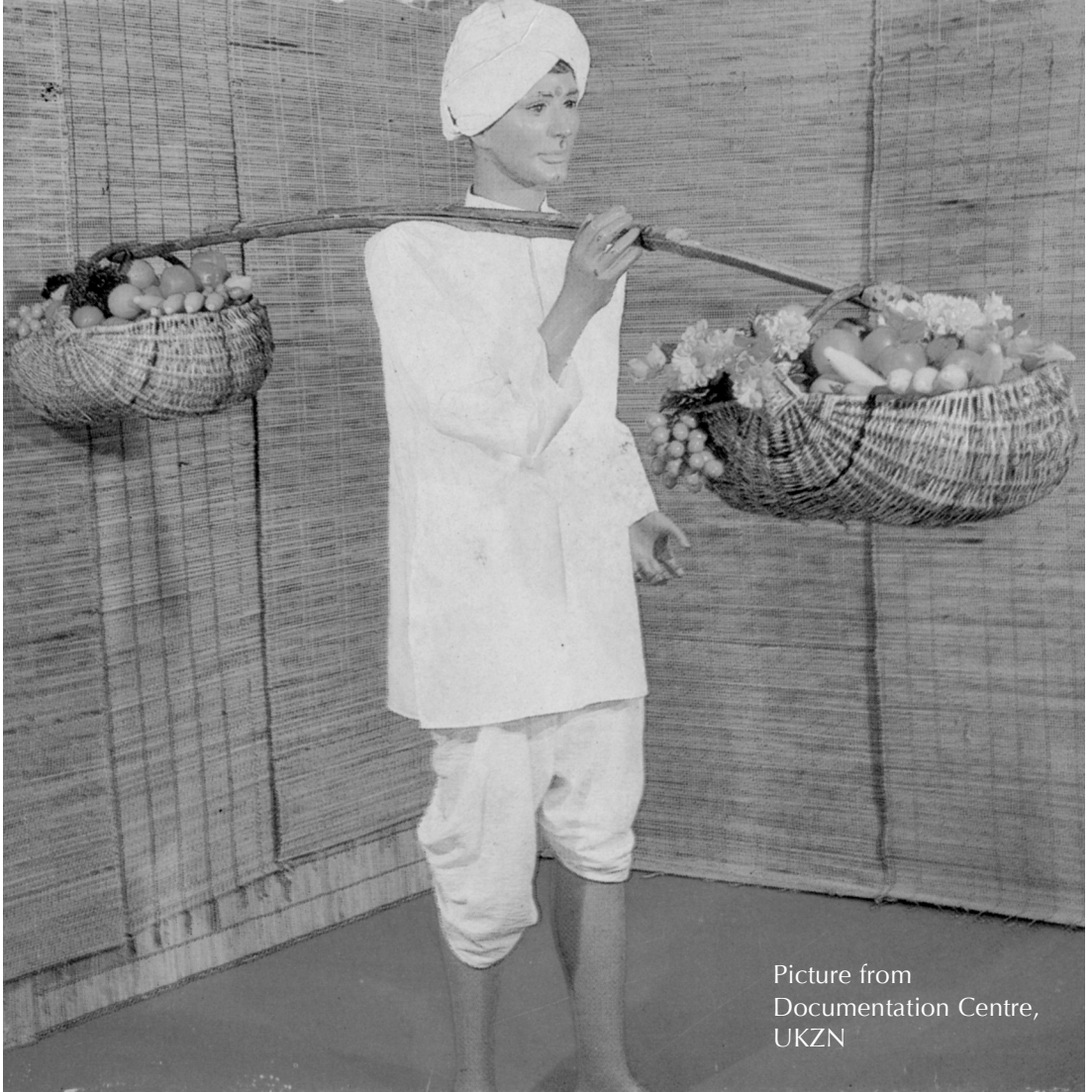


EARLY INDIAN HAWKERS



Picture from
Documentation Centre,
UKZN

Some lessons are forgotten, others with no reference to time are etched in one's mind. It refuses to be sand-papered away. These relate to my school master father, Simon David, a disciplinarian like few I have met in my lifetime.

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There were two incidents I recall; one in Tongaat on the north Coast and the other in Umzinto on the South Coast, while he was employed by the Natal Provincial Education Department.

In 1943, he was transferred to Tongaat from Woodlands Primary School in Pietermaritzburg, where he taught Standard 6, a public examination. Dad held the impressive record for 14 years, for producing a one hundred percent pass rate in his standard six classes. Not a single failure - a very proud record indeed! Do you think his students were proud?

We were all in boxes then, with Whites, Coloureds, Indians and Africans having separate schools with separate teachers in our individual boxes. There were a few Whites teaching in secondary schools and Teacher Training institutions in Indian schools.

Both Sastri College (for Indian boys) and Girls Indian High School had white principals. Sastri College had some Indian teachers Fort Hare University trained, while the girls' school had White teachers, with Indian females being employed from the 1960's.

My time spent at the Indian Girls High School, as a teacher, was less than a term as I had used the white toilet!

My Dade (he corrected us when we called him Dad, perhaps to add to his disciplinarian profile) was appointed acting principal of a secondary school in Tongaat. In those days he was the first 'Indian'. There was nothing White about him except part of his eyes and his teeth. Dade left for Tongaat with my Catholic mother and 8 children.

Such provision for secondary education for Indians was wholly inadequate and lent itself to corruption. Like African workers today who are forced travel long distances to work, Indian students were also forced to travel long distances to school, if indeed there were schools.

The Education Department had decreed that a list be drawn up, with Tongaat scholars requiring Secondary education to be first enrolled and thereafter a list of students from other areas.

Uncle Perry, the Vice-Principal at the same school as Dade, related this story to me. This is my recollection of that story.

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"I heard your father scream and rushed down the stairs to his office and found this grey-haired man, bent over, collecting money from the floor. Nobody would talk to me, until this man had left. I closed the door and asked Sye (short for Simon) what had happened? He told that he had shown the man the list and that Tongaat pupils would be first to be enrolled. If there was place, other students from elsewhere would follow. The grey-haired man had placed 42 pounds on his desk saying "Will this change your mind". Your Dad explained the procedure a second time. The parent's response was "Come Mr David, you do not earn this sum, please register my son."

Your Dad lost his temper and knocked the cash off his desk and told the grey haired chap to take his bloody money and leave the school premises. I think there were more expletives, thankfully none of that comes to mind.

My brothers and sisters were at the same school and they whispered during study time, at home that Dade had lost his cool at school. It was why I asked Uncle Perry about Dade. We had to deal with his temper at home –banging doors, silence at dinner, dead silence when we studied with him after dinner. Our silence and whispering made us appear that we were in an Anglican Retreat!

Sometimes before Tongaat, in Pietermaritzburg Dade found examination questions for Standard 6 and handed this to the department. There is a letter in his files from the Department commending his honesty. Perhaps if our grey-haired chap had seen this letter, he might have saved himself my father's ill temper!

My brother Romesh (12 years) died suddenly on the 17 December 1948. This was followed by the Afro-Indian Riots in 1949. My Dade was headmaster of a school in the Cato Manor area. He had been appointed head master of a new high school in Umzinto on the South Coast and had gone to his old school in Cato Manor to pick up his papers. It was the day the Afro Indian riots started.

When the police found Dade near his school he was disorientated and lost his speech for two days. My mother and the children were traumatised. When he could speak, he told us that sticks-carrying mob, were coming towards him. He was standing in the verandah of a house vacated by its owners. My Dad, dark as the night with only his teeth and eyes white, was surprised to find himself being called 'Baba' by

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the mob. They left both the house and Dad and went about burning and looting. 'My colour saved me' he explained.

The death of Buck, and the riots, turned my Dade from an agnostic to a believer. That is another story!

Umzinto was sugar cane and more sugar cane. We moved to many homes, black mambas and pythons, barracks telling of indentured labour, telling of long hours of labour, two iron bars for stove, no bed no furniture of any sort, aluminium pots and tin mugs, sometimes school uniforms hanging from the window.

My Thatha (grandfather) who died in 1947 would have been reminded of his early days of exchanging the shared poverty of India for the painful poverty of Natal.

It was our second home in Umzinto, where the second incident took place. I thought my Mum was buying vegetables from an Indian hawker who had put down his two baskets and the bamboo holdall lay on the lawn. My Dade peered over my Mum's shoulder asking the hawker what was the problem in Tamil. My Dade spoke impeccable Tamil, but could not read or write it. Another story!

The hawker had a dhoti and very little else (unlike the photo from UDW Documentation Centre, on the first page of this story).

He had brought gifts, two baskets of beautiful organic vegetables for the new principal. It was vegetables for a month. My Dade was not pleased. His face lacked a smile, but addressing the hawker as Nynah (father in Tamil) he explained as follows: (I had been to Tamil school Standard 6 and wrote my Thatha's letters to India and replied to his brothers}

Dade said, "Look here Nynah, I get paid for the work that I do. I can pay the rent of this house, pay my children's school fees and uniforms. With my new appointment I will earn more than I ever did and while I walk to school now, soon I will be able to buy a motor car." (Show-off!) (That arrived only 20 years later)

"Please take these vegetables and sell them. Perhaps you will come and sell your vegetables next time to Amah (Mum)"

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The hawker was further softened by a cup of tea and a slice of bread in the dining room. No phones existed then, so Mum made arrangements with Mr Puckree, the hawker for weekly purchases.

“Bring your children to school,” said Dade, “and I shall inform you if I can enrol them at my school or at another.”

I remembered these two incidents when Comrade Sbu Ndebele and his wife were ecstatic, when he received gifts of a Mercedes Benz and other gifts at the end of his premiership of our province.

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24/5/3009.

Durban.