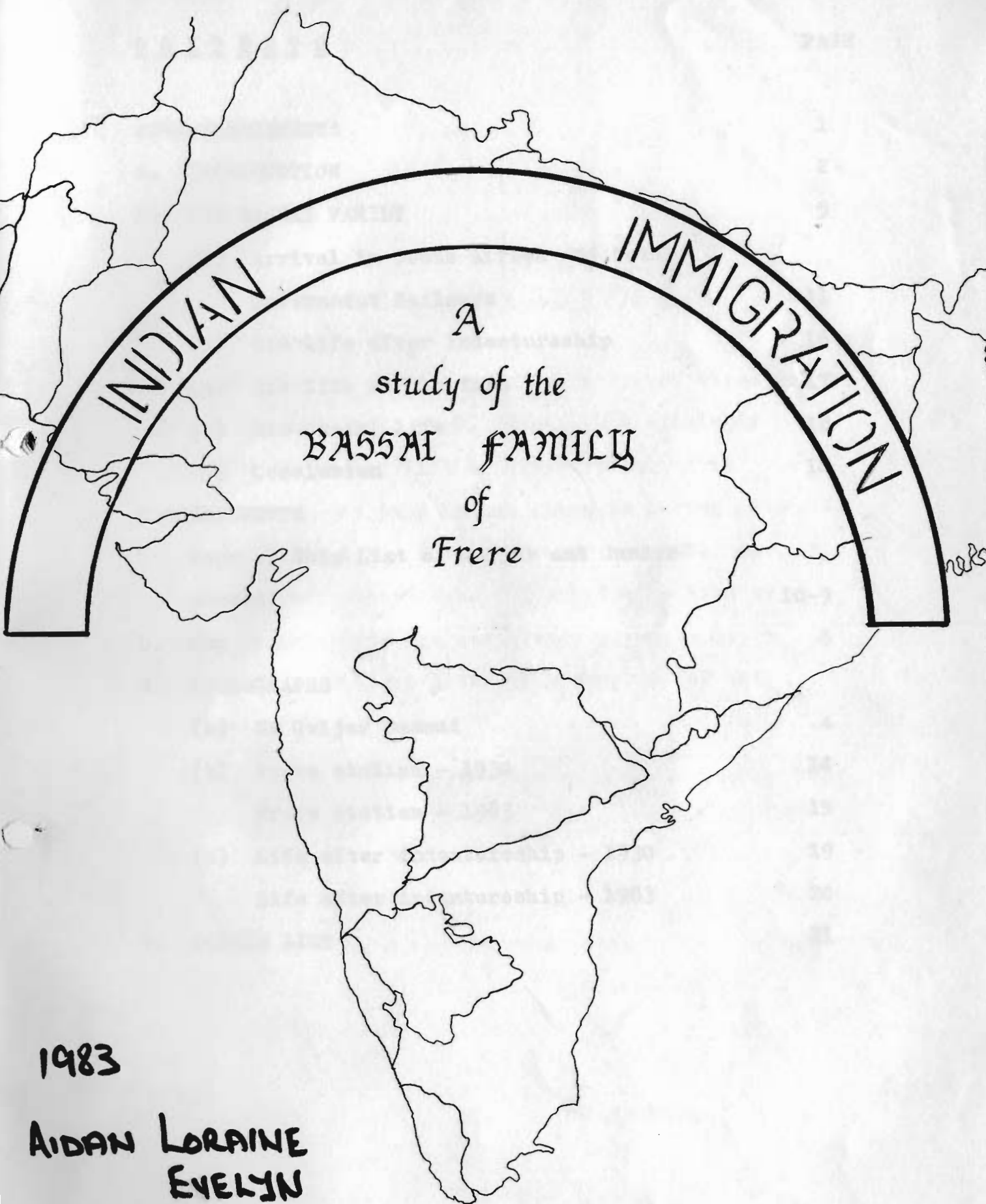




1983

AIDAN LORRAINE
EVELYN

16786

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

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Mr G. Bassai's son, Mr **B.** Bassai, who willingly unfolded to me the life of his parents. I am grateful for the time he has given me during which I could conduct the interview, the provision of documents and photographs. I would also like to place on gratitude the assistance given to me by Ravinraj and the provision of transport for the various trips to Frere.

A. INTRODUCTION

The first shipload of indentured labourers from India arrived on 16 November 1860 on the *Truro* in Durban harbour. By 1890 nearly 40,000 Indians were imported as indentured labourers. There was to use Sir W.W. Hunter's phrase a condition of semi-slavery. One must agree with Tinker's assessment that the average Indian who immigrated knew absolutely nothing about the place he was going to.

Immigration began because of the need for labour and it started in 1860 at the instance of the European settlers arrival and their possession of vast virgin lands ideal for tea, coffee and sugar cane plantations but lacked manpower. After the establishment of the first sugar cane industry by Edward Morward in 1857, it marked the beginning of a serious labour problem. The negro could not be compelled to work after the abolition of slavery. The Africans were not suitable because of their tradition and they had to be away for at least four months to farm their own land. Other means were tried, for example, Chinese labour, young men from England, but each attempt was a dismal failure.

News reached them that the system of indentured labour particularly from India was already well established in the Empire and Mauritius and West Indian colonies, and

/ revealed.....

3

revealed substantial benefits from indentured labour and this proved to be a temptation for South Africa. The government of India was therefore approached by the Europeans of Natal for Indian labourers. Recruiting agents toured some of the poorest and most congested areas and painting rosy prospects of work in Natal was a temptation for the people. Various incentives, example free passage, free board and lodging and a wage of 10 shillings a month were offered.

Not all migrations were motivated by common disasters or attractions, but rather some because of personal circumstances, domestic tensions, the urge to escape an epidemic, general restlessness or despair, a desire to improve their lot and for adventure, relief and from personal tragedy or misfortune.

Law 14 of 1859 provided the government and individuals to get labour from India. Labour was recruited from two main areas. At first, mainly embarking from Calcutta and mostly Hindi speaking. Secondly, Madras and they were Tamil and Telegu speaking. Labourers came singly leaving behind family and cut off their roots from India as they failed to retain contact. Natal Mercury describing those who arrived said they were not all field labourers, but included household and domestic servants, mechanics, trade people and gardeners.



FOREGROUND: MR GULJAR BASSAI

B. THE BASSAI FAMILY

It is the aim of the project to unfold the circumstances surrounding the life of an Indentured labourer, including his reasons for leaving India, arrival in South Africa, life as a worker and his life after indentureship. For this purpose I have choosen the Bassai family of Frere.

1. LIFE IN INDIA AND REASON FOR LEAVING

Guljar Bassai was born in the year 1877 in the village of Kusuir, in the district of Gadu, U.P. India. From the time Guljar can remember, India was experiencing serious economic problems. He related how British capitalism both created the demand for labour and the economic conditions in India that impelled labour to emigrate.

India had developed an advanced pre-industrial economy. Traditional pattern of relations were imposed by English landed system with private property in land, its sale and alienation. The disruption thus began was furthered by the incursion into the Indian economy of English manufacturing capitalism. The conflict was not simply occassioned by the impact of new industrial techniques upon older manufacturing processes. The technologically advanced method of production was not applied in India

/ but.....

but in Britain, where the manufacturing interest wielded sufficient power to protect themselves against Indian manufacturing and later to force the Indian market to stay open to their own. The result was unemployment and poverty and a drift back to the villages only to find further disruption there and to add to the pressure on the land and to increase fragmentation.

The growing impoverishment of the peasantry occasioned by the cumulative process of capitalist penetration and colonial exploitation had reached serious proportions. The impact of the land taxes and the destruction of villages upset the balance within the villages and as the Bassai family had owned land, they too were hard hit, and to add insult to injury, famines became progressively more frequent. In the first half of the nineteenth century there had been seven famines resulting in an estimated $1\frac{1}{2}$ million deaths. There were sharp increases in immigration following the famines in India. As Hugh Tinker writes, "There is a clear correlation between the years when the departures were heavy and the times when the harvests were poor".¹ He goes on to point out that in 1860 when a famine was experienced in North-western Provinces, departures from Calcutta were 17 899 and in 1861 it was 22 600.

/ The

1. Tinker H, A new system of slavery, pp 118-119

The Bassai family was very large and there was a need for the children to go out and work. So Guljar Bassai left home at the age of 16 years and wandered from district to district in search of some kind of employment. In the process of job hunting he came to Calcutta where he heard about the recruiting of labourers to South Africa. He had no alternative but to come to South Africa. He could not go back to the village because there were already millions of debt ridden peasants and landless "cultivators". The unemployed artisans, craftsmen, landless labour and peasants driven off the land of increasing fragmentation and people in debt, were the ones that formed the core of those who went out of India as migrant labourers.

And in support with the information given , I wish to quote the Secretary of Colonies when he said in the House of Commons that the indenture system was intended to provide occupation to a "vast population cultivating the soil, plunged in debt, having little hope for the future and having no security against the calamities of constantly recurring famines".¹

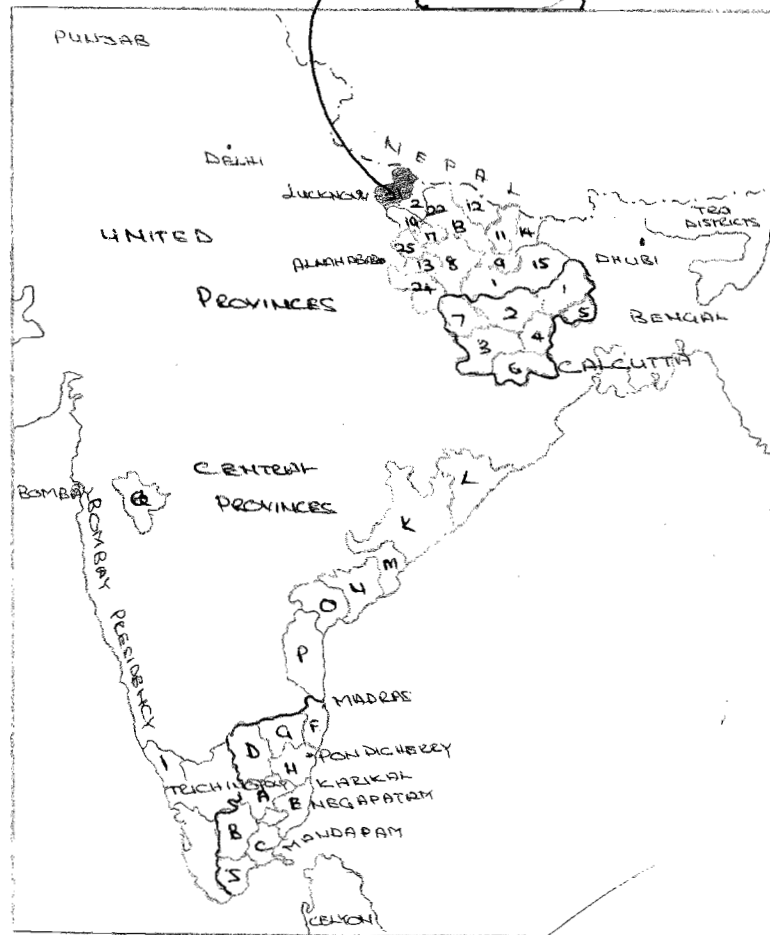
1. Hansard, Vol CCXXV, 1852-1859, quoted Narain, pl.

PORTS OF EMBARKATION

MADRAS - leading ports.

Kanikal - lesser ports.

Delhi - collecting centres.



DISTRICTS OF THE UNITED PROVINCES

- | | |
|------------------|--------------|
| 16. Ballia | 24. Mirzapur |
| 17. Ghazipur | 25. Saunpur |
| 18. Azamgarh | |
| 19. Fyzabad | |
| 20. Basti | |
| 21. <u>Gonda</u> | |
| 22. Gorakhpur | |
| 23. Benares | |

59/12/560

D.I. 336.

Revenue/Inkomste 516.



COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS.

AFSKRIF VAN SKEEPSLYS VAN INDIËRIMMIGRANTE.

No. 006

Ship
Skip *S. S. Umzinto*Date of arrival at Natal
Datum van aankoms in Natal *29th March, 1895*Name
Naam *Guljar Bassai.*Official No.
Amptelike No. *58311.*Age on Arrival
Ouderdom by aankoms *18 yrs.*Sex
Geslag *male*Height
Lengte *5' 3"*Father's name
Naam van vader *Guljar.*Mother's name
Naam van moeder *—*Next of kin
Naasbestaandes *—*If married, to whom
Indien getroud, met wie *—*To whom allotted
By wie ingeboek *—*District
Distrik *Birpur.*Caste
Kaste *Husur.*Body marks
Liggaamsmerke *Scar below right calf.*Smallpox or vaccinated
"okkies of geënt *vaccinated.*Iced a true copy.
ifiseer 'n-juiste afskrif.Stamp.
mstempel.

 Protector of Indian Immigrants.
Beskermër van Indiërimmigrante.

D.I. 336.

Revenue/Inkomste 516.



COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS.

AFSKRIF VAN SKEEPSLYS VAN INDIËRIMMIGRANTE.

005

Ship
Skip *S. S. Pongola.*

Date of arrival at Natal
Datum van aankoms in Natal *6th December 1948*

Name
Naam *Sundor.*

Official No.
Amptelike No. *75610.*

Age on Arrival
Ouderdom by aankoms *19 yrs.*

Sex
Gesl. *Female.*

Height
Lengte

Father's name
Naam van vader *Laiik.*

Mother's name
Naam van moeder

Next of kin
Naasbestaandes *Mardial - Brother.*

If married, to whom
Indien getroud, met wie

To whom allotted
By wie ingeboek

Taluk
Provinsie *Katawali.*

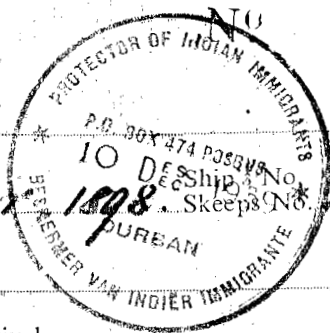
District
Distrik *Karrakhabad.*

Village
Dorp *Gowaltoly.*

Caste
Kaste *Jat.*

Boo, marks
Liggaamsmerke *Scar*

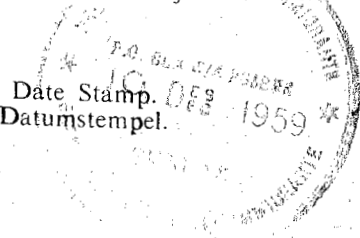
Smallpox or vaccinated
Pokkies of geënt *Vaccinated.*



Certified a true copy
Gesertifiseer "n juiste afskrif

Date Stamp
Datumstempel

P. B. T. J.
Protector of Indian Immigrants.
Beskermmer van Indiër-immigrante.



2. ARRIVAL IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NATAL GOVERNMENT RAILWAYS

(a) Arrival

Before Guljar left India he was married but during his long stay away from his wife, he met another women, whom he loved very dearly. She promised to meet him in South Africa. Guljar arrived on 29 March 1895 at the age of 18 years, from Calcutta, on the SS Umzinto (ship No. 274) which docked in Durban harbour, Natal.

By 1895, South Africa was still experiencing a serious labour problem that began in the 1800. The area where labour was desperately needed was in the railways. He was contracted to the Natal Government Railways for the first five years. Sundor Laik, his lover, arrived in South Africa on 6 December 1898, on the SS Pongolo (ship No. 118), the age of 19 years. Guljar made a trip to Durban where he met and married her in the Durban court. She remained in Durban where she was employed as a domestic servant in the Sydenham area. Guljar Bassai was stationed on the railway line between Ladysmith and Moorriver in Northern Natal.

(b) Natal Government Railways

/ This.....

This document indicates the need for labour in the railways;

DOCUMENT 59: Fourth Session, 12th Council, 1888, LC. No. 3

Honourable Member of Durban County, Mr Stainbank, wanted information on the subject of obtaining labour for the Railway Extension. Reply by Legislative Council office, Natal, 2 August 1888. The Colonial Engineer replied: ".....having the greatest difficulty in finding sufficient labour for carrying on the work in connection with the Railway Extensions....Resident Engineer found it necessary to employ as many Indians as he could"

In this way Guljar Bassai came to be contracted to the Natal Government Railways. The Indians that came were distributed as follows:-

General farming	6 149
Sugar Estates	7 006
Coalmines	3 239
Tea Estates	1 722
Natal Government Railways	2 371
Domestic servants	1 949
Corporations	1 062
Brick yards	740
Wattle plantations	606
Landing and shipping agents	422
Miscellaneous	313

/ Guljar.....

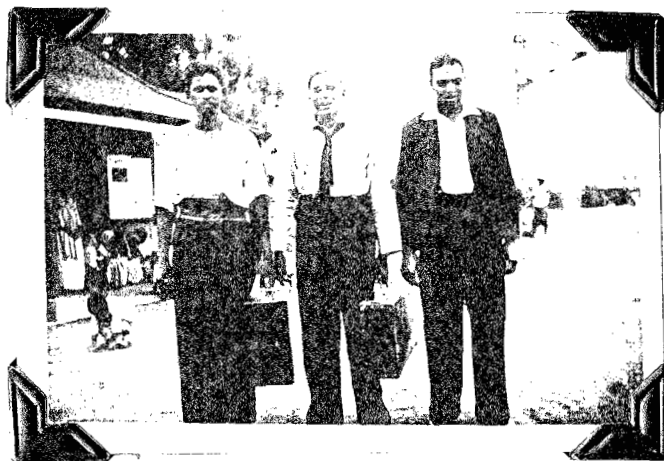
Guljar Bassai, with the assistance of 6 mules and 3 trolleys made return journeys between Moorriver and Lady-smith, delivering South African goods, daily. He was employed for a period of 5 years with a salary of 10 shillings (R1) a month. He received no increase although there was supposed to be an increase of 1 shilling a year. There could be reductions in wages because of "absence from the roll call", "neglect of work" or "disobedience". They were confined to an area of within one mile of the boundary.

During the latter part of the indentureship, he was relieved from the journeys made and instead he was responsible for some clerical work in the station in Frere.

FRERE - 1980



Mr B. Bassai (son) stands in front of
one of the many trains that used to
be stationed in Frere station.



Mr G. Bassai's sons photographed at
Frere station on the 6 March 1937.

Frere 1983



LEFT: The new Railway Line.

RIGHT: Old Railway line used by Guljar to make daily trips between Ladysmith and Moorriver - during indentureship to Natal Government Railways

The tin structure served as the station. Here Guljar worked as a clerk during the latter part of his indentureship.



Part of the new station but the platform is where Guljar and Sundor waited when they decided to go back to India.

3. HIS LIFE AFTER INDENTURESHIP

After the completion of his indentureship, he joined his wife who returned from Durban. Together they resided on a farm where Guljar was employed as a farm hand. They were given a small dwelling and a small piece of land to farm on. During one sowing season, he and his wife, together with a horse and plough, planted maize. The crop was a great success and he sold the maize for 300 pounds.

He then decided to go back to India, so they packed their belongings and made their way to the Frere station. While waiting for the train, Sunlor decided not to return because she was afraid that Guljar would return to his first wife. She put the idea forward to Guljar and he reviewed the decision taken and taking into account the economic conditions of India, he too decided against returning to India.

They walked into an uninhabited area and rested under some trees. Guljar suddenly had a "brain storm" and decided to purchase the land. He went to the Justice of Peace and made the necessary inquiries about the land. He bought the land for 10 pounds. The land is adjacent to the railway line, and within walking distance of the station.

4. HIS LIFE ON THE FARM

He built their first shelter, a tin shanty house. He pioneered the first business in Frere, a 'Native Eating House', on the Natal main line to Johannesburg for the benefit of the train travellers and those that worked for the railways. His wife assisted him by doing the cooking. A cafe was open next to the eating house. In 1900, he traded in fresh produce.

In 1910, he built his house because the family was growing and there was a need for space and he could also afford to build. Next to the house he built another shop, which was multi-functional centre. It was to supply daily needs to the surrounding area because the nearest town, Estcourt(9 km). The old shop was left and some of the remains still can be seen.

The business was very prosperous and in 1911 he bought a farm on the other side of the railway line and branched into farming (70 acres). He planted vegetables and,also housed some cattle.

Although at times he felt a deep need to go back to India, he always decided against it because he liked the situation in South Africa and he was becoming a rich businessman. He kept in constant contact with the family by way of

/ letters.....

letters.

He had 12 children, 7 daughters and 5 sons. He remained in business and farming until 1950 and then retired.

Three sons died during the period 1900-1950. He shared his belongings amongst the 2 remaining sons. One son inherited the farm and his wife now manages the farm because the husband died. The other son inherited the business but because he has his own business, Prere Sands, he has allowed some other people to manage the business. The business is now called Pakasons and Sons.

In 1952, Guljar Bassai decided to visit his family in India. When he arrived in India, he was rather surprised to see the building he helped to build as a small boy. He returned to South Africa in 1953.

5. HIS SOCIAL LIFE

He was noted for his interest in welfare work. He did not get involved in any kind of political activity, in fact he was very happy living in South Africa. He was also a member of the Hindu Association.

6. CONCLUSION

He was a well-known and well-respected man. He died on the 4 May 1959, at the age of 82 years.



G. BASSAI & SONS - General Dealer

First shop pioneered by Guljar in Frere



Mr G. Bassai photographed with
his four sons.



Mr G. Bassai, three
daughters and one son

Frere 1983



The first Shop pioneered
by Guljar Bassai.

The Native Eating House
on the extreme right
and the cafe on the
left.



The new shop built in 1910
now managed by Pakasons
and Sons. Main function
is to serve the surrounding
black population.



The house built in 1910
The son, Mr B. Bassai
and his family now resides
in the house.

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