

Institutional Hinduism: The Founding of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, 1912

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ABSTRACT The majority of the indentured workers who were shipped to Natal between 1860 and 1911 to serve as a source of cheap labour settled in the colony after completing their indentures. Notwithstanding their limited financial means they attempted to recreate aspects of their religious life in South Africa. This heterogeneous group practised a form of Hinduism that placed emphasis on ritual forms of worship and was based on a wide variety of myths, traditions, texts and festivals. By the beginning of the twentieth century a small but influential group of reform minded Hindus, who included in their midst ex-indentured workers and their descendants who had established themselves in business or acquired an education, as well as some trading class passenger migrants, embarked on a reform drive. They were motivated by several concerns. One was a fear that ritualistic Hinduism, based on ignorance and illiteracy, was making Hindus receptive to the preachings of Christian missionaries. Another belief was that a central organisation was needed for Hindus to deal in a unified manner with the common problems that they faced as a community. There was a concern that in the absence of such a 'voice' the Hindu agenda was being submerged into a broader Indian one, which was dominated by Mohandas K. Gandhi and his mainly trader class supporters.