

Indians in South Africa – A Brief History *By Rita Abraham*

Indian South Africans are people of Indian descent living in South Africa, the majority living in and around the city of Durban, making it the largest 'Indian' city outside India. The modern South African Indian community is largely descended from Indians who arrived in South Africa from 1860 onwards.

The first ships arrived with 342 Indian indentured labourers in November 1860, having left Madras and Calcutta the previous month. The voyage, in a sailing ship or paddle-steamer in those days, took an average of 45 days from Madras and 54 days from Calcutta, but a few decades later when steamers were used, the journey was considerably shorter and 600 passengers could be transported in comparison with the 300 or 350 that the *Truro*, *Belvidere*, *Lord George Bentinck* and *Spirit of Trade* carried in 1860.

Year 2017 marks the 157th anniversary of arrival of the first indentured Indians, an event with far-reaching results for the Colony of Natal and the birth of this community in South Africa. South Africans of Indian origin comprise a heterogeneous community distinguished by different origins, languages, and religious beliefs. The descendants of Indian Indentured labourers are now over 1,500,000 in South Africa and have progressed tremendously in all segments of society.

The indentured laborers tended to speak Tamil, Telugu and Hindi, and the majority were Hindu with Christians and Muslims among them. English is the first language of most Indian South Africans. Minority of the older people, still speak their mother tongue, such as Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Gujarati, Hindi and others as a first language or second language. Most young people do not speak any other languages, besides English and the compulsory second language taught at school, such as Afrikaans or Zulu. Many South African Indians still understand a variety of Indian languages to varying extents, often as a result of promotion by cultural organisations, or the influence of Bollywood. Recent immigrants have maintained fluency in Urdu, Hindi and Gujarati.

The coming into being of the Union of South Africa represented the culmination of systematic and institutional racial oppression in our country. It was a historical stage that anticipated the advent of a grand Apartheid 38 years later. In 1961, Indians were officially recognised as permanent part of the South African population. An incident of history, sinister in its imperial intentions, brought a sizeable number of people of Indian origins to our shores. Although the majority was indentured labourers, they also included traders, hawkers, and other types. These people are today as South African as any other citizen of our country.

This community of Indians came to South Africa as workers. However, their working conditions fell outside the conventional definition of workers. Inhumane and severely exploitative, their working conditions were reminiscent of slavery than paid labour. They decided, however, to make South Africa their home and integrated well into their newly found country with its emergent tapestry of cultures.

From early times, Indians and Africans worked together in the plantations and as household servants, as borne out in records and photographs taken in the 19th and early 20th century. And though Indians and Africans were different from each other in many ways, they also learned from each other.

Cultural cross-pollination took place, further bringing the two peoples together in some important respects. This is borne out in language: Both peoples have over time borrowed culinary words from each other, denoting mutual influence on cultural expressions.

Yet, it would be a historic misrepresentation to pretend that the relations between Africans and the Indian community have always been cordial. Political conditions created by Apartheid were consciously designed to divide and rule. Inter-ethnic and racial conflicts and feuds were thus not only the logical outcrop of the system but also the design of Apartheid, which was racially hierarchical.

This racial hierarchy saw the white people at the apex, followed by Indians, then Coloureds, and Africans at the bottom. In this racial matrix, Indians could have easily taken advantage of their relatively better economic conditions and looked the other way; instead they consciously cast their lot with fellow Africans.

It also entrenched the enduring values of indivisible humanity among the oppressed, thus practically rendering this racial hierarchy irrelevant. Through the vehicle of the African National Congress (ANC), a liberation movement alive to the ideals of a non-racial society early on in its life, the principles of unity have always been held aloft. Through this vehicle, the values and principles of a united, non-racial, non-sexist, just and democratic South Africa have historically held sway. Leading activists, revolutionaries and visionaries from the ranks of the Indian communities have historically been drawn to this humanist vision, and have, accordingly, played a critical role in the struggle for a non-racial society.

Above all, the political contribution of Indians in South Africa has been immense. The formation of the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses (as well as the African People's Organisation), which predates the formation of the ANC, and the political activities of these organisations under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Abdullah Abdurhaman, respectively, were the seeds not only of opposition to racism, but also contributed to anti-colonial activity.

We cannot realistically reflect on the historical role of the Indian community in South Africa without looking at the role Mahatma Gandhi played in laying the foundations for resistance against colonial oppression. He was not an indentured worker nor was he a trader in pursuit of new opportunities.

Gandhi came to South Africa from Britain, where he had just qualified as a barrister, to work on his first case involving a dispute between two Indian traders. Such were the conditions here that he stayed on for almost twenty years to serve the Indian community. We all know that fateful night in which Gandhi decided to dedicate his life to fighting oppression when he was thrown off a train at Pietermaritzburg because of the colour of his skin. He then developed his philosophy of fighting oppression, but not by violent means. He felt that it was a moral duty to overcome unjust rule. But it was also one's duty to ensure that one's own behaviour was beyond reproach. Gandhi called this "Satyagraha" or "firmness in truth/ soul force"; stressing that his philosophy involved much more than "passive resistance". At the same time that one was fighting an unjust enemy one should also remove injustices from one's own society.

Gandhi's views on the upliftment of all people and castes, of the equal treatment of women and of building bridges between peoples and religions remain relevant to us today. He above all practiced what he preached.

Of course, individuals do not make history, critical though their roles may have been in leading to change. Accordingly, Gandhi was not an island unto himself; his achievements also lie with those that supported him, ordinary working class Indians as well as the trading classes. And when he left there were others to continue his good work. Among these were leaders such as Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker, Nana Sita, Dr Goonum, Ela Gandhi (his granddaughter), Billy Nair, Maulvi Cachalia, Ayesha Bibi Dawood, Farouk Meer, Mewa Ramgobin, Ahmed Kathrada and many others. There were those who joined *Umkhonto we Sizwe* like Mac Maharaj and Laloo Chiba, and still others incarcerated on Robben Island for their roles like Indres Naidoo.

The Indian community, as with all other South Africans with the vision of a truly non-racial future, can be proud of those who were chosen to serve in President Mandela's first cabinet: the likes of Dullah Omar, Jay Naidoo, the Pahad brothers, Kader Asmal and others. It is a historical fact that the largest section of the Indian community have, intellectually and politically, always sided with the cause of national liberation. They readily embraced the cause of national unity, democracy, non-racialism, non-sexism, justice and equality.

As of today, we have overcome an unjust political order; democracy and freedom of association are our hard-earned rights. We have learnt enough historical lessons to know that just as racism was a conscious effort at social engineering; it can equally be defeated by conscious efforts to wipe it off our system of thought. Wiping off racism from our thinking, as already mentioned, goes hand in hand with commensurate improvement in our economic conditions.

Nelson Mandela's leadership, legacy and vision, to which we have all gravitated, should be actively used to unite people around the world and teach our younger generations to learn to love one another as brothers and sisters irrespective of color and race. This is the legacy we should seek to associate ourselves with, fully aware that when history makes judgment, we should not be faulted on the key areas of our responsibility, such as building non-racialism, about which so many of us have struggled for so long.

Rita Abraham is an ardent advocate of equal justice and prominent community advocate among Indians in South Africa, recipient of several awards and citations for outstanding community service. Convener and speaker at conferences in South Africa and internationally. Founded the South African Women's Forte, is Executive Member of Topoi South Africa and a patron of the performing arts; chair of GOPIO Women's Council; chairperson of Indian Diaspora Women's Forum. Worked to restore the KwaZulu-Natal Children's Hospital. .

