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Source: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1983), pp. 401-421

Published by: [Boston University African Studies Center](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/218743>

Accessed: 12/05/2011 06:21

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"THE ASIATIC MENACE":

CREATING SEGREGATION IN DURBAN, 1870-1900

Maynard W. Swanson

Idolatry, cholera and other epidemic and contagious evils were at our door. Skilled thieves, Dacoits and Indian mutineers more or less sanguinary, were certain to infect our native population.

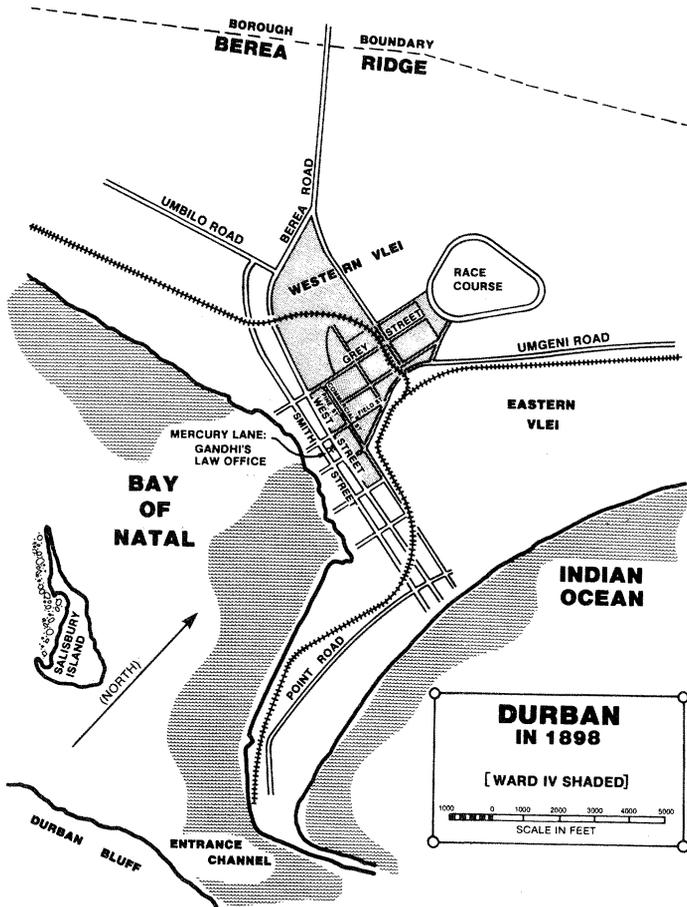
George Russell, *The History of Old Durban* (Durban, 1899), 490.

Race or Class? Which is the essential motive or determining root of segregation in South Africa? Much recent historiography has turned on this issue in ever-more complex formulations and combinations, as "Marxist revisionists" and "bourgeois liberals" debate the dynamics of settler-dominated societies moving into the industrial age.<sup>1</sup> The literature, however, has been heavily preoccupied with African-European relations and the questions of their group or class development. The present article calls attention to another perspective. This author has written elsewhere about how European responses to the increasing presence of Africans in towns at the turn of the century helped shape the pattern of race relations, politics and public administration in an early stage of urban industrialization in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> One conclusion was that official, governmental, and administrative classes generated more pressure than did business or commercial interests for systematic social controls leading to the creation of the legal and administrative structures of urban segregation. It is, at the very least, possible that in these phenomena, at that time, we can see the state, as such, generating "autonomous initiatives" and "pursuing its own strategies and goals" independently of other societal actors to a significant degree.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See for example Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Industrialism and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness 1870-1930*, (Longman, 1982). Its useful introduction, especially pp. 4-7, briefly surveys the issue from the revisionist perspective and supplies numerous bibliographical references. See also the earlier and controversial extended essay by Harrison M. Wright, *The Burden of the Present: Liberal-Radical Controversy over Southern African History* (Cape Town and London, 1977), which subjects both sides to vigorous criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Maynard W. Swanson, "'The Sanitation Syndrome': Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909," *Journal of African History*, XVIII, 3 (1977), 387-410, and "The 'Durban System': Roots of Urban Apartheid in Colonial Natal," *African Studies* 35, 3-4 (1976), esp. 166, 171-172.

<sup>3</sup> This is an aspect of sociopolitical analysis which has lately received increasing interest and attention. The phraseology is taken from Theda Skocpol's stimulating article, "Bringing the State Back In," *Items* 36, 1/2 (June, 1982), 1-8, Bulletin of the Social Science Research Council, New York.



Another, related conclusion was that the psychological milieu in which these segregationist initiatives emerged depended less upon economic considerations and more upon organic societal and scientific pathological metaphors such as crime, epidemic disease, and public health than has often been assumed. Further to the point was the suggestion that these metaphors seemed often to function not simply as rationalizations but as active motives or forces tending to shape perceptions, perspectives and behavior in those who ruled. None of this, of course, is meant to imply that racial segregation is in any meaningful sense a "natural" phenomenon, either mysteriously or inevitably ordained. Quite the contrary, it is a historical creation, the product of wilful human action.<sup>4</sup>

This article attempts to press the inquiry into urban development and the mentality of colonial authority further back into the nineteenth century. It also seeks to add to our knowledge of Natal, the rise of its Indian community, and its often unrecognized or discounted role in the inception of segregation in South Africa as a

whole.<sup>5</sup> Geographers R.J. Davies and D.S. Rajah have observed that the pattern of segregated land ownership and occupation forming the basis of the present day bipolar, spatially juxtaposed European and Indian central business districts of Durban was set in the late nineteenth century, and they refer to conflict between Whites and Indians that precipitated attempts at governmental controls over the latter in 1897.<sup>6</sup> A number of other studies have dealt specifically with the rise and treatment of the Indians in South Africa.<sup>7</sup> None have, however, viewed these developments through a detailed urban history. This article addresses that perspective at the center of the premier Indian settlement in South Africa. Dealing with a strongly urban and commercial or bourgeois element, it also seems to support a conclusion or at least the suggestion, without wishing to deny the vital importance of economic forces, that considerations of race and ethnicity constituted a significantly independent variable in the calculus of power and the making of urban segregation.

In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century the rulers of the seaport city of Durban were often less preoccupied with the African population among them than with the Indian community. That urban Indian community grew with the success of the indentured labor immigration scheme inaugurated in 1860 to serve the budding sugar industry. Had the Indians simply remained on the land under indenture and then as peasant small-holders and tenants, it is possible they would not have been perceived as an "Asiatic menace" by the Whites. But, while the mass of Indians remained in menial labor, a commercially thrusting and propertied class of urbanized Indians was emerging. During the 1870s these independent immigrants, called

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in a discussion of "Legislated Segregation before Apartheid" and the later inception of the Group Areas Act, John Western makes the important point that "segregation is not simply the working out of something 'in the nature of things' that just happens via the market mechanism" or out of concern for health hazards, but rather has been created by deliberate political action in fear for security or rivalry and greed for economic advantage, the latter especially at the expense of displaced Indians. Despite the difference over the weight or reality of societal metaphors, which is important, there is fundamental agreement between these views. It is precisely because segregation is historical and not inevitable that we conduct our researches. See John Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (Minneapolis, 1981), 42-48, 70-88.

<sup>5</sup> For example, note the development of the so-called Shepstone system and the Natal Code of Native Law, which became the basis of "native administration" under the Union of South Africa; and the model of urban administration found in the "Durban System" of beer monopoly, which was applied in the Union Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923. See David Welsh, *The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Colonial Natal, 1845-1910* (Cape Town, 1971), Ch. 9 and ch. 17, esp. 322-323; and Swanson, "Durban System," 160 note 2, 175.

<sup>6</sup> R.J. Davies and D.S. Rajah, "The Durban C.B.D.: Boundary Delimitation and Racial Dualism," *South African Geographical Journal*, XLVII (1967), 48; and D.S. Rajah, "The Durban Central Business District: A Study in Urban Geography" (M.A. thesis, University of Natal, 1968), 55-70.

<sup>7</sup> See Leo Kuper, Hilstan Watts, and Ronald Davies, *Durban: A study in Racial Ecology* (London, 1958); Ellen Hellman, ed., *Handbook on Race Relations in South Africa* (Oxford, 1949); Robert A. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa* (Ithaca, 1971); Bridglal Pachai, *The South African Indian Question, 1860-1971* (Cape Town, 1971); L.M. Thompson, *Indian Immigration into Natal 1860-1872, Archives Year Book for South African History*, II (Cape Town, 1952); Mabel Palmer, *The History of the Indians in Natal* (Cape Town, 1957); Bala Pillay, *British Indians in the Transvaal* (London, 1976).

"passenger" Indians, began to establish themselves in the wake of the indentured laborers who had saved Natal's sugar industry. They were astute, competitive merchants and traders. White colonists called them "Arabs" in contradistinction to the "coolie" laborers, because the most prominent among them were Muslim. By the early 1890s there were about 5,500 passenger Indians in Natal in a total Indian population of 41,000 which nearly equalled the Whites. They provided leadership of the Indian communities of Durban, Pietermaritzburg and other towns.

After 1870 also, the numbers of formerly indentured, now "free" Indians swelled rapidly and an urban concentration developed independently of the passenger immigrants. Significant numbers of these former "coolies" soon left the ranks of menial labor and traded on a small scale as itinerant hawkers or petty shopkeepers, or became artisans catering to Indian and European customers alike. Others acquired plots of land in and near the towns and became independent and necessary suppliers of market produce.

Coming to grips with its Indian people brought to Durban's White rulers a sense of alarm and annoyance more acute than that roused by recognition of a "Native problem." Whites perceived the Africans as a passive threat and affected a paternal regard for their allegedly natural subordination, but eventually they saw in the Indians a sophisticated and active menace to their own position in colonial society, competing for space, place, trade, and political influence with the imperial authority. They expressed this alarm largely by emphasizing the ways in which the Indians were most unlike themselves, culturally alien with social traditions and practices that Victorian colonials found repugnant. Above all, to the dominant Whites, Indians were a difficult legal and political problem, effectively claiming civil and economic rights as British subjects. Unlike Africans, there was no "Native Law" for them, and under the Natal Charter, passenger Indians were clearly exempt from class legislation affecting "Natives, Coloured persons or members of uncivilized races."<sup>8</sup> They acquired substantial property, became burgesses, were eligible for the franchise under Natal law, and some were registered voters. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

## DURBAN POPULATION

<u>Year</u>	<u>Indians</u>	<u>Africans</u>	<u>Europeans</u>
1870	668	1,766	3,147
1875	698	2,286	4,564
1880	3,309	3,817	6,736
1884/5	3,711	4,521	8,895
1891	5,488	7,592	12,472
1895	7,202	7,331	13,451
1899	9,562		19,762
1900	13,750 *	14,900 *	27,425 *

These figure reflect the effects of the Anglo-Boer War  
Sources: Mayor's Minutes, Police reports, Natal Blue Books.

The Durban municipal corporation discovered serious limitations in seeking to impose social controls over both its Europeans and "alien races" as it faced the problems of ordering a growing community. The exercise of governing powers was marked at first by considerable ambivalence because the material interests of Whites and Indians were often intertwined. Many Whites recognized that Indians contributed symbiotically with themselves to the development and welfare of the colony.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, however, Indians became a touchstone or scapegoat for political and economic frustrations on both official and popular levels. Eventually these antagonisms were channeled by increasingly determined leaders into the expectations of colonial autonomy as Great Britain prepared to give Natal self-government in the 1890s.

White rulers developed three approaches in their effort to control Indians: residential segregation, political exclusion, and commercial suppression. The first two of these emerged as a pattern in the 1870s; the third was a product of the 1890s. Until 1875 the public policy of the Durban municipality rested primarily on a scheme to create an Indian residential location. This was the first concerted attempt at group area segregation in Durban and one of the first in a major South African town. Its failure revealed that the Indians would certainly become a permanent and integral part of the urban community. Official efforts were then expended more or less fruitlessly in attempts to control Indian settlement in the town through sanitary building codes and to subjugate Indians through the vagrancy laws.

The promoters of indentured plantation labor did not expect the scheme to result in urban settlement, or if they did they conveniently ignored the thought. "Coolies" were to return to India when their indentures expired, or perhaps to remain on the land as peasants and laborers. But such simplistic and egocentric expectations were soon belied by experience. In 1870 there were 668 Indians in Durban, nearly all indentured laborers, and just two Indian retail shops. In 1875 Indians numbered 698, still largely indentured, but there were now one "Arab" and ten Indian stores and Indian-owned property had a municipal valuation of £3,000. By 1880, Durban's Indians had surged to 3,300, holding fifty properties valued at £15,000, including seven "Arab" and thirty Indian shops.<sup>10</sup> Ex-indentured coolies were gathering on the outskirts of the borough as market gardeners, while other free laborers turned to boating, fishing, and other services. There is no doubt that these Indian settlers contributed to the development of the entire community. The 1872 Natal Coolie Commission, encouraging Indian immigration for the sake of the sugar industry, held that "the advantages of retaining in the country a race of men of industrial habits and skill can scarcely be doubted."<sup>11</sup> Durban commercial interests and their allies, the coastal planters, were enthusiastic.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Law 21, 1888, "Registration of Native Servants...within the Boroughs of Pietermaritzburg and Durban," *Ordinances, Laws and Acts of the Colony of Natal* (1906).

<sup>9</sup>See Natal Coolie Commission, 1872, LCI-'72; and *Indian Immigrants Commission* (Wragg), 1887. Cf. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa*, 23-24, 32-33.

<sup>10</sup>Durban Mayors' Minutes (MM), 1889, Police Report; George Russell, *The History of Old Durban* (Durban, 1899), 259-260; Wragg Commission Report, 1887.

<sup>11</sup>Coolie Commission Report, LCI-'72, 13.

Other White citizens expressed a strong opposition to the proximity of "coolies," however, in connection with a plan aired in 1871 to bring in three hundred additional indentured laborers to work sugar plantations to be developed on leased borough lands on the flats, or vlei, just east of the settled area of town (see the map). That number would make the combined African and Indian population of the borough larger than the European. This prospect evoked a stipulation by members of the town council that the plantation scheme would be permitted only if a location were established "to obviate the evils that are likely to arise from the congregation of so many additional colored servants close to the town." This first serious location proposal called for compulsion, and it was to apply to all independent Blacks:

Kafir and coolie villages, remote from each other, in which all coloured people should be compelled to lodge for whom lodgings were not available in the town with the sanction of the owners of the premises where they sleep. Coloured constables would probably have to be appointed specially to look after such villages.<sup>12</sup>

Note that the council were not averse to the general idea of lodging Indians and Africans among themselves, they were averse to *independent* Africans and Indians. But they were mindful of the sanctity of a burgess's free access to labor and his desire to house servants at their place of work. In fact, White opinion divided on the wisdom of compulsory locations. The municipality lacked the necessary enforcement power, and over the next few decades it became manifestly clear that as a general rule it was the officials who wanted locations, not the citizens at large.

In the present event, the plantation scheme was stillborn, as the Governor refused his consent in response to petitions from citizens protesting the use of common lands for the private profit of individual investors. Nevertheless the possibility of an Indian location took on an independent life. A site was selected and plots laid out by the borough engineer on a note of urgency, as, according to the mayor, "each day's delay is bringing about . . . the further erection and habitation of Coolie shops in our very midst." In the absence of compulsion, leases were offered for sale at public auction. Despite the added inducement of an adjacent acre of free land with each lot, only eight lots of eighty offered were sold. The result was a complete failure of the Durban Council's first effort to establish a segregated living area for Indians. The mayor rather ingenuously speculated that the reason for lack of sales was

the fact that already several small Indian locations exist in the town itself . . . at the end of West Street, the northern portion of Field Street, and bounding on the Western Vlei [the area of the Indian quarter of present-day Durban] where the Indians have already built themselves houses, shops, etc. and which it seems they prefer to being located a short distance from the town.

"Legislation," the mayor concluded, "will doubtless have to be resorted to, to prevent these people thus locating themselves in our very midst, their habits and customs being, as is well known, so

totally at variance with and repugnant to those of Europeans."<sup>13</sup> But legislation under the British constitution was something that the White colonists of Natal could not easily have, as they were then discovering in their attempts to achieve sanitary and public health controls over the development of slum housing and commercial premises.

In 1871, with epidemic cholera advancing from East Africa and Madagascar and a great small pox epidemic decimating Cape Town, the Natal government opened the issue of local responsibility for environmental pollution, charging the Durban corporation with a total want of sanitary precautions. The town fathers had, in fact, already launched a council committee and a public debate concerning the "Sanitary Improvement of the Town," but they made an important distinction between the governor's point and the response they now proceeded to make to his charges. To the Natal government the trouble was simply an accumulation of waste and refuse creating the conditions for epidemic disease. For Durban politicians and White opinion generally, public health was not merely police work and public services, it was already being perceived as a question of "coolie habitation" - and of the limits imposed on the municipality by a combination of law, finance, and the ethnic constitution of their community.<sup>14</sup>

The local press had already set the tone in 1870, referring to even earlier proposals for an Indian village "properly regulated, supervised and managed," rather than to have "small nests of Oriental dirtiness scattered indiscriminatingly about the town." The experience of Port Louis in Mauritius was advertised as an object lesson dramatizing the process by which small holders and their tenants developed concentrated slums through multiple subletting of progressively smaller plots and apartments. "They must not be left to themselves ... but compelled to do what they should do." It was by no means really clear what anyone was to be compelled to do, or especially how he was to be compelled to do it, for the Durban corporation possessed only rudimentary legal powers to control subdivision, construction, occupation, and sanitation; and not Indians only, but Whites as well were involved as owners and occupiers. The popular diagnosis among the Whites, however, emphasized that the danger of overcrowding intensified all other problems, and overcrowding had become a menace "especially now that coolies have been admitted to occupy building plots."<sup>15</sup> This perception was

<sup>12</sup> MM 1871, Schedule B, First Report of the Committee of the Council on the Question of Leasing of the Eastern Vlei.

<sup>13</sup> MM 1872, 1873, 1874, 1875; Durban Corporation Letter Book (DCLB) v. T, 151, 164, 180, 184, 567; Durban Corporation Letters (Received) (DCL) v.1, December 1873

<sup>14</sup> Natal Archives (NA) CSO v. 2311, 515-518, Col. Off. to Cdt. Ft. Napier, 5 June 1871; CSO v. 388 #1474, Report of Capt. Bond, 5 July 1871; CSO v. 389 #1599, Mayor to Col. Sec'y. 26 July 1871, MM 1871, Schedule A, First Report of the Town Committee on the Sanitary Improvement of the Town, and "Coolie Dwelling Houses in Town." Note that the location project would have placed these villages on the outskirts of the town in 1871 but in less than a generation such places would have been surrounded by the built-up town itself. Planning for 1871 would not have obviated the "evils" identified then. The unwanted "habitations" could not have been put at a permanently safe distance, and the pattern of removal to the periphery would have had to be continued indefinitely.

<sup>15</sup> Natal *Mercury*, 24 March 1870, 22 November 1870 (Report of Town Committee), 13 December 1870 (Special meeting of Durban Corporation); NA, CSO v. 389 #1599, Mayor to Col. Sec'y., 26 July 1871; NA, CSO 2311, Col. Sec'y to Mayor of Durban, 12 August 1871).

constantly reinforced by the work of police and health officers. For example Durban's new inspector of nuisances, R.C. Alexander, recently recruited from Indian Army service, reported in 1877 on premises in West Street in the commercial center of town owned in two cases by a leading white citizen and in one case by Durban's first "Arab" merchant, Abubakar Amod, licensed to trade in 1875:

Lot 2a Block E., 3750 square feet was the property of John Millar, Esq., M.L.C. On it were 25 apartments including outhouses, constructed of wood and corrugated iron. Ten were living and sleeping compartments for 30 people. Two of these met the spatial requirements of the by-laws (Sec. 73). There was no light and no ventilation. Eight rooms were used as retail shops, four as kitchens, three as privies "of the very worst nature," and a number served as chicken houses. Lot 4a, Block E, 4500 square feet, also the property of John Millar, had 22 apartments, 10 of them used by 14 people. None of the rooms met the requirements of the bye-laws and were unfit for habitation. There were four kitchens, one stable and one privy unfit for use. The remainder, eight, were retail shops. Lot 10a, Block E, 2500 square feet, was the property of Aboobakar Amod, containing sixteen apartments. It was 25 feet wide and enclosed by brick buildings on either side. A brick store fronted it along West Street. Behind the store were ten wooden rooms each 5 x 10 feet or less with no windows, light or ventilation, eight of them stated to house 14 people. There were three kitchens, and one useless privy.<sup>16</sup>

Alexander judged that the actual number of inhabitants in every case was twice that stated. Nearly all were Indians, although two rooms in lot 2a were let to "kaffirs" (Africans) for an eating house.

By the year 1878 pressure on the council was so intense that they finally secured enhanced powers to regulate building construction standards. The catalyst was Abubakar Amod's intention to erect another building on West Street, and the general issue of public health and controlled development was thus confronted in terms of "Arab" enterprise in Durban's chief thoroughfare. Official candor might recognize that overcrowding was "an acknowledged evil in the case of both White and Black and any remedy proposed must deal with both classes," and it was clear that no law excluding Indians from economic rights would be sanctioned by government, but the persistent equation of "coolies" with squalor masked the fact to many Whites that the problems they ascribed to race were primarily associated with socioeconomic norms and political interests. The latter circumstance was illustrated when the town council tried to extend its new regulatory powers to the Natal government's properties within the borough's boundaries in order to control the presence of Africans and Indians there, for the government balked, refusing its assent. This indicates that an incipient contest between local and central authorities further complicated the struggle to regulate the development of the town and tended to exacerbate emerging racial attitudes. Nevertheless the municipality's enhanced powers had some

<sup>16</sup>DCL v. 14 (1877) #4139, R.C. Alexander, 4 September 1877.

effect: both Indian and European entrepreneurs were held to improved building standards, and the power of the municipality to review and license building plans on the main streets of the town was established. However, it was becoming clear to everyone involved that the full implications of Durban's multi-racial character far transcended violations of the building codes.<sup>17</sup>

The truth of this social and political reality was manifest in an episode concerning the application of the Vagrancy Law to Indians who had qualified as burgesses of the corporation - that is, eligible to claim the electoral franchise. This episode, relating property rights to political rights and civil status, witnessed the emergence of characteristic European attitudes toward the Indians under the existing legal constitution of the community. Late in 1877 strong protests were raised by Muslim merchants against police harassment and arrests under a Vagrancy Law that empowered the police to require all people of color "to give a good account of themselves" and to obey a 9:00 p.m. curfew. This had come into effect with Police Superintendent Alexander's enthusiastic enforcement in 1874. The official response to these complaints was not to impose common sense on Alexander but to institute passes. Thus the mayor was authorized to issue certificates of exemption "to such men of color who apply as are respectable Burgesses." Here the potential absurdities of their position came home to the councilmen of Durban, for this simply imposed an invidious distinction on persons whose sole apparent difference from Her Majesty's other subjects was the color of their faces and the cut of their clothes. If one fully fledged burgess or rate-payer could only be guaranteed his civil liberty by the grant of a pass, might not the restraint ultimately apply to every citizen, as citizenship was defined in law?<sup>18</sup>

Table 2

ELECTORAL FRANCHISE

Year	Municipal		Colonial	
	Indian	Total	Indian	Total
1875			5	920
1880			38	1,350
1886			54	
1889			113	
1891			109	2,052
1893	9	1,179	108	2,116
1895/6	12	1,892	143	2,100
1897	7	2,335		
1900	2 ?	2,799		

Sources: Valuation and Burgess Rolls, Colonial Blue Books. (Gandhi's analysis of the franchise in 1895 can be found in his *Collected Works*, vol. I, pp. 265 ff.)

<sup>17</sup> Natal Mercury, 13 December 1870; Durban Council Minute Book (CM), v. 10, May-September 1878, *passim*; NA, Attorney General Reports, III, 455, 624; MM "Indian Immigrants," 1874; NA CSO, "Misc." 1878, Govr. to Mayor 6 and 29 July, 2 and 18 November 1878, Col. Sec'y to Mayor, 2 October 1878.

<sup>18</sup> CM v. 10, 123-124, #4131, Dada Meah and Joosul, 3-4 September 1877; Russell, *Old Durban*, 260; Natal Mercury, 13 December 1877.

The issue caused lengthy debate and confusion in the Durban town council as that body grappled with the question of "who belongs?" The first proposal was simply to exempt all Indian rate-payers: "These people are not Coolies but Indian merchants," said one councillor, implying that municipal citizenship should rest primarily on an economic class distinction rather than a racial one. An Indian was a British subject, and if he were not under indenture and possessed the attributes of a rate-payer, then the law, common sense and decency seemed obvious. But opponents who were determined to assert a racial or ethnic standard to exclude the Indians, held quite another view: Indians were ALL "coolies." "The whole of the Indian ratepayers will be exempt," cried another councillor, "and some of them are the vilest wretches in the place." European feeling and official opinion, especially that of the influential police superintendent, finally persuaded the majority of the Durban council that an exemption recognizing the sensitivities of Indian burgesses "would be damaging to the safety and peace of the borough." As a compromise, the council sought ways and means of excluding "certain Coolies" from the burgess rolls. What this meant was that race or respectability were to be criteria for full citizenship, rather than the formal property requirement. The Municipal Corporation Law, however, would not allow the council to exclude Indians from the burgess rolls. The council then sought an amendment in the Vagrancy Law, allowing exemption passes for "respectable Indians, Coolies, Natives or other colored persons" from the curfew, and thus the matter stood more or less as it had in the beginning.<sup>19</sup> Later the Natal Registration of Servants Law of 1888 would define "uncivilized races" in such a way as to refine the distinction between subjects who might enjoy full citizen rights and those who might not. Then passenger Indians would be kept within the pale while other Indians were excluded. What happened in 1877, while inconclusive, was that yet another screw of tension was turned, the relentless though still inchoate determination of the White power structure was manifested, an essay in exclusion attempted, and the temper of the times revealed.

Throughout the 1880s on the open vlei lands of the borough where location schemes had failed, Indian squatters or renters and European investors now began to do, more or less haphazardly, what the Corporation had twice failed to make them do on its own terms. The area gradually bloomed with shanty settlements and garden plots. The 1884 valuation rolls show that Whites had leased or bought the land and rented it to Indians. In the main streets of the town Indians also continued to settle. There Indian shopkeepers and "Arab" merchants prospered among their English counterparts. As if admitting the permanence of Indian occupation, Whites increasingly referred to the west end of the developing central business district as the "Coolie Location." There was nothing organized or official about this; it was simply where Indians were congregating. The records are filled with reports and deliberations about the undesirability of these premises. Health, nuisance, and police officers urged more action.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>CM v. 10, pp. 189, 202, 203, 214-216, December 1877 - January 1878; *Natal Mercury*, 8 13 December 1877, 9 January 1878.

<sup>20</sup>CM v. 10, 11, 12, *passim*; MM *passim*.

At the end of the decade Police Superintendent R.C. Alexander, in alliance with members of the council, presented a statistical report of Indian progress intended to impress his employers with his favorite prescription for building locations, this time outside the borough boundaries. He showed that, since 1880, the Indian population had risen 50 percent, the number of their properties by 125 percent, and the valuation of those properties by 100 percent. "Arab" stores had increased six-fold. Now there were 250 Indian burgesses, 22 of whose properties were tenanted by Europeans. Moreover, 35 Indian and "Arab" shops were licensed in the main commercial thoroughfare. The outstanding entrepreneur, Abubakar Amod, now possessed land and buildings valued at £9,700, an impressive sum in those days. In the early 1890s, against the background of approaching self-government for Natal and in a time of serious commercial depression, these reports on "our Indians" grew even more shrill. An outburst in 1893 warned that "Our Indians are becoming a very serious element among us. They are about as prolific as rabbits, and almost as destructive to the welfare of Europeans." Alexander's statistics showed dramatic increases since 1889: Indian population up 31 percent in four years; now 229 properties; valuation more than doubled to over £70,000; and 128 shops against 85 in 1889.<sup>21</sup>

Table 3:

DURBAN PROPERTY

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Municipal Valuation (£)</u>	<u>Indian Valuation</u>	<u>No. of Indian Properties</u>	<u>Number of Indian Occupied Shops</u>
1870	£327,303			2 "Indian"
1875	428,569	£3,000		1 "Arab"
				10 "Indian"
1880	760,876	15,000	50	7 "Arab"
				30 "Indian"
1884	1,747,685	28,000	40 "Arab"	38 "Arab"
			78 "Indian"	26 "Indian"
1889	1,617,780	31,590	47 "Arab"	41 "Arab" *
			84 "Indian"	25 "Indian"
1891		45,000	150	103
1893	2,627,350	70,000	166 *	128
1896		80,000	200	134
1899		218,500		
1900**	5,626,700	436,680	256	

Sources: Mayors' Minutes, Valuation and Burgess Rolls, Police Reports, Natal Blue Books.

\*(R.C. Alexander's figures sometimes differed from other sources without explanation).

\*\*Total Durban Properties listed at 5,706 in 1900.

<sup>21</sup>CM v. 17, #33, Police Report: MM 1889-1893, "Our Indians."

Let us compare these figures with Durban's total valuation and European population. From 1880 to 1889, both Indian-owned property and total property rose 110 percent. From 1889 to 1893, however, Indian property increased by 120 percent while the total for Durban rose more slowly by 60 percent. As for population, the rise from 1880 to 1891 was 65 percent for Indians, 85 percent for Europeans, but from 1891 to 1895 the increase was only 8 percent for Whites against 31 percent for Indians. These statistics reflected the ups and downs of Durban's dependence on the fortunes of gold-mining and the race to complete railways to the Rand in which Natal fell behind during the early 1890s. Such considerations aside, it might appear that Alexander had a *prima facie* case for his anti-Indian strictures after 1890 but none at all before that date. The numbers were in any case taken uncritically as the gauge of battle, and Alexander inveighed against unregulated Indian urban habitation:

I admit that they have at all times treated the police under me with deference, and that their presence among us as laborers is a blessing, but as neighbors their filthy habits have made them a curse and I sincerely wish they would seek some other country where the police would treat them better and give them no cause for alarm.

He then lumped all Indians into one class, and while conceding that Indian merchants were thoroughly businesslike and law-abiding, he strongly recommended "that no licenses be given to Indians for any building in any of our three main streets," linking this conclusion with an appeal to increasingly popular European economic resentment: "They can if they choose, undersell the European trader by 30 percent .... thirty of these so-called Arab merchants have during the year failed in this colony, at a loss to the European traders of £15,000...."<sup>22</sup>

The ingredients for dramatic confrontations were thus prepared, but the city fathers were still mindful of the legal equality of all British subjects enshrined in the Natal charter. And they received fresh injunctions to this effect from the colonial government as the drive for self-government in Natal reached its conclusion. To the city fathers, however, these imperial admonitions appeared as a threat to their own security and a hindrance to the good management of the community. The Mayor's *Minutes* of 1890 and 1891 put their sense of dilemma in classic terms: "As purchasers and proprietors of town property they have equal right of citizenship with ourselves and cannot, therefore, be segregated" [1890]; "The only true solution of the difficulty [is] the segregation of these people in an Indian quarter; the isolation with better hopes of cure of this, our social leprosy" [1891]. Yet another scheme for an Indian location was undertaken on essentially the same *laissez-faire* terms as the abortive programs of 1875 and 1880. There was even less response than before. The public auction of plots was a complete failure; none were disposed of.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>MM 1893, 1895.

<sup>23</sup>MM 1890, 1891; CM v. 18, 19: September 1892 - September 1894, 28 January - 3 October 1895; Natal *Mercury*, 27 June 1895.

While reaching the point of complete frustration with location policy, the municipality was also engaged in an effort to acquire more arbitrary authority over Indian proprietorship. The town council proposed "that no properties sold by the Durban Corporation shall be sold or transferred to Arabs or Indians and a clause to that effect shall be made in all Titles to be issued in the future." This was strong medicine; indeed, it was illegal. But it contained one root of future group areas policy, prefiguring the measures later generations would seek with greater success. Most leading Whites understood at the time that such notions could not be realized without fundamental changes in the relationship of Natal with imperial authority, new conditions of Indian immigration to Natal, and amendment of the fundamental law of the colony. Such changes, indeed, were demanded and elected representatives and officials felt the rising pressures of an antagonistic electorate. In 1889, long before the famous anti-immigration riot of 1897 dramatizing Mohandas K. Gandhi's return to Durban from his rousing tour of India (in which he had publicly scored Natal's anti-Indianism), the Natal Working Men's Association delivered a resolution against the landing of Indian immigrants quarantined on suspicion of cholera. Fear of epidemic disease recurred constantly and, focussing on rumors of epidemics occasioned by Indian arrivals at the government immigration depot at Durban Point, it provided tinder for inflaming White racial antagonism. Every ship from India became an object of European popular suspicion and hostility.

At another level the protest was economic: fear of competition for jobs on the one hand, and for trade on the other. The Working Men's memorial attested to a rationale by which both White labor and White commerce resented Indians. At the same time, however, European leaders attuned to the sugar industry recognized their stake in Indian immigration, so they attacked the methods but not the fact of such immigration. Thus, when in 1890 the arrival of yet another contaminated ship brought the agitation to a head, the town council tried to end Indian immigration by steamship, urging sail to lengthen the voyage, thus assuring the outbreak of incubating disease while still at sea. They also sought to remove the Natal immigration depot from Durban Point to the bluff across the Bay "where isolation can be made effective and complete." In a similar vein the council launched renewed attacks on the government for maintaining nuisances in all its immigration, harbor and railway barracks housing large numbers of Indian and African workers.<sup>24</sup>

The early 1890s were a time of political stress and commercial depression. Attempts by the Durban authorities to segregate Asians in locations, to exclude them from property rights, to remove the Indian immigration depot, to suppress Indian public festivals, to attack the administration of the government's railroad barracks, and to subject government facilities within the borough to municipal bylaws were the opening salvos of a heavy engagement along the line of racial policy. In this complex of attitudes and behaviors public health, order, and convenience were inextricably tangled with the passions of commercial rivalry and communal antagonism. Superintendent Alexander's rhetoric on the Indian community was a fever-chart of this combination, in which social policy was conceived and

<sup>24</sup>CM v. 17 pp. 47, 76, 83, 360, 368, 377 (1889-1890).

prompted in the idiom of a contagion that must be exorcised by isolation. Indians did not remain passive in the face of these rising threats. Alexander's outburst in 1893 was an exasperated response to Indian moves to resist, by concerted appeals to imperial authority, the steps being taken against them. As the European burgesses and colonial electors celebrated their accession to responsible government on the 4th of July, 1893, the stage had been set for more drastic measures that were for them the promise, but for Indians the threat, of self-government. Municipal controversy then broadened out into the arena of colonial and imperial politics leading ultimately to Indian disfranchisement, anti-immigration laws, poll taxing, and the denial of trading rights. It is important to see that these measures represented a shift of emphasis from the attempts at social control which had characterized the 1870s and 1880s to a much more determined and concerted pursuit of communal exclusion which was to be the dominant theme of the 1890s and after. They struck at civil rights and economic liberties vouchsafed to British subjects under the empire, and in so doing signalled the final transference in British colonial minds of those rights and liberties from criteria based upon the possession of a stake in the political community to criteria based upon racial conceptions.

Self-government for Natal cast a long shadow over Durban's Indian population. It hastened the rise of political consciousness and a stronger sense of community among them. Gandhi's biographers usually credit him with initiating political organization and activity among the Indians of Durban. To an extent this view is right, for it was his decision to fight the 1894 Disfranchisement Bill which led to the founding of the Natal Indian Congress. His biographer, Geoffrey Ashe, has put it rather dramatically: "He had plunged into a faceless and depressed sub-world, the limbo of a trampled minority powerless to generate forces of its own."<sup>25</sup> But his point is overdrawn; the fact is that Durban's Indian merchants had pulled together as early as 1884 and again in 1891, trying to pressure imperial authority to protect their interests.<sup>26</sup> What the Indians had not done, and what Gandhi later led them to achieve to some degree, was to try to bridge the gulf that separated the mercantile elite from the class of Hindu and Parsi clerks and both of those from lesser orders associated with the indentured labor system.

These first efforts by the merchants were significant not only as cases of pre-Gandhian initiative, but as a foretaste of the circumstances in which Gandhi's later efforts were destined to flounder despite his personal success. In 1891 a petition signed by 72 leading merchants initiated in Durban was sent to the colonial secretary, who replied that he would like to have a bill of particulars from Natal. In 1892 Hadji Mohammad, Hadji Dada and Company sent memorials charging the municipality with victimizing Indians in the name of sanitary and commercial bylaws. The memorials went to the heart of the matter and argued against giving responsible government to Natal, saying the colony had too few White inhabitants sufficiently educated to govern or to have acceptable views toward Indians. The ammunition for this attack was provided by a controversy over trading rights in the Durban Municipal Market, where the

<sup>25</sup>Geoffrey Ashe, *Gandhi* (New York, 1968), 67.

<sup>26</sup>Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa*, 41, 42.

town council had tried to protect Europeans by preventing Indians from holding or occupying stalls. Some Europeans, however, had employed Indians to run their stalls for them anyway, and others had sublet stalls to Indian traders. Other Europeans had complained, however, and forced the market manager to remove the offending "Asiatics." These people then established their own marketplaces in the Durban mosque and on various public thoroughfares, from which they were also forced in turn to move. "We are all subjects of the Queen," protested the Indians, echoing the arguments of the burgess-Vagrancy Law episode of 1877. "By what right does the Corporation of this town refuse licenses to Indians in the public market, built with public money?"<sup>27</sup>

Nothing came of the Indian protests. The imperial authorities were determined to be free of direct government in Natal and they gave the benefit of doubt to Natal's governing officials, who gave it in turn to their colonist countrymen. The governor's deputy advised that the complaints were frivolous. The resident magistrate of Durban pooh-poohed complaints of Indian victimization and trivialized them by noting that in his experience he had "not once seen an Indian merchant of shopkeeper pushed, molested, or in any way maltreated ... but I have seen European women forced to give way in the streets to Arabs...." At the Colonial Office the senior clerk for South Africa, Edward Fairfield, confirmed this prejudice in a minute to the Colonial Secretary: "These people came in as indentured coolies," he said erroneously or misleadingly, "and their permanent settlement in the country was their own act," suggesting that they must therefore bear the consequences without complaint. He went on to remark that "the prejudice against Indians throughout South Africa, even in the Republics, is wholly English. The Boers like them because they undersell other traders. This underselling ... often means that they are cheating their principals." Thus Fairfield linked imperial concern for the maintenance of British trade to an unwelcome presence of Indians in South Africa. Lord Ripon then concluded that he was "unable to perceive that any ground for serious complaint has been established." He did not say "exists." One concludes that this was a careful distinction.<sup>28</sup>

The newly independent parliament of Natal proceeded after 1893 to enact the basic provisions of legal subordination for Indians which constituted in the mind of the White electorate the guarantee of their own security against the "Asiatic Menace." Ironically for the proponents of urban segregation, however, the Franchise Law of 1896 struck down the Indian parliamentary vote in Natal but left burgess rights and the municipal franchise untouched. This was a tactic to obviate the force of Gandhi's protests which rested heavily on the existence of municipal franchises in India as a justification for claiming the right to vote in Natal.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the £3 annual poll tax on free Indians, designed to keep the "coolies" in a state of indentured servitude, scarcely touched the Indian mercantile, white collar, and artisan classes whose success was the true source of White Natal's anxieties and antagonism.

<sup>27</sup> DCL v. 86, #7346 Acting Col. Sec'y. to Mayor of Durban 26 October 1892; CM v. 18, pp. 875, 1884; MM 1892.

<sup>28</sup> PRO, CO 179/180 (Natal, 1891), 16842/91; CO 179/183, 16781/92, and 22145/92.

<sup>29</sup> Natal Legislative Assembly Debates, 26 June 1894.

These anxieties soon found further violent expression in the "Asiatic invasion" crisis of 1897. Mobs in Durban prevented the landing of Indians from two ships suspected of harboring cholera, and attacked Gandhi on his return to Natal from the famous visit to India during which he had outraged colonial sentiment by inflammatory publicity against Natal's Franchise Act. In a dramatic and successful effort to mollify the demonstrators, the prominent Durban politician and attorney, Harry Escombe, pledged the government to legislate against Indian immigrants.<sup>30</sup> The Immigration Restriction Act of 1897 was aimed directly at the passenger Indians by prohibiting free immigration except under certain conditions, the most important of which was an education test requiring knowledge of a European language. Its effect was considerable, as between 1897 and 1901 nearly 5,500 passenger Indians were refused entry, although simultaneously about 3,400 were admitted to Natal as being domiciled there.

Finally and above all, Europeans now struck directly at the economic foundations of their rival colonists with the Wholesale and Retail Dealers Licensing Act of 1897. Even before the 1897 demonstration, the Durban town council had circulated among the towns of Natal a petition addressed to Prime Minister Sir John Robinson, editor-publisher of Durban's leading newspaper, *The Natal Mercury*, calling for a bill to provide them with drastic and essentially tyrannical powers to stop the lease or sale of land to Indians, to refuse licenses "to carry on any business or occupation ... to any person whom the Council may deem undesirable," and to compel "any class of persons" to live in a location. The Town Council of Pietermaritzburg replied with its promise of hearty cooperation, as did other towns in the colony. The local Colonial Patriotic Union dunned the Durban council with demands for action, advising that the three objectives should be separated so as not to jeopardize passage of the really vital one affecting trade licenses. The government's reply soon confirmed the wisdom of this course and the legislation that finally ensued allowed a direct attack on Indian commerce.<sup>31</sup>

The key provision of this extraordinary law gave local municipal councils rather arbitrary powers to grant or withhold licenses to trade and made them independent of review by any higher authority, including the Appeal Courts. The number of Indian traders, in terms of numbers of licenses held, experienced an absolute decline in the last years of the 1890s, but then recovered somewhat in the year immediately after the Anglo-Boer War when test court cases had weakened the municipalities' ability to make arbitrary denials of licenses to Indians. European licensing, on the other hand, increased over 100 percent between 1897 and 1898, then rose steadily at a slower rate thereafter. In 1897, trading licenses issued to Indians had constituted 55 percent of Natal's total (523 out of 941), in 1900 they were 27 percent (472 of 1,578), but by 1908 they had risen again to 33 percent (1,008 of 3,042). In sum, the long-range effect of the Licensing Act would be to enhance the movement

<sup>30</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 1-27 January 1897, *passim*, esp. 14 January 1897.

<sup>31</sup> *Natal Mercury*, 26 November 1896, 1-27 January 1897 *passim*, esp. 27 January; Natal Sess. Pap., L.A. No. 1, 1897, 2-16; DCL v. 121, 18560 & 18650; CM v. 20, 18776; Leg. Assembly Debates, LA 25 '97, 31 March, 5 April 1897; *Laws Relating to the Borough of Durban*, 174 ff.

toward communal segregation in Durban by tending to confine Indian commerce to Ward IV, the present area of the Indian central business district.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, Indians centered in Durban emerged under Gandhi's leadership with organized and vocal protest. Hadji Mohammad's group of 1891 and '92 was revived and the Natal Indian Congress was organized in 1894 for Gandhi's campaign against the franchise bill. From the outset the new group was conceived as more than simply a pressure group to serve a special interest, but as a coming together of Indians from all classes with charitable, cultural and social purposes in addition to political agitation.<sup>33</sup> The only really active center for the Natal Indian Congress was Durban itself and the overwhelming majority of leaders and members were Durban men. Seventy-six people subscribed to its inauguration at Dada Abdullah's premises in West Street and the number rose to 228 that first year. Canvassing in Pietermaritzburg secured 48 members, in Verulam, a north coast sugar planting center, 37 members.

What was the condition and extent of the community which Gandhi and the Natal Indian Congress came to represent? Here follows a survey of their development through the 1890s, based upon the Durban borough valuation and burgess rolls, comparing the years 1893 and 1899/1900. Eighty-six Indian proprietors with 166 properties in 1893 increased to 205 holding 256 properties in 1899. The valuations of these properties rose from approximately £70,000 to £218,500 during this period. In percentage terms, the number of proprietors increased 238 percent, nearly 2 1/2 times, while the total number of their properties increased 154 percent, or 1 1/2 times. That is, individuals tended to own fewer properties at the end of the decade. At the same time, the total valuation of Indian properties rose by 326 percent or well over three times while Europeans increased their ownership value by a lesser amount: 211 percent. But comparing these figures with the total valuation of Durban indicates that Indian properties in 1893 were worth only 2.6 percent of the total in the town, whereas in 1899 they amounted to 3.9 percent of the total.

As for population, Indians increased from 5,500 or 21 percent of the borough's population in 1891 to 7,200 or 28 percent in 1895. But from that point on, it seems, they declined as a proportion of the total population of Durban until they numbered 9,500 or 23 percent of Durban's population in 1899, the last normal year before the Anglo-Boer War. One conclusion is that the new Immigration Laws of 1895 and 1897 inhibited but did not halt the immigration or increase of free Indians. Another conclusion is that the Indian community as a group but not as individuals continued throughout the 1890s to advance materially at a modestly faster rate than the Europeans. But the proportion of the whole which Indians possessed was certainly a very small quantity in absolute terms. This fact gains impact in comparing it to the proportion of the population which Indians

<sup>32</sup>NA, GH, G 233/99: Petition of Indians on Administration of Act 18, 1897, by Durban Town Council, 31 December 1898, GH 878, G 375/08 Gov. Nathan Conf. dispatch 10 and 25 July 1908; CSO, 1903 vol. 1731 no. 4371/1903, Return of Licenses Issued to Indian Dealers; Wm. Broome, *Digest of Natal Law Reports*, n.s. 1894-1901 (Pietermaritzburg, 1903). These findings seem to qualify Davies and Rajah's view that the Dealers Licensing Act was "unsuccessful in inhibiting Indian trade" (p. 50).

<sup>33</sup>See Ashe, *Gandhi*, 58-61; Gandhi, *Collected Works I*, 130-131, 231.

represented. In other words, 28 percent of the population controlled 3.9 percent of Durban's property in 1899/1900. This was one measure of the "Asiatic Menace."

Another measure would be the distribution and extent of occupation and ownership of properties. What follows is an effort to describe the geographical pattern of the Indian community in Durban in the 1890s. The map will help to visualize this setting. The two main commercial streets of the city, West and Smith Streets, ran east and west parallel to the inner shore of Natal Bay and formed the central business thoroughfares. On their inland side, just west of the center of town, in Ward IV, the major Indian commercial and residential area was developing. By the 1890s Ward IV's Grey Street had become the main thoroughfare of Indian commerce but with considerable activity close by in Pine and Commercial streets. The Durban Market, noted previously in connection with the grievances of 1891 and 1892, was located in this area and here eventually an Indian Market was established, as was also the Native Market. This part of the city remains the "Indian quarter" to the present day. Two satellite areas of less concentrated occupancy had emerged in the western and eastern vleis, flat water-logged areas on either side of the original settlement of the town, stretching inland from the shore of Natal Bay to the slopes of the high ridge of land called the Berea which separated the Bay and the site of the city from its immediate hinterland. There was another satellite area of Indian activity on government land at the Point, where much of the port activities of Durban were concentrated, including the Indian Immigration Depot, with its barracks for concentrating newly arrived indentured laborers. Indian settlement in Durban, therefore, formed a kind of axis through the geographical center of the town with the eastern and western vleis balancing the major node of Ward Four, hard by the White-occupied central business district. The growth of the European community had already leapfrogged the Indian-occupied area and the insalubrious vleis to establish residential sections along the slopes of the Berea ridge. The Indians were also expanding from Ward IV outward through the vleis and along the main lines of traffic linking Durban with the north and south coasts and the interior of Natal via the Umgeni, Umbilo and Berea Roads, with the potential for spatial competition with the Europeans added to their commercial expansion.

Turning more closely to detail in Ward IV, the evidence suggests that the pattern of effectively complete segregation of land ownership and occupation found in later times had not yet been set. In 1899 there were 75 Indian proprietors of 107 properties valued at £157,500, and 197 more occupiers of properties valued at £165,000. This meant a general increase since 1893 of about 23 percent for Indian proprietors and 54 percent for occupiers. On the other hand, only 18 percent of all the proprietors in Ward IV were Indians in 1893, 20 percent in 1899. They actually possessed only about 9 percent of the Ward's property in 1893, and 11 percent in 1899, when the total valuation of the Ward amounted to £1,500,000. A conclusion to draw here is that even in the so-called "Indian Quarter," Indians actually in possession or occupancy formed a relatively small minority. Another implication is that the population of Ward IV must have been to some degree racially mingled, occupying one another's properties and presumably doing business with one another. Thus, in

Ward IV, 66 Indian occupiers in 1899 were registered for European-owned premises as compared to 133 Indians in Indian-owned properties. Ninety Europeans rented from Indian owners, as compared to 704 European occupations of European properties. In some streets of Ward IV upwards of 40 percent of the properties were owned by Indians, but nearly all actually occupied by Europeans. In other streets and blocks European proprietors tended to predominate as did European occupants, together with wealthy "Arab" owners such as Dada Abdullah, host at the founding of Congress.

Table 4:

TRADING LICENSES ISSUED

<u>Year</u>	<u>Durban - Indians</u>	<u>Natal - Indians</u>	<u>Natal - Europeans</u>
1891	159		
1893	193		
1895		393	356
1896	197	464	383
1897	270	523	418
1898	229	520	1,028
1899	244	461	1,106
1900	299	472	1,256

Sources: Natal Archives: Government House and Colonial Secretary's Office files. There are serious discrepancies in the several different compilations recorded in these sources. The figures shown represent the most internally consistent accounts.

Who were Durban's largest Indian property-holders? An inspection of the rolls indicates that the holdings of the outstanding entrepreneur Abubakar Amod approached £11,000 valuation in 1893, almost entirely in Ward IV. Next came Dada Abdullah with over £7,000 and renting European-owned business premises on West Street. Mohammad Isak, a member of the Indian Congress Committee in 1894, possessed £2,595 in properties in Ward IV. Three vice presidents of Congress, R. Naidoo, Moosa Hadji Cassim and Dowad Mahomed had holdings in Ward IV valued at £2,680, £2,170, and £1,820 respectively. At the end of the decade Abubakar Amod's successors, Ismail Abubakar, and Omar Hadji Amod, possessed numerous properties valued in toto at £27,000. Dada Abdullah's properties, in addition to his business premises, were then valued at £10,800. Moosa Hadji Cassim's were valued at £18,000. Adamji Miankhan, Gandhi's replacement as secretary of the Congress, had £1,800, and Congress itself was registered with two properties totalling £2,000, one of which was occupied by a European tenant. Numbers of Indians possessed considerably greater resources than many of the Congress leaders. It is difficult to conclude with a clear-cut assessment of the overall real wealth of Indian Congress leaders or their share of the community's holdings, but one general conclusion might be that on the one hand the "Asiatic Menace" remained a relatively modest one in the scale of Durban's wealth, and on the other its leaders had much in common, at least so far as material interests went, with the European mercantile community. There must have been a significant number of Whites who enjoyed and

recognized a mutually beneficial relationship with Indians. There were doubtless many more however, who resented their proximity, feared competition, or saw opportunity for gain by denying equal opportunity to Indian enterprise.<sup>34</sup>

The municipal voting rolls show that extraordinarily few qualified Indians registered and, interestingly, that very few of those who did so appeared to be members of Congress. The highest number for any year before 1900 was 12 out of 1,900 municipal voters in Durban, in 1895. (Later, in 1915, 52 municipal Indian votes out of 6,300 were recorded, and 582 out of 15,000 in 1924.) By comparison there were 113 on the colonial franchise roll for Durban county, and Gandhi counted 251 out of 9,300 for Natal as a whole. Even in Ward IV, therefore, Indian burgesses were vastly outnumbered by their European neighbors, and there is, of course, no indication of an urban "electoral influence" as promoters of the Franchise Bill had described in 1894.

"The Asiatic Menace" in colonial Natal thus appears far less a tangible reality than a panicked state of mind which dwelt on the substance of things feared and the vision of things unseen. In this phenomenon the urban context was decisive. During the 1870s and 1880s, the rulers of Durban had been forced to confront matters of civil order and development which in their view involved the most vital issues of policy. These included the powers and purposes of government, the rights of citizenship, the cultural and ethnic definition, and the spatial structure of their community. Three sources of stress had been initially identified: an environmental crisis of growth compounded by crowding and pollution with epidemic potential; a lack of fiscal and legal powers for decisive action; and the presence of the "coolies." As official frustrations developed, many of them attributable to South African intercolonial political and commercial rivalry and the vagaries of the business cycle having little or nothing intrinsically to do with the presence of Indian traders and merchants, local emphasis nevertheless fell more and more upon the Indians as scapegoats. The tendency emerged for Whites to discuss the need for social control, public security and health, town planning, commercial arrangements and political aspirations in terms of racial or ethnic differences.

The influence of linked ideas about race and disease as societal metaphors, powerfully affecting the development of segregation, stratification, and divisions among groups and classes in South Africa, has been elucidated elsewhere and is applicable here. But we see that "race" was of course not the only determinant of societal issues. Racial attitudes and policies were defined in the growth and management of the social environment and entangled in a complex of forces and effects born of political and economic laissez-faire, of rivalry between levels of governmental authority, and of contests between public and private interests or persons moved by attitudes

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Gandhi wryly quoted Harry Escombe, the "hero" of the 1897 "Asiatic invasion" crisis, as having earlier said, "The Indian people do no harm as far as I know; in certain respects they do a great deal of good.... I know not why Arabs should be placed under police supervision more than Europeans. In cases of some Arabs the thing is simply ridiculous. They are men of large means, large connections, who are always used in trade if they can be dealt with more profitably than others." Gandhi, *Collected Works I*, p. 223.

as well as by material interests. The agitation of problems and crises, and the anxieties arising from them, were useful to public authorities ambitious for greater activity and control, to certain colonists demanding entrepreneurial advantage and security, and to cultural and ethnic chauvinisms having psychological as well as material motives and origins.

Administrative officials and politicians lent themselves vigorously to the process described above, uninhibited by significant constitutional political restraints or commitment to underlying political values. They were the greatest source of racial formulations in the institutional responses of colonial society. At the same time the 1890s witnessed a culmination of municipal assertiveness and independence as against central government in all spheres, a common aspect of European and Western urbanism at the time. This tendency was reinforced in Natal as the imperial authority receded from direct control and the Natal government became more susceptible to local agitation and electoral pressure. The towns thus emerged as the cockpits of communal conflict, and their municipalities stood forth as the protagonists of one racially defined segment against the other within these pluralistic communities, promoting baleful "solutions" to their common problems and their ethnic colonial rivalry.