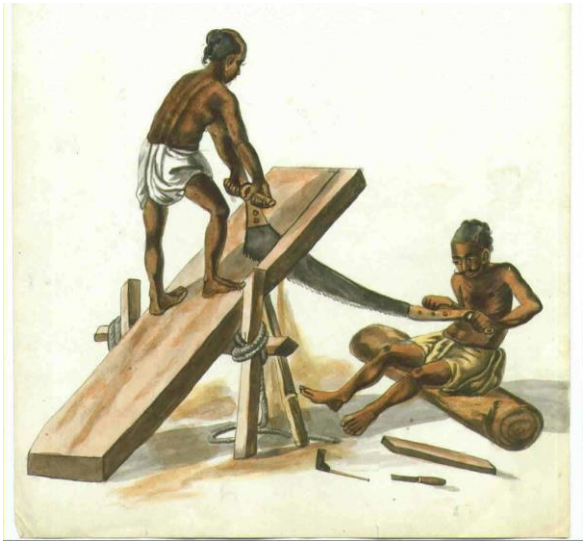
AN INSIGHT INTO THE INCEPTION OF THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY BY MIGRANT INDIANS IN DURBAN.

Compiled by Dr Shamin Mahabeer.

The origins and growth of the furniture industry by Indian founding families who settled in Durban is a story that demonstrates entrepreneurship and resilience. Establishing businesses and developing supply chains and logistics by timber merchants and furniture manufacturers was a heterogonous process. Businesses grew in an ad hoc manner as skills and industry knowledge developed over time. The business environment was hostile, and racially biased. Growth was stifled and constrained due to the restrictions imposed by apartheid. This narrative traces the history of a few pioneering families, and through these stories documents their trials, tribulations, and success in this industry.





Illustrations of artisans at work- Source: alamy.com

The formative years of sourcing timber and how both conventional and innovative methods facilitated the manufacturing process started by the founding families will be detailed. Tracing the histories of selected pioneers in the field will provide insight into how family dynamics, fraternal networking and improvisations contributed to their successes in the trade. Poverty and racial prejudice did not deter their drive for success despite the legal obstacles for expansion and access to markets. By-laws and regulations governing business domiciles were carefully crafted in the post-Group Areas period to cement earlier constraints placed on the expansion of Indian businesses and trade.

THE ESSA HASSIM FAMILY:

The history of Essa Hassim family, who established Essa Hassim Timbers located in Pine Street gives good perspective into the evolution of the timber industry. This is based on oral recollections by Mr Hajee Essa Hassims grandsons, Mr Nagib Essa Hassim and Mr Yusuf Ebrahim Essa Hassim.

Mr Hajee Essa Hassim, who was born in Jodiya in India in 1895, arrived in South Africa in 1907. He established Essa Hassim Timbers which stocked timber and hardware products. Mr Hajee Essa Hassim sons, Ahmed (b 1915), Osman (b 1921), Ebrahim (b 1926), and Hajee (b 1931) were involved in the business.

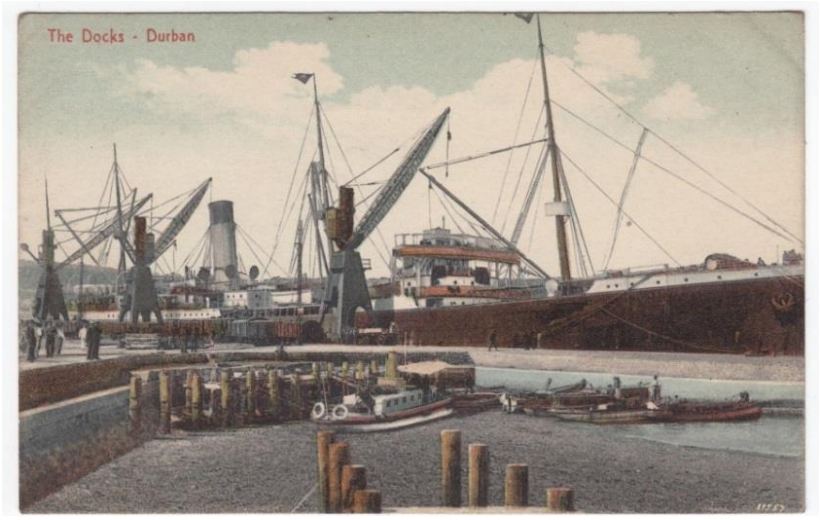


Hajee ***Ahmed*** ***Osman*** ***Ebrahim*** ***Hajee***

Source: The Southern African Indian Who"s Who- The Hajee Essa Hassim Family of Durban.

Mr Hajee encouraged his sons to develop formal educational skills in accountancy and commerce, and the business grew prolifically with their skills and input. Ahmed advanced the local business into commercial fields and Osman headed the financial division. Ebrahim was an accountancy lecturer at ML Sultan Technical College, and supervised the wholesale section. Once the business attained commercial success, Mr Hajee changed his focus to philanthropy, and was involved in various charitable endeavours in the religious and social welfare fields.

In the early 1900's, timber was sourced By Mr Hajee, and his assistant Paulos from the Durban harbour. He purchased wooden containers made from different timbers like meranti, salinga and oak. Mr Hajee and Paulos would plane the timber, cut into the requisite board sizes, and sell to furniture manufacturers. These activities occurred in rental premises.



Source: www. hipposcard.com

When Mr Hajee opened the store in Pine Street in 1935, commercial boards made in or exported into South Africa became available for sale. Mr Hajee, being Non- European was not allowed to directly purchase boards from supply companies on the basis of race. For many years, Mr Ebrahim Essa Hassim, who had developed a relationship with Mr Blaikie and Hope developed a system whereby they would act as middlemen in sourcing timber to supply to Essa Hassim Timbers. This arrangement, based on personal friendship worked for many decades.





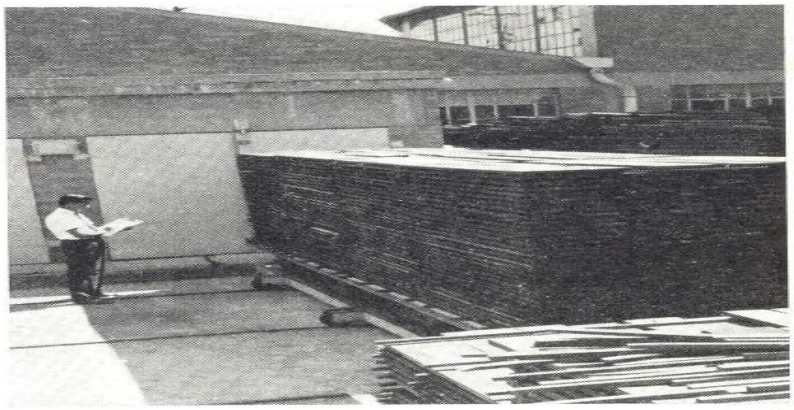
After 1955, these restrictions were eased, and Mr Hajee was able to source his timber directly from the suppliers, mainly Bisonboard, Uniply, Thesen Timbers and Novobord. In 1960, there was a fire at the store in Pine Street, and it was razed to the ground. The family rallied together, the store was rebuilt, the business resumed, and the company gained prominence in the following decades. The retail outlet was supported by family owned plants located in Archary, Pine and Houghton Roads in Clairwood. These warehouses were used as manufacturing and storage hubs. The Essa Hassim family demonstrate how their trade practices and professional training of successive generations in allied financial and commercial fields helped strengthen and expand their foothold in business. Their history illustrates how nuclear and extended families coalesced and supported a common cause.

The company stocked a large range of plain and veneered chipboard, blockboard, plywood, masonite and prefinished boards such as formica, paneleyte and melawood which was sold to the manufacturers for customised, office and domestic furniture. These processed boards which became easily available and cost effective, significantly impacted by the growth of the furniture industry from the late 1950's, so they are discussed in some detail.

A.Customised timbers:

The disposable income of the Indian community increased. This enabled some factories such as Mr Salligram Ramgulam of Jacobs Furniture & Bedding Factory (Pty) Ltd, Mr Ebrahim Moosa of Trueart Furniture Factory (Pty) Ltd and Mr Mehmood Bux from Monarch Cabinet Works (Pty) Ltd to start manufacturing superior furniture items using

solid imbuia and oak (imported from Brazil) and mahogany from Malaysia. The timber was dried in special electric kilns. This was done to prevent warping or cracking during manufacture. Hardwood veneers used by furniture manufacturers were imported from Brazil and Malaysia and also sourced from Skinner Thomas and Mr Gerry Petrook, GP Agencies and Pearl Veneers.



Load of imbuia entering or leaving electric kilns.

B. Commercial timbers:

Bisonbord, Novobord and Interboard manufactured *chipboard* for local consumption. It was produced by chipping locally grown pine logs into particles, which was dried and mixed with resin and glue, compressed and conveyed into ovens and heat pressed. The smooth surface was ideal for painting, printing, veneering and laminating with impregnated foil, paper and formica. It was used extensively by manufacturers of household and kitchen furniture, shopfitters and office furniture.





***Plywood* was made by overlaying wood veneer glued perpendicularly and heat pressed so that the sheets were resilient and bendable. It was used in the manufacture of furniture, flooring, ceilings, doors and shopfitting. *Masonite* was made from fine steamed wood particles stretched into thin fibers and pressed together with enough pressure to form a resilient and bendable sheet. It was used in the manufacture of furniture, ceilings, doors**

and shopfitting. *Supawood* boards were made of wood fibers bonded by synthetic resin and compressed through pressure and heat, resulting in a compact and solid product with an excellent finish and durability. It was used in the manufacture of superior household furniture.

Essa Hassim Timbers provided timber to furniture manufacturers until the store in Pine Street in 1993 was closed, and the business interests divested between family members. The family continues its involvement in the retail timber industry with Pine Timber Board Express outlet located in Springfield Park, Durban. Yusuf Essa Hassim, and his son Mohammed set up a furniture manufacturing company named Nammco in Durban.

THE FURNITURE FAMILIES:

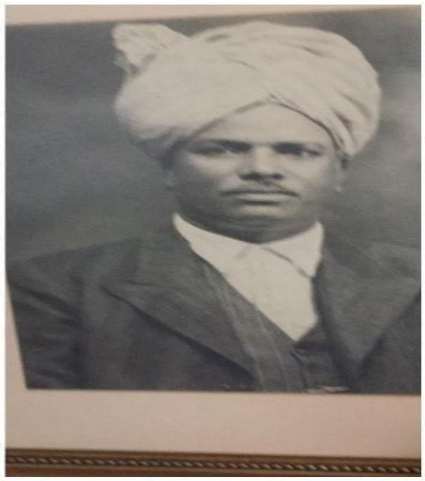
There were many founding families that established furniture businesses in Durban. Each family created its unique footprint on the furniture landscape. This narrative traces a few families, and gives insight into the history of the furniture industry pre and post-apartheid. The history of the Ramgulam, Mahabeer, Gunpath and Dunraj families are described here.

THE RAMGULAM FAMILY: KENILWORTH FURNITURE FACTORY

The Ramgulam family impacted the furniture industry in Durban and its surrounding suburbs significantly. Through the establishment of diverse businesses in the 1900s, they developed furniture lines to service different socio-economic subgroups within the community. They travelled internationally to study global trends and new products and made these available to the local population. As their factories grew, they embraced mechanisation, and many of their employees developed skills that allowed them to establish their own companies. The family continues to play a major role in the industry today.

The patriarch of this family dynasty, Mr Ramgulam Sarajbali was born in Colonelgunj district, Sumerpur, Uttar Pradesh in India in 1879. He arrived in South Africa in 1891 with his brothers Bhabooti and Dataram. After completion of indenture, Sarajbali and his brothers opened their first trading store and bakery in Verulam, named Bhabooti Brothers, Baking and Retailers. After many years, Bhaboothi and Dataram returned to India with their families, and remained there until their demise.

Sarajbali was an accomplished carpenter when he left India. He developed a relationship with a milling enterprise near La Merci. He passed his skills in carpentry to his son, Ramgulam, who subsequently trained his sons Rampersad (b 1904), Salligram (b 1912), Angath (b 1915), Seevnarayan (b 1917), Hariparsad (b 1918) and Manilall (b 1934).




Mr Ramgulam Sarajbali and Mrs Sookdeya Ramgulam. Source: Premraj Family Archives

Sarajbali was deeply religious, and together with other stalwarts established the Shree Gopalall Temple in Verulam. He remained in close contact with his family in India, and demised at the age of 68 in 1947.

The first enterprise established by the extended family in 1912 was in Kenilworth Road, Sydenham. This was a family compound that consisted of a retail outlet across the road, and a furniture workshop at the back of the home. The story of the Kenilworth factory is based on oral recollections by Sarajballi's great grandchildren Mr Eshu Seevnarayan, Mr Heera Salligram, Mr Taiju Rampersadh, Mrs Anugitha Bodasing, Mr Jay Premraj and Mrs Kamala Shah.

The origins and growth of Kenilworth Furniture factory is one of grit and perseverance. The grandchildren recollect their fathers working in the grocery store and the furniture factory after completing their homework when they returned from school. The women in the family, particularly Mrs Ramgulam often assisted with the physical completion of furniture items so that deadlines could be met. There was collective family responsibility across the age spectrum.

Pine and saligna timber was sourced from the timber mills, Ramnath Box Factory in Verulam, and Maidstone Box Factory in Tongaat. Oak and other hardwoods were obtained from Thesen Timbers in Maydon Wharf. These boards were sourced from plantations in Knysna. The payment for timber was based on a relationship of trust between the family and their suppliers. This was either by verbal agreement, or the signing of a promissory note where-by payment terms were agreed upon by both parties.

Whenever a delivery of timber arrived at the factory, it was closely inspected for wood borers. The affected timber was separated and immediately treated with wood borer chemical which was applied by brush and or cloth and allowed to dry before being processed. These pictures demonstrate the extensive damage that these insects cause.



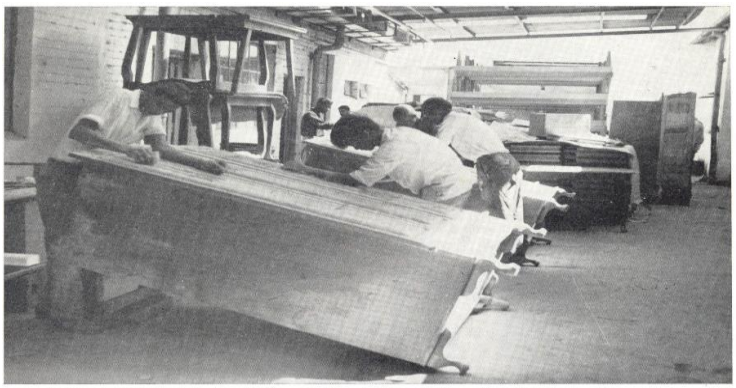


The entire process of furniture manufacture was manual. The boards were cut using hand saws, and planed using hand planes. The corners were mitered using a tenon saw.





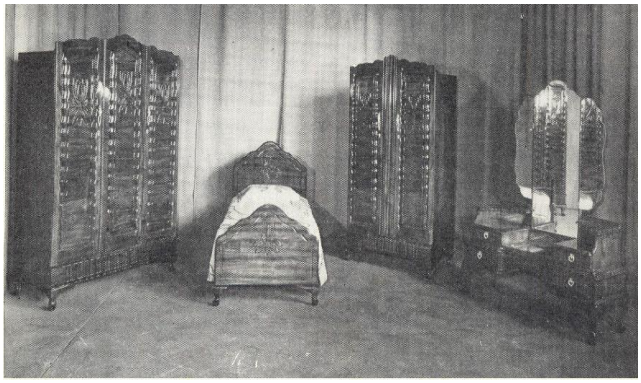
The pearl glue, which was integral to the process was prepared and heated so that it liquefied before the process of board preparation and item assembly started. Individual pieces of board were drilled with holes, and held together with a dowel stick. The glue was applied to the edges of the boards so that they adhered to each other, then clamped together, and allowed to dry overnight. The top and sides of the item were solid wood, and plywood was used at the bottom and at the back. The plywood was attached to the solid timber using either glue or screws.



Artisans involved in the final polishing of items. Source: Fiatlux (5)June 1967 130-3.

The factory began manufacturing customised furniture for the community at large. Their target market was mainly Indians and White consumers of the lower and middle income groups. Items manufactured included coffee tables, three piece mirrors, hallstands, bedroom and dining room furniture. Items were transported to the communities using a horse and cart. As the demand for goods increased, they began supplying commercial outlets in Durban city. These stores included Beare Brothers, Savelles, McNamees and Jimmy Green amongst others.





Some customised items typical of the era: Source: Fiatlux (5)June 1967 130-3.

The majority of staff employed were unskilled labourers from the local Indian community. As they spent time in the factory, many carpenters developed niche skills. Some became cabinet makers, whilst others worked in the assembly line. Many family members were employed at the factory over generations. Thus, the Ramgulam family, through the years were also responsible for training skilled artisans. Some of these individuals, like Mr Dunraj of Rotterdam Furnishers, and the Gunpath brothers of General Manufacturing Co started their own furniture manufacturing businesses in Durban.





The staff did not initially belong to labour unions. The working relationship was largely one of trust and good faith built between and employer and employee. In the early stages, factories operated with regular volumes of low cost items so profit margins were small. They were paid a weekly wage, and a holiday bonus at the end of the year.

There was an evolution of labour in terms of skill, education and unionisation over time. The earliest body established for workers was the Industrial Council for the Furniture Industry (around 1945/6). It was mandatory for all staff to register. The various wage

categories payable to workers according to expertise was pre- determined. The council were vigilant that workers were correctly paid according to their skills, and sent out inspectors regularly to ensure that correct processes were followed on site.

The employers formed the Natal Furniture Manufacturers Association. The purpose of this body was to negotiate and arrive at a consensus with the Industrial council about wage increases, terms of employment etc. As the political scenario in SA evolved, the unions became more active. The unions survived on subscriptions paid by employees, and started to gain traction around 1958.Many smaller companies, or those engaging in unfair labour practices ceased to function around this period due to changes in labour law.



Rampersad, Angath, Seevnarayan, Hariparsad, Salligram and Mrs Sookdeya Ramgulam

Source: Seevnarayan and Rampersad Family Archives.

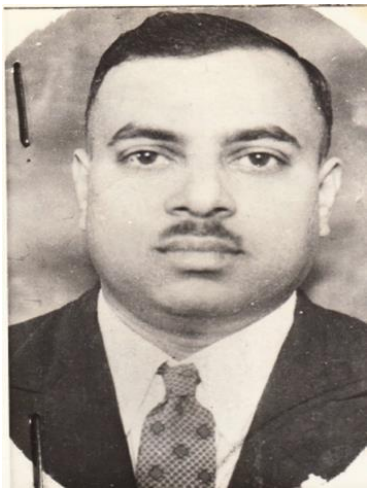
The Kenilworth factory and store were destroyed in a fire in 1957. At that stage, Manilall was supervising that factory. The other brothers had already ventured into their own furniture businesses. Rampersad established General Cabinet Works, Salligram Jacobs Furniture and Bedding (Pty) Ltd, Angath Natal Furniture Products and Peak Furnishers, Seevnarayan Natal Joinery Works and Imperial Furniture, and Hariparsad Regent Furniture Factory. Each brother attained significant success in their businesses, and created their unique footprints on the furniture industry in Durban in the following decades.

THE MAHABEER FAMILY: MAHBRITE FURNITURE FACTORY

The factory originated in Seaview, on a plot of ground adjacent to the family home owned by Mr Mathabeek Mahabeer at 77 Braid Avenue. Mathabeek was the eldest son in a family of seven siblings. His father died suddenly, and he had to assume responsibility for his mother and younger siblings. He was a young boy, barely an adolescent when he began seeking employment. He obtained a job in a furniture factory for a weekly wage of

75 cents. He worked at various furniture factories there-after, and learnt his trade as an artisan.

Mr Mathabeek Mahabeer



Source: Mahabeer Family Archives

Mrs Mathabeek Mahabeer and Mrs Dolly Ram

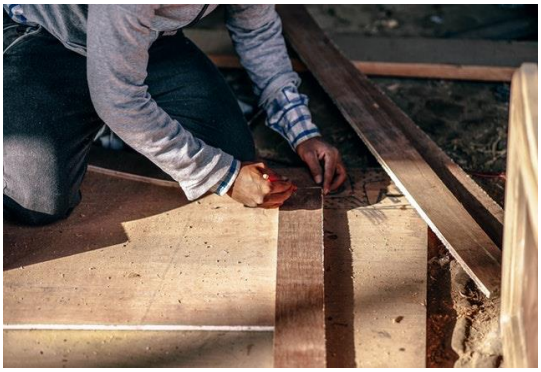


This was a difficult time for the family as there were young children, and a large extended family that needed support. There was a smallholding adjacent to the family home and income was supplemented by Mathabeek's mother and wife, who sold vegetables at the morning market in the city centre. Mrs Dolly Ram recalls her grandmother, and mother awakening at 2 am, and walking to the market weighed down with heavy baskets of produce. This was especially difficult for them during the winter months, as the market was a considerable distance from the family home.

Mrs Ram remembers her father as a studious, enlightened gentleman, who read verses from the Ramayan to his family every evening. He was keen to educate his daughters, and ensured that all three received an education to Standard V1. During that era, it was possible for those who completed Std V1 education to teach at a primary school. Mathabeek educated his daughters although the prevailing mindset in the community was that young unmarried girls in a home were not deemed worthy of an education, as they would soon be married, and become housewives and rear children.

As his sons attained adolescence, the family constructed the factory over weekends on the family plot. It was named Mahabeer Furniture Factory. In the 1940's Mathabeek began making furniture from second hand timber at the factory in Seaview. These were unpainted items, mainly occasional furniture like robes, kists and cabinets.





Pictures of artisans at work were sourced from following sites- alamy.com, dreamstime.com, pinterest.com, shutterstock.com, Lost Art Press blog.

The brothers would deconstruct the original item, remove nails, recut and plane the timber for making customised boards as required in the construction of the new item. Mathabeek obtained orders from White owned retailer stores like Edmonds and Moore in the city. He was an extremely skilled craftsman by this time, and was able to teach the art of furniture craftsmanship to his sons, and factory workers. He was friendly with the Ramgulam brothers, particularly Seevnarayan, and he assisted with the factory.







Some hand crafted furniture items by Mathabeek. Source: Rodney Keerath

As the business grew, Mathabeek purchased a lorry, and some machinery. The first machine was for cutting timber boards to size, and the second was a combination of a sawbench and planing machine. As orders increased, Mathabeek began securing second hand boards and timber from SA Railways. This was the principal business model.

When his eldest son, Rajcoomar (Bobby) completed matric at Sastri College, he inherited the family business after his father's demise at age 49 under similar circumstances to those of his father. He was responsible for the well-being of his widowed mother, and unmarried brothers and sisters. The factory expanded rapidly under his ownership. He purchased new machinery, employed more staff, marketed product to retailers, and streamlined the administrative elements of the business. His bothers Inderjeet and Dayanand began working at the factory after completing their studies.





Dayanand, inderjeet and Rajcoomar (Bobby) Mahabeer. Source: Mahabeer Family Archives

The implementation of the Group areas Act of 1950 forced the Indian community residing in Seaview to relocate to areas designated for Indian occupancy. A plot of ground was purchased at 3 Rana Road, Isipingo Rail, and Mahbrite Furniture Factory began a new era in Isipingo. The business expanded further after relocation to Isipingo. Bobby Mahabeer established relationships with business colleagues like Mr Kasipersad Pattundeen from Palm Footwear in Rana Road, Mr Bertie and LM Naidu from Bertco Bodies and continued his association with the Seevnarayan, Salligram and Rampersad Families in Jacobs.





Mahbrite Furniture Factory in Rana Road Isipingo. Source: Mahabeer Family Archives.

Bobby attended the Dale Carnegie Leadership Course in the early 1970's, and the self-help publication "How to win friends and influence people" had a huge impact on his strategic thinking. The implementation of the principles of the book, understanding the decision making cycle, and learning how to establish trust and initiate change became integral elements that created new perspective. With regards to business practices, he developed skills on how to become a better salesman, established fundamental techniques in handling complaints, and became a more skilful executive and manager. He built staff loyalty within the business, and compartmentalised the factory into a more structured entity. In 1970, Bobby Mahabeer met Mr Mayer Greenspan, who was the merchandising manager for twelve stores in Natal owned by Russell and Company, which included

Wanda and Tiger Furnishers. This started as a business relationship, and evolved over time to become a close personal one, and was a game changer for Mahbrite Furniture Factory.

From 1970 to 1990, the business grew prolifically due to sheer hard work, networking, and the application of strict marketing principles with regard to product, logistics and distribution. Bobby would visit the central warehouse on a bi-monthly basis, to monitor the sale of Mahbrite's range of furniture, and to provide the warehouse buyers with guidance on stock replenishment.



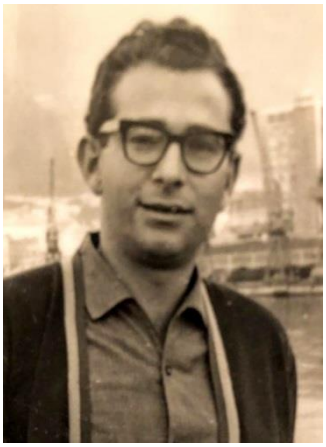


Mahbrite Furniture Factory Extension: Mahabeer Family Archives

Together with the administrative manager and divisional purchaser at Russells, Mr Brian George, Bobby conducted research on economy homes in Chatsworth, Merebank, Austerville, Wentworth, Umlazi, Kwa Mashu and Phoenix. Many were mass produced homes with restricted infrastructure and access. They measured the size of the rooms and the dimensions of stairwells so that furniture could be carried up and through narrow passages. They utilised this information to manufacture furniture to accommodate the requirements and affordability of this target group. This illustrates how ranges of furniture were developed for mass township consumption and the process whereby manufacturers catered to class demands and tastes.



Mr Brian George



Mr Mayer Greenspan

As the Russells and Beare brothers group established brand awareness in this market, the factory began supplying furniture to other parts of Natal, Transkei and the Eastern and Western Cape. The factory specialised in the "Sapele"and "Paneleyte" veneered range of economy furniture. The upholstered range, with the "Charmaine bedroom suite" being a best-seller became extremely popular. The "Sapele" veneered range from Mahbrite included a cherry robe and dressing table, a single combi robe, a mirror front robe, a chest of drawers, kists and a spacesaver 3pce robe.

.





Source: Mahbrite Furniture Factory Archives

Mr Brian George recounts his personal interactions with Mr Bobby Mahabeer. "Mr Mahabeer was always meticulously dressed. I can still picture this gentleman walking into our warehouse, dressed in a brown two piece suite, sparkling white shirt with beige tie and matching pocket handkerchief, with well shone shoes. He had a friendly smile and was well mannered, towards all our staff, irrespective of colour or creed.

Inderjeet (Bobby's brother) was the sales representative of Mahbrite products. He called on us on a weekly basis, to ascertain stock quantity, attend to repairs and exchange policies. We were invited by Bobby to the showroom and factory at Rana Rd, Isipingo every six months to discuss new ranges, bi-annual turnovers and negotiate terms, price increases and work out lead times and forward planning of Mahbrite products.

We were also invited to do factory tours, as part of our functions was to inspect the various timbers, view production lines and partake in quality control. During periods of maximal commercial activity, Russells warehouse sent 41 trucks and trailers to load Mahbrite products for delivery to the stores in the Transkei and Eastern Cape."

As the scale of operations expanded, Bobby adapted to more sophisticated trading practices. As 45% of the annual retail turnover was in October, November and December, the factory had to ensure that the stock was delivered to the warehouses one month prior to the end of year sale period. This required adequate stocks of timber, increased logistics,

distribution, staffing and storage facilities. His brother Dayanand assumed responsibility for furniture production, assembly and dispatch at the factory.

Together with the retail outlets, Bobby was instrumental in creating direct marketing to the consumer, and bore part of the costs for these projects. This was done through catalogue advertising via pamphlets, and through daily and weekend newspaper catalogue inclusion during the festive period. This included favourable payment options to pay via terms to the consumer. He arranged flexible and low interest financing with banking institutions to compensate for increased running costs during peak production periods at the factory.

The upholstered range, with the "Charmaine bedroom suite" being a best-seller became extremely popular. In the movie, the "The Long Walk to Freedom", it a great source of pride to the family to note that the bedroom suite used by Winnie and Nelson Mandela, was sourced from Mahbrite Furnishers.











Source: Mahbrite Furniture Factory Archives

Bobby attended international furniture conferences in Germany and Tokyo. This ensured that he incorporated innovative designs and new trends into the business. He imported state of the art machinery from Germany, and expanded his own graphic designing skills, as he exclusively designed furniture ranges, as was responsible for the manufacturing processes within the factory. He served as a council member of the Industrial Council Furniture Industry for several years.

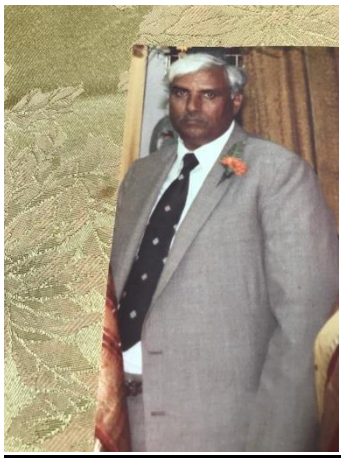




Source: Mahabeer Family Archives

As the business became more profitable, Bobby turned his attention to philanthropy and civic duties. He was involved in the inception of the Aryan Benevolent Home and the SAHA Business forum. He was an active member of the Arya Samaj, and assisted Pandit Nardev and Mr Chotai with various projects. He and Mr Kasipersad Pattundeen acquired a property in Kharwastan through community donations, and the Hindi Shiksha Sangh was constructed on this site. He demised in July 2006.

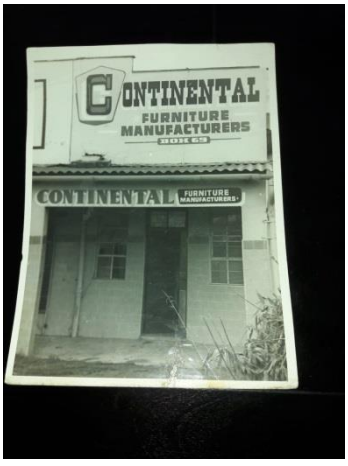
THE GUNPATH BROTHERS: GENERAL MANUFACTURING CO



Manilall Gunpath



Sewpersadh and Lutchman Gunpath



Continental Furniture Manufacturers

The Gunpath brothers were born in Wandsbeck road in Sydenham. Sewpersadh and Manilall Gunpath joined their father at his business, Building Construction Company when they matriculated. Lutchman Gunpath studied Accountancy and Business studies at M L Sultan College. As work in the construction industry declined, Sewpersad and Manilall joined Saligram Furniture Factory in Jacobs as machinists. Manilall left the company to start his own business in Clairwood called Eclipse Furniture Manufacturers.

Due to financial constraints, Lutchman left college to join Sewpersad in making furniture at their residence in Jacobs. They purchased wooden boxes from Toyota Motor Assembly and disassembled these boxes to manufacture furniture items, mainly kitchen units. Some years later, they opened a factory in Sir Kurma Reddy Road in Clairwood and traded as General Manufacturers. They manufactured three and four door kitchen units and dressers. As the business grew, the company expanded to produce duco bedroom suites, room dividers and entertainment units. Furniture was made with chipboard and supawood.

The brothers relocated the factory to Rana Road in Isipingo Rail, and opened another factory in Old Main Road in Isipingo called Continental Furniture Manufacturers. This factory manufactured outdoor tables and chairs from steel and timber. These companies amalgamated, and purchased their own property in Ally Road in Isipingo, and traded as General Manufacturing Co. They crafted bedroom, dining room suits and room dividers from solid oak. The company supplied items countrywide to the Beare group, Games and Ellerines. The staff compliment during that period was 60. The brothers continued at this factory until their retirement in 2004. After their official retirement, they continued with a small manufacturing entity from their home in Isipingo Beach, and passed their carpentry skills to their sons. They were actively involved in community and civic services, assisting the Arya Samaj with many charitable and educational projects.

THE DUNRAJ FAMILY: THE ROTTERDAM GROUP







Source: Dunraj Family Archives

Source: The Leader- 1972

Mr Dunraj was an accountant who completed his formal education with a diploma from the London School of Economics. In early 1950, he joined the Jacobs Furniture and

Bedding Factory owned by Mr Salligram Ramgulam. He worked in an administrative position, and later became a sales associate. He observed the manufacture of furniture there, and rapidly acquired the skills required in the manufacturing industry. In 1969, he purchased a furniture factory located at 68 Soupan Raod, Clairwood from the Ramawtar Family.

With focus and determination, Dunraj established the Rotterdam group of companies over the next twenty years. This consisted of two manufacturing plants, Manbro Furniture Manufacturers in Clairwood and relocated Rotterdam Furniture Factory from Soupan Road to Prospecton, an industrial park near Isipingo Beach. He also expanded into furniture retailing with the flagship store being Savidan Furnishers, Arena Furnishers in Isipingo Rail and Benrock Furnishers in Tongaat. His son, Satish joined the business in 1978. Mr Dunraj focused his attention on civic duties, serving as Mayor of Isipingo for a term during the 1970's. He demised in 1990.

In summary, these are the stories of some Durban Indian families who initiated the furniture manufacturing industry in the southern suburbs of Durban. There were other families that impacted the furniture scenario in Durban like the Moosa family of Trueart Furnisher Factory (Pty) Ltd, the Pardesi family of Premier Furniture Factory and the Tambuti Singh Family who created their unique footprint in this industry.

There are common attributes seen in all these families, namely a strong work ethic, entrepreneurship and resilience. Education of their children was paramount. Once they attained commercial success and business stability, they focused on civic, religious and philanthropic work. These actions contributed to the upliftment of their communities as part of a larger project of socio-cultural expansion for the common good of all.

Although many of the individual companies manufactured furniture for the same market, there existed an element of congeniality, and a spirit of goodwill amongst the businesses. They often loaned machinery and timber o each other so that deadlines could be met. When the need arose through growth and strength, the diversification of family businesses by way of breakaways into niche markets was recognised and supported.

What was also interesting was that apart from Mr Ramgulam Sarajbali who was a skilled artisan from India, many who came to be associated with the industry were self-taught, honing skills on the job. Improvisations such as the extraction of timber from containers , the types of timber used and the production of items for people in the neighbourhood of suburb-based factories, were spurred by the need to earn a living and support growing families. With expansion, mechanisation was more assiduously implemented. As disposable income increased, the pioneers gained advantage through travel to foreign shores to initiate and improve styles which were then integrated into domestic production.

Racial divisions grew in South Africa and were codified in the statutory provisions of the Group Areas Act of 1950. This act specified the allocation of property in residential and business sections in urban areas on the basis of race. Subsequent enactment barred members of other races from living, operating businesses, or owning land in designated areas. These laws impacted heavily on these families.



Source:qz.com



Source: theguardian.com

Many factories were forced to desert their premises in or near central Durban and move to outlying areas. Businesses with small profit margins had to purchase or rent trucks. Poor commuter and transport infrastructure made transport for workers more difficult and expensive. Already disadvantaged by not having easy access to bank finances like their European counterparts, many deals were transacted between owners on the basis of trust, a promissory note or a handshake. Fledgling businesses struggled to access bank loans and finance. Many promising start ups were forced into bankruptcy due to the financial practices based on race by financial institutions during this era.

Although racial discrimination was the order of the day, there were relationships that were forged on a personal level. Paulos, who was an African labourer worked with Mr Hajee Essa Hassim at the Durban docks from the early 1900's. His role in the pioneering days, and loyalty to Mr Hajee was remembered by successive generations of the Essa Hassim family. They ensured that he and his family were financially sound, and took care of Paulos during his retirement and ill health. There were real ties of love and affection there. Similarly, Mr Blaike and Hope, who were European timber merchants acted as middlemen to purchase boards for Essa Hassim timbers for many decades because of a close personal relationship with Ebrahim Essa Hassim. There was mutual respect, and close bonds between the Jewish furniture retailers like Beare Brothers and Russell Furnishers and their Indian suppliers.

The women in these families provided support to their spouses or parents in many ways. They ensured that the children were educated, and also spent their time after school learning their craft from their fathers and grandfathers at the factory. There are recollections of Mrs Ramgulam assisting in sandpapering furniture items, or assisting in other chores so that deadlines could be met in a timeous manner. During the days of apartheid, it was not possible for races to socialise at restaurants or other outlets. Many

women prepared meals at home to entertain prospective buyers, and often did the catering when there were marketing events at the factories. There was a collective effort and responsibility involving all family members so the businesses prospered despite challenges.

Economic barriers, commercial demarcations and restraints did not deter Indian entrepreneurs from gaining a foothold and expanding in the furniture industry. Healthy respect, honest dealings and gentlemen's handshakes were the order of business then. Securities and bank guarantees were originally absent from business dealings. These informal and ad hoc arrangements made trade viable to Indian furniture manufacturers from the earliest of times.

Stories of the Essa-Hassim's, Ramgulam's, Mahabeer's, Gunpath's, Dunraj's, Moosa's and others provide insight into the history of migrant Indians and the furniture industry. The businesses included a support structure with women, school going sons and faithful workers, who went beyond the call of duty. Some like Paulos from Essa Hassim's came to occupy a seminal place in the annals of their family histories. This narrative can be extrapolated to Indian manufacturers in other parts of the province during this period. Each business was able to prosper and survive in this challenging industry with their niche manufacturing and style innovations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

My early childhood memories are of barefoot trips along a lane from my home to the factory as a little girl so that I could watch my father and uncles at work. Despite my mother's fears of me being injured on site, and collecting wood splinters and sometimes nails on the soles of my feet, I was a regular visitor. I was fascinated by the ethos and energy that existed there, and loved watching these skilled craftsmen creating beautiful pieces of furniture. "The factory", as it was fondly called by our family remained a vital and integral part of my childhood and adult life. My father shared many of his innovative ideas, strategies for expansion and challenges with me, and these stories provided the backbone for this narrative.

I am hugely grateful for the time, insight and recollections provided by Mr Nagib and Mr Yusuf Essa Hassim, Mr Brian George, Mrs Kowsilla Mahabeer, the late Mrs Dolly Ram, Mr Rodney Keerath, Mr Jay Anpath, Dr Vishay Dunraj, Mr Satish Dunraj, Mrs Sas Greenspan, Mr Eshu Seevnarayan, Mr Heera Salligram, Mr Taiju Rampersadh, Mrs Anugitha Bodasing, Mr Jay Premraj and Mrs Kamala Shah. Mayer and Sas Greenspan formed bonds with our family across racial divides during apartheid which we continue to cherish today. Mr Thiru Munsamy at the UKZN Documentation Centre at the Westville campus was extremely helpful. I would recommend a visit to this treasure trove of memories, which through meticulous documentation and artefacts provide access to the history of our community.

My cousin, Mr Pravin Ram provided me with guidance, and his eloquence and succinct suggestions helped refine the story. Thank you, Pravin for your patience, excellent comments and for proof reading this article.

The Ramgulam family were friends of both my grandfather and father, and we continue to maintain our generational connections with the family. Uncle Eshu, your intellect, attention to detail and philanthropic streak reminded me of similar qualities that I admired in my Dad. Thank you for proof reading this narrative, and your contributions to the manufacturing elements were vital to my understanding the details of the industry. Uncle Taiju, your optimism and sense of humour was delightful. Uncle Jay, thank you for your diligence, and guidance.

Researching the professional aspects of my father's life, and then integrating the experiences that we shared together gave me new insight into his character. Inheriting the responsibility of providing for his mother and extended family as a teenager, and being committed to the well- being of the family required maturity, discipline and determination. He was a pragmatist who inherited the factory in Sea View with skills as an artisan, but through focused application embarked upon new business models. He travelled overseas to extend his graphic designing skills and mechanisation, and navigated the challenges of apartheid and unionisation of the workforce. My parents implemented the concept of gender equality, particularly with regards to the education of their daughters, for which I am hugely grateful.

Finally, to the next generation of these founding families, who are embracing new frontiers with regards to their professions, I am sure that you are grateful for the foundations that were laid by our remarkable ancestors, and will use them as role-models in your own careers and philanthropic work. We acknowledge the words of Warren Buffet with regards to the sacrifices of our ancestors. "Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago."



Author: Dr Shamin Mahabeer

Chemical Pathologist.