

‘Gokhale, Polak and the end of Indian indenture in Natal, South Africa’

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Abstract

152 184 Indian indentured workers were imported to Natal between 1860 and 1911 to work on the colony’s sugar, tea and wattle plantations, the railways, coal mines, and the municipalities. Although indentured labour played a crucial role in expanding the economy of Natal, opinion over Indian labour was divided amongst whites from the beginning. The presence of a settled Indian population aroused the ire of many white settlers and restrictive laws were imposed against Indians once Natal received self-government. The termination of indentured migration to Natal was due to multiple factors. In addition to opposition from large segments of the white population, Indian nationalists sought to use indentured labour as a bargaining chip to gain concessions from the South African government over the treatment of free Indians in the country, while Indian South African political leaders hoped that the end of indenture would reduce the proportion of Indians in relation to whites and over time naturally erase the “Indian Question” as a political problem. Some Indians, both in India and South Africa, opposed indenture because they saw the system as semi-slavery. With the exception of sugar planters, White South Africa was not unduly concerned about the end of indenture. In the preceding years, the South African government passed legislation that imposed taxes on Africans and reduced their access to land, forcing large numbers onto the labour market. The end of indenture did not result in an improvement in the position of Indians in South Africa, as many had hoped. On the contrary, in the decades that followed, more onerous legislation was passed that confined Indians to second class status.

The annexation of Natal by the British in 1843 was followed by large scale immigration of mainly British who found success with sugar production which became the principal crop in the colony. Though there were approximately 50 000 Zulus in Natal when the British annexed the colony, sugar production was hampered by the shortage of a stable, low-cost labour force because the Zulu had access to land on reserves that the British established for them, and where they lived under customary law, as well as on land in Christian missions, and on land purchased by speculators in anticipation of white settlement. Africans not only subsisted on this land but flourished as producers of fruits and vegetables for the local market (Atkins 1986). Theophilus Shepstone, the architect of the reserves, who was largely responsible for the affairs of Natal’s Africans from the 1840s to the 1870s, held that Africans and Europeans were distinct communities and ‘to coerce the Native to become dependent on the European by economic pressure was not compatible with this outlook’ (Thompson 1938: 14).

Natal’s labour shortage was so desperate that an editorial in the *Natal Mercury* newspaper of 18 April 1859 warned that ‘the fate of the colony hangs on a thread and that thread is labour.’ Planters petitioned for Indian indentured labour which was proving successful in a number of former slave colonies where it was imported after the abolition of slavery, beginning with Mauritius in 1835. Natal’s appeal was taken up from 1855 by Sir George Grey, High Commissioner over British territories in Southern Africa, who was aware of the success of indentured labour in Mauritius (Vahed 1995: 28). Negotiations between the Natal and Indian governments paved the way for the importation of Indian labour, with the passage of Law 14 of 1859, ‘to provide for the introduction of coolies into this Colony at the public expense, and for the regulation and Government of such immigrants.’ (Vahed 1995: 29).

The first group of indentured workers arrived in Natal on board the *Truro* on 16 November 1860. Between then and July 1911, 152 641 indentured migrants arrived in Natal. Their labour contract stipulated that indentured workers were to labour for five years for an employer to whom they were assigned. They were free, at the end of that period, to either reindenture or seek work elsewhere in

Natal. Tayal (1977), Henning (1993), and Desai and Vahed (2010), amongst others, have chronicled the appalling conditions under which the indentured laboured. Although they were entitled to a free return passage after ten years in the colony, only a third returned to India (Bhana 1991: 20).

Unlike other sugar producing colonies, Natal's economy was diversified. Sixty percent of indentured migrants were allocated to sugar estates, while others helped to extend the railway network in the colony, worked for the Durban and Pietermaritzburg municipalities where they did such things as street sweeping, grass cutting, and scavenging, or worked in coal mining, wattle, tea and general farming, or came with special skills to work in hospitals, hotels, private clubs and dockyards (Vahed 1995: 34-36).

Indentured workers were followed to Natal from the mid-1870s by migrants, mainly from Gujarat on the west coast of India, who came at their own expense, hence were termed 'passengers'. By the mid-1880s, as passengers and some ex-indentured Indians spread throughout the colony, they were seen to constitute an economic threat to white settlers who pressured for legislation to restrict Indian trade, residence, and immigration rights (Vahed and Bhana 2015: 23-40).

This chapter focuses on the factors that led to the end of indentured migration to Natal in 1911. The pressure to end indentured migration came from several sources. While the employers of indentured labour saw Indians as a "necessary evil" and wanted the system to continue, other whites in South Africa opposed the importation of indentured labour because they felt that Indians were an 'unassimilable' element who complicated "race" relations in the country. Many Indians too opposed indentured labour, some because they saw the system as inherently bad, and others because they thought that the stoppage of indenture would reduce the Indian population in South Africa in proportion to that of white South Africans, and thus naturally solve the Indian question as a political problem.

Settlers' divisions over indenture

White settlers were divided over indentured labour. Those who benefited from it pointed to the advantages of a settled Indian population. Sugar baron Sir Liege Hulett stated in 1908 that the 'condition of the Colony before the importation of Indian labour was one of gloom.... The coast has been turned into one of the most prosperous parts of South Africa' (Calpin 1949: 10). But there was opposition from upcountry farmers who were able to secure African labour as well as from white professionals and workers. But until Natal received self-government in 1893, there was a 'decisive and permanent' alliance between planters and the executive, resulting in the Natal government contributing £250 000 per annum from the general revenue to subsidise indentured labour. But as Thompson points out, 'at no time did the subsidy express the will of the majority of the Natal electorate, and it is significant that the subsidy was withdrawn by the first Natal Government (1893) that was responsible to its legislature' (Thompson 1962: 70).

The Natal government did not anticipate the permanent settlement of a large Indian population in the colony. Indenture was seen as a temporary measure until African labour was available for the local market though it was never explained how and when this would be achieved. (Thompson 1938: 33). That the government expected Indians to return to India explains the offer of a return passage only after ten years in the Colony (expecting migrants to continue reindenturing until then) and the offer of land to Indians who settled permanently in the Colony. Only a handful of plots were granted by the time the provision was abrogated in 1891 (Pachai 1971: 8). The solution to the labour crisis thus created a problem for the wider white settler population which had to compete with free and passenger Indian traders, clerks, and labourers. In 1894 the Natal Indian population of 46 000 exceeded the white population of 45 000 for the first time (Henning 1993: 81), adding to white feelings of being swamped by Indians.

Natal achieved self-government in 1893 and immediately set about dealing with the perceived "Asiatic Menace". The government stopped the subsidy for indentured immigration in 1894 and sent Protector Louis Mason and Henry Baines, a member of the Legislative Assembly, to India to negotiate for indentured contracts to terminate in India (see Natal Archives (NAB), Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO), CSO5549/93, 20 January 1894). The Natal government submitted a memorandum to the effect

that 'the unlimited settlement of Indians is not desirable, and there is a general wish that when they have completed their last period of indenture, they should return to India.' Lord Elgin, Viceroy of India, advised that the Indian government could not agree to compulsory return but would have no objection to legal means being implemented to compel Indians to return. This was realised in the Immigration Law Amendment Act of 1895 which imposed a £3 tax on Indians who did not reindenture or return to India after completing their indentures. Indentured migrants were offered a free passage home at the end of five years to encourage them to return (*Indian Opinion (IO)*, 17 September 1903; CWMG 3: 245-246). Harry Escombe, then Natal Attorney-General, was clear in moving the second reading of the tax Bill that Indians were wanted in Natal as workers only, and not as settlers and trade competitors. Laws were also introduced to limit Indian immigration and their trading and voting rights (Henderson 1905: 293).

Formal political leadership amongst Indians was provided by the merchant class who formed the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1894 with Mohandas K. Gandhi as secretary. The NIC's strategy was primarily constitutional and included petitions to government officials and private persons in Britain, Natal, and India, and letters to newspapers arguing for the rights of non-indentured Indians (Swan 1985: 51). This strategy failed to stem the tide of racist legislation and Gandhi lamented in a letter to the moderate Indian politician, Dadabhai Naoroji, on 18 September 1897 that Joseph Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, had 'yielded to the anti-Asiatic clamour of the different Colonies.... The agitation against the Indians is due *to colour and trade jealousy*' (CWMG 2: 167-168). Gandhi stated in 1903 that indentured migration had 'complicated the Indian Question ... throughout South Africa' and advocated ending it while increasing white immigration so that Indians would become inconspicuous and 'there would be hardly any opposition to the Indian trader, or to Indian enterprise in general' (*IO* 9 July 1903; CWMG 3: 138).

Natal, however, needed Indian labour so while it did not want to stop indenture, it tried to prevent a settled Indian population in the country. Another delegation was sent to India in 1903, comprising of two senior officials C.B. de Gersigny and H.C. Shepstone, to get Indian authorities to agree to relax recruiting conditions in India, allow recruitment for coal mines in Northern Natal, and to terminate indenture in India. The Indian authorities refused and the Natal government responded by extending the three-pound tax to children to further the burden on free Indians in order to force them to reindenture or return to India (Pachai 1971: 22).

Joseph Baynes, M.L.A. Natal, visited India in February 1905 where he met with the Natal Agents in Madras and Calcutta, as well as Sir Denzel Ibbetson, the new head of the Department that oversaw Indian emigration, and Viceroy Lord Curzon. In a report to the IITB in April 1905, Baynes stated that that there existed a strong feeling ('among leading Indians') with regard to the treatment to which their fellow countrymen are subjected in South Africa. The Government of India have to take cognisance of this feeling.... Under existing circumstances it does not appear to me that there is any chance of receiving any more favourable consideration or any further considerations from the Indian government (India Office J&P 1485/1906).

Anti-Indianism in the Transvaal

It was not only in Natal that anti-Indian laws were passed. There was a substantial Indian population in the Transvaal where the the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance of 1906, which Gandhi termed the Black Act, required Indians to register with the Registrar of Asiatics by providing fingerprints. Those who did not register could be imprisoned and even forced to leave the colony. Gandhi went to London in 1906 on behalf of the Transvaal British Indian Association (TBIA) to seek redress from the law. In London, he was part of a delegation headed by Sir Lepel Griffin, chairman of the East India Association, that met with Morley, the Secretary of State for India, on 22 November 1906. Griffin urged Morley to stop indentured migration to Natal 'until the status of their fellow-subjects in South Africa is altered.' (CWMG 6: 141). The delegation failed to either stop indenture or the 'Black Act' which became law in March 1907 (Pachai 1971: 35).

Transvaal's Indians responded by embarking on passive resistance. Gandhi was arrested on 28 December 1907 and sentenced to two months imprisonment on 11 January 1908. He was taken from prison on 30 January 1908 to meet with Smuts to discuss a compromise to the impasse. Interviewed after the meeting, Gandhi again called for an end to indenture: 'So long as Natal continues to import indentured labour, so long will there be some trouble or other in connection with Asiatics' (*IO*, 1 February 1908; CWMG 8: 112).

White Natalians also wanted to stop indenture. Colonial Secretary Sir Charles O' Grady Gubbins told a *Natal Mercury* reporter that the government had shut down the Emigration Agency at Calcutta as it intended to prohibit the importation of indentured labour at a date to be finalised (*IO* 4 April 1908; CWMG 8: 244-245). The Natal government introduced Bills in 1908 to stop further Indian immigration and the granting of new trading licences to Indians after 31 December 1908, while all existing licences would be terminated on 31 December 1918. The British government rejected the trading licence Bill in July (Pachai 1971: 49). The Natal Farmers Conference, meanwhile, passed a resolution in April 1908 that indentured migration should not be stopped until African labour became available (*IO* 25 April 1908; in CWMG 8: 278). The Natal Parliament therefore decided to suspend the Bill to stop indentured labour until commission has investigated the labour situation in the colony (*IO* 9 May 1908; CWMG 8: 296-297). Natal's Indians held a mass meeting in Durban on 29 August 1908 and passed a resolution 'strongly urging the stoppage of indentured Indian immigration to Natal, under the present state of the law, which reduces indentured labour to a form of slavery' (in Polak 1909:

The Clayton Commission was appointed on 25 November 1908 to investigate, among other things, 'the advisability of discontinuing or restricting the immigration of indentured Indians to Natal' (Meer 1980: 635). It reported that there were 2 429 employers of indentured labour, with only 7 006 of 25 579 indentured workers on sugar estates. If indenture ceased, industries such as sugar, tea, wattle, farming, and coal mining would decline. African labour was deemed 'unreliable' and it was predicted that the cost of labour would go up as a result of the anticipated labour shortage in the event of indenture being stopped (Meer 1980: 638). While Indian labour was deemed essential, the Commission had 'no hesitation in saying that the evidence is practically unanimous that the Indian is undesirable in the Colony other than as a labourer' and the Natal government should negotiate compulsory return (Meer 1980: 639). Polak, however, warned that Natal's Indians would never accept such a condition: 'the proposers of the scheme ... are content to regard the Indian labourer as a machine, from which the last ounce of work is to be ruthlessly extracted, and which may then be "scrapped" with other outworn instruments of labour' (Polak 1909: 49).

Delegations to England and India

As Natal, Transvaal, Orange Free State and the Cape Colony began discussions about a Union, two Indian delegations went to London in 1909, one from the Transvaal headed by Gandhi and another from Natal led by Amod Bayat, while H.S.L. Polak went to India as a one man delegation to publicise the grievances of Indians in South Africa. The Natal delegation presented a statement of its grievances to the Colonial Office on 11 August and met with Lord Crewe on the following day, 12 August (see Appendix XIX; CWMG 10: 16). They requested that indenture be ended 'in the interests of the Colony, of the free Indian population, and even of the indentured labourers themselves.' The material benefits of indenture were outweighed by 'the deterioration of their (the indentured) manhood and the vicious consequences that react upon the Colony as a whole.' (CWMG 10: 21). The statement asked that the 'least' that Natal should do 'in return for the supply of indentured labour is to grant common justice and fair treatment to those British Indians who have settled there, and who have thus acquired vested interests' (CWMG 10: 22). Lord Crewe did not say whether he would write to the Natal Government about the Dealers' Licences Act and he 'says nothing about the demand for stopping the import of indentured Indian labour' (*IO* 16 October 1909; CWMG 10: 102). The Natal statement and a forwarding letter were sent to the Viceroy in India calling on the Indian government to act against the Dealer's Licences Act, advising that there was a 'tangible remedy at the disposal of the Indian Government, and that is, to stop the supply of indentured labour that annually flows into it unless the Colony deals justly by the Indian traders and labourers' (*IO* 25 September 1909; CWMG 10: 47).

This was a time in India when nationalist fervour was heightening and there was greater concern among Indian nationalists with what was going on in the colonies, with South Africa in particular enjoying wide coverage. The treatment of Indians in South Africa was a rallying point for many nationalists. And the indentured were a bargaining chip in this power play. The INC passed a resolution in 1906 that indentured labour to Natal should be suspended 'as a means of extorting relief' until the colony redressed 'the existing intolerable disabilities and recognises Indians as equally [sic] members of the Empire' (*IO*, 6 January 1906; CWMG 5: 57-58).

In 1905, John Morley was appointed Secretary of State for India and Lord Minto the Viceroy. Both realised the need to change and introduced minor constitutional changes, as a means to appease younger, western-educated leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipain Chandra Pal, and Aurobindo Ghosh who were losing faith in the Indian National Congress' (INC) program of liberal nationalism (Pachai 1971: 24). The Indian Councils Act 1909 (or the Minto-Morley Reforms), gave Indians limited involvement in governance by permitting some Indians to be members of the Legislative Council.

Henry S.L. Polak, an English Jew, was a sub-editor of a newspaper in Johannesburg when he became acquainted with Gandhi. He joined Gandhi's law firm after qualifying as a lawyer, and worked alongside Gandhi for the cause of Indians in South Africa. Polak reached Bombay on 21 July 1909 and was in India until the end of the year. His propaganda work at meetings organised by Gokhale's Servants of India Society in Bombay and Calcutta, by Gandhi's friend Pranjivan Mehta in Rangoon, and G.A. Natesan in Madras was important in raising public awareness about the situation of Indians in South Africa, which eventually led to the end of indentured migration. In addition to addressing public meetings, Polak published a book, *The Indians of South Africa* (1909), in October 1909, which was circulated to influential people in India (Desai and Vahed 2016: 145-146). On the question of indentured labour, Polak (1909: 21-22) wrote evocatively of the system as a dehumanising one:

The resident Indian regards the system as a thinly disguised form of slavery, entirely foreign to the system of Indian thought and economic doctrine and colonial feeling is largely hostile to its continuance on economic grounds.... The system is abhorred by reason of its evil effects upon Indian and European alike. Nowhere else in South Africa is the customary mental attitude of the Europeans towards the Indians so contemptuous. He seems not seldom to have been brought up in the tainted atmosphere of the Southern States of the American Union, and the Indian contract labourer is often, to him, a being of a sub-human order. With the employer, the tendency is to treat the labourer as a mere chattel, a machine, a commercial asset to be worked to its fullest capacity, regardless of the human elements, careless of the play of human passions. The system lends itself to heartlessness and cruelty.... The system itself reeks with injustices to all those who are subject to its powerful and far-reaching influences. Because the slave wears a gold collar round his neck and is clothed in silks, he is no less a slave. Between the master and the servant there can be no human relationship save such as may often be observed between an owner and his cattle. And as a matter of fact, the Indian labourer is often regarded by his employer as of less account than a good beast, for the latter costs money to replace, whereas the former is a cheap commodity.

Gandhi wrote in October 1909 that Polak's 'vigorous efforts in India are a source of great strength [to our cause]. A very fine cable-report of the Bombay mass meeting appeared in the local newspapers. It said that the meeting demanded that the recruitment of indentured labour for Natal should be stopped. People's feelings were roused to a high pitch by Mr. Polak's speech.' (*IO* 16 October 1909; CWMG 10: 97). If Polak's book is any indication, his speeches would have been highly passionate. He ended his book with a plea to Indians:

These heroic men (Indians in South Africa) have cried to India, "Oh! Thou Mother of Strength. Take away my unmanliness and MAKE ME A MAN!" In their agony and despair they have turned to their Motherland to rescue them from their annihilation and extinction, that they might be spared for the sake of her high honour, her lofty reputation. And what has been India's reply? What will henceforth be India's reply? (Polak 1909: 96).

After he addressed a meeting in Calcutta, an Indian South African League was formed and resolutions passed for the Indian government to stop indentured labour to Natal. Polak worked closely with

Gokhale. He addressed the 24th session of the INC conference in late December 1909 where Gokhale moved a resolution on 29 December that the Indian government should abolish indentured labour to Natal in retaliation for the colony's racist policies against Indians, appeal to the Imperial Government to cease the move towards a white Union, and raise funds for the struggle in South Africa (Pachai 1971: 54). The Aga Khan III, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, presiding at the annual session of the All-India Moslem League in Delhi in December 1909, was critical of the treatment of the Indians in South Africa. He spoke of 'Indian martyrdom in South Africa' and said that the Imperial Government should stop indentured emigration from India to Natal unless the Transvaal government changed its policies towards Indians (*IO*, 5 February 1910; CWMG 10: 405)

The Natal Government had no intention of changing its policies towards Black people. During negotiations over Union, the only question on which Natal agreed with the Transvaal and the OFS was the franchise for people of colour. As Brookes and Webb (1965: 240) point out, Natal Prime Minister F.R. Moor said that 'in his opinion the white and black races in South Africa would never be amalgamated. The history of the world proved that the black man was incapable of civilisation'. The Natal government did change the trading licences act but that was only to 'arrest the agitation for ending the system of indenture' and out of fear that satyagraha would spread to Natal (*IO*, 11 December 1909; CWMG 10: 353). The South African Union which came into being on 31 May 1910 consolidated white hegemony in the country. This was what Polak (1909: 93) had feared when he wrote that 'this joining of hands is to be by and on behalf of the white races alone. The ideal of a great white South Africa transcends everything.... The interests of the non-white people are made deliberately to subserve the interests of the dominant race.'

Gokhale's resolution

Acting on the INC resolution of 29 December 1909, Gokhale, tabled a resolution in the Indian Legislative Council on 25 February 1910 to the effect that 'this Council recommends that the Governor General in Council should be empowered to prohibit the recruitment of indentured labour in British India for the colony of Natal.'¹ In moving the resolution, Gokhale made an impassioned speech in which he argued that the influx of indentured Indians into South Africa 'lowered' the position of free Indians because 'the feeling of contempt with which the indentured Indian is generally regarded comes to extend itself to ... other Indians of independent means.' The resulting imposition of anti-Indian laws meant that the 'whole community feels an intolerable and continuously increasing economic burden placed upon its shoulders.' The governments of Transvaal and Natal had adopted 'an utterly selfish and heartless policy' and did not take threats to stop indenture seriously. The Natal government, in fact, had the 'arrogance', in the midst of agitation in India, to ask the Government of India to agree to the termination of indenture in India or on the high seas. The threat to stop indentured labour would help to secure 'from the Natal Government fair terms generally for the Indian community resident in the Colony.' It would also force Natal to keep its African labour in the province, thus creating a labour shortage in the Transvaal whose government would have to reconsider its attitude to its own Indian population. Gokhale urged that the resolution be adopted for 'no single question of our time has evoked more bitter feelings throughout India ... than the continued ill-treatment of Indians in South Africa' (Sabhlok 2015)

Fourteen Indian members, including Sardar Partab Singh, Nawab Sayed Mahomed, Sachdananda Sinha, Mr Chitnavis, Mr Madholkar, Babu B.N. Basu, Mr Ghaznavi and The Maharaja of Burdwan, spoke in support of Gokhale's resolution which was unanimously adopted, though the system as a whole was not abolished. Dadabhai Naoroji urged the Government of India to apply economic pressure on the South African Government in order to force it to address the grievances of free Indian settlers. The Colonial Office had been 'too mild' and the time had come for the Indian government to stop relying on the false 'assurances' of statesmen in England and South Africa and to use its own 'resources' to 'grapple with the question with its accustomed spirit.' Indentured labour was 'a lever in the hands of the government' and should be used to settle the Indian question in South Africa.' Since the grievances of Indians in South Africa were mainly commercial (trading restrictions), the Indian government should stop indentured labour in order to 'touch the commercial conscience of the colonist to bring him to reason' (*IO* 16 April 1910). Mohammed Ali Jinnah, a member of the All-India Moslem League, who

would later lead the struggle for a separate Muslim state, was categorical that the 'first, and the primary object of this resolution is retaliation, and the subsidiary object is no doubt in the interests of the labour itself.' They had to act because the Indian South African question 'has roused the feelings of all classes in this country to the highest pitch of indignation' (*IO* 16 April 1910). Subba Rao called for action because nothing would give contentment to Indians 'unless and until British citizenship is made a reality at Home and abroad.' Sir Vithaldas Damodar Thackersey reminded members that 'no question attracted greater attention throughout the length and breadth of India than the question of the position of Indians in South Africa' and the Indian government had to act for the good of both India and the workers (*IO* 16 April 1910).

In March 1910, Robertson, Member for Commerce and Industry, introduced a Bill to amend the Indian Emigration Act of 1908, which would give the Governor-General in Council the power to prohibit emigration to any country if 'sufficient grounds' existed to do so. The Bill was to become law in July (*IO* 14 January 1911). Under the Indian Act XIV of 1910 (Brookes and Webb 1965: 286), the Government of India issued a notification prohibiting emigration to Natal with the date to be decided upon following negotiations with the Natal government. An editorial in *Indian Opinion* stated that the stoppage of indenture would help resolve the Indian question in South Africa because there would be fewer of them and they could expect 'to get the laws about passes, etc., repealed, and there will be fewer attacks on traders'. There was now 'better hope of success' for Indians (*IO*, 2 April 1910; CWMG 10: 471).

The end of Indenture

Robertson announced in the Imperial Legislative Council on 3 January 1911 that 'in the absence of any guarantee that the Indians will be accepted as permanent citizens of the South African Union after the expiration of their indentures', a notice would be introduced by the Governor-General in Council on 1 April prohibiting further immigration of indentured labour to Natal from 1 July 1911. Lord Harcourt, Secretary of State for the Colonies, London, relayed the message to Lord Gladstone, the Governor-General of South Africa, on 4 January 1911 (SAB, GG 88, 15/89, January to May 1911). Gokhale welcomed the announcement which evoked 'a feeling of sincere satisfaction' since the treatment of Indians in South Africa evoked 'soreness of feeling in India'. He saw the action of the Indian government as proof that it would not hesitate to 'take decisive action for the furtherance of their interests, even though it should inflict some injury on a British Colony' (*IO* 11 February 1911). Moulvi Mahomed Aziz Mirza of the All-India Moslem League, 'conveyed the most heartfelt thanks of the Indian Mussulman to His Excellency the Governor-General-in-Council for his just and statesmanlike act' (*IO* 11 February 1911).

The Anglo-Indian press in India, on the other hand, was critical of the decision which it saw as a retaliatory measure that benefited no one. *Indian Opinion* (25 February 1911) criticised this attitude, arguing that wherever in a 'foreign land, the coolie exists, there all Indians must surely be dragged down, politically, socially, and economically, to the "coolie" level. All are "coolies" alike'. The end of indenture would thus raise the status of the free Indian population. The *Natal Mercury*, which represented majority white opinion in the Natal, opined in its issue of 4 January 1911, that the decision was not unexpected and that if the Indian government had not stopped indentured migration, the South African government would have done so: 'Public opinion in India was strongly averse to the continuance of the emigration of indentured labour to South Africa, just as public opinion in South Africa is strongly opposed to the free admission of Asiatics....'

The NIC submitted a memorial to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on 15 May 1911 covering a variety of issues. On the question of indentured labour, the memorialists offered 'respectful thanks of the British Indian community of Natal' for the 'decision to stop the supply of indentured labour to Natal' because indentured labour 'savours of a state bordering on slavery.' They expected the treatment of free Indians to improve with the stoppage of indenture because 'most of the troubles that British Indians throughout South Africa have had to undergo have been largely due to an artificial increase in the Indian population of South Africa, brought about by the introduction of this class of labour.' (CWMG 11: 403-04).

Indian Opinion singled out two men for being instrumental in ending indenture, Polak and Gokhale. With regard to Gokhale, the paper stated, 'we cannot but write with the highest respect. In spite of his many most exacting self-imposed duties, and notwithstanding his indifferent health, he has found time to study our question as no other Indian has done' (*IO* 7 January 1911; CWMG 11: 205-206). The NIC convened a public meeting on 7 January 1911, where the chairman Dawud Mahomed said that it was his 'joyful task to congratulate you, and all the Indians of South Africa, upon the gratifying news' that the end of the system of 'veiled slavery' was close at hand. He wanted them to rejoice because 'our Motherland has made it plain that she will no longer submit to the intolerable indignities that our European fellow-colonists have attempted to impose upon us.' The decision, he said, had given Indians 'a new sense of our own dignity, and the knowledge that a solution has been provided for the problem of the treatment of Indian in South Africa and the condition of their future admission into the Union'. Indians could, 'for the first time, look whites squarely in the face, firm in the knowledge that henceforth we are free men, untainted with the poison of a slavish environment.' Mahomed singled out for praise Gokhale, 'for the patriotic manner in which he pursued the issue', and Polak, who 'with unflinching zeal has preached in season and out of season, throughout the length and breadth of India, the destruction of an iniquitous system degrading alike for Indian and European' (*IO* 14 January 1911).

Polak, following his return from India, spent time at the Phoenix Settlement in Natal, and used this time to speak out against indenture. He wrote to the *Natal Mercury* that all 'self-respecting Indians in South Africa' would 'heartily rejoice' at the Indian government's decision. They would regard the action 'to be in the nature of a Nemesis for the injustices that have been practiced everywhere in South Africa against them'. Whites who were concerned about industries in Natal, 'should have thought of this before they took up the pleasant pastime of Indian-baiting.' His advice for whites who remained silent: 'to stand aside when a wrong is being perpetrated is as blameworthy as to commit it oneself' (12 January 1911; republished *IO* 14 January 1911).

In another letter to the *Natal Witness* on 24 March 1911, Polak criticised an editorial in that paper suggesting that indenture should be continued with the provision of compulsory return. He wrote that the editor appeared to 'regard the Indian labourers as chattels' whereas the Indian authorities who agreed to indenture, did not see the twelve shillings a month wage as 'fair compensation' for the hard work done by the indentured; rather, the passage was to 'enable the indentured to 'develop freely in their new homes after the expiry of their indentures', should they choose to do so (in *IO* 28 March 1911).

Polak left Natal at the end of April 1911. The NIC held a farewell reception for him at the Union Theatre in Victoria Street, Durban. Chairman Dawud Mahomed commended Polak whose 'self-sacrifice and marvellous zeal in their cause had stirred the hearts of the Indian people'. The NIC presented him with an address that read:

Your admirable and useful work in India on behalf of the Indians in South Africa, and especially the procuring of the stoppage of the recruitment of Indian servile labour for Natal, in which you were so largely instrumental, will ever remain bright in our memories, nor do we think that our Motherland, for whose honour your task was undertaken, will be unmindful of it.

One of the speakers, T. Subrahmanyam, said that poor Indians along the north and south coasts of Natal 'would grieve bitterly' at news of Polak's departure (*IO* 6 May 1911).

Reaction of Natal's employers

The termination of indenture was generally welcomed by white South Africa. The *Cape Times* (4 January 1911) saw it 'as the first solution of the Asiatic problem. If anything were needed to stimulate this frame of mind it has been General Smuts' patriotic declaration...that South Africa as a young country should be thrown open to White immigrants, regardless of education or language...'. The South African government also formally welcomed the decision to end indenture in a telegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies (PRO, L/E/7/1184, J & P 145, P.D. No. 35, 1911. In Correspondence from Crewe of the India Office to Governor-General of India, 17 February 1911). The *Natal Advertiser* stated that Natal could not afford a large Indian population and that the government should find a solution to

the labour crisis, which should not be difficult 'with the enormous native population at our disposal' (in *IO* 14 January 1911). The *Times of Natal's* view was that the situation was 'not hopeless'. Natal had first right to its Zulu labour and should institute measure to prohibit the export of labour to the gold mines of the Rand (in *IO* 14 January 1911).

However, employers of indentured labour in Natal were concerned. One of the largest employers, Liege Hulett, blamed 'agitators' for linking Indian trading licenses with indentured labour. He felt that in order to get 'what is wanted for the trading class, a dead set is made against indentured labour. The agitators go about trying to make trouble on the estates for the purpose of stopping coolie immigration'. The situation would be 'disastrous' unless alternative sources of labour were found (*IO* 5 March 1910). On 10 January 1911 the Natal Sugar Growers Association sent a telegram to Smuts, the Minister of the Interior, asking the government to negotiate an extension to the notice period. The Minister declined their request on the 11th. He said that the workers imported by 30 June would meet their immediate requirements and that future labour needs would be given 'serious and sympathetic consideration' by the government (*IO* 28 January 1911).

Other employers also complained that the notice period of six months was too short. The Natal Coal Owner's Association, Natal Cooperative Mealie Grower's Union, Natal Wattle Growers' Union, Natal Sugar Growers' Association, and Natal Tea Planters submitted a joint petition to the Governor General of India in which they stated that because they were assured of a regular labour supply, they had invested 'enormous investments of capital [which] would not have taken place if Petitioners had felt uncertain about labour'. Petitioners 'respectfully urge that fifty years permission to import this labour should not cease suddenly at six months notice'. At the very least, they pleaded with the Indian government to complete the indent of 15 000 workers for whom deposit had been paid, to 'remove from the minds of Petitioners that they are ... being punished for acts over which they have no control' (SAB, GG 88, 15/89, January to May 1911). The request was denied and employers began making alternative plans.

Walter Stead, secretary of the IITB, wrote to R.P. Gibbes, the Natal Emigration Agent in Calcutta, on 13 January 1911 that the Board was sending its medical superintendent Dr. Burton Nicol, to India in an attempt to 'increase the number of Indians to be shipped to Natal before the 1st July.' On 21 January 1911, Stead informed employers in Natal that Sirdars would be travelling to India in February to recruit workers. Those who were keen on recruiting labour via these Sirdars had to contribute to the travel and subsistence allowance of the Sirdars, who themselves could only return to Natal under five years indenture because of the immigration laws. The Sirdars were paid between £2 and £10 each per month (*IO* 18 February 1911).

The NIC got wind of this scheme and actively campaigned against it. Polak, who was in Natal during this period, visited plantations to persuade Sirdars not to go to India as recruiters. *Indian Opinion* (28 January 1911) reported, for example, that after he spoke in Verulam on 24 January a Sirdar told him that he had intended to go to India but would now not do so and would advise his fellow Sirdars accordingly, as he realised that they would be participating in 'killing' their brothers and sisters. In the same issue of *Indian Opinion*, the editorial urged Indians to do everything in their power to frustrate these 'unholy efforts' on the part of employers to 'introduce as many hundreds of these human chattels as possible before June 30'. Indian traders in Natal were urged to encourage indentured workers not to reindenture by explaining that the wages of free labour would increase if there was a labour shortage, and, in turn, traders would 'benefit by the greater purchasing power of his Indian and native customers'. *Indian Opinion* reported on 18 February 1911, that Polak had visited plantations in Stanger and Tongaat on the north coast of Natal to speak to storekeepers and workers, urging them to refuse to enter into new indentured contracts, but to enter into free civil contracts.

The Sirdars left for India on the *Umfuli* on 14 February 1911. In all there were 88 Sirdars on board, with 14 going to Calcutta to recruit in the United Provinces, whilst the others were to go to North and South Arcot, Chingleput and other parts of Madras. More Sirdars would have gone but some withdrew as a result of Polak and other activists making 'the true facts of the situation known to them'. Those Sirdars who did go, were kept secluded at the Bluff Depot so that they would not change their minds because

of outside pressure. Opponents of the scheme arranged for P. Krishnaswami Naidoo, well-known passive resister from the Transvaal, to travel on the same ship in order to persuade the Sirdars to change their minds about recruiting. Naidoo bought the ticket in the name of P. Krishnaswami, as he was known in Natal. On the day of boarding, however, the authorities became aware of his presence and instructed Sirdars and ex-indentured migrants to board the ship before the deck passengers, who asked Polak to intervene on their behalf but the shipping company refused and in fact stated that Polak had no mandate to speak for them. When eventually the deck passengers were allowed to board, Naidoo was refused permission because he did not buy the ticket in his full name of P.K. Naidoo (IO 18 February 1911). An editorial in *Indian Opinion* (18 February 1911) stated that the vindictive actions of the authorities would not stop the protest against the Sirdars since 'arrangements have been made by our friends on the other side (India) to foil the mercenary designs of the employers' and predicted that 'the results accruing from the lavish expenditure will hardly be commensurate with their anticipation'.

Shortly after the Sirdars reached Madras, there was a mass meeting on 1 April 1911 under the auspices of the Indian South African League at the YMCA Auditorium to protest their activities. Amongst those in attendance were G.A. Natesan, of the publishing company G. A. Natesan & Co.; the Rajah of Kollengode; Yakub Hussain of the All-India Moslem League; and other dignitaries of Madras. Chairman Dewan Bahadur M. Audinaryanaiah, who was chairman of the South African League, said that all present were aware of the problems of Indians in the Transvaal, at the root of which was the indentured system. Natal's employers had sent Sirdars to recruit labour without bothering to improve the treatment of Indians already in the country. The residents of Madras had to work hard to counteract the Sirdars (IO 8 April 1911). Natesan described indenture as a 'form of slavery' in which Indians were distributed like 'cattle amongst various employers' and made to live in 'huts which were worse than pig-sties'. The 'men were ill-treated and women were dishonoured'. The system had no redeeming feature' and they had to 'do everything in their power to prevent its continuance.' The Sirdars had to be stopped from 'doing their nefarious and unpatriotic work' and he suggested that the South African League should employ students to follow the Sirdars around the villages to prevent them from recruiting. Dr T.M. Nair proposed that a Vigilance Committee be formed to keep an eye on recruiters and arrest them so that they can 'taste the gaol life which the coolies in Natal suffered'. The meeting passed a resolution that it 'viewed with grave concern' the arrival of Sirdars and that 'active measures should be taken to prevent the planters and their agents defeating the object of the Government of India in prohibiting indentured emigration to India'. It urged local authorities to arrest and prosecute who who were recruiting 'under false pretences' (IO 8 April 1911).

There were changes in personnel in Calcutta before the Natal "recruiters" reached there. Gibbes went on leave in February 1911 and A. Marsden, the Emigration for Fiji, became Acting Agent for Natal as well. Dr. Nicol reached India on 26 February and the Sirdars reached on 13 March (Henning 1993: 130). In addition to public anger, the Sirdars faced a legal constraint in that the Indian Emigration Act XVII of 1908 stipulated that recruiters had to be licensed, and deemed it an offence for anyone who 'makes or attempts to make, any agreement with any native of India, purporting to bind him to emigrate,' which punishable by imprisonment and a fine of up to 3 500 rupees. Marsden warned the Sirdars not to act as agents or take prospective migrants to sub-agents, but if any of their friends or family wished to indenture, they were to inform the sub-agent who would send a recruiter who will arrange for that individual to be sent to the employer in Natal (Henning 1993: 130).

Several Sirdars testified about their experience when they returned to Natal. They experienced a torrid time because the poor working condition of indentured workers and political problems of Indians in South Africa were known to villagers, while Sirdars had a terrible reputation. Sirdar Munusamy Naidu was 'sorry' for having gone to India. While the 'name "Sirdar"...may have some weight in Natal, in India Sirdars are treated like pariah dogs....' Naidu waited in his village 'patiently' and managed to recruit a few workers, even though notices in Tamil had been distributed warning people not to emigrate. Four family members returned with him (Bhana & Pachai 1984: 28).

Sirdar Muthusamy stated that he was told that Marsden would provide him with assistance, but when he got to India 'no one after all gave me any help.' He recruited just seven workers because of one

Venkatachalam who had served his indenture with the African Boating Company in Natal and returned to the village a few months prior to Muthusamy's arrival. Venkatachalam told villagers that there was much 'agitation' in Natal and warned them 'to take care of their children, chiefly young women. He made the people believe that some Sirdars purposely come to India to take away ... young women of fair complexion to get rich husbands in Natal, and thereby get some large amount'. The village magistrate warned Muthusamy against speaking to women and that he would be personally liable if villagers were missing. 'All this discouraged me and I resolved to abandon the idea of recruitment' (Bhana and Pachai 1984: 27)

Sirdar Periya Gengadu was sent by his employer with a mandate to recruit fifty workers. He was to be paid 2s 6d. per 'coolie'. He hoped to become a 'rich man' by recruiting between 100 and 200 workers but when he got to his village, his 'thoughts and plans turned out to be a mere dream. Pamphlets were circulated informing villagers that a hundred Sirdars were arriving to take villagers to an 'unknown country'. He visited five or six villages but failed to recruit anyone. Soon, 'the village magistrate put a guard on me. I was more or less a state prisoner.' He returned with his wife and three relatives (Bhana and Pachai 1984: 28). Sirdar Raghbir was arrested for illegal recruiting and tried on 1 May. His sister, brother-in-law and a friend had signed to go to Fiji but he persuaded them to join him in Natal. With Marsden's intervention, Raghbir was not imprisoned but fined 190 rupees and his family was allowed to proceed to Natal (Henning 1993: 130).

The story of Sirdar V, Sampson is especially illuminating. He described himself as a 'God-fearing' Christian who was respected by 'Brahmins and high-caste Hindus' in his village before he emigrated to Natal. He felt 'really proud' when he was nominated Sirdar by his employer, and volunteered to recruit in India as it would give him an opportunity to 'supersede Markapur Lazarus, who is now in Natal a Compounder'. He went to his home in Nandavanam, where villagers were cordial to him. He 'had several invitations. I enjoyed myself well'. But when word got out that he had returned to recruit workers, the villagers began to 'look down upon me'. Sampson was arrested when he was caught explaining to a prospective recruit what life was like in Natal:

[The police] placed me in the lock-up for 12 hours; they then told me to go away, warning me at the same time that I will be arrested and punished. On the 28th May [1911], the same sergeant came to me and asked me to produce my licence. I told him submissively that I have no licence. He again took me to the same police station and kept me in the lock-up for I told them that I had not got a farthing. They let me out with the same warning. I asked my wife to go with me to Natal. First she refused. Gradually by kind words I got round her and she came my way. Through her I got her sister and two more Indians to emigrate (Bhana and Pachai 1984: 28–29)

These narratives provide a window into the life of indenture: Indians migrating without family, the appalling reputation of Sirdars, the personal aspirations of some within migration, how news of struggles in Natal travelled to village level and the fear of employers about life after the stoppage of indenture (Henning 1993: 130). The struggles of Sirdars suggests that Polak's lecture tour and the campaign by locals within India was effective.

The final blow for Natal's employers was that because recruiting was slow, the Emigration Agent in Calcutta did not charter a ship to Natal. There was a sudden increase in recruits and by mid-June there were over 400 recruits at the depot but no ship to transport them to Natal. The IITB sent a telegram to the office of the Prime Minister of South Africa for help but no answer was received. The *Umhloti* was due at Colombo on 6 July and employers tried to arrange for the recruits to be taken by train from Tuticorin to Kandy and put on the *Umhloti* there, but that suggestion failed to materialise because the law only allowed emigration from the ports of Madras and Calcutta (IO 1 July 1911). The IITB sent an 'urgent' telegram to India on 22 June 1911 asking for an extension to transport the recruits who were in depot awaiting transportation. The Secretary of State for the Colonies informed the Governor-General of South Africa on 30 June that the 475 'Natal coolies have already been transferred to Fiji ... regret cannot now take action.' The position of the South African government was at odds with that of employers. J.W. Sauer signed a minute on behalf of the South African government that the ministers 'do not wish to associate themselves with the requests contained in the petition, and think it unnecessary

therefore to make any comment thereon' (Henning 1993: 130).

The *Umlazi*, with 462 passengers on board, arrived in Natal on 21 July 1911, the last shipment of indentured workers to Natal. Employers considered Indian sojourn a failure. The *Natal Mercury* reported on 27 June 1911 that planters lost around £2 000 in recruiting expenses because of the failure to secure a ship, they missed out on the 400 odd workers, and since most of the recruits in Calcutta were relatives of indentured workers in Natal, there was a danger that additional labour would be lost because the relatives in Natal may choose to return to India after completing their indentures (in *IO* 1 July 1911). An editorial in the *Indian Opinion* (29 July 1911) noted that

all the energy (of the employers) has been to very little purpose, however, for had anything like the normal yield of labourers been obtained there would have 10 000 brought here since Christmas, and some of the more sanguine planters expected, when it was notified that recruiting would stop in June, at least 15 000.

Only 2 400 Indians were recruited in the period from January to June 1911, amounting to 16 percent of the total number of labourers indented for (*IO* 29 July 1911).

Conclusion

The pressure to end indentured labour migration to Natal came from several sources in India as well as in South Africa. In India the treatment of Indians in South Africa aroused great hostility and stopping indentured migration was seen as leverage to get white South Africans to change their attitude towards Indians, and when that failed withholding indenture was a means to punish the South African regime. In South Africa only the immediate employers of Indian labour keen for the system to continue. Most whites opposed the importation of indentured labour because they felt that an 'unassimilable' element was being introduced into the country and complicating the already complex "race" relations in the country in which a minority white population was ruling over a majority African population. Many Indians too opposed indentured labour, some because they saw the system as intrinsically bad; others because they wanted to punish the South African government for its racist policies towards Indians; and yet others because they believed that the stoppage of indenture would reduce the Indian population in South Africa as a proportion of the total population, and thus naturally resolve the Indian question.

The South African government was not too concerned about the stoppage of indentured labour. A delegation of the IITB met with Smuts, the Minister of Interior, Mines and Defence, and Colonel Leuchars, the Minister of Commerce, to discuss the consequences of the stoppage of indenture and possible replacement labour. Smuts told the delegation that the government had plans to secure an alternative labour supply which could not be made public as 'several delicate and difficult problems had to be solved in connection with it.' The newspaper report speculated that 'it is understood that a supply of African labour will be provided' (*IO* 1 July 1911). It was African labour that whites were keen to lay their hands on. In Natal, as Jeff Guy has shown, the British wanted to end the political independence of the Zulu and 'free Zulu labour by means of a decisive military victory'. They failed to subjugate the Zulu during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, but this was 'merely a first stage in a prolonged process' (Guy 1994: xx). By the first decade of the twentieth-century, the Zulu were increasingly forced onto the labour market as they lost access to land, taxes were imposed on them, and they experienced a number of natural disaster. The final blow was the Land Act of 1913 which reserved just 13 per cent of South Africa's land for Africans (see Guy, 1982). The availability of African labour rendered Indians superfluous in farming, mining and the public sector. Thus ended the system of Indian indentured labour migration to Natal. The hopes of Indians that the end of indenture will result in an improvement in their status did not materialise. On the other hand, the arrival of Indians had long term consequences in that the minority as a racial group between the economically and politically dominant whites and the majority African population, which created tensions that linger to the present.

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¹ Gokhale was permitted to introduce resolutions under powers granted to Indian members of the Legislative Council by the India Council Act, 1908, better known as the Morley-Minto Reforms which allowed non-official members of the Imperial Legislative Council to propose resolutions.

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