

# C O N T E N T S

| NO.                                        | PAGE.   |
|--------------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Acknowledgement                         | 1.      |
| 2. Introduction                            | 2.      |
| 3. Place of Origin                         | 3.      |
| 4. Conditions in India in the 19th century | 4.      |
| 5. Mr Muthans Socio - Economic Background  | 5.      |
| 6. Reasons for Leaving India               | 6.      |
| 7. Arrival in South Africa                 | 7.      |
| 8. Settlement in South Africa              | 8.      |
| 9. Period of Indenture                     | 9.      |
| 10. Period After Indenture                 | 10 & 11 |
| 11. Conclusion                             | 12.     |
| 12. Bibliography                           | 13.     |



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## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

A special acknowledgement of gratitude to the patient Mr and Mrs Munsam without whose steady loyalty and devotion I would not have been able to write this essay.

Also to Vijay Vasundarian for having sacrificed her time to type this essay. My heartfelt thanks to the Department of Indian Affairs in Stanger Street for the valuable help they had rendered in helping to make this journey into my roots an enjoyable one.

I have shared my personal discoveries with you because I felt that they were most profound in my search through the passage of time.

I have now achieved a greater sense of appreciation regarding my origins through you.

\*\*\* S. Kisten

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

The arrival of the Indians to South Africa in 1860 marked the beginnings of the exploitation by the white man for years to come. However, it is important that we as historians examine the reasons for this exodus of people from their mother country India to the foreign soils of a country that was so remote to them.

It has been established however, that the infant colony of Natal had great agricultural possibilities especially in the sugarcane fields.

The year 1850 marked the beginning of much of Natal's later history and prosperity when Edmund Morewood planted the first cane in Umhlahli about 35 miles north of Durban. Eight years later; the sugar industry of Natal was said to be producing 5000 tons of sugar.

1. For all the progress that was taking place land was plentiful, experience was not lacking and money was available. But it was the question of labour that presented the greatest obstacle to the continuance and expansion of the sugar industry.

Labour potential was present and in abundance however, certain problems prevailed which hampered the exploitation of this labour.

2. The Zulus proved to be good domestic servants but the chief difficulty was their unwillingness to be subjected to the disciplines of regular attendance of work. How and where to obtain labour was one of the first concerns of the planter, as indeed it was of every other employer in the developing community.

Natal colonists came to know about the indentured labourers in Mauritius and they hoped that a similar system would get them out of their dilemma.

The British government through negotiations with India thereby obtaining labour.

Through this act the seeds for Indian labour exploitation were planted and resulted in decades of intensified poverty and misery, reducing the Indians in South Africa to a slave population who were to toil for many years for the benefit of the white community.

## F O O T N O T E S

1. Pachai, B. The International Aspects of the South African Indian Question (1860 - 1871)p.3.
2. Calpin, C.H. Indians in South Africa p.1.

## PLACE OF ORIGIN

In attempting to explore the history of the Indians in South Africa, I have chosen my maternal great - grandfather Mr Munien Muthan as the subject of my study into my roots.

My great - grandfather was born in 1883 in a South Indian Village called Velapakam in the North Arcot District in Madras. I have found it useful that a study of India in the nineteenth century be taken into account in explaining the reasons for Indian immigration into South Africa.

Landless Indians were in fact still slaves to the ploughs and wheels they worked all day in Madras and various other areas in the South. Childhood had proved no effective shield against exploitation in the South Asian villages and towns.

The charter act of 1833 also opened India to unrestricted British emigration and enterprise, mercantile as well as machinery. As Britain's Midlands fast became the industrial workshop of the world, not only did the demand for Indian cloth diminish rapidly in London and Lancashire, but cheaper machine - made cottons from England became increasingly popular in Calcutta, Patna, Bombay and Madras. The East India Co. cloth factories in Dacca were all abolished by 1820. Between 1813 and 1833 the decades that marked the collapse of Bengal's vast home-spun cotton industry, millions of Indians both men and women were thrown out of work by machines half a world away. Unemployment reached unprecedented levels as the industrial revolution rocked India's peasant economy, transforming what had been an interdependent but self-sufficient state of relative economic prosperity into a precariously dependent market of peasants whose numbers would continue to increase thus increasing the economic pressures on India's arable land.

## FOOTNOTE

1. Wolpert, S. A New History of India. p. 213-214.

## CONDITIONS IN INDIA IN THE 19th CENTURY

The British were the first conquerors superior, therefore inaccessible to Hindu civilization. They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry and by devastating all that was great and elevated in that society.

The destruction of Indian manufacture drove the craftsmen back to the fields, where they were forced to produce raw materials needed by British Industry in order to possess the cash needed to purchase British goods.

The Indian peasant and his wife, tilling the fields and toiling to produce cloth on the hand-loom and the spinning wheel could not possibly compete with the new machines, however hard they worked. India, the great workshop of cotton manufacture for the world since immemorial times became now inundated with English twists and cotton stuffs. It will be readily understood that the effect of the new economic policy of English capitalism in India was revolutionary. Firstly, by divorcing industry from agriculture and secondly by destroying cottage industry altogether.

It is therefore essential that for us to understand the reasons for the Indians coming to South Africa are closely related to British exploitation of the peasant community in India. It is therefore apparent that all the benefits brought to India by the British were brought not for the good of the Indians. However, whatever the motives the British undoubtedly accomplished a social revolution in India, but it was a revolution which conferred no immediate advantage on the Indian people. On the contrary it intensified their poverty and their misery, reducing them to a slave population who were to toil yet for many years for the profit of the foreigner.

### FOOTNOTE

1. Hutchinson, L. : The Empire of the Nabobs : A Short History of British India p. 123. to 209

## MR MUTHAN'S SOCIO - ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

My great-grandfather's parents were peasants who worked on the rice plantations in Velapakam. They made their living out of rice-growing on a subsistence level. However they also engaged in minor farming such as vegetable growing. These people also sold lumps of black sugar which in "Tamil" was called "vellum". However even this did not do much to ease their plight.

Although my great-grandfather was responsible for most of the agricultural tasks, his wife also contributed by helping to till the soil. The destruction of Indian manufacture drove craftsmen like my great-grandfather back to the fields where they had to toil for a living.

## FOOTNOTE

Information obtained from interview with Mr Muthan's son Mr Munsemi.

## REASONS FOR LEAVING INDIA

The interview that I had conducted with my grandfather, the son of my subject revealed that it was purely because of a decline in his relationships with his parents that drove my grandfather to abandon his country and his people.

The mother of my great-grandfather had died while he was very young. He never did get a very well with his father and hence at a very early age he took to drinking alcohol. Apparently because most of the Muthan clan did not participate in drinking alcohol thier relatives had become very upset what aggravated the problem was that a very close relative worked in a courthouse in Madras and felt that his position was being degraded by one of his own. The people of Velapakam had tremendous respect for the Muthan family. His father also threatened to use violence on my great-grandfather, hence because of these reasons he ran away from home.

My great-grandfather also enticed his fiancée my great-grandmother to be into running away with him. Her parents even tried to get on to the ship the S.S. Pongola to retrieve their daughter. They failed however. Thus we can see that it wasn't purely because of economic reasons that he left Madras but because of the poor relationship with his father.

The indentured labour system was a easy way out of his dilemma .

## FOOTNOTE

Information obtained from interview with son Mr Munsami.

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

|                       |   |                                     |
|-----------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Serial Number         | : | <u>298</u>                          |
| Colonial Number       | : | <u>109797</u>                       |
| Date of Arrival       | : | <u>12-01-1905</u>                   |
| Name of Ship          | : | <u>S.S. PONGOLA.</u>                |
| Place of Registration | : | <u>                    </u>         |
| Date of Registration  | : | <u>                    </u>         |
| Number in Register    | : | <u>                    </u>         |
| Name                  | : | <u>MUNIAN</u>                       |
| Father's Name         | : | <u>MUTHAN</u>                       |
| Age                   | : | <u>22 YEARS.</u>                    |
| Sex                   | : | <u>MALE</u>                         |
| Caste                 | : | <u>PARIA.</u>                       |
| District              | : | <u>NORTH ARCOT</u>                  |
| Thanna/Taluq          | : | <u>ARCOT.</u>                       |
| Village               | : | <u>VELAPAKAM.</u>                   |
| Height                | : | <u>5'5"</u>                         |
| Bodily Marks          | : | <u>MOLE ON RIGHT SIDE OF CHEST.</u> |
| Name of Next-of-Kin   | : | <u>FATHER.</u>                      |
| Relations Accompanied | : | <u>                    </u>         |
| Small Pox/Vaccinated  | : | <u>VACCINATED.</u>                  |
| Remarks               | : | <u>                    </u>         |

Certified a true copy.



REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE



### ARRIVAL IN SOUTH AFRICA

My great-grand father was recruited by emigration officials in the north Arcot district in Madras. I was unable to obtain any facts regarding the date of his departure from India, however I have established through the Department of Indian Affairs that he had arrived at Port Natal on Sunday the 1st January 1905. He had sailed on a ship called the S.S. Pongola. He had suffered from no illnesses or diseases on the ship.

### FOOTNOTE

Information obtained from Dept. of Indian Affairs in Stanger Street, Durban.

Information also obtained from interview with his son.

## SETTLEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

The interview with my grandfather Mr Munsami revealed that my great-grandfather first settled in Avoca. On arrival they stayed at a depot in Point. They were recruited by immigration officers at Port Natal. He was allocated to a sugarcane farm in Avoca.

This farm was owned by Mr H.P. Harrison who was also founder of this estate. The farm was called Rosehill. My research into the Avoca Sugar Estate revealed that it was originally a coffee plantation. Mr Harrison came from England without any agricultural knowledge and in a few years had built up the estate.

Early in 1876 however, we note that Mr Harrison was calling for tenders for the erection of a sugarmill and that by the August of that year, the new mill was at work. It's complete machinery consisted of one 12h.p. steamengine, one 6h.p. steamengine, a donkey engine, one vacuum pan and an adequate mill.

I have very little information about the Avoca Central Mill as it was called at one time, beyond the fact that for many years it was a land-mark on the north coast road across the valley from Avoca Station. It ceased it's operations in 1916. Since that time this estate had raised sugarcane without cessation, sending it to Natal Estates for crushing for Harrison's descendants.

Avoca estate is otherwise well-known for the roses there, descendants are of original plant which spent three months at sea on its way from England to Natal in 1863. The area around and including Avoca Estate has been known as Rosehill for nearly a century.

### FOOTNOTE

1. Osborn, R.F. : Valiant Harvest - The Fouding of the South African Sugar Industry 1848-1926 p. 245-247.

### PERIOD OF INDENTURE

Mr Muthan was indentured for five years to P.H. Harrison brothers. Came with his doti and shirt from India however in South Africa his mode of dress changed.

He first worked as a cook in the Harrison household although he did not know anything about cooking because of his peasant background. He worked as a cook for two years.

Then he was transferred to the sugarcane fields for about three years. He was paid 15 shillings and received his money in gold. There was'nt the kind of monetary system we have today. Treatment on the fields was harsh. Those who didnot work hard enough were subjected to physical punishment. These indentured Indians including my great-grandfather were given rations of rice, mealie-meal, oil, dhall, salt and beans. They had to cook their own meals. They obtained water from the wells and rivers. They had to be on duty at 6 o'clock in the morning. They cooked on down fires and lit paraffin lamps.

They lived in compound built for them by the sugar magnet. Each family had own small wood and iron room and kitchen . My great-grandfather earned very little and struggled to make a living.

He married the woman he had run away with from India. Only his friends in Avoca attended the wedding. None of his relatives from India attended. His wife-to-be however had relatives living in South Africa who attended the wedding. In 1907 their first child a girl, named Kullammah was born. Their second child Munsami the person I interviewed was born in Avoca in 1909. Only these two children were born during indenture .

### F O O T N O T E

Information obtained from interview and ship's list.

### PERIOD AFTER INDENTURE

After indenture my great-grandfather worked for a few years at Bishop's place in Umgeni in 1911. He then went to Duff's Road in 1913 . He worked for E.E. Shire. He used to drive Mr Shire's horse and carriage thereby acting as a chauffeur. He drove Mr Shire to the station in the mornings and fetched him in the evenings. Five children were born in Duff's Road. They were Chinappen, Dunbagio, Amardhum, Angammah and Vissalutchee.

In 1918 he came to Sydenham in Durban. The children went to school. He worked at a few places in Durban. The first place he worked was engineering firm called African Marines in Point Road. This firm has now become a world renown ship builders called Dorbyll and Co. He had an ordinary wood and iron house in Sydenham. He earned about one pound and ten shillings a week. He travelled on trams and tram fares were one ticky a ride. His wife my great-grandmother never worked.

In 1917 there was a major flood in South Africa in August. His son the person that I interviewed had just started schooling then. The headmaster had sent him home because of the flood. His mother had wondered how was it that they were having holidays so soon. The person I interviewed also stated that there was a problem with communication in those days. English was difficult to learn. The Umgeni River was flooded and the Duke of Arcourt Bridge collapsed. This bridge was built by the late Sir Hulett .

The person I interviewed also spoke about the effects of the first World War on them. They could not get white rice from India hence they had to eat mealie rice. This was when mealie rice was included in the stable diet. He said that the prices of commodities rose. He did not know much about this period because he was very little. Two more children were born in Sydenham. They were Parvathy and Sonny.

.....cont/

### Period After Indenture Con/

My great-grandfather also worked for huntleuchairesin Point Road for about five years. He worked in the boilerroom. He worked here right up to his death. He earned about five pounds a month plus ration and housing accomodation. His wife had a stall in the market where she sold vegetables.

My great-grandfather died in 1958. He was'nt ill however he died after attending a wedding in Pietermaritzburg. On that memorable Sund ay evening on the 13th September 1958 he died in Argyle Road. He was burried on Wednesday in Kennilworth. His children however wrote to his brother in India telling him of his death. The son I interviewed, Munsami told me about a promised visit to India. When he was little his mother asked him to chase that was getting into their house. He was knocked down by the cow and was seriously injured. His mother made a vow that when he grew up she would send him to a temple called Thirupathi in South India.

In 1936 Mr Munsami did board a steam ship called the Inkomati for India. He visited his relatives in Velapakam and stayed with them for nine months. He came back the following year. He had gone back to Velapakam as a last tribute to his father and ancestors he never knew,

### F O O T N O T E

Information obtained from interview and ship's list.

## CONCLUSION

Th revolation of my study into my roots has produced so much to be appreciated that I have nothing but explicit gratitude for the people who suggested this research project. The study of my great-grandfather has greatly helped in satisfying my curiosity regarding not only my origins but also the history of the indenture d Indians in South Africa.

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