

MISS N. SAMLALL

16911

HISTORY III

THE CIRCUMSTANCES

SURROUNDING THE

ARRIVAL OF

MR. PRAG

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to:

Mr Mayaram, who so willingly provided me with the information concerning his father, Mr Prag.

I also wish to place on record my indebtedness to the following:

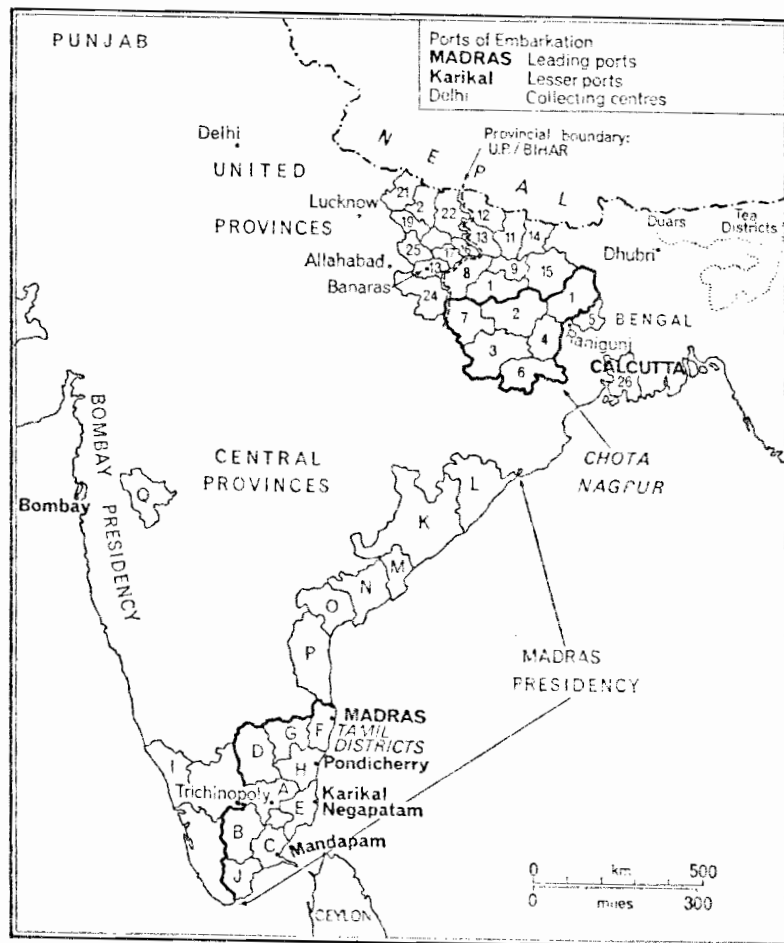
The typist, Miss P. Ramasis.

And to the many kind friends who helped in one way or the other.

My work concerning the Indians has been an enriching experience.

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Main Districts of Recruitment

Note: each group is listed in order of concentration of recruitment

SOUTH INDIA

The Tamil Districts

- A. Trichinopoly
- B. Madura
- C. Ramnad
- D. Salem
- E. Tanjore
- F. Chingleput
- G. North Arcot
- H. South Arcot
- I. Malabar
- J. Tinnevely

Telugu Districts

- K. Vizagapatam
- L. Ganjam
- M. East Godavari
- N. West Godavari
- O. Guntur

P. Nellore

Bombay Presidency

Q. Ahmadnagar District

NORTH INDIA

Hill Coolie Districts

1. Santal Parganas
2. Hazaribagh
3. Ranchi
4. Manbhum
5. Birbhum
6. Singhbhum
7. Palamau

Bihari Districts

8. Shahabad
9. Patna
10. Gaya
11. Muzaffarpur

12. Champaran
13. Saran
14. Darbhanga
15. Monghyr

Districts of the United Provinces

16. Ballia
17. Ghazipur
18. Azamghar
19. Fyzabad
20. Basti
21. Gonda
22. Gorakhpur
23. Banaras
24. Mirzapur
25. Jaunpur

Calcutta Metropolitan Area

26. Twenty-Four Parganas

MAIN DISTRICTS OF RECRUITMENTS

A. INTRODUCTION

Natal opens its eastern gateway on the Indian Ocean through the Port of Durban. Indian immigration to South Africa was a selective process in which certain individuals and categories of people, reacting to specific pressures in their homeland, was induced to migrate by the promise of future rewards. Thus from 1860 onwards indentured Indians from India started arriving in Natal and they comprised of peasant farmers, rural artisans and agricultural labourers. They embarked at the ports of Madras and Calcutta for the Colony of Natal under a system of indenture for a five year period.

Regulations governed their entire lives from birth to death and stringent rules and severe penalties were imposed on them, from the time that they settled in this new country. Their departure from India and the conditions under which they arrived in Natal left distinguishing marks on them. They were violently snatched from their traditional moorings in India and brought to a completely new country in a manner that they lost all contact with their kith and kin.

Today, the majority do not have any communication with their relatives in India nor do they have any knowledge

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of their native village. After their period of indenture, many decided to remain in their land of adoption. The majority of these settlers were of Hindu faith. We know, however, they brought with them their culture, their customs and their traditional which they guarded very jealously. They preserved these and lived accordingly. They planted the seeds of Hinduism wherever they settled.

That the Indians first came to Natal as a result of persistent demands for cheap and reliable labour by a group of Europeans who had preceded them by less than forty years. While the recruitment was initially, for the sugar plantation, it was seen to be sufficiently profitable to be extended to railways, dockyards, coal mines, wattle plantations, municipal services and domestic employment.

The Cape Times wrote, "Natal presents the curious spectacle of a country entertaining a supreme contempt for the very class of people she can least do without."^I It was the virtues of the Indians that made them formidable competitors. As Lionel Curtis told Gandhi many

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I. B.R. Nanda, Mahatma Gandhi, p. 50

years later, "it was the virtues, rather than the vices of the Indians, which had aroused the jealousy of the European and exposed them to political persecution."²

For many people the fascination of history lies in the pursuit of the ultimate mystery of personality. It is the object of this project to trace the circumstances surrounding the arrival of an indentured Indian.

2. B.R. Nanda, Mahatma Gandhi, p. 50

B. PLACE OF ORIGIN

Mr. Prag Sheonath was born in the district of Basti. He and his wife, Mrs. Parbati Prag, worked at the rice fields in the village of Mohanwa. At the time, the village life was harsh and hard, the country was underdeveloped, stricken periodically by famine and ravaged by disease. The impact of industrial technology was severe, but the effects were aggravated by the British Rule. The Indian traditional system was interrupted by the imposition of England's landed system and the English criminal code with its emphasis on protection of private property. India was flooded with English manufacturers. Home industry had decayed with the importation of British goods and cloth. The result was unemployment and poverty. In most places, the land was owned by a few wealthy land owners, who exploited their tenants.

C. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Mr. Prag, accompanied by his wife, did not emigrate to South Africa to escape any specific brand of persecution, political or religious, nor did they come in organised groups interested in creating any new society. They came with kinsmen and friends. They were driven to leave India by a variety of reasons—poverty, ambition, domestic tensions, restlessness of spirit and the urge to escape a misfortune. These members hoped to return to India someday after acquiring some wealth.

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These unemployed artisans and craftsmen, landless labourers and peasants were driven off the land. This formed the core of of these people who went out of India as migrant labourers. However, this new migrant system was not a spontaneous movement and, more important, this system was not designed for the people who were landless and unemployed.

Calcutta and Madras became the 'Coolie Catchment' centres for the world's trade in indentured labour. Rosy prospects of work in Natal were painted for these peasants. Promise of wealth was the most obvious inducement to Indians. Mr Prag and his companions were told by some recruiters of a country where, 'chilli trees bore gold'; 'money was easy'; 'food was plenty', 'gold was plucked up in the street' and 'fruit hung uneaten from the trees'. One old man was told that he would 'see the land of Devas (God)'. Free passage, board and lodging, a wage of ten shillings a month, and the right to a free return passage to India after five years indenture or alternatively the option to settle in the land of their adoption.

D. THE CASTE SYSTEM

One of the most important traditional social characteristic of India is the caste system. It is the essential

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part of the background of Indian immigration to South Africa. Mr Prag belonged to the 'Ahir' caste, whose dealings were with cows and the distribution of milk. The Caste System is no form of 'apartheid' but a group of people who have one thing in common - they all practise the same skill. The Caste received its name from the trade of its members. This system was brought about as a partial solution to the economic problems in India. It ensured an adequate supply of skilled people at all times in that the skill and knowledge of the father was taught to the son. With the absence of guilds (like those in England), the rigidity of it prevented others from learning a trade to which they did not belong. The caste has religious beliefs expressed through the dogmas of karma (moral causation) and dharma (righteous conduct).

6. ARRIVAL OF INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

It was due to the mixture of the above mentioned facts that "these humble people, who braved the arduous journey across the Indian Ocean to the Garden Province of today's Republic of South Africa, and who by sweat and toil, made sacrifices for their children's future, could cast their gaze upon this land, they would indeed have cause for great joy and pride of achievement."³

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3. A. Sookd eo: Indentured Indians living in Natal
with special emphasis in the 1890's
and the caste - Structure among
Indians, p. 30

All this finds effortless and triumphant expression in this study.

Lord Milner wrote, "the Asiatics are strangers forcing themselves upon a community reluctant to receive them."⁴ In fact, the Indian immigration to South Africa started at the instance of the Europeans Settlers who were in possession of vast virgin lands ideal for agriculture, but lacked the manpower. Natal is one of the favoured regions of South Africa. We must agree with Sir W.W. Hunter's phrase that this system was a condition of semi slavery.

F. LIFE OF MR PRAG SHEONATH IN SOUTH AFRICA

Mr Prag Sheonath, at the age of 25, arrived at the Port of Durban on the 16 January 1904, aboard the S.S. Pongola. He was accompanied by his wife, Mrs Parbati Prag. The vast majority were between the ages 25 - 30 years. It is easy to understand, this should be so: The work required from them was strenuous and the recruiters sought people who were young and physically fit. They were expected to be energetic and, perhaps, they were the most adventurous.

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4. B.R. Nanda, Mahatma Gandhi, p. 35

Before being allowed to embark, Mr Prag was medically examined. A detailed report was submitted on him. All other members of the ship who were unfit, were rejected back to India. Mr Prag had to undergo a medical examination on board and on landing. The reports contained stereotyped statements as: "the men, with a few exceptions, should prove a servicable lot of labourers."

6. FIRST PLACE OF SETTLEMENT AND OCCUPATION

The indentured Indians in the ship were of different religions, localities and cultures. Most of them were complete strangers to each other. These labourers were then bought off by different farmers. The labourers were not free to choose their employers or type of work. Mr Prag and his wife were transported to New Hanover, where they worked on the wattle plantations on the Comins Farm. The wattle plantation, although only employing 606 indentured Indians in 1909, did depend on indenture to a large degree. These people were used along with the Africans for stripping off the bark and bundling it for transport to the drying sheds. During that period both the black and silver wattle were grown indiscriminately, but it was found that the black wattle was superior. While men were busy stripping off the bark,

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the women collected the dry seeds and planted them.

These labourers on the plantation worked from sunrise to sunset. They returned to their environment much too exhausted. They prepared the meals from their daily rations. Each member was confined within one mile of the boundary of the estate. Each labourer had to have a written leave, otherwise he could be arrested with costs deductible from his wages. Any labourer from the estate could be considered a deserter. The common problems were: assault on the labourer, insistence on work despite illness, poor rations and extra hours without pay. These were the hardships, cruelty and degradation of the system.

Stories told by Mr Mayaram, son of Mr Prag, are of people exposed to tensions, the urge to escape and a desire for adventure.

Amyth developed that these labourers represented the lowest rung of the ladder in the caste - ridden society from which they came and could be exploited with contempt and indifference for the benefit of Natal. Palmer states, "So greedy for cheap labour were the planters, that they and the government and the press were all blind to the inevitable results of the immigration policy."⁵

5. B. Pachai, South African Indians: The Evolution of a Minority, p. 40



CLOSE RESEMBLANCE

OF

THE HOUSE



THAT MR. FRAG

AND

FAMILY OCCUPIED.



4. RESIDENTIAL AREA

Mr Prag and his family lived in houses built of wattle and daub. The hut was thatched with hay, a pillar inside supported the roof. There was just one low entrance through which one passed by bending oneself. This was the only aperture for the passage of air. They plastered the walls and floor with animal and earth dung. The furniture in the house is in keeping with the simplicity of the place. There was a small plot of land given to them, on which they grew vegetables. This was advantageous to this family as this supplemented the family income.

1. EDUCATION

This particular family had always been a separate element in South African life. They remained apart racially. There were no intermarriages in the family, thus keeping the blood pure. The preservation of the Indian language was almost entirely due to the persistence of the Coolies in speaking their mother tongue among themselves. This was also assisted by the lack of education for children: they did not learn an alien language in schools, no schools were provided for them. In this case, it was a survival of Hindi; or 'plantation Hindustain'.

I. TRADITION

The practice of tradition was evident during the festive seasons. Here they created colour and noise of their native ~~and~~ land. We may imagine a happy and excited scene with the roads lined with Indian immigrants. They were allowed to commemorate their ancient tradition even amidst the harsh conditions of the plantation life.

II. RELIGION

Mr Prag was of Hindu faith. Hinduism has perpetuated itself through a social system. We have here a religion that has staked its existence on the permanence of a social system. The security of the system is threatened now on many sides. Hinduism involves the worship of a cow, a conception which is alien to the Europeans. These people fought with the government for the recognition Indian priests as marriage officers. Several traditionalists including Mr Prag formed the 'Hindu Organisation' to be known as the Shri Vishnu Temple. Times were difficult and owing to their poor financial resources, members experienced great difficulty in contributing towards the payment of the land for the Temple. With determination and faith in God they worked towards the realisation of their objective and their efforts bore fruit when the land was finally freed and fully paid.

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In keeping with their customs and traditions, members felt the need for a place of worship. There was a burning desire to erect a temple on the land that was purchased for this purpose. The final product reflects the dexterity and craftsmanship of a master builder.

L. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WHITES

Mr Prag's relationship with his employer was almost distant. The whites were certainly absolute and their ideas were not to be challenged. The relationship between manager and labourer was not interfered with by the administration unless a really scandalous situation emerged. Mr Prag had never participated in any one of the major strikes. It is easy to analyse this statement: they remained apart racially. Further, there was no way in which they could leave the farm and contact anyone. So they were cut off from the main stream of politics. Whites resisted the introduction of any other group of settlers who might compete with them and possibly replace them as a class.

M. THE PRAG FAMILY

Mr Prag had six children. The first and succeeding generation of the Indian born to immigrant parents maintained their identities too, less strongly as Indians with direct contacts with their ancestral homeland. Their ties with the adopted country became firmer. The Prag family settled in New Hanover and remained there for many years after. With the death of Mr Prag, his family continued to maintain their faiths, principles and practices to perpetuate their identity.

N. CONCLUSION

The humble origins of the Indians should be remembered. Its significance is often overlooked by critics whose knowledge is confined to the wealthy and well educated; and who have no experience of the lower strata of India where the untouchables and ignorant lived, from which the bulk of Indians arrived. With the legal termination of slavery, there came no end to bondage upon the plantation. With the formal termination of indenture, there came no end to the unequal situation of the Indians. They arrived as Coolies, and in many people's eyes they are still Coolies. For slavery is both a system and an attitude of mind. Both the system and the attitude are with us still.

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

Serial Number	:	<u>167</u>
Colonial Number	:	<u>102017</u>
Date of Arrival	:	<u>16-01-1904</u>
Name of Ship	:	<u>S.S. PONGOLA</u>
Place of Registration	:	<u>—</u>
Date of Registration	:	<u>—</u>
Number in Register	:	<u>72</u>
Name	:	<u>PRAG</u>
Father's Name	:	<u>SHEONATH</u>
Age	:	<u>25 YRS</u>
Sex	:	<u>MALE</u>
Caste	:	<u>AHIR</u>
District	:	<u>BASTI</u>
Thanna/Taluq	:	<u>DOMARIAGANJ</u>
Village	:	<u>MOHANWA</u>
Height	:	<u>5'3"</u>
Bodily Marks	:	<u>SCAR LT. SIDE BACK</u>
Name of Next-of-Kin	:	<u>FATHER - SHEONATH</u>
Relations Accompanied	:	<u>WIFE ACCOMPANIED.</u>
Small Pox/Vaccinated	:	<u>VACCINATED.</u>
Remarks	:	<u>—</u>

Certified a true copy.


REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

