

**BEGINNINGS OF INDIAN IMMIGRATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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South Africa is a meeting place of different racial stocks and culture. Bantu: Europeans the coloured and Asiatics, a majority of whom are Indians, form its population. The whites form rest of the total population, a minority and hardly a fraction of the total labours potential.

For a correct appreciation, it is necessary to look back to the historical factors that brought the Dominion of the South Africa into being, and the circumstances that led to Indian immigration into that country.

It was the development of the sugar industry in the coastal region of the Natal in the middle of the nineteenth century, which led to the presence of almost half a million Asians in the union of South Africa¹. Thus, the thoughts of the citizen centred around the Indians, who had been successfully brought to NATAL as far back as 1834. In 1855, in an address of welcome for Sir George Grey during his visit to Durban – the urgent request for Asian labourers was repeated.

It was evident that the white population of Durban had low advantage in the import of Asian workers into Natal. Grey apparently concurred in this, when he as recorded by the Natal Mercury of Nov. 9- consented to the purchase of “Coolies” From India who “as a half civilized race” would be an example for the Africans, “who regarded the British as too much above there for emulation²”.

Indian Immigration into South Africa, on any significant scale, began with the arrival of indentured labour in 1860 under a tripartite arrangement involving the Govt. of Britain, Natal and³ and ended in 1911, with the prohibition of emigration of labour to Natal by the Govt. of India⁴. The life of Indians in South Africa during those fifty years, amply illustrated the plight of Indians everywhere in the then British empire which is described by a Natal born Indian scholar in this way, “The Indian, of whatever class and engaged in whatever occupation was at the beginning of his stay a welcome addition to the local population. But with the passage of time his presence was deemed to be both unnecessary and a threat⁵”.

The first legislative enactment in a British territory directed against the Indians as a race by Law 3 of 1885, proclaimed after Imperial consent by the South African Republic (The Transvaal) on 26 January 1887. This law was applicable only to the persons belonging to any of the native races of Asia. The law prohibited these races from obtaining citizenship or fixed property rights in the Republic and further empowered the Govt. to designate locations, where the Asiatics may be directed to live, for “purposes of Sanitation”.

Feeling against Indian immigration, however, continued to grow which resulted in the attempt to prevent the landing of some 800 free passenger Indians in Durban in December 1896. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who was returning from India, was among the passengers. The Natal Govt. attempted to assuage the European feelings by passing the Immigration Act (of 1897). This prohibited the immigration into Natal of anyone who could not pass a

prescribed dictation test in a European language & who was not in possession of a specified some of money. Also the Govt. attempted to restrict the trading activities of these “Free” Indians through the Trade Licencing Act (18 of 1897). The operation of this Act was explained to the Large Commission in 1919 by Col. Molyneux who had been the licencing officer for Durban for over 20 years. He said, “We do what we can do to restrict further Indian Licence. Always as a European license is granted almost a matter of course whereas Indian Licence is refused as a matter of course, if it is a new one ⁶”.

The Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) introduced a temporary bill in anti-Indian agitation and legislation in Natal, That the Govt. of Natal was, however, unwilling to give up pressures on “free” Indians to return to India was evident, in their studied silence over Indian Govt. ‘s request in 1900 to reach a just settlement of the issue while the services of India and the Natal Indians during the Boer War uere still fresh in be mind of the colonists ⁷.

For, in the Transvaal, now a British crown colony, “the British rulers applied themselves with British vigour and precision to the task of enforcing Boer Law” ⁸. Eve before the hostilities had ended, Milner, who combined in himself the officers of High Commission in South Africa and Governor of the Transvaal and Orange River colony felt that it was necessary that all Asiatics (in the Transvaal) should be registered and all, save those of the better class, be confined to trading and residential locations ⁹“. After the incorporation of the Transvaal in British South Africa, Milner felt even more convinced that the Indians were “strangers forcing themselves on a community reluctant to receive them” ¹⁰. Milner was contended himself with suggesting voluntary registration of all Indians in the Transvaal, whereas his successor, Selbourne, issued an ordinance in August 1906 amending the Asiatic Law (3/ 1885) whereby every Indian man, woman or child of eight years of age, who was entitled to reside in the Transvaal was required to register with the Registrar of Asiatics and obtain a certificate of registration, and for this purpose, had to give mark of identification, including finger and Thumb impression. Thus, all Indians in the Transvaal were reduced to the status of criminals. Gandhi saw in the ordinance, "nothing..... except hatred for Indians" and considered that resistance to the requirement of finger prints was a question of honour, not only Indians in the Transvaal but throughout South Africa as well as India ¹¹.

The Govt. of India remonstrated, to no avail, against the severity of the two enactments. Gandhi had already in 1906 warned Lord Elgin, then Secretary of State for colonies, that “rather than submit to the great degradation involved” in submitting to any unjust laws, Indians “would go to Govt. Now he launched his first Passive Resistance campaign in South Africa. On 9 May 1907 the campaign took the form of refusing to take out registration certificate entering, Transvaal and hawking without license. It provoked severe reprisals from the Govt. including imprisonment, had labour. In prison and deportation.

During the intervening years, the Transvaal Govt. passed two more Acts forbidding persons of colour from occupying for trade or other purpose land in any area proclaimed for mining, and, the Township Act excluding Asiatic traders from stands inside Townships.

Such was the plight of Asians in two of the constituent territories of the future union-Natal and Transvaal – where the Indians were concentrated ¹². The Orange River colony or the Orange free state had not admitted Indians at all. In the cape colony there were no formal restrictions specifically directed against the Indian until 1906 when the entry of Male Asiatics of the age of 16 and above from overseas was forbidden.

NOTES

1. Durban Observer, Oct. 17, 1851, quoted by Ferguson Davie, p. 3.
2. Natal Mercury, June 20, 1855, Quoted by Ferguson Davie, p. 6.
3. Palmer, Mabel, The History of Indian in Natal (Cape Town. 1957), p. 8.

4. Government of India, History of the Indian Problem in South Africa (upto 30th April, 1935), p. 5.
5. Pachai, B. The International Aspects of the South Africans Indian Question, 1860-1971 (Cape Town, 1971), p. 12.
6. Quoted in South African Indian Congress, Treatment of Indians in South Africa,, A Memorandum of Facts, circulated in UNGA, New York, 1946.
7. Govt. of India, Memorandum -1946, p. 3.
8. Sir Henry Cotton, "Presidential Address to the 1904 session of the Indian National Congress", quoted in Pachai, B. op. cit., p. 28-29.
9. Walker E. 4. Op. cit., p. 523.
10. Milner to Secretary of Stata Quoted in Pachai B. Op. cit., p. 28.
11. Gandhi, M.K. Satyagraha in South Africa, Ahmedabad, 1928, p.99.
12. At the birth of the Union of South Africa, Indian population was distributed thus:-
Natal 1,33,000, The Transvaal 11,000. The Cape Colony 7,000; O.F.S. 100 (2) Total 1,50,000 (E. A. Walker, p.547).