Passages of Ink: Decoding the Natal Indentured Records into the Digital Age

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In every British colony that received indentured workers from India, officials recorded personal and social details for identifying the arriving migrants. In Natal, 152,184 migrants were inscribed into such lists between 1860 and 1911. This article traces the history of this set of documents from their mid-nineteenth-century origins as registers of imperial labour control to their twenty-first century digitisation by an amateur historian in a relational database, available online. Against the backdrop of transforming informational technologies, the story of the shipping lists is the story of their changing social and political meanings in relation to the circumstances of the Indian diaspora in South Africa over one hundred and fifty years. Now held at the Durban Archives Repository, these records are regularly drawn upon by South Africans of indentured ancestry to establish family origins for the purposes of applying for the status of 'Person of Indian Origin' or 'Overseas Citizen of India', offered by the Indian government to individuals who can prove Indian ancestry within a number of generations. Thus, the ships' lists are bracketed by very different periods in which the creation of an 'exceptional' political status was legislated to serve economic interests by harnessing linkages of the Global South.

In 2008, Anil Maharaj of Pietermaritzburg decided to apply for 'Person of Indian Origin' (PIO) status from the Indian consulate in Durban. Offered by the Indian government to eligible individuals who form part of the global diaspora, PIO status, similar to OCI ('Overseas Citizen of India'), provides a range of civic and economic benefits, including 15 years of visa-free residence and travel in India, competitive interest on bank savings and – if desired – a path to full citizenship. As part of his application, Maharaj was compelled to furnish proof that a parent, grandparent or great-grandparent had been born on the Indian subcontinent. He was vague on the details of his own family history but noted that his mother's wedding certificate contained a series of numbers. (See Figures 1 and 2.) These documents helped him locate various deceased relatives in the Pietermaritzburg archives but not to trace overseas family origins. Then he learnt that the Documentation Centre archive on the campus of the former University of Durban-Westville contained a CD with information that might help him.[1]

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1   Interview with Anil Maharaj, Durban, 3 July 2013.

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Figure 1: *

That information proved to be a complete list of indentured migrants who had made the journey from India to Natal by ship over a century ago. Tracing the numbers, he now identified his mother's mother's father as Gajadhur Ramadhin from Uttar Pradesh, indentured number 45093, who at 19 years of age had arrived on the *Umtata IV* in 1891. He discovered that his paternal great-grandfather was Shivcharan (recorded as 'Sheocharan' and assigned the number 85032) from the village of Tartee in Jaunpur, who had come to Natal in 1901 at the age of 24. On board the *Umlazi XIII*, Shivcharan had 'married' 20-year-old Kaulesari, who hailed from the village of Chiliapur in Azimgarh.

The consulate required that Maharaj check this information against copies of the original collection of these documents, all housed in the Durban Archives Repository, where the archival director Rishi Singh is authorised to verify its accuracy. As he does for all other such requests, Singh brought out the photocopied pages of a series of bound volumes. The original record books, fragile and with many of them damaged by time and neglect, are stored in the repository to be consulted if the photocopied records prove unclear or of poor quality. Each volume is comprised of tables, with entries inscribed by hand on horizontal lines stretching consecutively across both open

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Figure 2: *

*   Figures 1 and 2 have been removed due to difficulties in securing copyright.
     Journal editor: Andrew Bank

pages from left to right. Under column headings – including an assigned registration number, father's name, age, sex, village of origin, caste and identifying 'body marks' – are the corresponding details of each named individual. This set of 91 volumes comprises the original register books of the shipping lists, inventories documenting the arrivals of 152,184 Indians at Port Natal between 1860 and 1911. Sixty-two of these volumes are the records of vessels from Madras and 29 of ships from Calcutta. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

In every colony that received indentured workers from India, officials recorded personal information for identification and to track their employment. The paper regime of Indian indenture, as a feature of post-slavery European empire, is made manifest in the names and details of men, women and children who migrated across oceans to places of work and settlement. Yet these records also signify, and continue to exert, ongoing historical change. The lists have become implicated in new and emerging regimes, in local identity formation and in transnational linkages and formations of power.

The history of the shipping lists – their creation, survival and technological transformation over more than a century – is a story of their changing social meanings

Figure 3: Ship list: Durban Archives Repository, North Indian ship register, Book M. Photo: Thembisa Waetjen

Figure 4: Boxes containing the ship registers at the Durban Archives. Photo: Thembisa Waetjen

and uses. Crafted as an institutional method to delimit the terms of indentured settlement, influx regulation and social control by the colonial government in collaboration with employers, these records have over time been used for other purposes by differently interested actors. These changes are contextual, related to both local and global political and social transformations, but they also emerge from the multiple properties of the lists themselves: their materiality as paper documents, the free-floating information they contain, and their capacity to accumulate symbolic value.

In this article we trace a history of the shipping lists from the mid-twentieth century, when they came into public focus at a time of further shifts in, and representations of, the continuously anomalous civic status of Indians in South Africa. Our discussion runs along three strands of inquiry: the technological translation of handwritten volumes to digitised formats with increased public access; the uses of the lists as a source of knowledge for different purposes; and what the documents have signified in relation to the shifting political circumstances of the Indian diaspora of South Africa. The story of the ships' lists is bracketed by very different periods in the history of the Global South, but with each witnessing the creation of an 'exceptional' political status legislated to serve economic interests by harnessing transnational linkages.

Paperwork: Records and the Arrival of Indentured Indians in Colonial Natal

In the post-slavery context of continuing imperial management and exploitation of racialised subject populations, the system of Indian indenture provided for a particular form of civic status. Its moral base as a system of 'free' labour was constructed through its bureaucratic administration, the provision of specialised personnel and offices, the recruitment of women to satisfy prescribed gender ratios, and the endowment of certain rights and recourse to law.[2] While historians have debated the de facto nature of indentured status in relation to the abuse and inhumane conditions routinely experienced by those labouring in the colonies,[3] there is little question that British imperial policy making sought to invest the indentured contract with social recognition and constituted a meaningful departure from slavery's titles and deeds of sale.[4]

Under the terms of Act 15 of 1842, the British government established the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission to institutionalise the recruitment and transport of Indian subjects to its sugar-growing colonies in Mauritius, the Caribbean, South America, and Fiji, as well as the south-eastern coast of Africa. In most cases, including that of 416,000 migrants to the West Indies and the more than 450,000 who went to Mauritius, indentured workers functioned to fill the post-slavery labour vacuum

2   See N. Essop-Sheik, 'Labouring under the Law: Gender and the Legal Administration of Indian Immigrants under Indenture in Colonial Natal, 1860–1907' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005), 20.
3   See H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); J. Beall, 'Women under Indentured Labour in Colonial Natal, 1860–1911' in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990); M. Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).
4   See M. Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery and Indian Indentured Labour Migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1998).

in established plantation economies. In other cases, as in Natal, they were recruited to develop emergent colonial agri-capital ventures where local indigenous societies remained resistant to processes of primitive accumulation, despite the concerted efforts of settlers through taxation and other strategies.

In 1859, overriding a lack of consensus amongst colonial settlers and, indeed, sugar farmers, the Natal government passed legislation initiating the importation of 'coolie labour' from India. Grafted on ordinances set out for the Caribbean island colony of St. Lucia which had begun importing migrants the previous year, the Natal Legislative Council passed Laws 13, 14 and 15 setting down the conditions for the system, including the duration and terms of contracted employment, minimum wages and benefits, transport regulations and health provisions, and rules to be observed by employers and employees respectively. Section 3 of Law 14 stipulated:

> The immigration agent shall keep a "register," in which shall be inserted the names of all Coolie immigrants who may be hereafter introduced into this Colony at the public expense, and shall number each of such immigrants by a particular number, commencing with the number one, and proceeding by numerical progression, and shall distinguish therein, under different heads, the number, name, age, and sex of every such immigrant, and the time when, and the place from which, and the vessel in which, such immigrants shall have arrived …[5]

In addition, as specified by Law 13, section 14, the protector of immigrants was to keep a 'separate register' and issue a 'ticket of registration' to each immigrant. Tickets were composed of 13 categories of recorded information: name of immigrant; number; name of father/mother; sex; age; stature; marks; caste; native country and village; name of vessel and captain by which introduced; whether accompanied by children and if so their names; sexes and ages; time during which competent to engage; and remarks. A ticket when issued indicated a fully 'processed' immigrant, whose post-voyage health and general wellbeing had been confirmed through inspection and whose labour power had been successfully assigned to an employer. Official reproduction of hereditary and biometric data sets were directed towards securing both the control ('regulation and governance') and the basic civic status of 'Coolie immigrants' within this post-abolition system of coercion.[6] The protector's office would continually monitor indentured residents, keeping a record of births and deaths, money they earned, the amount that they saved or remitted to India, diseases contracted, letters

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5   Law 14, published in the *Natal Government Gazette,* 12 July 1859, reprinted in Y. S. Meer et al (eds), *Documents of Indentured Labour: Natal 1851–1917* (Durban: Unity, 1980), 41–2.

6   The concern with control is evident, not only as related to the ongoing identification, tracking and management of individual migrants as numbered units of labour power, but also to assist in the collection of funds owed to the state by employers, who were obliged to contribute (in the first indenture) three-fifths of the costs of passage for each 'bond' (male). As for legal measures regarding the civic status of migrants, the official concern to distinguish indenture from slavery is evident in Law 14, section 5, for example. Provision here is not only for 'proper and sufficient food and lodging', medical care and minimum wage, but also that 'in no case whatever shall any bond and wife, nor any parent and child, be allotted to different employers'. Section 9 outlined conditions by which immigrants ending their indentured term would receive a certificate of discharge, entitling them to 'liberty' of various sorts 'in the manner of any other labourer, not being a Coolie immigrant.' See Essop-Sheik, 'Labouring under the Law', 29.

that they may have received or sent, change of employers, death or injury, and other details imagined to be pertinent.

Late in 1860, the protector of emigrants stationed in Madras, one M. Franklin, wrote to Natal's colonial secretary to inform him that the first ship carrying migrants was about to get under way and to clarify specific terms of service considered to be non-negotiable by those on board. Of the passengers themselves, the letter noted: 'Your Agent here will of course furnish the officer appointed as Protector of Immigrants at the port of disembarkation with full particulars regarding them.'[7] On 16 November 1860, the *Truro* docked in the port of Natal with 342 contracted labourers to be processed by receiving agents. *Truro* was the first of 19 such voyages in the first six years. In 1866, the stream of migrants was temporarily halted as a result of the economic downturn in the Colony. Further delays were imposed when, in 1871, alarming complaints by returnees to India of unlawful exploitation and abuse prompted an official investigation of conditions in Natal. The so-called Coolie Commission of 1872 identified offences and put forth solutions designed to ensure the welfare of indentured workers. By 1874, the system resumed and the flow of migrants continued, with just over 360 subsequent voyages.

Between 1860 and 1911, 152,184 Indian migrants under indenture contract arrived in Port Natal. Boarding ships in Madras and Calcutta, these individuals had contracted themselves to work a six-day week in the Colony for an initial term of three years (which could be followed by a further two years, for an 'industrial residence' of five years). Globally, almost 1.2 million men, women and children emigrated from India under contracts of indenture, comprising a vast diasporic movement that transformed the cultural and demographic composition of receiving societies. A majority of migrants, upon completion of their period of servitude, remained to fashion new lives and livelihoods in the contracting colony. In Natal, while some indentured migrants returned to India, most remained to live either as free settlers or under renewed contracts of indenture, the latter choice an effect of the political vulnerability and financial indebtedness that were often actively cultivated by employers. In the first decade of the twentieth century, conditions of economic indebtedness and continued abuse of indentured workers were among the political issues taken up by Mohandas K. Gandhi during his later years in South Africa, and by nationalists in India, in campaigns that advocated the termination of indenture as a labour system.[8] Meanwhile, the 1910 Act of Union signalled the formation of national institutions and the shift in locus of policy making. Indian indenture was ended in Natal in 1911 and globally in 1920.

The shipping lists remained in the Office of the Protector of Indian Immigrants for five decades after indenture was terminated. Registration numbers, once used to track employment transfers and repatriation, continued to be a tool for the post-Union administration of previously indentured Indians and their progeny: to register

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7   CSO (Colonial Secretary's Office) 1152 of 1860, published in Meer et al (eds), *Documents of Indentured Labour,* 53.
8   See D. Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 144–7.

births, deaths, marriages, movement between colonies, and on the 'Estates of the Dead' documents. Governmental use of ships' list numbers ended when the protector's office was closed in 1962. By this time the National Party government had introduced new institutional mechanisms for racialised population management.

Vijay Mishra has observed that the Indian indenture shipping lists, while regulating the movement of subject populations through colonial ports, also marked the entry of large numbers of largely illiterate, 'ordinary' people into imperial history.[9] The recording of indentured arrivals has meant survival into the present of the details of hundreds of thousands of individuals, providing names and clues to personal histories, values, identities and origins—read along and 'against the grain'.[10]

But these registers also effected historical change. For example, the capture of contracted workers' names and fathers' names into official lists transformed the family designations of many immigrants, with fathers' names coming to serve as fixed surnames as immigrants navigated the intergenerational protocols of the Natal Colony. Variations in spelling, introduced through Anglophonic translation and inscription, rendered these names formal via the ears and handwriting of colonial clerks. It is also the case that many migrants seized the transoceanic opportunity of indenture to escape difficulties in India and to seek a new life; official registration sometimes became a means for the fashioning of new personal identities. As Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie has observed, with reference to the 'archives of movement' kept by the Department of the Interior, regional director, Cape Town (IRC), official registers of names 'in some cases sustained fictive lives.'[11]

Scholars of archival biography have established that 'archives of control' are neither fixed nor totalising.[12] The Natal shipping registers are not transparent sources of inert data. They give historians the opportunity to consider the implications of the uneven way they were made at the time, as well as how their uses, meanings and impacts escaped regimental intent.

Primary Sources: Photographing and Microfilming the Lists in the Era of Separate Development

Despite the ending of indenture, the Office of the Protector remained active into the second half of the twentieth century and the residency in South Africa of people of Indian ancestry continued to be a concern of state. Although many fought for the British in East Africa during World War I, anti-Indian agitation swept across South Africa in the post-war period and manifested in proposed legislation in the 1920s to curb trade, residence and immigration.

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9   V. Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2007), 34.
10   A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
11   U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 'The Form, the Permit and the Photograph: An Archive of Mobility Between South Africa and India', *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* 46, 6, 2011, 650–62.
12   For examples of South African contributions to seeing archives in new ways, see C. Hamilton, V. Harris, J. Taylor, M. Pickover, G. Reid and R. Saleh (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002).

South African Indians pushed for a round table conference, which was held in Cape Town. The Cape Town Agreement of 1927 resulted in a scheme for the voluntary repatriation of Indians and the appointment of an agent by the Indian government to monitor the workings of the Agreement. The repatriation clause conveyed the idea of African-born 'Indians' as foreigners in South Africa, a notion that continued to dominate state thinking. Meanwhile, the presence of an Indian agent-general until 1946[13] meant that links to India, as well as cultural identification and dependence on that country, remained strong among South African Indians. These developments further solidified the fusion of a local 'Indian' identity in which differences of language, culture, religion and class were already losing political salience. Into the 1940s, South African Indians continued to be treated as a distinct population and to engage political struggle separately from other South Africans.[14]

The Sauer Commission of 1946 officially designated South African inhabitants of Indian ancestry as 'foreigners' (despite the reality that most had been born locally)[15] and the state applied concerted legislative pressure to curtail further immigration from India.[16] When the National Party came into power in 1948, 'Indians' were incorporated into apartheid's racial classification systems and, in the 1950s, separate zones of residence were set aside for them during the planning of Group Areas. Yet government sentiment continued to nurture xenophobic dreams of excising Indians as a 'foreign element'.

However, on 16 May 1961, the minister of the Interior, Johannes de Klerk, declared in Parliament that 'Asiatics' would be accepted as South Africa's 'permanent responsibility', abandoning the repatriation project. In August, Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd announced the establishment of a Department of Indian Affairs. The new department would now take over the responsibilities of the Office of the Protector of Indian Immigrants which, to that point, had registered birth, marriages and divorces, taken charge of the estates of the dead, overseen payment of pensions and disability grants on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare and Pensions, and issued identity documents and passports from the Department of the Interior.[17] The shipping lists were now transferred to the offices of the Department of Indian Affairs.

It was in 1961, also, that a university for Indians was founded in Natal, housed temporarily on Salisbury Island but moved in 1972 to a new and modern campus in Chiltern Hills: the University of Durban-Westville (UDW). UDW was one of several racially founded institutions of higher learning, manifesting the state vision of racial and ethnic 'separate development'. An important aspect of apartheid's commitment

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13 In view of impending segregation legislation, in May 1946 the Indian government asked Ramrao Deshmukh, its high commissioner in South Africa, to return to India for consultations. The Ghetto Act was passed in June and Deshmukh did not return. Instead, the Indian government took the matter to the United Nations and, as relations between the two countries became strained, the Indian High Commission in South Africa was officially closed in 1954.

14 See U. S. Mesthrie, 'From Sastri to Deshmukh: A Study of the Role of the Government of India's Representatives in South Africa, 1927 to 1946' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Natal, 1987).

15 According to the *Protector of Indian Immigrants Report for 31 December 1954*, of the 306,814 indentured Indians and their descendants in Natal, only 16,334 were part of the original indentured migrant population. The rest were born in Natal. In addition, there were 30,680 Indian passengers born in India and Natal who were simply passing through the ports..

16 For example, the Immigration Regulation Amendment Act of 1953, which sought to stem new inflows from India, addressed a key weakness of the earlier 1913 law by targeting the long-standing transoceanic marital practices.

17 See 'The Department of Indian Affairs: An Historical Overview', *Fiat Lux*, 9, 10, December 1974, 24–7.

to this vision was the cultivation of 'ethnic' knowledge to bolster organic conceptions of cultural identity and heritage. An 'Indian' Documentation Centre was established on UDW campus in 1979, around the same time that centres were opened at the 'bantustan' universities of Zululand and Transkei for the study, respectively, of Zulu and Xhosa heritages.[18] The new centre divided local opinion. Progressive voices amongst the Indian public deplored the racial segregation of history and its paternalistic flavour, while others supported UDW's unique educational mandate and perceived opportunities to grow a distinctive collection. Cosmo Grenville Henning, who arrived from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and became the first director of the Documentation Centre, was among the latter voices:

> The establishment of the Centre, as an archive and a museum, where all aspects of the history of the Indian South African could be collected, preserved and classified, was a dynamic move on the part of the University. As the majority of South Africa's Indian community settled within a radius of a hundred kilometres from Durban, and the fact that the University is the only tertiary institution in South Africa which offers tuition in Indian languages, Hinduism, Islam, Oriental Studies, and Indian Philosophy, the choice of establishing the Centre at the University was a happy one and augurs well for the future.[19]

In the early decades, UDW drew a student body that was exclusively 'Indian' but maintained a mostly 'white' administration and teaching staff. In 1977, Joy Brain, who had been working as an information specialist at the ('white') Teachers' Training College of Edgewood just outside Durban, joined the history department at UDW.[20] While researching the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Natal for her doctoral dissertation, Brain was intrigued by the names of Indian Christians that appeared in the documents. The existing historiography on Indian South Africans was just sufficiently robust to carry a number of methodological problems that the meticulous Brain would seek to challenge. Her book *Christian Indians in Natal, 1860–1911,* published in 1983 by Oxford University Press, was a study of persons of Christian faith who had come to Natal as indentured migrants from India (see Figure 5). It asked some basic questions about numbers and origins that had been skirted in previous scholarship. As she explained:

> I tried to find the answers to these questions, collecting all the information available from theses as well as from published sources. It soon became apparent that many of the statements made were contradictory and that

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18 C. G. Henning, 'The Concept of Documentation Centres and Their Value to the Student', *Bulletin: Academic staff, University of Durban-Westville*, 6, 3, 1985, 49–61, 57.
19 C. G. Henning, *The Indentured Indian in Natal, 1860–1917* (New Delhi: Promilla, 1983), xi.
20 Brain, born in 1926, worked as librarian first at the Johannesburg library, then the South African library and finally the Wedgewood library until she joined UDW in 1976. Her doctoral thesis, titled 'History of the Roman Catholic Church in Natal 1886–1925, with special reference to the work of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate', was completed in 1979. By then, she had already published *Catholic Beginnings in Natal and Beyond* (Durban: T. W. Griggs, 1975), which was based on her MA thesis.

Figure 5: Joy Brain with her book *Christian Indians in Natal*. Photo: Thembisa Waetjen, 2014

some of the writers tended merely to repeat the observations of their predecessors. I therefore determined to return to the original sources, in this case the immigration records, and to start from the beginning in an attempt to estimate as accurately as possible how many of the indentured immigrants described themselves as Christians.[21]

'The most complete record of immigration', she continued, 'is contained in the shipping list.'

Brain set about searching for these lists in 1978, which proved a confusing endeavour. Brain's expressions of interest in viewing the documents at the Department of Indian Affairs offices were initially rejected. She was unclear why but believes that it was related to the political situation at the time and strained relations with India. She approached a university administrator whom she thought could help. 'He was high up in [the University of] Durban-Westville and I thought, as sure as eggs, he was part of the Afrikaner [Broederbond]'. Permission was granted to investigate.

I expected it to be the usual archives. You know, piles of things, indexes and so on. But by the time this came through, the [protector] had stopped looking after Indians, it was the Department of Indian Affairs by then. And

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21   J. B. Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal 1860–1911* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Figure 6: Items from Joy Brain's archive of microfilms of the ships' lists. Photo: Thembisa Waetjen

so they had moved – chucked out more likely – every paper that they had about Indians. And so then I started to get annoyed. It has been taking me long enough to get permission. Now you have to find them for me! And so eventually they said, 'Yes we know where they are. They are transferred to the Department of Indian whatever it is.'[22]

Brain 'made enough of a fuss' and was able to discover the documents. Her book acknowledges that 'the main part of the work was done at the Department of Indian Affairs, which through their deputy regional representative, Mr J. Möller, generously allowed me the use of their shipping and immigration records.'[23] Yet, in fact, the state of these archives, and the physical conditions of the documents themselves as now-neglected artifacts of paper and cardboard, prohibited use in any methodical way. As she remembers it, they were 'in no order at all', just 'piles of things with covers coming off. It was a disgrace.' She realised that it would take years to record all the names and that it would be impossible to do so at the Indian Affairs Department. Permission was therefore requested and granted to have the lists microfilmed, on the strict condition that none of the documents would be removed.[24]

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22 Unless otherwise specified, Brain's account of her research process is taken from an interview with the authors on 15 April 2013, in Durban. She was also interviewed by telephone on 28 May 2013.
23 Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal*, xi.
24 J. B. Brain, 'Computerisation of the Indian Shipping Lists,' Explanation that accompanied the version of the shipping lists published as a CD, 2003.

The archival transformation of the lists from paper to film was a homespun process, a cottage industry production, executed by members of the Brain family. Joy Brain intended to reproduce the lists with help from her husband Peter, a medical doctor who was also a keen semi-professional photographer. They found that they could not use a microfilm camera (rotary or planetary) because these were too large to get into and use in the storage room; they also feared that the quality would be poor. While Brain pondered over a solution, help came in the shape of her son Richard, a professional photographer based in Impendle in the Natal Midlands. After much experimentation with father Peter's vintage Leica cameras, Richard eventually settled on the right focus range and copied the entire shipping list using three Leica cameras, one of which eventually collapsed under the strain. The five-foot lengths of 35mm document film were developed by Peter and Richard in Peter's dark room in the cellar of the Brains' home. The documents were stored as photographic images. According to Brain, the lists were then 'spliced together, sometimes in the wrong order, by a commercial film studio … the end result was not as professional as it would have been if a microfilm camera had been used.'[25] This was an enormous undertaking. She would have gone to professionals, she recalls, but, given the sheer volume of photographs, the cost would have been prohibitive. So, the family team did 'the best we could under the circumstances.'

Brain used the microfilms of the shipping lists to identify Christian Indians for her book and was able to correct previous scholarly conjectures about numbers and places of origin. In addition to analysis, over half of the book's pages are filled by four comprehensive tables made up of information derived from the original shipping list documents. Table 1, oriented in landscaped columns from pages 12 through 144, provides the original shipping lists' details (name, age, sex, place of origin, denomination and subsequent employment destination) for all indentured immigrants arriving from Madras and Calcutta who identified themselves as Christians.[26] Table 2 catalogues all ships arriving from Calcutta, demonstrating as incontrovertible the previously refuted idea that Christians arrived from Northern India and not merely from the Madras port. Table 4 is a record of the districts in India from which Christians came, and in what numbers. She was able to conclude, with reasonable certainty, that her statistics were sound, 'since all the 91 volumes were searched twice over and names were compared with the relevant entries in the Indian Immigration Registers.'[27]

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25 *Ibid.*
26 Brain's book prompted a search for family history. For example, in 1984, the Reverend Victor Lazarus, then president of the Southern African Missiological Society, was approached by Professor David Bosch of UNISA to review the book. His review was published in *Missionalia,* 12, 1984, 34. Echoing Brain, he welcomed her 'meticulous research', which 'exposes the ignorance and speculation that missionary work is a recent development among Indians.' Without such knowledge that was 'scholarly, scientific, statistical, and [had] historical accuracy', most South Africans tended to view Indian Christians 'negatively', he wrote. Lazarus was excited to find a record of his family in the book. He contacted Brain for assistance and has spent the past three decades researching his family history. He learnt that he had relatives in Bangalore, and in 1987 visited his paternal uncle Benjamin. The family has maintained contact and the younger generation keep in touch via Facebook.
27 Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal*, 246.

The shipping lists also formed the basis for Brain's subsequent research on the economic history of Indians in Natal during the colonial period, in which she drew upon the caste and occupation of migrants and traced them to employers listed in the Estates Registers at the Natal Archives.[28] This subject of study emerged from her classroom interactions. Brain remembers what she thought to be a general backdrop of silence and shame among students hailing from families of indentured background. She believed that a 'low caste' stigma associated with this history explained why so many of her students

> had never been introduced into anything about it. No grandmother [around] who seemed to talk or a father who wanted to talk. And I thought that if [the students] could now look at some family – it could be their own family – and see that they were running a successful shop, or teaching or whatever, and then if they went back to see what had happened [during indenture], they couldn't help but be proud.

On the premise that intergenerational stories of determined work ethics and upward mobility could instil pride in heritage (and perhaps a lesson in aspirational morality), Brain believed that knowledge of humble family origins was an important rationale for historical research at UDW.

> [Research on indenture] interested me because in the early days when I was at Durban-Westville I wanted somebody to recognise that Indians who had come in these little boats and knew nothing had actually done a tremendous amount and had every reason to be proud … You are coming from a poor background and had no money and had to do manual work, and now [today], where are the Indians? You can't walk into one shop in this town without finding somebody [of Indian ancestry] working at it. They had every reason to be proud. And the ones who had the initiative … in the 1860s to go to work in the [Kimberley] diamond mines, they have even more reason to be proud because there was no proper building, scaffolding, anything. You jolly well got into the hole as best you could.

Joy Brain's colleague Surendra Bhana shared her concern about the lack of historical knowledge among the descendants of indentured Indian migrants. Born in Gujarat, Bhana had moved to South Africa with his parents as a child in the 1940s. He earned degrees in history from the University of the Witwatersrand and UNISA (University of South Africa) and was teaching at a secondary school in the Indian group area of Lenasia when a Fulbright scholarship took him to the University of Kansas in the United States, where he completed his doctorate in 1971. Upon his

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28 J. B. Brain, 'Indentured and Free Indians in the Economy of Colonial Natal' in B. Guest and J. Sellars (eds), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal University Press, 1985), 199–234.

return to South Africa, he recalls that he applied for a position at the University of Natal but was advised by its department to apply at the 'Indian' UDW. He found, to his surprise, that the 'indentured experience[s] had remained virtually hidden and I made it my primary goal to focus on them. I made research of the indentured Indians the centre of my inaugural address [as professor].'[29]

Bhana and Brain together took on the project of indexing, ordering and adding to the shipping list data. Funded by UDW, local Indian business houses and by the HSRC, they ran this project for five years, from October 1981 to March 1986, with most of the data entered into computer files from Brain's microfilmed reels. As a first step, they divided the indentured passenger entries from all 384 ships into 26, chronologically arranged lists, alphabetically ordered from A to Z. Each passenger group from a particular ship was assigned a two-letter symbol. Thus those from the first ship, the *Truro*, were labelled AA; the second ship, the *Belvedere* AB, and so on. The information on the microfilm was transcribed by hand onto a specially prepared form that included all the data available on the ships' lists. There was one form per passenger, which also incorporated information compiled after their arrival and employment, obtained from documents kept by the protector's office such as employers' registers, death certificates, dates of return to India, and so on.

Assistants, hired for this project on a fulltime basis, entered the data. As both Bhana and Brain point out, microfilm can only be read with analog or digital magnification, which places great stress on the eyes and is physically exhausting. The result, Bhana acknowledges, is that 'while [the assistants] were diligent, their work was careless. The supervision could have been better.'[30] According to Brain, 'it was a slow and exacting occupation and errors inevitably slipped in.'[31] By 1986, when funding for the project was depleted, 95,382 indentured migrant entries had been captured.

The information was fed into the Hewlett Packard 1000 computer, with the help of Mike Laidlaw of the Computer Science Department at UDW, who designed a programme for this purpose. It soon became apparent that the computer was too slow and its storage space too limited. The information was therefore transferred to an ICL computer and a programme devised to analyse the information by means of the SPSS statistical tool. The information was stored on magnetic tape, while a hard copy was printed and the bound copy stored in the library of UDW.

Close to this time Bhana read *Girmityas*, the 1983 work of the Fijian scholar Brij V. Lal, a grandson of indentured migrants.[32] Lal's quantitative analysis was based on emigration passes, which, as was the case with migrants to Natal, contained detailed information on each passenger. Lal's findings challenged prevailing notions about the indentured in terms of their caste, gender and pre-migration movements, revealing the value of a complete data set to academic history. According to Bhana, Lal

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29 E-mail correspondence from S. Bhana to G. Vahed, 17 August 2013.
30 *Ibid*, 28 May 2013.
31 Brain, 'Computerisation of the Indian Shipping Lists'.
32 B. V. Lal, *Girmityas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983).

encouraged me to produce a book, even if it was statistical. I started writing up in 1987 under great pressure since I had [by then] decided to leave for the United States. A report was submitted to the library and the HSRC. On Brij Lal's advice, I then proceeded with the book. I did additional research at Berkeley in 1988 or 1989 and then had the book published by Promilla's.[33]

Bhana's study, published in 1991,[34] is mainly a statistical analysis of the project data that had been captured by 1986. Bhana's written reflection on the limitations of his analysis is revealing of the technological capacities and the specialised knowledge that characterised computer programming at that time. For example:

> The computer took about one and half days to produce frequency counts of quantifiable data like numbers of males and females, age and height distributions, caste and religion distributions, and so on. But the programme was not designed (and could not be designed given the volume) to correlate and cross-correlate categories of information. So, for example, sex distribution could not be correlated to caste, places of origin or employment. Similarly, caste / religious distribution could not be correlated to place of origin. So, the opportunity exists for a more versatile programme in the future that might yield analyses in its many permutations. It would help for the historian who wants to do so to be more computer-wise.[35]

While Brain and Bhana were busy rendering the complete set of ships' list volumes into usable primary source data, a selection of lists were published in 1980 as part of a larger documentary collection in Y. S. Meer's *Documents of Indentured Labour: Natal 1851–1917*. Produced by the Institute of Black Research (IBR),[36] a unit run by Fatima Meer, a professor in the Sociology Department at the University of Natal, *Documents* had a different aim from the publications produced at UDW. Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie argues that the approaches of Brain and Bhana 'became subsumed by a search for patterns' while the Meer collection introduced the groundwork for social histories and a biographical approach through 'naming the unnamed'.[37] Yet, *Documents* was also a response and contribution to the challenge of Durban-born Black Consciousness that was shaping political mobilisations at this time. As a convicted and banned activist in the National Indian Congress and African National

33 E-mail correspondence with S. Bhana, 28 May 2013.
34 S. Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal 1860-1902* (New Delhi: Promilla, 1991).
35 S. Bhana, 'Indentured Indians in Natal, 1860–1902: A Study Based on Ship's Lists', October Report presented to the HSRC, 1987, x.
36 The IBR was established by Fatima Meer in 1972 and published much of her work as an academic and activist. *Documents of Indentured Labour* was a project initiated by Fatima Meer even though her name does not appear on the list of 'authors' because she was banned. Instead, on the front cover are listed Y. S. Meer (main author), Penny Gains, Shamim Marie, Shereen Motala, Zwelakhe O. Msomi, Rehana Padia, Sara Pochee, Farida Pochee, Jane Turner and Ntombintombi M. Zondi, all of whom worked as a collective in researching and compiling the book. From our brief engagement with some of these contributors it appears that the project took over a decade to complete. Shamim Marie (née Meer) did research at the Pietermaritzburg Archives in 1969, her matric year; Farida Pochee did research at the Pietermaritzburg Archives in 1978.
37 U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Producing Biographical Knowledge about Indians in the Cape: The State, the Archives and the Historian*, UWC inaugural address (Bellville: UWC, 2009), 10.

Congress, Fatima Meer's own contribution and authorship could not be recognised at the time, yet her political project is evident. Its Preface, attributed to Advocate T. L. (Thembile Lewis) Skweyiya, who was the chairman of the board of the IBR, frames the work within a Marxist conception of the human past, 'a history of the powerful and the powerless, dichotomized in different historical epochs as the master and slave, the lord and serf, the landlord and peasant, the boss and his worker.' This published collection of documents was offered as evidence of the colonial exploitation to which Indians were subjected, a history that could demonstrate a background shared by Africans and Indians, expressed through a unified 'Black' political position.

> In Natal, the Indian and the African, kept strange and distant from each other by their culture and by their administrators, were pitted against each other on the labour market. The conflict continues today within the system of apartheid which, inter alia, aggravates it but there also exists a search for identification among workers. The documents, among other things, should assist in that search for identification.[38]

Documents of Indentured Labour expresses the story of Indian indenture in Natal through official and informal correspondences, newspaper clippings, the texts of laws and court records, medical reports and legal observations by a range of personnel and the complete Wragg Commission report of 1885–1887, which investigated conditions related to immigrants and indentured work. Included in the collection are six shipping lists: the *Truro* (1860), the *Belvedere* (1860), the *Scindian* (1863), the *Saxon* (1864), the *Blenheim* (1874) and the *S.S. Umlazi* (1911).[39] Shireen Motala, now a professor of education at the University of Johannesburg, worked to compile some of these lists at the Department of Indian Affairs in early 1979 on behalf of the IBR. But that work, and the problem of access, had been engaged even earlier by Sara Pochee who, in 1972, approached the Department of Indian Affairs for access. The department would not permit her to copy the documents but she wrote down the details from some of the lists requested by Fatima Meer.[40]

Today, a later generation of Brain- and Bhana-trained historians have continued to draw upon the Natal shipping lists as an important primary source for scholarship on the Indian diaspora.[41] As one example, Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai's book *Inside Indian Indenture* accessed the lists for names and other details of

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38 Meer et al, *Documents of Indentured Labour*, 'Preface'.

39 We can only speculate about the selection of ships. The *Truro* and *Belvedere* were the first ships from Madras and Calcutta respectively; and the *Umlazi* was the last ship to bring indentured migrants to Natal. The *Scindian* (1863) was the only ship to arrive in 1863 (there were no ships in 1862); while the *Saxon* (1864) and *Blenheim I* (1864) were from Madras and Calcutta respectively. It is possible that the plan initially may have been to compile registers of one ship from each of Madras and Calcutta for each year of immigration but that this did not materialise, and the *Umlazi* was added to bring 'closure'.

40 Telephonic interview with Sara Poochee, August 2013. *Documents* thanks I. Nethraj, W. Padayachee, and J. J. D. Moller of the Department of Indian Affairs for allowing the IBR to copy some of the documents. By the time Shireen Motala got to the ships' lists five years later, she was permitted to copy the documents.

41 The phrase 'Indian diaspora' is not meant to imply the existence of a homogeneous, unified or essentialist social identity. As deployed in this article, in the South African context, it refers to people whose ancestors left (British controlled) India from the late nineteenth century, and whose current sense of shared group-ness (to the extent that it exists) has emerged through both cultural agency and the historical conditions of subordination and resistance to colonial and apartheid rule.

migrants, which made it possible to trace individuals (via their registration numbers) through the system, as well as to relay larger patterns that shaped the experience of indenture.[42]

In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the preservation of the shipping list documents, and their use by historians for the production of Indian diasporic history, was concomitant with their translation into new formats through photographic and increasingly accessible computer technologies. In addition to their use by specialists, increased public access to the lists created new opportunities for the investment of this data with symbolic cultural significance. By the 1990s, digitising and the internet correlated with the emergence of multi-racial democracy in South Africa and these realities would invest the shipping lists with new political value.

Public Access and Cultural Performance in a 'Rainbow Nation': The Ships' Lists on CD-Rom

In 1994, South Africa emerged from four decades of apartheid rule under the National Party and the African National Congress was voted into state power. While a platform of 'non-racialism' conveyed the intention to ensure equality between persons and the integration of national space, the metaphor of 'rainbow'[43] revealed a population imagined rather as multi-racial and multi-cultural. Conceptions of culture and race continued to operate, and 'Indian politics' was championed by politicians like Amichand 'The Bengal Tiger' Rajbansi of the Minority Front, with some fair measure of success. 'Heritage' emerged as a valued discourse and endeavour, both as an effort to celebrate previously 'hidden' or undervalued histories and in response to an open and growing tourism market. A growing interest in tracing family trees and cultural roots became a strong trend. The shipping lists were drawn into these developments both as material artifacts with symbolic weight and as a source of information available to the general public.

Following Surendra Bhana's departure in 1987, Joy Brain secured additional funding from the HSRC to complete the task of capturing and organising the balance of indexed passenger data. With just over 95,000 entries compiled, there was still more than a third of indentured migrant information to process. During 1990 and 1991, Jaythree Singh, who was employed on this project, helped to decipher North Indian proper and place names. Due to name changes since the nineteenth century, it was often difficult to locate towns and villages and Singh, with her knowledge of India and family contacts in that country and by using the index of *The Times Atlas* and Gazetteers,[44] helped to resolve many of the anomalies. After her retirement in 1992, Brain personally took on the formidable task of checking, revising and correcting the

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42 A. Desai and G. Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860-1914* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2010).
43 The concept of 'rainbow nation', attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was also used by Nelson Mandela in his speech at his inauguration as national president, 10 May 1994.
44 Gazetteers were produced from 1869 for the East India Company, who required information about imperial territories in India. They include information about caste, language, people's way of life, food, dress, marriage customs, religious beliefs and so on.

computerised indexes of indentured passenger data against the original shipping list registers. This project would take just over a decade to complete, as she and a team of volunteers and retired scholars would also add to the shipping data from other documentary sources, such as estate registers, injuries on duty of migrants, and dates of return to India.

The checking process was facilitated by another archival relocation of the original volumes of the ships' lists in the early 1990s. With apartheid institutions crumbling, the now-defunct Department of Indian Affairs office space transitioned back into the custody of the Home Affairs office, located at the then Oswald Pirow Building on Smith Street. Moving the shipping documents from the Home Affairs premises to what was then known as the Durban Intermediate Archives Depot in De Mazenod Road, Greyville was an massive initiative undertaken by several key individuals. The archivist Andrea Luxton had been hired in 1991. According to her, 'there were no heroics involved on my part in salvaging the ships' registers: as you will see … chance or divine intervention played a very important role!'[45] She had been training the staff of a number of governmental bodies in records management, through a course that was at that time called 'The Registry Systems'. One of the attendees happened to be from the Durban offices of Home Affairs and mentioned during one of the sessions that they had rooms full of records just lying on the floor. Luxton arranged to conduct an inspection of the record keeping practices of Home Affairs, there encountering what she described as

> a number of stuffy, dusty, hot and very dirty rooms. In one particular room, records were lying higgledy-piggledy all over the floor, in the most awful storage conditions I had yet seen. I picked up a couple of the records (they were huge hard covered register books) and realized that they were the registers/passenger lists of ships carrying indentured (and other) Indians into Durban harbour. I realized that these were very important records and that they were in danger of simply falling apart because of the hot, humid and filthy conditions in which they were being housed.

This was the impression of other archival depot staff who joined the effort to transport the registers to more secure storage. Rishi Singh, hired at the end of March 1992, remembers that

> we were shocked, everybody was talking about it here that the records were in such a bad state … from what I gathered it [the collection] was thrown on the floor. It was totally disregarded and nobody looked after it, didn't bother about it. And we rescued it. We actually said, 'We will take this'

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45   E-mail correspondence with Andrea Luxton, 17 May 2013.

because they obviously didn't realise the value of the record at the time …
we rescued these documents, or else they would not be with us today.[46]

Although official policy was to first appraise records for their archival value, it
was clear to Luxton that appraisal was not necessary 'as the records spoke for them-
selves: they were so significant that subjecting them to appraisal would just have been
an exercise in futility as they would all have been declared permanently valuable any-
way.' She requested the Home Affairs staff to list the records and transfer them to the
Durban Archives but

> it was quite difficult getting Home Affairs staff to co-operate: they simply
> did not see the importance of these registers. They were happy to clear them
> out of the room in which they were stored so that it could be converted to
> office space, but we basically had to force them to list the records, [which]
> were transferred in a closed bakkie to the Durban Archives.

The records were accessioned into the Durban Archives Repository's holdings.
Luxton was concerned that the records 'were already very vulnerable and [in] dete-
riorating condition' but they did not have restoration staff, so she and her team 'did
our best by the records by simply gently dusting them and storing them in a climate-
controlled environment.' Due to a now-growing demand to use the records, the reg-
isters were photocopied and the copies were made available to researchers.

Still, it was the original paper registers, all 91 volumes, that were now consulted
by Brain in her final stage of checking and compiling. This was done on location at
the Durban Archives Repository with Tom Bennett, a retired professor of engineer-
ing, and other retired academics.[47] The project was an informal, companionable oc-
casion as well as a scholarly one. Rishi Singh recalls that archival staff had initially
assisted in compiling a list of the migrants from the registers, working first in parallel
and then in collaboration with Brain. But then

> we kind of dropped off the project because they had a good team and it
> looked to me like a social event … you know, they really enjoyed them-
> selves. They used to sit here with the registers and have their tea and we
> arrange[d] a couple of things for them. And so eventually they managed to
> go through all of the registers.[48]

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46   Interview with Rishi Singh, Durban, 6 May 2013.
47   Bennett and Brain travelled almost weekly to the archives to work on the shipping lists as well as the estates registers to add
new information to their database, as well as check and revise existing information. In 1999, Tom Bennett introduced Deidre
Papendorf to the project. Originally trained as a microbiologist, Papendorf completed a degree in library science and took up a
position in cataloguing at the Killie Campbell Library from 1983; from 1989 until her retirement in 1998, Papendorf worked at
the E. G. Malherbe library of the University of Natal. She describes herself, along with John Ford, another retired lecturer from
the Natal Technikon , as 'junior partners' in the project ('Tom and Joy did most of the work'), but was able to put her cataloguing
skill to good use by helping to organise 'systematically the huge amount of material that we had to get through. I was used to
working in that.'
48   Brain herself commented on teamwork: 'We took our morning tea with us and we went to find a room down there and had our
morning tea. It was fun having them because if there is anything funny that turns up, a name or something, if you are by yourself
it isn't very funny but if there is somebody to join in with you, it is.'

Other individuals, also, were drawn into the work on the lists. Two women from the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints helped to find and correct surnames. With a massive microfilmed collection of the British Empire, the systematic concern of the Mormon Church with genealogy has been as a spiritual mission, to save souls through retrospective baptism over names, and this too became a valuable resource.[49]

In their efforts, Brain's team faced several problems. One was the poor condition of some of the original shipping registers. Over the years they had been handled for various purposes with the result that some of the pages were torn or lost, or had some details missing. In a few instances, the registers were virtually unreadable. Some of the pages had been repaired with opaque tape, which according to Brain, had become

> brittle and discoloured and nothing can be seen through it. Another problem is the nineteenth century copperplate handwriting. For example, it is often impossible to distinguish between "n" and "u", or "m" and "r", 3 and 8, or 5 and 7. Even the use of a magnifying glass failed to resolve these problems. Name places were also a problem because many names have changed since India became independent in 1947. The original names as they appear in the registers were left on the final list.[50]

Brain and her colleagues completed their final compilation in 2003 and it was published in digital format as a CD-rom. The personal and social details of 152,184 indentured passengers, brought together from the various relevant archival sources in addition to the original shipping lists data, were now in a format that fitted easily into a coat pocket.

The completion of the CD, which would be publicly archived and sold at cost to members of the general public, was met with enthusiasm by KwaZulu-Natal provincial leaders tasked with showcasing goodwill in the new 'rainbow nation'. The post-apartheid enthusiasm for cultural heritage was simultaneously fuelled by a growing unease, with fears raised about the vulnerability of 'minorities'. Official political discourse ten years after transition praised the cultural pluralism of South Africa's make-up, and ruling party politicians in the province were keen to counter the claims of alarmist colleagues. A CD of the Natal indentured shipping lists proved an occasion for nation building. According to the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Archives Act 5 (section 5(2)) of 2000, researchers making use of archival records were requested

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49 According to Wayne van As (telephonic interview, 3 June 2013), the Church's manager in Africa, they assist government institutions in over a hundred countries to 'preserve historical documents of people for future generations.' In South Africa they are providing assistance to digitise material in archives nationally. Once digitised, the Church receives a 'donor copy' for its master 'Family Search' collection. Why provide this assistance? Although Goolam Vahed was told by Joy Brain that the involvement of Church members was possibly to conduct posthumous baptism into the Mormon faith, according to Van As, 'we do not provide names for the baptism of people we don't know. Family is central to everything we do so we want to provide access to do family research through records which can be accessed digitally.' While this may be official policy, compliance depends on millions of members worldwide. There was controversy in the US during 2012, for example, when it was discovered that Holocaust victims were baptised.

50 Brain, 'Computerisation of the Indian Shipping Lists'.

to donate a copy of any published work to the archives. More than merely accepting a donation of the CD, however, the Durban repository archivist Rishi Singh, along with the provincial archivist Mrs S. J. Mcgoya, saw an opportunity to draw public attention to the workings and importance of the archives. Describing the shipping list compilation as a 'major contribution' to the general vision and 'initiative by the KwaZulu-Natal Archives to record and preserve the collective memories and documentation of the past', they requested the presence of members of the Department of Arts and Culture at a 'Diversity Celebration' to take place on 16 November, a date commemorating the arrival of the *Truro*.[51]

Festivities on that Spring day in 2003 were held at the Durban harbour, in the 'Amanzi Shed' at Point Waterfront, and special guests included archivists as well as 'heritage practitioners, local councilors, genealogists, members of the diplomatic core … and other stakeholders'. Approximately 20 'communities'[52] from various parts of the province were invited to participate in a multi-cultural music, song and dance festival showcasing the respective cultures, with culinary demonstrations and flea market booths adding to the exchanges on offer. According to Rishi Singh 6,000 people participated. The revelries were crowned by a re-enactment of the 1860 arrival of the indentured by ship.[53] At four o'clock in the afternoon the *Makana* – a boat belonging to the harbour and carrying the minister of Education and Culture and Narend Singh, along with other 'immigrants' – was welcomed by Zulu traditional dancers and the South African Navy band. Reflecting on the day, Narend Singh explains:

> We literally enacted the arrival of the settlers into Natal. We were at the Point and we had a boat to go to sea. We had the different nationalities who came to Natal as settlers, they were dressed in their traditional outfits, even the Zanzibaris, and we were met by the Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Lionel Mtshali, saying, 'We want to embrace you'. We had their food and cultural events. We wanted to do two things. The first is that we wanted to showcase the diversity in this province. And the second was that we wanted people to welcome each other. When the settlers first came, it was unpleasant. There was conflict between different groups, and many even died of illness and sickness. We wanted to welcome each other make a fresh start for the province where we know and understand each other and can progress together.[54]

Joy Brain officially handed over a copy of the CD to the minister who, in his address, declared, 'This will show that the rainbow nation is not a cliché but practised clearly in our lives.' The day ended with a spectacular fireworks display.[55]

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51   Undated memo to B. Mthanzi, acting deputy CEO of the Heritage Celebration, from S. J. Mcgoya, Provincial Archivist, KwaZulu-Natal Archives.

52   An annexure identified these 'communities' further, as 'Chinese, Italian, French, British, Jewish, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Mauritian, Japanese, San, Pakistani, Americans, Indian, Zulu, Xhosa and Greeks.'

53   S. Shabangu, 'Launch of CD-Rom Containing Details of Early Immigrants', *Natal Mercury*, 13 November 2013.

54   Telephonic interview with Narend Singh, 12 July 2013.

55   According to Rishi Singh, 'the fireworks alone cost to the extent of R60,000. It was a beautiful fireworks display. Music went on until the evening. It was one of the biggest events I know we have held in this [archives] department since I have been here.'

Virtual Life: Internet Access and Digital Developments

In 2005, the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville were merged, along with three other campuses, to form the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The Indian Documentation Centre was reborn as the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre, and subsequently became the Documentation Centre. The data compiled in the 2003 CD was posted onto the centre's website as nine Microsoft Excel spreadsheets in downloadable PDF format. Anyone with internet access could navigate to the lists, clicking on a 'Trace your roots' link to a page authored by K. Chetty, the centre's then director.

This is how Cassim Badsha, a retired computer programmer, amateur historian and resident of Pietermaritzburg, got his first glimpse of the lists. He was alerted to their existence in December 2010, when – at a cricket test match between India and South Africa at the Kingsmead cricket grounds – he was introduced to the historian Goolam Vahed:

> I asked Goolam about articles which appeared in the *Leader* many, many years ago called "I remember", purportedly written by A. C. Meer but written by I. C. Meer [who was banned and could not be quoted] and Goolam told me, 'Yes, it's on the web, do a Google search.' And my Google search weirdly took me to the website of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and I found the ships list.[56]

When Badsha saw the PDF format his thought was, 'That could be very cumbersome in trying to access data.' Access, in the spreadsheet format, meant scrolling up and down the 6,099 pages to work through the horizontal entries. They could provide viewers who knew what they were searching for with ready information about individual passengers, yet this was generally the extent of their function. To reveal trends and analytical statistics, the raw data had to be extracted and separately calculated. To Badsha's programmer mind, the PDF files presented themselves as a challenge and opportunity. 'When I found the ships' lists it was a like a goldmine of easily accessible data for a programmer to develop a relational data base. And that is when I just took off, applying my limited computer skills.'

Badsha's skills were, in fact, considerable. His career began in data capturing when in 1969 he was employed by the British company International Computers Limited (ICL). Around 1974, the company gave some of its South African Indian employees an opportunity to learn Cobol programming. Badsha demonstrated an aptitude for this work and moved his career into programme development, working 29 years with Eskom until his retirement in 2011. To develop the shipping list database, he used Clarion, the Windows-based software he had become most familiar with over 21 years.

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56 Interview with C. Badsha, Pietermaritzburg, 8 May 2013.

Since beginning the project in 2011, Badsha's work on it has been ongoing. 'The very weekend I found [the ship's lists], I started. And the programme has gone through lots of development phases … the more one searches into the data, the more one thinks about it, then you go through phases in the extension of the product.' The process also involved going back over work already completed.

> A cleaning up process is necessary also. And checking and that sort of thing. I already recently, just yesterday, found that there are duplicates. There is a whole string of duplicate numbers, over 30, and it is in the remarks section and it is identified in the list that these are duplicate numbers. So I would have to do something, like on the duplicate number I will have to modify the number and put a D at the back of the number to indicate that it is a duplicate. But still retain the original number, for what it is worth.

The value of a relational database in this form is in its capacity to generate statistics – correlations, trends, and the like – with a few clicks of a mouse. It is the possibilities emerging from this that interest Cassim Badsha. Deeply intrigued by historical interpretation, he is motivated by the promise of new ways of reading existing information. 'Statistics-wise we can now say so much more. And the amount of statistics that have come out of it, like how many people died of suicides or drownings and hangings and snake bites and things like that, it's all recorded there'. It is possible, he explains as another example, to hypothesise who were the worst employers among the many sugar estates using indentured workers because of the high numbers of recorded suicides and maltreatments. 'The data files ha[d] never been aggregated into one. Having done this, through this programme, and having stripped key areas and linked them to the total file, like doing searches by specific village or caste or ship etc. etc. has now given all the data greater meaning.'

> There is enough information now for the knowledge gained from the programme to be used by academics in tuition of a previously unknown understanding of what Indian indentured history is all about. Just those flat ships lists are pretty meaningless until you do this data mining. That is exactly the term used. Data has been *mined* to produce this information, which has been there for the last so many years but nobody dug up and found that it can be used extensively. Now it is all available and it can be used as a subject content at high schools, at universities, by economists, by sociologists.

Badsha would like his programme to be used more broadly, however. Like Brain and Bhana, though without the promise of academic prestige, his motives are civic and his labour unremunerated.[57] Like them, too, he believes that public knowledge of

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57 Upon learning about Badsha's project, Joy Brain in an e-mail dated 24 April 2013 raised some concerns over property rights related to the expenses she had covered for the initial films and the funding provided by other parties. However, amicable discussions resolved the matter when she learned that Badsha was not planning to profit from his effort and indeed shared many of her aims. He agreed to acknowledge her original contribution on the front page of his database.

previously invisible agents of history can inspire those who follow. The programme can be used by families to trace lineages and to learn names, but a clear new advantage his database offers is that even bits of information can now be filtered and correlated to provide clues that may lead to fresh discoveries. For example, 'Sometimes they might not know who their grandfather was, or great-great-grandfather was, but then somebody elderly says, "Yes, he did work at Greys Hospital." And then they can do a search by hospital, by employer category, and then search there and then they may find the name there.'

Badsha claims that 'with these ship lists, what Professor Brain and others achieved goes far beyond what has ever been attempted in the West Indies and Guyana. Not even in Fiji or in Mauritius. I don't think they come anywhere near what has been done here.' He raises an important point. At a roundtable at an academic conference on Indian indenture held in 2011 at the University of Mauritius, sponsored by the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund,[58] the prospect of creating a global immigration database was discussed. Goolam Vahed, who was part of that roundtable, noted that the surprising revelation of that meeting was just how little work has been done on digitising. To date, only in Suriname, where around 80 percent of the immigration registers have been captured in a project driven by the government,[59] has an effort been made to create databases. It may be the triumphal race nationalisms produced through South Africa politics that has been a unique factor driving the preservation of certain kinds of historical information.

Now fighting cancer, Badsha has felt a special urgency in getting the project completed.[60] His work to 'clean' the data in this relational database has been directed towards developing a web version, one that is sufficiently fast and efficient to interest users. In addition to speed, correlational capacities and efficiency, this bank of seemingly disembodied data will also bear the interpretative political stamp of its programmer. In addition to developing the programme's analytical categories, Badsha has chosen to feature an early photograph of the late anti-apartheid activist Fatima Meer on the front page. Although Meer did not hail from a family with an indentured background, Badsha waves away any concern that the photograph might be viewed as incongruous or misleading. When he first saw the image he was 'quite touched that there was a young lady, a young girl who was not even 18 years old in her traditional garb, standing on a lorry and making a political speech at Freedom Square.' For Badsha, the image suggests a shared history among people of Indian ancestry, which underlies his passion for this project. If, as has already been discussed, the programme becomes accessible through the Documentation Centre website, it would appear to confirm the continued ethnological interpretation of the ships lists as belonging ideologically to 'Indian' history, even as its new 'virtual' life opens up its potential range of users and usages. As suggested by Isaacman et al, digitising can

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58 This is an organisation established by that country's Department of Arts and Culture in 2001 to conduct research on indentured migration and preserve heritage sites connected to indenture.
59 The Suriname project has captured 27,000 out of its 34,000 immigrants. It is driven largely by twice-migrant Indo-Surinamese living in the Netherlands and in Mauritius.
60 Cassim Badsha passed away 5 October 2014.

'reformulate' approaches to the past, through contesting the 'ways in which existing collection organize our reading and understanding'.[61]

The development of the shipping lists as a data set, its online availability and the development of a more powerful tool to access information is contributing to the manner and nature of its uses. These days, it is the descendants of those whose names appear in the ships' lists who have become its most frequent consultants and beneficiaries. These developments introduce new conundrums of ethics and historical truth: newly accessible records may contradict oral tradition, be found to contain information painful to families, or prove to carry inaccuracies. In addition to a transforming national South African landscape, emerging Global Southern conditions and political relationships have opened up new opportunities for people of Indian ancestry. This has meant new uses and attributions of value for the ships' list records.

The Shipping Lists in the Twenty-First Century Global South

South Africans of Indian origin whose ancestors arrived in the Natal Colony as free migrants find that there exists no archival compendium of documents recording arrivals and subsequent movement – as there is in Cape Town – through which family histories can be explored.[62] Many records of free passage to Natal have been lost or destroyed. Most regard this as a misfortune as, these days, being able to trace family roots can hold emotional and material advantage for people in the greater Indian diaspora. For people of indentured family background, on the other hand, consulting the shipping lists can provide linkages to the subcontinent and the possibility of connecting with long-lost relatives or even for the recovery of property.

Another, related, reason to verify ancestry through the lists is applying for 'Overseas Citizen of India' or 'Person of Indian Origin' status, which can offer a range of benefits in India itself. Anil Maharaj, who applied for such a status in 2008 through use of these documents, was granted the PIO and, in 2010, successfully traced both his maternal and paternal families on a visit to India. Stories like his have become relatively common. Many Indian South Africans have successfully applied for either the OCI or the more limited but still desirable PIO certification.[63]

The Overseas Citizenship of India document was created in 2006. At the 2008 Bharatiya Pravasi Divas (Global Indian Diaspora), the Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh announced that professionals possessing OCI cards could now

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61 A. F. Isaacman, P. Lalu and T. I. Nygren, 'Digitization, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of Southern African Liberation Struggles: The Aluka Project'. *Africa Today*, 52, 2, 2005, 72, 55–77.

62 Yet, as Dhupelia-Mesthrie notes, in the case of the Cape there are also exclusions and silences. See 'The Form, the Permit, the Photograph', 659.

63 A PIO card allows for visa-free travel to and from India for 15 years. Further, if one's stay in India exceeds 180 days during a single visit it is necessary to register within 30 days of the expiry of 180 days with the foreigners registration officer. An OCI card, on the other hand, permits lifelong visa-free travel and unlimited stay. Citizens of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, Nepal, Afghanistan and Bhutan are excluded from this arrangement.

work in India. Plans to merge the PIO and OCI were announced in 2011 but have not materialised.[64]

The PIO and OCI are both offshoots of India's 1973 Foreign Exchange Regulation Act that created an official status for 'persons of Indian origin holding a passport of another country'. The Act allowed non-resident Indians to deposit money in Indian banks with competitive, guaranteed rates of interest, thus increasing the mass of foreign exchange and investment potential. In 1999, the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party created the PIO card, providing additional benefits to certain categories of non-resident Indians, and garnering diasporic political support. Politically, this was part of a wider 'effort by the right-wing Indian government to convert diverse, often wealthy populations of Indian origin into a permanently attached "expatriate nation", or a "global Indian family."'[65] The Indian government benefits greatly by providing status to the estimated 25 million Indians settled in various parts of the world. Substantial revenue in India comes from non-resident Indians. While the provision was intended to target people of Indian ancestry in wealthy nations of the North Atlantic basin, thousands of individuals of indentured background – including those in Natal – hold status as PIOs. While not endowing blanket citizenship rights, the documents provide for unlimited travel, property acquisition, residency and the opportunity for full citizenship within a number of years.

With such powerful incentives, genealogical verification has become a service industry in India. One website, which claims to be advertising on behalf of the Department of Overseas Indian Affairs in Delhi, offers a 'Tracing the Roots' programme to assist potentially eligible candidates with their applications. A website instructs applicants to fill out the provided forms. A fee of 20,000 rupees is requested, of which 6,000 rupees is paid out by the department to 'Indiroots', with whom it has apparently entered into a Memorandum of Understanding for this purpose.[66] The product for purchase is information:

> The details of the roots in India (where traceable) i.e. name of close surviving relatives, details of the place of origin of their forefathers (paternal and maternal side) and a possible family tree will be prepared by "Indiroots" and submitted to the Ministry approximately within a period of three months from the date of receipt of the application by it.

Applicants are warned of possible disappointment and that 'in case of any doubt about the genuineness of the "roots", the decision of the department, taken in

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64 A Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Non-Resident Indian Day) has been observed in India on 9 January each year since 2003 to celebrate the achievements of overseas Indians. The date commemorates the return of Gandhi to India on 9 January 1915. The event is sponsored by the Department of Overseas Indian Affairs, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the Confederation of Indian Industry. It is held in a different city each year. In addition to the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman awards being given, issues concerning the Indian diaspora are discussed.

65 T. B. Hansen and F. Stepputat (eds), *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 34.

66 'Guidelines for Tracing the Roots Programme', Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, http://moia.gov.in/services.aspx?ID1=315&id=m6&idp=333&mainid=23, accessed on 12 August 2013.

consultation with the applicant and "Indiroots" will be final and binding on "Indiroots." When successful, Indiroots is rewarded with the balance of 14,000 rupees. Applicants are, however, promised a reimbursement of 10,000 rupees in cases where evidence of ancestry proves unconvincing. These, and other such enterprises drawing business from all over the world, help contextualise the significance of the information that was written into the shipping lists of Natal from a century and a half ago. For South Africans of Indian indenture background who are searching for family origins, the preservation and public availability of such documents is crucial, with savings of time and cost an additional advantage for many individuals.

Conclusion

The story of the survival of this large volume of original documents known as the 'shipping lists', and of the paper and electronic versions of this information, is also the story of their changing social meaning in the context of the political, economic, and cultural transformation of the Indian diaspora in South Africa.

The Natal indenture ships' lists have never been politically neutral. A naïve way of reading their story emphasises their democratisation through increased access and widespread use by members of the general public for their own purposes and benefit. However, these documents and their uses continue to fall within a charged political context, both at a national level – within Indian and South African politics respectively – and in terms of the economy and identity of an emerging Global South.

Indenture was constructed as a status of exception, produced to meet the needs of post-slavery settler capital in the context of empire. In the shipping lists, we have the names of those whose contracts evidenced the 'special' nature of its terms for exploitation and political unfreedom. The linkages of imperial globalisation enabled this South–South mobility and zoning of space. Today, it may be important to consider ways in which the ships' lists are bracketed by different periods in the history of the Global South, where the creation of an 'exceptional' political status was legislated to serve economic interests by harnessing global linkages. A century and a half after the first registration numbers were assigned to the migrants aboard the *Truro*, the lists can be seen as once again mediating movement and special civic status between India and South Africa.

There are new regimes of power at work in trading partnerships between members of the BRICS configuration of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, with transnational flows of capital and labour and alliances being pursued by these states and championed by government leaders. The Indian government's awarding of status to its diaspora is part of this trend. Yet, within the institutions and discourses of the nation state, civic entitlements to resources and rights are relatively firmly fixed within national borders and boundaries. The double standards of states in relation to the differentiated legitimacy of transnational flows have sometimes created tension and even vitriolic conflict on the ground. The lag in civic status and identities, embedded at the national level, has incubated nationalisms in South Africa with a troubling, distinctly xenophobic, flair. The worrisome emergence of xenophobia in recent years,

including voices that attempt to (once again) construe 'Indians' as a foreign ('exceptional') element in the population,[67] should alert us to the dangers of fixing notions of belonging to narrowly nationalist forms of association and entitlement. It also reveals the politically charged and ongoing shifts of meaning carried by the shipping lists which, created as registers of foreignness and subordination by empire, have in new circumstances become tangible and symbolic links to transoceanic heritage for a very large number of South Africans of Indian ancestry.

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67   The violent campaigns against Indians in 1949 and 1985 have been well documented, as has the 2002 anti-Indian song by Mbongeni Ngema. Since May 2013 an organisation called the Mazibuye African Forum has been publicly agitating for an end to Indian rural land ownership in KwaZulu-Natal and their BEE status, and is calling on them to 'go back to India'.