce, polygamy and maintenance would not apply. The solution for Indians was the appointment of Muslim and Hindu religious marriage officers. Muslim traders like Aboobaker Amod and Dawud Mahomed successfully petitioned the Government to appoint a marriage officer. Act 19 of 1881 provided for the appointment of a marriage officer for the “solemnization of marriage of persons professing the Mahommedan faith”. Aboobaker was selected as the first Muslim Marriage Officer. He was appointed on 14 May 1881, but there is no record of him having registered marriages between his appointment and death in 1887.<sup>29</sup>

### **Religion and culture**

Religion was one of the strongest bases around which migrants organised their lives. Mosques were crucial in reconstructing religious life – the mosque was the heart of Muslim community life. The *Jumuah Masjid* in Grey Street, Durban, built in 1881, remains the largest mosque in the Southern Hemisphere and a major tourist attraction. It was built by Aboobaker Amod and Hajee Muhammad on land purchased from K. Moonsamy for £150 on the corner of Grey and Queen Streets. The sale was registered in the Deeds Office in Pietermaritzburg on 15 August 1881. Aboobaker and Haji Dada used the small 13 feet by 20 feet brick and mortar structure, which accommodated around fifty persons, as the mosque. It was extended by contractor John Dales in 1884 in order to accommodate 275 worshippers. A large verandah at the Grey Street entrance provided a place for traders to gather in the evenings to discuss community affairs.<sup>30</sup> *Jumuah Masjid* came to be known in local parlance as the “Memon Masjid”, because Memon merchants like Aboobaker Amod, Hajee

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28. NAB: II/10, 443/1883, 31 July 1882.

29. NAB: II/8, 18 May 1881.

30. E. Sulliman, “A Historical Study of the Juma Masjid.” BA Honours, University of Durban-Westville, 1985.

Mahomed Haji Dada and Moosa Hajee Cassim financed the building and upkeep of the mosque, and controlled its Trust. The other large ethnic group among Muslims in Durban, Gujarati-speakers from Surat, built the *West Street Mosque* about a kilometre away, reflecting the ethnic divide among Muslims.

The area about thirty miles north of Durban was the site of dense Indian settlement. Verulam, Mount Edgecombe, Tongaat and Umhlali included some of the earliest sugar mills. Indians were employed in large numbers in this area and many settled here after completing their indentures. Aboobaker opened his first store in Verulam, and built a mosque in the village in Wick Street. According to the trust deed, he had purchased the land in 1878 from Richard and Josiah Harvey, and built a mosque for “the use of the Sunni Mahommedans worshipping in Verulam, Natal”. When Aboobaker died in 1886, his son Ismail and brother O.H.A. Jhaveri obtained transfer of the property. They allowed locals to manage the mosque until 1918. At a meeting of the mosque congregation on 12 March 1918, Ismail and O.H.A. Jhaveri ceded the property to Cassim Motala, Amod Maiter, Amod Kathrada, Suliman Asmal, Amod Kajee, Amod Paruk, Mahomed Maiter and Mahomed Hassen Paruk, “all of Verulam, Natal, merchants, in their capacity as Trustees for the Verulam Sunni Mahommedan Mosque Trust, their successors in office or Assigns”.<sup>31</sup>

The building of mosques is testimony to Aboobaker’s concern to establish Islam in his new land of settlement.

One of the first communal religious practices introduced by Muslim traders in Natal was the *Urs*, the annual celebration of the birth of the Prophet. *Urs*, meaning “wedding” or “happy occasion” in Arabic, is observed to commemorate the birth of the Prophet, which is considered a blessing for mankind, and thus a “happy occasion”. Muslims’ celebration of *Urs* was restricted by Law 15 of 1869, which imposed a 21:00 to 05:00 curfew on Indians and Africans. Contravention could result in imprisonment of five months or a fine of £5. Aboobaker was arrested in November 1876 for contravening curfew regulations. As the Mayor was authorized to grant exemption from the curfew to “respectable Burgesses” of colour, Aboobaker wrote to him shortly after the incident:

I wish to bring to your notice the unjust treatment I have received at the hands of the borough police and to devise some means of preventing its recurrence at any future time. The fact briefly stated are as under. On Saturday, 24 November last at 9.30 p.m. I was returning from *Messrs. Read and Co.’s* evening sale in company with a friend

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31. NAB (Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository): “Deed of Transfer” drawn up by John Fraser, 27 January 1919.

Dowjee Ahmed Timol. On reaching my house we sat conversing for a little while. Shortly before 10 p.m. Ahmed took his departure but had not proceeded far when he was arrested by two native constables for contravening the vagrant law by being out after 9 p.m. Hearing his voice I opened my door and discovered him being marched off to the police station, and thinking I might possibly be of service in bailing him out, I accompanied the constables and their prisoner. On arriving at the police station the sergeant in charge inquired whether I had a pass and, on my replying in the negative, said I must also consider myself under arrest. I told him I was, by the Superintendent of Police's [Alexander] word to me, exempt from the provisions of the vagrant law. But he replied that he would make no distinction as his orders were strict and he was bound to obey them. Finally, I was released on promising to appear on the Monday following. I submit the above as a plain statement of fact and I protest most emphatically against being subjected to such indignity. I am a ratepayer and contribute in various ways to the Borough funds. I therefore claim the protection of the Council, failing which I must take measures to protect myself.

The Mayor refused the application by traders for a general exemption. Fifteen Muslims sent a petition to the Protector for permission to be outdoors after 21:00 during the *Urs* in 1877. On 14 March 1877, Protector Murdoch McLeod conveyed to the Mayor the "prayer of the Mahommedan inhabitants of the Town" to be exempted from the curfew regulations during the "*Moulud Sharif*, one of their religious seasons during which they require liberty to stir about until one a.m. I hope no difficulty may be experienced in granting this wish, which appears to me to be a reasonable request ... I am sure that no ill consequences to Law and order will attend the indulgence." Town Clerk William Cooley informed Murdoch on 15 March 1877 that the Town Council would consider granting permission to ratepayers only. Murdoch replied to Cooley on 17 March 1877 that "the accident of a man's not being a ratepayer is hardly sufficient reason for his being precluded from the observance of his religious rites. These men come here on the assurance of the Indian and Natal Governments that 'Your religion will in no way be interfered with', ... The Council would be blamed for having provoked anger by too rigid adherence to what I must be excused for saying appears to me rather a one-sided law."

Town Councillors responded sarcastically to McLeod's remarks at a meeting on 19 March 1877. Councillor Jameson said: "We are threatened with massacre. We had better give in at once". Councillor Palmer regarded the threat as "simply ridiculous". The Mayor expressed his "irritation that Captain MacLeod had criticised a law made by the Government", and maintained that it would be "a great mistake to let the Indian remain out after 9 pm".<sup>32</sup> Murdoch

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32. *Natal Mercury*, 20 March 1877.

wrote to the Mayor on 21 March 1877 that Muslim signatories to the petition, “the most respected of the Indian community, are very indignant at the treatment they have received”. McLeod also wrote to the Colonial Secretary on 26 March 1877:

The *Moulid Sharif* is a feast of great importance with the Mahommedans, connected as it is with the birth of their Prophet. The feeling among them is very strong that they have been unjustly dealt with and that their Protector is powerless to assist them. If I am to do my duty as PROTECTOR of Indian Immigrants it will be necessary to arrive at some plain understanding as to the amount of obstruction a body of irresponsible Municipal Councillors can make to me.

The Colonial Secretary took exception to the Protestor’s tone, and warned him on 21 April 1877 that “the manner in which you advocated the case of these Mahommedans was such as to deepen any feeling of injury they might labour under, and bring about the very results you were anxious to avoid”. The Colonial Secretary decided that in future “the Corporation, if properly approached, will be ready to grant to respectable Mohammedans desiring to celebrate the rites of their religion a fair and reasonable exemption from the byelaws”.<sup>33</sup> Durban’s traders were granted an exemption from the 21:00 curfew from 1879. The impression Aboobaker made among local whites, and their high opinion of him, is clear from an editorial in the *Natal Mercury* over the issue:

It is an interpretation of the law that is too rigid; in drawing that line too closely, that the police may err – as err they did, very palpably, in the case of Aboobaker Amod. That worthy man is no more to be confounded with a “native” than Asiatic is to be confounded with African, Semitic with Negroid, civilised with savage. No class of persons, no matter what their nationality might be, would be less likely to give occasion for a curfew bell than the Arabs, and especially of Arabs of the grade to which Aboobaker belongs.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Wragg Commission, 1885-1887**

Aboobaker was highly regarded by white officials. His knowledge of Indians carried great weight and he was called to give testimony to the Wragg Commission of 1885-1887. His evidence on business was alluded to above, but he also shared his opinions on other aspects of Indian life in Natal. His comments provide valuable insight into contemporary Indian life in Natal. They show that the relationship between him and working class Indians was

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33. NAB: II/2, 14-27 March 1877.

34. *Natal Mercury*, 13 December 1877.

not simply an exploitative one of trader and worker. He possessed an intimate knowledge of indentured Indians, and the opinions and advice he offered suggests that he took a keen interest in their welfare.<sup>35</sup> He complained to the Commission that Indians were “unable to carry out their religion freely and as they desire”. When admitted to hospital, they were “obliged to eat meat, which is forbidden both to the Hindoo and Mohammedan”. In prison, too, they were forced to eat meat. Aboobaker thought “it very advisable to have diet-scales hung up on the walls of the hospital, written in the language of the Indians, in order that they may see the nature and amount of food provided for them”. Aboobaker’s other complaint was that “the Mahomedan has his beard shaved off in gaol”. He also felt that at the time of the two Muslim Eid festivals, “Ramajan and Haj, the Mohammedans should have a holiday”. Aboobaker also called for conditional easing of the 21:00 curfew: “I would object to the curfew (9 o’clock bell) being applied to the Indian population, on account of religious and marriage ceremonies, sickness, and so on”.

Aboobaker was also concerned about marriage customs among Indians, and especially the many social evils resulting from the shortage of women. Unequal sex ratios, he observed, promoted the consumption of drugs and alcohol among indentured migrants, and encouraged gambling to fight loneliness; it made stable family life impossible; and forced men into relations with prostitutes. Aboobaker was concerned about the absence of laws governing marriage: “There is no law which provides proper marriage ceremonies, either among the Hindoos or Mohammedans. With reference to divorces, I think that they must be left to be dealt with by the Supreme Court. I think that the law, as enforced in cases of adultery, is not strict enough. I also think that prostitution and unhappiness amongst the Indians are caused by the deficiency of Indian women”. Lax marriage arrangements and paucity of women contributed to the perception among whites that indentured migrants were amoral and promiscuous.

Inheritance was another issue that occupied Aboobaker’s thoughts. He was concerned that because many Indians had come without families, relatives in India might be deprived of inheritance by unscrupulous acquaintances in Natal. He wanted colonial officials to be responsible for the estates of the dead: “I think that the administration of the estate of a deceased Indian should be in the hands of the Protector of Immigrants. If, after the expiration of six months, and due enquiry has been made in India as to the next of kin, there be no result, I am of opinion that the proceeds of the estate should be devoted to Indian education”. This last statement shows how much he valued education as a tool for the upliftment of Indians. He saw important social benefits in education,

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35. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, pp 389-391.

something that the general Indian community had not taken up in earnest. "Another thing is that girls are married, when very young, to men very much older than themselves. These evils are best to be remedied by education. The chief point I make for the Indian population here is the want of education, which is at the bottom of most of their complaints". Both the government and employers failed to provide for the growing number of children. The first schools were established by Christian missions from around 1880. Despite their sterling work, they were handicapped by a shortage of funds and facilities, poor attendance, language difficulties, and a dearth of capable teachers. Hindu and Muslim parents were reluctant to send their children to mission schools because they feared proselytisation. As late as 1910, only 5 per cent of Indian children of school-going age were attending school.<sup>36</sup> Aboobaker's concern regarding education extended beyond school children. He felt that a lack of business knowledge contributed to many business failures among free Indians: "I think about twenty-five percent of Indians, on the termination of their indentures, work on their own account. There is not a large number keeping stores. I do not think that there are more than one hundred shops, held by free Indians, in the whole Colony. There are some few who trade properly, but a great many, for want of knowledge and education, buy and sell below the purchase price, and continue to do so until they fail".

Aboobaker wanted the Natal authorities to control Indian access to alcohol, and, where possible, impose prohibition: "I do not think that the Indians, outside of the towns, are under sufficient police control. I think that, if you prohibited drink altogether to the Indian population, you would do a great deal of good". He calculated that Indians were spending approximately £12 000 per annum on alcohol, which could be put to better use: "If that money were put into education, it would be a great advantage to the colony". Aboobaker told the commissioners that while both Hinduism and Islam prohibited alcohol, indentured Indians took to drink because of the lack of social sanctions in Natal. In India, he said, higher caste Hindus were expelled from their caste if caught drinking, while "among the lower castes drunkenness is looked upon as a disgrace". Aboobaker blamed south Indians for excessive drinking among indentured Indians: "The Madrassee is the greatest drinker in India, and, when he comes here, he imports his drinking habits with him. I think that the Madras man teaches the other Indians here to drink". The veracity of Aboobaker's contention cannot be independently verified.

Aboobaker also commented on suicide among indentured Indians. Bhana and Bhana have shown that the scale was second only to Fiji, and considerably

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36. J. Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1983), pp 198-199.

higher than Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad. For the period 1900-1903, for example, the suicide rate among indentured Indians was 63,38 per 100 000 in Natal, 72,79 in Fiji, 16,53 in British Guyana and 19,81 in Trinidad.<sup>37</sup> Aboobaker told the Commission that suicide was due to “firstly, adultery; secondly, drink; thirdly, the breaking of marriage contracts as regards the children; fourthly, the use of *ganja* drives them frantic, and they commit suicide, and sometimes homicide”. Aboobaker called on the Government to increase the proportion of women, and “take these matters of drinking and smoking noxious drugs, in hand, and pass stringent laws concerning them”. It seems as if Aboobaker had a better grasp of the sociological and psychological factors that led to suicide than the Protector who, in 1894, commented that the suicide was common because Indians did not “value life ... The most trivial thing in existence will often lead to suicide”.<sup>38</sup>

The quality of Indian interpreters also troubled Aboobaker: “I am not satisfied with the Indian interpreters in some Courts; they are not educated and they accept bribes. I think that an interpreter should pass an examination, equivalent to that called the ‘higher standard’ in India, which is exacted from all Government officials”. This was a perceptive observation by him. Prinisha Badassy has shown that interpreters, as civil servants, were intermediaries between the colonial state and the wider Indian population and in certain instances, because of the enormous power they wielded over the indentured population, they were “active agents in the perpetuation of colonial oppression, and hegemonic imperialist ideas”. They had the command of English, a critical asset in colonial Natal, and some abused their position. Those who were selfish and arrogant, Badassy showed, exploited the working poor by falsifying their stories and extorting bribes and other illegal payments.<sup>39</sup> “The *kaffir* constables tyrannise over the Indians very much indeed”, Aboobaker told the commission. In colonial Natal, as part of their policy of divide and control, employers placed Africans in a position of authority over Indians, and often used them to carry out corporal punishment. There were frequent complaints by indentured workers to the Protector that African overseers physically abused them with large cane sticks or whips (*sjamboks*).

Aboobaker also pointed to the difficulty that many Indians experienced in trying to obtain their basic supplies: “The grumbling is on account of the

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37. S. Bhana and A. Bhana, “An Exploration of the Psycho-Historical Circumstances Surrounding Suicide among Indentured Indians”, in S. Bhana (ed), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* (Peepal Tree, Yorkshire, 1991), pp 137-188.
  38. Bhana and Bhana, “An Exploration of the Psycho-Historical Circumstances Surrounding Suicide among Indentured Indians”, p 137.
  39. P. Badassy, “Turbans and Top Hats. Indian Interpreters in the Colony of Natal.” BA Honours, University of Natal, 2002.

Sunday closing of shops, which deprives them of the opportunity of purchasing, as they have to work six days in the week”. Though most Indians were not Christian, they were prevented from trading on Sundays. Aboobaker’s submission was not self-serving. The prohibition on Sunday trading was a serious handicap for indentured Indians, particularly those who were single and did not have spouses to do their shopping. When the law prohibiting trade on “the Lord’s Day” was introduced in 1878, many Indians protested to the Government that Sunday was the only day during the entire five-year period of indenture when workers were free to purchase the necessities of life. On other days, the law stated that if workers were found two miles away from their place of employment, they could be jailed. The Government ignored Indian complaints in order to appease white traders. Despite the many problems and inconveniences that Aboobaker referred to, he felt that “the condition of the Indian population, as far as food and treatment are concerned, is better in Natal than in Mauritius”.

Aboobaker was unquestionably an accomplished and successful businessman. His interest, however, was not confined to trade. His evidence was insightful and perceptive. His observations show that he was a careful observer of Indian society, was aware of the problems they faced and gave careful thought to solutions. This was even recognised by indentured Indians long after his death. For example, when K.D. Naidoo, a Hindu from Pietermaritzburg, sent a petition to Governor-General Lord Gladstone in 1911, outlining Indian grievances, he acknowledged Aboobaker’s contribution:

I would like to refer to Mr Aboobaker Amod, a well-known gentleman in Natal who had a large business many years ago. He did his utmost for the Hindus sending them away to India as free passengers, supplying them with food and all that was necessary and giving them money as well. A few years afterwards Mr Aboobaker Amod returned to Bombay where he died. Mr Aboobaker Amod well deserves the thanks of the Indian community.<sup>40</sup>

### **Rise of anti-Indianism**

In his testimony to the Commission, Aboobaker also reflected on rising anti-Indianism, which he attributed to the economic depression in the Colony. He was confident that white complaints would cease once the business climate improved: “I think that if the Indians are allowed to remain in the Colony, they will be a great benefit to it. I do not think that it would be right to compel Indians to go back to India at the end of their service. I think that much of the present complaint arises from bad times; as business mends and produce

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40. NAB: PM 1/1/61, 15/255, 11 March 1912.

increases, labour will be required and the present complaint will not be so frequent". The proliferation of Indian traders in Natal gave rise to racist policies. Depression in the 1880s left many traders insolvent, both white and Indian, but whites blamed Indian competition for their plight. They felt that fewer Indians were affected by the depression because of their "different" business methods and "standard of living". Such sentiments were widespread in the Colony. In 1886, an anonymous correspondent to the *Natal Witness* attributed the depression "in great measure to Indian traders who compete against the white man everywhere. Eventually there can be nothing but the extinction of the white trading classes. These Asiatics prosper on a profit that would not find a white man in food". Indian wholesalers were accused of monopolising the rice trade: "their principal and almost only food – rice – is bought from India; and the importation of this is now almost exclusively in Arab hands. Reckon thousands of pounds have been sent from the Colony for the purchase of this stuff". Aboobaker, who imported rice from India and Mauritius, and competed directly with white firms like *Snell & Sons*, *Atkinson & Co.* and *Arbuckle & Steel*, was regarded as the chief culprit. As a result of Aboobaker's competition the price of rice dropped from 21 shillings per bag in 1880 to 14 shillings in 1884.<sup>41</sup>

While Natal contemplated how to deal with Indian competition, the Transvaal and Orange Free State (OFS), introduced anti-Indian legislation which made migration very difficult. Ordinance 18 of 1884 categorised Indians in the OFS as "Coloureds" and compelled them to pay 10 shillings head tax each, while Ordinance 1 of 1885 required Indian traders to register with the magistrate of the district in which they did business and barred them from renting or purchasing immovable property. In 1885 thirteen Gujarati "Arabs" in the OFS, led by Aboobaker who had a business in Heidelberg, petitioned the OFS Volksraad regarding the disabilities brought about by these laws. Indians, the petitioners said, wished to be classified as citizens rather than "Coloureds", and enjoy full rights as they paid "their licence fees, like all white traders". In Natal, the petition added, Indian traders were "treated like Europeans", considered citizens, had the right to vote, and could become landowners, rights denied to Coloureds in the Free State. The petitioners emphasised that they "favoured" the state by using local banks, making use of postal coaches, and selling their goods at competitive prices. They considered it most "humiliating for their dignity to be classified and as it were to be equalled with the Coloureds". Petitioners were hopeful that "your Honour, after having received this explanation, will not be unwilling to withdraw the said Ordinance in so far as it concerns Arabs".<sup>42</sup>

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41. *Natal Witness*, 8 April 1886.

42. S. Bhana and B. Pachai, *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans*

The Free State Government ignored the petition and instead applied the laws robustly. Aboobaker submitted a second petition in May 1887, in which he pointed out that Ordinance 1 of 1885, which prohibited Indians from renting or purchasing property, did not make provision for “Arabs who held land in lease or otherwise at the date of the Ordinance”. The law required Indians to leave the Free State by the end of 1886, though many traders had leases and licences to the end of 1887. Landlords were pressuring Indians to “terminate their tenure” because district magistrates were threatening them with fines of £100 each if they did not evict their “Arab” tenants. The petition urged Government to take into consideration that rent paid by Indian traders was “a contribution to the wealth of the State”; that trade competition had “reduced the price of commodities and is therefore to the benefit of the consumer”; and that as “subjects of the English Queen”, Indians had “the right to be treated equally with other subjects of Her Majesty”. The petitioners asked Government to “render assistance in accordance with the constitution and principles of a State founded on freedom”.<sup>43</sup> The petition was in vain. In September 1890, a law prohibited Indians from owning property or trading in the Free State unless they had been registered under Ordinance 1 of 1885. Indian traders had not taken the 1885 legislation seriously and large companies like *Aboobaker Amod & Co.* and *Moosa Hajee Cassim & Co.* had to cease trading in the OFS.<sup>44</sup> Anti-Indian legislation in the Transvaal was enforced after Aboobaker’s death.

### Untimely death

Aboobaker’s testimony to the Wragg Commission was his last significant contribution in Natal. He returned to India in July 1886, while his cousin Hajee Dada and brother O.H.A. Jhaveri remained in Durban. Aboobaker died of cholera in August 1887 at the age of 35. News of his death reached Durban on 8 August 1887 when Hajee Ismail of Bombay, Aboobaker’s cousin who described himself as “intimately connected with him in business”, telegraphed Hajee Dada. The *Natal Mercury* reported Aboobaker Amod’s death on 11 August 1887:

We yesterday learnt with regret that Mr Aboobaker Amod, Head of the firm of *Messrs Aboobaker Amod & Co.*, died at Bombay on Sunday last from cholera. The news was received on Monday by the representatives of the firm in Durban, but owing to Arab custom, the intelligence was kept quiet for a few days. Mr. Aboobaker Amod

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(David Philip, Cape Town, 1984), pp 31-32.

43. Bhana and Pachai, *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans*, pp 32-33.
44. M. Tayal, “Gandhi: The South African Experience.” PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1980, p 67.

came to the colony from Mauritius, and he had an extensive business in South Africa, and also in India. Deceased was a man of keen perceptive faculties, and took an eager interest in the doings of the town and colony generally, and his loss will be severely felt by the Indians and Arabs of the town, to whom he often proved a good friend. The deceased left here for a sojourn in India in July last, and was only in his 35<sup>th</sup> year when he fell victim to the fatal scourge.<sup>45</sup>

As Aboobaker did not leave a will, the Master appointed Hajee Dada as executor of the estate and guardian of Aboobaker's brother O.H.A. Jhaveri, who was a minor.<sup>46</sup> Aboobaker's family continued to play an important role in Natal. His son Ismail returned from India in 1913 to join O.H.A. Jhaveri, co-heir of Aboobaker's estate. Like many traders, Ismail maintained close links with his ancestral home. He presided at the Kathiawar Muslim Educational Society at Porbandar in 1918; was chairman of the *Porbandar Jooma Mosque and Madressa Managing Committees*; he was a close friend of His Highness, the Rana Sahib of Porbandar, and was invited to annual meetings of the Indian National Congress. Ismail died in Durban in 1925 at the age of 49.<sup>47</sup> O.H.A. Jhaveri, born in Porbandar in 1871, joined Aboobaker in Durban in 1884. He and Ismail managed the business, which they renamed *E. Aboobaker & Brother*. O.H.A. Jhaveri was very active in public life. He was a loyal supporter of Gandhi and the NIC, of which he was secretary for several years, and was variously president of the South African Indian Congress during the 1920s, chairman of the Orient Club, trustee of the M.K. Gandhi Library, Mahatma Gandhi Phoenix Settlement and *Jumuah Masjid Trust*.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusions

Aboobaker Amod was one of many thousands of Indians who settled in Natal independently of official arrangements between the governments of Natal and India. His story is important in the first instance because he stood out from his contemporaries. He was the first passenger migrant, his businesses flourished, his operations were transnational, he was a large landowner, he helped build mosques, provided assistance to the needy, was the first Indian Postmaster-

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45. *Natal Mercury*, 11 August 1887.

46. NAB: MSCE 6/313/1887, 9 September 1887.

47. D. Bramdaw (ed), *The South African Indian WHO'S WHO and Commercial Directory. A Biographical Sketch Book with Illustrations of South African Indians and an Illustrated Business Directory 1960* (The Natal Witness, Pietermaritzburg, 1960), p 225.

48. D. Bramdaw (ed), *The South African Indian WHO'S WHO and Commercial Directory. Incorporating Southern and Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Portuguese East Africa 1938-1940* (The Natal Witness, Pietermaritzburg, s.a.), p 120; NAB: MSCE 37673/1943.

General and the first Muslim Marriage Officer. He was respected alike by Indians, both Muslim and Hindu, indentured and passenger, as well as many white settlers and officials.<sup>49</sup> However, Aboobaker's story is important not only for what he achieved in his personal capacity, but also for what it tells us about the migratory experiences of early traders. His biography underscores, in the first instance, the manner in which colonial authorities differentiated Indians on the basis of class. Whites referred to larger Indian capitalists as "Arabs", while working-class Indians were often referred to by the derogatory nomenclature "coolie". The positive attitude of many whites towards passengers is reflected in an editorial in the *Natal Mercury* in 1877 when Indian traders were subject to the 21:00 curfew. According to the editor, Natal's increasing link with India would

... bring to us an ever-growing influx of Eastern enterprise and population; that they will contribute considerably to the prosperity and activity of the place we cannot doubt. These Arabian merchants and dealers form an almost inseparable adjunct of Indian immigration. They are, so to speak, the commercial agents of the working people of India; whose wants they understand, and know best how to satisfy. To expel them from our midst; to subject them to special plans and penalties because their skins may be a shade darker than those of Europeans, would be to do a manifest injustice.<sup>50</sup>

We noted from Aboobaker's petition to the OFS government that "Arabs" enjoyed the same rights as whites in Natal. This remained the case until the 1890s. The attitude to working-class Indians, on the other hand, was different. The *Natal Mercury* wanted them and Africans segregated in locations: "Council will have ere long, to direct its attention – to the setting aside of a 'quarter' for the lower orders of Coloured residents ... It would be sound policy for the Corporation to set aside a certain block of land which might be occupied by this class of tenants under regular supervision".<sup>51</sup> While it falls outside the scope of this study, we should add that the attitude of whites, even those like future Prime Minister Harry Escombe, who was sympathetic to Indians, changed as whites and Indians reached parity in numerical and class terms. Responsible Government in 1893 gave white colonists the means to introduce restrictive legislation against Indians and make race the basis for the "meta" identities that were to shape relations in colonial Natal. This led, as Padayachee and Morrell have suggested, to many traders giving up on Natal by

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49. For short biographical sketches on members of the Jhaveri family, see: F. Meer (ed), *The South African Gandhi. An Abstract of the Speeches and Writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* (Institute for Black Research, Durban, 1996), pp 1193-1194.

50. *Natal Mercury*, 13 December 1877.

51. *Natal Mercury*, 13 December 1877.

World War I, and settling elsewhere as a result of declining opportunities.<sup>52</sup> Aboobaker's story illuminates a number of themes relevant to early Indian migrations, such as fissures among migrants, the importance of family networks in increasing immigration, deplorable living conditions of the working classes, social and economic hardships of indenture, the pivotal role of culture and religion in shaping Indian lives, and the trading practices of early traders.

This narrative also highlights the difficulty and value of using oral history to reconstruct the past. In the Jhaveri family, Aboobaker's story has been passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. Elements of the story have changed with each reconstruction, though the core has been retained. Family members continue to accept tales of Aboobaker's indigency even though photographs of the massive, opulent and striking castle-like family home on the outskirts of Porbander, with a second home in the city, his rapid economic success in Natal and the respect he commanded from locals, suggest that he had been a man of means when he arrived in Natal. They also continue to believe that he gave shelter to Paul Kruger when the latter was stranded in the Transvaal. The difficulty with oral history is due partly to well-documented problems associated with memory, as well as to the fact that individuals select stories from the past that assume a life of their own. They are told so often that tellers believe them without pondering on their veracity.<sup>53</sup> This article underscores the importance of examining many and diverse historical sources. Testimony from Aboobaker's family was invaluable in providing the broad outlines of his life, family background, and migration to Natal, as well as his relationship with many of the settlers who followed him to Natal. After interviewing Aboobaker's descendants, research for this paper was carried out in the archives using sources like the Reports of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, Estates of the Deceased, and the Immigration Restriction Department. Together with minutes of Town Council meetings and contemporary newspapers, this helped to recreate the most likely account of Aboobaker's early life and settlement in Natal. While the deconstruction of some of the myths and legends surrounding Aboobaker's life may not be entirely palatable to his descendents, this research process has shown that knowledge is partial, that research methods can provide a safeguard on oral history if carried out vigilantly, that the historian can become close to a subject without losing objectivity, and that the researcher should always endeavour to assert the final authority on the outcome.

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52. Padayachee and Morrell, "Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy, c 1875-1914", p 98.

53. See: K. Plummer, "The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research", in P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and L. Lofland (eds), *Handbook of Ethnography*. (Sage Publications, London, 2001), pp 395-406.

### **Abstract**

Aboobaker Amod is generally regarded as the first passenger migrant of Indian origin to settle in Natal. His stay was short but he made a significant religious, economic and social contribution. This short biography of Aboobaker serves as a lens through which to view the migratory experiences of early traders, their association with indentured Indians, networks among traders and relationships between passengers, white settlers and colonial authorities. Passenger migrants came outside of official arrangements between the governments of India and Natal. They came voluntarily at their own expense and were subject to the ordinary laws of the Colony. Aboobaker's story underscores the manner in which colonial authorities differentiated Indians on the basis of class, the fissures among Indian migrants, importance of family networks in increasing immigration and the importance of religion in shaping Indian lives. This paper also highlights the difficulty and value of using oral history. Many of the legends about Aboobaker which are accepted among his descendants and are repeated in public settings, are not corroborated by "historical facts". This emphasizes the importance of examining diverse historical sources in reconstructing the past. While testimony from Aboobaker's family provided the broad outlines of his life, this was augmented by archival sources and contemporary newspapers. This helped to recreate the most likely account of Aboobaker's early life and settlement in Natal. This endeavour underlines the fact that historical knowledge is always partial and subject to revision.

### **Opsomming**

#### **"A Man of Keen Perceptive Faculties": Aboobaker Amod Jhaveri, 'n "Arabier" in Koloniale Natal, circa 1872-1887**

Aboobaker Amod word oor die algemeen beskou as die eerste passasier Indiese landsverhuiser wat hom in Natal gevestig het. Sy verblyf was kort, maar nogtans het hy 'n betekenisvolle godsdienstige, ekonomiese en sosiale bydrae gelewer. Hierdie bondige biografie van Aboobaker dien as 'n lens waardeur die migrasie belewenisse van vroeë handelaars, hulle verhouding met ingeboekte Indiese arbeiders, onderlinge netwerke tussen handelaars en die verhouding tussen Indiese passasier immigrante, wit nedersetters en die koloniale owerhede bestudeer kan word. Passasier immigrante het onafhanklik van die offisiële ooreenkomste tussen die owerhede van Indië en Natal verhuis. Hulle het vrywillig en op eie koste geïmmigreer en was onderhewig aan die normale koloniale wetgewing. Aboobaker se lewensverhaal onderstreep die wyse waarop die koloniale owerhede tussen Indiërs onderskei het op grond van

klas, die gapings tussen Indiese migrante, die rol van familienetwerke by toenemende immigrasie en die belangrikheid van godsdiens in die vorming van Indiërs se lewens. Hierdie artikel dui ook die problematiek verbonde aan, en waarde van die gebruik van mondeling oorgelewerde geskiedenis aan. Vele van die legendes oor Aboobaker wat sondermeer deur sy nageslag aanvaar en in die openbaar herhaal word, word nie deur “historiese feite” gestaaf nie. Die feit beklemtoon die belang daarvan om diverse historiese bronne aan deeglike beoordeling en ondersoek te onderwerp wanneer die verlede herskep word. Waar die getuienis van Aboobaker se familie die breë buitelyne van sy lewe voorsien het, is die res van die prentjie deur argivale bronne en tydgenootlike koerante ingevul. Dit het gehelp om die mees akkurate weergawe moontlik van Aboobaker se vroeë lewe en vestiging in Natal te skep. Hierdie poging toon weer eens dat historiese kennis altyd net gedeeltelike kennis is en altyd aan hersiening ondergeskik bly.

**Key words**

Indian traders, Muslims, migration, ethnicity, racism, colonial Natal.

**Sleutelwoorde**

Indiër handelaars, Moslems, migrasie, etnisiteit, rassisme, koloniale Natal.

