

“In Search of Roots”: A Case Study on the Life of Mr. Thelochan Balgobind

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ABSTRACT This case study is about a family member, Thelochan Balgobind¹, whose position in his immediate family of thirteen siblings, as the fourth child to his parents, sought from his young age of thirteen to fourteen years to work and provide for the family. His determination to ensure that his parents and siblings were sheltered, fed and clothed took him through several jobs that eventually led to two things. First, it brought out the entrepreneurship within him to a point where he raised the living conditions of his family to way above the poverty line. Second, it forced him to become more introspective, urging him to search for his “roots” and to understand himself better in the context of an exploitative and racially discriminatory political system. These two aspects make up the core of this paper which must be seen not simply as a reflexive account in itself, but also as an attempt to locate and understand a self-made entrepreneur against the background of harsh and challenging conditions.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, this paper represents my reflexive understanding of the life-history of a family member, Thelochan Balgobind (TB), in the context of upward social and economic mobility. Secondly it is an attempt to grasp the urge in TB to search for his “roots” in India and to know himself, his family background, society and the Indian Diaspora better in the setting of an exploitative and racially discriminatory political system of South Africa. The use of this personal reflexivity focuses upon his family’s history and that of the wider Indian community. This biography depicts an individual whose life history crossed the boundaries of poverty demonstrating success over a period of adversity. This research identifies the process of upward mobility as a motor to imprint cultural influence of South African Indian people. His life history is an example of the accomplishments of many Indians families in South Africa who have achieved success over adversity. As a person born and brought up in South Africa, though of Indian descent, he displayed a remarkable preference for individual initiative which was probably lacking among the people of his forefathers’ generation. It led him to successes as an entrepreneur. Details of such stories, particularly of the early years in South Africa, are largely unknown and untold. Therefore it is important that this knowledge is preserved so

that our roots and early struggles are not forgotten and are understood as an integral part of the history of South Africa. Furthermore it is also important to record the perseverance, and resilience of our forefathers against the adversities that they faced for future generations to reflect and appreciate years from now.

Contextualization and Process of the Research

This case study traces the life history of Mr Thelochan Balgobind from the period 1934 to 2010. It examines the process of upward mobility from working class to middle class society in South Africa. This entails going into the trials and tribulations of his life, his search for his identity and the contributions made to his ancestral village. This reflexive account comprises TB trying to reconstruct the past; not just the objective process by which he found his roots but, also as an inner journey which he underwent to connect and trace the link to his identity in the context of South African society.

I justify my selection of this case study method to understand the process of upward mobility of Indian migration to South Africa in terms of ‘double diachrony’ to describe the process of TB’s upward mobility. In writing about TB’s biography, I have discussed his entrepreneurship and individual initiative and taken into account not only the changes taking place in South Africa, especially with regards to the

Indian community, but also the changes which have taken place in India even in rural settings, over a period of time.

In terms of the social field of his ancestral village in India which TB visit numerous times, clearly he is more entrenched in a class system out of which he has worked his way up, and his mobility has taken place along class lines and not caste lines. In this sense, in his South African social setting, class has dominance over caste. It would appear that in South Africa indenture system of labour recruitment and migration made it difficult to preserve caste distinctions. Migrants were recruited as individuals and found it difficult to maintain caste separation during the cramped journey overseas. The breakdown of caste accelerated on plantations, where the migrants did the same work at the same rate, irrespective of caste status and taboos. They were also housed together in barracks and subject to communal bathing (Lal 2006: 242). When TB speaks to his people's village, the phenomenon of caste is in the forefront. Although in India itself in general caste is gradually being overshadowed by class factor, the dynamics and pace of this change is different from what occurred in South Africa. Caste stratification in India is still surfacing in various contexts whereas in South Africa it has almost been overtaken by class.

In this research I have used multiple sources of data, i.e. formal interviews and discussions with family members (both personal and telephonic); informal discussions with the participant, archival documents, newspapers, photographs, videos and literature. Formal interviews were conducted from May 2009 to May 2010 with TB who is the central figure of this case study. Research for this paper is based on the growing recognition that issues such as the three "p's": process, practice and power, can be instrumental in the course of research. The approach adopted here concentrates on the life history of my father as a window to the three "p's" in the context of his adaptation to conditions of living and mobility in South Africa. In order to understand the process of upward mobility we first have to understand the circumstances under which Indians arrived in South Africa.

THE ARRIVAL OF INDIANS WITHIN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In an incisive account that exposed the

realities of the hardships that Indian indentured labourers had to endure, Meer (1980) summarised the role of the Sardar and the colonial employer as exploitative and manipulative. She pointed out that "opportunities for the frugal comfort were few for the standard practice was to work the labourers from dawn to sunset, Sundays included. Having provided the workers with rations and secured their labour, the planters were insensitive to all else. Their main concern was to economize labour. They saved on rations by reducing them to half on the slightest pretext, by replacing the portion of the stipulated rice with mealie meal, and meeting their complaints by arguing that mealie-meal was better for them and by refusing rations to non-working women and children though they were entitled to these by law. They saw their workers as a crucial but vexatious part of the estates productive equipment, draining for all sorts of unnecessary concession at their expense. They refused them permission to leave the estates, grudge them their wages and devised ingenious means to deprive them of these, with justice through a rate of fines." Bhana and Pachai (1984) later strengthened Meer's (1980) analysis by also noting that "The indentured Indian had a harder time adapting and adjusting to new realities and circumstances. The documents recapture incidents of misery that accompanied indenture. The conditions were harsh and restrictive in many cases, not too far removed from slavery. There are complaints of low wages, long hours, low rations, and inadequate attention to social and medical needs and of beatings. The system worked heedless of human feelings." The indentured labourers were bound by contract for five years.

Thelochan Balgobind's Forefathers Arrival in South Africa

TB's paternal grandfather, Mehi Sahu³ known as Mahilall (note dropping of the caste identifier 'Sahu' from his name), came to South Africa as an indentured labourer at the age of twenty five on the 14 August 1883⁴. On the copy of the ships list of Indian Immigrants, retrieved by TB from the National Archives of South Africa, the ships name was Sophia Joahim (Fig. 1), his colonial number was given as 29953 and caste was identified as Sonar (occupational type). He migrated from the northern parts of India, from the village Hurpurwa which is 2, 3 kilometres from the district of Sarlahi.



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NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SOUTH AFRICA
NASIONALE ARGIEF VAN SUID AFRIKA

COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS

(Information extracted from Register: G)
 (Please note that the information below is based on an interpretation of the handwriting from the register)

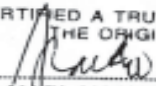
	Name of Ship	:	Sophia Joahim
	Date of Departure	:	09 June 1883
	Date of Arrival	:	14 August 1883
2.	Name	:	Mehi Sahu
3.	Father's Name	:	Toti Sahu
4.	Sex	:	Male
5.	Caste	:	Sonar
6.	Age	:	25
7.	Height	:	5ft 4,5"
8.	Next of Kin	:	Nuckchedi: Brother
9.	Zillah	:	Nepal
10.	Pergunah	:	Asibhoo
11.	Village	:	Hurpoorwa/Hurpurwa
12.	Colonial No.	:	29953
13.	Bodily Marks	:	Scar at temple

Certified a true copy.



HEAD: DURBAN ARCHIVES REPOSITORY

CERTIFIED A TRUE COPY OF
THE ORIGINAL



MARLAN NAIDOO
 COMMISSIONER OF OATHS
 PRACTISING ATTORNEY, 7 S.A.
 907/8 MARITIME HOUSE
 143 SALMON GROVE
 DURBAN 4001

REFERENCE:
WEB ADDRESS:

ENQUIRIES:
E-MAIL:

TELEPHONE:

Fig. 1. A copy of the ships list from the National Archives of South Africa on the arrival of Mehi Sahu to South Africa.

Sarlahi is a bordering district of Nepal (Fig. 8) in India (mythological territory of Mithla the birthplace of Sita, of the religious text 'Ramayana').

TB's mother's father, Doorgha, came to South Africa from the village of Jokari in Arrah (Ara), in the state of Bihar, India, (Fig. 8). Bihar is a state in eastern India. It lies mid-way between West Bengal in the east and Uttar Pradesh in the west. It is bounded by the country of Nepal to the north and by Jharkhand to the south.

Mahilall Thoothie Sahu (TB's grandfather) served his five year contract⁵ at the Waterloo Estate in Verulam on the north coast of Natal, (Fig. 9). Instead of returning to India, Mahilall chose to settle in South Africa. On his own he leased some land in New Glasgow, and cultivated sugar cane by turning dry land into arable land making it productive.⁶⁶

While their initial recruitment had been for work in the plantations, Indian labour was also later distributed to the railways, dockyards, coal mines, municipal services and domestic employment. Even though they were not happy with the racist laws and taxes, only about 23% of Natal Indians had returned to India by 1911, when the much abused indenture was finally terminated. Many of the Indians had acquired little plots of land and became kitchen gardeners and hawkers, retailing their produce to the White community. In a nutshell, Our Indian ancestors had to overcome many challenges. Initially, they had to submit themselves to hard labour and servitude without due appreciation. That was followed by mindless racial oppression. Finally, they had to wage a relentless fight against the evils of apartheid that they completed in partnership with all the oppressed people (The Indian Diaspora 2000: 77-87).

It is clear that the process of upward mobility in TB's case started two generations ago. Families like that of Mahilall were able to work hard and shift from a working class status to middle class status. Such families contributed in a significant way to the economy of South Africa.

Mahilall married, Bechuni Kallichuran, whose parents came to South Africa from India. They had fourteen children- ten sons and four daughters. Mahilall built ten houses (made of wood, iron and tin) in a row in New Glasgow, near Verulam (Fig. 9) for his sons. These houses are still in existence. Mahilall died at the age of seventy five on the 25 May 1937 at his residence in New Glasgow. Thelochan was then three years

old. Thelochan's grandfather died as a farmer and a free Indian Immigrant after serving his five year indenture ship from 1883 to 1888. His wife Bechuni died a week later at the age of sixty five.

One of their sons, Balgobind was TB's father. Balgobind was the first generation born in South Africa. Balgobind married Toothpathy Doorgha in 1925.

Thelochans Family Composition and Kinship Network

Balgobind and Toothpathy had thirteen children, twelve of whom were born in New Glasgow and one in Red Hill, Durban (Fig. 9). Two of these children died when they were very little. The surviving children comprised six boys and five girls. The eldest was Namdass. Thelochan is the second child. The third is Prem, fourth Domathie, fifth Sathy, sixth Kunchan, seventh Dolly, eighth Premilla, ninth Ashok, tenth Satish and eleventh Manju. At the time of writing this research, three of the sons, Namdass, Prem and Sathy had passed away. TB's father, Balgobind was an enterprising man who had his own sugar cane farm and used to transport sugar cane to the mill on ox wagon. In 1930 he bought a lorry and began carting sugar cane to the mill on his lorry. For extra income he carted other farmers' cane on his lorry to the mills. Being an innovative man he also rented his lorry in order to augment his income further. Balgobind got tired of farming and was encouraged by the success of his transport business to venture into investing his profits to purchase taxis and buses for expanded transport business activities. Initially the buses transported people in the Non-White areas between New Glasgow, Verulam and Inedwe (Fig. 9). In 1947 he moved from New Glasgow to Red Hill in Durban and also transferred his business to Durban. Thereafter his buses commuted from Durban to Cato Manor (Fig. 9). In 1952 Balgobind and his family moved to Spencer Road in Clare Estate, Durban. He contributed financially to the establishment of the incinerator at the Clare Estate crematorium to which his name has been incorporated onto a plaque as a sign of appreciation. TB was twenty eight years old when his father fell ill at the young age of fifty four and passed away on the 30 December 1962.

TB's mother, Toothpathy was a good mother who cared well for her children. As a religious person she ensured that her children did not take

to alcohol, smoking and gambling, having instilled good moral values in them. After the death of her husband she strove to keep the family together and maintained the strong family kinship that existed between her children. She passed away at the age of sixty eight on the 16 September 1979.

Thelochan's Childhood

TB was born on the 3 April 1934, being the second generation of his family to be born in South Africa and the third generation from India. During the 1930's in South Africa, the then British Government in India agreed to encourage and facilitate the repatriation of Indians. Very few Indians opted for repatriation. As mentioned earlier, TB's grandfather did not opt for repatriation.⁸ TB remembers the atrocities and economic hardships of World War 11, being eleven years old when it ended. He remembers: *"there was food shortage in South Africa, most of the food was taken away for the army - what little was available was priced very high - people could only buy food on the 'black market' (a term used to buy goods illegally.) The state provided rations once a week. No rice was available - we used to make our own rice with mealies called mealie rice. We were not allowed to use light at night - all curtains had to be blackened in case it could be seen from the plane. Even motor cars drove at night with lights off, people used small blinkers."*

As during 1940's the white Government in South Africa enacted a series of discriminatory laws⁹. At the age of twelve in 1946, TB experienced the 'Ghetto Act' which was the first law providing for the compulsory segregation of Indians in Natal. The Government of South Africa, instead of making amends, became even more aggressive in its policy of racial discrimination which became its official policy after the National Party came to power in 1948. It made several legislature enactments such as the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, Prevention of Mixed Marriage Act, all of which provide the base for apartheid. In short, the National Party institutionalized racism in South Africa. The vast non-white majority, including families like TB's, was thus subjected to all kinds of hardships. The black population was pushed into so-called 'home-lands', which surrounded the major industrial towns where the blacks (those days this category included migrant Indians as well)

were forced to go as wage labourers (Sawant 1994: xii-xiii).

TB lived in New Glasgow until the age of thirteen. His family lived in a wood and iron house where his mother cooked outside on an open fire. In 1947 he and his family moved to Red Hill in Durban. When TB was fifteen years old he witnessed the Afro-Indian clashes in January 1949. This was a bitter racial conflict that occurred between the Indians and Africans in Durban resulting in deaths and the destruction of thousands of homes and stores by arson and looting. African migrant workers marched towards Indian areas with police collusion. Terror was unleashed on the largely impoverished Indian working-class population (Lal 2006: 249). The main cause of the violence was the rivalry for jobs, social space and services in Durban between Africans, Indians and Whites. The consequent loss of life and property was officially given as follows: Deaths: 142 (87 Africans, 50 Indians, 1 white and 4 others whose identity could not be determined); injured: 1087 (541 Africans, 503 Indians, 11 Coloureds and 32 whites; of the injured 58 died); Buildings destroyed: 1 factory, 58 stores, 247 dwellings; buildings damaged: 2 factories, 652 stores and 1285 dwellings (Bhana and Pachai 1984: 208-209).

Although TB and his immediate family were not physically affected by the 1949 riots, the male members of his family were instrumental in rounding up and guarding women, children and the elderly in a safe house during this period. His uncle from his mother's side of the family who owned a shop in the suburb of Clairwood was attacked, robbed and assaulted during the riots.

At the time when TB's family members were still living in Red Hill the Groups Areas Act¹⁰ was passed in 1950 forcibly relocating many Indians from their original residential homes, especially Mayville and Cato Manor, to new residential areas. TB was not personally affected by this Act. In his opinion the restructuring of urban space was 'a blessing in disguise' because on the positive side it brought together the Indians in a way that allowed them to reinvent their 'Indianness'. For most it meant relocation from shacks and wood-and-iron homes to racially segregated townships like Chatsworth and Phoenix. On the negative side, it meant Indian people's moving far from their places of employment, resulting in higher transportation costs. While the community of Indian was coming closer, because of Groups Areas Act the extended

families faced breaking up and the elderly had to suffer adversities¹¹ (Lal 2006: 250).

Thelochan's Marriage

In 1954, at the age of twenty years TB's introduction to his beautiful bride had followed the typical pattern of an arranged marriage. His aunt introduced him to a fifteen year-old girl Sonmathie Boodhram from a rural area, Esenembe on the North Coast of Durban. While the conversation referred to the first meeting as an "introduction" it was in essence an arrangement which the young girl could not refuse. It was a normative practice of the mid-twentieth century when arranged marriages were the role and responsibility of parents and their extended families. This was a practice that was reproduced from the Indian sub-continent as a way of demonstrating an affiliation to a value system that remained uncompromised almost nine decades after Indians first arrived in South Africa. Such an introduction was however not a *carte blanche* endorsement of a free and unmonitored courtship. TB was allowed to visit his bride-to-be but socialization with her was not necessarily a private affair. Family pride and discipline was expressed in the ways in which young girls were reared through careful control and being chaperoned for any event outside of the family property. After a year-long association with Sonmathie (SB) a traditional Hindu wedding on 18 December 1955 allowed them the privileges that married couples have. Being only sixteen when she entered the large family of twenty one people, and not knowing how to cook SB learnt from her mother-in-law and relied on her eldest sister-in-law Hirmothie (husband's eldest brother's wife) whom she regarded as her '*backbone*'. She took care of her husband's younger sisters and brothers.

Between 1956 and 1972 Thelochan and Sommathie had five children - one son and four daughters: his first child, a son, Santosh was born on the 22 November 1956. His daughters Sharitha (Shirley) was born on the 14 October 1958, Shanta on the 8 March 1961, Arleen on the 6 March 1967 and Samantha (Lou-Lou) on the 9 May 1972¹².

The birth of his fourth child Arleen marked a turning point in his life and forced him to interrogate himself and to ask whether he was in a position to care adequately for his growing family. The joy of fathering another child was concomitantly accompanied by a period of serious

introspection about his position as a self-employed person who did various jobs such as laundering, collection and sales of sacks and other odd jobs that served as the basis for confidence building in the entrepreneur that he eventually became.

It was during this period that he began becoming more concerned about both his immediate family as well as his extended family, asking himself how he was to transcend his meager lifestyle and cater not only for his children, but also for his siblings and their offspring's. His lower class status urged him to think more aggressively about how his children were to be raised in society where class status was often the determining factor of their acceptance in the broader community. Despite his daughters being little children in the late 1960s and early 1970s he felt strongly about the kind of futures that each of them should have. For TB raising his class status was a way of accruing greater respectability for his children. His question in the conversation is an indication of this: *"I asked myself: 'who is going to marry my daughters now, a poor man like me. It was then that I decided that I must do something, I must become somebody.'"*

After staying in Clare Estate for eleven years as a married man, TB moved with his wife and three children to Merebank in 1966 at the age of thirty two.

Thelochan's Occupational History

In 1950 at the age of sixteen, when he was in standard seven (equivalent to grade 9), having attended Sastri College, he left school to support his extended family. The social and economic life was tough and TB did various jobs in order to earn a living. Initially, at the age of sixteen, he worked as an office boy where he earned five shillings for a few years. In the 1950's five shillings was a relatively substantive amount with which working class people could at least afford to purchase the bare minimum for their survival. It was actually more 50 pence. Thereafter he earned three rand a week. In 1956 when his father died TB with the help of Namdass and Sathy had to manage the extended family. He had to get his brothers and sisters married and settled into their respective families. He worked extremely hard (day and night) to provide for his family, going through various jobs e.g. dry cleaning and sacks business.

TB encountered many trials and tribulations during this period.

As stated above the year 1967 marked a major financial transformation in his life. After the birth of his third daughter and the decision made by him that he had to succeed in his life, he bought his first payloader¹⁴ at the age of thirty three. Coincidentally in Natal during this period the Government brought about housing schemes in Chatsworth. Building contractors required machines to excavate the land. TB had a little prior experience in the transport business (when his father provided a bus service in Verulam and Durban), embarking on this venture, and taking on the contracts from building contractors, provided to be a huge success. The purchase of one pay loader resulted in the purchase of another payloader until he built up an entire fleet of one hundred within the extended family. In 1977 he opened a pay loader business in Mauritius and contributed to the development of the sugar terminal and harbour in Mauritius. He was also on the Government advisory committee for the Mauritian airport. TB is now retired and has passed the payloader business onto his son Santosh.

Thelochan's Civil Society Engagements

TB contributed to various civil society organizations. In 1990 he was on the parents committee of the Apollo secondary school in Umhlathuzana Township and raised funds to put up the swimming pool at the school. In 1998 he was on the committee of the Umhlathuzana Township Civic Association and raised funds to build the Silver Star Nursery School. He also supported the formation of the first Hindi radio station called Hindvani which broadcasts to people in and around Kwa-Zulu Natal. Although he respects all religions, he is not dogmatic about his religion. He believes that *"the best religion is truth and honesty"*.

Thelochan's 'Search for His Roots' - Genesis of Establishing Familial Contact in India

From an early age (when he was fifteen or sixteen years old) it was a deep-felt desire, a quest of TB to explore his cultural connections and to make contact with the people and place where his ancestors lived in India. In the interviews TB stated: *"none of Mahilall's fourteen children ever*

thought of going to India and tracing their roots; those children in turn had big families also, at least an average of ten children, I don't know why I was the chosen one."

In his quest to discover his roots and understand his heritage, TB encountered a host of difficulties. His forefathers came to South Africa as indentured labourers therefore their names, village and district address were entered on their emigration passes. However, the search became complicated because the names of places and their spellings had changed; villages had been incorporated in different districts and there were different villages with similar names. Indian Independence and partition produced massive changes in terms of geography of the country. These changes did not take place neatly on 14-15 August 1947. The changes in the subcontinent from partition and the formation of India and Pakistan, the accession and integration of the princely states into these two new nation states, and the latter separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, means that it is necessary to recognize that historic India, which embraced the entire Indian subcontinent, does not exist today as it did in the past. The different parts of the subcontinent are not now regions within India, but separate nations whose relations are now of an international character (Lal 2006: 30). Fortunately, TB's ancestral village was not affected by these changes and in 1971 his dream to trace his ancestors materialized.

Reaching the actual village was an arduous task: *"firstly you have to get to India, having a passenger list with you. It states there on the passenger list the village, state, full address, everything. All that was captured on the passenger list even the caste. You have to go to the biggest place first, the nearest city, and there you go to the government office, they know everything. You keep repeating the same thing in every city, until you get nearer and nearer, closer and closer."* His desire to know more about his Indian links led him through a journey of many small villages on India-Nepal border. He travelled through many villages before reaching Hurpurwa. TB indicated to me:

Finally we reached it, upon reaching the remote village in the early evening; we called for the head man. Even our caste is on the passenger list, with my caste is indicated the family group. In India, and in the village, the caste system is very strong. The villagers called

the family from the caste group that was listed on the passenger list. When we mentioned the grandfather's name, they had an inkling. They had an uncle who had disappeared from the village without any trace that their father used to tell them about. Information was verified with stories, caste and names. So from there the headman tells that that is the relative now. We finally got it. Even the spot where my grandfather lived was on the passenger list and these people were still living on the same spot. We stayed there over night and checked the happenings in the village. We stayed there a couple of days and investigated further to confirm that we were in the correct location. I was satisfied that I was in the right place, I was always cautious of people but after talking to the elderly people of the village I realized that the disappearance of my grandfather from the village was a much talked about incident in the area (Figs. 2 and 3).

The village people were harmless, timid and very calm. They had no pride, were down to earth. They brought in a clean sheet and spread it on the floor for us to sit. They were all very inquisitive, have very inquiring minds; they wanted to know more and more. They don't even know where South Africa is. On my second trip to the village I took an atlas and maps and I took one of those inflatable globes, which I subsequently left at the school.

The living conditions were very poor; they lived in mud houses, with hardly any provisions. The village houses had neither running water nor electricity. Before departing we gave them some money, my cousins were still living at the time. I left some money for the school funds and the temple funds.

I asked my father,

You have established the links between yourself and our great ancestors from India. You've accomplished something that very few people will even contemplate embarking upon. You have traced your forefathers, taken your mother, brothers, sisters, and various members of your family to the village. How do you feel about your achievement?

TB replied,

The main thing is that you must have the desire to know who you are, where we came from, our true identity and origins. One must have the desire to do something and take the first step. But here in the present we are too busy earning a living, to busy in our own little world, no time

to think about our roots, our forefathers. Having traced my family in India I feel a sense of fulfilment. My cousins and uncles both in South Africa and the village are very proud of what I've done and achieved. Where there's a will there's a way, anything is possible in this world. I don't think there is anything that is impossible, even going to the Himalayas. I drove across the Himalayas from Katmandu to India, by 4x4 Jeep over the mountains. I will never do it again because the roads are treacherous- corrugated roads, full of rocks and stones and potholes."

Since 1971 TB made thirty trips to India (Figs. 2 and 3). He has been to Hurlpurwa (Figs. 4, 5 and 6) ten times and to Bihar five times. In 1978 he took his mother to her ancestral village in Arrah. TB subsequently went there four times. In October 2008, being his last trip to India he took three of his male cousins (paternal uncle's sons) to the village (Fig. 7). They asked TB to take them to their ancestral village but paid for their own travel, food and accommodation.

Thelochan's Contribution to His Ancestral Village in India

TB told me,

Present conditions of surviving relatives are very poor. I made a contribution to the ancestral village and its inhabitants by giving his paternal cousins financial assistance. Subsequently we put in borehole pumps, one for inside the house one outside providing them with plenty of flowing water.

In 1998 TB sponsored his grand nephew, paternal cousin Chanderdew's son Arun Shah to stay in South Africa. He wanted to observe how the South African Indian people lived. *'I managed to bring one of the youth, my nephew, who was lecturing and has a master's degree in science, to South Africa. I brought him here for three months.'* TB paid for his airfare and provided him with hospitality and money. Two years ago in 2008, one of his nephews in Hurlpurwa, Santosh Kumar, obtained the American green card and required money to go to America. TB and his brothers Ashok and Satish provided financial assistance. Santosh Kumar now lives in America and in turn sends money to his home village in India in order for them to prosper economically by doing small scale farming, planting rice and sugar cane.



Fig. 2. Thelochan (left) with cousin Chanderdew (right) and relatives from the village of Hurpurwa on his first visit to India in 1971



Fig. 3. Thelochan's relatives from the village of Hurpurwa on his first visit to India in 1971



Fig. 4. Thelochhan (right) and Sonmathie (third from left) with relatives and Nephews Santosh Kumar (left) and Raju (center) in Hurpurwa in 1985.



Fig. 5. Thelochhan (right) with Arun Kumar Shah (left), Sonmathie third from left and relatives in Hurpurwa.



Fig. 6. Thelochohan (seated back right) with his brother Satish (seated back left eating from one plate) and Indian relatives in Hurpurwa in 1993.



Fig. 7. Thelochohan (standing left) with Indian Aunt (left), Indian cousin (second from left) and South African cousins Madhan (third from left) and Soan (right) in Jokari, Arrah in 2008.

TB told me about the current status of the ancestral village in India,

On my last trip to our ancestral village in November 2008, I found that my relatives are doing much better than before. They now have electricity and cell phones, I think the children are growing up and getting a bit educated. My family also went there, my brothers, my son, have regular contact with them, and now.

CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates the resilience of Mr Thelochohan Balgobind who during his youth had to strive to provide for him and his extended family. His strong desire for economic success and his entrepreneurship led him to establish a business that could: support the needs of his family; succeed in his quest to find and connects with his identity and roots; lead him to achieve success over adversity and to provide for his ancestral home. His leadership and vision ensured that he and his family survived during hard economic times. This biography of Thelochohan demonstrates his endeavours from his young



Fig. 8. Map of India



Fig. 9. Map of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa

days of twenty-five years to find out who he was, where he came from, that actually prompted him to trace his forefathers in India and make contact with his relatives abroad. He stated: *"well, I was always anxious. Every time I got more and more enthusiastic, I did a lot of research and finding out"*. It is the story of an intrepid, determined and lucky searcher who successfully completed his investigation and located distant relatives and achieved a sense of belonging, introspection and success in undertaking this journey - a sense of

accomplishment in achieving a dream that few people would embark on in their lifetime.

As a third generation descendant of an indentured labourer, he demonstrated the resolve, endurance and perseverance that migrants all over the world had to show. From a poor working class background to an upper middle class position was rooted in the work ethics and subsequent successes of numerous other descendants of indentured labourers. It was his belief and faith in what his family history had taught him that



Fig. 10. Mr Thelochan and Sonmathie Balgobind (seated) with Prof Shanta Balgobind Singh at the Global Organisation for People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) gala dinner, International Convention Centre, Durban on 31st March 2010

sustained his enthusiasm not only to succeed for himself and his own nuclear family, but to carry along extended family as well. This commitment is part of an age-old tradition that is still characteristic of the extended family system among people of Indian origin. It is entrenched in a value system that made him a befitting custodian of it. This is a narrative of turning historical adversity into advantage.

NOTES

- 1 Thelochan is my father. In attempting to do his case history my purpose was to experience the reflexive approach to ethnographic research and to expound his contribution to the Indian Diaspora in South Africa.
- 2 Double diachrony is the study and description of the change or development in the structural systems over a period of time; i.e. diachrony in terms of the historical happenings in South Africa as well as those in India. In the case of Thelochan in the context of the wider social stratification of Indians in South Africa, the class situation becomes dominant rather than caste. In India there is also emerging a class stratification which is taking over the caste stratification. In the context of Thelochan's biography, both the changes taking place in South Africa, especially with regards to the Indian

community, as well as those in India have to be taken into account.

- 3 People with the surname "Sahu" belonged to the Sonar caste whose main occupation was to work with gold. In South Africa his name changed into Mahilall without the caste name "Sahu" because of the difficulty that the authorities had in documenting names.
- 4 Migration from India began in the middle of the 19th century, when thousands of Indians were brought to work on the sugar plantations in South Africa. On the 16 November 1860 a group of 342 Indians, comprising men, women and children, arrived at the port city of Durban on board the S.S Truro. They were the first of 384 such arrivals of 'human cargo' containing as many as 152 184 people that were shipped to South Africa over the next 51 years. Of them 62% were men, 25% women and 13% children. Two thirds of these emigrants were from the then Madras Presidency, Mysore, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal (The Indian Diaspora 2000:76). The initial purpose of importing Indians was to tend the sugarcane and sisal plantations of the British settlers. Their settlement and distribution across the Natal colony was staggered and subject to the economic conditions of the entire British Empire and its relationship to other imperialist forces. Around this time in India, the 1850's and the 1860's, imperial control made united Indian political action more possible than any previous time. (Lal 2006: 26).
- 5 Indenture spawned harsh laws that governed every

- aspect of the migrant's lives. They had to work for five years for the employer to whom they were assigned. Overwork, malnutrition and squalid living conditions formed the pattern of daily life for most agricultural workers; Indentured Indians had few ways of resisting (Lal 2006: 243). The colonial administration sought to curb the activities of the Indians by enacting a whole compendium of discriminatory laws against them, with a view to boxing them in and curbing their enterprise and economic progress. Their economic activities faced difficulties because of discriminatory laws. By June 1886 there were already more "free" Indians in the Natal Colony than indentured Indians. They were free from their contracts, but not free to join the political process, or to vote as equal citizens of their adopted country (The Indian Diaspora 2000:78).
- 6 While their initial recruitment had been for work in the plantations, Indian labour was also later distributed to the railways, dockyards, coal mines, municipal services and domestic employment. Even though they were not happy with the racist laws and taxes, only about 23% of Natal Indians had returned to India by 1911, when the much abused indenture was finally terminated. Many of the Indians had acquired little plots of land and became kitchen gardeners and hawkers, retailing their produce to the White community. In a nutshell, Our Indian ancestors had to overcome many challenges. Initially, they had to submit themselves to hard labour and servitude without due appreciation. That was followed by mindless racial oppression. Finally, they had to wage a relentless fight against the evils of apartheid that they completed in partnership with all the oppressed people (The Indian Diaspora 2000:77-87).
 - 7 From the siblings most had remained in the range of middle to upper class citizens and were residents in the types of homes consistent with their statuses.
 - 8 When Thelochan was a young boy there was mass nationalism in India led by Mahatma Gandhi; a series of major campaigns- 'Non-Cooperation', 'Civil Disobedience', 'Individual Satyagraha' and 'Quit India'- marshalled popular forces against imperial power and increasingly called into question the legitimacy of British rule. Combined with broader changes internationally, Britain's own position and the inability of the imperial power to do more than hold down the situation, particularly during World War II (1939-1945), the stage was set by the early 1940's for the British to begin to concede that their position in India was untenable (Lal 2006: 27).
 - 9 Such as the trading and occupation of Land Restriction Bill of 1943 (the Pegging Act) which restricted movement of the Indians and bound them to their existing residences and business for three years (Sawant 1994: xii-xiii).
 - 10 The full measure of the impact of the Groups Areas Act on the Indian people of South Africa in human and socio-economic terms has still to be calculated, if it is at all possible to calculate human suffering. Settled communities, numbering several tens of thousands, and in one case estimated at forty thousand, were uprooted from their hearths, homes, temples, churches, mosques, schools and cultural institutions and forced into dormitories and sleeping cubicles without the right or opportunity to choose neighbourhoods and neighbours. No scientific study has yet been made of the material losses of the Indian people under the Groups Areas Act – of the extent of land lost, of the number of people who have been affected, of what has happened to them in terms of the destruction of their family life and the break-up of joint families and the resultant socio-economic ills, of the types and the quality of homes destroyed, of the types and quality of houses into which they have been driven, of the compensation paid, of the replacement costs of those people who have elected not to go into the dormitories and the cubicles called Indian townships, of people who were landowners and are now tenants of the state and local authorities, of the number of Indian businessmen who have been ruined, of the value of their losses, of their replacement, if nay, and of the number who were once businessmen but are now obliged to join the labour market (Bhana and Pachai 1984:217-218).
 - 11 Adversities such as having to live in nuclear units rather than extended families. The Durban municipality deliberately built houses that were designed for a nuclear family of four thereby ensuring that the economic strength of the Indian extended and joint families would gradually erode.
 - 12 Santosh married Ashitha and have three children, Vikash, Shanil and Sapna. Sharitha married Anand Jayrajh and have three children, Avishkar, Shathi and Preethi. Shanta married Surendra Singh and have three children, Rajiv Kumar, Ameet Kumar and Rhea. Arleen married Sudesh Ramlall and have three children, Kusheel, Sumeet and Pooja. Samantha married Sudesh Sidlall.
 - 13 TB moved away for at least three reasons: a lack of space; the new area was attractive to the emerging Indian middle class; and it was close to greater economic opportunities for someone like himself. It was here that he purchased his first pay loader which placed him in convenient distance to the booming building industry throughout Durban.
 - 14 A payloader is a trademark used for an excavating machine with a large scoop in front.
 - 15 The size of his operation got Thelochan and other proud family members to talk about his business as being the biggest in the African continent.
 - 16 In Mauritius Thelochan established friendships with people from various countries. He also met the Prime Minister of Mauritius Sir Ramgoolam.
 - 17 Having an incredibly enquiring and adventurous mind, Thelochan toured the world and has been to the many wonders of the world, not once but to some several times.
 - 18 The conference was attended by delegates from around the world; the paper was well received, having stimulated much discussion and debate. Mr Thelochan and Sonmathie Balgobind were present at the research presentation and at the conference.

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