

The Making of "Indianess": Indian Politics in South Africa During the 1930s and 1940s

Goolam Vahed
University of Durban-Westville

The years 1914 to 1949 were witness to rapid and extensive change in the social and material conditions of Indians. The transformation of the majority of Indians to an urban-based proletariat presented them with new challenges as well as additional choices of group membership. They came into contact with African and white workers in their places of employment, as well as with Indians from different language and religious backgrounds at home, school and work.

These changes were important for Indian identity formation. Ginwala, Pahad, Meer, Frederickse, Bagwandeem, and Tayal, amongst others, have argued that the newly urbanised workers radicalised Indian politics by acquiring a class and non-racial identity which called for the broadest possible united front against white minority rule, and that it was this new identity which propelled Indians into joint action with Africans and Coloureds from the 1940s. This is seen as evidence of the forging of a non-racial identity which brought the different disenfranchised "racial" groups closer together.¹

¹ F. Ginwala, "Class, Consciousness and Control: Indian South Africans, 1869-1946," Ph.D dissertation, Oxford University, 1974; M. Tayal, "Ideology in Organised Indian Politics," Paper presented at Conference on "South Africa in the Comparative Study of Class, Race and Nationalism." New York, 1982; F. Meer, "Indentured Labour and Group Formation in Apartheid Society," *Race and Class* XXVI 4 (1985); E. Pahad, "The Development of Indian Political Movements in South Africa," Ph.D thesis, University of Sussex, 1972; D.L. Bagwandeem, *A People on Trial For Breaching Racism. The Struggle for Land and Housing of the Indian People of Natal: 1940-1946* (Durban: IBR, 1995); Julie Frederickse, *The Unbreakable Thread. Non-Racialism in South Africa*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1990).

Some recent studies have questioned this notion that there was a clear cut development of class consciousness and non-racialism amongst Indians during the 1930s and 1940s.² Identities are fluid and constantly negotiated in the interaction between individual and society. We cannot, therefore, speak in terms of fixed 'master' identities like race, class or ethnicity. Many Indians who adopted a class identity did not see a contradiction between class and racial identities and, in most cases, class identity coexisted with racial identity. As Filatova reminds us, colonial society "created a complicated system of intertwined identities" which "coexist and intermingle in intricate ways, showing a trace of this or a side of that identity in various circumstances."³

For Indians, identification was neither automatic nor residual but was constantly re-negotiated on two levels. On the one hand, Indians manifested identities that were important in relations with other Indians. These were based on language, class, caste and religion. On another level, however, Indians were also involved in relations with "outsiders," and being "Indian" assumed importance during critical periods as political and economic pressures pushed disparate members closer together. It is intended to explore how in over four decades a common identity, "Indianness," emerged in relation to Africans and whites. Further, that a central part of this process was related to race and ethnic distinction.

²P. Maylam. "The Changing Political Economy of the Region 1920-1950," in R. Morrell. ed. *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal. Social and Historical Perspectives*. Durban: Indicator Press, 1996; B. Freund. *Insiders and Outsiders. The Indian Working Class of Durban 1910-1990*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995); A. Desai. *Arise Ye Coolies. Apartheid and the Indian. 1960-1995*. (Johannesburg: Impact Africa Publishing C.C.. 1996).

³ I. Filatova. "History Through the Prism of Identity: Interpretation at the Crossroads," Morrell ed. *Identities*, 6.

Arrival and Settlement of Indians, 1860-1914

Three themes need to be underscored for this early period: Indians were fragmented along class, language, caste and religious lines; merchants dominated Indian politics in South Africa; and a separate political tradition resulted from the mobilisation of Indians along racial lines. Between 1860 and 1911, Natal imported 152,642 indentured Indian workers to solve its labour crisis. The list of indentured immigrants included several hundred castes and although the majority were middle-to-low caste there were some upper-to-middle level castes.⁴ They were drawn primarily from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the southeast, and Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the northeast of India. Migrants from the south spoke Tamil and Telegu; northerners spoke dialects of Hindi.⁵ Indentured Indians were followed by entrepreneurs from Gujarat who began arriving in Natal from the mid-1870s. Unlike their indentured counterparts, they were considered British subjects and subject to the ordinary laws of the Colony. They were incorrectly called 'Arabs' because of their Muslim religion and mode of dress.⁶

The special circumstances of merchants enabled them to keep their social distance from other Indians and identify with India as their home country. The main distinction in Natal was between Gujarati-speaking Muslim and higher caste Hindu traders from northern India, and Telegu and Tamil speaking indentured Indians from south India. The former were light skinned and looked down upon darker skinned south Indians.⁷ Merchants wanted to be excluded from the disabilities which

⁴ S. Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal 1860-1902. A Study Based on Ships Lists*. (New Delhi, 1991), 20.

⁵ R. Mesthrie, *English in Language Shift. The History, Structure and Sociolinguistics of SAIE*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7

⁶ S. Bhana and J. Brain, *Setting Down Roots. Indian Migrants in South Africa 1860-1911*. (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1990): 65-

⁷ Ginwala, "Class," 97.

other Indians faced. A merchant called Ebrahim Camroodeen, for example, complained to the immigration restriction officer that "no distinction is made between common and better class Indians."⁸ The Wragg Commission noted that "Arabs (Indian traders) associate with Indians only so far as trade and labour compels them."⁹ George Mutukistna, an ex-indentured Indian, testified that Indian merchants "think themselves better because they are rich and think that, by observing caste distinctions, they can set themselves apart from the Natal Indian people."¹⁰

Passenger Indians had greater access to capital, skills and business acumen and rapidly came to dominate the "Indian" economy at the expense of ex-indentured Indians which further sharpened class differences. Whereas in 1875, 10 free Indians and 1 passenger Indian held trading licences, by 1885 the figures were 26 and 40 respectively.¹¹ In a letter to the Town Clerk outlining their economic situation since the 1890s, ex-indentured Indians complained that passenger Indians had superseded them in trade:

Our people (Madraseses and Calcuttias) carried on business all over Durban prior to 1890 such as General Dealers, Fruit and Vegetable dealers, and several other businesses of like nature. Our people since 1890 have been gradually ousted from all the above mentioned businesses by our so-called Indian brothers, the Red Caps and Banyans.¹²

⁸ V. Padayachee and R. Morrell, "Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy, c1875-1914," in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17 1 (March 1991), 10.

⁹ Wragg Commission Report, 1887, in Y.S. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour in Natal, 1851-1917* (Durban: Institute for Black Research, 1980), 363.

¹⁰ Wragg Commission, in Meer, *Documents*, 393.

¹¹ Wragg Commission, in Meer, *Documents*, 81.

¹² Letter from municipal employees to DTC, 10 September 1924, NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1929, Z23 (vol. 3). 'Banyans' refers to north Indian Gujarati Hindus while 'Red Caps' were Muslim traders, the 'red caps' being the red middle eastern head gear worn by Muslims.

White hostility was aroused by non-indentured "free" and "passenger" Indian farmers, market gardeners, hawkers and traders who were blamed for the shortage of labour and for undercutting prices.¹³ Once Natal obtained self-government in 1893, non-indentured Indians were legally subordinated so that whites could feel secure against the "Asiatic Menace". Indians were deprived of the vote, immigration was curbed, and a £3 tax imposed on non-indentured Indians.

Indian resistance to these measures was dominated by merchants. The most prominent elite organisation was the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) which was formed in 1894 by Mohandas K. Gandhi. Its strategy was primarily constitutional as it attempted to protect the trade, franchise and residence rights of merchants.¹⁴ However, by bringing together Indians from different backgrounds the NIC introduced "Indianness" in South African politics and initiated a separate racial political identity. Even the name of the party was a calculated choice. According to Gandhi "'Congress' was the very life of India. I wanted to popularise it in Natal."¹⁵

Natal was part of the British Empire and Indians constantly placed themselves within an imperial identity. During the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 Gandhi organised an Indian Ambulance Corps to assist the British. When the Bambatha Rebellion broke out in 1906 the NIC offered assistance to the government. Advocate Gabriel, a descendant of indentured Indians, explained that while Indians suffered disabilities, this should be viewed as a "family quarrel" which had to be "forgotten in the face of a common danger." As a British subject

BS. Bhana, "Indian trade and traders in colonial Natal," in B. Guest and J. Sellers, *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony. Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Colonial Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1985), 236.

¹⁴ M. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 51.

¹⁵ M. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 158.

who owed his loyalty to King Edward, he could not sit back and leave his "fellow colonists to quell the revolt."¹⁶ Gandhi also noted that Indians did not seek an alliance with Africans because they wanted to be treated differently to Africans on the basis of being British citizens.¹⁷

By 1912, when Gokhale, an Indian diplomat, visited South Africa, the tax was in the forefront of Indian grievances. Gokhale discussed the tax with Smuts and left the impression that it would be repealed. When Smuts denied this, Gandhi considered it ethically proper to pursue its repeal through mass action and initiated a strike by 4,000 Indian workers at the coalmines in Northern Natal in October 1913. The success of the strike was assured when 15,000 Indians on coastal sugar estates joined at the end of October.¹⁸ A further 7,000 free Indian domestics, waiters, railway and municipal workers, and newspaper and milk vendors also joined in sympathy.¹⁹

This strike shows the complex interplay between race and class. Although there were class-based reasons for the strike it took on a racial dimension because Indians of all classes were suppressed by the state on the basis of race. The privileged economic position of merchants was neutralised by their having to confront racism. As Imam Bawazeer, a Muslim priest, remarked when he was departing for India in 1915: "We are all Indians in the eyes of the Europeans in this country. We have never drawn distinction between Mahomedan and Hindus in public matters. We must set aside any differences and be united."²⁰ Workers cited prominent Indian figures like Gandhi and Gokhale in explaining their decision to strike.²¹ Further, the

¹⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 28 April, 1906.

¹⁷ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 9, 149.

¹⁸ Swan, *Gandhi*, 252.

¹⁹ C.G. Henning, *The Indentured Indian in Natal*, (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1993), 183.

²⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 3 December 1915.

²¹ Swan, *Gandhi*, 256.

strike was sustained by contributions from Indians from all over South Africa while "large sums of money poured into South Africa from all parts of the Motherland."²² Being treated legislatively as a composite whole forced a "made-in-Natal" consciousness on Indians who were diverse in terms of their class, caste, language, phenotype and religion. As Filatova has pointed out, 'Africans', 'Europeans' and 'Indians' were created "as a mechanism of redistribution and exploitation within the framework of colonial society. Their corresponding colour-tainted identities gradually emerged as a result of common interest formed by colonial social engineering."²³

The Politics of Accommodation, 1920s and 1930s

Moderates continued to dominate politics until the mid-1930s. A conspicuous feature of their politics was the desire to maintain a link with India. At a conference in August 1919 moderates emphasised that "blood is thicker than water. The destinies of India and ourselves are one, and we cannot afford to dissociate ourselves from our Motherland."²⁴ In 1919 Swami Bawani Dayal represented South African Indians at the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress at Amritsar. In 1922 he got the INC to agree that South Africa could send 10 delegates to its annual meetings.²⁵ On 15 March 1922 all Indian businesses in Durban were closed to observe a day of prayer for the "salvation of India."²⁶

The link with India was further strengthened during the mid-1920s. As discrimination increased, the SAIC proposed a round-table conference between the Union, Imperial and Indian governments which led in the Cape Town Agreement of 1927,

²² *Golden Number of the Indian Opinion*, 1914.

²³ Filatova, "History," in Morrell, *Identities*, 11

²⁴ *The Dharma Vir*, 22 August 1919.

²⁵ N. Agrawal, *Bawani Dayal*, (Ettawah: Indian Colonial Association, 1939), 44.

²⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 17 March 1922.

as a result of which an Indian Agent was appointed to facilitate relations with the Union government. This not only ensured that the struggle of Indians remained isolated from that of Africans but also served as a moderating influence. Radical leaders were to later complain that the Agency "has become the spearhead of compromise and defeatism."²⁷

Middle class Indians underplayed class by emphasising that Indians were a homogenous collectivity with common interests. Manilal Gandhi, son of M K Gandhi, pointed out that during crises Indian capitalists "joined hands with the labourers; both have suffered together in the same cause. It must never be forgotten that Indians have a common foe to combat - race prejudice."²⁸ An alliance with Africans was deemed retrogressive and the SAIC declined to participate in the 1927 Non-European Co-operation Conference on the grounds that Indians were citizens of the British Empire and had a different status to Africans who possessed the right "to ask the rulers to quit" but had not "attained the standard of education or civilization to enable them to do so."²⁹ Sastri, the first Agent, warned that Indians stood a better chance of getting redress "if we fight our own battle, for their (African) status is greatly inferior to ours...."³⁰ Sastri advocated an alliance with white liberals and formed the Durban Inda-European Council in 1928. Although such councils had existed for Africans and whites since 1921, Sastri insisted on a separate council for Indians to avoid a formal alliance with Africans.³¹

Indians persisted in placing themselves within an imperial identity by reinforcing their loyalty to Empire. When the Prince

²⁷ *The Call*, June 1940.

²⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 4 November 1919.

²⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 17 June 1927.

³⁰ *The Leader*, 2 April 1941.

³¹ US. Mesthrie, "From Sastri to Deshmukh, A Study of the Role of the Government of India's representatives in South Africa, 1927-1946," (D.Phil, University of Cape Town, 1984), 92.

of Wales visited Durban in 1925 he was garlanded at a special ceremony attended by 15,000 Indians and told to "tell our king that we are his loyal subjects." The *Indian Opinion* was proud that "our decorations surpassed expectations. No expense was spared to prove that although we were not treated with equality yet our loyalty and enthusiasm could not be questioned."³² When Prince George visited Durban in 1934 Indians were told that "it was the duty of everyone in this country to show loyalty to him in whatever way and as extravagantly as he may choose."³³ For the Coronation of King George VI, a programme of sports, music, entertainment and meals was organised on 12 May 1937 and attended by around 25,000 Indians.³⁴ When some Indian workers were dismissed in 1937 for striking the *Indian Views* commented that the "term British subject connotes freedom and justice and fair play. Let us hope that we will not be disappointed in loyal Natal now that these are demanded."³⁵

As part of their programme of moulding an Indian 'community' moderates even organised Indian workers. This was stimulated by the 1927 Liquor Bill which stipulated that Indians could not be employed in establishments which served liquor. The NIC organised a conference of workers, merchants and professionals in December 1928 at which the Natal Workers Congress was formed with A. Christopher as president, and AI Kajee and PR Pather as vice-presidents. They were all prominent businessmen and moderate politicians.³⁶ Although the NWC formed five unions, as a result of widespread unemployment and poverty during the depression, it was unable to pursue the grievances of workers and gradually ceased to be

³² *Indian Opinion*, 11 September 1925.

³³ *Indian Opinion*, 9 March 1934.

³⁴ Report of Sub-Committee appointed by the Town Council to organise the Coronation of King George VI in May 1937. 3/DBN, 4/1/3/1541, 303 IISJ, Durban Town Clerk's Files

³⁵ *Indian Views*, 18 June 1937.

³⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 7 December 1928.

an influence. Notwithstanding this, the paternalistic attitude of merchants meant that workers were again organized along racially exclusive lines.

Economic Transformation and Growth of Trades Unions

The availability of African labour, which was due to many factors including the 1913 Land Act, resulted in a drop in Indian labour in most major sectors during the inter-war years. On Natal's coal mines the number fell from 3,739 in 1911 to 488 in 1945;³⁷ on the railways their numbers decreased from 6,000 in 1910 to 400 by the mid-1930s;³⁸ on the sugar estates the percentage of Indian labour dropped from 88 in 1910 to 7 in 1945. Shrinking opportunities in rural areas spurred the urbanward migration of Indians. The number of Indians in Durban increased from 15,631 in 1911 to 123,165 in 1949; as a percentage of Durban's population Indians increased from 23% to 32.9% during this period.³⁹

A large number of workers were absorbed in manufacturing employment where Indian employees more than doubled between 1925 and 1949, from 5,237 to 13,711. They were concentrated in certain sectors viz. food, clothing and textile, leather, furniture and paper and printing.⁴⁰ However, the government's White Labour Policy, coupled with the prejudice of white employers, denied Indians access to higher paying skilled positions. They established themselves as semi-skilled and unskilled industrial operatives earning extremely low wages. Of the 8,574 Indians in industrial employment in 1936,

³⁷ H.R. Burrows, *Indian Life and Labour in Natal* (Johannesburg, SAIRR, 1952), 161.

³⁸ R.H. Smith, *Labour Resources of Natal* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1950), 76.

³⁹ University of Natal, *The Durban Housing Survey*, (Durban, University of Natal, 1952), 35.

⁴⁰ V. Padayachee, S. Vawda and Tichmann, *Indian Workers and Trades Unions in Durban: 1930-1950*, (Durban: Institute for Social and Economic Research, UD-W, 1985), 33-36.

4,000 were "unskilled industrial labourers", most of the others being semi-skilled.⁴¹ In the emerging labour whites were far better placed than Indians. In 1951, for example, the per capita income of Indians was £40.02 and that of whites £282.74.⁴² Indians, in turn, assumed a more favourable position than Africans, particularly from the 1940s. The average wage ratio in manufacturing between Indian and African, which was only 133:100 in 1924/25 rose to 166/100 in 1953/54.⁴³

Low pay and unemployment manifested itself in extensive poverty which was a pervasive feature of Indian life in Durban. In 1940, for example, CS Smith, a visitor to Durban wrote to the Town Clerk as follows:

As a stranger to Durban from overseas, one of the first things that struck me was the appalling conditions of the majority of Indians here, malnourished and housed in hovels, without any sanitation.... Just before Xmas I was working at Hulett's in Rossburgh and had to give out the meagre Xmas boxes to Indians. I have never seen such hopeless, emaciated specimens of humanity. Some were too dazed to say "thank you" and had the apathetical look of the half-starved.⁴⁴

Such observations are supported by contemporary studies. A 1941 survey found 36% of Indian families in Clairwood in debt, 38% barely made ends meet, while only 26% were able to save money.⁴⁵ A University of Natal study in 1943/44 found that 70.6% of Indians were living below the poverty datum line and

⁴¹ Memorandum Submitted by the Social Services of South Africa (Durban Branch) to the Natal Indian Judicial Commission, 12 June 1944. SAIRR Papers.

⁴² L. Kuper, H. Watts and R. Davies, *Durban, A Study in Racial Ecology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), 243.

⁴³ Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 59.

⁴⁴ CS Smith to Town Clerk, 14 February 1940. NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/3/2033, 642.

⁴⁵ Sykes, "An Analysis of Income and Expenditure of a sample of Indian Families in the Clairwood area of Durban," *The South African Journal of Economics* (March 1941), 54.

that 40% were destitute.⁴⁶ A six-year study of the clothing industry reported in 1944 that 90% of Indians suffered from malnutrition and 60% from amoebic dysentery.⁴⁷ The daily income per head of Indians was one sixth that of whites in 1943.⁴⁸

Industrial employment and urban poverty spawned the rise of dynamic and charismatic younger leaders and trade unionism that was free from the patronage of the middle class. The new leaders challenged the politics of accommodation. Many were products of the working class and members of the CPSA. Having experienced the harshness of working class life, they devoted themselves to organizing workers and actively tried to forge a cross-race, cross-class alliance.

Mr Rowley Arenstein, a CPSA activist from that period, recalls that the Party had won over to its ranks two Indian workers, HA Naidoo and George Poonen, who dominated the trade union movement.⁴⁹ Poonen, born in 1913, was forced by poverty to leave school at the age of nine. Over the next decade he held four or five jobs and attended night school where he completed grade six. By the early 1930s both he and Naidoo worked at the same clothing company. When an Indian worker was caught stealing at the factory in 1934 the employer drilled holes in the toilet door so that guards could keep watch. Naidoo and Poonen were dismissed for organizing a protest strike. Shortly thereafter they met a CPSA member, Ramotla, who introduced them to Edward Roux. Roux explained communism to them and provided them with literature. About a month later the CPSA held its annual general meeting in Durban. Naidoo was elected secretary and Poonen party organizer of the Durban

⁴⁶ Ginwala, "Class," 303.

⁴⁷ *The Daily News*, 8 June 1944.

⁴⁸ Memorandum Submitted by the Social Services of South Africa (Durban Branch) to the Natal Indian Judicial Commission, 12 June 1944. SAIRR Papers.

⁴⁹ RJ. Arenstein interview with I. Edwards, 24 July 1985.

district. Poonen was elected chairman of the CP (Durban district) in 1938.⁵⁰

The organization of workers was extensive. Between 1934 and 1945, 43 unions with Indian membership were registered in Durban. By 1943, 16,617 Indians were members of trade unions.⁵¹ Between 1937 and 1942 Indian workers were involved in 46 strikes in Durban.⁵² A discussion of a few of these strikes illuminates the complex process of identity formation and the fragmented class-consciousness that emerged.

At Durban Falkirk Co. Ltd white unionized workers struck for higher wages in February 1937. Though supported by unskilled Indians and Africans they accepted a separate deal.⁵³ When Indians and Africans formed an unregistered union, management dismissed 15 Indians and one African as part of a "retrenchment" program.⁵⁴ 400 workers, including 300 Indians, embarked on a strike on 25 May which was only resolved on 15 July 1937 when the merchant dominated SAIC worked out an agreement with the Minister of Labour in terms of which 119 workers were re-employed, the rest were to be taken back when "circumstances permitted."⁵⁵

The involvement of merchants in the strike is significant. According to Poonen strike organizers approached the NIC for aid: "We said, look, you are supposed to represent the Indian workers.... We were able to convince them it was their duty to support the workers."⁵⁶ The NIC organized several mass meetings. At one such meeting in June 1937, where the "hall was packed to capacity," Sir Raza Ali, the Indian Agent stated that "it was his duty to do what he could to help and to make a

⁵⁰ G. Poonen interview with I. Edwards, 1985.

⁵¹ Padayachee, *Indian Workers*, 57.

⁵² Padayachee et al., *Indian Workers*, 83.

⁵³ Padayachee et al., *Indian Workers*, 89.

⁵⁴ G. Poonen interview with I. Edwards, 1985.

⁵⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 16 July 1937.

⁵⁶ G. Poonen interview with I. Edwards, 1985.

full report to the Government of India." For EM Paruk, a merchant, the dismissal of Indian workers had "become the affair of the whole community." AI Kajee, a merchant who had been present at the Industrial Council hearing as well as at the company when the workers returned to seek jobs, considered this a turning point and demanded "justice from higher powers for all Indians who are ground down. Let us remember we are Indians first and everything else after."⁵⁷

Merchants saw the situation in group terms and stressed communal solidarity. In appealing for relief, EM Paruk pointed out that the "daily bread of innocent women and children was involved. I ask you to stand by your fellow countrymen...and extend to them your moral and material support."⁵⁸ Traders, hawkers and market stall-holders contributed items like rice, mealie meal, salt, fruit, vegetables and bread to provide rations for the workers and their dependents, totalling 1,850, for the duration of the strike.⁵⁹ While the involvement of merchants was the difference between sustaining the strike and its collapse, the manner in which the strike unfolded strengthened group consciousness.

At the Dunlop Tyre Company the number of Indian employees dropped from 282 in March 1942 to 149 by December 1942 as management deliberately replaced Indians with African workers. The situation erupted when 13 Indian employees were dismissed in December 1942. Indian workers went on strike to demand the reinstatement of the dismissed workers and recognition of their union. The company used scab African labour to break the strike.⁶⁰ At a mass meeting of 30 Indian organizations and trade unions on 16 January 1943, moderates stressed that the "question has passed beyond the borders of Trade Union activity, and has assumed an Indian

⁵⁷ *Indian Views*, 11 June 1937.

⁵⁸ *Indian Views*, 11 June 1937.

⁵⁹ *Natal Advertiser* 3 June 1937.

⁶⁰ *The Leader*, 23 January 1943.

national aspect." The NIC agreed to take the matter up with the government and Dunlop management, and to provide support for workers and their families: "Congress is always prepared to assist in the alleviation of distress in which Indian men, women and children are involved."⁶¹

On 21 January 1943, A. Kajee wrote to the Minister of Labour that the matter "was of serious concern for the whole Indian community in Natal, and there is alarm lest it be extended to other industries." He requested an arbitrator to settle the dispute. Of particular concern to Kajee was that "hundreds of raw hands" had been employed to replace Indians.⁶² However, management made it clear that all vacancies created by the strike had been filled. The NIC then asked Dunlop management whether Indians had been employed to fill the vacancies because "if your policy aims at the exclusion of Indians, the matter is one of grave concern and creates a precedent which can only be regarded as a serious threat to the security and living standards of thousands of Indian workers." Dunlop's reply was that none had been employed.⁶³ In fact no Indian worker was ever again employed at the company.⁶⁴

The third strike was by 800 Indian laundry workers in December 1945.⁶⁵ Once again, African scab labour was used to break the strike: "Hundreds of natives have appeared outside the laundries and have offered themselves for work regardless of the existence of pickets."⁶⁶ Police reinforcements were called when Indians blocked entrances to laundries to prevent African scab labour from being used.⁶⁷ Most Indians lost their jobs. For *Indian Views*:

⁶¹ *Indian Views*, 19 February 1943.

⁶² *Indian Views*, 19 February 1943.

⁶³ Reply dated 24 January 1943, in *Indian Views*, 19 February 1943.

⁶⁴ Padayachee et al., *Indian Workers*, 115.

⁶⁵ *The Leader*, 12 January 1946.

⁶⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 December 1945.

⁶⁷ *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 December 1945.

The laundry strike has taught a bitter lesson. The potential danger of scabs among Africans was lost sight of.... In the unskilled field the Indian is not indispensable. There are any number of African workers available for that kind of work. Even in the skilled field the African is quite the equal of the Indian.... Indian workers would be well advised to weigh their future.⁶⁸

Employers deliberately replaced Indians because they were considered more militant. Rowley Arenstein recalled that "a lot of employers decided that if the African workers weren't agitated by the Indian workers and by the communists, then everything would be fine."⁶⁹ Indian workers were mostly semi-skilled and unskilled and were dispensable because of the large-scale urbanization of Africans during the war years. This is a recurring theme of the 1940s. Dairy workers were replaced by Africans "who appeared less likely to demand higher wages and improved conditions" and "they even accept lower than prevailing wages."⁷⁰ Indian sugar workers complained that since they had formed a union, they were being replaced with Africans.⁷¹ Indian employees of the Durban City Council dropped from 2,344 to 2,169 between June 1947 and June 1948. The chairman of the Durban Indian Municipal Employees Society was "perturbed" that Indians were replaced by Africans because they were unionized and Africans were not, and warned the union to be "more vigilant and see to it that Indian workers are not victimised or unnecessarily retrenched."⁷² When 90 Indians were dismissed by the National Bag Manufacturing Company for attending an NIC rally without permission, the

⁶⁸ *Indian Views*, 6 February 1943.

⁶⁹ I. Edwards, "Recollections - The Communist Party and Worker Militancy in Durban, early 1940s," *South African Labour Bulletin* II, 4 (1986), 71.

⁷⁰ *The Guardian*, 21 August 1941.

⁷¹ *The Guardian*, 22 December 1939.

⁷² Letter from DIMES to Town Clerk, 16 January 1947. NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/3/2045, 35/642.

"machines were running this morning under the control of Natives." According to Mr AJ Attenborough, the manager, "natives who were labourers up to yesterday have stepped into the shoes of the semi-skilled operatives, and are making a creditable job of the work." Management refused to re-employ Indians.⁷³

Job security remained an important concern even after radicals assumed control of the NIC. When housing schemes were being developed the NIC questioned the Durban City Council whether Indians were employed as artisans, what measures had been taken to encourage their employment, and what "long range plan" exists to increase their employment.⁷⁴ The Indian Branch of the Building Workers' Industrial Union requested that only Indian artisans be employed for Indian housing schemes.⁷⁵ 17 trades unions were even moved to issue a joint warning that:

If European employers continue their policy of retrenching Indians as a political weapon, the direct consequence of such a policy would be to drive Indian workers into the hands of Indian employers who would not hesitate to use the occasion to enter into unfair competition with their European counterparts.⁷⁶

The 1940s marked a turning point for Indians. Whereas prior to this period Indians struggled primarily against white racism, the African urban presence, which expanded rapidly from the early 1940s, resulted in Indians being sandwiched between white racism and the attempts of Africans to carve a niche in the racially segregated urban economy. Indian monopoly was threatened in areas they had once dominated. Indians now harboured the fear that they were being replaced by cheap African labour, became disenchanted with unions, were

⁷³ *The Daily News*, 21 February 1946

⁷⁴ NIC to Town Clerk, 24 October 1945. NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/3/1980, 30/565°.

⁷⁵ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/3/1980, 18 December 1945.

⁷⁶ *The Leader*, 2 May 1947.

averse to strike action, and concentrated on protecting their position in particular industries. The failure of non-racial unionism was not due simply to the failure to build strong union structures or to the involvement of politicians in union affairs. The reasons are much deeper. Indians brought more to the factory than their mere physical presence and cannot be isolated from their own subcultures. How they behaved, and the identities they assumed, was shaped by the social world in which changes took place.

There was a close link between race, ethnicity, culture and identity. Indians joined unions because of poverty and supporting the NIC was the next step. After all, it was the "Indian" Congress. The story of Mr M. emphasises this point.⁷⁷ Mr M., who was born in Cato Manor, left school in 1931 at a very young age to work in the clothing industry. He joined the Garment Workers Union when it was formed in 1934. From 1940 he worked for a mineral water company. There were eight such firms in Durban at this time and he formed the Mineral Water Works Union. Mr M. was also a member of the CP from the late 1930s, secretary of the NIC during the 1940s, a member of a religious body, the Arya Samaj and was associated with the activities of the Hindu Youth Organisation. He was also involved in the work of the Anti-Segregation Council and was arrested during the passive resistance campaign. Given this, Mr M.'s comments are fascinating:

Before 1949 we didn't want to have anything to do with the Africans. Even to this day, ... we don't want to rub shoulders with the Africans. I'm still a member of the NIC. My leanings are towards the left... The 1949 riots made us more anti-African. Our feelings became more bitter. We hate Africans to be quite honest with you and you can't blame us.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ D. Chetty, "The Durban Riots and Popular Memory," Paper presented at the University of Witwatersrand, 1990.

⁷⁸ Chetty, "Popular Memory," 9.

As stated earlier, many Indians did not see a contradiction between leftist and racial identities and, in most cases, class identity coexisted with racial identity. The failure of non-racial unionism resulted in many radical leaders turning to nationalist politics which further promoted group identity.

From Accommodation to Confrontation

At the same time that trade unionists were making their mark, a radical professional class was also emerging. The most prominent members of this class were Dr GM (Monty) Naicker, Dr Dadoo and Dr Goonam. Dr Naicker, whose grandfather had come to South Africa as an indentured worker, was born in 1910, and qualified as a doctor in Edinburgh in 1934 where his contemporaries were Drs Goonam and Dadoo. All three returned from Edinburgh in the mid-1930s. While Dadoo was based in the Transvaal, Goonam and Naicker became involved in the problems of the poor in Durban.

HA Naidoo, George Poonen and other union organizers had initially remained detached from organised Indian politics. This changed from 1937 when they were instructed by the CPSA to enter Indian politics. This was the era of the "Popular Front" and communists world-wide sought to forge a united front to counter Fascism.⁷⁹ The new leaders were prominent in the Non-European United Front, which had been initiated by the Coloured petty bourgeoisie in the Cape, and from which moderate Indian politicians had chosen to stay aloof. Dr Dadoo and HA Naidoo were elected to the National Council of the NEUF in April 1939, while Naidoo was a member of the Durban Provisional Committee of the NEUF.⁸⁰ This was the first attempt by Indians to forge a common "Non-European" identity.

⁷⁹ E. Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope. A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 309.

⁸⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 1 December 1939.

Naidoo and Poonen set about finding recruits to bolster their position. The Natal Indian Youth League, formed in February 1939 with Poonen as vice-president, brought together 40 sectional and religious youth bodies with 1000 members. At the first conference of the League, while various political issues were addressed, it was also emphasised that "Indians must stick together ... they are fighting as a whole and must forget all religious differences."⁸¹ To educate workers in outlying areas, Poonen formed a Worker's Study Circle in Clairwood.⁸² George Singh organized the Merebank Literary and Debating Society.⁸³ The Liberal Study Group, which had a membership of approximately 200, included Dr Goonam and Dr Naicker, who became president of the NIC in 1945.⁸⁴

Trade unionists and radical professionals joined the NIC in October 1939, which was reconstituted as the Natal Indian Association. The critical issue at this time was the attempt by whites to prevent Indians from purchasing property in certain areas. The "Pegging Act" of April 1943 banned white-Indian property transactions in Durban for a period of three years. In April 1944 moderates met with Smuts and agreed to the Pretoria Agreement which suspended the Pegging Act in return for voluntary segregation.⁸⁵ This upset radicals who formed the Anti-Segregation Council (ASC) in April 1944, a broad front of intellectuals, trade unions, sports, cultural, youth and farmers associations.

While radicals espoused non-racialism their campaign reinforced Indianness. For example, at a meeting in Overport, Dr Naicker said that the area needed a strong branch as it was "predominantly Indian - the people must make the Congress an

⁸¹ *Indian Opinion*, 17 February 1939.

⁸² G. Poonen interview with I. Edwards, 1985.

⁸³ *The Call*, July 1940.

⁸⁴ *The Leader*, 25 January 1940.

⁸⁵ Bugwandeen, *People on Trial*, 142.

effective instrument for supporting Indian demands."⁸⁶ Debi Singh, organizing secretary of the NIC, said that the campaigns were aimed at making people in India more conscious of the problems of Indians in South Africa. Reports of every meeting were sent to interested parties in India and "every available means was being used to get India's intervention."⁸⁷ A total of 31 meetings were held in 3 months and the NIC's registered membership increased from 3,000 to 22,000.⁸⁸

Moderates were aware that support for the radicals was overwhelming and did not tum up at the election on 21 October 1945. The 7,000 Indians in attendance elected all 46 nominees of the ASC to the executive of the NIC, 12 of whom were CPSA members. Dr Goonam was made a vice-president.⁸⁹ This coincided with the formation of a shadow government in India under Nehru. Indian nationalism exerted a strong ideological leverage on South African Indians. Important events were observed in Durban. The Indian Independence Day celebration was organized annually from 26 January 1942 by the Indian League of Durban.⁹⁰ Portraits of Indian leaders were hung on stage while the "playing of national songs added to the atmosphere of solemnity."⁹¹ Dr Goonam, H.A. Naidoo and other radicals addressed these gatherings annually. For Dr Goonam "all Indians must observe this day. It is their duty. An independent India would mean the recognition in South Africa of Indians as equals of the white people."⁹² Leaders considered these celebrations "a historic step in the natural consciousness of the Indian and their kinship with the people of India."⁹³

⁸⁶ *The Leader*, 22 December 1945.

⁸⁷ *The Leader*, 22 December 1945.

⁸⁸ *The Leader*, 12 January 1946.

⁸⁹ Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope*, 360.

⁹⁰ This day was observed annually before independence in 1947.

⁹¹ *The Leader*, 30 January 1943.

⁹² *The Leader*, 31 January 1942.

⁹³ *The Leader*, 2 February 1946.

Shortly after it came to power the radical NIC even proposed a federation of all Indians outside India "to protect and champion the cause of Indians abroad," as their status in the British Colonies, Zanzibar, Tanganyika and Uganda was linked.⁹⁴ When India achieved her independence on 15 August 1947, the NIC requested that all Indian businesses close and religious bodies hold "special services for the safety and progress of our Motherland." 15,000 Indians attended a meeting in Albert Park where pictures of the national leaders hung on stage, and "women stood on stage with saris in their national colours."⁹⁵ These events promoted group identity. These tactics are not anomalous when one considers that radical leadership did not emerge from a vacuum. Leaders grew up in Indian society and many belonged to religious and cultural organizations. Hence one of the first demands of the radical NIC was that the South African Broadcasting Corporation give more air time to Indian listeners.⁹⁶

As we see in the case of Dr Goonam, vice-president of the NIC, for example, the link with her Indian background is ever present. Through mother "we learnt to think beyond our surroundings for she transported us to ancient times in India.... I moved about almost involuntarily, submerged in this Indian world of profound ritual."⁹⁷ At Edinburgh the "most compelling influence on me was that of Indian students.... It was very easy for me to feel a kindred spirit with them for I too was Indian. I was attracted to the firebrands in the college and came to feel a strong affiliation with India."⁹⁸ Despite being involved in the "Left Book Club", the "Liberal Studies Group," the radical NIC and the urban poor in Durban, Dr Goonam proudly emphasised her 'Indianness' at a public meeting in India in 1941:

⁹⁴ *The Leader*, 8 June 1946.

⁹⁵ *The Leader*, 2 September 1947.

⁹⁶ *The Leader*, 24 November 1945.

⁹⁷ Dr Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, (Durban: Madiba Publishers, 1991), 12.

⁹⁸ Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, pp.41, 44.

I would like to clear a misapprehension some people have in India that Indians in South Africa were no longer Indians ... Mr Sastri would be able to testify to the good conduct of Indians there. The Indian continues to be Indian and will never lose his traditions but, on the other hand, guard them zealously.⁹⁹

In London, where she was in exile during the 1960s and 1970s, Dr Goonam was a member of the Tamil Sangam.¹⁰⁰ In exile in Zimbabwe during the 1980s: "I found that the local Indians did not have any cultural bodies and so founded the Zimbabwe Tamil Sangam, and organized classical dancing, theatrical shows, and a Tamil school. Our members were drawn from Sri Lanka, Singapore, South Africa, Mauritius and various parts of India."¹⁰¹

The shared cultural forms and festivals, residential segregation, and kinship and occupational ties impacted on most Indians and even shaped the direction and form of resistance. Resistance and protest, ironically, contributed to the forging of group identity. The passive resistance campaign provides evidence of this.

Passive Resistance, 1946-1948

The "new" NIC faced a crisis almost immediately. The Asiatic Land Tenure Bill of March 1946 segregated Indians and the NIC responded by launching a passive resistance campaign. Although leaders spoke of non-racial action, the campaign resulted in exclusive Indian mobilization over an issue which concerned them only, while the rhetoric was couched in racial and communal terms. For example, in a statement in court in June 1946, Dr Dadoo explained the purpose of the meeting as follows:

⁹⁹ *The Leader*, 12 April 1941.

¹⁰⁰ Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, 143.

¹⁰¹ Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, 173.

It is for the removal of the difficulties of the Indian community and for the upholding of the honour of the Indians that we have launched upon this campaign.... We consider this inhuman Act derogatory to the honour and dignity of the Indian community as a whole and to the Indian nation.¹⁰²

The campaign, which began on 13 June 1946, continued for exactly two years. By the time it was stopped in June 1948, almost 2,000 arrests had been made. The process of courting arrest was well orchestrated. Volunteers forwarded their names to the Passive Resistance Council (PRC). They were put into batches of five to 20, under an appointed leader, and offered themselves for arrest as a group. At a Farewell Reception prominent leaders reiterated the history of the struggle, the implications of the Bill, the best way to cope with prison life, and so on. Speeches were rendered in English, Hindi and Tamil. Volunteers were then garlanded.¹⁰³ When resisters were released, "thousands of Indians" gathered at Red Square to welcome them back.¹⁰⁴

The list of resisters is interesting. A 1947 report of 1,710 resisters included 492 factory workers, 235 housewives, 117 "waiters" (restaurant attendants), 53 municipal workers, 26 laundryworkers, 29 jewellers, 28 shop keepers, 13 tailors, as well as bus conductors, students, managers, ushers, and welders.¹⁰⁵ Thus, although the law primarily affected merchants as it closed an important avenue of investment, the majority of resisters were poorer Indians. Interviews with volunteers suggest that the welfare of the "community" was a crucial consideration. Mr Sunkar Bagath, a hawker, felt that "it is the duty of all Indians to rally behind the banner of the passive resisters. To do otherwise would be to help the government to strangle the

¹⁰² *The Guardian*, 4 July 1946.

¹⁰³ *The Leader*, 14 September 1946.

¹⁰⁴ *The Leader*, 27 December 1946.

¹⁰⁵ Report of the Passive Resistance Council, in *The Leader*, 21 June 1947.

Indian community politically, economically and socially."¹⁰⁶ Jack Govender: "I am a factory worker.... The Ghetto Act applies to me as much as any other member of the Indian community. It is an act which gives my people an inferior status."¹⁰⁷

About 50% of resisters were given money to maintain their families during their absence.¹⁰⁸ For funds, the PRC appealed to "the Indian people of South Africa to rally to the just cause of the community. Workers, businessmen, professionals and farmers. Either we perish as a whole or we resist as a whole...."¹⁰⁹ Donations were received from Indians throughout South Africa as well as from India and East African Indians, with Dr Dadoo personally visiting Kenya to raise funds.¹¹⁰ It was not only merchants who contributed. For example, in July 1946 some 200 workers donated a full day's pay which amounted to £30.¹¹¹ In January 1947, 30 members of the Natal Fishermen's Association at Fynnlads contributed £50.¹¹² This recollection by Dr Goonam suggests that the campaign promoted group identity.

We organised fun fairs, dances, bouquets, beauty contests; some money's came from overseas. But the mainstay of our donations were the moneys we collected locally from the storekeepers and professionals, that part of the community that had money to spare. It was an altogether Indian campaign, financially and ideologically.¹¹³

The way the issue was handled internationally further reinforced Indianness. Much faith was placed in India. A delegation to India appealed to their "Brothers and Sisters ...

¹⁰⁶ *The Leader*, 29 June 1946.

¹⁰¹ *The Leader*, 3 August 1946.

¹⁰⁸ *The Leader*, 14 September 1946.

¹⁰⁹ *The Leader*, 6 April 1946.

¹¹⁰ *The Leader*, 13 July 1946.

¹¹¹ *The Leader*, 13 June 1946.

¹¹² *The Leader*, 14 September 1946.

¹¹³ Goonam, *Coolie Doctor*, 107.

Render all support, financial, moral and otherwise, to our struggle of resistance. Ours is a common struggle!"¹¹⁴ The NIC asked the Government of India to raise the question at the General Assembly of the UNO "to uphold the honour and dignity of Indians abroad." India placed the matter before the UN in December 1946.¹¹⁵ In December 1946, February 1947 and April 1947 the NIC called for a Round Table Conference.¹¹⁶ When Gandhi, "the Father of our struggle", died, Nehru was "accepted in the Resistance Movement as our undisputed leader and adviser."¹¹⁷ Upon his return from the All-Asia Conference in March 1947 Dr Naicker was proud to report that:

India recognised that we in South Africa were not only fighting for our just rights but also to preserve the national honour and dignity of all Indians A mighty India is arising and will allow no country to trifle with her sons and daughters in other countries.¹¹⁸

The passive resistance campaign ended suddenly in June 1948. When the National Party defeated Smuts in the general election, the NIC sent a telegram congratulating Malan and announced that it was suspending the campaign until the new government had made a clear pronouncement on the future of Indians.¹¹⁹ This sudden change in attitude was partly due to the drop in support for passive resistance and a shortage of funds. As pointed out earlier, half the resisters were paid while they were in jail. From May 1947 the financial position of the NIC deteriorated because many merchants withdrew their support after moderates had formed the Natal Indian Organisation as an

¹¹⁴ *The Leader*, 6 April 1946.

¹¹⁵ *The Leader*, 13 December 1946.

¹¹⁶ *Passive Resister*, 6 June 1947.

¹¹⁷ *Passive Resister (Johannesburg)*, 5 March 1948.

¹¹⁸ *The Leader*, 7 June 1947,

¹¹⁹ *The Leader*, 5 June 1948.

alternative to the NIC.¹²⁰ Support was dwindling by the second year. For example, whereas the monthly convictions for October 1946 was 507, that for August 1947 was 6.¹²¹ A meeting in September 1947 only drew 1,000 people and mustered 39 passive resisters, 24 of whom were from outside of Durban. This is a very small number when one considers that around 7,000/10,000 Indians attended meetings during the first year. Further, that on the same day over 2,000 Hindus attended another meeting in Albert Park to watch the flag of the new Dominion of India being hoisted.¹²² When the Natal Passive Resistance Council held a meeting on 11 January 1948 to revive the movement, a planned march did not materialise because only 450 people attended.¹²³ Due to waning support the police even took a policy decision to stop arresting resisters, as the lack of publicity would further lead to the death of the movement.¹²⁴ To garner national support a decision was taken to break provincial barriers. On 24 January 1948, 15 Indian passive resisters went to Johannesburg. Again, there was no mass support or attendance at meetings.¹²⁵

The number of resisters is very small when one takes into consideration the assertion by Dr Naicker that 21 trade unions with a membership of 25,000 Indians had pledged their support to the campaign,¹²⁶ and that by June 1947 the NIC had 34 branches throughout Natal with a registered membership of 34,875.¹²⁷ Even the figure of 2,000 arrests is artificially high because many volunteers were from outside of Natal and some

¹²⁰ Special Report From the Chief Inspector, South African Police, to The Secretary For External Affairs, 30 January 1948. KCM3697, 957/205, C. 6/1807.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² *The Daily News*, 19 September 1947.

¹²³ SAP to Secretary For External Affairs, 30 January 1948.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 June 1946.

¹²⁷ *Passive Resister*, 6 June 1947.

were arrested more than once. For example, RA Pillay, chairman of the Sea-View-Bellair Branch of the NIC, was arrested four times.¹²⁸ A survey of the correspondence to newspapers suggests that not all Indians supported the campaign. SR Pillay wrote that it was the leaders of the unions, "not the whole of the workers," who supported the campaign.¹²⁹ The "Children of Indentured Pioneers" thought that segregation would at least "put a check on the selfish motives of the trader class." Unlike traders, poor Indians were the real contributors to the country. The time had come for an "Indian Immigrant Association" to address their concerns.¹³⁰ AY Naicker also wanted to dispel the notion that all Indians opposed the Land Tenure Bill. The majority of Indians were "crammed" in small areas and looked to the proposed legislation to set aside land "for expansion and development, and provision of amenities."¹³¹

Some Indians welcomed segregated housing in the early 1940s. X.Y.Z. felt that the majority of Indians, poor like him, "are just ordinary workers endeavouring to eke out a living.... We favour segregation, and do not consider it a stigma, or an affront to our national pride. We welcome townships well laid out with all the amenities, solely for Indian occupation."¹³² The Cato Manor Indian Economic Housing Scheme Ratepayer's Association, which represented the first group of Indians to be provided with homes by the Town Council said that it "wanted to collaborate with the authorities for the efficient maintenance and improvement of facilities." It emphasised that it was:

Non-political and prefers to negotiate directly rather than through any political association. The Association deeply appreciates the attempts of the City Council to provide suitable houses for its Indian citizens; and is desirous of doing all in its

¹²⁸ SAP to Secretary For External Affairs, 30 January 1948.

¹²⁹ *Daily News*, 11 June 1946.

¹³⁰ *Daily News*, 16 March 1946.

¹³¹ *The Natal Mercury*, 19 February 1946.

¹³² *The Natal Mercury*, 22 July 1943.

power to assist the expansion of the housing scheme. We realise that the success or failure of the Scheme ... will depend on the intelligent co-operation of those for whom the houses are provided.... We support the Scheme inspite of the opposition from Indian political organisations.¹³³

The legislation was of direct consequence to merchants only, and did not have a direct impact on the day-to-day lives of poor Indians. This, and the increasing conservativeness of Indian workers, probably explains why the campaign never aroused the same level of support as Gandhi's 1913 campaign. Notwithstanding this, the manner in which the campaign was conducted, with mass meetings, raising of funds, arrests and so on within an Indian setting, reinforced group consciousness,

The 1949 Riots and Its Aftermath

In March 1947, Dadoo and Naicker signed a joint declaration of co-operation with Dr Xuma, president-general of the ANC, pledging "the fullest co-operation between the African and Indian peoples." The joint political campaigns that this "Doctor's Pact" was intended to herald never took place because only Indian issues mobilized Indian masses. The attempt to forge a non-racial identity led only to unity at the level of leadership. The identity of non-racialism did not permeate to the masses.

In their daily lives Indians and Africans were not only socially apart, but competed for very limited resources as Durban's population more than doubled between 1936 and 1951. Indians, Africans and whites were incorporated separately into the local economy. Although disadvantaged relative to whites, Indians were much better placed than Africans. They dominated trade in the "non-European" sector of the city as well as in African areas. Africans were not welcome in white shops and patronized Indian-owned shops. As inflation cut the level of

¹³³ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/3/1880, 35/540, 15 December 1940.

African real wage levels from the mid-1940s the most tangible index of declining living standards were prices of goods in Indian stores.¹³⁴ Similarly, in the absence of municipal transport Indians controlled bus transport. For the African poor who had to travel great distances to work, this became another arena of struggle.¹³⁵

Shortly after the "Doctors Pact", Selby Msimang, executive member of the Natal ANC, warned that "our executive has refrained from declaring what it knows to be the universal feeling of the Africans in this Province as it would not like to hasten a rupture within the ranks of Congress."¹³⁶ What was this "universal feeling"? Many Africans felt that Indians were using Africans to further their own ends but doing nothing for them otherwise. As early as 1935, a meeting of approximately 500 Africans in Durban noted "with alarm that not a single native has been employed at a living wage by any Indian as a clerk, bookkeeper, salesman, tailor, printer or carpenter."¹³⁷ Similar sentiments were regularly expressed in the local press. An "Insulted Native" complained that Indians looked upon Africans as "inferior types of human beings." In Indian-owned cinemas there was a "colossal amount of segregation." This was considered an "insult" because Indians "depend largely on the native purchasing power to keep their businesses going."¹³⁸

Indians also held numerous negative stereotypes about Africans. Miss SL recalls that Indians considered themselves "as something a little better" and that their relationship with Africans "was mainly a master-servant relationship. It was not good at all. It was deplorable in many, many ways."¹³⁹ Very

¹³⁴ T. Nuttall, "'It Seems Peace But It Could Be War': The Durban Riots of 1949 and the Struggle for the City," unpublished paper, nd, 10.

¹³⁵ Nuttall, "Peace," 12.

¹³⁶ G. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa. The Evolution of an Ideology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 104.

¹³⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 25 January 1935.

¹³⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 21 April 1944.

¹³⁹ Interview with Miss Sylvia Lawrence, 30 March 1989.

early on Gandhi himself eschewed a political alliance with Africans because "there is no common ground between them (Africans) and us in the daily affairs of life."¹⁴⁰ There are many other examples of Indians not wanting anything to do with Africans. In 1928 the Indian Social Service Committee wrote to the Mayor to complain that "natives" were using the toilet which had been built near the Indian market for Indian market gardeners and squatters. "We certainly think that this practice should be stopped if any serious affray is to be avoided."¹⁴¹ In 1943, the Cato Manor Ratepayers' Association noted with "deep concern" the large number of African shacks being built in the area. "Native women" washed their clothes in streams thus polluting the water and "propagating" disease. Further, the area was now unsafe and the produce of market gardeners was "being stolen by the neighbouring natives. We trust and hope that some relief will be given to the property owners in the area." There were 15,000 shack dwellers and "something should be done to safeguard the public health before it is too late."¹⁴²

Dormant tension between Indians and Africans boiled over on 13 January 1949 when George Madondo, an African youth of 14, got involved in an argument with a 16 year old Indian shop assistant. Madondo slapped the boy who complained to his employer. The employer pushed Madondo through a glass window. Madondo was taken to hospital where he was treated and sent home. The employer was later fined £1 or 7 days for common assault.¹⁴³ This seemingly trivial argument ignited a major riot. Word of Madondo's assault spread and Africans attacked Indians all over the city for three days.¹⁴⁴ When the

¹⁴⁰ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 9, 149.

¹⁴¹ Letter from !SSC to the Mayor, 4 April 1928. 3/DBN, 4/1/2/442, 9/135. vol. 3.

¹⁴² To Town Clerk, 12 July 1943. NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1297, 30/316^N.

¹⁴³ UG 36-49. Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Riots in Durban, 1949, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Riots Commission, 1949, 4.

riots were finally subdued, 142 people had been killed and 1,087 injured.¹⁴⁵ On 17 January 1949, 44,738 Indians were housed in refugee camps which had been set up in community halls, schools, temples and mosques all over Durban.¹⁴⁶ 268 Indian homes were looted and completely burnt and 1,690 were partially destroyed and looted. 47 Indian businesses were completely burnt and 791 partially destroyed and looted.¹⁴⁷

The riots must be seen in the context of the following.¹⁴⁸ During the 1940s Africans waged a number of struggles to improve their economic situation. Many believed that ethnic mobilization and racism had been responsible for the success of Indians and that they had to mobilize likewise. Indians were seen as traders who sent profits abroad, who were party to price-cutting and usurious lending practices, who were part of a separate trade clientage system which benefited them only, and who kept to themselves. The stereotype of the "trader" was useful for mobilizing against Indians. This is corroborated by evidence before the Riots Commission. The principal grievances of Africans were: insolent treatment by Indians, overcharging by traders, ill-treatment on buses and incorrect change given, loose relations between African women and Indian men, exorbitant rents by Indian landlords, competition between Africans and Indians for bus certificates, the superior position of Indians in industry, and general economic competition between African and Indian traders.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Riots Commission, 1949, 5.

¹⁴⁶ NIO. Supplementary Statement, 1949, Schedule 2.

¹⁴⁷ NIO. Supplementary Statement, 1949, Schedules 3, 4, and 5.

¹⁴⁸ For a detailed account of the competition between Indians and Africans see LL. Edwards, "Mkhwnbane Our Home. African Shantytown society in Cato Manor Farm, 1946-1960," Ph.D, University of Natal, 1989; LL. Edwards and T. Nuttall, "Seizing the Moment: the January 1949 Riots," Paper Presented at History Workshop on "Structure and Experience in the Making of Apartheid," University of Witwatersrand, 6-10 February 1990; T. Nuttall, "'It Seems Peace but it could be War': The Durban Riots of 1949 and the struggle for the city," Unpublished Paper, nd.

¹⁴⁹ Riots Commission of 1949.

Indians denied such allegations and, in fact, the NIO tendered evidence to disprove these accusations and concluded that because the African "was afraid to show his hostility to the European, he found in the Indian a convenient scapegoat."¹⁵⁰ The NIO also suggested that anti-Indian inflammatory speeches by White politicians "have tended to single out the Indians in Natal as an unwanted entity must inevitably reach the ears of the Africans", and encouraged the latter.¹⁵¹

The riots undermined the political alliance between the ANC and NIC and emphasized the boundaries which existed between ordinary Indians and Africans. A middle class African newspaper looked on the riots positively because they had shown that "our people were ready for economic development. None will deny that they have shown an amazing eagerness to look after themselves. Just now people are rushing to buy buses, establish stores or set themselves up as hawkers."¹⁵² The same newspaper also warned that:

The leaders of the Indian people have found it difficult to convince the Africans that they are willing to work genuinely for the betterment of the other non-Europeans as well. If the Indian community .is not gifted in the direction of making friends with those who might guarantee them a safe and secure future then if their people's morale breaks down they cannot claim that their hands are altogether clean.¹⁵³

The riots had a significant impact on Indian consciousness. The scare and horror stories which filled the Indian press increased fear and hatred. "He Died A Hero" narrated the story of "Longy" Naidoo who, when confronted by a "horde of blood thirsty impis", exhorted his friends to escape while he took on the "savage mob." "Burning with rage at the impudence that one solitary Indian had the audacity to invite them to a battle, they

¹⁵⁰ NIO Statement to Riots Commission, 1949, 18.

¹⁵¹ NIO Statement to Riots Commission, 16.

¹⁵² *Jnkundla Ya Bantu*, 19 March 1949.

¹⁵³ *Jnkundla Ya Bantu*, 23 April 1949.

set upon him with a will, allowing his companions ample time to flee."¹⁵⁴ "Ferocious Attacks by Natives on Indian Women and Children" told of a man who was assaulted and thrown into his burning house by a mob which then assaulted and raped the wife and 11 year old daughter. In another incident a woman and her 19 year old daughter were made to watch the husband being hacked before they were both raped.¹⁵⁵ "Indian Boy Burned Alive" recounted "one of the most horrifying, gruesome and treacherous acts of savagery yet perpetrated." It was the story of a 13 year old boy Harrichand Mahabeer who was caught and gagged by two Africans. They tied a sack around his waist and set it alight.¹⁵⁶ While these stories were probably exaggerated or fabricated they hardened the attitudes of Indians. R.S. Nowbath, then editor of *The Leader* wrote:

Those who have seen their homes destroyed in front of their eyes, those who have seen a life-time's savings go up in smoke, those who have seen their children hacked in front of them, and those who helplessly watched their daughters raped, will not, they cannot, forget. The generation that lived through that night of terror, January 14-15, will never forgive the African. For two generations at least the embers of hate will smoulder.¹⁵⁷

Conclusion

When the Royal family visited South Africa in March 1947, the NIC called for a boycott of the celebrations.¹⁵⁸ Moderates led by AI Kajeer, however, formed the Durban Indian Royal Visit Committee which included bodies as diverse as the Liquor and Catering Trades Union, representatives from the municipal barracks, Durban and District Indian Cricket Union,

¹⁵⁴ *The Leader*, 29 January 1949.

¹⁵⁵ *The Leader*, 5 February 1949.

¹⁵⁶ *The Leader*, 12 February 1949.

¹⁵⁷ *The Forum*, 29 January 1949, in Bhana and Pachai, *Documentary History*, 211.

¹⁵⁸ *Passive Resister*, 28 February 1947.

Durban and District Girl Guides Association, Natal Indian Football Association, Hindu Tamil Institute, Early Morning Market Association, and Riverside Muslim Madressa.¹⁵⁹ They organised a function in honour of the Royals in spite of the boycott call by the NIC. 65,000 Indians attended the event at Curries Fountain, the largest ever public gathering of South African Indians. Indian and western music was played and the Indian Girl Guides and Boys Scout formed a guard of honour as the king and queen arrived. Both South African national anthems were played and bouquets were presented to Queen Elizabeth. The ceremony took place on a dais which was a replica of the Taj Mahal.¹⁶⁰

This reception for the Royals is remarkable given that the visit took place in the context of urban poverty, labour strikes, and passive resistance, all of which placed Indians in opposition to capital and the state. What it shows is that the process of identity formation was complex and formed in complicated circumstances. It cannot be reduced simply to a struggle between collaborationists, seen as traders who clung to their 'Indian' roots and residual identity, and non-collaborationists, who are seen as the descendants of indentured workers who gradually embraced a non-racial class identity.

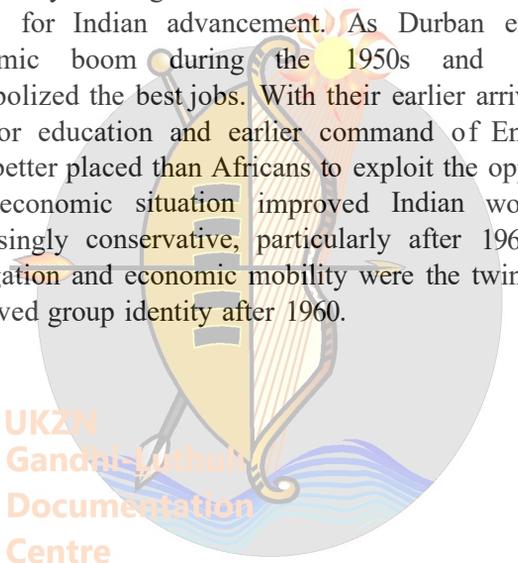
Indians, Africans and whites occupied different economic positions, with Indians sandwiched between white oppression on the one hand and growing African nationalism. While there was an objective basis for forming an alliance with Africans various factors conspired to prevent a class alliance. The position of Indians as a "middle" group between whites and Africans, competition with Africans for scarce jobs, housing and other resources, shared cultural forms, the continued white domination of power, and the memory of attacks from Africans in 1949 and 1985, all influenced the formation of identity. Loyalty to non-

¹⁵⁹ *The Leader*, 15 March 1947.

¹⁶⁰ *The Leader*, 22 March 1947.

work group memberships influenced and shaped class identities. Given the impact of their life outside the workplace, it was perfectly reasonable for Indians to support the SACP and trades unions yet remain very "Indian" in other facets of their life. Indian militancy did not automatically lead to support for non-racial political alliances.

From the 1940s there was a growing education, skills and wage gap between Indians and Africans which continued to widen in subsequent decades.¹⁶¹ While apartheid suppressed Indians, by stifling Africans even more it created economic spaces for Indian advancement. As Durban experienced an economic boom during the 1950s and 1960s whites monopolized the best jobs. With their earlier arrival in the city, superior education and earlier command of English, Indians were better placed than Africans to exploit the opportunities. As their economic situation improved Indian workers became increasingly conservative, particularly after 1960. Residential segregation and economic mobility were the twin pillars which preserved group identity after 1960.



UKZN
Gandhi Luthuli
Documentation
Centre

¹⁶¹ See Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, pp. 50-63.