

## *125 Years — The Arrival of Natal's Indians in Pictures*

November 1985 marks the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the first indentured Indians, an event that was to have far-reaching results for the Colony of Natal. The first ships arrived in November 1860 having left Madras and Calcutta the previous month. The voyage, in a sailing ship or paddle-steamer, in those days took an average of 45 days from Madras and 54 from Calcutta but a few decades later, when steamers were used, not only was the journey considerably shorter but 600 passengers could be transported in comparison with the 300 or 350 that the *Truro*, *Belvidere*, *Lord George Bentinck* and *Spirit of Trade* carried in 1860. The type of ship in general use at about this time is shown in the view of Calcutta docks.



1. Scene at Calcutta docks, about 1870.

(Photograph: India Office Library and Record Office, London)

Groups of Natal agriculturalists had begun to agitate for the importation of labour as early as 1855 and necessary legislation was finally passed in 1859. However, before labourers could be sent to Natal the necessary

machinery had to be set in motion in India. William Collins, the Postmaster-General, was sent to India as special agent and he arranged for two Emigration Agents to represent the Colony, one in Madras and the other in Calcutta.

Recruiting was carried out by licensed recruiters and their assistants or 'touts' under the supervision of these Emigration Agents. The Protector of Emigrants, appointed by the government of India, was in overall control of all indentured emigration and saw to it that regulations were complied with and investigated all complaints made by individuals. The 152 184 men and women who came to Natal as indentured labourers were from a wide area but the majority were recruited in Madras Presidency and Mysore in the south and Bengal, the Ganges valley and Bihar in the north.

Intending emigrants were required to sign a contract, printed in English and the Indian language of the district, setting out all the conditions of service applicable in Natal. The conditions for all places to which Indian labourers were sent were based on the recommendations of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission of 1842. It was stipulated that the clauses of the contract be carefully explained to the signatory before he signed or put his mark and in country areas this had to be done at the magistrates' offices. Once this was done the intending migrants were transported to the nearer of the two ports of embarkation where they were housed in the depot barracks and subjected to a full medical examination at the depot hospital.



2. Awaiting medical examination outside Depot, Calcutta.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

The medical officers at the depot hospital were told exactly what to look for in the intending immigrants. Firstly they had to be fit enough to stand a voyage of two months followed by ten years of manual labour. They were to be free of contagious diseases, men were to be not more than 35 years of age and women not more than 30 unless part of a family. Height and weight were to be in proportion so that a man of 5 feet tall should weigh not less than 115 lbs with an extra 5 lbs for each additional inch. Certain physical signs such as calloused hands and well developed chest were taken as indications that the man being examined had been accustomed to manual labour and would thus be a useful immigrant in the colony where agricultural labourers were in short supply. Anyone showing signs of heart disease, varicose veins, goitre or any debilitating or contagious disease as well as venereal disease was to be rejected. Another medical examination was carried out once the ship docked in Port Natal and it was not uncommon for individuals to be declared unfit for work and sent back to India even though they had originally been passed as healthy.

Once the emigrants had been cleared by the medical officer they waited in the Depot for the arrival of the ships which were chartered by the Emigration Agents. Every vessel used to transport indentured Indians had to conform to specifications laid down by the Government of India with regard to space per person, water, rations, medical attention and ventilation. The captain was required to sign a charter party and to undertake to carry certain stores, medicines and equipment.

Extra clothing for the passengers had also to be carried.

**SCHEDULE.**

PROPORTION OF PROVISIONS, FIREWOOD, WATER AND MEDICINES NECESSARY FOR A  
SHIP CONVEYING EMIGRANTS FROM MADRAS TO NATAL.

**PROVISIONS.**

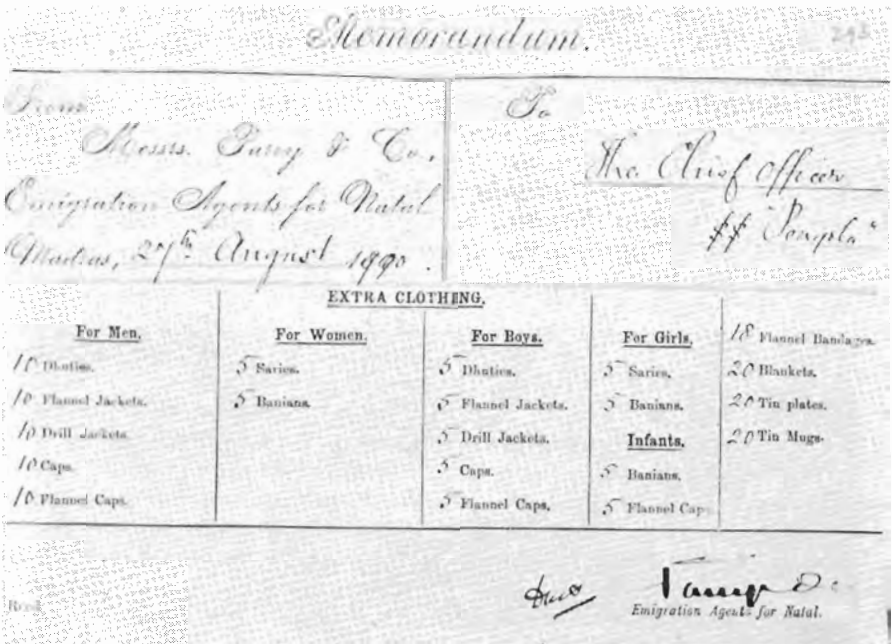
**For every Statute adult the Ship is licensed to carry.**

ARTICLES	QUANTITY (PER DAY).	REMARKS
Rice	24 lb	N.B.—The length of the voyage to Natal throughout the year, is to be reckoned of ten Weeks.
Dhall	4 "	
Ghee	1 "	
Oil, Gingelus	1 "	
Salt	1 "	
Turmeric	1 "	
Onions	1 "	
Tomatoes	1 "	
Chilies	1 "	
Tamarind	2 "	
Salt-salt	2 "	In lieu of dried-meat, fresh mutton at scale rate for eight days to be issued at discretion of Surgeon.
Cucumber	2 "	
Garlic	2 "	
Mustard, Pepper and Cassia Seeds	2 "	
Soap, Nat	1 "	

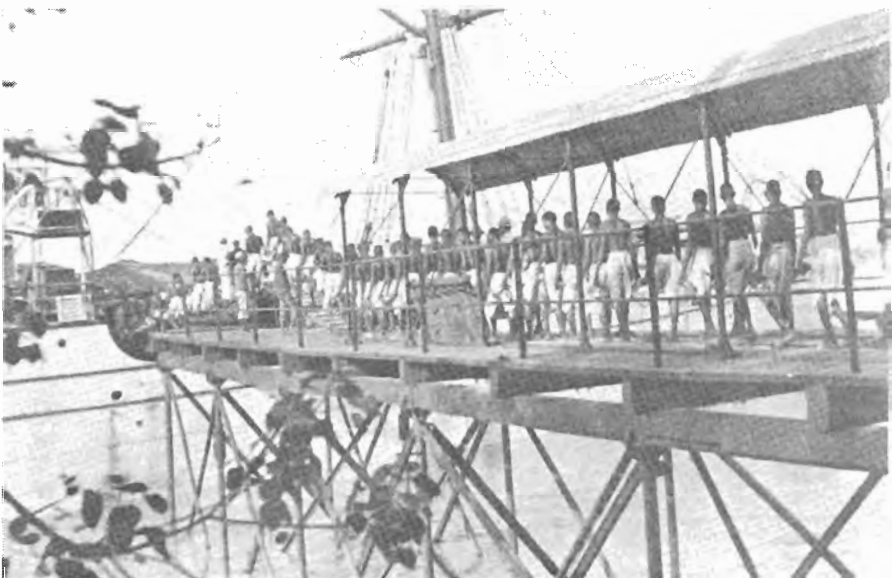
**For one Week or Seven Days exclusive of the above Scale.**

3. Schedule showing rations to be carried by ships.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



4. Memorandum showing extra clothing that each ship was obliged to carry.  
 (Photograph: Author's Collection)



5. Embarking at Calcutta.  
 (Photograph: Author's Collection)

Finally the ship was provisioned and ready to depart.

In place of a passport each emigrant was provided with an emigrant certificate.

This information was also entered on the ship's list, a copy of which was handed to the officials in Natal when the ship docked there and at this point a colonial number was allocated to each individual, including babies born during the voyage. This colonial number was used to identify Indian immigrants throughout their stay in the Colony. A section taken from a ship's list is shown opposite. The name of the first employer was added by the clerks at this time.

II/1/6

DEPT No. 4631

MAN'S

HEALTH CLASS

EMIGRATION CERTIFICATE.

No. 71

Ship *S. S. Enmore*  
8, GARDEN REACH, CALCUTTA, on *5 Dec* 1874.

Name, ..... *Beerage* 10222

Father's name, ..... *Kunda*

Age, ..... *36*

Case, ..... *Kavate*

Height, ..... *5* Feet. *4 3/4*

Name of next-of-kin, ..... *Len Sheroye*


Is married to whom, .....

Zodiac, ..... *Pisces*

Profession, .....

Village, ..... *Asogwa*

Physical marks, ..... *Protruding chest*



I hereby certify that we have examined and passed the above-named man  
fit for emigration as an agricultural labourer; that he is free from  
any and mental disease, and has been vaccinated.

*[Signature]* *[Signature]*  
Surgeon Superintendent. Deputy Surgeon.

I hereby certify that the man above described (whom I have engaged as  
a labourer on the part of the Government of Natal, where he has expressed  
his willingness to proceed to work for hire) has appeared before me, and that I  
have explained to him all matters concerning his duties as an Emigrant accord-  
ing to Section 38 of Indian Emigration Act VII, of 1871.

COUNTERSIGNED

*[Signature]* *[Signature]*  
Inspector of Emigrants at Calcutta. Emigration Agent for Natal.

6. Emigrant certificate issued in 1874.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

Particulars Copied from Ship's lists.

No	Name	Father's name	Age	Caste	Height	Weight	Place	Religion	Remarks	Signature
12060	Ghuras	Puran	4 28	Kovvi	5 6	London	Hindhi	Murli	South Africa	
121246	Ghuras	Moti	4 21	Chama	5 7 1/2	Butterpur	Butterpur	St. Karli	Ben. & J. K. G.	
122453	Ghuras	Deotahal	4 22	Chia	5 3 1/2	Alhaboo	Churpur	Shaneking	part of	
119569	Ghuras	Badal	4 20	Chama	5 6 1/2	Partalpur	Jitwarra	Shanatt	part of	
118623	Ghuras	Baldan	4 28	Chala	5 6	Bahrayh	Bhrinje	Kowhata	part of	
120376	Ghuras	Isahari	4 23	Kovvi	5 5 1/2	Baste	Domingoy	Chetali	part of	

7. Extract from ship's list showing colonial number in first column and employer in last. (Photograph: Author's Collection)

Ships bringing immigrants from India were granted pratique in the usual way unless there had been cases during the voyage of infectious disease, particularly cholera, smallpox and measles. In such cases the ship was placed in quarantine and forced to fly the yellow jack and to wait in the roadstead. The *Belvidere*, which arrived ten days after the *Truro*, reported an outbreak of cholera on board in which twenty-four people had died. When this news reached Durban there was an outcry, especially among those who had been



8. Coming ashore. Port Natal. (Photograph: Local History Museum)

opposed to the importation of Indian labour from the beginning. However when no further cases were reported the panic died down and the immigrants were allowed to land after their possessions had been burnt and they had been supplied with new clothing. In the nearly 51 years during which indentured Indian labourers continued to arrive there were only a handful of ships that had to be quarantined on arrival. Usually the passengers were brought ashore in small boats and then transferred to the Depot on the Bluff.



9. Landing. Port Natal.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



10. Crossing the railway line on the way to the Bluff.

(Photograph: Natal Museum)

Shortly before the arrival of the *Truro* and the *Belvidere* an official post of Coolie Agent was created with Edmund Tatham as the first incumbent. His main task was to see to the accommodation of the immigrants and then to allocate them to the colonists who had applied for them. Added to these duties was the financial responsibility for collecting the money due from employers. This was originally set at £7 but later increased to £12.10.0 and then £15 for each immigrant landed. This was to cause endless problems until eventually the Colonial Secretary agreed, very reluctantly, to allow employers to pay by instalments. Throughout his years in office Tatham had difficulty in satisfying the colonial officials about his accounting methods and in the end this was to lead to his dismissal. His successors were more fortunate in being able to concentrate on the immigrants and their needs, leaving the financial side to the Indian Immigration Trust Board. The policy in allocating immigrants was to keep families together and also, whenever possible, to send people from the same village to the same employer. Employers had to accept the immigrants sent to them and only in cases of bankruptcy or proven ill-treatment by the employer or his agent could transfers be made before the indenture period was completed.

The majority of the immigrants in the 1860-1866 period were allocated to employers along the coastal belt, from Verulam to Umzinto, where they were in demand as agricultural labourers on estates which, at that time, were growing a variety of crops while experimenting with growing various types of sugar-cane. Some of the Indians, however, were indentured to residents of Durban as domestic servants or to the Corporation as labourers. After 1874, when immigration was started again after a break of eight years, there was a demand for their labour in the inland districts and by the end of the century Indians, indentured and free, were working in almost every part of the Colony as well as across the borders on the diamond and gold fields.



11. Free Indians at the Diamond Fields in the 1870s.

(Photograph: Kimberley Public Library)



The conditions under which Indian indentured workers were employed laid down nine hours of work per day, from sunrise to sunset, rations as quoted below, wages of 12 shillings per month during the first year, increasing to 13 shillings during the second year. Medical attention and treatment was to be provided free of charge, letters could be posted to India free of charge and there was freedom to practise their religion without interference. The original indenture period was five years, after which it could be renewed for another five years with the same employer or could be terminated and a new employer found. At the end of ten years immigrants were to be provided with a free passage to India or they could remain in Natal as 'free' Indians.

Rations were to be supplied by the employer, consisting of one and a half pounds of rice per day and each month 2 lbs of dhal, 2 lbs of salt fish, 1 lb of ghee or oil and 1 lb of salt. Despite the strict application of these conditions some of the immigrants had cause to complain, as the following letter shows.

To

The Protector of Indian Immigrants  
Durban

Sir

We the undermentioned Indians, are undergoing great hardships, we have not received our rations such as rice, dhal, oil & salt. We have not received wages for four months. we have only received 15/- We start to work at 5 A.M. and return home at 8 P.M. we work on Sundays & don't get 6 extra. We are like dogs without a mouth, we are afraid to ask our masters for anything for fear of being assaulted.

If we don't get a reply to our letter we shall be coming down to see you

Ramsingh Jee No. 112266  
Ganman Marthin No. 112266  
Indentured to  
J. H. Stanley &  
Manderson

12. Letter of complaint from indentured labourers, Thornville Junction, 1908.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

In 1874 a new set of regulations was implemented in an attempt to eliminate some of the problems that had arisen between employer and indentured worker and in that year a Protector of Immigrants was appointed with increased powers. At the same time the number and standard of interpreters was improved. By the 1880s there were considerable numbers of free Indians in Natal in addition to the indentured and they were engaged in many types of occupation — agricultural, technical and commercial, skilled and unskilled. As agricultural workers they were employed on sugar estates, tea and coffee plantations and on dairy farms.



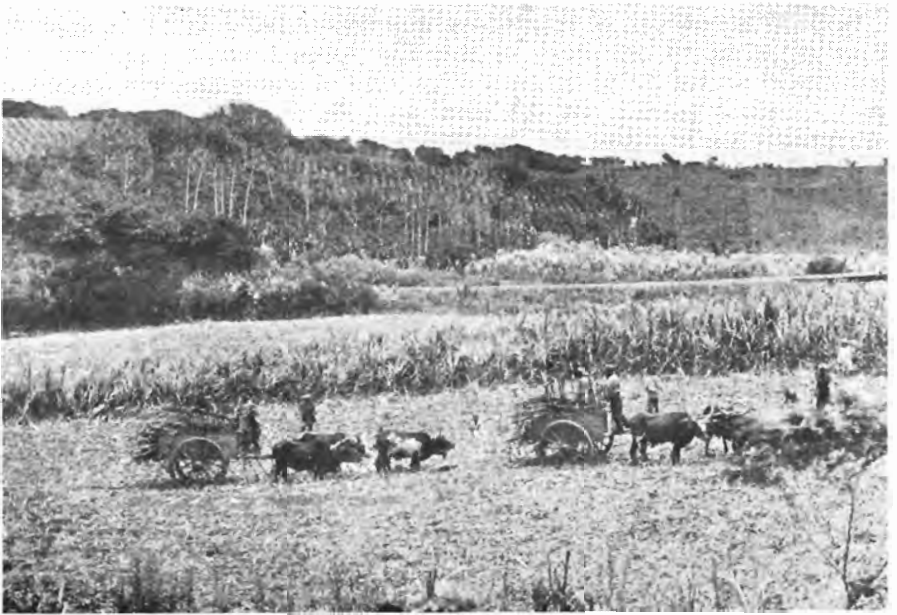
13. Picking coffee beans.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



14. Loading milk onto a train, Nel's Rust Dairy.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



15. Indian labourers in a cane field.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



16. Workers in a tea plantation.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



17. Fruit sellers, Verulam.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

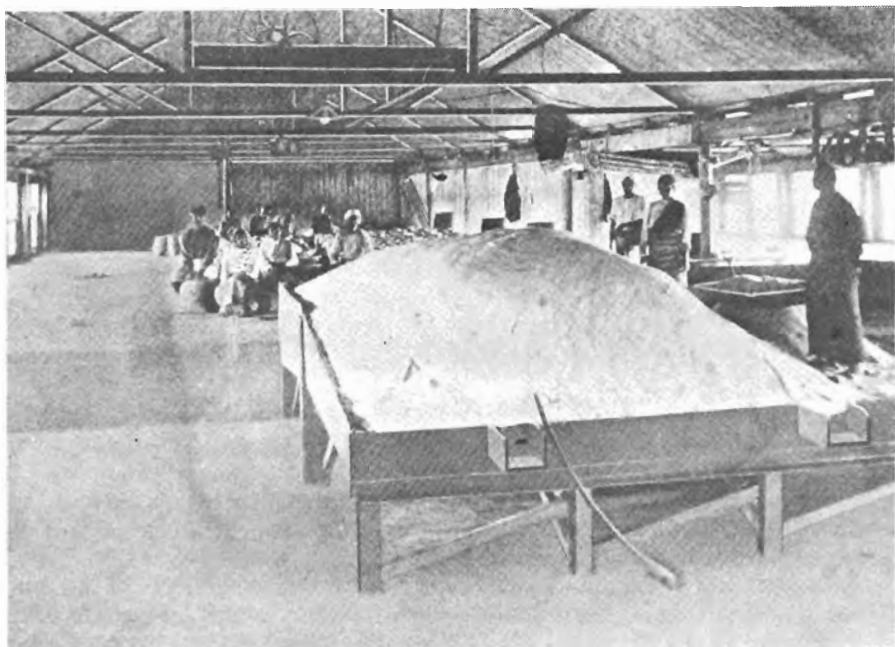
They soon had the monopoly of market-gardening in the vicinity of the towns, delivering their produce to the market, selling it on the streets or hawking it from house to house in panniers.

More technical occupations were followed by Indian workers in tea and coffee factories, tobacco and cigar factories, in tailors' shops, in quarries and in collieries in Northern Natal. They were also employed in wattle plantations where they stripped the bark required for tanning and as shepherds on up-country farms. At Port Natal they worked as stevedores for the African Boating Company, forming the bulk of their labour force.



18. Scene at Indian market.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



19. Bagging sugar, Tongaat.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

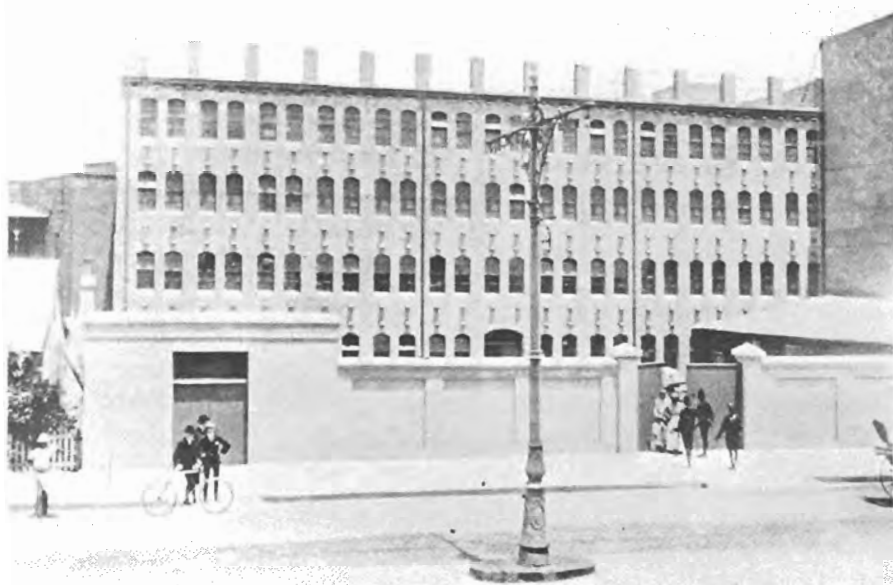


20. Packing cigars, Queen Street factory.

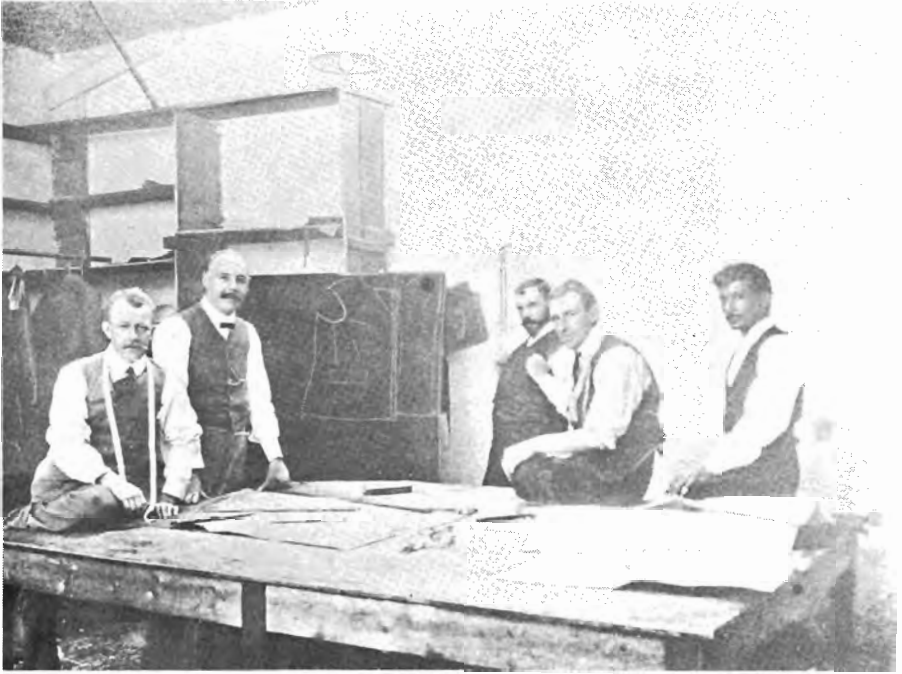
(Photograph: Author's Collection)



21. Stripping bark, wattle plantation, showing Indian sirdar (or overseer) on left.  
(Photograph: Author's Collection)



22. African Boating Company barracks, Point, c. 1908.  
(Photograph: Author's Collection)



23. Indian assistant, Stevens' school of tailoring.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



24. Marble quarry showing Indian and African labourers.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

Masulah boatmen, with their boats, had been imported in 1860 to assist the Port Captain, and Indian fishermen were active in the Bay, using seine nets. On Salisbury Island groups of free Indians set up small fish-smoking plants where they made a steady living since dried fish was in demand as part of the ration supplied to indentured labourers.



25. Fishing off Durban beach.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



26. Smoking fish, Salisbury Island.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

The first Indian labourers employed on the railways were imported from Mauritius by the Railway Company at the end of the 1870s but it was not long before indentured labourers were working in large numbers for the Natal Government Railways. Many of these men had formerly been employed in railway construction in India and were specially imported into Natal because of their experience or skills. Indian families as well as single men were accommodated on site in places like Pinetown, Ladysmith and as far as Charlestown while the line to the Transvaal was being constructed, and overall the N.G.R. was the largest single employer of Indian indentured labour.

When the railway expansion came to an end many of these workers remained in the inland towns earning their livings in various ways including the practice of their traditional crafts, trading or market-gardening.





27. Indians employed in railway construction.

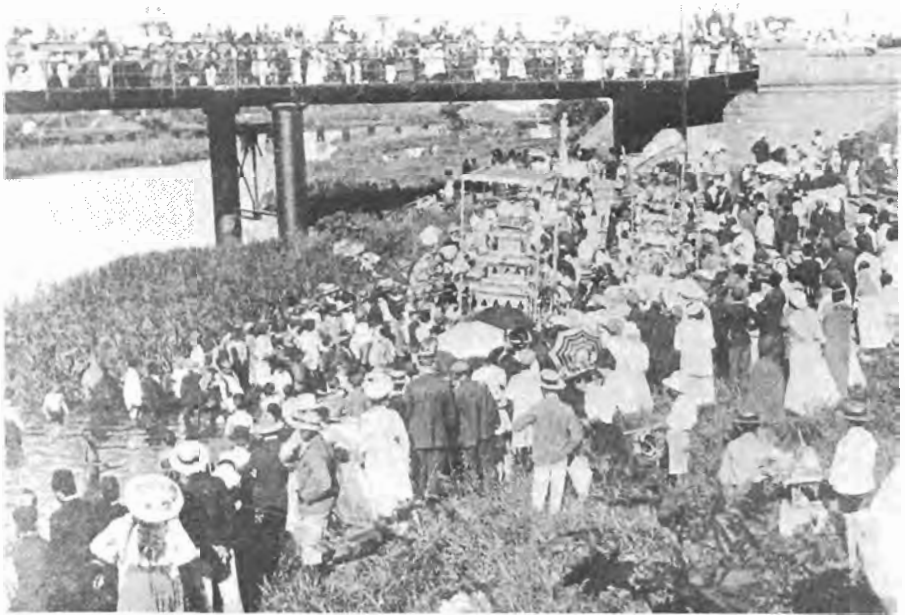
(Photograph: Author's Collection)

Although Indian labour played an important part in the development of the sugar industry this has been somewhat over-emphasized while their contribution to the overall economy has not received the attention it merits. The part played by the 'special servants', brought from India, particularly from Madras, in the growth of the hotel industry in Durban deserves special mention. They provided the waiters, dhobies, doormen, carriage drivers and chefs, attired in crisp white uniforms, turbans and coloured sashes, who were a distinguishing feature of high-class establishments.



28. Diningroom. Commercial Hotel.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)



29. Mohorrum festival showing crowd at Umgeni River.

(Photograph: Kimberley Public Library)

The social influence of the Indian people on Natal has also been considerable. Their architecture, colourful clothing and customs have made Durban a cosmopolitan city and Natal as a whole more interesting and less insular. Their religious ceremonies are an unfailing source of interest to Westerners and the photograph of the Mohorrum festival, which is still observed, shows a celebration at the Umgeni River in the last century.

JOY B. BRAIN

#### Acknowledgements

Photographs 11 and 29 by courtesy of Kimberley Public Library, 8 by courtesy of Local History Museum, Durban, 10 by courtesy of Natal Museum and 1 by courtesy of India Office Library and Record Office, London.

My thanks are due to the Natal Archives for the following documents:

3. Indian Immigration Papers, II/1/4: 978/1878.
4. Indian Immigration Papers, II/1/98: 1375/1900.
7. Indian Immigration Papers, II/1/6: 99/1880.
8. Indian Immigration Papers, II/1/145: 729/1906.