

PREFACE

I chose to research the history of Mr Dunsham Heminshell Singh, a senior resident of Shallcross, because I could not find enough information on either my paternal or maternal grandparents who arrived as indentured Indians to South Africa.

I interviewed Mr Dunsham Singh at his home in the Community Development flats in Zoutpansberg Loop in Shallcross. Partial Communal living is still practiced in the flats. I was frequently distracted and disturbed by the noise in the building, but Mr Singh did not detract from his narration. He was hospitable and willing to help. He has a good command of the English language. However, he was incoherent at times, and tended to be vague over some issues when his memory or hearing seem to fail.

Mr Singh was a prosperous farmer. He is now a pensioner. He walks a distance of about two and a half kilometres to a vacant plot which he has converted into a small nursery, to tend his seedlings.

There are no photographs of Mr Singh's grandparents or parents, because none were taken at the time. They were highly superstitious about being photographed. It was believed to be an enticement of early death.

My several attempts to verify Mr Singh's arrival on the S.S. Umona at the Indian Affairs Department were unsuccessful. I could not make a personal visit because of the inconvenient hours of office. I, therefore requested information through correspondence. I have not received a reply to date.

1983

D. Pillay

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P-R

MR DUNSHAM HEMINSHELL SINGH

Date of Birth: 27 September 1902.
Birth place : Valthavoor, South India.
Pass Number: 92545
File Number: 16599
Identity Number: 800 465565 A

BUS OWNERS ASSOCIATION - DURBAN
Pension No 31015/81
CONCESSION FARE PERMIT No 057
Date of issue 2/12/76
Mr./Mys.
DUNSHAM H. SINGH
Address
755 Flat 3.
Zoutpansberg Street
Shallcross
Is entitled to travel on buses which come under the jurisdiction of the Bus Owners Association at a concession of 50% of normal fares on Mondays to Fridays between 8.00 a.m. and 4.00 p.m. and Sundays & Public Holidays, in terms of an agreement between the Bus Owners Association & the Durban Association for the Indian Aged.
For Bus Owners Association
For Durban Association for the Indian Aged (W.O. 3011)
THIS PERMIT IS NOT TRANSFERABLE.
25 JUL 1977



Arrival: Passenger on the S.S. Umona. (infant)

Date of Arrival: March 1903.

Port of entry: Durban.

Accompanied by:

Grandmother: Kamala Bai - Arrived in 1860 as I.L.

Father : Ganesh Dhokul Singh - Born in Natal.

Mother : Dhanratan Bai

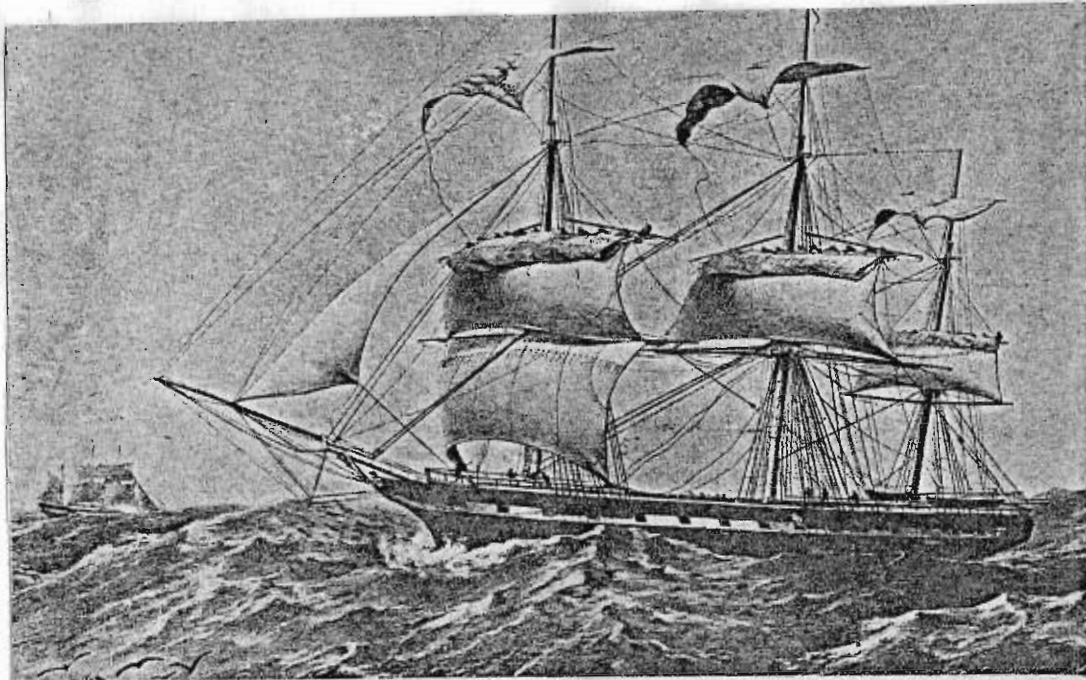
The majority of Indian South Africans are the descendants of indentured workers brought to Natal between 1860 and 1911 to develop the country's sugar production. Although land in Natal was suitable and money and experience were not lacking, labour was the greatest obstacle. The zulus were unsuitable because of their innate habits. The European's psychological attitude to labour, especially manual labour, caused a shortage of labour although the white population figure in 1850 was about 95 000 to 100 000.

The Natal Mercury (22:11:1860) recorded the landing of the Truro as a very remarkable sceneMost of the many spectators who were present had been led to expect a lot of dried, vapid and sleepy looking anatomies. They were agreeably disappointed. As the swarthy hordes came pouring out of the boat's hold, laughing, jabbering, and staring about them with a very satisfied expression of self-complacency on their faces, they hardly realised the idea one had formed regarding them or their faculties. ...Master Coolie seemed to make himself perfectly at home, and did not appear in the least disconcerted by the novelty of his situation. He looked about him with considerable animation, and very generally remarked that Natal was colder than Madras. ¹.

Mr Dunsham Singh's paternal grandparents, Dhokul and Kamala Bai Singh arrived on the third ship as indentured labourers to Natal in 1860. His father was born in Natal. He was "educated" and worked as a bookkeeper for 21 years in a wholesale firm - Dada Abdulla Imam . He couldn't find a suitable wife in Natal so he went to India, in 1901. He was unable to return to South Africa sooner than March 1903 because of the Anglo-Boer War. He married Dhanratan Bai daughter of Hanuman Singh, a magistrate in Pondyicherry. Their son, Dunsham was born on 27 September 1902 in Valthavoor in South India.

ARRIVAL:

Dunsham Singh arrived in South Africa when he was six months old with his grandmother, Kamala Bai, his father- Ganesh Dhokul Singh and his mother, Dhanratan Bai. He cannot recollect a reason, from the "tale" narrated by his grandmother, for the absence of his grandfather on this trip. According to his grandmother, they had travelled abroad a German sailing ship, the S.S. Umona, similar to the Hotspur below.



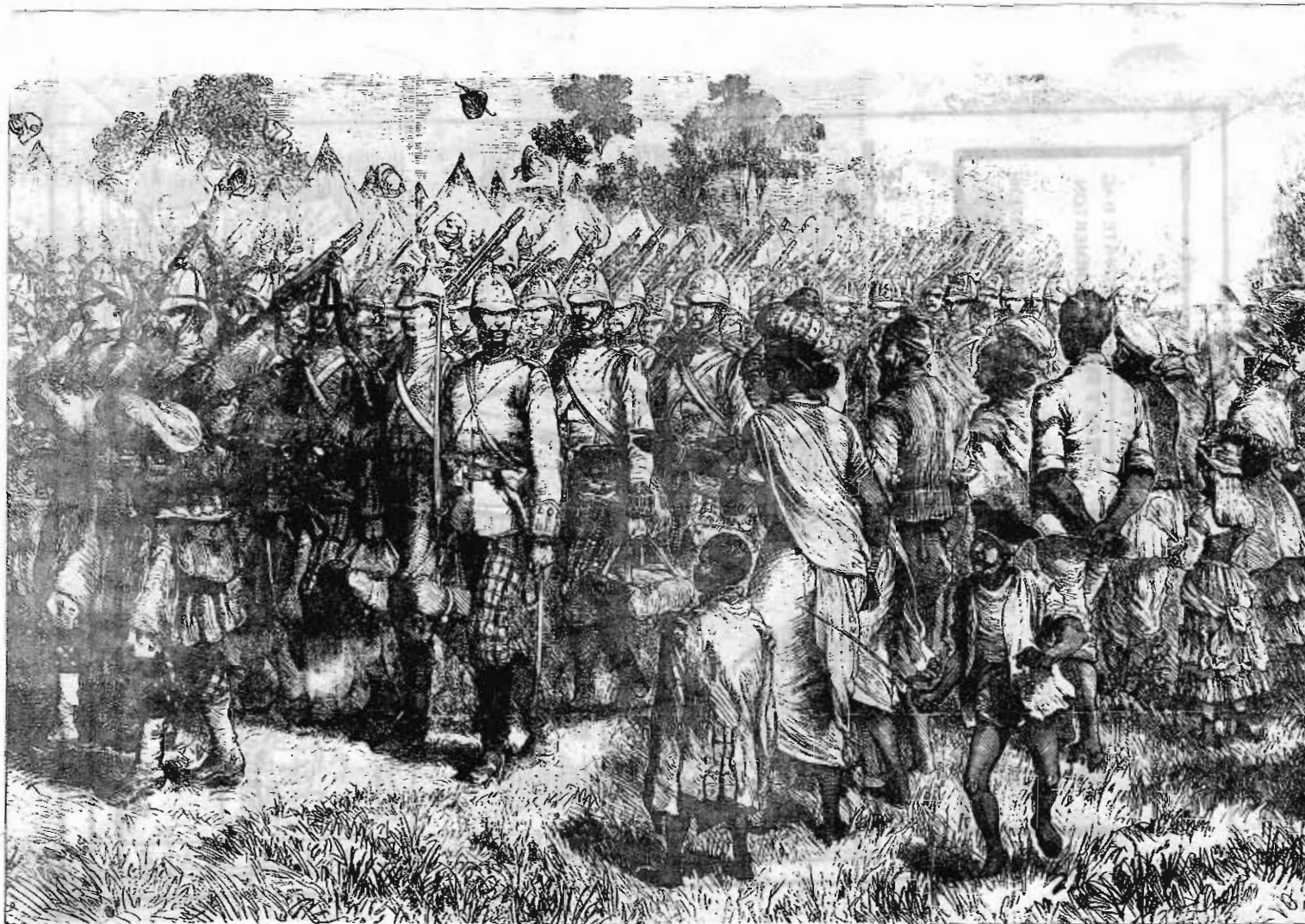
Courtesy National Maritime Museum
The Hotspur, in which James and Katharine sailed to South Africa

The ship which travelled through the Mozambique Channel to South Africa was caught in a very severe storm. The family was nearly swept off the ship. The grandmother used her sari to tie the members of the family securely to one of the masts, so that they may perish or survive together. There was panic, there were wailings and praying to be heard. Their fervent prayer for a safe landing was answered, when the ship docked safely in Durban in March 1903 .

The family had returned mainly for economic reasons. Mr Ganesh Dhokul Singh wanted to continue his work with the wholesale firm as a bookkeeper and his lucrative "side-line" business of selling imported commodities to the Indians. Dunsham's granny had left behind her farm, and hawking business.

On his arrival, Dunsham's father found himself unemployed. He had not returned within the contracted vacation leave of six months. He had been replaced. He therefore, sought the help and advice of Advocate, M.K. Gandhi. When Advocate Gandhi pointed out that the employer was within his rights to employ another bookkeeper, Dunsham's father out of chagrin, threatened to kill the advocate. The family settled in Durban and hawked fruits. Later, they moved to Pinetown where his parents started a farm.

The Early Indians in Natal.
The Zulu Wars had important bearing on the lives of Indians
in the country.



THE ZULU WAR—1879. The 91st Regiment leaving camp at Durban for the front.
By kind permission of the Illustrated London News Picture Library and courtesy of the Local History Museum, Durban.

Teacher's Centre
Springfield College of Education:

LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA:

In the year of Dunsham's arrival in Natal, important issues emerged: In 1903, the Natal Government extended the £3 tax to the children of indentured labourers.

C.B.De Gersigny and H.C. Shepstone were appointed commissioners to go to India in 1903. The exact points which the commissioners were required to discuss were:

1. Relaxation of recruiting restrictions in India.
2. Possibility of obtaining greater facilities to recruit labour for the mines of Natal; and
3. Modification of terms of indenture so as to secure termination of engagement in India.

The Indian Government wanted their subjects to be better treated.²

The general picture in Natal was that whereas the Government of Natal was urged by sugar and other industrial interests to ensure the continuance of the system of labour immigration from India; it was at the same time prevailed upon by European interests to oppose the untrammelled trading activities of Indians.³

The indentured labour system placed a responsibility on the authorities in Natal to ensure "fair" treatment of the labourers. It also meant the increase of the free Indian population in Natal, which in turn affected the trading activities in the country.

To dispel the opinion held against Indians, that they were "money-grabbing" local Indians through the motivation of M.K.Gandhi, served as non-combatants in an Indian Ambulance Corps, as stretcher bearers.

This service was given during the Anglo- Boer War between 1900-1914, and during the Zulu Rebellion in Natal in 1906.

FARMING AND HAWKING:

The Singh family had returned as "passengers" to Natal. They were able to pay for their passage from their savings as sugar labourers and later as farmers and hawkers in Natal. Cost of living was relatively low. They received rations of food. There were no pleasures- only work. They were able to rent and buy land relatively cheap in Sarnia. They owned thirty one acres of land in Sarnia which they farmed. By this time the "free" Indians had begun to compete with European Coastal farmers in the production of maize and vegetables and fruits.

Dunsham initially helped his father in their garden. Then he lived with his enterprising grandmother who was carrying on a lucrative business

2. B. Pachai. : The South African Indian Question

1860-1971. page 22.

3. Ibid. page 47.

in hawking, carrying her rough woven, heavily laden basket on her head. She was^a shrewd business woman. However disaster struck after her attempt to supply pineapples to a jam factory failed. (this incident could not be verified) Thirty acres were planted with pineapples. The crop could not be harvested in time to be taken to the jam-factory. The fruit was destroyed by beetles. This disaster resulted in bankruptcy.

Market gardeners secured the monopoly of supplying the Durban and Pietermaritzburg markets with vegetables. In 1885, of the 3711 Indian resident within the borough of Durban, about 2 000 had bought or rented land.⁴

In 1880, a magistrate of Durban observed:

Indians produced most of the vegetable consumed by Europeans... They pay high rents for land which would otherwise be unproductive to the owner. They are great cultivators of maize, tobacco and garden produce.⁵

C.P.Reynolds, a prominent sugar planter of Umzinto, giving evidence before the Lands Commission (1900-1902) stated that the Indians improved waste lands which Europeans would not use. He had himself given out lands on lease to Indians "which suffer terribly from drought and are not suitable for care". Another farmer said, "You will see the Indian and his wife, weeding his fields, even by moonlight."⁶

This industry and perseverance of our Indian people caused the value of the land to increase. What had previously been sold at twenty and thirty shillings an acre, rose to between eighty and one hundred shillings.

The land owned by the Singh family had been taken from them under the Group Areas Act. He now resides in a flat owned by the Shallcross Community Development and Services Board.

The asiatic issue restricting trade and residence to certain defined areas in the Transvaal arose as early as 1904. After the Anglo- Boer clash, the National Convention was convened in Pretoria in 1904 to deliberate over this segregation.

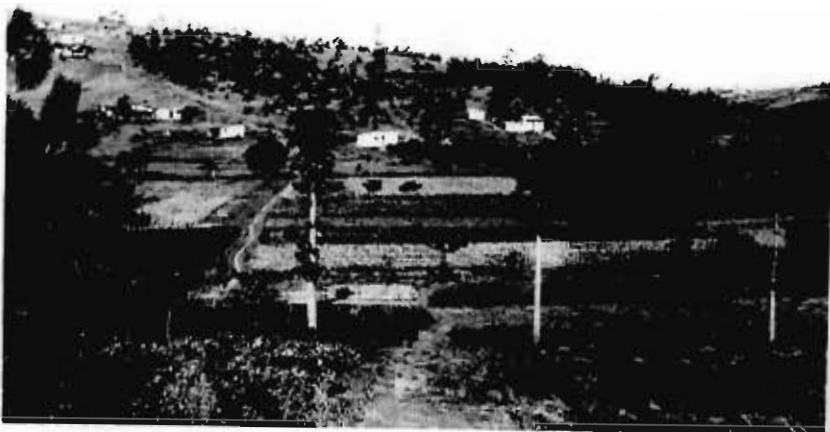
4. B. Pachai: The South African Indian Question 1860-1971. page 69.

5. Volume II of Natal Regional Survey: Studies of Indian Employment in Natal By the Dept. of Economics of the University of Natal Page 12.

6. B. Pachai : The South African Indian Question 1860-1971. page 275.

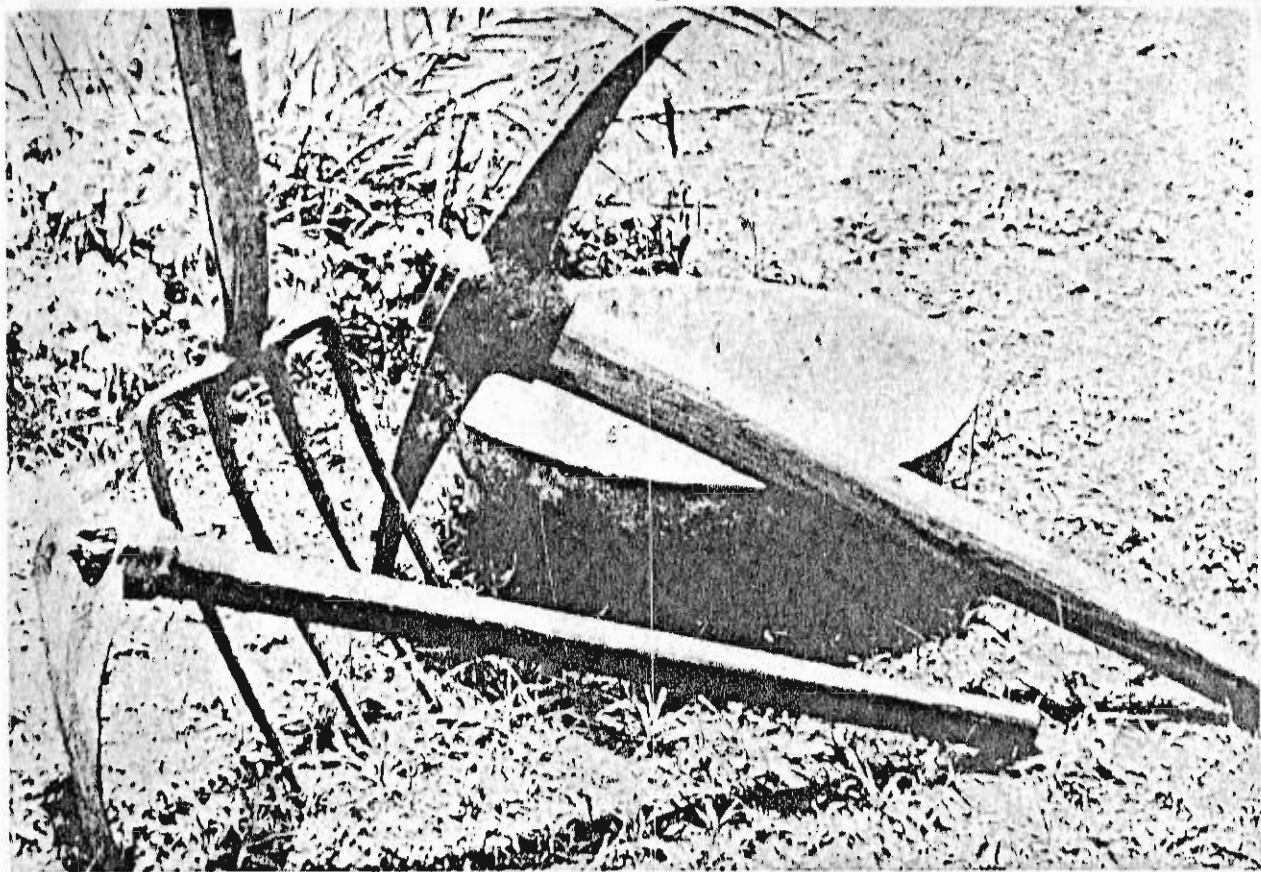


They worked from sunrise to sunset under bullying sirdars. They worked in gangs of about a hundred men. They planted, harvested, and transported the cane on shoulders to the mills.



The open skies and surrounding fields softened the appalling estates.

Pictures - through the kind courtesy of Durban Westville Documentation Centre.



Some of the early umplements issued to the Indentured labourers for use in their daily labours.

Source: The South African Sugar Journal.

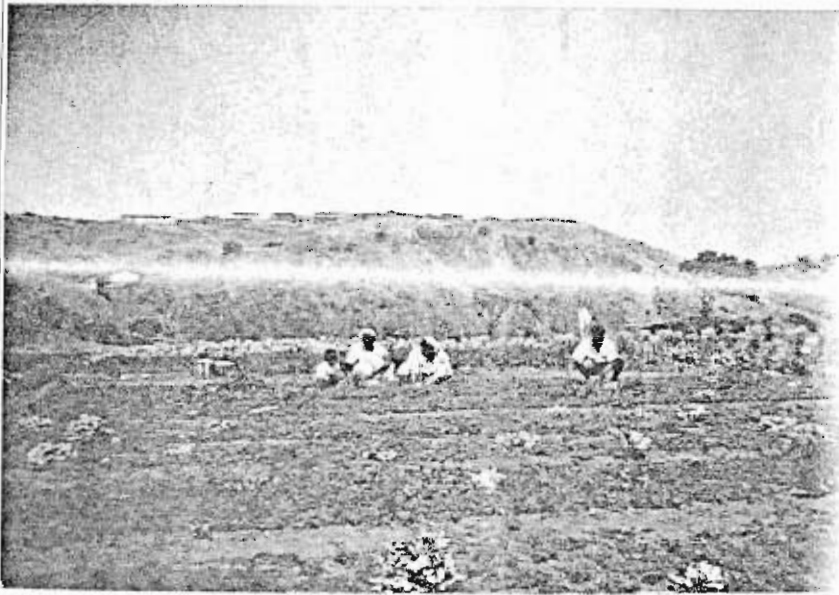


PLATE 2
Indian families at work in their gardens.

Source of Pictures: Natal Regional Survey vol II.

Dept. of Economics, University of Natal.

THE INDIAN FARMER

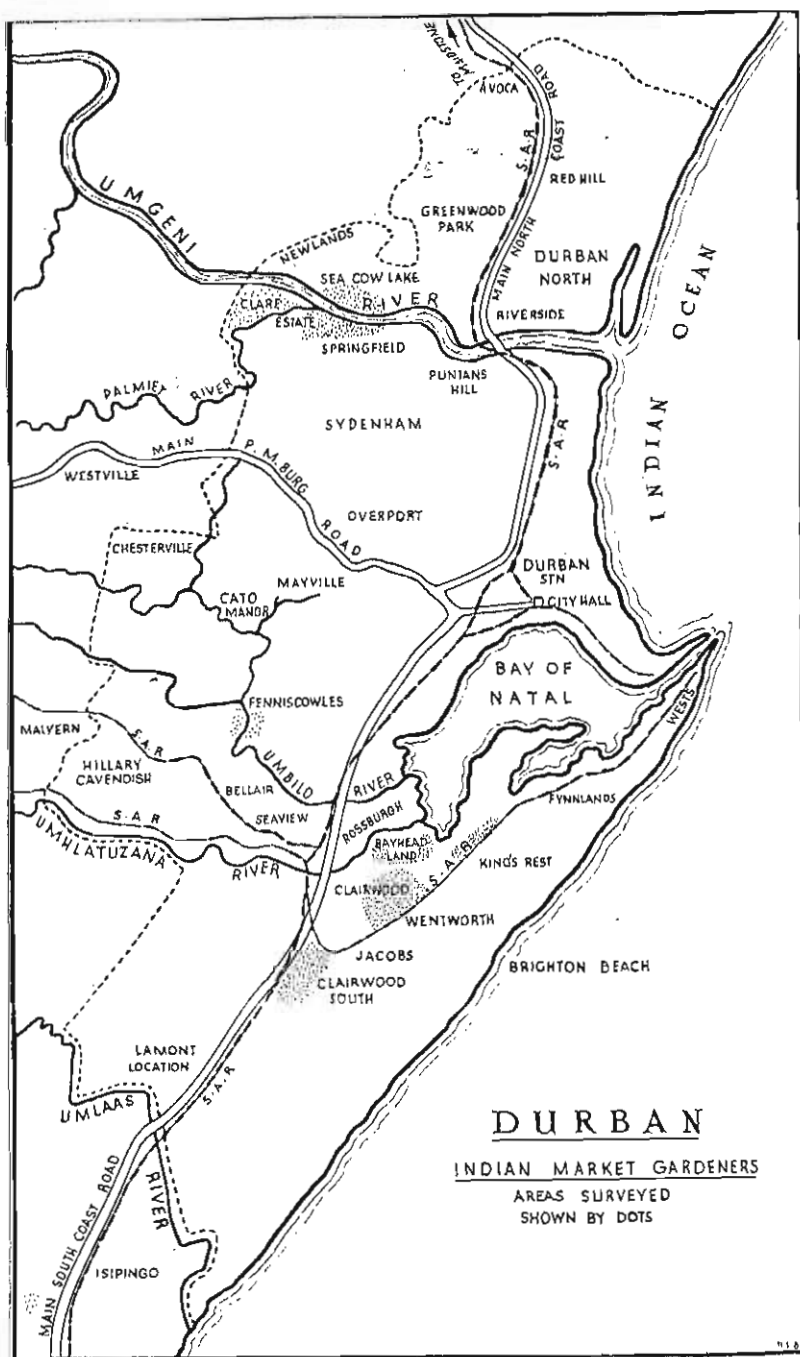


Indians worked on European Estates or cultivated on their own farms which were bought or rented.

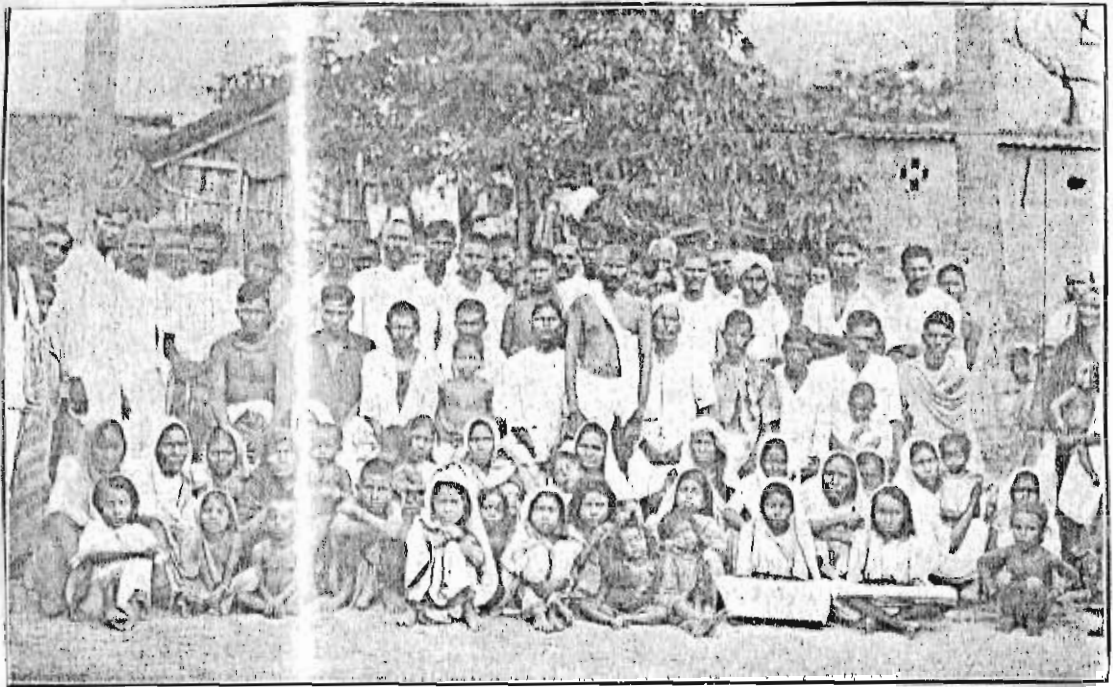


The Singh family grew pineapples on 30 acres of land.

Pictures by the kind courtesy of the Durban Westville Documentation Centre.



Source: Natal Regional Survey Vol II. - Indian Employment
in Natal - University of Natal.



Victims of assisted emigration scheme under Capetown Agreement in Calcutta



Some repatriates in Madras returned from South Africa under assisted emigration scheme

How they looked? According to The Natal Mercury: 22/11/1860.

They were a queer, very Oriental like crowd. The men with their huge muslim turbans, bare scraggy shin bones and coloured garments, the women with their flashing eyes, long dishevelled black hair and inquisitive glances, and the children with their meagre, intelligent faces.

Source of pictures: The South African Sugar Journal.

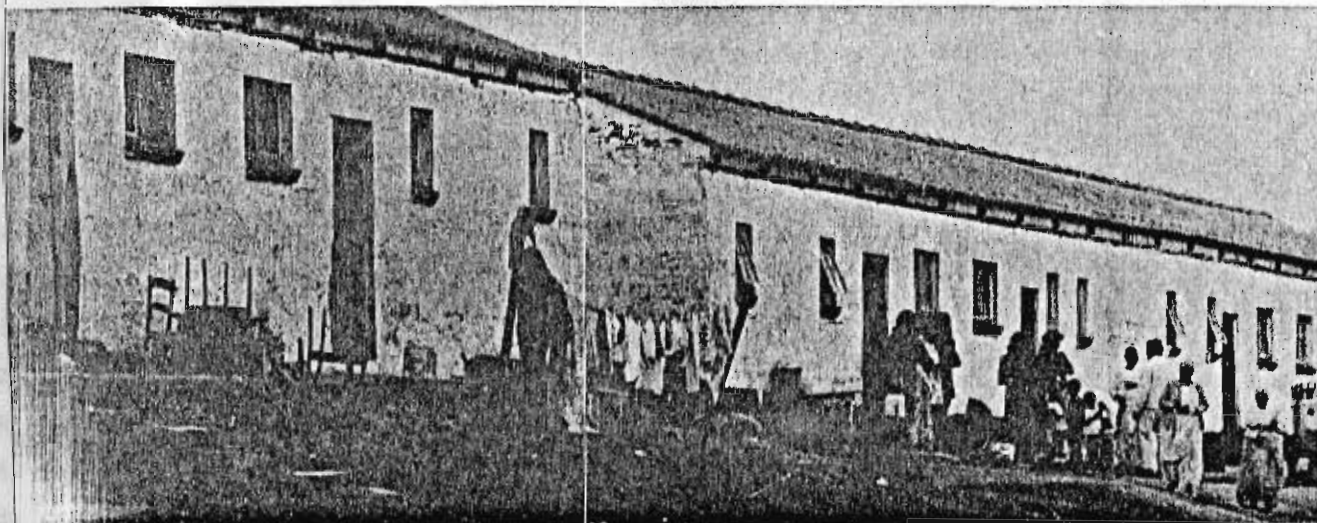


Living conditions were either barracks or dotted shacks with cultivated patches of land around them.

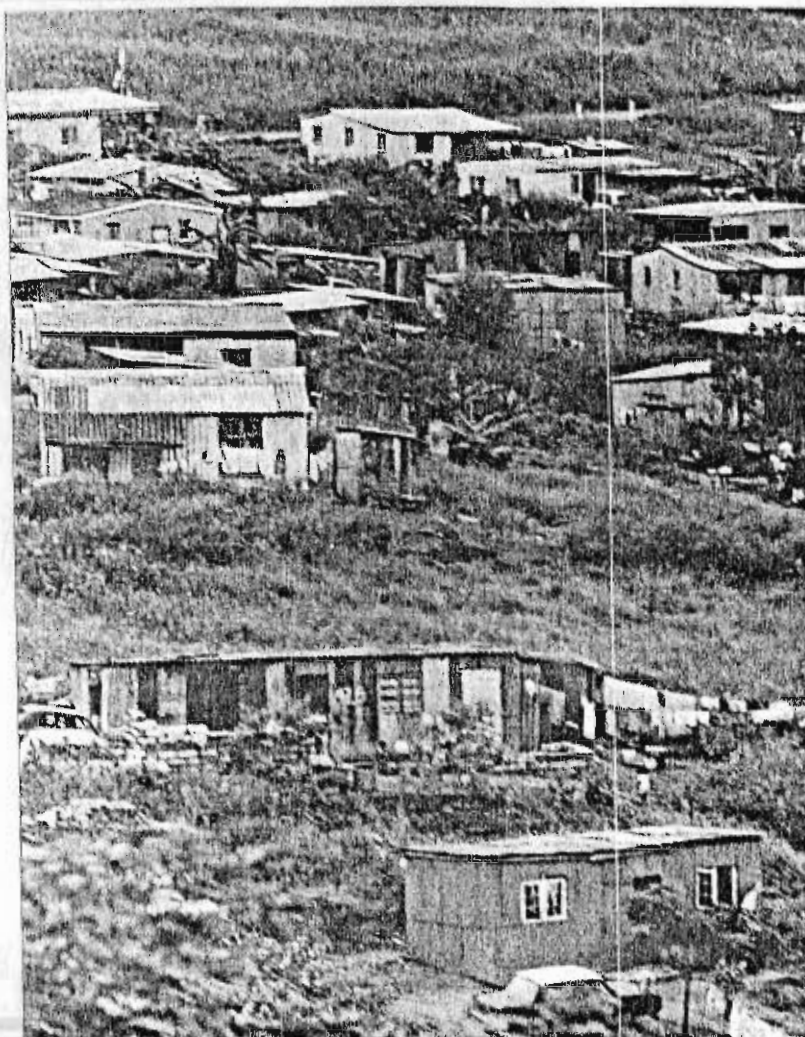
The picture above depicts the homes in the early fifties. Hulett's Refinery could be seen in the background.

Picture through the kind courtesy of the University of Durban Westville Documentation Centre.

CHANGES IN LIFESTYLES



Pictured above are the "barracks" erected in the early 1900's for Indian labourers. These "barracks" were, in later years, converted into homes for retired Indian labourers of the Natal Estates in Mount Edgecombe. The pensioners continue to live in these drab buildings which are to be demolished shortly to make way for the expanding Phoenix Township.



From the early barracks Indians soon began buying or leasing land and building their own homes. This was the trend in the thirties. One such area was Avoca, north of Durban.

The Marriage Certificate of

Dunsham Singh and Payineamma

Registered on the 14 January 1932 under Act 22 of 1914

Date of Marriage: 13 July 1930. - Sarnia, Natal.

Place of Birth: Valthavoor, India. and Sarnia, Natal.

5249-23/7/14-10,000 S

INDIAN MARRIAGE REGISTER

Form 35 (Health).

For the Registration, under Act No. 22 of 1914, of a Marriage contract in accordance with the Rites and Ceremonies of an Indian Religion.

No.	Date of Registration of Marriage.	Name of Parties.	Age or Approximate Age.	Race.	Usual Place of Residence at time of Registration.	Occupation.	Usual Place of Residence at time of Registration.	Date of Marriage.	Place of Marriage.	Indian Religion under Rites and Ceremonies whereof Married.
2/32	14/1/1932	DUNSHAM SINGH	29	Indian	Valthavoor, India.	Farmer	Sarnia, Natal.	13/7/1930	Sarnia, Natal.	Hindu
		PAYINEAMMA				Domestic	-do-		-do-	

Parties to the Marriage.

(Sgd) DUNSHAM SINGH

PAYINEAMMA, Her X Mark.

Witnesses

(Sgd) Y.M. M...

(Sgd) J.L. S...

I, the undersigned, do hereby certify that the above Marriage was, upon the application of the parties thereto, registered by me on the 14th day of January 1932, in the presence of the persons named as Witnesses, under and by virtue of the Indians' Marriage Act, No. 22 of 1914.



THE COPY

14 Rehulu

MARRIAGE OFFICER.

(Sgd) H.V. SON,

Magistrate

Actg. Magistrate

Marriage Officer.

Indian Magistrate

EDUCATION:

Dunsham Singh was educated in a "multi-racial school". The school was situated at the present Greenacres site in West Street. He left school after passing the Standard three examination.

According to the "Report On Indian Schools For 1886" by F. Colepeper Inspector of Indian Schools in Natal:

There are twenty - seven schools in the colony. The Durban school under Mr Troughton, has the largest attendance. It is the only school in which sewing and singing are systematically taught. The scholars acquitted themselves well in the examination. This school receives more supervision and attention generally than any dozen others. The highest grade offered was Standard four. Dunsham's " education" was considered to be of great importance by his grandmother who like so many other Indians in Natal realised that many of the problems of poverty confronting Indians in Natal were accentuated by ignorance.

There were very few trained teachers. Upon his leaving the Government School, Dunsham was approached by members of the community to teach at a private school for Indians in Sarnia. He taught for several years but left because the pay was not satisfactory.

He then worked as a wine steward and billard - marker at a local club . He visited India in May 1926 to seek his relatives. He travelled on the Karagola and returned in May 1927. On his return he started a nursery garden.

FAMILY:

He married Payineamma Thambiran on the 13 July 1930. She was born in Sarnia in Natal. The marriage was arranged by the parent and elders in the community. He has thirteen children, thirty nine grand children and eleven great grand children.

Major Incidents:

Dunsham did not take part in any political activities, but he recalls a letter he delivered to M.K.Gandhi from his father. He did not know its contents. He remembers the flooding of the Umgeni and the Connaught railway bridge being washed away. He recalls the tales told about the flooding of the Umbilo River. He has also seen the Indian workers strike and march to the Transvaal border. He had lost two of his sisters in an epidemic of influenza.

On the eleventh of March 1910, nearly three hundred Indians gathered on the Durban platform to see off a big batch of passive resistance recruits to the Transvaal. The transvaal Indians were themselves in the thick of the fight. Nearly a 100 were in custody at the time in Diepkloof Prison. A number were awaiting deportation, the worst form of punishment for the resisters. Among the deportees were people who were born in South Africa.⁸

Dunsham Singh remembers the excited discussions which were centred around the visit of the most important Indian Government official to South Africa on the 22 of October 1912. His grandmother told him about this great man. He was Professor Gopal Krishna Gokhale who successfully moved the resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council, to discontinue indentured labour to Natal.

CONCLUSION:

Although Dunsham Singh is not in a position to recall many historical events in his life. His life has been one of rich experience and perseverance. He belongs to a race of stalwart spirited people from whom we have inherited a very rich history.

SOURCE LIST:

1. Robert F. Osborn : Valiant Harvest
The South African Sugar Association 1964.
2. Bridglal Pachai : The South African Indian Question:
1860 -1971
3. Volume II of Natal Regional Survey : Studies Of Indian
Employment In Natal
Dept. of Economics -University of Natal.
4. Y.S. Meer et al: Documents Of Indentured Labour Natal
1851-1917.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Pictures: Documentation Centre University Of Durban Westville.