

THE HAMBANATI STORY

Approximately 40kms. north of Durban, HAMBANATI lies within the town borough of Tongaat – the rich white heartland of one of Natal's major industrial concerns, the Tongaat Sugar Company (now the Tongaat-Hulett Group Limited).

This black dormitory township reflects a basic contradiction of racial capitalism, and one that, logically and historically, has been the root cause of this troubled township's endless problems.

While continuing to act as a reservoir of cheap labour for industrial capital, the purpose for which black townships were originally established, this visibly impoverished enclave in its sea of white prosperity is, for the ideologists and apologists of apartheid, as antithetical as it is physically galling.

It was the Tongaat Sugar Company that, in 1935, channelled funds through the town's Health Committee (later its Town Board) for the provision of segregated accommodation for its black employees.

This was in accordance with the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 that gave legislative effect to the long accepted principle of compulsory racial segregation. This same act made these peripheral black townships the administrative responsibility of local authorities.

Underlying white anxieties about the racial purity of their "white" cities lurked the real and imagined threat of losing control of a workforce that decades of military conquest, taxation, dispossession and political subjugation had systematically reduced to the level of slave-wage earners.

This was the era of Stallardism – apartheid's worthy forerunner – the ideology that most clearly articulated the fears and ideas and self-interests of the white ruling classes that subsequent legislation made effective.

Henceforward, South Africa's urban areas were to be made the exclusive preserve of whites and Africans, as mere "sojourners", tolerated only to the extent that they minister to white needs. Their failure to do so rendered them 'surplus' and liable to be endorsed out to their places of origin. "The town", it was stated, "was to be a European area in which there is no place for the redundant Native" – as Africans were then called.

This is the rationale that has continued to inform bureaucratic opinion to this day whose result has been a system of influx control that has been described as the most coercive ever devised.

By agreement, and in line with the machinery of influx control, the majority of Hambanati's residents were permitted occupancy of their sub-economic homes just so long they remained employees of the Tongaat Sugar Company. This economic blackmail was yet another form of social control. While the local authorities, with equal rigour, saw to the strict observance of the 1945 Black Urban Areas Act of 1945 and all other restrictive and discriminatory legislation.

However restricted black urban dwellers were, Hambanati's included, the change over to Administration Boards, following the 1971 Bantu Administration Act, spelt over more stringent living conditions and even less freedom.

The "Natives" were being made to pay for their own oppression out of ever dwindling resources.

Hambanati was no exception. Already under strain, matters worsened with the introduction of the new Boards until, in 1975, came the shock announcement of Hambanati's deproclamation as a black residential area. Pending the removal of the township's 10 000 inhabitants to Ndwedwe, no further approval was given, despite repeated approaches, for the capital expenditure of much needed amenities such as schools, sewerage, roads, housing, electricity, etc.

The government was awaiting the degeneration of Hambanati to force the "voluntary" removal of its people. It had not, however, reckoned with the spirit of resistance it encountered: evident not only on this relocation issue but on all other related issues that, one way or another, attempted the further deprivation of the community, namely: the high school issue, the cemetery issue, the sewerage and rubbish dump issues, the issue for the increase of community facilities and the housing issue – all of which have been carefully recorded and documented by Hambanati's very able community leader, Ian Mkize.

It was of course these very matters that helped facilitate the mobilization of the Tongaat Youth Organisation, a very resilient Women's Action Group and an association for residents in general. Such organisations served to unite the community and render it less vulnerable to state harassment and victimisation. Hambanati's all too visible proximity to "white South Africa" continued to irk its political 'masters'.

Its economic 'bosses' on the other hand have, throughout, neither acted nor spoken in its defence on any account – despite the profits gained by the sweat of its super-exploitable labour. On the contrary, there has, on the question of Ndwedwe for example, been active collusion between the State and capital until it was borne in on the (Sugar) Company the additional expenses they would incur should the removal go ahead.

Finally, on December 3, 1980, the Group Areas Board reversed their earlier decision and Hambanati won its protracted battle to be retained as an urban residential area for Africans.

Its community activities had, by 1981, made Hambanati a symbol of resistance, inspiring others in the struggle to continue resisting whilst lending support on a practical level also. Even its political foes had to concede its strength and tenacity and the extent of its influence.

Hambanati's battles, however, were not over – the bloodiest was yet to come and with it the tragic circumstance of brother pitted against brother whose outcome could only ever be but a pyrrhic victory. Far from advancing the real struggle against the common enemy of political oppression and economic exploitation, the recent conflict in Hambanati must effectively have retarded it.

The issue currently dividing (if very unevenly) the community is that of Hambanati's incorporation into KwaZulu (the statutory laws pertaining date back to the late 1950s). A polarization of the community first became evident preceding the Community Council elections of 1979 at which very little interest was generated for all unopposed Inkatha candidates. The participation of Port Natal Administration Board (PNAB) official in activities surrounding the election and their open collusion with the pro-Inkatha/pro-incorporation lobby, both then and thereafter, made the anti-incorporationist majority hold them largely responsible for this polarization. As the author of a pamphlet encouraging incorporation and widely circulated to residents the chief Director of the PNAB gave credibility to these accusations levelled at his underlings.

The unilateral decision by the Department of Co-Operation and Development (DOCD) to incorporate Hambanati and Lamontville into KwaZulu was, predictably, arbitrary and undemocratic. In which sense the central government cannot escape responsibility for the initial imposition of a highly unpopular measure and the severe tensions their pronouncement caused within the communities of Hambanati and Lamontville.

Seemingly insensitive to where their divisive tactics were leading the DCOD and its Administration Board pressed on, despite repeated warnings, with two unpopular bye-elections in Hambanati. Thus were the seeds of confrontation sown still wider and that led, inevitably, to the crisis of 1984 involving the loss of life and considerable destruction to property.

Already in the troubled township violence and crime were on the increase. Despite this escalation, the gutting of Mr. Magwaza's car in the early hours of July 1 was taken as the start of the now open confrontation between pro-and anti-incorporationist factions and, respectively, Inkatha/United Democratic Front (UDF) supporters. Mr. Magwaza was/is an executive member of Inkatha and Principal of the Hambanati Higher Primary School.

In spite of the all-round condemnation of this act taken at a community meeting of Inkatha and anti-Inkatha sympathisers alike, Inkatha continued to hold the UDF responsible and three members of the UDF affiliate, Masakhasane Tongaat Youth Organisation (MATOYO), were held but never formally charged after three court appearances.

Reprisals followed swiftly with attacks on the Zimani Creache, the Tongaat and District African Child and Family Welfare Society and the stoning of the Welfare Officer's private home. Suspects cited were all leading members of Inkatha. Thereafter stonings, arson, assaults – and even the murder of two innocent visitors – followed, with intermittent breaks, for over three months.

Efforts were made to defuse this untenable situation. On July 19 a delegation from the Hambanati Residents Association (HRA) met with officials of the PNAB with a view to finding a formula and plans were laid for a township meeting between members of both the Inkatha and UDF formations. Despite the urgency, and pleas from HRA for an earlier date, the meeting was fixed for September 4. The Joint Rent Action Committee (JORAC), another UDF affiliate, also attempted to mediate but with equally little success.

Meanwhile, a climate of terror was building up that, following a week of intensifying violence, climaxed with Black Sunday of 26 August and the murder, by the mob, of the respected community leader, Alfred Sithole. Two busloads of Inkatha supporters (bearing NUF registration numbers) and kombi loads of Impis invaded the township setting alight the homes of a dozen or more anti-incorporationist leaders. The origin of the four wheel vehicles that carried the flame throwing equipment has never been traced.

A disturbing feature of these and subsequent attacks was the involvement of Community Councillors, as well as the open incitement of Inkatha supporters drawn mostly from outside.

It was at this stage that Natal Coastal sent its four strongly worded telegrams to the President of Inkatha, to C.J. Saunders, to Dr. F. van Zyl slabbert and to R.A.F. Swart, M.P. A contraversial intervention from several accounts whose ripple effects could still be reverberating! Our only, indirect, response was a scathing indictment of the Black Sash and Diakonia by KwaZulu's Chief Minister in one of his public addresses.

The position continued to worsen and eventually gave way to a period of lawlessness and unbridled crime as vigilantes from the criminal section of the community took over control.

Fear fed on anarchy and the security situation became such that there was an increase in the exodus of affected families to the degree that schools were left paralysed and community organisations crippled.

Twenty-five of these families, that included sixty-two children, took refuge at Oakford Priory near Verulam. While the immediate needs of these families were being met, it was imperative to start pressing rightaway for medium and long term demands that would ensure their safe return to Hambanati – and to their long established, if happily repaired, homes.

And ad hoc Crisis Committee was created (that included three Natal Coastal members) under local community leadership. It met regularly each week with the people and helped facilitate arrangements for the latter's negotiations with the PNAB, Inkatha, the police et al. In addition, the committee helped mediate with other bodies such as the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), and educational authorities vis-avis alternate, temporary schooling, etc.

Various other institutions and individuals expressed concern and offered help. A notable omission of such concern, however, was that of Mr. Chris Saunders, the industrial chief of the majority of Hambanati's oppressed workers. Despite direct appeals there has never been any response whatsoever, from this quarter, to their plight. This same type of ruling class indifference that the people of Hambanati feel was evident amongst officials of the Administration Board and the department in general.

Nor is it majority opinion that the community's interests are being served by an unrepresentative (Inkatha) Council who they openly accuse of having been co-instigators of the crisis. As elsewhere, the HRA are calling for the dissolution of Community Councils.

Finally, with the advent of the new year those who months before had fled their homes, returned. An uneasy peace prevails to this day but efforts at reconciliation, if very low key, are being pursued.

And I end my story with a last word from Ian:

'I am hopeful that the people of Hambanati will still 'find one and another' and engage in co-operative effort to build their community''.
