

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

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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.

PASSAGE TO AFRICA

Middle-passaged
Passing
Beneath the colouring of desire
In the enemy's eye
Scatter of worlds and broken wishes
In Shiva's unending dance
(Itwaru in Carter and Toorabully 2002: 38).
“Master Coolie” arrives, the *Natal Mercury* proclaimed, when the *Truro* landed at Port Natal on 16 November 1860 with 339 Indian workers aboard.

Most would have defined their identities through traditional customs that prevailed in the village. This did not mean that the villages stood still. The coming of British rule had disrupted their patterns of life and the taxes that were imposed brought new burdens. There was resistance. The most spectacular and sustained was on the eve of the first indentured to set sail for Port Natal—the 1857 rebellion.

Faced with debts and starvation, many sought to pursue the promise of a new life abroad. Few would have contemplated that they would never return to the land of their birth.

The indentured were herded into a depot awaiting departure, a place of new challenges. Tradition, caste, religion, emotions and feelings came up against a system that saw migrants as an undifferentiated mass of ‘coolies’, whose purpose was to turn their bodies into money for colonial masters. Names became numbers, human beings units of labour. “In the transformation of kuli to coolie, the distant humanity of individual Indians was appropriated and elimi-

nated as the person collapsed into the payment” (Bremner and Daniel 1992: 270). Old habits and traditions came up against the new disciplines and regimentation of the depot. While new, hesitant and tenuous bonds were built in this holding environment, the sight of ships at the harbour was a constant reminder that departure was imminent and there would be new separations.

The ship, “the medium of mercantile capitalism and of the [middle] passage of indenture, [was] the first of the cultural units in which social relations were re-sited and renegotiated” (Mishra 2007: 74). Hierarchies ‘imagined’ into being over a long period; divisions based on age-old customs; castes, religions, dialects, centuries in the making, began to unravel. Space, place, and time were compressed. Recent acquaintances brought the possibilities of intimacy. There was little official space for caste or custom. A Pariah's reply to a Brahmin upset at being bumped into: “I have taken off my caste and left it with the Port Officer. I won't put it on again till I come back”, poignantly sums up the situation (Bhana 1991: 21). Grierson, a British official, cited a returned emigrant, “A man can eat anything on board ship. A ship is like the temple of Jagannath, where there are no caste restrictions.... [Emigrants] invented a curious theory regarding ship-board life, which shows the adaptability of native customs” (in Kale 1999: 140). The Jagannath Temple in Puri, Orissa, has been one of the most famous Hindu pilgrimage centres in India since around the eleventh century. It acquired a reputation for treating worshippers equally, requiring all to make and serve their food together, and eat from

the same plate, irrespective of caste. The idea of the ship as the temple of Jagganath also “arose because pilgrim ships went from Calcutta to Orissa: hence all ships out of Calcutta acquired the same reputation” (Northrup 1995: 88). The ship, as Lal points out, was the “site of a massive social disruption” as old rituals and ceremonial observances of village India were compromised in that crucible. No one could be certain about the true caste of *bhandaries* (cooks); high and low caste ate together in a *pangat* (row), shared and cleaned toilets, and took turns sweeping and hosing the deck. The voyage was a great leveller of status (Lal 2000: 29).

There is one story in particular which is related almost universally in discussions of caste among the indentured, because it epitomises the difficulty of maintaining strict regulations; the recollection by a woman on board a ship to Fiji. During the early part of the voyage, migrants were finicky about caste. Then, one day, there was a storm, a wave rocked the ship, passengers were tossed about, the food was mixed, and migrants faced a stark choice between eating polluted food or going hungry. From that day on, everyone “became one” (Tinker 1947: 155). On another occasion, a Brahmin was caught stealing potatoes to cook a separate meal for himself. He was paraded on deck with a raw potato stuck in his mouth (Kale 1999: 128).

While the first indentured worker arriving on the *Truro* to be assigned work was Sheikh Ebrahim (colonial number 49), just four days after his arrival, many of the indentured had a long wait at the barracks, some as long as three months. By now, the indentured would have been on the move for almost half a year. Confined to cramped quarters and left largely to fend for themselves, many became ill and some did not survive. Forty year old Kaghery (12) died from exposure on 13 December 1860. Children, ranging from 18 months to 10 years, were particularly affected. Bounded by the discipline of the depot in Madras, squeezed by the tight quarters on board the ship, their plight was further compounded by prolonged confinement on the Bluff in abysmal conditions.

For some, having nurtured their children through what they thought was the worst of the journey, there was wrenching pain to come. Choureamah Aurokuim (99), a thirty-four year old Christian woman from Trichinopoly, was separated from her daughters, eight year old

Megaleamah (100) and three year old Susanah (101). Choureamah was assigned to Grey’s Hospital; Megaleamah was considered to be of working age and apprenticed to A. Brewer in July 1861; while Susanah was apprenticed to Isabela Ottava. Choureamah, with barely time for a stolen hug and a kiss before saying goodbye to her young children, died in September 1863. Little is known about her daughters, stripped of their mother, ripped from each other, and orphaned before the age of 10.

SUBVERTING THE SYSTEM

Indentured migration to Natal was part of an international circulation of labour arising out of a new phase of imperialism which saw sugar being grown in places that had not experienced slavery before, like Fiji and Natal, and the abolishment of slavery by the British Parliament in 1833. In total, some 1.3 million Indian contract labourers were exported to Mauritius, Jamaica, British Guiana, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Grenada and Natal from the middle decades of the nineteenth century to satisfy the demand for cheap labour (Meer 1980: 3).

The majority of the 152,641 workers who arrived in Natal between 1860 and 1911 were young males. About 70 percent were in the 18-30 age group, while the average male: female ratio was approximately 68:32 (Bhana 1991: 20). The list of immigrants included several hundred castes drawn primarily from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south-east, and Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the north-east of India. Madras was the point of departure from the south and Calcutta from the north. Migrants from south India spoke Tamil and Telegu; northerners spoke dialects of Hindi which came to form a South African Hindi (Mesthrie 1992: 7).

The contract aimed to control movement and impose time-discipline so that labour would be available predictably and reliably—just-in-time labour. Indentured workers signed on for five years. They had no choice regarding their employer and were to perform all tasks assigned to them. At the end of five years, they were free to either re-indenture or seek work elsewhere in Natal. They were entitled to a free return passage after 10 years but almost 60 percent chose not to return to India (Bhana 1991: 20). Approximately 60 percent of indentured workers

were allocated to sugar estates where they formed the backbone of the labour force.

However, indentured workers were utilised in many sectors of Natal's economy. They were pivotal in the extension of the railway network throughout Natal. The Natal Government Railways total allocation of more than 8,000 Indians made it the largest single employer of indentured labour. Indians were employed as gatekeepers, signalmen, and platelayers or utilized for collecting tickets and doing office clerical work. The Durban Municipality also hired large numbers of Indians in its health and sanitation department. The majority were low-paid, unskilled general labourers who did things like street sweeping and grass cutting, while others worked as night soil men, scavengers, and in the street lighting department. They were housed under atrocious conditions at the Magazine Barracks, just north of the city centre. Emigration Agents also recruited Indians with special skills to work in hospitals, hotels, private clubs, dockyards, and as domestics. They were usually recruited in urban areas in India, could speak some English, and commanded a higher salary because of their skills. Indentured Indians were also employed across the province, including the coal mining areas of Northern Natal and the wattle and tea plantations in the Natal Midlands.

Despite signing work contracts, indentured Indians faced numerous difficulties as contracts were abused in practice. The appalling conditions under which they laboured have been widely chronicled (for example Desai and Vahed 2010). Indentured Indians had few ways of resisting their exploitation due to a series of regulations which maintained rigid control over their lives and movements. Formal control included draconian laws which viewed all contractual offenses as criminal acts and sanctioned legal action against Indians for 'laziness' and desertion (Tayal 1978). In fact, when the first group of indentured workers returned to India in 1870 and complained of ill-treatment, a commission was appointed in 1872 to investigate work conditions. One result was the appointment of the ironically named "Protector" of Indian Immigrants. But as Swan concludes, "there is a solid weight of evidence in the Protector's files to suggest that overwork, malnourishment, and squalid living conditions formed the pattern of daily life for most agricultural workers" (Swan

1985: 26). For Tinker, social and economic life on estates amounted to "a new system of slavery" (Tinker 1974: 6).

Movement from the estate was limited, as Indians were not permitted to go more than two miles from the estate without their employer's written permission, even if the purpose was to lay a charge against that employer. Similarly, they could not live off the estate, refuse any work assigned to them, demand higher wages, or leave their employer. Despite these measures, the indentured found ways to undermine and subvert the system through individualistic acts like absenteeism, desertion, suicide, feigning illness, and destroying property (Swan 1985). There were also rare but powerful collective challenges, the first in 1862 when 22 workers walked off Henry Shire's Melkhout Kraal Estate in Umhlanga.

The indentured suffered a sense of deep loss at leaving their homelands and families behind, and their experiences of labour created long-lasting wounds. But the biographies of individual indentured migrants and families also reveal innovations, imaginations and resistance, some overt, others more subtle, which resulted in a tightly knit community and collective memories.

A NEW CAST(E)?

...the Hindi-speaking, the Telegu-speaking and the Tamil-speaking indentured labourers, living side by side, exchanged their local customs and practices and developed a unique blend of Hindu religious practice. This was facilitated by the fact that the early indentured labourers were bent on preserving what little they brought with them by mutually assimilating each other's customs and practices, instead of being exclusivistic. The indentured labourers, coming from various linguistic backgrounds, and living in an alien land among alien people, had only one thing in common, that is their being Hindu. So they celebrated each others' festivals, participated in each others' local ceremonies (Kumar 2000: 38-39).

The indentured endured multiple (de)partings, from the village to the depot to disembarkation. But while the sense of loss has been commented upon, in many instances, the old was remembered and resurrected in new conditions. They carried religion and culture with them,

which would prove essential to the establishment of new lives.

For example, there are numerous instances where the religious and cultural symbols of the village were remembered and through tremendous sacrifices, there were attempts to recreate them. At the same time, old ways of living were challenged and relationships that would be considered taboo back in the village were consummated and new, broader identities forged. Single female migrants were common, and many would have accepted the crossing in an attempt to break from the socially confining gender roles of Indian society. Enduring the hardship of the *kala pani* made sense “because it offered the potential for renegotiations of gendered identity within the strictural dissolutions of caste, class and religious boundaries that occurred during the displacements” (Mehta 2004: 5).

The human cargo of the *Truro* and *Belvedere* probably never realised it, but in crossing the *kala pani*, they were the spark for an imagining of a new community that sought to suture old traditions with new ways of living. In India, “caste was a form of collective unfreedom from which it was more difficult for individuals to escape than slavery or serfdom” (Anderson 2012: 22). In an ironic twist of fate, the migrants who left for South Africa were swapping one for another.

Life on the estate was harsh but labourers reclaimed old traditions as a way of stamping their identity on this new environment. Some would never see their families again; others were dispersed to different parts of Natal and the newly arrived received strength from religion, cultural traditions and networks in order to brave the tribulations of colonialism. Many would be followed at a later stage by friends and relatives, and could often stipulate that they be assigned to the same employer.

Sometimes congealing, other times fraying and bursting at the seams, how the indentured sought to reconstitute Hinduism was to lay the foundations for the institutional forms that came about in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The setting in Natal would have made it difficult to transplant the conventional caste system. Employers did not respect purity, rank, or duty. All workers performed the same work. In fact, the higher castes were frowned upon for

being less productive. Economic opportunities in Natal permitted mobility for free Indians, irrespective of caste, and many took advantage of this. And Indian migrants themselves had different understandings of caste. Ramdeen Ujudha (10596) recounted to the Wragg Commission:

I am going back to India to see my father and brothers and sisters. Here I have eaten with different people and broken my caste. My friends in India will not even eat with me, so I must come back. When I go back I will ask my mother to cook, but I will tell what I have done; she will cook, and I will eat outside; she will not allow me to eat inside where she and my relatives are. No fine could bring me back my caste, being a Brahmin. Just before coming my last offering to the Ganges was that of the holy thread: I was not worthy to wear it any longer. When the coolies come here, they lose all caste, even the Brahmins intermarry with the Chamars. What is to be done? In my own country if a Brahmin even goes for a call of nature, he must put a thread round his ear (Meer 1980: 388).

Others were determined to hang on to their caste affiliations. Telucksing, who had come in the 1860s and was a storekeeper by the 1880s, told the same Commission:

I have not suffered in my caste in any way by coming across the ocean to Natal, because I observed all my religious ceremonies and I have done nothing to debar me from enjoying my caste privileges. On my return to India, my relations will receive me as one of themselves. I am of the Kshatriya caste, which is the caste of the fighting men and agriculturalists. If a Brahmin came here, he would not lose his caste unless he did something detrimental to his religion. Brahmins are vegetarian and do not indulge in strong drinks. Simply crossing the ocean, or “black water” as the Indians call it, does not involve the loss of caste. The Indians here drink to excess and do not comply with any of their caste observances (Meer 1980: 388).

While caste was fraying at the edges and other times reconstituting itself, the indentured responded to a system designed to turn them into numbers by building sites for religious worship. The majority of the indentured were Hindus and the first sign of their religious expression was to build rudimentary temples.

Connecting the Past with the Present – the First Temples

Hinduism was not a realm of belief or practice separate from the rest of existence, but permeated it as the ubiquitous texture of popular life (Anderson 2012: 25).

There is evidence that Hindus established temples from the earliest days. C. Behrens, who managed the estates of the Colonisation Company from 1867, told the Coolie Commission that the “Coolies at Riet Valley have built a Hindoo temple, where they celebrate their own feast days. Those days are in addition to the holidays given to the Coolies by Law [for Muharram]” (in Desai and Vahed 2010: 242). Even on sugar estates, Indians erected shrines and temples to their deities. They were sometimes encouraged by employers who provided land, contributed money, and even gave workers time off for worship (Meer 1980: 22-23). Given their circumstances, the building of temples would have been an onerous undertaking with few resources to hand. Temple-building was regarded as a sacred activity and was mostly a community effort. Most were tiny, often no more than six feet by six feet, and made from wattle, daub, thatch, and later, corrugated iron (Meer 1980: 141).

The building of places of worship was an important first step in establishing formal practices. The lush plantations of the Natal sugar country allowed temples to be built in serene surroundings, generally facing in an easterly direction and built close to a river because of the importance of water in the Hindu belief system. They were painted bright colours with elaborate designs due to the importance of visual imagery, or *darshana*, in religious worship. Many Hindus do not worship Shiva or Vishnu *per se*, but one of their particular avatars, consorts, or children. South Indian temples were built to Shiva and his consorts like Uma, Parvati, Durga, and Kali. Migrants from the Ganges plains named their temples after Vishnu who represents love and harmony, and is referred to as Perumal and Emperumal, or Narayan in South India. Although most of the older temples were built in the South Indian style, contemporary temples often display elements of both north and south, reflecting the unique nature of South African Hindu architecture:

Southern deities dressed in Gujarati dress adorned the buildings and Islamic domes ap-

peared over shrines. North Indian temples, already heavily influenced by Western architecture, received external altars and ko i poles often making it difficult to distinguish one from the other (Mikula 1982: 10).

Gradually these elementary structures were replaced by more elaborate temples as the migrants finished their indentures. The indentured and ex-indentured began erecting shrines on sugar estates in Umbilo (1869), Newlands (1896), Cato Manor (1882), Isipingo Rail (1870), and Mount Edgecombe (1875). Employees of the Durban Corporation, who were housed in the Railway and Magazine Barracks in the city centre, built three temples in the 1880s. Of these, the Durban Hindu Temple in Sontseu Road still exists, and continues to host the major celebration of Ram Naumi annually in March.

Babu Talwantsing and Chundoo Sing, both of whom came as indentured workers, founded the Gopallal Hindu Temple in Verulam in 1888. Talawantsing was born in Fyzabad in 1877, and came to South Africa as an indentured migrant in 1891. After completing his indenture in 1896, he went into cane farming in Verulam, later opening businesses. He was a member of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), served in the South African War, was one of Gandhi's staunch supporters, and a key organiser during the 1913 strike. Chundoo Sing was born in Jaipur in 1851 and came to Natal as an indentured worker in 1883 (see Bhana and Vahed 2005: 51-72). The Singhs renovated the temple as they prospered and the community became more settled, and it was opened officially by Gandhi in May 1913. They also formed the Hindu Mintra Mundal.

The Umgeni Road Temple, originally built in 1885, is today the largest temple in South Africa. One of the main financial contributors was a woman, Amrotham Pillay, who had come to Natal as an indentured migrant in 1889. She married K.K. Pillay and they ran a successful business in Greenwood Park. She gave a portion of her wealth to renovate the temple and was a regular contributor. In Pietermaritzburg, the Sri Siva Soobramoniar and Marriaman Temples were built in 1898 in the South Indian style and the Shri Vishnu Temple in 1907. One of the key figures in the Shri Vishnu temple was Gokul Rambuli Singh, born on a plantation in Inanda to indentured parents, who studied in

Durban, and worked as a legal clerk and photographer in Pietermaritzburg. He helped found, and later became president of the Shree Vishnu Temple, Veda Dhrama Sabha, and Vedic Vidya Parceharak (Bhana and Vahed 2005: 54).

On the south coast, in Umzinto, the Vishnu Hindu Temple provides an excellent example of the progression of the indentured, as they moved out of indenture and established themselves in business, building temples and other religious and cultural markers. In the process, they created a familiar environment that resonated, however imperfectly, with the world that they had left. The trustees of the temple, Soubiah Narraindoo (18911), Moothoosamy (4498), Muthialu (36621), Ayyavu (36672), Ramsamy (2987), and Murugan (22740), were all market gardeners who had arrived as indentured migrants.

Murugan Naik arrived in August 1880. He was 26, of the Vannia caste, from Arcot and served his indenture with Hawksworth Bros. in Avoca, north of Durban. He would have been 55 when the temple was built, and died in 1936 at the age of 82. Ayyavu Muniappan, caste Muppa, from Tanjore, landed in Natal in October 1888. He was 26 when he began his indenture at the infamous Esperanza estate and in his late forties when the temple was built. He died in 1935. Several aspects of this information are relevant. One is that trustees were of different castes, another is that all were successful market gardeners; they were from different parts of Madras Presidency, had been in Natal for several decades, and, interestingly, several of them had moved long distances to start market gardening.

The Shree Emperumal Temple in Mount Edgecombe is one of the best-known temples in South Africa, and its environs are filled with the history of indenture. The very origin of the temple is intertwined with sugar. The Emperumal Temple was built in 1875 in close proximity to the sugar mill, the barracks where workers were housed, and the Dumat Dam, which was named after Alfred Dumat, the Mauritian manager of the mill. Besides the Shree Temple (1875), several other temples were built at Mount Edgecombe, such as Ganesha (1898), Soobramaniam (1920), Kaliyamm (1925), and Gengiammen (1935).

As the survival of the indentured depended on a good harvest, this may have been a reason why temples to Vishnu were built along the north

and south coasts, where sugar was planted. It is interesting that the Shree temple was dedicated to Vishnu, traditionally a North Indian deity, when South Indians were in the majority (*Indian Opinion* 23 September 1906 in Desai and Vahed 2010: 245).

The present temple at Mount Edgecombe was built by Kistappa Reddy (1863-1941), who arrived as an indentured worker in 1898, and was assigned to Marshall Campbell's Natal Estates Sugar Mill. A proficient and skilled temple builder, he was involved in building and renovating temples throughout Natal, along with Kothanar Ramsamy Pillay, a passenger migrant from Mauritius. The two were responsible for most temple renovations in the early decades of the twentieth century. Reddy's life reveals much about the indentured experience. He worked as a field labourer, but was a *Koluthukar* (brick-layer) by profession. He could read Tamil and possessed manuals on temples, though it is unlikely he had detailed drawings to work from. Reddy created scriptural forms from memory. After completing his indenture, he settled in Cato Manor, and set up business as a builder. He prospered, purchasing six acres of land, and built a large house. Two of his sons followed his vocation initially, but went a step further, becoming draughtsmen. At some point before Reddy's death in 1941, the family went into the printing trade. Reddy visited India twice to purchase Tamil types for the press. After the opening of the Marriaman Temple in Pietermaritzburg, the *Natal Witness* (6 November 1925) carried the following report, which also serves as an appropriate tribute to Reddy:

An old Indian, K. Reddy, is the sculptor, and he is held in great veneration by his countrymen all over South Africa. This worker possesses most wonderful hands. He has erected the most artistic domes and temples all over the Union. His eyes are regarded as wonderful, and his sense of proportion most exact. He never uses a rule to measure, and yet his work is exact to the finest degree (in Desai and Vahed 2010: 246).

Temples were a source of community bonding, drawing on ancient skills and providing the organisational backbone of Hinduism in Natal.

INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

From the Vedic tradition to the present, the emphasis seems to be on the performance of the ritual and its continuity (Kumar 2000: 64).

All over the province of KwaZulu-Natal, temples are still prominent. Even on the sugar estates which Indians have long left, deep in the cane-fields, temples stand as a constant memory to a time when they played a central role in the lives of the indentured.

Many of the festivals continue to be celebrated. One of the most important is Kavady. In 2012 under a scorching sun in the old sugar towns like Tongaat, thousands converged on the sports ground during the Kavady festival. It is a remarkable event that stitches the past into the present; the rhythm of the old world transposed.

The firewalking (Draupadi) festival has been practiced since the turn of the century, and is practiced today at the Umbilo Shree Ambalavanar Alayam Temple in Cato Manor, also known as the Second River temple, another example of the preservation of ceremonies and its continuing resonance in present times (Rushby 2011).

There are new challenges to Hinduism however. In the huge townships of Chatsworth and Phoenix, Pentecostalism has grown dramatically. Alongside this, the mobility of a whole generation of educated Indians has seen them leave the province in search of employment. As a result, temple congregations struggle to find new cohorts to administer temple affairs.

In some cases the emphasis, too, has changed. While one of the first tasks of the indentured was to build temples, there is a growing trend to build massive monuments to the gods. A huge Shiva stands outside Umgeni Road temple, dwarfing the existing structures, while an imposing Hanuman stands guard over a temple in Chatsworth. On the one hand, these monuments represent a growing confidence of Hindus as they re-connect with India. On the other, they can be seen as a defensive gesture, as more and more of a new generation do not speak Indian languages and migrate to other areas, leaving behind communities in which the temple plays a role in initiating a whole new cohort into the traditions of Hindusim.

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