

Indian Immigrants in South Africa

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Abstract: *This Article tries to trace the historical development of Indian indentured labour in South Africa. Indian immigration to South Africa began in 1860s. But The large scale emigration of Indian labourers from India to various parts of world began in 1834, beginning with Mauritius and the West Indian Colonies, However, as this period virtually coincided with or followed closely the abolition of slavery, the attitude of British and other plantation owners throughout the world remained relatively unchanged towards this evil, and in fact, there was a little difference between their new charges and their former slaves. The history of Indian diaspora in South Africa is a history sufferings of Indian indentured labour.*

Keywords: Indian immigration to South Africa

I. INTRODUCTION

It started back in 1860s when Indians first went to South Africa as indentured labourers. Between 1860s and 1911 1,52,184 indentured migrants from India, arrived in Natal colony. Contrary to this common belief that Indians had first gone to South Africa as indentured labourers in 1860, in fact they had already arrived there much earlier in 1652. Dutch merchants returning home from their voyage to India, and the East Indies had taken Indians to the then Dutch Cape Colony and sold them as slaves to the early Dutch settlers. In India, then existing land tenure system of Royatwari and Zamindari and land revenue system resulted in the displacement of thousand of agricultural workers from their native land. The small peasant farmers faced increasing debts and the British Agricultural Policy encouraged the growth of commercial crops, (e.g., tea) rather than food crops as all surplus food exported, this meant that during times of famine, was generally famine food was unobtainable and millions died of starvation.

In the year 1860, when emigration to Natal commenced there was famine in the North-West Province and 17,899 persons migrated from Calcutta to various destinations in Africa, A record number of 4,28, 929 emigrants left from Madras for Natal because of severe famine in South India. Most of the migrant labourers were either landless workers, small peasant or artisans and of low social origin e.g. lower caste. By 1911, the total number of Indians in South Africa were 1,49,791. These were distributed among the four provinces as follows; Cape-6,606, Natal- 1,33,031, Transvaal-10,048 and the Orange Free state-106. Natal only had about 43,888 indentured Indians and 69,304 free Indians. In the case of Natal, the independent migrants came from the western part of India. Large scale immigration of Indians was stopped, by the year 1911, Presence of such large number of Indians in South Africa changed the mosaic of South Africans society and influenced their socio-economic life. At the same time Indians also tried to adopt their life style to the new social milieu and in the process evolved as a new community of South African Indians. Their culture is Indians at core but influenced and modified by the South Africans society and culture.

Arrival of Indian Labour Migrants to South Africa:

The timing of the first wave of Indians who reached South Africa was about two years after the first Dutch explorer, Jan Van Rieback, settled in the Cape of Good Hope to establish a half way house to India in 1652¹ Over fifty² percent of these early Indians were brought as slaves from Bengal and from the coastal regions of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, by Dutch East India Company over the years. They inter-married with White settlers and Coloureds people, and were absorbed into the general population.

The second wave of Indians coming to South Africa commenced in November 1860. They came mostly from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal to work as indentured labourers in the sugar plantations in Natal. Later, Indians from Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh also arrived in South Africa as "Passenger Indians" who were mainly

peasants³. Among this group, of Indian immigrants there were black smiths, weavers, traders, soldiers, mechanics, gardeners, barbers, carpenters accountants etc.⁴

Indians in South Africa came from a wide variety of backgrounds and brought with them several cultures, languages and customs. However, they lived and worked from sunrise to sunset for a pittance. Indian workers were insulted and exploited, flogged and deprived of wages and rations. As time went on they were even refused to renew their indentures. After the period of indenture and as "Free Men" they found employment as market gardeners, mine works, railway and council workers, small traders, howkers, hotel and domestic workers.

The origin of the Indentured Labour system :

In Britain, slavery was abolished by legislation in Parliament in 1833.⁵ A large number of slaves left plantation. The origin of the indentured system lay in the **Act V of 1837**⁶, passed by the Government of India. Another measure [**Act XXXII 1837**]⁷ extended the scheme from Calcutta to Madras and Bombay but Indian South Africans have a long history of settlement in South Africa. Cyril Hromnik, a Czech, historian claims in his book, Indo-Africa published in 1981, that it is believed, that Indians had settled in Southern Africa more than two thousand years ago to exploit gold and other minerals.⁸ According to him, the term "Bantu" comes from the Sanskrit word "Bandhu" [relative] which the Indians used for their African helpers or servants.⁹ There are evidences that Indians were taken to the Cape from the 1650s to be sold as slaves and that their descendants may well outnumber the Indians in South Africa. Many of the prominent Afrikaner families have Indian ancestors, especially their matriarchy.

The early 19th century South African economy was pre-capitalist economy, which was largely centered on slave- labour based production of wine, wool, hides, ostrich, feathers and consumer crops. After the abolition of slavery there was a shortage of labour without which land resources could not be developed. The Indian indentured labourers who arrived at this time were needed along the coastal belt to keep the estates going and to enable them expand. The Indian indentureds were distributed along the coastal belt, roughly from Umzinto into in the south to Verulam in the north. Tatham, in his initial report to the Colonial Secretary dated 23 November 1860 stated that of a total of 199 male and female adults, 96 were not allotted to specific areas.¹⁰

In South Africa a vast majority of Indian lived in Natal. In considering the distribution of Indians in Natal in the nineteenth century, there are three large groups and one small and numerically insignificant group to be taken into account. The earliest arrivals consisted of a handful of laborers brought out by individual planters at their expense.

OF the three main groups, the largest was made up of the 1,52,184 indentured immigrants who arrived in Natal between November 1860 to July 1911¹¹. A comparatively small groups of men who had special skills were brought under contract were called special servants. They were mainly employed as waiters, chefs, carriage-drivers, dobbies (laundrymen) and grooms in hotels, clubs and official residences. Some were engaged as hospital attendants in Addington and Grey's hospitals. Some came to work on the refreshment cars of the Natal Government Railways (NGR).

Free or Passenger Indians

Voluntary Indian immigration came in the wake of the indenture. This constituted a small stream. In South Africa, the so-called "Free" or "Passenger" Indians were mainly peasants from Gujarat and Kathiawar, most of whom had mortgaged their land which they had hoped to free through earnings in Natal.

As more than 40 percent of the indentured Indians were originally from the agricultural classes, they soon ventured out into farming.¹² As time went on, they refused to renew their indentures. As free Indians, they found employment in market, as gardeners, mine workers, railways and council workers, small traders, hawkers, hotel and domestic workers. They are referred to as 'free' because they had been issued with a free discharge certificate on their completion of their indenture and were free to move around the Colony, or to purchase or rent property to set themselves up in business to practice a trade or to engage in agricultural pursuit. However, they were not free to leave the colony if they wished to retain their right to a return passage to India, and license to leave Natal were given on a condition that this right was voluntarily waived. As a result of this requirement, many free Indians left for other parts of South Africa without applying for a license. Later, when there was a strong anti-asian feeling among the white settlers after the granting of

responsible government in 1893, this was relaxed and Indians willing to return to India were usually given a free passage.

Table one give an indication of the number of indentured men allocated to coal mines in the year 1896-1911.

Table 1: Indentured Indians Employed in Coal Mines

Years	Number Employed
1896-1897	1037
1898-1900	1317
1901-1903	2282
1903-1905	567
1905-1911	3611

Source : Surendra Bhana and Joy Brain, Indian Migrants in South Africa, (1860-1911), Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1990, P.33

Indian Traders expanded with the arrival of the “Arabs” who came from the Western parts of India. They were called “Arabs” because they wore ‘Kurta’ and ‘Izaar’ and probably also a “Turkee topee” as did the inhabitants of the middle eastern world at the time. These early Indian traders who were predominantly Muslims in the first decades after 1870, saw an advantage in being called “Arabs” since it set them apart from the indentured Indians who were known simply as coolies.

II. CONCLUSION

Indians went to South Africa in broadly three different phases. The first phase of Indians who reached South Africa was about two years after the first explorer, Jan Van Rieback, settled in the Cape of Good Hope to established a half way house to India in 1652. The second phase of Indians coming to South Africa commenced in November 1860. Third those Indians whose period of indenture was completed and those who did not want to stay at the plantations moved out to urban areas. They and 'passenger' Indians took on to trade in large numbers to provide for the needs of indentured and free Indians. But then they realized the benefits of trading with the blacks and slowly they extended their services to provide for the White customers.

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