

'GIVE TILL IT HURTS': DURBAN'S INDIANS AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR¹

Goolam Vahed

University of Durban-Westville

In October 1913 approximately 20,000 Indian workers joined Mahatma Gandhi's campaign of resistance against the South African government. This was a spontaneous outburst against terrible working conditions and a realisation that the £3 poll tax on free Indians meant perpetual indenture.² The findings of the Solomon Commission of Enquiry resulted in the Indian Relief Act of 1914, which abolished the tax but left the status of Indians essentially unchanged. World War I broke out shortly after Gandhi's departure to India. This paper will examine the reaction of Indians to the war and its impact on them in the context of ongoing racial oppression and exceedingly arduous economic conditions. This is not a story in the genre that seeks to recover black involvement in South African wars. Rather, the war will form the backdrop for a narrative about the deep divides among Indians, and about social and political mobilisation in the vacuum left by Gandhi. In so doing, this study will question the taken-for-granted classification of Indians as a homogenous racial group. Historically, use of the appellation 'Indians' has inferred that the attribute 'Indianness' united them as a collectivity in opposition to whites and Africans. This study will seek to deconstruct this notion by examining the class, religious, ethnic, language and other cleavages among Durban's Indians in the years immediately following Gandhi's departure from South Africa, differences that surfaced during debates over, and involvement in, the war. This study will also add to our understanding of a period that has been neglected because the historiography of Indian South Africans has tended to focus on specific individuals or particular epochs. In the existing literature, the story usually stops in 1914 with Gandhi's departure for India, and is taken up in the mid-1930s when a younger generation of Indian leaders came to the fore.

Documentation
Centre

¹This was the motto of Indian merchants when they implored Indians to donate to the war effort. *Indian Opinion*, 11 October 1918.

²J. Beall and D. North-Coombes, 'The 1913 Natal Indian Strike: The social and economic background to passive resistance,' *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* VI (1983), 73.

DURBAN AND ITS INDIANS IN 1914

Durban was a town of just 9,000 acres in 1914 with a population of 74,000 comprising 33,428 whites, 18,010 Indians and 20,302 Africans.³ It was chiefly a port and commercial centre with rudimentary industrial development. Industry comprised mainly of metals and engineering firms that were concerned with wagon and ricksha making, and repairing imported machinery on the sugar estates, coalmines and shipping trade.⁴ The chief exports were coal, wool, hides and skins, wattle bark, maize and whale oil.⁵ The Natal economy relied greatly on railway traffic from the Rand, with the Overberg trade, customs duties and railway receipts accounting for 69% of Natal's revenue in 1908-1909.⁶ Durban was a commercially and industrially expanding city whose economic take-off was given momentum by World War I. Local industries were given a fillip by restrictions on overseas trade and high freight costs, and 'enjoyed a high increase in their business'.⁷ War-time demand for soap, matches, spirits, beer and explosives, the latter because of large orders from the imperial government, boosted industrial development, while an oil refinery, flour mill and Hardening Works were started in 1915. The export of explosives totalled £41,000 in 1915 and £120,000 in the first five months of 1916.⁸

Durban's Indians were highly stratified along lines of religion, region, caste and class. Between 1860 and 1911, 152,641 indentured Indian workers arrived in Natal. Although entitled to a free return passage after ten years, almost 58% remained in the Colony.⁹ From the mid-1870s they were joined by entrepreneurs from Gujarat on the west coast of India, who were termed 'passengers' because they came of their own accord, at their own expense, and were subject to the ordinary laws of the Colony.¹⁰ A third social group was comprised of 'colonial-boms', the Natal-born offspring of indentured workers. A small number of them were educated as a result of the early opportunities provided by mission schools. Directly and indirectly, Indians were made to feel like an unwanted people. After Natal achieved self-government in 1893, the English settler legislature passed a spate of laws to force Indians to re-indenture or return to India upon completing their

³Standard Bank Archives (SBA), INSP Jil/209, Durban 1905-1929, July 1914.

⁴M. Katzen, *Industry in Greater Durban*, Part I (Durban: University of Natal Press, 1961), I.

⁵Standard Bank Archives (SBA), INSP 1/ii209, Durban 1905-1929, July 1913.

⁶B. Guest and J. Sellers, 'Introduction', *Receded Tides of Empire: Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Natal and Zululand since 1900* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1994) 1-24.

⁷SBA, INSP J/1/209, Durban 1905-1929, 17 June 1916

⁸SBA, INSP 1/1/209, Durban 1905-1929, 17 June 1916

⁹S. Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal, 1860-1902. A Study Based on Ships Lists* (New Delhi: 1991), 20.

¹⁰S. Bhana and J. Brain, *Setting Down Roots. Indian Migrants in South Africa, 1860-1911* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1990), 660.

¹¹M. Swan, *Gandhi. The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 185.

indenture, and to legally subordinate non-indentured Indians so that whites would feel secure against the 'Asiatic Menace'.¹

Prior to 1914, Indian politics were dominated by merchants who dissociated themselves from the mass of Indians and tried to obtain equality with whites on the basis of Queen Victoria's 1858 Proclamation, which asserted the equality of all British subjects. In 1894 merchants formed the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) to protect their trade, franchise and residence rights within the existing political order. Each of the NIC's six presidents between 1894 and 1913 was a prominent merchant, while 75% of its membership was comprised of traders.² Gandhi's passive resistance campaigns, which began in 1907 in the Transvaal, addressed the grievances of merchants only. By 1911, when Gandhi's movement was reduced to negotiations with Smuts, he added the tax to the list of grievances. This gave Gandhi mass-based support. By 1914, when Gandhi departed for India and war broke out, the class differences among Indians remained entrenched. The mass of indentured and ex-indentured Indians continued to languish at the bottom: poor, uneducated, unskilled, eking out a living as unskilled workers. The majority were employed in agricultural work as market gardeners who sold their produce at the Indian Market or through hawking, or held unskilled positions with the Durban Municipality.³

WAR AND THE INDIAN BEARER CORPS

Indian commercial and educated elites were eager to prove their loyalty when World War I broke out. This must be viewed in the context of the imperial connection. Indian elites hoped that after the war British imperial goodwill would result in redress for Indian grievances. In the words of the *African Chronicle*. Indians 'should not lag behind in their duty to the King who has protected us all these years; in future years to come, better prospects are awaiting us, under the aegis of the same Empire when it has emerged triumphantly from the present ordeal'.⁴ Although Indians suffered many disabilities, a mass meeting of the Natal Indian Association (NIA)⁵ on 27 August 1914 passed a resolution stating that the 'consideration of grievances has given way to the performance of duty to the Empire'. The meeting 'declared its loyalty to the King-Emperor, and readiness to serve the Crown

1 M. W. Swanson, 'The Asiatic Menace: Creating Segregation in Durban, 1870-1900,' in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 16, 3, (1983), 401-421,421.

² Swan, *Gandhi*, 51. For a comprehensive discussion of the NIC see S. Bhana, *Gandhi's Legacy: The Natal Indian Congress, 1894-1994* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press, 1997).

³ SBA, INSP 1/1/209, Durban 1905-1929, July 1913.

⁴ *African Chronicle*, 16 October 1915.

⁵ Some Muslim merchants, unhappy with Gandhi's 'confrontational' strategy, passed a motion of no-confidence in his leadership in 1913. Gandhi left the NIC and formed the NIA.

and co-operate with the government in defence of the country'. Merchants like P. Rustomjee and A.H. Kajee, and educated Indians like V. Lawrence and A. Christopher, were present at the meeting.⁶ There was a degree of tension among the elite because Muslim merchants were ambivalent about supporting Britain and her allies, because they feared a victory would result in the dismantling of the Muslim Turkish Empire. The *Natal Mercury*, in fact, interviewed prominent local Muslims on this issue and reported that in the 'minds of all Indian Muslims there was a deep sense of patriotism... All agreed that their first and foremost duty was to be loyal to the Sovereign and Empire to which they belonged'.⁷ Notwithstanding this, whites like J.R. Knolly wanted all 'Arabs'⁸ interned for the duration of the war.⁹ While N. Khan wanted the Indian community to take legal steps against such persons who are striving to accuse the good name of law-abiding Indian merchants', the matter eventually petered out.¹⁰

After a second meeting on 31 August the IHA informed the government that first aid instruction had been arranged for Indian volunteers who wished to serve as ambulance bearers. The government replied that 'further communication will be sent' if the assistance of Indians was needed.¹¹ An indication of the loyalty of Indians is that both meetings ended with three cheers for the King-Emperor and the playing of the national anthem. The government's procrastination infuriated many Indians. F. Lazarus complained that he had served in the Bearer Corps during the Boer War and was disappointed that the government had ignored this offer. He said that he could gather 200 Indians 'to be at the call of Great Britain or General Botha within 48 hours'.¹² Jack Moodley wrote: 'I am an Indian who was born and brought up in Durban, and feel equally as strong as any other subject of Great Britain, that our duty lies in our being prepared to sacrifice everything in the interest of humanity at large.... If the Government declines to accept our offer there are surely many public-spirited men in the Indian community to finance us to travel and join the forces that are being raised in England'. According to Chris L. John: 'I am a Colonial-born Indian and, with many like myself, who are born in South Africa, am prepared to enlist in any of the corps now in course of formation. Will any in authority please inform the public whether our services will be acceptable?'¹³ It was only after a year, in September 1915, that the government asked the NIA to recruit 250 Indians between the ages of 18 and

⁶*Indian Opinion*, 2 September 1914.

⁷*Natal Mercury*, 11 November 1914.

⁸Natal's whites referred to Muslim traders as 'Arabs' because of their Middle Eastern dress.

⁹*Natal Witness*, 26 February 1915.

¹⁰*Indian Views*, 26 February 1915.

¹¹*Indian Opinion*, 2 September 1914.

¹²Reprinted in *Indian Opinion*, 7 October 1914.

¹³*Indian Opinion*, 1 September 1915.

30 for two bearer companies.¹⁴ The rate of pay was a contentious issue for Indians. They were to be paid ISs per month, the rate payable to Indian soldiers, rather than that paid to white South Africans. *Indian Opinion* protested, in vain, that since the standard of living 'was much lower' in India, South African Indians 'who had adopted the European standard of living' should be paid the same rate as their white counterparts.¹⁵

An army camp was especially constructed in Stamford Hill Road for Indian volunteers. Here they received training from Captain Dunning who had spent 20 years in India, spoke five Indian languages and was a former Deputy Protector of Indian Immigrants.¹⁶ When a reporter from *Indian Opinion* visited the camp in November 1915, he found 30 men in 'good spirits', who received training in first aid, ambulance work and physical exercise in the mornings and drill work in the afternoons. A Mr. Rajkoomar of Stamford Hill supplied milk daily for the staff and company.¹⁷ When Senator Marshall Campbell visited the camp in November 1915, he found some men playing cricket while others were cleaning their camps. At the 'call of a whistle' by Major Briscoe 'the men quickly assembled on parade'. They were wearing 'strong' black boots, khaki trousers, woollen jerseys and headgear adorned with the springbok badge. Of the first 78 applicants, 64 had been accepted. They were all ex-indentured or colonial-born Indians, and most were unemployed. Some of the volunteers had served in Madras infantry regiments: 'their experience is proving of great assistance to Sgd. Caddick, the drill inspector'.¹⁸ Volunteers were given food rations on a weekly basis, comprising of tea or coffee, dhal or peas, oil, salt, curry powder, chillies, tamarind, sugar, onions, and meat three times a week. Because the portions were very small, A. Christopher, leader of the Bearer Corps, asked the Indian public to contribute 'comforts' as 'the men in camp are beginning to feel the want of little comforts to which they have been used in civilian life'. V. Lawrence sent vegetables, Rustomjee a case of soap,¹⁹ M. C. Anglia donated books, Shaik Himed Ramie biscuits while others contributed jam, candles, cigarettes and plums.²⁰ An early indication that serving in the Corps meant little in terms of the racial status quo was given in November 1915. Christopher asked the Mayor to allow Corps members in uniform on tram cars free of charge when travelling from the camp to the Town Hall,

Centre

¹⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 17 September 1915.

¹⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 8 October 1915.

¹⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 15 October 1915.

¹⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 5 November 1915.

¹⁸ *Natal Mercury*, 24 November 1915.

¹⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 5 November 1915.

²⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 10 December 1915.

because the 'conditions of their service provides for nominal pay only'. The DTC resolved that 'no such privilege be granted'.²¹

On 13 December 1915 the NIA organised a public meeting in the Town Hall to bid farewell to the Bearer Corps, which was comprised of 114 men - 88 Tamilians and 26 Calcuttias - who were dressed in khaki with matching turbans. The importance of regional and language identities is evident in this breakdown provided by *Indian Opinion*. Volunteers were urged to do their duty with 'honour to themselves and their country'.²² Parsee Rustomjee served lunch on 16 December, the day the men departed for East Africa. Forty waiters were hired to serve 250 people. From morning, 'huge cooking pots were boiling away and by noon the curry and rice was ready'. Whites and 'leading Indians' sat at a head table. For Rustomjee the presence of whites showed that 'we are all one in heart in our loyalty to his Majesty...'. He was pleased that Indians were to help the wounded because 'nothing more is in keeping with the spirit of the community which is essentially a peaceful one'. Dawud Mahomed, G. H. Miankhan, R. N. Moodley, A. H. Peters and Rooknudin urged the men to perform with honour and 'uphold the traditions of their race'.²³

It is ironic that while the Indian elites were feting whites and demonstrating their loyalty to the Empire, it was the poor and unemployed Indians who were to serve as 'cannon fodder'. After lunch, Marshall Campbell, Rustomjee, and Reverend and Mrs Bone went on board the 'Trent' to meet Corps members.²⁴ Shortly after the first Corps departed, arrangements were under way to raise a second company under Captain Murdock, a medical doctor who had been the district surgeon of Weenen.²⁵ A Farewell Banquet was held for the Second Corps on 27 January 1916 at Rawat's Theatre.²⁶ In all, around 700 Indians served during the war.²⁷

According to Christopher, shortly after they reached East Africa the Corps was divided between Captain Briscoe and the South African Horse, under General van de Venter, which 'the boys did not altogether like'.²⁸ They came across the second Corps under Captain Murdock, who 'were very much disappointed to learn that they would not be with us as they were under the belief that they were coming out to join us'. Both Corps were further divided into numerous smaller regiments spread far apart: 'We would to Heaven that all our boys came together'. Christopher's column also met General Smuts:

²¹ Natal Archives (NA), 3/DBN/ 4/ 1/2/318. Christopher to Mayor, Minutes of DTC meeting, 27 November 1915.

²² *Indian Opinion*, 24 December 1915.

²³ *Indian Opinion*, 17 December 1915.

²⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 24 December 1915.

²⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 21 January 1916.

²⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 14 February 1916.

²⁷ *Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants*, 1916 and 1917.

²⁸ *The Leader*, May 1916. This was a monthly periodical published in Durban by G. D. Bull.

'There the great and unostentatious man stood deep in thought. We were awed by his personality... Would the sight of us take the General back for a moment to South Africa and the passive resistance movement... He graciously acknowledged our salute as he passed by'. Christopher presented Smuts with a petition complaining that Indians received fewer rations than their white counterparts.²⁹ Christopher touched on this subject in a private letter to Marshall Campbell in September 1916:

The subject of rations is the one subject next to the consideration of the enemy that takes up the time of the men. Rations fluctuate like the temperatures and sometimes it does fall as low or below zero but never does it rise to its zenith! It is at present a hopeless country for the men to forage for food but its very hopelessness drives the men to diligent search and alas! There returns a fortunate one with a handful of 'ungu' • crushed mbela • or some other equal common article in the Union - and he thereupon becomes the cynosure of all eyes and - yes - the subject of many varied and minute enquiries. At present their lies between us and the enemy a patch of green luscious beans and the enemy think of it and so do we!³⁰

According to Christopher, their patients included Lieutenant Day, who had taught some of them in the Boys' Model School in Smith Street; Corporal Scott, the 100 miles South African cycling champion; and Jack Morkel, a Springbok rugby player who was to die as a result of his injuries.³¹ In camp, the men 'turned their hands to many things'. Goon Reddy and Lutchman baked bread while a thatched roof was built for volunteer cooks, 'a pretty little structure it looked'.³² Christopher wrote that although they were a 'Bearer Corps' in name, they were in fact an 'ambulance in its comprehensive sense'. They carried the sick and wounded to hospital and conducted a hospital, sometimes treating as many as 150 patients in a day.³³ A member of the Second Corps, whose name was not disclosed, wrote that their duties included attending to the sanitation of camps, cutting down trees, mending roads and acting as officers' orderlies. According to Christopher, injured members of the Corps, as well as those worn out by marching or diseases like malaria, diarrhoea, sunstroke and rheumatism, were kept in the convalescent camp if not too bad, or were sent to Dar-es-Salaam.³⁴ Christopher was pleased with the positive race relations: 'everybody is glad to be of assistance to someone else. And the European South Africans are part of us as we are of them and the best of feelings prevails all round. And this we hope is but the bright beginnings of

²⁹ Reprinted in *Indian Opinion*, 9 June 1916.

³⁰ Killie Campbell Library, (KCM) 89/33/lil, MS DAW 2.042, A Christopher to M Campbell, 20 September 1916.

³¹ Article contributed to *The Latest*. Reprinted in *Indian Opinion*, 2 February 1917.

³² *Indian Opinion*, 9 June 1916.

³³ KCM 89/33/111, MS DAW 2.042, A. Christopher to M Crunpbell, 20 September 1916.

³⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 8 December 1916.

a happy future for all the children of the South African soil'.³⁵ This optimism would prove to be unfounded.

There were glowing reports on the work of both Corps. The South African cricket test wicketkeeper T. A. Ward stated that the hospital was very 'ably' run by the bearer corps. He was pleased with the 'conscientious manner' in which they carried out their duty, 'they did everything in their power to make the patient comfortable'; their 'patriotism should not go unrewarded'.³⁶ G. Louch, a major in the South African Field Artillery, found the Company to be a 'cheerful, willing crowd, always at the right place and did invaluable work in the Firing Line'. Colonel J. H. Whitehead wrote that 'the Indian community will be glad to hear that they were not only most courageous in action but did all the work asked of them in a quick, intelligent and willing manner'.³⁷ Lt. Col. J de Vos wrote that 'they have worthily upheld the traditions of the fighting stock they are descended from in India. It is an honour to have been associated with such men in the field'.³⁸ Captain L Vitne Tebbs, a medical officer with the 10th South African Infantry, noted that:

At Ufioni Hospital they formed the whole nursing and orderly staff and performed their duty thoroughly, and were always ready and willing and attentive to patients. I should desire no more willing and intelligent staff to work with. In the field they have always been in the first line of troops, and invariably on the spot when their services have been required, and ready to follow their leader anywhere.... I have on several occasions been indebted to them for their prompt services in bringing the wounded from the firing line.... a better example in action could not have been set by the White troops.³⁹

The work of the Indian Corps received minimal official acknowledgement. In December 1916 Christopher received the 'Distinguished Conduct Medal',⁴⁰ while L. J. Singh, who was twice wounded in the thigh and had a bullet permanently lodged in his leg, received the Distinguished Service Medal.⁴¹ Fifty-one Indian bearers returned on Christmas Day, 1916, while a further 41 returned on 27 January 1917. They were met at the Point by officials of the Comforts Committee who accompanied them to the camp at Stamford Hill. Rustomjee entertained 20 members, whose homes were outside Durban. The injured were admitted to Addington Hospital while the rest of the men remained in camp.⁴² At the beginning of April 1917 there were approximately 40 men at Addington suffering from the effects of their wounds, or the tropical

³⁵ KCM 89/33/1/1, MS DAW 2.042. A. Christopher to M Campbell. 20 September 1916.

³⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 22 December 1916.

³⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 4 May 1917.

³⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 6 April 1917.

³⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 6 June 1917.

⁴⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 8 December 1916.

⁴¹ *Indian Opinion*, 7 April 1917.

⁴² *Indian Opinion*, 23 March 1917.

climate.⁴³ Four Indians died in 1916, 10 in 1917 and three in 1918.⁴⁴ The Indian Bearer Corps was demobilised in March 1918.⁴⁵

INDIAN ELITES AND FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Indians made a substantial financial contribution to the war effort. The Mayoress of Durban, for example, formed an Indian Women's War Relief Committee on 6 September 1914 to knit, sew and 'render other necessary assistance'.⁴⁶ When the Mayor of Durban formed a War Relief Fund in August 1914, Manilal Gandhi, son of Mahatma Gandhi and editor of *Indian Opinion*, believed that because the Fund afforded relief to those suffering from the effects of the war, it appealed even to the 'strictest passive resisters'. He urged Indians to contribute to the fund:

It will be a lasting disgrace if the Indian community do not contribute sufficiently...One word to those who feel, for one reason or another, that the community is labouring under disabilities because of their race, and that, therefore, they have little inclination to come forward and help. We want to warn all such persons that now is not the time to hold back the hand. Give freely, do your duty, and afterwards you will be better able to claim justice and equal treatment.⁴⁷

War fairs, soccer tournaments, boxing exhibitions, street collections, athletics meetings and plays were held to raise money.⁴⁸ The largest individual contributors were Parsee Rustomjee and G. H. Miankhan & Co who each contributed more than £15 in August 1914. In all, Indians contributed £330 during August 1914.⁴⁹ Another means to raise money was the holding of a 'Sports Day'. One, at Albert Park on 10 October 1914, raised £10.⁵⁰ The Sports Day in May 1915 was held at Lords, the first time that Indians were allowed use of this sports field by the Durban Town Council (DTC). Leading Indian merchants and politicians attended the programme of football, athletics and cycling that raised around £25 and ended with cheers 'for His Majesty the king Emperor' and singing the national anthem.⁵¹

In October 1915 Mayor Nicolson and Senator Campbell requested Indian leaders to form a 'general' body to regulate the collection of funds. Indians, instead, formed two bodies, the dividing line being religion. Hindus and Christians — Parsee Rustomjee, Jack Moodley, L. Gabriel, A. Christopher

⁴³*Indian Opinion*, 1 April 1917.

⁴⁴*Reports of the Protector of Indian Immigrants*, 1916, 1917 and 1918.

⁴⁵*Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants*, 1918.

⁴⁶*Indian Opinion*, 9 September 1914.

⁴⁷*Indian Opinion*, 15 Dec. 1916.

⁴⁸*Indian Opinion*, 9 Sept. 1914.

⁴⁹*Indian Opinion*, 19 August 1914.

⁵⁰*Indian Opinion*, 21 October 1914.

⁵¹*Indian Opinion*, 26 May 1915.

and V. Lawrence - fanned the Durban Indian Committee (DIC). Muslim merchants, on the other hand, formed the Mahomedan Merchants' Committee (MMC) under Dawud Mahomed, E. M. Paruk, M. C. Coovadia, M. S. Randeree and M. C. Anglia. R. B. Chetty wanted to form a separate body for Hindus but was persuaded to join with Christians to form the DIC. *Indian Opinion* was disappointed that 'difference of sect and religion was allowed to creep in... the reputation of the Indian community is injured' and the editor urged the DIC to include Muslims.⁵² Haji Amod Thaveri was belatedly added to the executive of the DIC, even though his departure for India was imminent. To avoid conflict between the bodies it was agreed that the DIC would not target Muslim merchants and vice versa. The DIC, which met every Monday at the premises of Rustomjee in Field Street, collected £120 in the first week of its existence. On 21 October 1915 Indian politicians like Rustomjee, Lawrence and Christopher sold flowers to Indians on the streets of Durban, collecting almost £30.⁵³ In November 1915 the DIC donated half a ton of 'gwaai' (tobacco), while Anglia and Dawud Mohamed collected an equal amount from Muslim merchants for troops in northern Rhodesia (Zambia).⁵⁴

At a public meeting on 8 December 1915 at Rawat's Theatre, a 'Comforts Committee' was formed with Robert Somasundram as chairman, L. Gabriel and N. Sullaphen as Joint Secretaries and V. Lawrence, Honorary Treasurer. The Committee also included M. C. Anglia and Tajmoon, both Muslim merchants.⁵⁵ On 13 December 1915, 25 Indian Christian women including Agnes Francis, Gladys Samuels, R. Joseph and 'Miss Joshua' formed a ladies branch of the Committee under Mrs Bone, wife of Reverend Bone, to visit those that the 'men were leaving behind' and 'represent their wants to the Committee'.⁵⁶ To *Indian Opinion*, the women showed that 'they too can suffer for the good of the country they live in, for the honour of their Motherland, for the 'izzat' of the British Raj, for the solidarity of the British empire'.⁵⁷ The Comforts Committee worked closely with the authorities. The Mayor and Mayoress were invited to a 'Bioscope Entertainment' on 13 January 1916,⁵⁸ and the Mayor was, in fact, invited to every event organised by the Committee. When Nicolson was elected Mayor, V. Lawrence of the DIC offered his 'heartiest congratulations on your election as the Mayor of this Model Borough, the Brighton of South Africa'.⁵⁹ The news of the Mayor's election came as 'great pleasure' to Parsec Rustomjee, who conveyed the

⁵² *Indian Opinion*, 15 October 1915.

⁵³ *Indian Opinion*, 22 October 1915.

⁵⁴ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/222. N. Mackeurtan to Mayor Nicolson, 18 November 1915.

⁵⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 10 December 1915.

⁵⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 24 December 1915.

⁵⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 5 November 1915.

⁵⁸ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/144. L. Gabriel to Mayor Nicolson, 5 January 1916.

⁵⁹ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/144. V. Lawrence to Mayor, 7 August 1915.

'good news' to Gandhi.⁶⁰ The attitude of the DTC towards street collections reveals its attitude to class differences among Indians. When the Comforts Committee requested permission to hold a collection, the Chief Constable opined that they should be allowed to do so because the body was comprised of 'respectable Indians'.⁶¹ But when the Nagari Paracharani Sabha applied for similar permission to raise money to repair the Springfield Hindu Hall, which had been damaged by floods, the application was turned down.⁶² Permission was reserved for Indians who worked closely with the authorities and were deemed 'respectable'.

By March 1917, when it had been in existence for 14 months, the Comforts Committee consisted of 43 members and had held 51 meetings. Its achievements included a street collection on 5 February 1916 that raised £130, which was handed to Captain Briscoe to start a Corps Fund collecting contributions from Indians from all over the Union, and the supply of 1,041 shirts by the ladies section over a four-month period. The first consignment of 'comforts' sent to East Africa in January 1916 arrived there safely; subsequent consignments were either delayed as a result of transport congestion in East Africa, or items went missing. Major Briscoe therefore called for a stop to this practice. From March 1916, Indian reinforcements to East Africa were each given a parcel of 'essentials' (razors, cigarettes, biscuits, etc.) valued at 20s. The Committee also provided fruit and cigarettes to an Indian Regiment passing through Durban, the Indian officers of the hospital ship 'Gascon' were supplied with refreshments and cigarettes, and £50 was given to the Red Cross for Christmas comforts for Indian bearers of South Africa and India.⁶³

Stallholders at the Indian Market, meanwhile, formed a Committee under Dada Mia, F. Lazarus, Chairman of the Stallholders Association, and Suchit Maharaj in August 1915 to raise money. According to Maharaj, every stallholder paid 'willingly in accordance with his means' and promised to 'readily bear his share of the burden so long as the war lasts'. Interestingly, white stallholders at the Borough Market did not undertake a similar project. Stallholders subscribed £15 to the Fund in September 1915, expressing a special request that this money be used for the relief of the distressed in England.⁶⁴ Stallholders were traders and must be distinguished from poor Indian farmers who sold their products at an alternate street market in Victoria Street. The Market Committee organised an Indian War Fair over two days on 15 and 16 December 1916. M. C. Coovadia, M. C. Anglia, and E. M. Paruk of

⁶⁰ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/21144. Rustomjee to Nicolson, 8 August 1915.

⁶¹ NA, 3/DBN, 4/112/145. Chief Constable to Town Clerk, 16 February 1918.

⁶² NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/145. R.H. Pat, President, to Mayor, 6 March 1918.

⁶³ Report of fSA Indian Bearer Comforts Company Committee, in *Indian Opinion*, 16 March 1917. *Indian Opinion*, 29 Oct. 1915.

the MMC were co-opted on the organising committee. Farmers contributed a day's produce while stallholders closed their stalls for two days and donated poultry, furniture, clothing, and building materials for sale at the Fair.⁶⁵ Mayor Nicolson opened the Fair at the market, which was decorated with South African and British flags. A guard of honour, composed of men in training for the Bearer Corps, welcomed the Mayor and Mayoress. Other guests included Senator Campbell, the Chief Magistrate of Durban, and Councillor Francis, Chairman of the Market's Committee. During the course of his speech the Mayor commented that Indians 'have the benefit of living under British rule. You have had the opportunity of hearing what German rule means in Belgium and Serbia. You people who were born in India know what British justice and freedom mean...'.⁶⁶ The highlight of the day was the auctioning of a cow by the Mayor. Hoosen Cassim first purchased it for £13 but returned it for resale. It was subsequently bought by Abdul Hay Amod for £10, then by Mohammed Abed for £9 and finally by Dawud Mohammed for £8, raising £40 in all. In all, £930 was raised over the two days.⁶⁷

Mayor Nicolson convened a meeting of the DIC and MMC in March 1917 with the purpose of uniting them so that they would work with each other rather than against each other. The deep divisions among Indians were reflected in the composition of the new body. An eight-person committee elected to represent 'each section of the Durban Indian community' was made up of V. Lawrence (Christians), B. A. Maghraj (Calcutta Hindus), Rustomjee (Parsees), R. B. Chetty (Madras Hindus), P. J. Sanghavi (Bombay Hindus), E. M. Paruk (Bombay Muslims), M. L. Sultan (Madras Muslims) and S. Emamally (Calcutta Muslims). At the first meeting on 8 March 1917 sub-committees were formed so that each individual could collect funds from 'their section of the community'.⁶⁸ This illustrates the extent to which religion and regionalism were determining factors among Indians. Rev. Bone, who worked closely with the Committee, commented in 1917: 'It should be remembered that the rich Indian merchants are Mahomedans, and of an entirely different race from the Hindus. The latter have no more claim upon the former than they have upon Europeans'.⁶⁹ Differences between Hindus, Christians and Muslims were compounded by differences among these groups emanating from their areas of origin in India. Given this, it is not surprising that the Committee was unable to work together for long. The Protector wrote to the Mayor that it was 'to be regretted that there is this ill-feeling existing among the Indian community, and this is particularly noticeable when the full Committee meet,

⁶⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 22 December 1915.

⁶⁶ *African Chronicle*, 23 December 1916.

⁶⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 22 December 1916.

⁶⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 16 March 1917.

⁶⁹ *Indian Opinion* 11, 7 December 1917.

and especially when Parsee Rustomjee makes any remark'. Differences between Rustomjee and Anglia and his supporters were irreconcilable.⁷⁰

INDIAN WORKERS DURING THE WAR YEARS

While the commercial and educated elites were urging financial support for the war, large numbers of Indians were experiencing serious financial difficulty. Unemployment was a serious problem, the DTC noting in November 1914 that it 'threatened to assume embarrassing dimensions'. In view of the 'already acute and rapidly increasing distress occasioned by unemployment in the Borough', an Unemployment Relief Fund was formed in October 1914 to take care of unemployed whites. By October 1914 work had been found for 51 people while a further 133 were receiving relief.⁷² In November 1914 the DTC voted £100 to the Unemployment Fund.⁷³ In March 1915 the Unemployment Committee of Organised Workers called for Public Works in order to 'immediately absorb as large a number as possible of the unemployed'.⁷⁴ Unemployment was a serious problem for all. But while whites could count on the state for assistance, Indians had to fend for themselves. This was compounded by food shortages, particularly rice, which was the staple for most Indians. Rice shortages were due to delays in shipments that resulted from the activities of the German Cruiser 'Emden' in the Bay of Bengal. After consultation with the government, rice was replaced with mealie-meal on plantations.⁷⁵ *Indian Opinion* was unhappy because Indians' 'physical constitution cannot stand a violent change from rice to a strong food like mealie meal. Rice is their "staff of life"'.⁶ *Indian Opinion* suggested that the DTC loan vacant land to unemployed Indians to convert to 'smiling fields of crops' to alleviate the problem. Further, wealthy Indians should loan land to small farmers 'with the humane and patriotic object of doing a great service to the Empire to which they belong'.⁷⁷

No such projects materialised; instead food prices rocketed. The price of a loaf of bread increased from 4d in August 1914 to 8d in June 1915; flour from 13s to 20s per 98 pounds and meal from 21s to 35s per 195 pounds.⁷⁸ The DTC requested an explanation from the Durban Chamber of Commerce. The

⁷⁰ NA, 3/DBN, 411121/433, Protector Polkinhorne to Mayor Nicolson, 14 November 1917. The correspondence makes reference to a private letter that Rustomjee wrote to the Mayor outlining the main differences among Indians. Unfortunately, this letter is missing from the files.

⁷¹ NA, 3/DBN, 41112/890, Minutes of DTC Meeting, 2 November 1914.

⁷² NA, 3/DBN, 41112/890, Report of Unemployment Relief Fund, 31 October 1914.

⁷³ NA, 3/DBN, 41112/890, Minutes of General Purposes Committee, 23 November 1914.

⁷⁴ NA, 3/DBN, 41112/890, L. Ceam, Unemployment Committee, to Town Clerk, 29 March 1915.

⁷⁵ *Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants*, 1914.

⁷⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 14 September 1917.

⁷⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 21 October 1914.

⁷⁸ NA, 3/DBN, 41112/821, Durban Town Clerk to East London Town Clerk, 3 July 1915.

Chamber replied that merchants were 'compelled' to increase prices to 'counteract the panicky demand from inland centres, to discourage speculative buying and to conserve stocks in the interests of regular customers'. Prices were thus raised even though there was no scarcity of wheat, flour and rice at the main sources of supply'.⁷⁹ In June 1916 V. C. Pather and 53 Indians petitioned the Minister of Interior to investigate the 'excessive increase in prices of foodstuffs and other necessities of life', an increase 'not accompanied by a rise in wages'.⁸⁰ On 5 July 1916, R. B. Chetty of the Natal Hindu League organised a mass meeting at the Indian Market. Chetty obtained permission for large numbers of workers from the Railway Department and Durban Municipality to attend. Chetty told the crowd that the increase was due to 'artificial causes' such as hoarding, higher freight prices and war surcharges. Freight costs had increased 300% even though there was no danger to ships and the cost of coal and the wages of the crew had not increased. Speakers like B. A. Maghraj, R. K. Naidoo, Thungavelu Naicker and V. S. C. Pather, all colonial-borns, called on the Durban Municipality and Railway Departments to pay a 'war bonus' to Indian employees, a privilege that whites enjoyed. Messages of support were read out from Hindus in Kimberly, Pietermaritzburg, Stanger and Tongaat, who offered 'unanimous sympathy'. P. S. Aiyar handed the resolutions to the Chief Magistrate of Durban.⁸¹ Chetty told another meeting in July 1916 that nobody represented the interests of Indians since Gandhi's departure, even though Indians were worse-off under Union because Prime Minister Botha was determined to 'bundle all the Indians out of the country'. In response to pleas from 'ordinary' Indians that 'the Indian community had to be established on a sound basis', he had formed the Natal Hindu League to take up the cause of poor Indians.⁸² However, as the name suggests, Chetty was representing the poor Hindu.

The price of rice escalated exponentially during the war and there was real danger of starvation. A meeting at the Royal Picture Palace in September 1917 was attended by over a thousand Indians who were addressed by the Reverend Koilpillai, C. V. Pillay, editor of *Viveka Banoo*, Reverend B. L. Sigamoney, and Gordon Lee, of the Industrial Socialist League. According to Sigamoney they were meeting to show solidarity with the 'poor suffering class. Our duty as Indians was to stand by our poorer brethren at this time'. C. V. Pillay, speaking in Tamil, told the crowd that the price of a 160-pound bag of rice had increased from 24s in 1914 to 42s, dholl from 2d per pound to 6d, and ghee from 1s. 6d. a pound to 3s. Pillay had written to the Governor-General to fix the price of rice, dholl, ghee and oil, which were essential components of

⁷⁹ BNA, 3/DBN, 4/112/821, Durban Chamber of Commerce to Town Clerk, 6 August 1915'

⁸⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 30 June 1916.

⁸¹ *African Chronicle*, 8 July 1916.

⁸² *African Chronicle*, 22 July 1916'

the Indian diet, but to no avail. Gordon Lee added that since the government had set a precedent by fixing the price of sugar, which was important to whites, at 26s per bag from the 35s at which it had been retailing, there should be no problem in fixing other prices. He urged Indian workers to organise or 'go under': 'even a stone image would weep tears of blood when it saw the sufferings of Indian workers in this country'. Sigamoney warned that poor Indians would 'take the law into their own hands. The government must realise what a temper we are in over the profiteering. I will lead the demonstration'.⁸³ The middle-class *Indian Opinion* warned against violence:

To act in a disorderly manner or injure property as a demonstration against profiteering would not serve the purpose intended. And if it would, it is a wrong way of seeking redress. If a demonstration is desired, let it be a peaceful one - one that would touch the hearts as well as the pockets of those who are concerned.⁸⁴

Protests continued in other parts of Durban as well. The residents of Sea View, Bellair and surrounding areas, who met at the residence of P M Naicker in September 1918, warned that a further increase in food prices 'will not be conducive to contentment, orderly government, and happiness among the people'.⁸⁵ Rice remained a contentious issue even after the war. In October 1918 M. C. Naidoo sent a letter to the government on behalf of the Indians of Malvern to protest in 'unmistakable language freely and fearlessly to halt this perpetual increase which was due to nothing but artificial causes... any further increase is fraught with danger'.⁸⁶ Rice was also the cause of friction between municipal workers and the OTC, which tried to persuade them in February 1920 to accept flour and meal instead of rice. Indians initially refused, but after 'lengthy discussion' accepted 1.5 lbs of flour and meal for each pound of rice reduced.⁸⁷ In October 1918 John L. Roberts, a colonial-born Indian, chaired a mass meeting of Indian Municipal workers, who petitioned the OTC to either increase their wages or give them a war allowance in view of the 100% increase in food prices and 250% increase in clothing prices since 1914.⁸⁸

While Indian workers experienced terrible economic hardship, some Indian merchants made huge profits. The Standard Bank's Annual Report noted in 1915 that the 'enhanced prices at which old stocks are being disposed of has been of considerable benefit to the large wholesale houses and others

⁸³*Natal Advertiser*, 7 September 1917.

⁸⁴*Indian Opinion*, 7 September 1918.

⁸⁵*African Chronicle*, 28 September 1918.

⁸⁶*African Chronicle*, 5 October 1918.

⁸⁷NA, 3/DBN, 411/211374, General Storekeeper to Town Clerk, 1810211920

⁸⁸NA, 3iDBN, 41i2i1373, 0Si10/1918.

carrying large holdings'.⁸⁹ The Bank's 1916 Report noted that while 'importers have found some difficulties in the replenishment of stocks, this has been more than counteracted by the higher profits obtained on all commodities'.⁹⁰ The 1918 Report noted that 'merchants and shopkeepers are enjoying times of exceptional prosperity'.⁹¹ The *African Chronicle* commented in August 1917 that:

A feeling of bitterness is engendered by the knowledge that the wholesale merchants reap the benefit of every rise in price. Prices are artificially raised by speculating on the rising market, and by those holding stocks, advancing prices from day to day. Is it any use our asking dealers to combine together in fixing a reasonable price for Indian foodstuffs, based on the actual cost, plus reasonable charges and profit? We appeal to businessmen to have consideration for the poor.⁹²

A Cost of Living Commission reported in 1919 that because of the shortage of goods, merchants were increasing prices irrespective of cost, the only check being 'the necessity of keeping his regular customers supplied and satisfied'.⁹³ The Commission's examination of eleven Indian traders in Durban led it to conclude that 'undue profits have been made by wholesale merchants in foodstuffs, boots and shoes, and soft goods'.⁹⁴

PERFORMANCE OF INDIAN TRADERS 1914-1917

	1914	1915	1916	1917
Turnover	232,895	252,800	345,895	501,189
Gross Profit£	29,079	5,277	46,731	74,438
%	12.5	13.9	13.5	14.8
Expenses	£ 13,094	16,519	16,899	25,906
%	5.6	6.5	4.9	5.1
Net Profit	£ 15,985	18,758	29,832	48,532
%	6.9	7.4	8.6	9.7

⁸⁹ SBA, INSP 1/11209, Durban 1905-1929, 21 July 1915.

⁹⁰ SBA, INSP 1111209, Durban 1905-1929, 17 June 1916.

⁹¹ SBA, INSP 1/11209, Durban 1905-1929, 31 July 1918.

⁹² *African Chronicle*, 11 August 1917.

⁹³ Union of South Africa, Cost of Living Commission, Profits Report, U.G. 1-19, No. 19, 4.

⁹⁴ Union of South Africa, Cost of Living Commission, Profits Report, U.G. 1-19, No. 19, 16. The twelve traders were A. M. Amra, Hoosen Cassim & Co., Hajee Hassim, B. Ebrahim Ismail & Co., Jalbhoy and Sorabjee Bros., G. H. Yankhan & Co., A. H. Moosa, A. E. Randeree, A. M. Shaikh, M. S. Randeree and A. E. Rajah. Source: Union of South Africa, Cost of Living Commission, Profits Report, U.G. 1-19, No. 19, 59 and 67.

According to *African Chronicle*, there was tangible evidence of this prosperity. While only one Indian owned a second-hand motor car in 1914, as a result of 'profiteering during the previous three years Durban's Indians had purchased thirty new cars with a value of around £200 each' by 1917.⁹⁵ Further, the value of properties owned by Indians in the Borough of Durban increased by 53% between 1909 and 1920, from £501,750 to £940,050.⁹⁶

Difficult economic conditions resulted in a flurry of trade union activity among Indians. The Industrial Socialist League (ISL) established night classes for Indians and issued pamphlets on Marxism in Tamil and Telegu.⁹⁷ An Indian Workers Industrial Union was inaugurated in March 1917 with Gordon Lee as chairman and Sigamoney and Sukdeo as secretaries.⁹⁸ Pressure from white workers made the position of Indians even more precarious. The executive of the Natal Federation of Trade and Labour Union called on white organised workers in November 1917 to 'prevent contractors employing cheap Indian labour to do their painting'.⁹⁹ The Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' League viewed with 'disgust' the decision of the DTC to use Indians to paint tram cars, 'to the detriment of returned soldiers'.¹⁰⁰ The Amalgamated Society of Carpenters protested in February 1919 that tearooms at the Beach were being furnished by Indian labour. The DTC gave an assurance that skilled Indian labour would not be used, even though 80% of skilled cabinet-makers in Durban were Indian. The cancelling of sub-contracts left many Indians unemployed.¹⁰¹ In April 1919 the Federation of Trades and Labour published a Notice in the *Natal Mercury* requesting trade unionists not to patronise tearooms that employed Indians.¹⁰² *African Chronicle* found it ironical that:

It is British workmen who demand that 'no Asiatic labour should be employed in any trade.' But the same British worker, while the Empire was trembling in the balance a year or two ago, did not think it prudent to make such a demand, because he knew he won't get a job if there was no Empire. Now, seeing that the Empire is as safe as he is, the British worker wants to elbow the Indian out of his billet, or failing which he says he will paralyse the industries of the country by a general strike. As a result of this threat a great many skilled workers have been thrown out of work.¹⁰³

⁹⁵ *Natal Advertiser*, 7 September 1917.

⁹⁶ NA, 3/DBN; 41112il 150, Town Clerk to L. MacGregor, Sec., South African League, 30 March 1922.

⁹⁷ E. Mantzaris, 'The Indian Tobacco Workers Strike of 1920. A socio-historical investigation.' *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* VI (1983), 115-125, 116.

⁹⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 23 March 1917.

⁹⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 2 November 1917.

¹⁰⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 8 March 1918.

¹⁰¹ *Indian Opinion*, 28 February 1919.

¹⁰² *Natal Mercury*, 8 April 1919.

¹⁰³ *African Chronicle*, 8 March 1919.

Indian dockworkers, painters, hotel employees, tobacco workers, catering, garment and shop assistants were unionised by July 1917.¹⁰⁴ The IWU held meetings on a weekly basis in the open air at the corner of Grey and Victoria Streets.¹⁰⁵ In July 1919 Indian workers in hotels, restaurants and tearooms formed a Union under the guidance of Sigamoney.¹⁰⁶ One of the largest and most important unions was the Durban Municipal Indian Employees Union (DMIEU), formed in 1917 to take up the struggle for better working conditions and higher wages. In a petition to the Mayor in February 1919 DMIEU demanded higher wages and more rations because an

Indian could wear a loin cloth and work on a sugar cane field but Indians in your employ could hardly be expected to wear a loin cloth and walk along the public thoroughfares of Durban with credit to their employers.... Our children have to be educated unless we as a community are to be allowed to sink and remain in the lowest depths of degradation and poverty. It is our desire to raise the standard of our existence generally, in life manner and custom, to that of Western ideals.¹⁰⁷

The difficult economic conditions had contradictory consequences for Indian workers. On the one hand it brought into the open class differences between Indian commercial elites and workers. At the same time it was difficult to forge class alliances with white and African workers. While white workers protected their position on the basis of race, African workers flocked to the mass-based Industrial and Commercial Workers Union.

LOYALTY UNREWARDED

At the conclusion of war Indians held special prayers 'in accordance with the desire of our King'. The motto of the fund raising committee for 'Our Day' celebrations on 24 October 1918 was 'give till it hurts'.¹⁰⁸ This event once again underlined the deep divisions among Indians. F. Lazarus and S. Ansary complained to the Mayor that stallholders were 'entirely left out when the Committee was formed to carry out the celebrations', notwithstanding the fact that:

Market people were the first to take the lead among the Indian community in assisting the first Fund, which was inaugurated at the vey commencement of the War It seemed strange that when the time came for rejoicing, some of the persons who not only did nothing for the war, but who were antagonistic, came on the scene and captured the Annistice celebration movement... That the Market Committee has always worked on its own

¹⁰⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 4 July 1919.

¹⁰⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 29 June 1917.

¹⁰⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 4 July 1919.

¹⁰⁷ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/1373, DMIEU to Mayor, 26102/1919.

¹⁰⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 10 November 1918.

independent lines is well known to the Mayor and therefore it feels strongly on the point of its having been left out.¹⁰⁹

The hopes of Indians that their contributions would be acknowledged and perhaps rewarded were in vain. On 8 November 1920 the DTC agreed to provide a Roll of Honour for white Municipal Employees killed during the war. The Memorial was erected on the landing of the Municipal Offices Block on 18 October 1921.¹¹⁰ In contrast, although Indians had formed a War Memorial Committee, acquired land at the corner of Alice Street and Warwick Avenue to erect a 'worthy memorial' to members of the Indian Corps 'who made supreme sacrifice in East Africa', and a design was prepared by Clement Beneque, a well-known local artist, the memorial, which would have cost £1,500, was never built because of lack of finance.¹¹¹ Dr R. W. Gabriel wanted to know in 1939 why the memorial had not been built when £500 had been collected and 21 years had elapsed. He suggested that the money be put in a Fund for the dependents of those who had died during the war. Gabriel also questioned why Indian Corps members were not invited to the annual Armistice Day parade. 'X.Y.Z.', who served in the war, suggested that each merchant should be made to contribute £25 for a Memorial, which was essential:

The European youth of today do not know what the Indian community has done for the Empire and the sooner this War Memorial is erected the better. Europeans do not know the value of the Indian, and that is why the question of segregation has arisen. Why should the Indian be the victim? The European should respect the Indian and not use him when in need.¹¹³

The only 'reward' that Indians received was that the names of those who died in East Africa were included on the DTC War Memorial that was unveiled in March 1926.¹¹⁴ Instead of treating Indians more equitably, there was a revival of discriminatory legislation. The South African League, formed in 1919 to resolve the 'Asiatic Problem', considered Indians a 'serious moral, economic and political menace', and the cause of unemployment and low standards among whites. For the League, the solution was to ban Indians from employment in 'positions of responsibility' such as clerks and traffic officers, impose residential and trading segregation, and encourage repatriation.¹¹⁵ The DTC bowed to white pressure and passed

¹⁰⁹ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/21825, Market Committee to Mayor, 29 November 1918.

¹¹⁰ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/211 185, Acting Town Clerk to Finance Committee, 11 January 1923.

¹¹¹ *Indian Opinion*, 19 April 1929

¹¹² *Indian Opinion*, 28 April 1939

¹¹³ *Indian Opinion*, 5 May 1939

¹¹⁴ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/140, DTC Minutes, 27 March 1926. The following are some of the Indians who died: M. Chendriah, M. Doorsamy, J. B. Lazarus, M. Murugasan, K. Ramiah. S. Moodley, K. Abdulrahim, J. Budhu, D. Moodley, I. M. Moodley, C. Muthuraluru, T. M. Naiken and K. R. Ramiah

¹¹⁵ NA, 3/DBN, 4/1/2/J 150, Leo Macgregor, hon. sec. SAL, to Town Clerk, 12 Nov. 1920.

laws to restrict Indian trade, residence and employment. Racist practices against Indians continued unabated. For example, when the Union Zulu Choir performed in aid of the League of Returned Soldiers and Sailors in August 1921, Indian and African soldiers were made to sit separately in the balcony. *Indian Opinion* questioned: 'Was this distinction made, we ask, when it was a question of fighting on the battlefield? Did the assistance of the darker races have the effect of polluting the white races during the war as it seems to have now in times of peace?'.¹¹⁶ Indians, who had been injured in the service of the Bearer Corps and could not climb to the top of the tramcar, were not allowed to sit at the bottom because that area was reserved for whites. *Indian Opinion* asked rhetorically: 'if this is the way men who have all but met their deaths for the sake of the empire's cause are treated by our Town Council, what treatment are we to expect for other Indians?'¹¹⁷

CONCLUSIONS

This account of Durban's Indians during World War I has shown that it is erroneous to speak of an 'Indian community'. There were deep social, political, economic and cultural divides between and among working class Indians and the educated and commercial elites. These stark differences determined reaction to the war, participation in it, and the material effects of war on various classes of Indians. Indian commercial and educated elites considered themselves part of an Imperial entity and saw the war as an opportunity to display their loyalty to the Empire and foster closer relations with whites in Durban. While merchants expended enormous energy in the drive to collect funds for the war effort, and many of their businesses made huge profits, working class Indians languished in poverty. The elites' embracing of the war effort was ultimately futile because whites racialised class, made race a point of reference in group relations, ignored the character, qualities and class position of individual Indians, and intensified the segregationist drive after the war. These years also witnessed the coming of age of colonial-born Indians who contested the leadership vacuum created by Gandhi's departure. Educated colonial-born Indians assumed a greater role in Indian affairs. The likes of Christopher, Sigamoney, Maharaj, and others involved themselves in a wide range of organisations and issues, and challenged the right of commercial elites to be the voice of the 'community'. This study has also shown that while successive white governments attempted to socially construct the racial classification 'Indian' by ethnicising race and orientalisising Indians as a homogenous and distinct racial 'community', Indians were severely divided. The lines of cleavage included

¹¹⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 5 August 1921

¹¹⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 14 September 1917

the notions of social and cultural supremacy held by the commercial elites in relation to the darker complexioned descendants of indentured Indians, the internecine struggles between Tamil and Hindi-speaking Hindus and Urdu and Gujarati-speaking Muslims, tensions between Christians, Muslims and Hindus, areas of origin, differences in religious rituals and cultural practices, and the impact of class on the lived experience of Indians. The tensions created at the time of World War I vividly demonstrates that in Natal there was no fixed, essentialist, unchanging, homogenous racial Indian identity.

