

*“Make haste my Lord . . .
You cannot help
me after my death”*

Editorial Note

S. John was a Christian indentured Indian. He did hawking for his employer, although it is not clear whether he was originally hired for that purpose, or whether the Tuckers were his first employers. There must have been others who were hired as hawkers, but this class of employment among the indentured was infrequent. John is not typical of the indentured individuals in that he was able to read and write English. His letter, then, is one of a very few that provides first hand the indentured perspective, and is therefore historically valuable. The complaints against his employer sound reasonable enough, although some of his charges suggest to me a paranoid mind. The picture he creates makes good social history; and the researcher studying the development of the English language among Indians may find the mannerisms of interest.

Despite claiming to have ‘no time to write letters’, John appears to have been gifted with the pen. The Deputy Protector, who investigated John’s complaints, found some of them to be valid, but was generally unsympathetic. He was inclined to believe that if John ‘were to write less and try and satisfy his employer by endeavouring to do his duty, matters would go more smoothly’.

Of the individuals named in John’s letter C.W. Tomkins was caterer for the Railway Refreshment Rooms. He built the Inchanga Hotel where he had a large bakery and mineral water factory and from where he despatched daily consignments to the various buffets and dining rooms. A. Fricker was in charge of the Refreshment Rooms at Estcourt. Mr Tucker, however, is less easy to identify; the 1904 *Natal Almanac* lists an Ed Tucker as running an eating house in Durban, though whether he was the one of whom John complained is uncertain.

John’s letter of 13 July, 1904 is addressed to the Protector of Indian Immigrants. It has been broken into paragraphs and some punctuation supplied, but otherwise no changes have been made.

Source: II/1/128, 1613/1904, Natal Archives.

SURENDRA BHANA

May it please your Excellency my Lord. Hoping the trouble will be excused, I with due respect and humble submission beg to submit these few lines to your generous and kind considerations.

Oh my Lord, I pray your majesty to sympathize with my pitiful conditions. How long I suffer disconsolation and affliction. Make haste my Lord to help me in my distress. You cannot help me after my death my Lord. Your majesty say that I give trouble to my employers. Don’t think so my Lord. I did not give any trouble to my masters and I will not give any trouble to them. I am a christian. I know it is a great sin to tell lies or to be humbug. In order to cover their curious heart they say that I am humbug and liar. Did your majesty ask them what trouble I gave to them? I did not give any trouble to them my Lord.

Mr C.W. Tomkins once promised to Mr Fricker manager of Estcourt and said, 'If anyone put John into prison I will give 8 pounds to him.' Mr Fricker himself said to me, all the waiters know this. My employers try their best to kill me in any way they could, but they looks good to others. Most honoured my Lord I humbly pray your majesty to see to my fruitful conditions.

On the 13th June 1904 Mr Tucker filled a large tray with sweetmeats, fruits, books and paper and gave order to me to walk along the platform when train comes to sell them, and compelled me to sell them from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. I did not refuse it. I sold them for two days. On the 15th June I was sick by that hard working. Thinking it is best to show myself to the magistrate of the City Police I without a pass went to the Interpreter of City Police and reported about my sickness and requested him to tell to send me to hospital. But he said to me to go to your manager and ask him to send you to hospital.

When I returned from the Court, Mr Tucker met me near the Court and charged me to a police man for not having a pass from him. But Interpreter declined to take me in charge and gave order to send me to hospital. My manager left me behind and returned from the Court, and then I went to a Doctor named Mr Wood and requested him to examine me. I returned from the Doctor's house with a prescription note and showed it to my manager, and requested him to send me to hospital. No, no. I shall take you to hospital for examination. Come and follow me, he said and took me to the Compounder of N.G.R. Hospital and said to him, examine this humbug feller who put his face downward so that I take him for jail. Compounder said, 'No I cannot,' send him to the medical officer. And then my manager Mr Tucker took a knife from the hand of the Compounder, which he had for his work on that time, and came to me to stab with it, crying, take away this wretched feller, and said, Why you did not die. I answered and said, Sir, the Lord God keeps me in life to protect my poor children who still expecting my hand.

While I saying these words Mr Tucker was whispering something with the Compounder which I did not understand but the Compounder interrupted and said, no, no 'he is a poor man having children.' I hope Mr Compounder will not deny these what I say here. Mr Compounder sent me to the medical officer's house. While my manager was still speaking with the Compounder, I was examined by the doctor and was sent to hospital where I was 8 days on 22nd June.

I was discharged from hospital with a weak state. When I was in hospital I tried very much to speak, and tell about my sickness to the Doctor but I had no chance to speak with the Doctor because he was busy. Otherwise I should have told him about my sickness. When I returned from hospital I carried a uncovered letter in which Mr Compounder stated that I was fit for work to my manager. I am sure of it that there was a speech between my manager and Compounder. Otherwise he will not certify me that I am fit for work.

Most Honoured my Lord, I swear it that I felt very weak on the day of my dischargement, on the very day Mrs Tucker ordered me take fruits tray to sell. I am under this hard work suffering very much difficulty. Oh my Lord, I swear it by the greatest name in the universe that I feel still weakness. My muscles are not strong enough to walk properly. My feet, ankles and hip are

very much paining because of my infirmity. Those who go by the train sympathize with my pitiful and miserable state when I walk along the platform with that fruit tray. Did not I say that there is something about my life, my Lord. I dare to make an oath that Mr C.W. Tomkins sent me to Pietermaritzburg for the purpose of assassinate me. There is no doubt of it.

From 7 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. I must do my work. Mrs Tucker treat as a slave. She says that I am humbug and in order to hide her evil design she speaks with her feigned lips good. She says your Protector you say is in my hand and he will not refuse to my words. I hope he will not hear you. Oh my Lord, I pray your majesty. Where can I go if your majesty so will pleased us to be ill-treated. Oh my Lord incline your ears and hear my voice of crying, no one is put but you to protect the destitute indentured men. Even a mule gets some rest off his work, but on my part I could not find any rest while other servants enjoy their rest. I was compelled to wait in the kitchen. I have no time to write letters. This application was written . . . [words missing?] to work here, not to be humbug.

I have finished 2½ years. During these time no managers say that I don't know how to cut bread and butter. Mrs Tucker finding that there is no other way to treat me badly she ventured to say that I don't know how to cut bread and butter. Oh my Lord let it be pleased your majesty that I did not agree to come here to sell fruits, and I did not agree to work whole day. But I must do my work whole day or whole night when busy in order to make my Superior satisfied. Did not I work in the time of war. Night and day we work. I did not mind my rest, but it is unsufferable when the order proceeding out of their envious and cruel heart for the purpose of fulfil their revengeful thought.

In conclusion I most humbly pray your majesty to call me to Durban, before I transferred to Zululand because my manager said that he would transfer me to Zululand, and examine my strength and sickness and be gracious to cure me of my illness and make me fit for work. Because though I looks a strong and fleshy man I swear it that I am too feeble and weak. All my joints are very painful. I pray your majesty don't forsake me, help me. For which act of kindness I shall praise your name. I remember you in my prayer and I shall duty bound to pray your honor, welfare and prosperity.

I beg to remain
Most excellency my Lord
I am your obedient servant
S. John No. 90785.

