

THE COMING OF INDENTURED LABOURERS FROM INDIA TO SOUTH AFRICA WITH
SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO MR DHANI JIAWON.

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15583

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Indian immigration to South Africa was a selective process in which certain individuals and categories of people, reacting to specific pressures in their homeland, were induced to migrate by the promise of future rewards. Their migration had the appearance of voluntary choice, in fact, the opportunity to migrate was legally a socially restricted and controlled. "While the higher caste Hindus were forbidden by the Institute of Manu from residing outside the land of their birth on penalty of excommunication, the prohibition appears to have been ritually circumvented in the interests of commerce for several centuries." 1

The indentured system served as an alternative to slavery, and provided the workers with certain limited safeguards. When the European sugar planters of Natal pressed their claim for labourers, the British government (in India) after lengthy negotiations with Natal authorities assented in 1859 to their request. "The absence of an effective alternative available to the Natal planters and lend strength to the conclusion that it had to be Indian labour at any cost if the Natal economy were to be saved from ruin." 2 Therefore the coming of Indians to Natal was inevitable and this inevitability stems from local and not external sources.

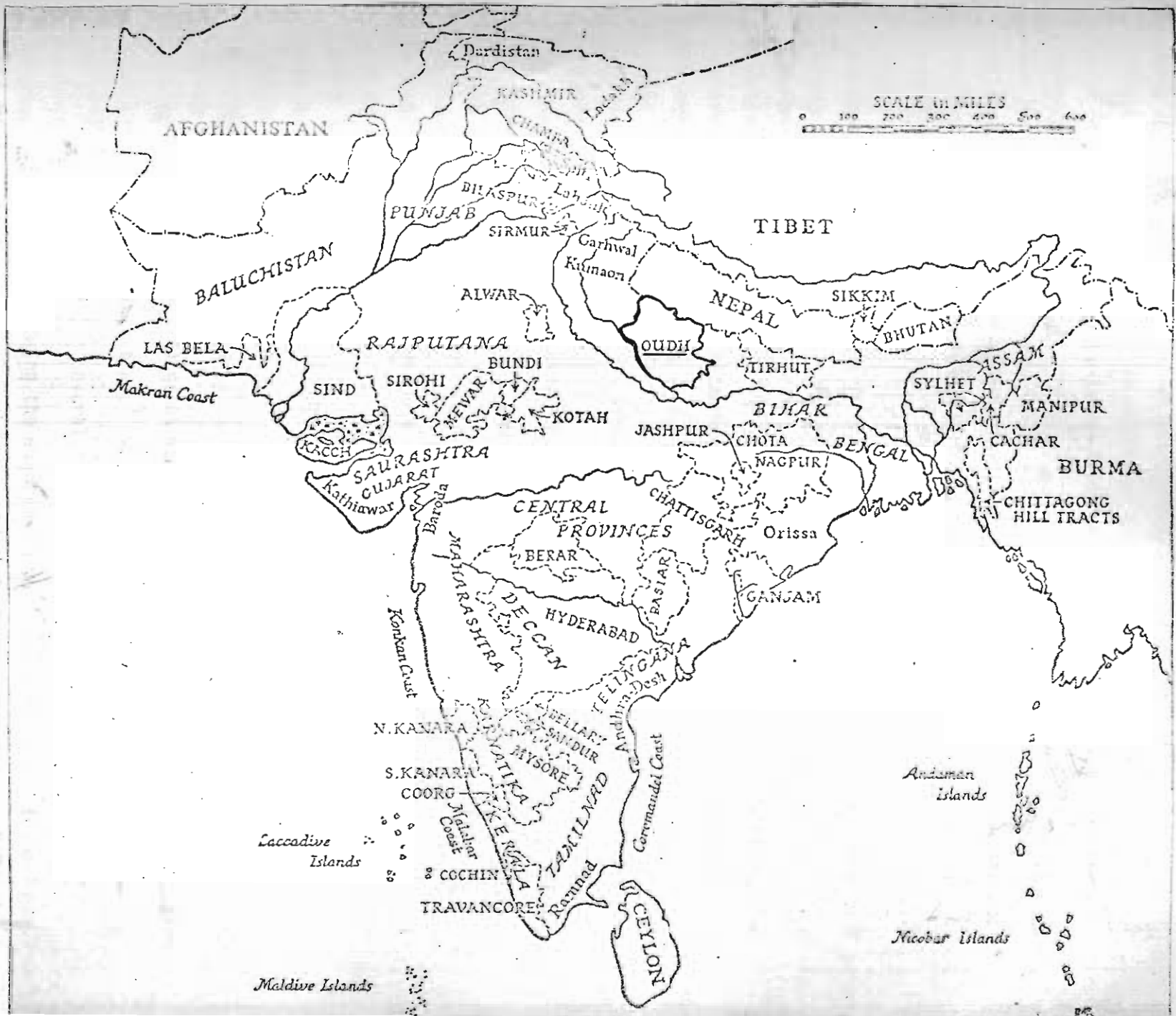
The first batch of indentured Indians arrived in 1860 on contracts of service for a period of three (later five) years, after which they became automatically "free". As "free" Indians, they could remain in Natal or receive a free return to India, or they might indenture for a further period of five years service, after which they had the option of a free passage back to India or a piece of Crown land in lieu of fare. Thus the Indians came to Natal as a result of persistent demand for cheap and reliable labour by a group of Europeans. While the recruiting was initially for sugar plantation, it was seen to be profitable to be extended to railways, dookyards, coal mines, municipal service and domestic employment.

Mr Dhani Jiawon is an example of one such person who came from India has an indentured labourer. He came from Fyzabad, a district in the province of Oudh in North India. Since 1948 officially Faizabad, district in India, in east Uttar Pradesh, called the United Province

1. H. Kuper : Indian People in Natal, p.1.

2. B. Pachai: The International Aspects of the South African Indian Question(1860-1971), p.5.

The Indian Subcontinent



until the Dominion of India was constituted under the Indian Independence Act, 1947.³ The capital city is Fyzabad. It is situated in the Ganges Plain and is bounded on the north by the river Gogra. The chief language is Western Hindi. It is an agricultural area, the chief products being rice, wheat, sugar cane, oilseeds, gram, barley, corn, tobacco and millet. The Chief industries are hand - loom weaving and sugar milling. The main centres of the district are Fyzabad, Fonda, Akbarpur and Jalalpur. It is rich in ancient remains, and is the holy city of the Hindus. The climate is of monsoon type.⁴

Mr Dhani's grandfather was Mr Pachoo and his father's name was Jiawon. Dhani had two elder brothers, both married with children. Dhani was the youngest and he was unmarried. They lived together as one family in the tradition that existed then. Economically, This family was well to do according to the living standards then. They possessed sufficient land for agriculture and they also had cattle. They were a close knit family, until father died. Their mother had died earlier.

In the 19th century village life in parts of India was harsh and hard, the country was underdeveloped, stricken periodically by famine, ravaged by disease. Home industries had decayed with the importation of British goods and cloth, peasants were in need of land, a few wealthy landowners misused their tenants. The 'condition' motive for leaving India alone is seldom sufficient. It was generally related to other experiences, more especially the nature and strength of family ties, which explains why from among several brothers only one would immigrate. The same thing had happened to Mr Dhani, where it appears he had a quarrel with one of his sister-in-laws, reasons undisclosed, which coincided with the recruitment of labour for a foreign country (South Africa). A number of young adventurous people, including Mr Dhani, recruited themselves in this labour force on 5 March 1889. The majority of those recruited sprung from the lower classes whose social, educational and certainly economic status in India, would have induced them to seek improvement of their condition in a new country. Even those of higher castes who no longer could be economically sustained in India were driven by necessity to migrate despite the Hindu religious and social codes which forbade emigration. " Promise of wealth, the currency easily forged by recruiters, was the most obvious inducement to indenture." ⁵

3. Encyclopedia Americana, 1965 ed., Volume 12 , p. 208.

4. Encyclopedia Britannica, 1971 ed., Volume 9, p. 1062.

5. H. Kuper: Indian People in Natal, p. 10.

Mr Dhani left India on 5 March 1889 at the age of 25 years. The 'labour force' travelled in 'bullockcart' to the nearest railway station, then by train to Calcutta. Finally they travelled by ship to South Africa. They arrived in South Africa on 26 May 1889 in the 'SS Congella' at the Durban Harbour (see appendices). The voyage from India to the colonies, to say the least, was extremely arduous. It is only in the twentieth century that science and technology acquired some sort of mastery over the hazards of overseas emigration. " The Calcutta emigrants belonged to a mixed bag representing the higher and middle ranging echelons of a caste-structured society, which, in the occupational areas, embraced navvies, weavers, iron-smiths, agriculturalists, priests and warriors. " ⁶

After Mr Dhani arrived in Durban he had to start work as an indentured labourer. He was indentured for five years to a North Coast Sugar Cane farmer, William Campbell, as a field worker for some time. But for the major part of his indenture, he was transferred to the distilling plant of the Company, until the five year period was complete. William John Campbell a Scotsman who landed in Natal from the Conquering Hero in June 1850. He was interested in agriculture. He saw a failure in the sugar industry. In 1857 he bought land on the Umhloti, first planting arrowroot, while he prepared to become his own cane planter and miller. This dual role, the necessary fashion in those days, he attained by 1861 when he first crushed his cane with his own steam mill. He named the estate "Muckle Neuk". The sugar machinery was imported from Glasgow in 1860 and was considered at that time to be the most modern in the colony. Even though it was against his own interests as an employer of labour, he all along strongly opposed the introduction of Indian labour in Natal. " He always insisted that greater effort should be made by the government to foster a working spirit among the native population. " ⁷

During the five year period of indentured labour, the labourers encountered many difficulties from their employers. The work required from the indentured was strenuous and exacting, and the recruiters sought people who were younger and physically fit. The indentured was very rarely more than thirty years old, and the vast majority were between twenty and twenty five years. Before being allowed to embark each volunteer was medically examined, the unfit were rejected and a detailed report was submitted on

6. B. Pachai; South Africa's Indians, p. 5.

7. R.F. Osbon; Valiant Harvest, p. 132.

those who were accepted. Women and children were among the immigrants. The indentured were not at all happy of this new life in a foreign country. Hard manual work was enforced upon them for long hours, in any weather condition under strict supervision. When asked for reasons for leaving, in almost every case, the answer was that they were promised a civilized way of life, for their work in a foreign country. The labourers did not anticipate, that within five of compulsory labour, the youthfull energy, morality and self respect will be seeped out for very little money, some rice, dholl and salt a month. Many labourers committed suicide because of the treatment they received. They could not leave for India because of the contract, but immediately after the contracted period many left for India. Ater the completion of five years of indentured labour, the indentured labourers were issued a document referred to Mas " Certificate of Freedom" and failure to produce it rendered ~~ex~~ indentured labourers to immediate arrest and imprisonment as vagrants (see appendice). The reason Mr Dhani did not leave South Africa after the indentured period, was because he became a family man during the period of indenture.

After indenture, that is in 1894, Dhani and his family settled on a 'leased land' owned by a sugar cane farmer named Johnson near Verulem. They used to cultivate vegetables for home use and the surplus was sold in the surrounding areas. The main crops mealies, beans and other lentils. They were dried and sold by bags. Dhani and his family stayed in this farm until 1911. But they had to leave this farm as the owners Johnson Estate expanded their sugar cane plantation. Most of Dhani's children were born and brought up in this farm. They lived happily because there was a large Indian population living in the farm and also in the adjacent areas under similar economic conditions. Since the population around there consisted of mostly of Hindi speaking people, the social and cultural needs were favourably met. There were a few Indians who at this stage owned fairly good size sugar cane farms. Living in Johnsons farm and intermingling with people of the surrounding areas who were also immigrants, gave a sense of security and encouragement to one another. It was a distinct departure from the rigid and controlled life they had to put up with during the indentured period.

So much so, that they built temples where worshipped the various deities in the Hindu traditional way. Besides praying various social functions were held in great pomp and glamour. Specially trained young men dressed

in women clothes danced in a orderly way, aided by Indian music. Typical Indian musical instruments were used and they were manufactured locally. They mostly sang songs from the epics of Ramayana, Mahabharatha and Purans (all religious books). Since the people were fully acquainted with the epics, they enjoyed the songs and hence danced as well. Mr Dhani had a fine reputation amongst the people at Johnsons farm. Although he was not educated in the literal sense, he had fine judgement based on tolerance and morality. Whenever there was a quarrel between two parties Mr Dhani was called upon to settle matter and in most cases the decision was respected. People very rarely went to court. Only the very complicated cases went to court, and it became the talk of the village for months. Usually whenever there was a reason to believe that trouble was brewing amongst the community, a meeting was called, where the matter was fully discussed and finality reached. This was called "Panchayat". A system strictly followed as tradition to this day in remote parts of India.

When Mr Dhani and his family left Johnsons Estate in 1911, a number of acquaintances who lived in the neighbourhood also joined him and settled in Accuts Estate near Inanda. This place was close to Gandhi's Phoenix Settlement and it is here that they met Mahatma Ghandi almost frequently. The land that they now occupied was temporary lease land and because of its uncertainty it was felt unwise to develop it to the fullest extent. It was clear that they would have to go somewhere else to settle.

Therefore Mr Dhani and his family settled at Winns farm in Merebank in 1914. Mr Winn was one of the early pioneers. He was a bachelor and not a greedy person. He was quite happy to let his land in small lots, where people could build houses. There was sufficient land to cultivate and even to keep cows. Although the land was on lease, it gave the people some stability. A number of families from different areas followed and settled in this place. They all built their houses at the lower end for reasons of water, because there was a stream along the lower end.

Mr Dhani and his family worked on the farm and they also had cows. The Farm produce taken to the Durban Indian Market and the milk was sold locally at three pence a quart. Mr Dhani was very devoted to his cows, a habit he acquired in India. He trained and loved his cows so much that they followed him whenever he called them by their names.

While living at the Winns farm an acre of land was bought in Duranta Road, in Merebank, for R120. This land was bought by instalments. Although the land was bought there was no intention to build immediately. But after some time Mr Winns was getting old, he sold his farm to E. M. Paruk and company. E.M.Paruk and Company sub divided the farm into building plots and sold them at very easy terms. This did not affect the dwellers very much because most of them bought the site on which their houses were built. Those that were still interested in farming acquired other suitable land as there were plenty of land in the immediate vicinity available. Other obtain employment in the emerging industries in the neighbourhood. Mr Dhani by now was old and he suffered with asthma. Mr Dhani's cows had to be gradually given up and were sold because of insufficient grazing land. He persisted in looking after the cows although he suffered from asthma. However he kept one good milking cow even though grazing was limited. In 1923 Mr Dhani and his family left Winns farm and built a larger house in Duranta Road, sufficient for the entire family. Mr Dhani by completely retired and in reasonably good health. In retirement he attended to his only cow and also planted various kinds of fruit trees. He used to nurse the trees the same way as the cows. No one could disturb him from his hobby. His family used to wonder why he is constantly labouring so hard, that the fruits of which he may not be able to enjoy. They did not realise that one has to do his duty for the sake of duty and not desiring for the fruit. It is a philosophy of the Gita unconsciously embeded in the Hindu mind. Mr Dhani is remembered to this day because some the trees he planted still exist and the Durban City Council has built a small park with beautiful flower beds around these trees.

Mr Dhani only got married after the first year of his indentured labour. He married Soondhree. She had a daughter with her about five years old named Bhagirathie, from her previous husband in India. Soondhree was Barayee by caste (sweet makers) and she was from the Barayalwe district near the city of Poona. Her husband had died, leaving three children, two sons and one daughter. Soondhree had to leave her home after her husbands death wither three children to fend for herself. She soon found life very difficult and the labour recruitment gave her an opportunity to escape the sufferings of widowhood. During this period in India were not allowed to marry or have the protection of a breadwinner. Soondhree joined the immigrants about the same time as Mr Dhani. She came to South

Africa with her daughter but left her two sons behind in India, never to hear or see them again.

As already mentioned, one of the main reasons why Mr Dhani did not leave South Africa after his indentured period was that he became a family man during the period of indenture. Mr Dhani had six children of his own and one step daughter. His first child Juggernath was born in 1891. His other children were Janki(female); Manki(female); Baijnath (male); Dooknee (female) and Ramcharreen (male). While staying at the Johnsons farm Juggernath was sent to Johannesburg to work as domestic servant for one of William Campbell's family. He worked there for two years and returned to Natal. He gained valuable experience there as a young boy and also learnt to speak English reasonably well. Juggernath and three of his younger sisters were married during their stay at Johnsons. In fact by 1914 all of Mr Dhani's children were married. Juggernath with his strong personality and his ability to speak the English language later managed to get a job at the Surprise Soap factory at Jacobs as a charge hand.

Mr Dhani was a very socialable person. He was well respected among the people. Whenever there was a quarrel between parties he was called upon to settle matters. During the period of indenture Mr Dhani met many people from his own village whom he knew and a few were his relatives. For instance he met Mathura(his elder brother's son-in-law); Boodhoo Kurmee and Saran Kurmee. Mr Dhani was a Kurmi by caste and it was observed very strictly. Kurmi was a cultivating caste. "The Kurmi comes near to the Brahmin!"⁸ The Brahmins were regarded as the highest caste and they were priests. Every Kurmi was sought and brought within the clan and friendship strengthened with a view later for closer relationship and marriage. The pattern of clanship was practiced in India by their forefathers and they wished to continue the system in Natal. Marriage arrangements were strictly confined within the caste.

During the period of indenture or for some time later, they had very little time for recreation, or had any suitable venues, due to long hours of work during indentured period. Every spare time was used for something profitable for survival. In the evening, that is after supper they got together and listened to or read the Ramayan, Purans or the Mahabharatha. Since ninety five percent of the immigrants

8. G.S. Ghurye : Casts and Race in India, p. 120.

could not read or write, they employed a person to recite these books. In almost every case the reciter was a Brahmin. Traditionally according to the caste system, as interpreted by the backward areas from which most of them were recruited, the Brahmin caste were only privileged to read and write. Any other caste was forbidden from book learning or even offering prayers. Surprising this behavior is practiced even to this day in a number of states in India.

Politically the indentured labourers suffered very much. In 1895 the Immigration Law Amendment Act was passed. The colonial European point of view at that time was summed up by saying that the "Indians were appreciated as labourers only and were not welcomed as settlers and competitors."⁹ The Act imposed a residential tax of three pounds. It offered three options to Indian immigrant labourers: to return to India on the expiry of the contract of service, to re-indenture for a further period and finally to pay an annual licence of three pounds to remain in the colony. At first the tax was payable by adults only but in 1903 it extended to apply to girls aged thirteen and boys aged sixteen years. "By legislature enactment free Indians were now made unwelcome."¹⁰

Therefore Mahatma Gandhi took up the struggle of the Indians for liberation and equality in South Africa. He employed the method of non-violence or 'passive resistance'. Almost all the Indians, including Mr Dhani, took part in the struggle and finally the Indian Relief Act was passed and the three pound tax was abolished.

In conclusion, Indians came to Natal by invitation to work as indentured labourers in 1860. But over the years they moved into other occupations and to other parts of the country. By dint of industry they then became a visible element in the South African economy. The free Indians grew in numerical strength and as the need for more and suitable land became pressing, the Indians spread further away from the suburbs of Durban, along the North and then the South Coasts. Many a settle formed by these Indians still exist today where legislature has not uproot them. The majority of immigrants choose to stay in South Africa and their descendants are second, third, fourth and fifth generation born South Africans. They form ^{a society} very different from their forbears in India, a society in which there is little existence of a caste system and where

9. B. Pachai : The International Aspects of the South African Indian Question(1860-1971), p.9.

10. B. Pachai : The International Aspects of the South African Indian Question(1860-1971), p.9.

they are influenced by Western ideas.

Indians in South Africa are said to be very passive and patient . The same can be said for Mr Dhani Jiawon, because when he arrived in South Africa as an indentured labourer, the conditions were very unstable and intolerable. But he still persisted in staying back after his indentured period was over and had a total of thirty nine years of happy life in South Africa. Mr Dhani died on the 10 June 1928.

Appendices

NATAL. File 7.17801

Certificate of Industrial Service,

UNDER LAW 2 OF 1870, SEC. 56.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY that Muniamma
 Official No. 30655 Father's Name Karayaniswami
 Indian Immigrant, having completed her indenture, is hereby released from
 further Industrial Service.

DESCRIPTION —

Age 9 years
 Height growing inches.
 Bodily Marks nil
 Date of Arrival in Colony April 23rd 1884.
 Ship Andati XII
 Last Employer G. S. Smith

DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION,
 DURBAN, NATAL.
May 2nd 1889.

L. M. ...
 Protector of Immigrants.

Copy of a "Certificate of Freedom"

Reference Number: 29/2/2/4.....

COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN IMMIGRANT.

SERIAL NUMBER : 33
 COLONIAL NUMBER : 37750
 DATE OF ARRIVAL : 26-5-1889
 NAME OF SHIP : S.S. CONGELLA

PARTICULARS OF REGISTRATION.

PLACE : FYZABAD
 DATE : 5-3-1889
 NUMBER IN REGISTER : 356
 NAME : DHANI
 FATHER'S NAME : JIAWON
 AGE : 25 YEARS
 SEX : MALE
 CASTE : KURMI
RESIDENCE
 DISTRICT : FYZABAD
 THANNA : SANDA
 VILLAGE : RAJAM
 HEIGHT : 5'3"
 BODILY MARKS : FACE BIRTH MARKED
 NAME OF NEXT-OF-KIN : NIL
 RELATIONS ACCOMPANIED : NIL
 REMARKS : NIL

CERTIFIED A TRUE COPY:

.....
 REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE,
 DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS.



Statistics on the 'S S Congella (26 - 5 - 1889)

Adults (males) 196

(females) 95

2 - 10 years (males) 25

(females) 26

Infants (males) 9

(females) 12

Born on ship 1 (female)

Died: none

Total men, women and children

Male 230

Female 134

2/5/83

He is proud to be called coolie

Sir, — On Thursday, April 12 at about 4.40 pm I was waiting at the corner of Pine & Field Streets for the robot to change. A Mercedes Benz 450 SLC sports driven by an Indian woman approached the robot. On seeing this a white gentleman remarked to his friend, "The coolies are stinking rich."

I wish to make the following comments with the hope that the two white men will read this article, and also for those who think alike.

The word "coolie" did not anger me because coolie is a Tamil word meaning wage or salary. Hence, every wage-earner is a coolie irrespective of the colour of his skin; so we have Indian coolies, white coolies, Coloured coolies, etc.

There are many "stinking rich" Indian coolies around. Because of our progressive attitude, forethought, hard work and self-help nature, we are what and where we are today. Our forefathers were brought into this country with many promises and after expounding their agricultural expertise and knowledge they were given "nought for their comfort" but they struggled on and on. With their meagre coolie (wages) they built little shacks here and there and they called them schools where they taught whatever little knowledge they had to their children on an "each one, teach one" basis. The road to progress and advancement was indeed long, rough and tedious but as sure as the sunrise.

Until recently most of our schools were either private or "Government-aided" and we paid for our own education. Our rapid advancement and progress were unbearable to others and as a result we were thwarted with all kinds of cruel restrictions, discrimination, job reservation, Group Areas Act, etc. But the Indian coolie is like a plant; he will grow and progress under any condition until one day he becomes "stinking rich". I am very proud to be an Indian coolie

D.C. GOVENDER

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