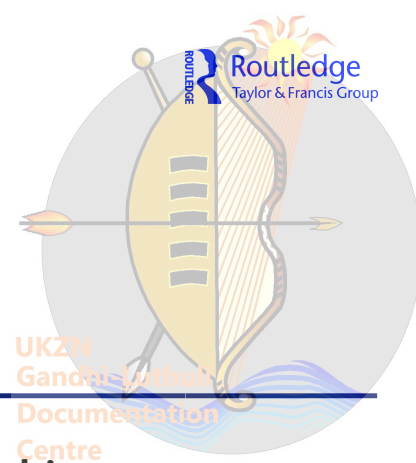


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The revenge of history: Indian indenture and its afterlife in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The aftermath of the 150th anniversary in 2010 of the arrival of the first indentured migrants in Natal saw an explosion of family and community histories. While some academic historians question the credibility of such histories, carefully sifted and cross-referenced, they can provide a wealth of new information, allowing for deeper insights into indentured migration and Indian settlement in South Africa. Family histories help in building intergenerational histories that go beyond indenture. This expansion of the historical archive provides a fuller story of Indians who, for a large part of their existence, were written out of the history books or written in as a festering sore to be lanced from the South African body politic through mass repatriation. While digging deeper into individual family histories, the story is situated within the broader context of racist exclusion, showing how these boundaries were reinforced as much as they were challenged and trespassed.

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Historians are interested in the whole human past. We want to people that past with living, breathing individuals, as if they lived only yesterday, as if we had known them.

- Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath (2011, 1)

The Indian diaspora in South Africa is awash with story-telling.¹ In the past two decades there has been a rash of (mostly) self-published books that delve into family and community histories.² It is as if there is a need for catharsis. Indians were largely written out of the nation's official history during the periods of segregation and apartheid, except for chapters with titles like 'The Indian Problem'. Studies by historians focused excessively on Gandhi and the political struggle, with very little work on how Indians built a life in twentieth-century South Africa.

In the immediate post-1994 period, the emphasis was on liberation history and the lives of those who fought the apartheid system and paid a high price for it. It was as if Indian South Africans were seeking to claim their place in the 'Rainbow Nation' by

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extolling their anti-apartheid credentials. As the transition to post-apartheid society unfolded, and especially since 2010 when Indians marked the 150th anniversary of their arrival in South Africa, ordinary Indians seem to have found their voice and are intent on telling the world about their quest to become fully-fledged South Africans.

There has been an explosion of family and community histories, histories of indenture, culture, sport and leisure. Why family histories? Tholsi Mudly expresses a sense of the desire to know her family's history not only through the years of indenture in South Africa but even farther back to the villages from which the family hailed. She quotes the author Alex Haley:

In all of us, there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we came from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there's still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness. (2011, 56)

In response to this 'loneliness' family histories have come to the fore. For historians, these works provide wonderful descriptions of local customs and practices as well as anecdotal information regarding the lives and experiences of Indians, and, more generally, information occluded in the traditional sources of history.

This article draws on a few select memoirs and family histories to trace the afterlives of indenture and capture the human dimension of migration. We draw on these sources, remembering, as Brian Waddell reminds us, that we cannot have a

dogmatically empirical approach to sources and analysis. I don't mean by this a willingness to make things up, more just a recognition that our ability to recover the objective truth is imperfect and that imaginative, narrative approaches to history have a part to play in helping us understand what people in the past may have been thinking, feeling or doing. (Waddell 2012)

The production of family histories was facilitated by the meticulous records kept by colonial officials. The personal details of each migrant, including their names, names of parents, caste, height, weight, village of origin, and employer, were recorded. Surendra Bhana and Joy Brain, historians at the then University of Durban-Westville, undertook the tedious but exciting task of digitising these 152 000 records, which are now available online. This source is often drawn on by researchers and descendants of the migrants to write family histories or establish family origins for the purposes of applying for Person of Indian Origin (PIO) or Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards (Vahed and Waetjen 2014).

We approach these community and family histories with caution, aware that they can veil as much as they reveal. As journalist Youlendree Appasamy observes:

South African Indian families are deeply invested in the avoidance of shame. There are things we don't talk about, memories we would rather bury than speak out loud. But memories don't die, they rise like specters and haunt the living As I was also the descendant of indentured laborers, I was shaped by the afterlives of this system in ways I cannot yet name. Indeed, in the absence of collective naming, it has been impossible to address our problems. Patriarchal violence is spoken of in whispers across kitchen tables and normalized as part of a woman's burden. (Appasamy 2021)

But reading these histories alongside our archival-based works reveals their value in allowing historians to sketch the outlines of how 'coolies' became Asiatics, became 'Aliens', became 'Problems', became South Africans. The colonial archive is defined as much by what is in it as what is not. The documents lodged there, the transcripts of

Commissions of Inquiry, and the Protector's Reports are all imbued with the racist (st)ink of the time. As Ann Stoler reminds us, archives were 'cultural agents of 'fact' production, of taxonomies in the making, and of state authority ... The archive was the supreme technology of the late nineteenth-century imperial state' (Stoler 2002, 88).

The historian Alessandro Portelli points to the hypocrisy in assessing historical sources. He observes that many written sources 'granted an automatic certificate of credibility by historians are carried out with nothing resembling scientific criteria and nearly always with a heavy class bias.' Yet historians who 'turn up their noses at oral sources (and family and community histories in our case) accept these without blinking. In a lesser measure this applies to parliamentary records, newspaper interviews, minutes of meetings and conventions, which together form the chief sources for much traditional history, including labour history.' If oral (and family and community) history is seen to suffer from memory lapse due to the distance from events, 'there is always a greater or lesser lapse of time between the event and the written record' (Portelli 1981, 101).

What happened to the generations following indenture?

Afterlives

The term 'afterlives' focuses on the post-indenture lives of migrants and their descendants. We seek to understand the paths walked by those who came after indenture. Their story has mostly been told in broad sweeps like 'market gardeners', 'industrial workers', and 'municipal employees'. Much of this history has hugged the city of Durban and its edges. But the inter-generational family histories take us further and provide a sense of how many of the subsequent generations stayed close to the plantations, building on networks to grow small businesses and facilitate their children's entry into higher education, a crucial plank common to those who stayed in the rural areas and those who made a quick entry into the urban.

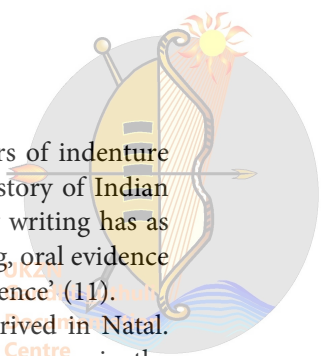
Our early work on indentured labour (Desai and Vahed 2010) was inspired by the landscape of the south and north coasts of KwaZulu-Natal. The sugar plantations, the temples, and the last of the barracks are still visible. We wanted to tell the stories of the people who came from across the Indian ocean, were reduced to numbers and lived and worked at the mercy of a vicious colonial system, but who built and left a lasting legacy. By trawling the archives and reading the colonial documents against the grain, we sought to turn indentured numbers into people.

But there was always something more to the story. In towns like Umzinto on the south coast and Stanger on the north coast, one sees shops, schools, places of worship, and transport companies with names like Singh. How did this happen? How was capital accumulated? Who built these local schools and temples? What were the different paths taken out of indenture? What choices were made, and how did this impact the trajectory of the generations that came after?

What is the purpose of history if it does not breathe meaning into the present?

If indenture made us look in the rearview mirror, with afterlives, we follow the path taken by those who came after.

This quest is inspired in part by Fijian-born historian Brij V. Lal, who wrote in his 2022 edited book, *Girmityas. The Making of Their Memory-Keeper from the Indian*



Indentured Diaspora, that the research of the second-generation scholars of indenture ‘provides tantalising glimpses into the beginnings of an autonomous history of Indian indentured and post-indenture communities’ (Lal 2022, 5). This history writing has as its spine ‘social history, history of people rather than of things, storytelling, oral evidence and family histories’; it ‘thrills to the particularities of the human experience’ (11).

Between 1860 and 1911, more than 152,000 indentured migrants arrived in Natal. Although they were entitled to a free return passage after spending ten years in the colony, most opted to make a home in South Africa. The Wragg Commission, appointed to investigate the conditions of indentured labourers in Natal, reported in 1887 that indentured migrants were reluctant to re-indenture when they completed their five-year contracts: ‘An Indian, drawing the first breath of freedom after five years of indentured service, will, in almost every instance, prove unwilling to re-indenture.’ They left the plantations because they could earn higher wages by engaging in domestic service, as waiters and barmen in hotels, market gardening, hawking, selling horns and hides to Africans, and fishing and fish curing on Salisbury Island (Meer 1980, 324). The Commission observed that ‘free Indians thrive in Natal . . . Their industrious habits cause them to prosper in nearly every occupation in which they engage’ (Meer 1980, 321).

This resulted in White settlers becoming antagonistic towards Indians. ‘Free’ (those who had completed their indentures) and ‘passenger’ (emigrants who came outside of indenture) Indians were seen to constitute a threat to their economic dominance. By the late 1880s, white settlers demanded discriminatory legislation against Indians. Despite mounting racist laws that placed restrictions on movement and the right to trade and entry into the mining industry, the ex-indentured migrants found ways to earn a living, nurture families, and build self-help institutions.

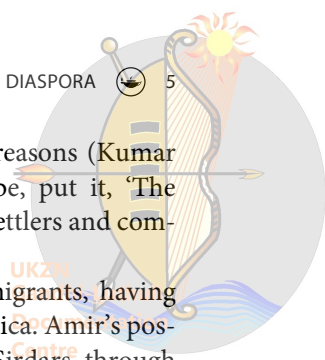
This is a work in progress as we keep an eye on new histories emerging, chasing down brochures, sweeping the archives, interviewing people, and systematically searching the newspapers of the time.

We begin with the story of Amir Sing, inspired by the work of his great-granddaughter, Vicki Bismillah, in *Indentured: A Labourer’s Journey* (2016).

Poolwa Gaoh (The flower village)

Amir Sing was born in Muzaffarnagar in Northeastern India. He arrived in Natal at the age of 22 as indentured migrant 29277 on the *John Davie* on 30 June 1883 and was assigned to the Acutt Sugar Estate in Inanda, north of Durban. After completing his five-year term of indenture, Amir transferred to the nearby Effingham Estate in Avoca, where he was hired as a Sirdar. He married Bhogaruthy, the colonial-born daughter of indentured migrants Inderjeet Sing (13975) and Phoobsbury Rameshur (13976).

After two terms of indenture, Amir opted not to accept the offer of a free return passage to India. His second term ended as Natal was granted Responsible Government in 1893. This was the year in which Mohandas K. Gandhi arrived in Natal and his sojourn in South Africa would leave a lasting legacy (Desai and Vahed 2016). With Responsible Government came a wave of anti-Indian legislation, just as the ex-indentured were trying to build their lives as ‘free’ Indians. The 1895 Indian Immigration Law imposed a three-pound tax on free Indians, Act 8 of 1896 deprived most Indians of the franchise, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1897 restricted Indian entry and the Dealers Licenses



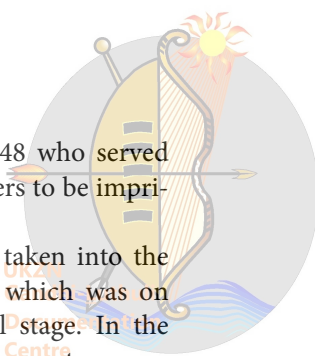
Act gave white councils the power to deny trade licenses for a host of reasons (Kumar 2013; 2014; 2017). As future prime minister of Natal, Harry Escombe, put it, 'The Indians are to come here appreciated as labourers, but not welcomed as settlers and competitors' (Henning 1993, 95).

Away from the noise of anti-Indianism, time-expired indentured migrants, having survived the worst aspects of indenture, began to contemplate a life in Africa. Amir's position as Sirdar meant that he likely displayed leadership qualities. Some Sirdars, through their somewhat privileged position on the plantations, were able to accumulate resources that were beyond those of ordinary indentured migrants. Beyond money, Amir had ten years of accumulated knowledge of the soil, the seasons and a sense of the market for both obtaining materials and selling his products. He purchased land between Avoca and Bailey Roads to the north of the Durban city centre, close to where he had served his second term of indenture. Soon he developed a niche market specialising in growing varieties of flowers that were much valued in Durban, such as blue agapanthus, red hot pokers, and red cluster roses. Amir transported the flowers by ox-cart to florists in the city and, in the early days, hawked them to white homes in nearby Avoca and Red Hill. Amir was largely responsible for Avoca gaining the reputation of a *poolwa gaoh* (flower village).

Indian flower sellers were prominent on Durban's streets from the early decades of the twentieth century. While white colonists initially dominated the market, Indian farmers began to elbow them out. They made the arduous trip to Durban to auction them at the City Market in the afternoons, often sleeping on pavements before making their way back. The flowers were then taken up by Indians fresh out of indenture who would sort and re-bunch them for sale the following day.

The Durban City Council was persistent in policing the flower sellers using a 1915 law to force them to be on the move rather than securing a spot on a street corner. After numerous petitions, from 1921, they were permitted to place their baskets on the pavement at the intersection of West, Gardiner, and Church Streets, fronting the post office. But the quality of their product and price they sold the flowers for raised the ire of white florists. In a draconian intervention, the Council summarily put a stop to street flower selling in October 1924. It was a devastating blow. Protests followed, joined by whites who saw the value of the flower sellers. In a rare concession, the Council backed down and allowed Indians back onto Gardiner Street. The racist whites were placated by the fact that the flower sellers would be shunted to the Borough Market in June 1925 (Vahed 1999, 40–42).

As Amir and Bhogaruthy's business expanded, they were building a family. Nine children, six daughters and three sons, filled their mud house. Their sons Dalip and Ranjit were involved in flower growing, while the youngest son, Debi, who was born in 1913 and qualified as a teacher, carved a reputation as a political figure. In following Debi's life, we trace the story of anti-Indian legislation in the middle decades of the twentieth century, the resistance to it and the price paid by activists. He attended the Sastri College, the first high school for Indians, joined the non-racial Liberal Studies Group, and was a high-ranking official of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Debi was secretary of the Passive Resistance Council, which coordinated the campaign against land segregation in Durban. This was the first effort to adopt Gandhi's satyagraha strategy since his departure from South Africa in 1914. The campaign against what came to be



known as the Ghetto Act drew 2,000 volunteers between 1946 and 1948 who served periods of imprisonment for breaking the law. Debi was one of the resisters to be imprisoned (Desai and Vahed 2010b, 173–204).

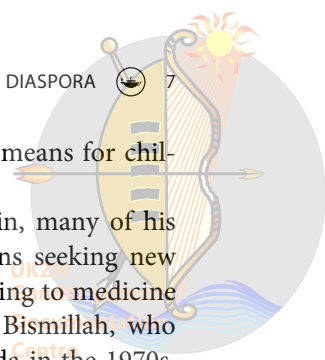
Crucially, the Indian struggle against discriminatory legislation was taken into the newly minted United Nations Organisation (UNO) in 1946 by India, which was on the cusp of independence and flexing its muscle on the international stage. In the midst of these struggles, the Afrikaner-controlled National Party (NP) came to power in South Africa in 1948. Railing against local Indians for embarrassing the country on the world stage, the NP stood on a platform of repatriating Indians from South Africa. Adding to the sense of trepidation among Indians was the bloody racial riot in January 1949 between Indians and Africans (Desai and Vahed 2010b, 232–255).

Debi's NIC was on the back foot because the NP cited the race riots to vindicate its policy of apartheid or separate development. But the NIC came out fighting. An embryonic alliance with the African National Congress (ANC) was mooted and a joint campaign was planned. It was written into the history books as the Defiance Campaign of 1952, but, as subsequent political events would reveal, it was much more than that. This was the spark for a shift into the multi-racial politics of the Congress Alliance. Debi Singh was once more in the thick of things. He was among the 156 activists charged, alongside iconic figures like Nelson Mandela, with treason in December 1956. All were eventually found not guilty (Desai and Vahed 2010b, 334–353). Debi was imprisoned for five months during the State of Emergency in 1960 and was banned and subjected to house arrest for several years. He died in 1970 as apartheid intensified and a year before his beloved NIC was revived.

Debi's brother Dalip was born in 1900 and, at 13, participated in Gandhi's great strike of 1913. He married Jaso. Oral history has it that Jaso's mother, Bachni, was widowed at a young age in a village near Meerut. She was abused by her in-laws and escaped into indenture on the last ship bringing indentured migrants to Natal in 1911. Jaso was not yet four. Bachini worked as a domestic servant in Red Hill and married the gardener, Maharaj. Amir befriended Maharaj when he was delivering flowers, leading to Dalip's marriage to Jaso in 1922. They had 12 children: Soorsuthy, Sonpathy, Doonie Rewathy, Ramsingh, Surat, Gulab, Mansingh, Saras, Munnie Madhuri, Uma, Vicki Hemwathi, and Shaun Rathan.

Meanwhile, Amir Sing was digging deeper roots in South Africa. In 1919 he moved out of the family's small wood and iron house into a self-built larger wood and iron home facing Avoca Road. The house was renowned for its botanical garden. But Amir was not satisfied building a family; he wanted to build a community. A devout Hindu, he spearheaded the quest to build a temple, the Shree Luxmi Narayan Temple, which is a living monument to Amir and the pioneers of Avoca. This commitment to turning space into place continued through the work of Amir's son Dalip, who donated the land where Avoca Secondary School stands today. Amir Sing died in 1933. With Dalip managing the flower farm, he spent his last years at the temple, walking the rolling hills of the flower farm and sitting on the banks of the Umghlangane River.

Did he yearn to return to India? We will never know. What we know is that Amir ensured that the generations that came after were able to pray at a temple and render



offerings to the gods of Hinduism. Crucially, his son Dalip created the means for children, one step out of indenture, to get a high school education.

While Amir spent his life building a sense of place in hostile terrain, many of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren have migrated across the oceans seeking new worlds. They have distinguished themselves in fields ranging from teaching to medicine in Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada. Vicki Bismillah, who authored the family story, was born in Durban and emigrated to Canada in the 1970s, where she worked as a teacher, Principal and Superintendent of Schools, and as Vice-President, Academic and Chief Learning Officer of Centennial College in Toronto. At the time of writing, her daughter Zia was a senior paediatrician at Toronto's Sick Children's Hospital and Professor at the University of Toronto's Medical School and her son Zeyd was a Professor of Liberal Arts at Centennial College.

While Amir Sing developed a niche market in flowers, in the story that follows we see how transport became a source to accumulate capital. While Sing's market was mainly white, for Boni Singh the African market paved the path to building a business. In the telling of Boni's life, we had the benefit of the work of Anita Shah (2023), his great-great-granddaughter.

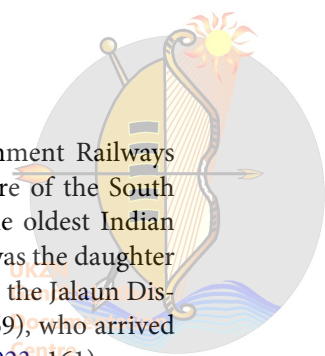
Boni Singh, 'the Taxi King'

Pallot Bhikaridoss (31541) and Somaria Lallbeharie (31643) were from Bihar, almost 600 kilometres from the port of Calcutta. Pallot left Calcutta on 7 May 1884 and arrived in Port Natal on 8 July 1884, almost two months later, on the *Glenroy IV*. They met and married on board the ship and were assigned to the Equeefa Estate in Umzinto. Their twin sons, Jaldhari and Ladhari, were born in 1885 (Shah 2023, 151).

The Equeefa Estate was one of the most appalling in its treatment of indentured workers. The Wragg Commission (1885–1887) into indentured labour, which began its work a year after Pallot and Somaria arrived, recorded that medical officers reported on their visit to the estate:

The stench that assailed us had its origin partly in the very roads we traversed which are composed of rotting megass with here and there patches of human excrement and partly in the reservoir or dundar pit, the latter containing mill refuse in a state of seething fermentation and exhaling a most filthy stench which is carried over the estate by every air. (Henning 1993, 70)

Pallot and Somaria survived the poor conditions. As with most indentured migrants, their options were limited after completing their indenture. Their ability to take advantage of the discovery of gold in the Transvaal, for example, was blocked by the restrictions on inter-provincial movement. Like most migrants they opted to work the land they knew so well. With their limited savings, they put a deposit on land on the Umbellibelli Farm in Umzinto where they took up market gardening. Their stretch of land expanded to seven acres. When war broke out between the Boers and the British in 1899, Gandhi was keen to show Indian loyalty to the British Empire and organised an Indian stretcher-bearer corps. For reasons unknown, Pallot took up this call. Whatever hopes he had for the postwar period were dashed as he died in 1903, barely a year after the war ended (Shah 2023, 159).



Pallot's son Jaldhari began work as a shunter for the Natal Government Railways (NGR) and lived in the Umlaas area west of Camperdown. But the lure of the South Coast was too much and he moved to Esperanza, the site of one of the oldest Indian settlements in Natal. He married the colonial-born Kuvary in 1906. She was the daughter of Lolly Sing Boodh Sing (11104), who arrived in Natal from Koorsura in the Jalaun District in Uttar Pradesh in February 1875, and Lutchmonia Purbhoo (13069), who arrived in June 1876 from the village of Kataria in Piro, Uttar Pradesh (Shah 2023, 161).

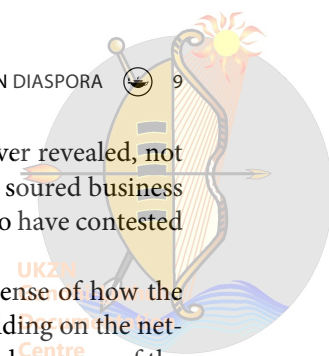
Jaldhari and Kuvary were market gardeners in the Umzinto area before Jaldhari got into the horse-drawn transport business in 1918. He purchased a 12-seater Dodge in 1924 and operated a bus service. He died in 1929, aged 45 (Shah 2023, 161).

Jaldhari and Kuvary had nine children. The most well-known was Boni. Born in Umzinto in 1919, he attended St. Anne's Convent School in Umzinto. This Roman Catholic School, run by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, was the only school available to Indians in the district. Boni completed standard six in 1936 and found work as a petrol attendant at Jogia's Filling Station. He married Soominthara Singh of Clairwood in 1939 (Shah 2023, 13).

In 1944, aged 25, he bought a seven-seater Dodge. Soon, he owned several Chevrolet taxis. He popularised the slogan, 'Boni Singh, the Taxi King'. By this time, a new generation of Indians were spreading their wings across the South Coast. Indenture was already a distant memory. Small businesses proliferated, schooling became more accessible and a professional class began to emerge. Africans were moving to urban areas in search of work while keeping a rural homestead going. In this environment transport was a lucrative business that white colonists for some reason did not bother to enter. Boni, with the infrastructure developed with his taxi business, took the plunge into busses. He purchased his first bus in 1950 and started Bonnie's Bus Service. Money rolled in, but Boni refused to sit still. He put capital into a petrol filling station in 1953, called Coronation Motors. His grandfather had responded to Gandhi's call to support the Crown and Boni marked the coronation of Queen Elizabeth of England with the name of his business. The bus fleet grew to 30 by the early 1970s, making it the largest bus service on the South Coast. Boni Singh invested in property and was involved in several businesses as a director (Shah 2023, 22).

Boni Singh was involved in extensive community work. He served on the Umzinto North Town Board, Umzinto Child Welfare, Umzinto Indian High School Education Committee, and the Umzinto Wrestling Committee. He was a Member of the Civil Defence Organisation (Transport Organisation), Patron of the Lower South Coast Football Association, and Member of the Umzinto Indian Ratepayers Association (Shan 2023, 53).

Boni Singh's life came to a sudden and tragic end. He stood for the Local Affairs Committee (LAC) elections on 3 September 1975. The LAC was an attempt by the apartheid government to give Indians a say in local government. Its critics pointed to the fact that it had very little budgetary control and had to accept the strictures of apartheid. Others argued that they could use the LAC to advance local interests, and that was better than nothing. Feelings ran high. Because of his history of investment in the local community, Boni was expected to coast to victory. But then tragedy struck. On 2 September 1975, while he was canvassing for votes, he was stabbed multiple times by a former employee, an African man, Nelikaye Manjati, and died almost instantly. Manjati was



sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. The reason for the murder was never revealed, not at the trial or after. The family suspected that political reasons allied to a soured business relationship were behind it. Boni Singh was cremated on the day he was to have contested the election (Shah 2023, 59).

In tracing the bare outlines of Boni Singh's story, we get a greater sense of how the generation that came in the wake of indenture sought to make a life. Building on the networks his father had established, he began to expand the taxi business and was one of the pioneers of the bus industry. This was a remarkable journey a couple of decades after indenture. His community involvement provides glimpses into the way in which Indians began to dig deeper roots in the areas where they settled. Welfare and education figured prominently in community work, and Singh exemplified this. But this entry into the market came with costs. In some quarters of the African community, Indian dominance of the small trader and transport industries was met with antagonism. It was felt that Indians had greater access to capital, and Africans were not granted licenses. This was one of the central reasons witnesses gave to the 1949 Race Riots Commission for African antipathy towards Indians.

Beyond this, busses were seen as bringing nefarious influences to rural areas. H.I.E. Dhlomo, a leading African writer of the period, put it this way:

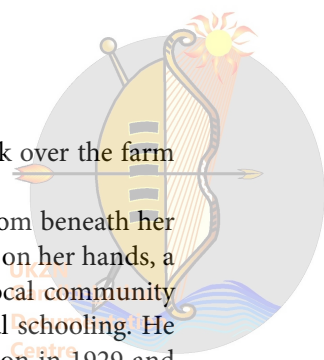
In parts of this country buses are ethical questions. An Indian bus is introduced into a self-contained, quiet rural [area] or mission with high standards of morality. In no time, pop goes the self-sufficiency, quietness and morality and ethical codes of the place. An enterprising African ousts the Indian, and morality like the coy and slow-moving maiden she is, returns slowly and diffidently through the back doors – but the village returns not to quietness and self-sufficiency. The habits and outlook of the people are changed forever. (Soske 2017, 154–155)

Notwithstanding such negative sentiments, Boni Singh represents an individual from a humble indentured background who rose through market gardening and bus ownership and participated in local politics. Some see this participation as collaborating with the apartheid regime; others view it as a way to protect and advance the Indian community. It was a debate that was to consume Indian politics in the 1980s.

The Dullays on the South Coast

Continuing our focus on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, we pick up the story of the Dullays through the memoirs of Prithviraj Dullay, the grandson of indentured migrants. His father, Ramkisum Dullay, was born in Port Shepstone in 1906. Ramkisum's parents had arrived as indentured migrants in 1898 and worked on the same plantation for 22 years. This was different from earlier migrants and may have been a direct result of the imposition of the three-pound tax, which virtually compelled indentured migrants to reindenture or return to India (Swan 1984, 247–248).

The 1913 strike was intense on the South Coast. Plantations were burnt, and the police responded with brutal repression (Desai and Vahed 2016, 212–227). Prithviraj's grandparents were imprisoned during the strike. Like the Singhs, after serving their indenture, the Dullays opted to remain on the South Coast. They bought ten acres of land in Albersville, where they grew rice, mangoes, litchis, avocados, naartjies, bananas, and pawpaws. The produce was sold at the local market. They lived in a wood and iron



house. Ramkisum's father died in 1924 at age of 45, and his mother took over the farm (Dullay 2010, 3).

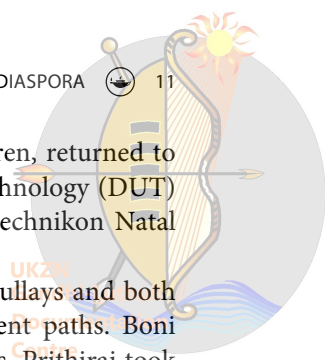
Her grandson Prithiraj writes that she 'she was always barefooted. From beneath her *langha* (skirt) one could see thick brass anklets. She had similar bracelets on her hands, a nose stud and a dot tattoo on her chin.' Prithiraj recounted that the local community worked hard to build a school and Ramkisum had three years of formal schooling. He developed a love for languages. A daredevil, he bought a Harley Davidson in 1929 and toured Natal on the bike. He branched into the taxi business with the purchase of two Chevrolet taxis and opened a theatre called Shree Rama Hall in Albersville, where he staged Hindu religious plays.

Indenture was a system designed to get the most labour out of workers. The plantation bosses often denied the indentured time for religious and cultural activities. Musical instruments were confiscated, and fines were imposed if workers insisted on time off for holy days. But still, they built rudimentary structures to pray to their gods and held ceremonies remembered from the now-distant villages of India. Freed from indenture, they were able to develop these religious and cultural activities in the open and had more time to indulge in activities denied them on the plantation. Prithiraj recounted that 'it was not unusual for plays to last ten hours or more.' The theatre was converted into the town's first cinema in the 1940s, screening Indian and American films. After the death of his mother in 1946, Ramkisum opened a business selling bicycles, primus stoves, and bicycle spares. He also had a radio and electrical repair shop.

Prithiraj was born in 1946. 'By the standards of the small town,' he wrote, 'my family was quite well off. It was their industriousness and the infectious attitude that radiated from Dad about nothing being impossible that laid the foundation for success.' During the Poqo uprising in the Transkei, Ramkisum repaired the guns of the 'rebels'. He was arrested in 1969 and taken to the Transkei for questioning, severely beaten, but released after a few days (Dullay 2010, 7).

The first high school for Indians in South Africa was opened by Agent-General Srinivasen Sastri in 1929. Students from all over Natal competed to fill the limited spaces. However, the upliftment clause of the Cape Town Agreement of 1926/27 yielded benefits in education. Prithiraj was a beneficiary, becoming the first of the Dullay's to acquire tertiary education. Training to become a teacher, he attended the Springfield College of Education from 1968 to 1970. Prithiraj's days at Springfield witnessed a resurgence of political resistance after the banning of the liberation movements in the early 1960s. The spearhead of this resurgence was Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. Many Indian university students began to adopt the identity of Black, rejecting the designation 'Indian' as an imposed apartheid construct. What about Indian traditions? What about the struggle to advance Indian rights that so animated the struggles in the first half of the twentieth century? What would the identity 'Black' involve? (see Desai and Vahed 2021). These were heady days and these questions were lost in the swirl of the coming revolution.

Prithiraj was arrested in 1968 and was thereafter constantly under the radar of the apartheid regime. He fled into exile in 1978 with his wife Mala following the state crackdown after the Soweto Rebellion of 1976. He worked at the ANC-run Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Tanzania, and eventually went into exile to Denmark. It was an alienating life as he was far from home, cut off from family and the everyday struggles of Black people. When the liberation movements were unbanned in 1990, and Nelson



Mandela was released from prison, Prithiraj and Mala, with their children, returned to the land of their birth. Prithiraj taught at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and spearheaded the campaign to have the former white campus of Technikon Natal named after 'Comrade Steve Biko' (Dullay 2010, 9–13).

While Boni Singh's family settled in the same area in Natal as the Dullays and both went into the transport business, Prithiraj and Boni's life took different paths. Boni opted to work the system and stood as a candidate in the LAC elections. Prithiraj took a militant non-collaborationist stance and was hounded into exile.

These two stories point to the power of micro-histories and family biographies. They provide us with the sense that despite the overbearing structures of life under apartheid, people made choices, displaying agency that often took different forms.

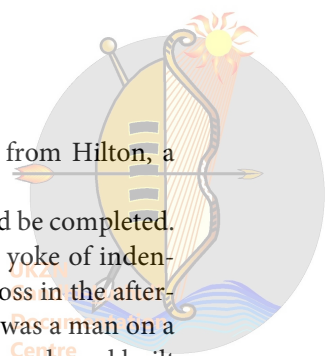
Pungan

The Inanda area has been the focus of our research for several decades. This is the area where Gandhi pioneered the Phoenix Settlement that stands to this day. It was also the place where the first President of the ANC, John Dube, opened the Ohlange Institute, and it houses the headquarters of the prophet Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Church, which has more than two million Zulu followers. In 1985, Inanda was caught in a cauldron of violence that resulted in Indians being driven out of the area (Hughes 1987).

Our research was sparked by more contemporary concerns. We were interested in the lives of those forced to flee to nearby Phoenix and have been conducting oral interviews. In 2021, riots across KwaZulu-Natal saw Indian vigilantes defending their homes as social media was awash with threats of an invasion by Africans from nearby squatter settlements. Our research focuses on why this area is a lightning rod for tensions that periodically break out into open violence. We were keen to track the families of indentured migrants who came to labour in the area and to learn how successive generations negotiated their lives.

One of the best-known pioneering families is the Pungans. We knew family members and had access to the memoirs that were developed into a full-blown history. It is a fascinating story that provides new insights for our research on Phoenix. Poongavanum Velan (130575), known as Pungan, and Thoyee Raman (130576) arrived as indentured migrants from Thiruvotthiyar in North Arcot in the Madras Presidency on the *Umhloti* on 19 February 1907. Although they came as husband and wife, they were initially assigned different employers. They protested and succeeded in being assigned to the Groenberg Wattle Plantation in Inanda. Their first child, Kisten, was born on 17 October 1908 (*Pungan Family* 2010, 10).

Pungan's task at Groenberg was to fell and peel the bark of wattle trees. He was skilled at the task and showed leadership qualities which saw him promoted to Sirdar in 1911. This position of authority did deter him from participating in the 1913 strike. The three-pound tax that was at the heart of the strike impacted people like Pungan as it would have forced him to reindenture and spend a substantial portion of his life tied to a plantation. Despite the years of loyalty, the reaction to his participation and probably local-level leadership was a week's imprisonment and, thereafter, being sent to work at the Hilton Wattle Plantation in the Midlands, a long distance from home. When he was allowed to return to Inanda there was a joyous family reunion. Thoyee said a prayer of thanks



to the gods, and in 1915, just more than nine months after his return from Hilton, a bouncing son, Moonsamy, was born (*Pungan Family* 2010, 11).

There were two years to run before his second term of indenture would be completed. Pungan dreamed of the day he and Thoyee would be released from the yoke of indenture. He was hurt at the way in which he was treated by the plantation boss in the aftermath of the strike and began planning for the end of indenture. Pungan was a man on a mission. While still working at the Wattle Plantation, he leased land in Inanda and built a mud house in his spare time. There were others like him, laying the foundations of life after indenture. The village that they had come from was now a distant memory. The growing family had to be tended to and fed. Other children followed Moonsamy between 1917 and 1929: Mariemuthoo, Veeramah, Narainsamy, Dhanam, Parvathy and Lutchmee. Pungan grew mealies, beans, pumpkins, and rice. All his knowledge, skills and networks were brought to bear on growing produce for a developing market. Soon the Pungans were leasing a hundred acres of land (*Pungan Family* 2010, 12).

Africans dispossessed by the land grab of the white colonists in Zululand and forced to labour in the urban and peri-urban areas were also hungry for land. However, legal instruments meant that Indians had limited access to land which was denied to Africans. Indians could rent land at a fixed rental in some areas on long-term leases and eventually buy land. Africans were prevented from renting and owning land by a plethora of racist and segregationist legislation, including the Land Act of 1913, which resulted in the destruction of the African peasantry, and cemented the migrant labour system, forcing many Africans into urban areas (Beinart and Delius 2014). The result was that Indians raised the ire of both whites and Africans. The 1936 Land Act permitted Africans to own land in Inanda. This concession, welcomed by Africans, would pit them against Indians who, as Pungan's story shows, already had considerable land holdings in the area (Simelane 2022, 17–19).

In 1929, Pungan built a four-bedroom tin house. The indentured couple who had laboured for ten years on the white man's farm, were on the move. They purchased 12 acres of land from E.M. Paruk and 31 from D.I. Paruk. The Pungans were determined to provide their children with an education. This meant a grinding journey for the boys to Verulam while the girls studied at the Olive Warner Mission School which Pungan helped to establish on the nearby tea estate in 1935. Education was at the heart of Pungan's pursuit of his family's progress. In an incredible act of philanthropy, the Pungans gave birth to the Moonsamy Government Aided School on the Tea Estate in Inanda in 1940. It was a stepping stone for the children as many went on to complete high school in Stanger and Tongaat (*Pungan Family* 2010, 13). In one of those quirks of history, the father of Ashwin, one of the authors of this article, taught at the Moonsamy School in the early 1960s.

Thoyee died in 1951 and Pungan in 1959. By the time the lease on the hundred acres of land expired in 1960, the family was well-established in the area. With capital in hand, they purchased a hundred-acre farm on which they built a seven-room brick house. They purchased a second farm, 43 acres in size. By this time, the Pungans were obtaining diplomas and degrees as farming gave way to a cohort of professionals among the younger generations (*Pungan Family* 2010, 10–14).

This is a remarkable story of coming out of indenture and building a life in Africa. Many of the Pungans still live in the vicinity of Inanda and contribute to local development. Their link to Inanda stretches over a century.

The Indian presence is a source of tension that dates to the late nineteenth-century and gathered steam after the 1936 Land Act. Inanda was one of the few places where Africans could own land and try to claw back what was lost in their defeat by white settlers. However, this was stymied by Indian land ownership. Indians had farmed in the area for decades. Their life savings were invested in Inanda and they were loath to give it up.

As resistance to apartheid increased, a number of differing interests in Inanda came into conflict. These included the growing militant comrades' movement allied to the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the ANC. The Zulu nationalist Inkatha Federal Party (IFP) was determined that the area would fall under its authority as head of the KwaZulu Bantustan. And there was the Indian presence. If Inanda was incorporated into the Bantustan, who would pay compensation to them? The apartheid government refused, foisting the issue on the white city council. They laughed off the idea. Meanwhile, the murder of a leading UDF figure sparked open warfare across the city between the IFP and the ANC/UDF. In the riots that spread into Inanda, Indian homes and businesses were looted. Most left for Phoenix with just the clothes on their backs. A lifetime of labour went up in the smoke of the threatening civil war in South Africa. Indians might have been bystanders in the conflict, but the people of Inanda paid a heavy price.

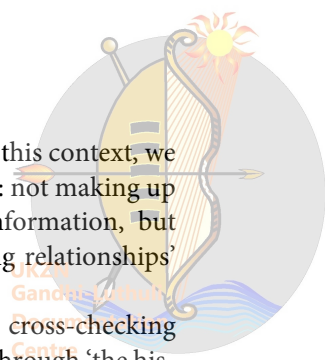
Around 40 families continued to farm after the 1985 riots while not living on the land. Farm managers and workers lived on the property. But as the much-vaunted land redistribution policy of the post-apartheid government faltered and the Zulu monarch sought to assert his authority in his Kingdom, the land in Inanda was once more eyed for its potential to be seized. The first signs were under-the-radar invasions and land grabs at the beginning of 2016. As the state turned a blind eye, the rhetoric became bolder. At a meeting between Indian farm owners, the traditional leader Nkosi Mqoqi Ngcobo, and the Verulam police in 2017, Ngcobo made it clear to the farmers, all descendants of indentured migrants, 'You don't own the land. The land belongs to the Qadi people. I do not recognize your title deeds. The land was taken from us' (Govender 2017). But it would appear that Ngcobo was not interested in farming the land. By 2022, a 'swanky new suburb complete with luxury mansions and well-manicured lawns' had developed on land that legally belonged to Indians who had title deeds and were paying rates. The (African) buyers paid Chief Ngcobo for land that belonged to Indian farmers. Court interdicts were ignored by Ngcobo and not enforced by the police (Makhaye, Mkhize, and Reporters 2022).

While some Indians still live in the areas surrounding Inanda, others, with degrees in hand have ventured into global fields.

Making history

This article uses family and community histories and memoirs to build a sense of post-indenture lives. In this outpouring of writing, one has a sense of the 'revenge' of history of a people defined as a problem, perhaps a time to set the record straight.

As historians, we are enthused by these works while aware that the stories can be romanticised, lend themselves to linear narrative and exclude as much as they include.



However, marginalised histories often require more creative methods. In this context, we follow Gay Talese who tells us that his nonfiction is ‘creative, not falsified: not making up names, not composite characters, not taking liberties with factual information, but getting to know real-life characters through research, trust, and building relationships’ (quoted in Twells et al. 2023, 157).

Using the family histories as a basis, we interrogate micro-histories, cross-checking different works, going back to the colonial archives, all the time thinking through ‘the historical structures in which the milieu of the everyday life is organised’ (Mills 1959, 175).

These biographies never cease to amaze at the way in which the indentured innovated and improvised. While the structure of indenture was designed to control, repress, and cut people off from wider society, in what often seemed like Goffman’s (1968) total institutions, spaces were found and futures were imagined. The story of the Pungans is an example of how, caught in the belly of indenture, they leased land, built a mud house and created the conditions for entry into the local political economy. In this sense we are beginning to understand that the end of indenture cannot be simply read as a rupture and a leap into the unknown. For many it was a kind of growing over as one life was left behind for another. The plantation had working times, and punitive measures hung over the indentured, but in many ways, the transition was often smoothed over as the indentured made plans to work fields of their own.

What does this shift in subjectivity from indentured to ‘free’ Indian mean? How did the ex-indentured respond to the changed circumstance of their broader status as ‘free’ given the myriad of legal and social constraints that the racial settler colonial state introduced? What impact did this have on their everyday lives?

Amateur historians have begun to open a path into this world. Their family and community histories, together with memoirs and autobiographies, look both backwards and forwards. These offer fresh insights into the lives of migrants following the end of indenture. From these, we can discern a myriad of accumulation strategies and how access to higher education became a bridgehead to class mobility. As successive white minority regimes tightened their grip on state power, the children and grandchildren of indenture found spaces to take advantage of opportunities as much as they sought to escape the repressive gaze of the state. Their ability to keep businesses going, enter professions, and buy property led to a backlash from whites. In passing the Group Areas Act of 1950, the apartheid state hoped to use segregation as a stick to beat Indian competition by corralling them into townships on the edges of cities. Tens of thousands of Black (including Indian) South Africans were put on the move. Our ongoing research follows these uprooted and relocated Indians into Chatsworth and Phoenix, two huge dormitory townships.

The next time one drives past the fields that the indentured once tilled, time should be taken to reflect on the harvest they yielded. The soil might be hard at first for professional historians, but if they follow the clues of the amateurs, there is a treasure trove to discover.

Notes

1. Indian indentured migrants were not the first Indians in South Africa. The Dutch East India Company (DEIC) established a refreshment station at the Cape in April 1652. Between a quarter and a third of the slaves imported to the Cape between 1652 and 1808 were from South Asia. While it focuses on Indian indentured labour, this article holds that

nineteenth-century Indian indenture was not unique in the history of Imperial labour and that there was continuity between the end of Atlantic slavery and the emergence of Indian indenture.

2. See, for example, the following family histories of indentured migrants: Bismillah (2016); Mudly (2011); Noël B. Peters. 2010. 'Laura R. Peters, 1914–2000. An auto/biography, Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the arrival of Catholic Indians to South Africa'. Durban: Self-published; *The Pungan Family. Centenary Celebration. 1907–2007* (2010); Shah (2023); Krishna Gubili. 2016, *Viriah*, Chennai, India, Notion Press. (Telugu Edition: 2020, Chennai, Anvikshiki Publishers; Ishwar Mangaroo. 2010. *Mangaroo. Defy Destiny, Leave a Legacy*. Phoenix: Metro Group of companies; M.L. Sultan, 'The Kollam Connection,' <https://www.mlsultan.com/the-kollam-connection.html> and Vahed and Desai (2024); Raboobee, <http://www.wahidfamily.com/raboobee-wahid-jogee.html>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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