

C O N T E N T S

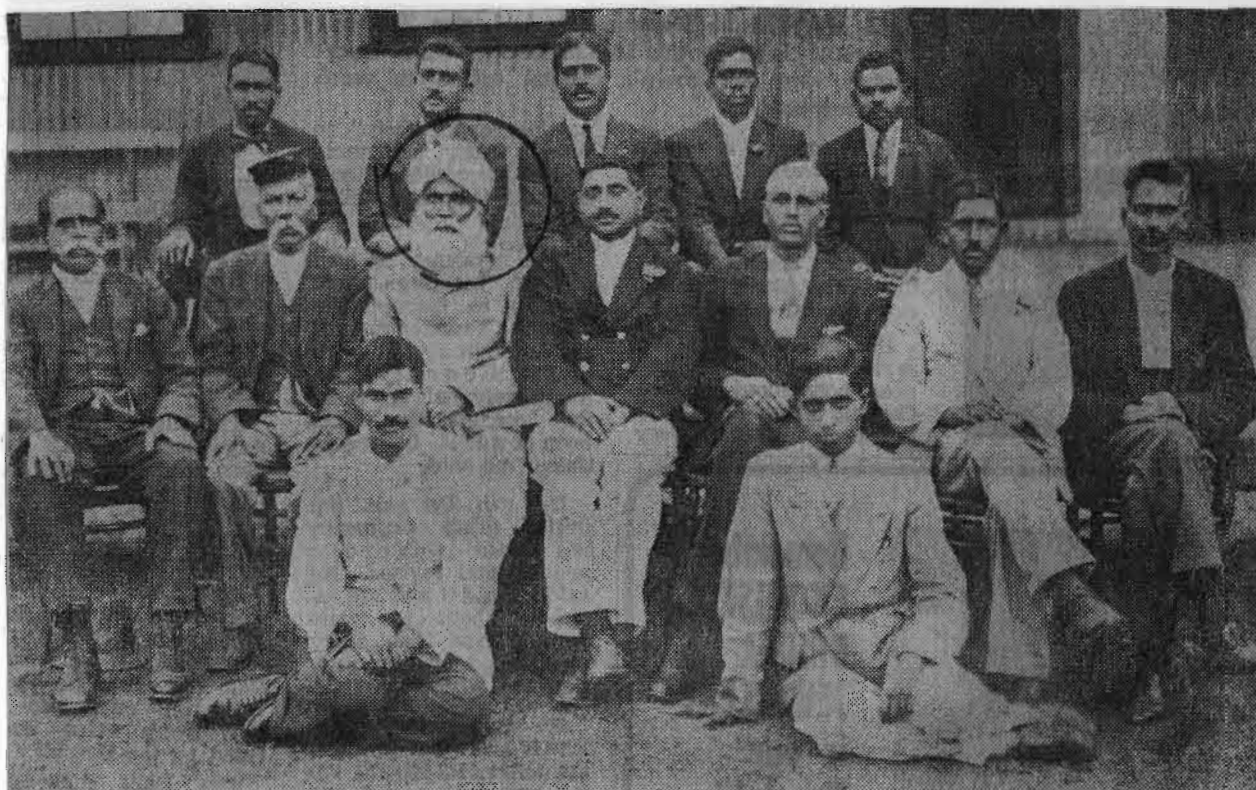
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13. Bibliography.

1983

J. HARRYSONKER

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1. FRONTISPIECE



MEREBANK Indian Association's office-bearers in 1930-31 were, back row, Mr. S. Rugebeer, Mr. C. S. Naicker, Mr. V. Narayansamy, treasurer, Mr. M. Nainsaingh, Mr. S. T. Nadasen. Second row, Mr. Somanah Pillay, vice-president, Mr. Seeboo Ram, patron, Mr. K. Maharaj, vice-president, Mr. R. Gopaulsingh, president, Mr. I. Secomar, secretary, Mr. S. Devnunden, vice-president, Mr. V. S. Pillay, patron. Front row, Mr. R. Ballussur, committee member, and Mr. N. G. Chetty, assistant secretary.

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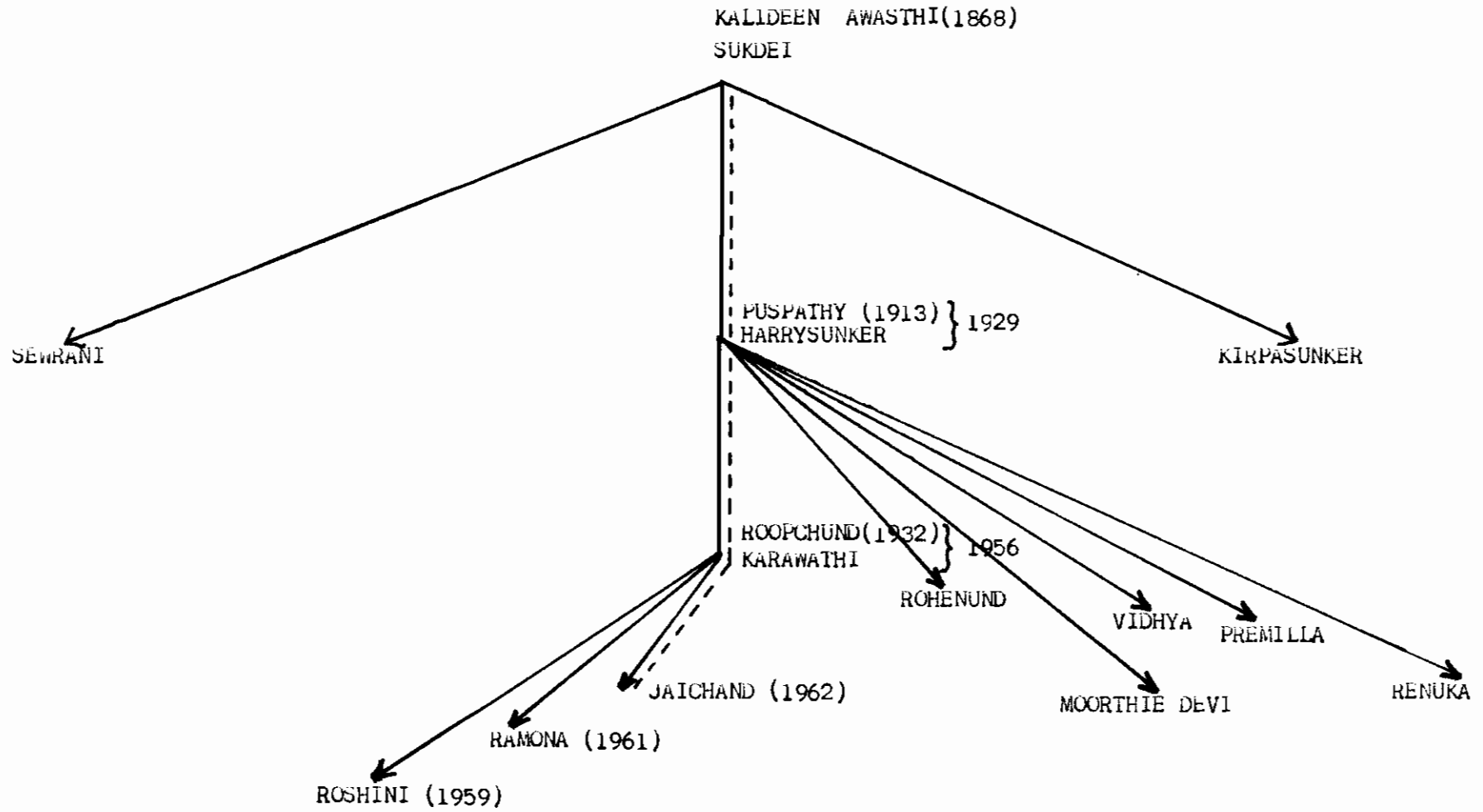
There is considerable literature on " Indians in South Africa." The conditions of service, the promises made but not kept, the ill - treatment, the injustices and finally the progress made is amply covered.

I could get very little material for my project from these sources. I had to find people who knew the Pundit, Babajee, Kalideen Maharaj, or Kalideen Awasthi as he was known to different people.

Some considered my questions rude and disrespectful and it took a lot of convincing on my part to show them that my motive was genuine.

I have tried to present as true a picture as is possible. It is unfortunate that I could not make more use of photographs. Many are in frames but the one I have selected shows him as I think he would liked to have been remembered - always one with the people for the good of the people.

3. FAMILY TREE



4. REASONS FOR LEAVING INDIA
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That Indians left their native country to work on the sugar plantations is a well known fact. What still has to be told is that for many, the voyage to Natal provided a release from social and economic factors which I shall discuss hereunder.

The rigid caste system, especially in the villages made the lot of those low in caste and the untouchables, miserable. The high caste - the Brahmins also had their problems. In the case of my great grandfather it was the Dowry System. In order to give his sister away in marriage he had to provide a huge dowry. As he did not have the cash he had to borrow from the money lender. It did not occur to him then that the rate of interest was so high that he would barely be able to meet the interest alone out of his earnings and that the Principal would remain.

When the money lender's demands for the interest and principal became more insistent, my great grandfather had to devise plans for an escape. Stories about Natal were rampant. He made up his mind to leave India with his wife. He did not anticipate that whilst it was easy for most to emigrate, for him there were added difficulties. This time it was his caste. Brahmins were not welcome as the recruiting officers feared they would not be capable of working on the fields. But they had reckoned without the cunning of my great grandfather. He changed his name and pretended to be a Kshatriya. His place on board the " Pongola XXIII," was in this way secured.

5. THE AWASTHIS

The Awasthis were a sub caste of Brahmins who lived in the village of MAJHAUNI in BARABANKI in the greater district of LUCKNOW.

My great grandfather was an only son. On the death of his father it became his duty to get his sister married. He himself had been married and one can imagine how difficult life must have been for him to provide for his wife, pay off the debt which was raised to provide the dowry by working on the land. His father's brothers had similar problems and were thus in no position to assist him.

6. ARRIVAL IN NATAL

Thus it came about that Kalideen Awasthi born in 1868, married Sukdei, daughter of RAJ/DIN SHUKLA of his own village, made the voyage on board the "Pongola XXIII." There were 324 passengers on board this ship which docked in Durban on May 22, 1896.

To do this he had to break away from his relatives and friends, cut his links with the land of his birth but in my opinion his most painful decision must have been when he decided to assume the name belonging to a lower caste. He adopted the name of Kalka Singh. It is by this name that he is known in the original records.

As a youth he had been taught to read and write Hindi. Being of a scholarly mind, he had read the Scriptures and was able to solemnise weddings and officiate at "Poojas", of which the Sanathanists or Conservative Hindus were so fond. He brought with him these precious books which served him and the community he served, so well during the

period of his indenture and the years that followed.

7. INDENTURE

Kalka Singh and his wife Sukdei worked for the Platt Brothers in Isipingo. The Platt Brothers hailed from Yorkshire and had named their farm Prospection. Lawrence Platt died in 1886 leaving the farm to his youngest son Alfred Platt. Robert Osram states " Though it was not youth that laid the foundations of the industry, yet the present position and prosperity of the Prospection Sugar Estates Limited, have been almost entirely due to a mere lad." ¹. This remarkable judgement takes for granted the labour provided for a pittance by the indentured labourers.

My great grandfather and his wife worked from 06h00 to 16h00, six days a week for 10 shillings a month. His monthly ration consisted of dhall, sugar, rice, flour, salt and oil.

The hardships his family suffered, he refused to talk about. Being a devout Hindu, he sincerely believed that all forms of afflictions were a result of sins committed in his life or in his previous existence. The only way out was to perform good deeds in his life. The message of the Gita - the concept of Karma and Dharma - became for him the guidelines of action. He bore with fortitude the loss of his first 5 children, all at childbirth. I have not been able to get clues as to the reason for the deaths but if one is to go by the hardships encountered by the average indentured Indian then I can only assume that the conditions under which they lived and worked must have contributed.

However bleak.../...Page 7.

1. OSBORN, R.F: VALIANT HARVEST, pg 208.

However bleak the beginnings, the story brings us to happier times on the expiry of his indenture. He once more changed his name to Kalideen. He is known by this name and also as Kalideen Maharaj, Kalideen Awasthi or as Babajee. Many who were struck by his intellect and profound knowledge of the scriptures gave him the title of Pundit.

He first lived in Reunion. News of this remarkable Brahmin spread down the South Coast. The Chowthees, Ramsinghs and Kissoonsinghs of the Umkomaas - Umzinto areas often hosted him for a week, so that he could offer prayer and they could listen to his discourses on the sacred works in Hindu Literature.

8. THE FAMILY

He then moved to Merebank and bought land $\frac{1}{2}$ acre in extent with Duranta Road as its frontage. Here he set up a humble dwelling. It is in Merebank that his true potential as a religious and cultural leader was realised. It is here too that the 3 children whom God spared, were born.

The eldest Sewrani was born in 1914. She was married to Sewsunker also of a Brahmin family which hailed from Port Shepstone. The second, Puspathy, my grandmother was born in 1916. She was married to Harrysunker, a Brahmin from Langalibelele, which had been a lime quarry. The third child born in this house was Kirpasunker in 1921. His family continues to carry the name of Kalideen Maharaj.

Sewrani died in 1942 leaving behind 7 children of whom 1 son and 3 daughters are still living. Kirpasunker the only son had some secondary education and began to teach as an unqualified teacher in 1939. Through

correspondence and part-time study he completed the requirements of the Senior Certificate and the N.T.D. He had also a few courses in the B.A. He retired as a Deputy-Principal in 1981 at the age of 60. He died a year later. Of his 3 sons, one is a Specialist Radiologist, one an H.O.D. - Humanities at a High School and the third a costs clerk. The two daughters are married to teachers and have two children each.

My grandmother widowed in 1973, had six children of whom four are living. She lost her second son in 1974 under tragic circumstances. She lost her second daughter in 1981. Today she has a son and three daughters, 20 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren.

9. THE LEADER
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Councillor K. Laloo writes " A tall, well-built sturdy personality, in a white turban and having a flowing white beard, the late Pundit Kalideen was such an imposing figure that men from all walks of life were drawn to him, by sheer force of the physical charisma which radiated from him." ¹ He continues - " From 1920 to 1950 Pundit Kalideen had a powerful impact on the religious and cultural lives of the Hindu Community in Merebank." ² To quote once more from the Councillor's report " His vision enabled him to realise that the material progress of the people in Merebank depended on instruction in the English Language. Thus he became an active member of the Merebank Indian Association (established 1923) which built the first school in Merebank." ³.

Pundit Kalideen.../...Page 9.

1. ANNEXURE 3. REPORT, COUNCILLOR K. LALOO.
2. IBID.
3. IBID.

Pundit Kalideen was of a generous disposition. He taught the Hindi Language freely to those who were eager to learn. The numbers however began to reach unmanageable proportions. There was need now for the imparting of the lessons in bigger premises. It was this that led to the formation of the Merebank Dharma Woonathee Sabha. Mr Hansraj Lalla, a pupil of the Pundit and Secretary of the Sabha for over 10 years takes up the story.

"He was a very highly educated man in Hindi and Sanskrit, a successful priest, a scholar of great learning, and most of all an able Organizer and Thinker."¹.

"After a lot of initial work in the year 1933, he founded a Hindu Society and named it the Merebank Sanathan Dharma Woonathee Sabha. He was instrumental in raising public funds to have a wood and iron Hall and Worship Place built in the district. Which hall and premises was being used for a day and evening classes for many years."².

"He conducted adult classes to teach boys and girls and adults to recite the Ramayana, and the Shri Mad-Bhagwad Gita of which scriptures he had a very high standing and love. Many of the children attended many eistedfods under his guidance and tutition."³.

Pundit Kalideen's reputation spread. During the late thirties a temple was built in Sirdar Road. The temple was called the Luxmi Narayan Temple. It was a beautiful temple and had a large hall adjoining it. The Hindu Community of Clairwood wanted a full-time priest. They engaged the services of the Pundit.

Mr H.R. Maharajh.../...Page 10.

1. ANNEXURE 2. REPORT. H. LALLA,

2. IBID.

3. IBID.

Mr H.R. Maharajh holder of an honours degree in Sanskrit and presently Principal of the Marianhill Secondary School reminisces.

" During the early forties he was appointed as a resident priest and teacher at the Luxmi Narayan Temple in Clairwood. Punditjee was revered by the community among whom he worked;"₁.

Mention must also be made of the "Sarabjanik Bhajan Mundal"₂, a body founded in Reunion by Pundit Kalideen. As the name implies the emphasis here was on the singing of devotional songs.

10. CONCLUSION :
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In the late forties the Pundit's health began to fail. During the riot of 1949 he had to be carried to the police camp in Wentworth. In 1951 his kidneys failed him. He died after a weekend of intense pain. Residents of the district travelled in open trucks to the Clare Estate Crematorium where the last rites were performed.

The Pundit has gone but links with India remain. Some years after his arrival, Pundit Kalideen summoned up sufficient courage to write to his uncles. There has been correspondence over the years. His daughter, Puspathy; his son and daughter-in-law have visited his place of birth in BARABANKI. They were always well received.

The community work he was involved in continues. The Indian Association which he helped to found acquired the Hillside School and Settlers School. These were in due course handed over to the State. A trust has since been formed with funds in excess of R70 000 for the upliftment of the Indian Community in Merebank.

The Merebank.../...Page 11.

1. ANNEXURE 4. REPORT. H.R. MAHARAJH.

2. ANNEXURE 2. REPORT. H. LALLA.

The Merebank Sanathan Dharma Woonathee Sabha's property was expropriated to make way for housing the Coloureds. On an alternative site a new building is slowly coming to completion. Efforts are being made to get one of the grand nephews of the late Pundit Kalideen Awasthi to perform the opening ceremony. If this is successful the community could not have chosen a better way to honour his name.

11. APPRECIATION :
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1. I would like to acknowledge my debt to my grandmother, Mrs Pusporthy Maharaj, who has so patiently listened to my questions and willingly supplied information to make this research project possible.
2. The Department of Indian Affairs for details of my great grandfather's arrival.
3. Councillor K. Lalloo, aged 75 years, who knew my great grandfather from the days of his youth.
4. Mr Hansraj Lalla who served for many years as the Secretary of the Merebank Sanathan Dharam Woonathee Sabha, a body founded by my great grandfather for the advancement of the Hindi Language and Hindu Religion.
5. Mr H.R. Maharaj - an active member of the Luxmi Narayan Temple which had its beginnings in Clairwood and is today sited in Mobeni.
6. The Natal Mercury for use of the Photograph published in their supplement on September 7, 1977.

12. ANNEXURES :

in re: late PUNDIT KALIDEEN AVASTHI

I, Hansrajh Lalla, adult, Indian male, 60 years of age do hereby make the following statement, about the above person, as I knew him personally, being educated by him in Hindi & Sanskrit, and working under him as a Hon. Sec retary to the Merebank Sanathan Dharma Woonathee Sabha, for ten years, after which I held various positions therein, in close association with him. He was also my Guru.

Around the year 1920 as people terminated their indentured labour with various Sugar Estates they settled in a district named MERE BANK, as a local land and estate agency was cutting up pieces of land and selling them for around £100.00 to £120.00 a piece.

Quite a lot of people took up their purchased stands and a community was well set in this district.

Whilst they were a few elderly people about, a great deal of enthusiasm was being gathered to set about social, spiritual and educational activities.

Three-quarters of the people of Merebank were mostly Hindi speaking, in those days.

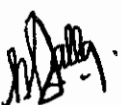
This is where Pundit Kalideen Avasthi took up a stand, after quite a lot of people approached him, he took it upon himself to help and to lead.

He was a very highly educated man in Hindi and Sanskrit a successful Priest, a scholar of great learning, and most of all an able Organizer and Thinker.

He lived in Merebank, and before any organized Societies could be formed a lot of people were calling on the Pundit's home for scholastic and spiritual advise, setting aside the time he spent on performing rites at sundry people's homes in Merebank, and the adjoining districts of Reunion, Isipingo, Clairwood, Clairwood South, Budree Place and Marine Drive. He did not have the time to go outside these areas, as much as he wanted to.

In these districts he was being overloaded with

- educational and spiritual -



(TWO)

educational and spiritual duties, he then worked up an idea to use other members of the community in their own fields and sub districts to form their own little groups and societies to ease his burden, but he always stretched his hands to keep them moving in the right direction.

He taught them to meet regularly, mostly monthly, taught them to debate, lecture, speech making, and performing all religious duties as they came up, according to our Hindi Calendar.

After a lot of initial work, in the year 1933, he founded a hindu Society and named it the Merebank Sanathan Dharma Woonathee Sabha. He was instrumental in raising public funds to have a wood and iron Hall and Worship Place built in the district. Which hall and premises was being used for a day and evening classes for many many years. Many men and women have passed through this Hindi School and have today become old, whilst his work carries on.

He was a founder, the teacher, the preacher, and the God Father of the above Society.

He was an aggressive Hindi and Sanskrit teacher, teaching in the afternoons and teaching adults in the evening in the School Hall.

With much hard work he produced many fine students, whom he harnessed to spread his work, and which they readily took to.

He conducted adult classes to teach boys and girls and adults to recite the Ramanya and the Shri Mad-Bhagwad Gita of which Scriptures he had a very high standing and love. Many of the children attended many eisteddfods under his guidance and tuton.

He had another fine quality in him, which was arranging for funerals when some person could not afford one. The people never refused to give. I remember may a poor girl was legally and religiously married even when a parent could not afford to do it themselves.

Even when old age caught onto him, he would be readily talking and advising the members of the Sabha what to do next, he did not falter, neither did he give anybody else to chance to slack down.

- Quite at a ~~xxxx~~ later stage -

B. J. G. -

(THREE)

Quite at a later stage, when he was partly bed-ridden, members just could not resist seeking his advise upon important matters pertaining to the Sabha, he readily assisted. One could say he was the owner of the Society and its property.

Quite a lot more could be said about this great ~~xxxxx~~ soul, and it would take a lot of research and time to really describe his qualities and his personality, but the property and Temple Hall of the Merebank Sanathan Dharma Woonathee Sabha in Merebank, and the Temple Hall, The Sarabjanik Bhajan Mundal in Reunion, even today stands, in his memory, to his fore-sight, hard work and his superb thinking ahead.

Personally he has given me a lot, like others. He taught me Hindi/Sanskrit and I was even able to write a Hindi Examination and obtain a certificate from Warda, India.

He fostered vegetarianism amongst his scholars. I at 60 am still a vegetarian.

In conclusion I must state that I have endeavoured to bring out the qualities of Avasthi as I knew him, firstly as a little boy, then as his student, lastly as I grew up to be a man, associating with him in the Sabha's work., but a lot more could be had if others who he associated with and taught, and many more societies, could say more about his philanthropic work in Merebank, and the adjoining districts.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'H. J. Kelly' with a stylized flourish at the end.

**SUID-AFRIKAANSE INDIËRRAAD
SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN COUNCIL**Telefoon } 423628
Telephone }Adres P. O. Box 31006
Address Merebank
18 May 1983PUNDIT KALIDEEN MAHARAJ

A tall, well-built sturdy personality, in a white turban and having a flowing white beard, the late Pundit Kalideen was such an imposing figure, that men from all walks of life were drawn to him, by sheer force of the physical charisma which radiated from him.

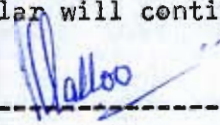
As a lad of twelve years it was my privilege to have first had his darshan, when my late father Khedu Shah took me to him. It had been my father's good fortune to have been under Pundit Kalideen's tutelage and thus he regarded and revered him as a guru.

For three decades - from 1920 to 1950 Pundit Kalideen had a powerful impact on the religious and cultural lives of the Hindu community in Merebank. Being well versed in Sanskrit, he had a sound knowledge of the Vedas and it was a joy indeed to listen to him, when he read the Ramayana, Gita and excerpts from the Mahabharath. Many are the homes which invited him to solemnise the weddings of their sons and daughters. Great were the gatherings when he performed the Shree Sathnarain Katha. Of particular significance in these times is that he always advocated that we be thankful for the rain we receive - hence his insistence on the worship of Indra.

His vision enabled him to realise that the material progress of the people in Merebank depended on instruction in the English Language. Thus he became an active member of the Merebank Indian Association (established - 1923) which built the first school in Merebank.

He realised also that the teaching of Hindi could not continue at his home - such was the demand for it. Thus he became a founder member of the Merebank Sanathan Dharam Woonathee Sabha. The Sabha built a hall and this became the centre for the cultural, religious and educational activities of the Hindi speaking people.

His contribution to the Indian Community in general and to the Hindi speaking people in particular will continue to be appreciated even though he died in 1950.



Councillor K. Laloo
(Member, S.A.I. Council).

MY REMINISCENCES OF THE LATE PUNDIT KALLIDEEN

I came into contact with the late pundit Kallideen through my father who himself was a person of high esteem in the community. The reverence and awe for Punditjee was considerably enhanced in our young minds when it was observed that my father himself always treated him with much special favour and respect. Besides, he explained to us that Punditjee was a profoundly learned man from whose tuition and example we would benefit tremendously. And so all of us were sent to the new Guru for lessons in Hindi and Sanskrit. In cultured Hindu families the Upanayan Sanskara, during which the pupil is entrusted officially to the guru for his spiritual education, is considered a very important ceremony in the life of the child; the priest chosen to officiate at this ceremony must be one of some spiritual stature, and Punditjee was chosen to perform the Upanayan Sanskara of two boys in the family in 1946.

Pundit Kallideen presented a striking personality - tall with a white flowing beard and commanding voice. He readily arrested and maintained the attention of his audience both by the depth of his knowledge on philosophical// scriptural matters by the force of his assertive nature.

During the early forties he was appointed as a resident priest and teacher at the Luxmi Narayan Temple in Clairwood. Punditjee was revered by the community among whom he worked; People often visited him for advice on religious matters in which he was a respected authority. As a teacher he was kind but extremely firm, never sparing the rod when it was necessary. Past pupils recall with awe (and some amusement) the moments when they were the targets of his ire. Yet the same master taught his pupils with exemplary devotion and love. No matter how busy he was, he always found the time at any odd hour for a student who was ready to enquire. For the progressive pupil his praise was lavish, for the unenterprising the condemnation was equally harsh.

In speech he was noted for his frankness and honesty, expressing an opinion fearlessly no matter how much it hurt or pleased. The community admired and feared him for this quality. However, generally he was liked by them as was evident from the many calls he received from people to visit their homes. And he made it his duty to visit and bless their homes, even if it meant walking long distances.

H. R. Mahapatra

(Ex-student of the revered punditjee)

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