



Girmitya Tales

An Odyssey

By

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In Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of
the Arrival of Indians to Natal (1860 – 2010)



Why Indians came to Natal

The British settlers' (c1840s) saw sugar as a viable export commodity but there was a serious shortage of labour. The fate of the colony "hangs on a thread, the thread is labour (Natal Mercury, April 1859).

The Zulus were not accustomed to selling their labour, tilling the soil was women's work, while the men hunted and protected their villages.

With the abolishment of slavery, the "Indenture(d) System", a compromise between slavery and the free-market system, was invented. The Natal planters petitioned for the introduction of Indian labour. Thousands of indentured Indians from India emigrated to Natal to escape the poverty, disease, famine, caste system, family problems and some came for the mere adventure - in the quest for better living conditions.

Recruitment Conditions

Emigration agents in Calcutta and Madras appointed recruiters and arkatis. Sometimes, recruiting agents were unscrupulous, the unsuspecting peasant, being carried off without knowing where they were going. Some recruiters made false promises and recruits duped into believing that 'sovereigns grew on chillie trees'. Early recruits travelled by foot, wagon and later railways to depots at Calcutta (Kalkatias, Hindi speaking) and Madras (Madrasis, Tamil, Telegu). Each person was inspected by a doctor and a certificate with their name, fathers name, age, caste, village etc. was issued. The Depots were crowded, unsanitary and recruits were kept like prisoners until a full ship load was secured.

The recruits brought clothes (turbans, dhotis, saris, jackets etc.), bedding and personal belongings such as pots, earthen lamps, betel leaves, tobacco, a hookah, curry powder, seeds, musical instruments, jewellery and medicine.

Shipment and Arrival (Nov 16, 1860)

The Belvedere left Calcutta on the 4th of October 1860, but the Truro which left Madras on the 12th of October arrived first with 340 passengers on board.

On the ships, cooking and sleeping arrangements were 'awkward', no secluded bathing areas, heavy congestion, poor food quality, limited supply of drinking water. Passengers were huddled together and many caste violations prevailed. Usually high caste would not eat, drink, socialize, use the same utensils or marry into lower castes. The voyage across the great black waters (Kala Pani) challenged these caste rules on the ship and even in Natal. They nevertheless entertained themselves on board with singing, playing cards, boxing and wrestling.

When the first immigrants arrived, there was no fanfare, speeches or crowds to welcome them. While the plantation owners welcomed them as financial assets, the White colonists on the other hand, held strong reservations about the new arrivals. Despite this, from 1860 to 1911, a total of 152,184 Indian settlers came to Natal.

The Agreement (= 'Girmit', hence indentured Indian = Girmitya)

By Law 14 of 1859, the terms and conditions of employment were set out – a free passage to Natal; a fixed wage for the first 5 years (10-14 shillings), thereafter could re-indenture or remain in employ of choice; free lodging, ration and medical services; strict rules relating to employment, penalties, punishment; a free passage to India after 10 years or a grant of Crown Land (withdrawn in 1891).

For the poor, unemployed and those escaping the conditions in India, the inducements appeared attractive.

Employment

While most Indentured Indians were assigned to the sugar estates, others went to the coal fields, railways, municipality, tea, coffee and wattle plantations. Others came as special servants, as waiters, cooks and dhobis.

Life on the Estates

The Indian Immigration Trust Board, set up in 1874, saw to matters of recruitment, repatriation, income and expenditure, remitting monies to India and the general welfare of the Indian, yet the indentured Indian suffered many hardships. Returned immigrants complained of conditions in Natal.

The Coolie Commission (1872) highlights some of their problems : The barracks or 'coolie lines' built of corrugated iron were unsuitable as it did not permit the escape of smoke, there were no bathing facilities, poor ventilation, lack of privacy, risk to fires and flooding. They built their own thatched homes made of wattle and daub, dried cane, grass and mealie stalks. Wage and rations were paid irregularly, assault and flogging by employers, enforced deductions when absent or ill, excessive fines, poor medical services, extra working hours, poor drinking water were some the complaints. One Rangasamy, who gave evidence pleaded for the building of temples, schools and increase in the number of women to the colonies as well as proper interpreters in the courts.

As a result many resorted to taking dagga to escape their cares while others committed suicide. Leisure time was marked by smoking (dagga, ganja, hemp), drinking (toddy, rum and sometimes 'kaffir beer' and gambling. These activities resulted in domestic problems, violence, suicide and social diseases.

On Treatment of Indians "a mere chattel, a machine, a commercial asset to be worked to its fullest capacity, regardless of the human element... the system lends itself to heartlessness and cruelty, if not on the part of the employers, then on that of his sirdars and overseers " "for it is slavery and nothing else". In tea factories young children were working 11 hours per day.

Passive Resistance - 1913

By 1913, the 3 pound tax on free Indians (Law - 1895) heightened their plight. Unable to pay the exorbitant tax, many returned to India, were forced to re-indenture and some ran away from their families or sold their children to avoid the tax. Meanwhile in 1913, Justice Searle ruled in the Cape Supreme Court that all marriages not conducted according to Christian rites were to be null and void – women no longer ranked as the wives of their husbands nor were their progeny entitled to inherit their parents' property. Both the 3 pound tax and marriages ignited the resistance.

Many indentured Indians under Gandhi made supreme sacrifices during the 1913 Resistance. Notably, the labourers formed the bulk of the movement. 16 women resisters were arrested, tried and sentenced to 3 months imprisonment, were herded with ordinary criminals and given food unfit for human consumption. Some were shot, others died in prison. Valiamma, a young resister gave up her life for the cause after duly serving a term of imprisonment. Harbatsingh, a Hindustani stalwart died in the Durban goal. The widow of Selvan, a free labourer, was shot dead while the late Narainsamy was deported to India.

Following a resolution by Professor Gokhale, the Government of India, Gazetted (April 1911) that as from 1st July "All immigration to Natal would be prohibited", thereby putting an end to the scheme.

Their Identity and Survival

Despite the many trials and tribulations that they faced, the Indian triumphed. From the time he set foot on South African soil he had made an indelible mark. The Natal Mercury of November 22, 1860 (excerpt) reports "A very remarkable scene was the landing... They were a queer, comical, foreign looking, very Oriental like crowd. The men with their huge muslin turbans, the women with their flashing eyes, long disheveled pitchy hair ... all evidently beings of a different race and kind to any race we have yet seen either in Africa or England."

Their social, cultural and religious practices and organizations have been the backbone to their survival and continued existence, for example, the Therakoothu, a form of dance-story-telling-drama (art form) was performed on the sugar estates.

In the early years, Muslims would celebrated the "Moharrum Festival", where the chariot (Pagodas) procession marched through the streets followed by spectators including Hindus and Christians, thus giving a unique flavour to the South African landscape. The marigold or "Kavady" festival drew much attention as well.

From the earliest times Indians have stood out in their manner of worship, the temples on the estates were made of wattle and daub, thatched and later of corrugated iron. Alongside, this they worshipped many deities combined with the reading of the scripture. The temple being the central place of worship, was also a place of social gathering for weddings, concerts, dance, drama and educational activities.

In their cuisine, Indians brought over the "curry" with the bunny chow, being very much a household name, today. Indian spices, their musical instruments, dress and language were unique. In the field of education, they held vernacular classes and help built their own schools (government-aided schools) on a pound for pound basis.

The Natal Indian Congress, the Indian Opinion, African Chronicle and later the Leader and Graphic served as the voice of the people.

Many Indians, after indenture leased land, became shopkeepers, market gardeners and hawkers (vegetable Sammy and "Coolie Mary") but despite their valuable contribution several anti-Indian legislation were put into place to restrict where Indians could trade or live and what jobs they could hold - and truly we have travelled a long, painful and eventful journey, an Odyssey, a noteworthy record of human achievement.