



CELEBRATING

150 YEARS

OF INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Some thoughts by Professor Ashwin Desai





When Photographs Inspire...Writing the history of Indenture

In *Inside Indian Indenture* Goolam Vahed and I tried to tell this story from the inside – in other words, from the experiences of the indentured themselves; using the letters, complaints, petitions, marriages, court cases, cultural practices, and a myriad of other traces they left behind.

But for me the title had rather more of a gothic undertone. It was the photographs that pulled me into this project. Almost literally. I doubt I would ever have returned to tell the tale of yet more suffering, sadness and smashed resistance. As I grow older, I find it harder to be moved by anything; by history, by narrative, by pain. In reading history, one gets used to the endless cycles of persecution, momentary triumph, then disappointment, and betrayal as a new beast slouches towards Bethlehem to be cloned from the one that came before.

But there was something singular about these photographs that pierced the scab of my cynicism. There was something oddly personal about them.

Staring at the photographs when I first got them; looking backwards down the history of Indian indenture, it felt as if I was being beckoned, cajoled to look backwards down the racial history of indenture in this country. Those very first South African Indian faces were somehow also me and my mates and my family, just around the corner. What must have been five generations between us suddenly felt compressed into living memory. And although there was an element of fear and indignity in their gaze as the colonial bureaucracy processed them ahead of their transportation to some land-baron's farm, there were angles to their expressions that told a story deeper than the story of just oppression and exploitation. I think it was this aspect that made them come alive.

One of them was a surly rebel, whose spiky hair was far more untidy on his mug-shot than necessary. There was a joker in the bunch standing next to a schemer who would quite soon "make-a-plan" either to cut the overseer down to size, or shirk an afternoon away or roll a joint. There were some brow-beaten, bewildered types but there were also some almost-impossibly pure and frank in their presentation of themselves as units of labour. Then there were those who seemed to betray a veiled excitement.

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Most of all, the photographs communicated the beginnings of a legacy. These naïve, vulnerable young boys and girls are the fathers and mothers of the men and women we have become, and yet we are also their parents. I say this because I felt quite protective of them. I know this sounds a strange thing to say about dead people and not a proper attitude for a sociologist or historian to take. But, on reflection, I think it is proper to confess that I wanted to protect the people in the photographs from - today.

I wanted to protect their stories from being regarded as the truth about them. Demonstrating any essence, reducing them to any set of fashionable political theories.

As regarding the people in the photographs, I did not want their warts removed, their bodies gymmed up, the Indianness exoticized, their haloes polished and positioned. I did not want them to appear only as victims. I did not want their stories rendered through the reductionist lenses of “transformation” or “nation-building” fashionable at this time. I did not want to seal up their story with my own theoretical and professional obsessions.

But still I desperately wanted to give them names, to recount to my neighbours their amazing exploits, to take pride in them, to shake my head in shame, to nourish them, to make sure are OK. This obligation, I think begins with keeping their story as open as possible, by refusing to glamorize or essentialize them.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. When indentured labourers were brought here, men outnumbered women several times over. Traditions imagined in India were re-imagined in Africa. Men began paying dowry.

There are stories of fights and feuds and rivalries for affection that would put Bollywood to shame. In putting the stories together from fragments from archives and secondary material one gets a sense of the building of a life in Africa and the price that was paid. Listen to the story of Maistry.



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Maistry was a Telegu of the Dhobi (washerman) caste, born 'about 1870' in a small village near Cuddapah in Andhra (Madras). His parents had six sons; he was the 'one before the last.' Maistry would have been expected to contribute to the family economically, even though he had several older brothers. From Leo Kuper's interviews, Maistry emerges as a quiet man determined to build a life for himself and his family.



As a young man, he was employed as a dhobi by the Royal Battery in Andhra, and produced a reference to this effect on his arrival in Durban.

Before long, the Royal Battery moved off. 'Then there was nothing' for Maistry, who had a wife and baby to support. After discussing the situation with his wife and parents, they agreed that he should indenture for five years. He was 'under twenty' at the time. Maistry and his friends, eight young waiters and three cooks from the same village, made the voyage into indenture, embarking on a journey that changed their lives forever. It must have been an incredible passage for these young men, unsure of what awaited them across the kala pani.

Upon arrival in Durban, Maistry was immediately swept off to a local hotel, where he took over washing duties, working diligently for five eventless years. Whether it was the long separation from his loved ones, loneliness of the new country, or a heart inflamed by passion, Maistry took a second wife, a young colonial-born woman, to whom friends had introduced him. "Colonial-born" referred to children born in Natal to indentured or ex-indentured Indians. Did he still harbour thoughts of his wife and child in India? Leaving India to earn a living for his family must have been difficult, and yet the memory of the family he had pledged to support seemed to have faded, as Maistry registered his second marriage with the Protector. Maistry's story is not unique. Many wives and children were abandoned as the realities of separation in time and space took hold.

Separation between husbands and wives, or migrants and their families, could last for months, years, decades; sometimes they became permanent. This severance of contact affected the very fabric of family life. Married migrants who left their wives and children in India probably intended returning after five years; they may have been apprehensive about Natal, or worried about the financial cost of supporting wives and children who would not receive equal pay and rations; or perhaps they were concerned about raising children without the support of an

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extended family network. Given that financial hardship induced many into indenture in the first instance, the option of taking families along may not have existed for many migrants. The memory of his waiting family, it seems, was not enough to tempt Maistry to make the return journey. Perhaps deep down he longed to be reunited with them, but could not afford it. With a new life forming around him in Natal, Maistry remained at the hotel after indenture when his supervisor offered to continue his post. He worked at the hotel for another six years. By then he was in his early thirties, thousands of miles away from the life he had begun as a young man, with another woman at his side, new friends, and without his extended family.

When the First World War broke out, Maistry, like many of his fellow countrymen, joined the thousand-odd Indian stretcher-bearers who served the British Raj under Albert Christopher in East Africa. It was gruelling work, largely invisible yet essential. The reports that filtered back from East Africa were glowing in their praise of the likes of Maistry. The South African cricket test wicketkeeper, T.A. Ward found the hospital 'very ably' run by Indians who carried out their duty in a 'conscientious manner.' Ward observed that 'they did everything in their power to make the patient comfortable,' and he felt strongly that their 'patriotism should not go unrewarded.'

Col. J.H. Whitehead wrote that 'the Indian community will be glad to hear that they were not only most courageous in action but did all the work asked of them in a quick, intelligent and willing manner.' Lt. Col. J. De Vos wrote that 'they have worthily upheld the traditions of the fighting stock they are descended from in India. It is an honour to have been associated with such men in the field.' Albert Christopher, a colonial-born Indian, was pleased that 'the European South Africans are part of us as we are of them and the best of feelings prevails all-round. And this we hope is but the bright beginnings of a happy future for all the children of the South African soil.' Such hopes would prove futile. Ironically, at the time that Kuper was interviewing Maistry, the National Party was busy codifying racist practices into the system of apartheid.



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When Maistry returned from the war in 1916, he joined Addington hospital as a dhobi. He eventually rose through the limited ranks to become head laundryman. By now he had fathered two children with his second wife. After twenty-eight years at Addington, Maistry's health was declining and he was put on pension. In 1947, with almost forty years of work in South Africa under his belt, and two grown-up children, Maistry decided to return to his homeland. Could the fact that India was on the edge of independence have beckoned him? 'I had half a mind to settle in India,' he told Hilda Kuper, as he had always maintained that he would eventually return to die in the land of his birth. Maistry was no different from the thousands of migrants who struck up an imaginary relation to the myth of return. Yet the romantic ideal of what awaited him when he crossed the kala pani was shattered. Maistry was bitterly disappointed. Everything was different. The village and villagers had moved on without him. His first wife was dead. So were most of his closest friends and many of his relatives. The infant daughter he had left behind was married. Awkwardly, they were reunited, but she barely remembered him. Only a few distant kin remained. Disillusioned and heartbroken, Maistry returned to Durban to live with his two children. His daughter was married, his son was a clerk. A life lived so far away had stolen from him his sense of place, of "home".

And then there is the story of Behron who was seen coupling with a favourite cow over a period of many days and Ramsingh who was caught similarly treating a horse. And as horrible and unromantic a picture as this may conjure up, I think telling these stories says something more poignant about the pent up drives and longings in human beings to find some sexual contact in this world, no matter the hurdles in the way. Imagine this being your world. Loveless. Alien. Cut-off. A Robinson Crusoe with a field of lilies before you. What could be more human than inventing a sexuality that allows you to take those flowers to bed?

At one instant galleons sailed half way across the world disgorging dirt-poor villagers, sold down the river by fellow Indians, with their notions of caste and cosmos, into a continent with a totally different set of social relations. However, the same oppressor, upon whose plunder the sun never set, was at the same instant busy entrenching itself on the African shores to which these indentured



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Indians were brought. And this settlement by the British was at the expense of a different tribe of villagers, the Zulu people. The interaction between Indian, Zulu, and white colonist positively vibrates with significance during the time of indenture - as a new set of social relations are forged in complex struggles, negotiations, agreements and mistakes.

In tracing the subsequent journey of indenture we tell a truly South African story.

