

# DOCUMENTS OF INDENTURED LABOUR:

## NATAL, 1851 – 1917

Y.S. Meer et al (eds): Durban, Institute of Black Research, 1980, 690 pp.

Reviewed by Surendra Bhana

The migration of indentured Indians to Natal between 1860 and 1911 has received little serious attention. Works on European immigration are substantially more numerous. The major works on Indian immigration are:

C.J. Beyers: "Die Indiervraagstuk in Natal, 1870-1911" (D. Litt. diss., PUCHO, 1969), A.G. Choonoo: "Indentured Indian Immigration into Natal, 1860-1911" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Natal, 1967), Z.A. Stein: "A History of Indian Settlement in Natal, 1870-1893" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Cape Town, 1942), and L.M. Thompson: **Indian Immigration into Natal, 1866-1872 in Archives Year Book for South African History**, 1952. C. Kondapi's **Indians Overseas, 1839-1949**, Bombay, 1951, and Hugh Tinker's **A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920**, Oxford, 1974, place the Indian indenture movement within a broader context, and are indeed very useful.

The History Department at the University of Durban-Westville is in the process of analysing the ship's lists of all indentured Indians, and should be in a position to generate new research on this neglected aspect of our history when the project is completed.

In view of the historiographical gap, this work by Y.S. Meer and ten others, sponsored by the Institute of Black Research is particularly welcome, despite some serious technical flaws.

The book draws attention to the days when Natal's young sugar industry desperately needed labour, and, finding that Zulus and other Africans could not be attracted to the venture, it turned to India. The experiment in indentured labour was already under way in Mauritius, Demerara (British Guiana), and Trinidad. The first application was made in 1854 unsuccessfully. It was renewed, and, when Natal agreed to introduce minimum conditions of service as required by India, emigration was sanctioned in August 1860.

Thus began Indian indentured immigration. The first ship to arrive was the **Truro** on 16 November 1860 with 342 passengers. The depression in Natal, among other reasons, temporarily halted indentured immigration between 1866 and 1873. It was resumed in 1874 and was continued until 1911. A total number of 152, 184 persons arrived by 1911, of whom 50, 716 embarked from Calcutta and 101, 468 embarked from Madras.

Those are the bare facts. The drama of an immigrant community's transplantation on the soil of another country in all its complex manifestations, is what the collection of documents seeks to portray. Indentured labour was a new experience both for the estate owners and the Indian immi-

grants. The documents directly and indirectly reflect many aspects: recruitment by emigration agents (this aspect has not been adequately covered in the book), embarkation on vessels either at Madras or Calcutta, reception by authorities in Durban, temporary housing in ill-equipped depots, allocation of workers to planters, and the organising of marches to the assigned estates within the radius of 30 miles.

The documents reflect the patterns of work and relaxation, housing and shelter, health and diet, death and burial, complaints and redress. The planters' primary concern was profit, and they were prepared to expend the minimum of money to see to the needs and welfare of the workers. Prejudices and discriminatory practices emerged against all classes of Indians. Free Indians, especially those in trade, presented a threat to the whites. Some of these feelings are expressed by whites in their testimonies to commissions of enquiry.

The first 21 documents deal with labour requests in Natal, and the official and legal aspects to the triangular relationship among Natal, India, and Britain. A chronological sequence is maintained in the presentation of the documents.

Documents 22 to 28, incorporate, *inter alia*, ship's lists for the **Truro**, **Belvidera**, **Scindian**, and the **Saxon**. The Register of Indian Immigrants for the **Truro** also gives employers against the names of the immigrants.

The balance of the documents from 29 to 66 (except for 49 and 62 which are two further ship's lists) deal with the problems that faced the indentured worker in one form or another. Documents are again arranged chronologically (except for the last one), so that one gets a reasonably clear picture of how problems and solutions, attitudes and opinions, beliefs and practices evolved from the one decade to the next. The 1890s and 1900s are not as fully reflected in the documents as the earlier decades. There are four commission reports (documents 37, 42, 58, and 60), a detailed analysis of laws and regulations (document 53), two Protector's Reports (documents 57 and 61), and an assortment of related documents.

Of great significance is the Wragg Commission (document 58). This 386 - page document is essential for any student studying the indentured labour system in Natal. The commission, headed by Puisne Judge Walter Thomas Wragg of the Supreme Court of Natal, heard the testimonies of 72 whites and 48 Indians, and visited estates, hospitals, prisons, Indian schools, the Indian cemetery, the fishing settlement in Salisbury Island, the depot at Point, Indian barracks in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and the location of free Indians. The commission also inspected rivers and streams

to determine for itself whether they constituted a health hazard to the indentured worker.

The perspectives offered by Indians themselves are valuable in reflecting an immigrant community's history. Telucksing, who had been in Natal for about 25 years, became a store-keeper in West Street, Durban, selling rice, ghee, and clothing (p. 388).

Aboobakker Amod, a trader from Mauritius, opened a business in Durban because he was "well acquainted with the general condition of the Indian population" in Natal. (p. 389). George Mutukistna was employed by the Natal Government Railway, and could read, write, and speak Tamil, English, and French. He could also speak Hindustani and Telegu. Mutukistna came to Natal because he could find no job in India. (p. 392).

Positive as all these points are in this book, they are marred by serious technical flaws. Taken together, these faults detract substantially from the book's usefulness as an easy source of reference. There are an average of 1100 words per page (17 cm x 22 cm in size) in very small print. The main body of the book is printed in a 7 - point typeface with a section (pp. 211-239) in 6 - point typeface, with no space between paragraphs to ease the movement of the eye. One has to struggle to read. The reviewer had to use a magnifying glass to read parts of the book.

Add to this the absence of a subject index. How does a student find references to say, food rations or punishment in the book? Short prefatory remarks to individual documents may have helped the reader to some extent. But

there are no explanatory remarks for most documents, not even for so massive a document as the Wragg Commission. The chapters at the beginning ("Labour for Natal" and "Introduction to Document") do make some amends for the absence of an index, but they can hardly be considered as an adequate substitute. Besides, the "Introduction" (pp. 1-2) fails to sketch a picture of economic conditions in India that forced thousands into the indenture system.

The source of the document is frequently missing or inadequate in its details. There is no bibliography that might help a reader to consult additional material. It does not appear as if the editors made a systematic attempt to search through a most important source in the Natal Archives at Pietermaritzburg, namely the Indian Immigration (II) records. Had they done so, they would have been able to attain greater balance in variety and depth in their selection. As it stands, the volume consists solely of official documents, a great many of which could have been left out to make place for the non-official documentation that is to be found in the II series. The inclusion of such material would have countered the relative under-representation of Indian perspectives.

Even if maps had been included (say of Natal's sugar estates and the major towns and villages from which the immigrants were drawn in India), and the editing had been more rigorous to eliminate inconsistencies and incomplete citations, the book has far too many fundamental problems to make it the kind of reference work it was intended to be. □

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