

**“Master Coolie Arrives”:  
Indenture and the Origins of Hinduism in Natal**

**Ashwin Desai**

*Centre for Sociological Research, University of Johannesburg, South Africa  
E-mail: ashdesai1@gmail.com*

**KEYWORDS** Indian Indenture. Hinduism. Natal. Temples. Festivals

**ABSTRACT** The story of Hinduism in South Africa often gets told through the formal organisations that developed in the first decades of the twentieth century. Frequently lost in this narrative is the role played by the indentured in keeping Hindu practices alive. This was not just a simple duplication of practices carried over the oceans but was often flexible, as both caste and gender relations had to be renegotiated in the context of new conditions. This article, while recognising the role of the ex-indentured and passenger Indians, seeks to place the indentured at the centre of a story of Hinduism, by tracing the first attempts to resurrect traditions through the building of religious and cultural communities.