

KAJA SAIB : FOCUS ON AN INDIAN PIONEER

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REGISTRATION NO: 16971

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PREFACE

There is a certain continuity about life that was quite evident a few decades ago, but more and more frequently individuals have begun to feel lost and these individuals possess vague ideas of their past, their parents' past and more important the past of their grandparents.

Thus the new generation experiences a widening chasm that separates these individuals from their origins and leaves them in a state of suspension in history. He cannot therefore look back at a "Golden Past" a facet that is quite an integral element of one's culture.

As Indians, our past is rich with the experiences and exciting adventures of our fore-fathers during their journey to South Africa and their stay here under a foreign government and a foreign law. The Indians have, since in those early days, established themselves so well that they have assumed an integral position in our present day South African society.

Thus I feel grateful to people who conceived such an original project as this. It provided me with an opportunity to breach the gap in my knowledge about my ancestors who came in the nineteenth century. In completing this project, I achieved a sense of personal gratification although I was not able to gather sufficient information about my subject, who is incidently dead.

My choice was my maternal grandfather who was known as Shaik Khaja Saib. I carried out the research into his life in Chatsworth. All the information obtained about him was through the technique of dialogue with various people who knew Mr Saib. Thus the research into his life consisted of interviews. I had also compiled a questionnaire

more as a means of prompting memories so as to allow for as spontaneous a dialogue as possible. When questions were directly addressed to my interviewees, they tended to talk "less freely" as they assumed that I sought for "hard" facts.

I experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining documents and my attempts were quite fruitless. Hence the dates of events are quite doubtful and difficult to ascertain. The fact that Mr Saib's children were scattered far and wide and that most of Mr Saib's close relatives are dead, posed a further hindrance and limited my sources of information.

INTRODUCTION

The Indians are the only part of the population of Natal that came by special and urgent invitation. They consisted basically of two groups: the "passenger" Indians amongst whom were many traders and the other group consisted of those who arrived as Indentured Labourers. Under the Indentured Labour system, Indians signed a five-year contract to work on sugar estates in Natal.

The first batch of Indians came on the ship, the "Truro", on the seventeenth of November 1860. Nineteen other ships followed bringing six thousand other people of whom more than two-thirds were men. The Indians brought as Indentured Labourers came from Madras and Calcutta the only two seaports from which ships bound for South Africa left from India. Many left their brothers and sisters, their wives and children and their relatives and their land of birth behind to seek a new and better life in a foreign place where they anticipated better prospects.¹

Many of the women who came were of remarkable courage and ability for although they were torn from their mother-country, they managed to retain religious practices and family units. Many of the grandsons of indentured labourers are today great professional men.²

The sugar planters were delighted with this labour force. The "Natal Mercury" made headlines about it. Some of the planters objected to women who could not work in the fields. The Colonists showed little compassion to the immigrants who were just "hands" and no more. The government on the other hand did not recognize Indian marriages, made little or no provision for Indian interpreters and medical attention was very inadequate. The government provided only a few

schools which had no qualified teachers.

Many of the labourers deserted and they were re-employed by other planters. Because deserters could not be identified they were hardly ever taken to court. Some of the planters took the law into their own hands and flogged and fired their workers and sometimes the punishment was too harsh. Magistrates also found it difficult to be fair to Indian labourers as the sugar planters were very influential people.³

It must be admitted that in the first six years of Indentured labour, Natal failed to look after the immigrants. The only people that did much to help the Indians were the Methodists who began their Indian Mission under the Reverend Ralph Stott in Ceylon in 1862.⁴

Although many people were trying to settle down they were much better off than others in India and after a time they even found it possible to celebrate their customary festivals.

Indian Immigration ceased in 1865. After the five year indentures were completed "free" Indians were able to demand for ^{better treatment for} labour outgrew the supply. Others moved away and became artisans, cooks, domestic servants and tailors. Still others leased or bought land and became suppliers of fruit and vegetables. Some opened shops. Thus they became integrated into the structure of Natal's economy.⁵

One such Indentured Labourer who left his very own impression in South Africa was Kaja Saib.

EARLY LIFE - INDIA

Our focus of attention dramatically shifts to India, more specifically Hyderabad⁶ where our hero was born in 1877. He was born to a family who belonged to the caste Malyalam.⁷ He had two older brothers of the names of Cassim and Rahamath and he had two sisters.⁸ Everyone in the family possessed grey-green eyes. Their occupation, as their lowly caste Malayalam, indicates, was one where they milked the only two cows the family possessed and sold the milk to obtain an income. Thus the Saib family led a sussistence life-style, barely keeping themselves alive.⁹

Kaja Saib remembered India as a land of stark contrasts. On the one hand he remembered the world of tightrope walkers and Indian dancers and on the other hand his memory was marred by visions of people committing suicide on railway lines, people who were dissillusioned with life and its laws of survival.¹⁰ Gradually, Saib became dissillusioned too and he desired a better standard of living. He was an illiterate and there were thousands of others like himself who had a bleak future in India. As if in answer to his hopes and prayers, news arrived of a free passage to a new land where whealth flowed in abundance. Here was his opportunity and a chance of a life-time, to change a traditional way of life in an exciting and adventurous manner. Secretly he made preparations to leave for the port of Madras where, he had heard, the ships departed bound for South Africa. A few days later he left and neither his family nor his relatives were to lay eyes on him ever again.¹¹

The port of Madras teemed with people milling about, boarding ships. Saib made his way through the people and boarded one of the ships. He could not read the ship's name as he was illiterate like thousands of his fellow men. The journey overseas was a totally new experience

for Saib and he often wondered what awaited him in South Africa. The squalid living conditions on the ship claimed many a victim on a journey that seemed endless and after weeks and weeks of sailing they eventually arrived.

SOUTH AFRICA

On disembarking Saib and his newly established friends were hustled to government offices where they were signed into a five year contract to work on the sugar fields. Little were they to realize what really lay in store for them!

Saib found himself attached to a batch of bewildered labourers on a sugar estate owned by a European man. He later learnt that he was in Zululand, more specifically Empangeni.¹² He worked long hours in the sugar fields and he led a hard life. But he realized that the potential for improving one's life-style was higher in South Africa than in India. Therefore when his contract expired he chose to remain in South Africa.

MARRIAGE

A few years later he began work in Eshowe¹³ as a tractor driver on another sugar estate called Gage Cottage.¹⁴ His life took a dramatic turn at this point. He met Meera Bi, who worked as a servant for Saib's employers, and later Meera Bi and Saib married and began a family. Saib fathered nine children at Eshowe. His first child died.¹⁵ The others were Essop, Khayroon, Rassool Bi, Doulat, Mohmeen, Fathima, Suleiman and Adam.

Before 1940 Saib and his family lived in Zululand.¹⁶ By this time Saib realized that there were better prospects for everyone near the

city of Durban. By the end of 1940 Saib had moved house to Clairwood. Meera Bi was pregnant and the child was due in 1941. Saib easily established himself with the company of Huletts as a Boilerman¹⁷ in control of the machinery that separated sugar from treacle. Not surprisingly he still maintained ties with the sugar industry and had not sought openings in other flourishing industries.

For the first time Saib experienced what it was to work various shifts. Every week, the shifts assigned to people were rotated. The morning shift began at 6 a.m. and terminated at 2.00 p.m., the afternoon shift extended from 2.00 p.m. till 10 p.m. and the night shift dragged on from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m.

CHARACTER

Kaja Saib enjoyed his spare time with a variety of activities. He loved relaxing on a stretcher out in the backyard of his Clairwood home and sunbathing. He was a very fatherly figure and a devoted parent. He was extremely conservative in the upbringing of his children. Before he took to smoking a pipe, he smoked cigarettes that were hand made. His young daughters always fought over the privilege to make his cigarettes for him. Saib enjoyed porridge and chutney.

A humble, timid person, Saib led a quiet life. Although he was a Muslim he did not consider religion as all important. He made frequent visits to the horse races being a regular punter.

He was extremely adept with the Indian languages of Tamil, Hindi, Telegu and Urdu.¹⁸ He also spoke Zulu, an important asset in South Africa as he could not communicate in the English language.

BIRTH

Meera Bi gave birth to twins on 5 May 1941. They were christened Zora Bi and Zubeida Bi. But Zora was separated from Zubeida and brought up by an uncle and aunt who had desired daughters but had failed to conceive any. Zora entered a wealthy family and received a good education at the school of Tongaat High. At the age of twelve in 1953 she lost her mother, a victim of cancer. Seven years later with the death of her father, Fathima (Zora) was reunited with her twin sister Zubeida. A few months later, on 12 June 1960 she married Abdul Razak Sayed.

Kaja and Meera Bi Saib conceived two more childre, Kulsum and Bharkath, and the latter assumed the position of the favourite child.

All in all Kaja and Meera Bi had thirteen children and at present seventy grandchildren.

Saib and his wife moved for the last time from Whitehall in Clairwood to Silverglen in Chatsworth. He retired in 1963 from Huletts. In 1965, after his third stroke, Kaja Saib died.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Brookes and Webb : History of Natal, p. 87.
2. Brookes and Webb : History of Natal, p. 88.
3. Brookes and Webb : History of Natal, p. 88.
4. Brookes and Webb : History of Natal, p. 89.
5. Brookes and Webb : History of Natal, p. 88.
6. Fakir Mahomed Bux, Khayroon Bi Rajab, Rassool Bi Shaik and Kulsum Bi Russel.
7. Malyalam is indicative of a caste of people who earn a living by milking cows.
8. Kulsum Bi Russel could only give me very scanty information of Kaja Saib's relatives.
9. Fakir Mahomed Bux, Khayroon Bi Rajab, Rassool Bi Shaik and Kulsum Bi Russel.
10. Kulsum Bi Russel and Rassool Bi Shaik.
11. His age and date of departure are doubtful for lack of information.
12. F.M. Bux, K.B. Rajab, R.B. Shaik and K.B. Russel.
13. The reasons and circumstances under which he left are doubtful.
14. F.M. Bux and K.B. Rajab.
15. The reason for the child's death is unknown.
16. F.M. Bux, K.B. Rajab, R.B. Shaik, K.B. Russel, Suleiman Saib and Fathima Abdul Razak.
17. F.M. Bux, K.B. Rajab, R.B. Shaik, K.B. Russel and Suleiman Saib.
18. F.M. Bux, K.B. Rajab, R.B. Shaik, K.B. Russel and Suleiman Saib.

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

I am grateful for the assistance of all those who helped me. I am especially indebted to Mr Fakir Mohamed Bux of Umhlatuzana, Khayroon Bi Rajab of Silverglen, Rassool Bi Shaik of Crossmoor, Kulsum Bi Russel of Bayview, Suleiman Saib of Silverglen and Fathima A. Razak of Risecliff.

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QUESTIONNAIRE (A GUIDE)

1. How well did you know Kaja Saib?
2. Where and when was he born?
3. Why and when did he leave India?
4. Where did he first work?
5. Where else did he obtain employment?
6. When did he get married?
7. What was his social status?
8. Describe his character, his social, religious and political activities.
9. How and when did he die?
10. Do you know of any special experiences that Kaja Saib had during his life?