

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

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Abstract

In every British colony that received indentured workers from India, officials recorded personal and social details for identifying the arriving migrants. In the colony of Natal, just over 152,000 migrants were inscribed into such lists between 1860 and 1911. This article traces the history of this set of documents from their mid-19th century origins as registers of imperial labour control to their 21st century digitization 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 PIO or OCI statuses, 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.

Keywords: Indian Indenture, Print Culture, South Africa, Indian Diaspora, Archive.

In 2008, Anil Maharaj of Pietermaritzburg decided to apply for 'Overseas Citizen of India' (OCI) status from the Indian Consulate in Durban. Offered by the Indian government to eligible individuals who form part of the global diaspora, an OCI or PIO ('Person of Indian Origin') 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. These 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.

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 indentured number 45093, Gajadhur Ramadhin from Uttar Pradesh, 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 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 archival director Rishin Singh is authorized to verify its accuracy. As 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 pages from left to right. Under column headings—including 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 just over 152,000 Indians to Port Natal between 1860-1911. Sixty-two of these volumes document the arrival of vessels from Madras and 29 are of ships from Calcutta.

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, and in global 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 and uses. Crafted as an institutional method delimiting the terms of indentured settlement, influx regulation and social control by the colonial government in collaboration with employers, these records have over time been utilized for different purposes by differently interested actors. These changes are contextual, related to 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-20th 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 digitized 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 ships’ lists are bracketed by very different periods in the history of the global south, in which the creation of an ‘exceptional’ political

status was legislated to serve economic interests by harnessing global 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 conceptualization as a system of ‘free’ labour was constructed through its bureaucratic administration, the provision of specialized personnel and offices, the recruitment of women to satisfy prescribed gender ratios, and the endowment of certain rights and recourse to law.¹ While historians have debated the de facto nature of indentured status in relation to the abuse and inhumane conditions routinely experienced by those laboring in the colonies², 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.³

Under the terms of Act XV of 1842, the British Government established the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission to institutionalize 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 to Mauritius, indentured workers functioned to fill the post-slavery labour vacuum 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 into Natal. 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 that

¹ See Essop–Sheik, Nafisa (2005) *Labouring Under the Law: Gender and the Legal Administration of Indian Immigrants under Indenture in Colonial Natal, 1860-1907*. Unpublished MA Thesis, History, University of KwaZulu-Natal, p20.

² See Hugh Tinker (1974) *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*. London: Oxford University Press; Jo Beall, Jo (1990) ‘Women under indentured labour in colonial Natal, 1860-1911’ in Cheryl Walker (ed.) *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*. Cape Town: David Philip; Carter, Marina (1996) *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University Press.

³ See Kale, Madhuri (1998) *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery and Indian Indentured Labour Migration in the British Caribbean*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.

[t]he 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...⁴

In addition, as specified by Law 13, Section 14, the protector of immigrants was to keep a ‘separate register’ and to issue a ‘ticket of registration’ to each immigrant, with thirteen informational categories corresponding to those of the ship registers. A ticket issued would indicate 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.

The reproduction of these data sets were a means of ensuring both the welfare and the continued tracking of migrants through their embarkation and disembarkation on contracted vessels, and between port agents, protectors and employers. The Protector’s office would also record births and deaths among migrants, money earned, the amount that they saved, diseases contracted, letters that they may have received or sent, and other details considered 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 that ‘Your Agent here will of course furnish the officer appointed as Protector of Immigrants at the port of disembarkation with full particulars regarding them’.⁵ 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 of unlawful exploitation and abuse by returnees to India prompted an official investigation of conditions in Natal. The so-called Coolie Commission of 1872 identified offenses 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 1860-1911, over 152,000 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

⁴ Law No 14, published in Natal Government Gazette 12 July 1859. Reprinted in Meer, Y.S. (1980) *Documents of Indentured Labour: Natal 1851-1917*. Durban: Unity Publications, p 41-42.

⁵ C.S.O. 1152 of 1860, published in *Ibid*, p 53.

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 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 20th 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.⁶ Meanwhile, the 1910 Act of Union signaled 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 until that office was closed down in 1962.

Vijay Mishra has observed that the 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’.⁷ 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. Historians would look to these documents as sources of information in the second half of the 20th century. But the registers themselves also effected change. For example, the capture of names and fathers’ names into official lists transformed the family designations of many immigrants, as fathers’ names now came to serve as fixed surnames.

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

Despite the ending of Indenture, the Office of the Protector remained active into the second half of the 20th 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 One, 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.

South African Indians pushed for a round table conference, which was held in Cape Town. The so-called 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 Africa-born ‘Indians’ as foreigners, an idea that continued to

6 See David Northrup (1995) *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 144-147.

7 Mishra, Vijay (2007) *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora. Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary*. London: Routledge, 2007, p 34.

dominate state thinking. Meanwhile, the presence of an Indian Agent General until 1946⁸ meant that links to India, as well as cultural identification and dependency 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 distinctive population and to engage political struggle separately from other South Africans.⁹

The Sauer Commission of 1946 officially designated South African inhabitants of Indian Ancestry as 'foreigners' (despite the reality that most had been born locally¹⁰) and concerted policies to curtail further immigration from India were enacted.¹¹ 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 Interior J. de Klerk announced in Parliament that Asiatics would be accepted as South Africa's 'permanent responsibility,' abandoning attempts to repatriate them. In August, Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd announced the establishment of a Department of Indian Affairs. The new Department would now take over the responsibilities of the existing office of the Protector of Indian Immigrants who, to that point, had registered birth, marriages, and divorces, took charge of the estates of the dead, oversaw payment of pensions and disability grants on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare and Pension, and issued of identity documents and passports from the Department of Interior.¹² The shipping lists were now moved to the offices of the Department of Indian Affairs.

It was in 1961, also, that a university for Indians was founded, housed temporarily at Salisbury Island but moved in 1972 to a new and modern campus in Chiltern Hills: the University of Durban-Westville (UDW). The 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

⁸ In view of impending segregation legislation, in May 1946 the Indian government asked its High Commission in South Africa, Ramrao Deshmukh, 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 official closed in 1954.

⁹ See Uma Mesthrie, 'From Sastri to Deshmukh: A Study of the Role of the Indian government's Representatives in South Africa 1927 to 1946,' (Ph.D, University of Natal, 1987).

¹⁰ 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 (colonial-born). In addition, there were 30,680 'passenger' Indians (Indian and Natal born).

¹¹ 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.

¹² See 'The Department of Indian Affairs. An Historical Overview,' *Fiat Lux*, vol. 9, no. 10 (December 1974): 24-27.

apartheid's commitment 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.¹³ The new Centre divided opinion, with Progressive members of the Indian public opposing a compartmentalized history, while others seeing an opportunity to grow a distinctive collection in support of UDW's unique educational mandate. CG Henning, who arrived from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), and was 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.¹⁴

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 an information specialist at the Teachers Training College of Edgewood (just outside of Durban), joined the history department at UDW.¹⁵ While conducting academic research into 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 related to 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. It asked some basic questions about numbers and origins that had been skirted in previous scholarship. As she explained her process

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 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

¹³Henning, C.G (1985) 'The Concept of Documentation Centres and their value to the student,' Bulletin. Academic Staff, University of Durban-Westville, 6.3; 49-61, p.57

¹⁴ Henning, C.G. (1993) *The Indentured Indian in Natal, 1860-1917*. New Delhi: Promilla, p xi.

¹⁵ Brain, born in 1926, did a librarian's course at Wits and worked at the Johannesburg library. After her marriage, she moved to Cape Town where she worked at the South African library. She emigrated to Australia in 1958 but returned in 1965 and did her BA, BA (Hons), MA, and PhD through UNISA. She worked at the Edgewood Library from 1970 until she joined UD-W in July 1976. Her doctoral dissertation, 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 dissertation.

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.¹⁶

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

Brain set about looking for these lists in 1978, which proved a confusing endeavour. Brain’s expressions of interest in seeing 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 Bond.’ 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 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 they eventually they said ‘yes we know where they are. They are transferred to the department of Indian whatever it is’.¹⁷

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.’¹⁸ Yet, in fact, the state of these archives, and the physical conditions of the documents themselves, 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 realized 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 from their ‘home’¹⁹. Brain intended to do this 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

¹⁶ Brain, JB (1983) *Christian Indians in Natal 1860-1911*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise specified, Brain’s own account is taken from an interview with the authors on 28 May 2013 (telephonic) and 15 April 2013 (Durban).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, xi, 1983.

¹⁹ Brain, JB. (2003) ‘Computerisation of the Indian Shipping Lists,’ Explanation that accompanied the version of the Shipping Lists published as a CD.

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'.²⁰ 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 team did 'the best we could under the circumstances'.

Brain used the shipping lists to identify Christian Indians for her book and was able to correct previous 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 ships' 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.²¹ 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.'²²

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.²³ 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 was associated with this history, explaining why so many of her

²⁰ Ibid, 2003.

²¹ 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* (1984) Vol 12, p34. 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 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 contact via Facebook.

²² Brain, 1983, p 246.

²³ Brain, JB (1985) "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, pp. 199-234.

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 instill pride in heritage, knowledge of humble family origins was viewed as an important moral 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 and 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 the concern about the paucity of historical knowledge among the descendants of indentured Indian migrants. Born in Gujarat, Bhana had moved with his parents to South Africa as a child in the 1940s. He earned degrees in history from the University of the Witwatersrand and 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 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' University of Durban-Westville. He found, to his surprise, that the 'indentured experience had remained virtually hidden and I made it my primary goal to focus on them. I made research of the indentured Indians the center of my inaugural address [as professor].'

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 labeled 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 incorporated any information compiled subsequently to arrival, obtained from documents kept by the Protector's office such as employers' registers, death certificates, dates of return to India, and so on.

The data was entered by assistants who were hired for this project on a fulltime basis. 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.' According to Brain, 'it was a slow and exacting occupation and errors inevitably slipped in.'²⁴ By 1986, when funding for the project ran out, 95,382 indentured migrant entries had been captured.

The information was fed into the Hewlett Packard 1000, with the help of Mike Laidlaw of the Computer Science Department, who designed a programme for this purpose. It soon became apparent that the HP 1000 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 Fijian scholar Brij V Lal, a grandson of indentured migrants²⁵. 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

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.

Bhana's study, published in 1991,²⁶ 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 specialized knowledge that characterized computer programming at that time. For example,

[t]he 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

²⁴ Brain, 2003.

²⁵ Lal, Brij V. (1983) *Girmityas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*. Canberra: Journal of Pacific History.

²⁶ Bhana, S. (1991) *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal 1860-1902*. New Delhi: Promilla & Co.

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.²⁷

During the period in which Brain and Bhana were intent on rendering the complete set of ships' list volumes into useable 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),²⁸ a unit run by Fatima Meer who had joined the Sociology department of the University of Natal in 1956, *Documents* had a different aim than the publications produced at UDW. As a convicted and banned ANC activist, Fatima Meer's own contribution and authorship could not at this time be recognized yet her political project is plain. Its Preface, attributed to Advocate T.L. (Thembile Lewis) Skweyiya, who was the IBR's chairman of the Board, 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.

Documents 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 also are six shipping lists: the *Truro* (1860), the *Belevedera* (1860), the *Scindian* (1863), the *Saxon* (1864), the

²⁷ Bhana, S. (1987) X

²⁸ The IBR was established by Fatima Meer in 1972 and published much of her work as an academic and activist. *Documents* was a project initiated by Fatima Meer even though her name does not appear on the list of "authors" as she was banned. Instead, on the front cover are listed YS 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 (Meer) Marie did research at the Pietermaritzburg Archives in 1969, her matric year; Farida Pochee did research at the Pmb. Archives in 1978.

Blenheim (1874) and the *S.S. Umlazi* (1911).²⁹ Shereen Motala worked to compile some of these lists at the Department of Indian Affairs in early 1979. But that work, and the problem of access, had been engaged even earlier by Sara Pochee who, in 1972, had 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. ‘It took a helluva long time’, recalls Pochee.³⁰

Today, a later generation of UDW-trained historians have continued to draw upon the shipping lists as an important primary source for scholarship on the Indian diaspora. As one example, Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai’s recent book *Inside Indian Indenture* accessed the lists for names and other details of 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.³¹

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 digital 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. Digitization 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 Ship’s Lists on CD-Rom

Following Surendra Bhana’s departure in 1987, Joy Brain secured additional funding from the Human Science Research Council to complete the task of capturing and organizing 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 19th century, it was often difficult to locate towns and villages and Singh, through her knowledge of India and family contacts in that country and through making use of the index of Time Atlas and Gazetteers,³²

²⁹ 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 materialize, and the *Umlazi* was added to bring “closure”.

³⁰ Interview, Sara Pochee telephonic, August 2013. *Documents* thanks I. Nethraj, W. Padayachee, and JJD Moller of the Department of Indian Affairs for allowing the IBR to copy some of the documents. By the time Shereen Motala got to the ship’s lists five years later, she was permitted to copy the documents.

³¹ Desai, Ashwin and Goolam Vahed (2010) *Inside Indian Indenture. A South African Story, 1860-1914*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

³² 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.

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 computerized indexes of indentured passenger data against the original shipping list registers. The project would take just over a decade to complete, as she and a team of volunteers and retired scholars would also continue to add to the shipping data from other documentary sources, including Estate Registers.

The checking process was facilitated by yet another archival relocation of the original volumes of the lists in the early 1990s. With apartheid institutions crumbling, the now-defunct Department of Indian Affairs office space was transitioned back into the custody of Home Affairs office, located at the then Oswald Pirow Building on Smith Street. The removal of the shipping documents from the Home Affairs premises, to be housed at what was then known as the Durban Intermediate Archives Depot in De Mazenod Road, Greyville, was an initiative and effort undertaken several key individuals. Archivist Andrea Luxton had been hired in 1991, becoming acting head a year later. According to Luxton, ‘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!’³³ 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 would join the effort to transport the registers to more secure storage. Rishin 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. They were actually ... from what I gathered it 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’ because they obviously didn’t realise the value of the record at the time.... The word we used was we ‘rescued’ these documents, or else they would not be with us today.³⁴

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 themselves: they were so significant that subjecting them to appraisal would just have been an exercise in futility as they would all have been declared

³³ Luxton, A. Email correspondence, 17 May.

³⁴ Singh, R. interview, 6 May 2013.

permanently valuable anyway.’ 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] deteriorating 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 utilize the records, the registers were photocopied and the copies were made available to researchers.

Still, it was the original 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 Archival Repository with Tom Bennett, a retired Professor of Engineering, and other retired academics.³⁵ The project was a companionable occasion as well as a scholarly one. Rishin Singh recalls that Depot 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 themselves. 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.³⁶

Other individuals, also, were drawn into the work on the lists. Two young 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

³⁵ 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 who assisted in the project, 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 organize ‘systematically the huge amount of material that we had to get through. I was used to working in that.’

³⁶ 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.’

as a spiritual mission, to save souls through retrospective baptism over names.³⁷

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.³⁸

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 over 152,000 indentured passengers, brought together from other archival sources in addition to the original shipping lists data, was now in a format that fits easily into a coat pocket.

The completion of the CD, which would be publically archived or sold at cost to members of the general public, was met with enthusiasm amongst provincial governmental leaders tasked with showcasing goodwill in the new 'rainbow nation'. A new, post-apartheid interest in cultural heritage and 'roots' had enthusiasm amongst many South Africans of Indian ancestry, but simultaneously fuelled a growing unease regarding the vulnerability of their status as a 'minority group'. Official political discourse ten years after transition praised the cultural pluralism of South Africa's national make-up and ruling party politicians were keen to counter alarmist calls—such as those of Amichand Rajbansi of the Minority Front Party—for 'the Indian community' to band defensively together.

According to the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Archives Act No 5 (Section 5(2)) of 2000, researchers making use of Archival records were requested to donate a copy of any published work to the archives. More than merely accepting a donation of the CD, however, Durban Repository archivist

³⁷ 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 digitize 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 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 baptized.

³⁸ Brain, 2003.

Rishin Singh, along with the Provincial Archivist, Mrs S.J. McGoya, perceived an opportunity to draw public attention to the workings and importance of the archives. Describing the Shipping List compilation 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 Ministry of Education and Culture at a ‘Diversity Celebration’ to take place on 16 November, a date commemorating the arrival of the *Truro*.³⁹

The Festivities of this November 2003 event were held at the Durban harbour, Point Waterfront, the ‘Amanzi Shed’ and special guests included archivists as well as ‘heritage practitioners, local councilors, genealogists, members of the diplomatic core... and other stakeholders’. Approximately 20 ‘communities’⁴⁰ from various parts of the province, were invited to participate in a multicultural music, song and dance festival showcasing the respective cultures with culinary demonstrations and flea market booths adding to the exchanges on offer. According to Rishin Singh around 6,000 people participated. The revelries were crowned by a reenactment of the 1860 arrival of the indentured by ship. Around 4:00 pm in the afternoon the *Makana*—a boat belonging to the harbor—carrying Minister of Education and Culture, 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.⁴¹

Joy Brain 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.⁴²

³⁹ Undated memo to B. Mthanzi, Acting Deputy CEO, of the Heritage Celebration from SJ McGoya, Provincial Archivist, KZN Archives.

⁴⁰ An annexure specified these ‘communities’ further, listing the following: Chinese, Italian, French, British, Jewish, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Mauritian, Japanese, San, Pakistani, Americans, Indian, Zulu, Xhosa and Greeks.

⁴¹ Telephonic interview, 12 July 2013.

⁴² According to 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.’

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 and the Indian Documentation Centre was reborn as the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre, and subsequently became The Documentation Centre. The data compiled onto 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 onto a ‘Trace your roots’ link to a page authored by K. Chetty, the Centre’s 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 of 2010, when—at a cricket test match between India and South Africa at the Kingsmead Cricket grounds—he was introduced to historian Goolam Vahed:

I asked Goolam about articles which appeared in *The Leader* many, many years ago called “I remember” by, purportedly written by A.C Meer but by 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.⁴³

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 6099 pages to work through the horizontal entries. They could provide viewers who know 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 list 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 (ICL). Around 1974, the company gave some of its South African Indian employees an opportunity to learn Cobal programming. Badsha demonstrated an aptitude for this work and subsequently 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.

Since beginning the project three years ago, 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

⁴³ Badsha, C. Interview, date. Pietermaritzburg.

the extension of the product.’ The process also has 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 hypothesize 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, his motives are civic and his labour unremunerated.⁴⁴ Like them, too, he believes that public knowledge of 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 provide clues that may lead to findings. 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

⁴⁴ Upon learning about Badsha’s project, in an e-mail dated 24 April 2013 Joy Brain raised some concerns over issues of 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.

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 go 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, the prospect of creating a global immigration database was discussed. The surprising revelation of that meeting was in just how little work has been done on digitization. To date, only in Suriname, which has captured 80 percent of its 34,000 migrants, and in Mauritius, where around 60 percent of the immigration registers have been captured, has an effort been made to create databases.⁴⁵ It may be the valorization of cultural identities and 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’s feels a special urgency in getting the project completed and his work to “clean” his database programme is directed at the development a web version, one that is sufficiently fast and efficient to interest users. Along with speed and efficiency, this bank of seemingly disembodied data will also bear the interpretative stamp of its author. In addition to developing its 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 ‘I 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. In keeping with this identitarian line of historical interpretation, discussions have already been held to put the programme on the website of the Documentation Centre, confirming the legitimacy of its custodianship of Indian historical information.

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. In addition to a transforming national South African landscape, new global southern conditions and political relations have opened up new opportunities for people of Indian ancestry and have created new uses and values for the ships’ list records.

⁴⁵ Goolam Vahed attended this roundtable and conference and has put Badsha in touch with its organisers.

The Shipping Lists in the 21st Century Global South

South Africans of Indian origin whose ancestors arrived as free migrants find that there exists no compendium of shipping lists preserved in public archives that can confirm their histories of family origins and migration. Many records of free passage have been lost or destroyed. This is unfortunate for them as these days, being able to trace family roots can hold emotional and material advantage for people of the Indian diaspora. For people of indentured family background, on the other hand, consultation of the shipping lists can provide linkages to the subcontinent, 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 for the purposes of applying for ‘Overseas Citizen of India’ (OCI) or ‘Person of Indian Origin’ (PIO) status, which can offer a range of benefits in India itself.

Anil Maharaj, who applied for OCI status in 2008 through use of these documents was granted the OCI and, in 2010, successfully traced both his maternal and paternal families on a visit to India. His story has become relatively common. Many⁴⁶ Indian South Africans have successfully applied for either the OCI, or the more limited but still desirable PIO certification.⁴⁷

The Indian government benefits greatly from its provision of status to the estimated 25 million Indians settled in various parts of the world. 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 NRIs 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.”⁴⁸ The OCI document was created in 2006. At the 2008 Bharatiya Pravasi Divas (Global Indian Diaspora), Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced that professionals possessing Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards could now work in India. Plans to merge the PIO and OCI were announced in 2011 but have

⁴⁶ Attempts to get the exact number have thus far proved unsuccessful.

⁴⁷ A PIO card allows for visa-free travel to and from India from 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.

⁴⁸ Hansen, T and Stepputat, F. 2005. (eds), *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 34.

not materialised.⁴⁹

Estimates are that one quarter of all 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 proclaims to be advertising on behalf of the Ministry 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 thousand are paid out by the Ministry to ‘Indiroots’ with whom it has apparently entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for this purpose.⁵⁰ The product up 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 Ministry, taken in 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 contextualize 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.

⁴⁹ 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 Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). 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.

⁵⁰ ‘Guidelines for Tracing the Roots Programme,’ Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, From <http://moia.gov.in/services.aspx?ID1=315&id=m6&idp=333&mainid=23>. Accessed on 12 August 2013.

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 that now exist in various forms, 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 emphasizes their democratization through increased access and widespread use by members of the general public for their own purpose 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 globalization enabled this ‘south-south’ mobility and zoning of space.⁵¹ One hundred and fifty years later, it may be useful to consider ways in which the ships’ lists are bracketed by different periods in the history of the global south in which 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, transnational flows of capital and labour and alliances are being pursued by respective states and championed by government leaders. The awarding of status to its diaspora by the Indian government is part of this trend. Yet, within the institutions and discourses of the nation-state, civic entitlements to resources and rights are relatively fixed within national borders and boundaries. The double standards of states in relation to the legitimacy of transnational flows create problems on the ground. The lag in civic status and identities which is embedded at the national level has incubated nationalisms in South Africa with a distinctly xenophobic flair. The worrisome emergence of xenophobia in recent years, including voices that attempt to once again construe ‘Indians’ as a foreign element in the population,⁵² should alert us to the dangers of fixing notions of belonging to nationalist forms of

⁵¹ Here we might flag possibilities for bringing the theoretical arguments of others to bear on the phenomenon of indenture. See Agumben, G [citations], Rajagopal, A [citation] and Nussbaum, M [Frontiers of Justice]

⁵² The Afro-Indian riots of 1949 and 1985 have been well documented; as has the 2002 anti-Indian song by Mbongeni Ngema. Since May 2013, an organisation called the Mayibuye 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.’

entitlement. There is some danger that the shipping lists may come to signify—if that xenophobic populism takes root—a racialized suspicion or envy of access to bi-continental identifications and resources. As a symbol of ‘roots’ and heritage, the shipping lists are not without dangers, even though the archive has shifted its locus from state to civic beneficiaries.

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