

## CONTENTS

|                                                     | <u>PAGE</u> |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| LIFE IN INDIA                                       | 1           |
| ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT AS AN<br>INDENTURED LABOURER | 3           |
| SUBSEQUENT PLACES OF SETTLEMENT<br>AND OCCUPATIONS  | 5           |
| MARRIAGE, BIRTH OF CHILDREN                         | 7           |
| SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS, AND<br>POLITICAL ACTIVITIES      | 8           |
| CONCLUSION                                          | 9           |
| APPENDICES                                          | 10          |
| SOURCE LIST                                         | 11          |

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PJ JOHN

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Life in India

My great-grandfather Ponnigadu (Ponimgaon) was born in 1863 in the village of Jampur, the district of Nellore, Madras. Nellore was situated along the eastern part of the Madras Presidency. It was one of the main Andhra districts. Ponnigadu was therefore a Telegu-speaking individual. He was a farmer and he belonged to the Uppaia caste.

Economic reasons forced him to leave India. The history of India in the mid-nineteenth century confirms that the country suffered a serious economic crisis. India for the past two thousand years had been the 'master' of world trade. But this was to change with the invasion by Great Britain. Since the expansion of Britain's influence was closely connected with a change in their economic position. For Great Britain this was the period of the Industrial Revolution where mechanical energy of a totally unknown kind was being used. Some of these were power looms, spinning wheels, steam engines and metallurgical processes.

These new industrial techniques disrupted the older manufacturing processes of India. The British manufacturers also had sufficient power which was used to force the Indian market to stay open to their own. India " became reduced into a plantation of cheaply exploitable raw materials and a dumping ground of machine made British goods".

Production was destroyed. Millions of artisans and skilled craftsmen became redundant. The unemployed from the towns and cities drifted to the villages. But they found no solution there. Instead they added to the problems that were being faced by the rural areas. The farmers were heavily taxed and this drained them of their profits. The rural areas were thus unable to maintain the unemployed from the urban areas.

Natural disasters like famine became a recurring problem.

"According to V.B. Karnik, in the space of 130 years between 1770 and 1900, there had been 22 famines in India".<sup>2</sup>

These conditions therefore prompted Ponnigadu to leave Madras on<sup>3</sup> 6 April 1898 on board the S.S. Umlazi IX".

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2. A. Bookdeo ; Indentured Indian Immigration in Natal with special emphasis on the 1890's and the cast structure among Indians, p. 6
  3. Protector's Report of December 1898.

### Arrival and Settlement as an Indentured Labourer

The journey from India was extremely arduous to say the least. As a humble villager who had no experience or knowledge about the world he had to brave the mighty oceans, the Indian, the Atlantic and the South Pacific. But he survived these odds and on the "26 April 1898"<sup>4</sup> he arrived in Southern Africa (Natal). During this time he was 35 years old. As an indentured labourer he arrived in the later phase of Indian immigration, following the Coolie Commission Report, that is, the period from 1874 until 1911. The early phase was from 1860 to 1874.

When the ship docked he was temporarily housed at the barracks provided for indentured labourers. The Barracks was then visited by the Protector for the purpose of allocating them to the various planters and householders who had applied for them.

Selection took place in his presence. Consequently, Ponnigadu was assigned to James Liege Hulett and Sons Limited on the 11 May 1898.<sup>5</sup> His 'master' had to sign a Contract of Service which was for a period of five years. This was required by law.

His employer also had to pay the amount of passage money.

Ponnigadu was then taken away.

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4. Protector's Report of December 1898

5. II Estates Register Vol. 4

The Hulletts estate was situated in Kearsney, Stanger. This was therefore Ponnigadu's first place of settlement. He was housed on the estate. As stipulated by the contract of service he worked 6 days a week on the sugar estates. For nine hours daily from sunrise to sunset he had to work on the fields. A break of at least an hour was given and this time was used to eat his starchy meal, prepared from his daily ration of rice and mealie meal.

He had to work in gangs of hundred or more. Work was supervised by the sirdars. It was extremely arduous work but he carried out his duties diligently. Also his farming experiences in India prepared him for work. Messrs. Hulletts also treated the workers fairly. This meant that he was better off than workers from other estates who were ill-treated and often deprived of their wages and rations.

With regard to his wages he was paid ten shillings and each year it was to rise by a shilling so that for the fifth year he was to earn fourteen shillings.

After five years his contract expired. He was duly issued with a certificate of discharge.

Subsequent places of settlements and occupations

Leaving Stanger he then settled in Jacobs, Merebank. He continued with farming but when the Durban Corporation began employing Indians he left Jacobs and moved to Somtseu Road. He worked as an unskilled labourer in the cleansing department.

As an employee he was housed in the quarters provided by the Corporation. Accomodation was provided on a family basis.

As in the case of the sugar estates and the railways, the contract of service was concerned only with the male workers wage and food ration. Rations provided were the same as those that he received while working as an indentured labourer. These were issued weekly on Fridays and Saturdays. The Corporation workers represented adistinct section of the Indian community, as they received rations and quarterly part payment of wages. " They were the urban counterpart of the unskilled labourers on the Natal sugar estates".<sup>6</sup>

The standard of living was low. This was the result of the crowded conditions of living.

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6. V.S. Naidoo: 'Survey of the Income and Expenditure of Indian Employees of the Durban Corporation, Living at Magazine Barracks, Durban, in South African Journal of Economics, Vol.14, No. 1, p,40.

There were often joint families living together. A joint family consisted of two or more single families living together. Grown-up sons who worked elsewhere also lived with their parents. This meant that they contributed to the income of the household, "thus enabling the family to provide for the dependent members more adequately, than would be possible out of the limited resources of the head of the family"<sup>7</sup>. Inadequate health services were also provided. As a result a high rate of dysentery diseases were present.

Ponnigadu worked for the Durban Corporation until he became of retireable age. He then moved back to Jacobs and lived there until his death.

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7. V.S. Naidoo: 'survey of the Income and Expenditure of Indians Employees of the Durban Corporation, Living at Magazine Barracks, Durban, in South African Journal of Economics, Vol.14, No. 1, p. 43.

Marriage, birth of children, etc.

He was married to Athamma. They had a Hindu wedding.

Three children were born to them, two daughters and a son.

These were Akkamma, Roshema (1906), and Subbiah (1905).

Social, Religious, and Political Activities

Nothing much is known about Ponnigadu's social activities.

With regard to his religious activities he was converted to the Christian faith.

Ponnigadu did not participate in any political activities.

But little did he realize that when he found employment for his son Subbiah (at the very early age of 11 years), that he would one day become one of the founding members of the

Durban Indian Municipal Employees' Society (D.I.M.E.S).

This trade union was established on 5 May 1935. It is still in existence and is concerned with fighting for better conditions for themunicipal workers. Subbiah was elected as Membership Secretary and later from the period 14 April 1937<sup>8</sup> to 1943 he served as President.

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8. Minutes of the Meeting of D.I.M.E.S of 1935.

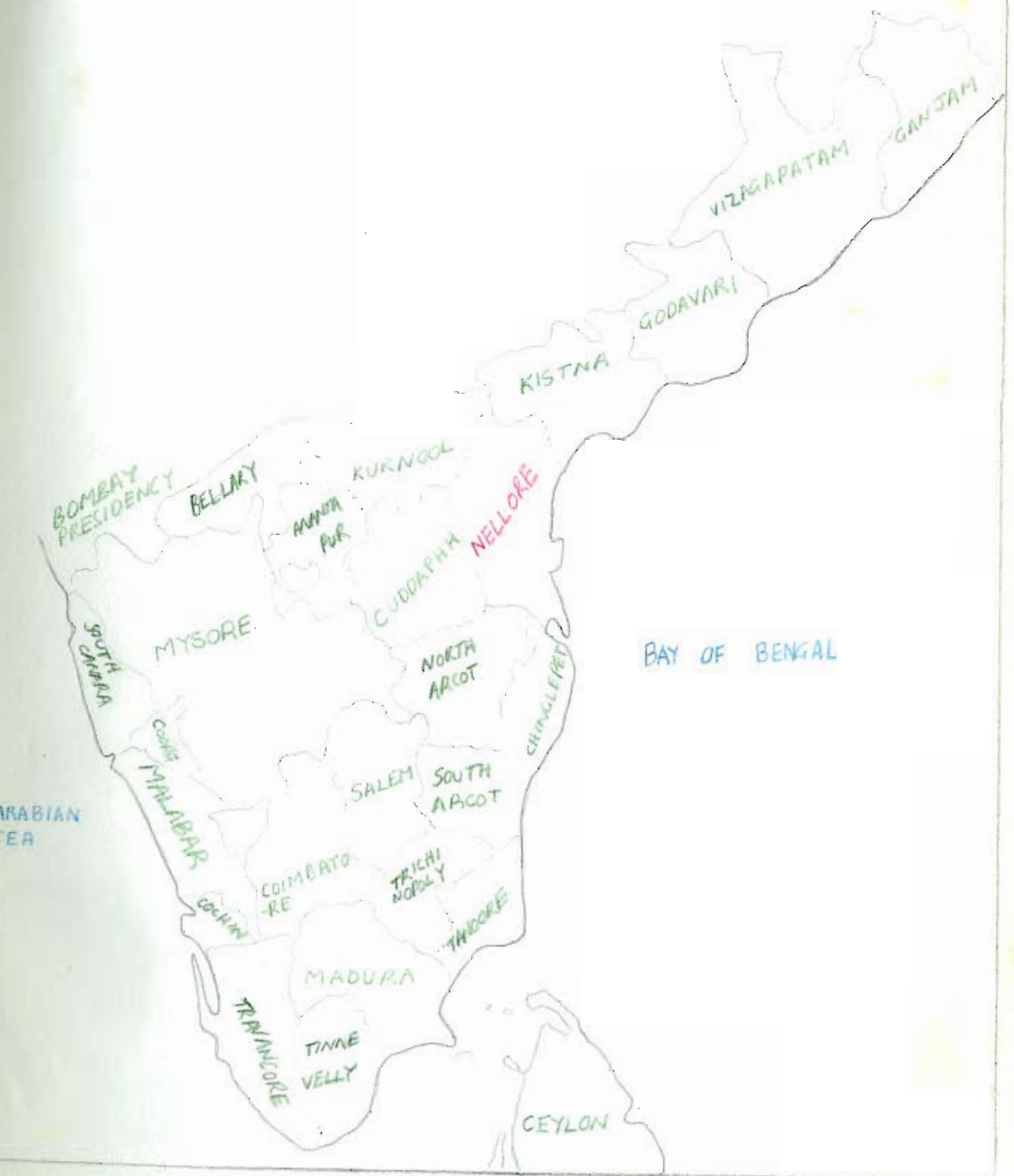
Conclusion

Tragic circumstances forced Ponnigadu as well as other indentured labourers to leave their home country and bind themselves to a contract, to work for unknown masters in an unknown tropical plantation. But as long as they were obliged to harvest the cane crop, they faithfully carried out their arduous duties.

We, the later generations have benefited from the 'sweat and toil' of these pioneers, for the Indians have progressed into an affluent society.

Appendices

# MADRAS PRESIDENCY - LATE NINETEETH CENTURY



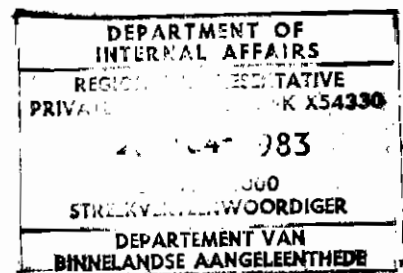
immigration came from the village of Nellore in Madras  
 taken from A. Sookdeo: Indentured Indian immigration in Natal with special emphasis on the 1890s and the caste-structure among Indians (Enlarged from D. Kurner-land and host in South India), p. 14.

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRSCOPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANT

|                       |   |                        |
|-----------------------|---|------------------------|
| Serial Number         | : | 425                    |
| Colonial Number       | : | 72725                  |
| Date of Arrival       | : | 26. 4. 1898            |
| Name of Ship          | : | S.S. UMLAZI 9TH        |
| Place of Registration | : | —                      |
| Date of Registration  | : | —                      |
| Number in Register    | : | —                      |
| Name                  | : | PONNIGADU              |
| Father's Name         | : | VIRARAGANJOLLOO        |
| Age                   | : | 35 YRS                 |
| Sex                   | : | MALE                   |
| Caste                 | : | UPPAIA                 |
| District              | : | VELLORE                |
| Thanna/Taluq          | : | VELLORE                |
| Village               | : | JAMPUR                 |
| Height                | : | 5'7"                   |
| Bodily Marks          | : | SCAR ON LEFT UPPER ARM |
| Name of Next-of-Kin   | : | —                      |
| Relations Accompanied | : | —                      |
| Small Pox/Vaccinated  | : | VACCINATED             |
| Remarks               | : | —                      |

Certified a true copy.

  
REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE



1. On board the S.S. Umlazi IX the passenger list was as follows:

|                         |            |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Men                     | 269        |
| Women                   | 113        |
| Boys                    | 43         |
| Girls                   | 29         |
| Infants:                |            |
| boys                    | 15         |
| girls                   | 15         |
| Total No. of passengers | <u>484</u> |

Protector's Report  
of December 1898.

2. Interview

Mr Dan

"Your great-grandfather came from India in the 1890's. He came to work in the cane-fields as an indentured labourer. He had to work for five years. He worked some where along the Tongaat area. I am not very sure .

He also worked as a labourer for the Corporation. Lived in Magazine Barracks in Somtseu Road. He was not educated and I don't know whether he took part in any social or political activities' He also lived in Jacobs. When he came from India he was a Hindu but when he became free and while he was working for the Corporation he became a Christian."

7 April 1983.

No. C

CITY OF



DURBAN

*Mayor's Parlour,  
City Hall,  
Durban, NATAL.*

12th October, 1938.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

This serves to introduce MR. SUBBIAH JOHN who is an employee of the Durban Corporation and has given 22 years good service. He is President of the Municipal Indian Employees' Society and is well known throughout the Corporation Service for his work for the non-European staff. Any assistance you can afford him on his present visit will be very much appreciated.

for Councillor Fleming Johnston,  
MAYOR.

*Amos*  
MAYOR'S SECRETARY.



Source List

GINWALA, F.: Indians in South Africa, Report No.34, London, Minority Rights Group, 1977.

MEER, Y.S.: Documents of Indentured-Labour -Natal 1851-1917. Durban, Institute of Black Research, 1980.

NAIDOO,V.S.: 'Survey of the Income and Expenditure of Indian Employees of the Durban Corporation, Living at the Magazine Barracks, Durban, in South African Journal of Economics, Vol.14, No.1, 1964.

SOOKDEO, A.: Indentured Indian immigration in Natal with special emphasis on the 1890's and the caste-structure among Indians. Nov. 1982.

Archives

Protector's Report of December 1898.

II Estates Register Vol. 4.

Interviews

Mr Dan - 7 April

Mr C.M. Paul - 25 April

Minutes of the Meeting of D.I.M.E.S. 1935.