

Towards a new labour dispensation: Background to the arrival of Indians in Natal in 1860

'... The great desideratum of our industry – an adequate supply of reliable and effective labour.' – George Robinson, *Natal Mercury*, 2 May 1855

Reflecting on the first eight years of his newspaper's existence, George Robinson, editor of the *Natal Mercury* wrote: 'Political questions had to be ventilated. Public opinion had to be developed, directed and represented'.¹ In the opinion of Adolph Coqui, then one of the largest landowners in Natal, the stance of the *Mercury* during the years preceding the arrival of the first indentured Indian labourers established it not only as the Colony's foremost newspaper on the subject of sugar plantation but also as the leading proponent of imported labour.²

From the outset the prospects for Natal's economy rested on its agricultural potential. Whereas the uplands of the interior seemed suited

to maize production and animal husbandry, in the coastal areas the crops that thrived were arrowroot, indigo, cotton, coffee and sugar cane.

From its inception the *Mercury* strove to champion the cause of the sugar planters. In an editorial headed 'The real condition of Natal', published on 23 December 1852, George Robinson demonstrated prescience when he wrote: 'Sugar is probably destined to constitute the first basis of our advancement and prosperity.' Sugar cane was first grown by Edmund Morewood after he obtained plants imported from Mauritius by the Milner Brothers towards the end of 1847.³ By 1852 Morewood had 40 acres of cane at Compensation which were described as being 'in a luxuriant state

... equal to the produce of Jamaica and Mauritius'.⁴ Although capital gradually became available and the first bank in Natal opened for business in 1854, it was the question of labour that presented the real obstacle to the future growth of the sugar industry.

As a labour intensive occupation, sugar cane cultivation required a large number of regular labourers. In the manufacturing season a high proportion of these had to be semi-skilled to operate the crushing plants. In spite of the presence of a large indigenous population, the Native Affairs Commission of 1852–1853 found that a 'uniformly insufficient supply of labour' had arisen because of an 'over-abundance of land located in the reserves'. As a result, Africans enjoyed a certain economic independence in that the needs of their subsistence economy did not require them to subject themselves to regular employment by the colonial farmers. Thus, despite the potentially abundant supply of labour, the development of the Colony's economy was hampered.⁵

The Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone's view on local labour was that 'it was not reasonable to expect that a nation of warriors and hunters should at once become steady labourers'.⁶ The plight of the coastal planters was therefore particularly frustrating: an abundance of land, the availability of capital and markets hungry for their cotton and sugar, but no progress could be made until a sufficient supply of labour was secured.⁷ Such were the circumstances which induced the idea of imported labour. In 1852 a few coastal farmers petitioned the colonial administration to look into the prospect of introducing indentured Indian labour but the Acting Colonial Secretary C.S.W. Harding

poured cold water on the request stating that the government could not legally get involved in the provision of such labour.⁸

Virtually alone amongst Natal newspapers, the *Mercury* came out unambiguously for imported labour in two editorials in 1854.⁹ On 26 April Robinson wrote: 'We still favour the idea of limited importation of foreign labour ... Indirect advantages would result to our native population from such an example ... of patient and successful industry.' He reiterated his appeal on 28 June arguing that once the African population saw the example set by 'a small amount of imported labour', they would come forward and make their labour available, thus obviating the 'necessity of further importations'. But Robinson's view on this was somewhat naïve. The Location system which Shepstone had devised was such that tribesmen were simply not obliged to seek wages by working on settlers' farms. By 1855, standpoints on the labour situation began to crystallise among sections of coastal planters. Petitions requesting indentured labour began to circulate. One petition suggested a limited importation of Chinese labour.

While the *Mercury* supported the petitioners and expressed the hope that they would receive favourable attention from the colonial administration in Pietermaritzburg¹⁰, its rival, the *Natal Witness*, scorned the idea of a 'scarcity of labour'.¹¹ It also put forward the view that the importation of labour should be the work of a chamber of commerce and not the responsibility of the government. Thanks to the publication of a letter from James R. Saunders, public awareness of the whole question of indentured labour gathered

momentum.¹² In his letter headed 'A retrospective view of immigration into Mauritius', Saunders, who immigrated to Natal from Mauritius in October 1854¹³, was full of praise for the advantages which Mauritius enjoyed from the use of indentured Indian labour. He also drew attention to the Indian Emigration Act of 1842 and the procedure to be followed by colonies wishing to procure indentured labour. Without hesitation the *Mercury* endorsed Saunders' case for indentured labour and urged all parties to meet and to determine practical measures for securing 'an adequate supply of reliable and effective labour'.¹⁴

A visit to Natal by Sir George Grey, Governor of the Cape and High Commissioner over British Territories in Southern Africa, was scheduled to take place in the latter half of 1855. The proponents of indentured labour were adamant that the Governor should be apprised of the labour situation and that his support for a scheme of imported labour should be secured.¹⁵ However, support for the idea was very sectional even amongst coastal farmers. Dissent ranged from outright opposition to grudging support for the measure only as a last resort.¹⁶ Upcountry farmers whose labour needs were very different were opposed to imported Indian labour. Meanwhile the *Mercury* continued to propound the need for imported labour. An editorial on 21 September 1855 concluded on an admonishing note: 'We have said before and we repeat, that the fate of the colony hangs on this issue ... tremendous is the responsibility of Government at such a crisis'.

Grey's visit to Natal took place in November 1855. Impressed by the efforts of the planters after a short tour

of the sugar estates on the outskirts of Durban, Grey expressed himself in favour of Indian labour and claimed that 'advantages of a political, social and industrial kind ... would flow from the introduction of this class of labourers'. He also pointed out that the colonists could expect that 'numbers of coolie families would remain as settlers after their term of service expired'.¹⁷ Significantly Grey's warning on the potential long range social consequences of indentured Indian labour passed unremarked in the colonial press. Instead, cane growers were filled with fresh hopes and expectations as a result of the promulgation of an ordinance in January 1856 'empowering the Lieut.-Governor of Natal to make rules and regulations' for the introduction of Indians from the East Indies. Unbeknown to the colonists, however, there was much cumbersome bureaucratic machinery to be set in motion before the first indentured Indian could set foot in Natal.¹⁸

Reflective of the interest aroused in the importing of indentured labour was an opinion expressed by Adolph Coqui, a wealthy landowner and sugar entrepreneur. In an article in the *Natal Guardian* he estimated that a quota of 20 to 30 Indians per plantation would fulfil the needs of most planters. 'The coolies would probably be found most efficient in the manufactory, while natives might be employed in the agricultural department of an estate,' he wrote.¹⁹ Coqui's enthusiasm also found expression in an opinion piece he penned for the *Mercury* headed 'Mauritius and Natal' in which he predicted success for the sugar industry and other tropical crops in Natal.²⁰ This article was later circulated in

Britain as part of the Natal Land and Colonisation Company's scheme to encourage British capital investment in Natal.²¹

Hopes of a prompt solution to the sugar planters' labour needs were dashed in March 1857 when news reached Natal that Grey's initiative had failed. The lack of detailed and satisfactory information regarding Indian wages and conditions that would be offered caused the Government of India to reject the proposed emigration of Indians to Natal at that stage.²² In the interim the first Legislative Council elections in the Colony had taken place.²³ Politically the idea of indentured labour was a non-issue. Only two of the 24 candidates in the election advocated the importation of Indian labour.²⁴ Both of them were defeated.

Notwithstanding the low profile of the imported labour issue in the elections, on the opening day of the new council, 23 March 1857, John Moreland of Pietermaritzburg County moved for the appointment of a Select Committee to investigate the necessity for the introduction of foreign labour.²⁵ On 21 April the Committee reported in favour of a renewed application to the Indian Government for indentured labour and called for tenders from planters.²⁶ But it was not until 6 August that Lieut.-Governor John Scott forwarded his report to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Henry Labouchere, in London requesting arrangements to be made for Natal planters to procure Indian labour.²⁷ In his report Scott stated that the cultivation of sugar and other tropical products in Natal was uncertain 'and dependent on circumstances over which no control can be exercised' in

that planters feared that 'at the critical moment labour might fail them'. He expressed the hope that a change might be gradually effected on the 'native population to enter service beyond a few months' at a time. The fact that the report requested only 135 indentured Indian labourers as an initial batch – this figure included J.R. Saunders' request for 50 Indians²⁸ – indicates the low level of interest in the topic.

More delays frustrated those who saw indentured labour as the panacea for their labour woes. Natal's request had to be processed by the India Board, the Directors of the British East India Company, the Land and Emigration Commission and the Indian Government. It was not until June 1858 that confirmation of Natal's application was received with a request that specific legislation be prepared by the Natal Government before final approval could be granted. To that end a copy of St Lucia Ordinance No. 2 of 1857 accompanied the correspondence to serve as a guide to the Natal Government in preparing the required legislation.²⁹

Despite the pedestrian pace of progress, Scott did not show any inclination to expedite matters. In November 1858 he wrote to the new Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, stating that he could not find the St Lucia Ordinance and requested that further copies be dispatched.³⁰ Thus, 19 months after the Legislative Council had indicated a willingness to procure imported labour, Natal was still no closer to securing it.

Meanwhile, the Umzinto Sugar Company privately imported a group of Malays and Chinese from Java.³¹ But the experiment was shortlived.

The meagre ten shillings in wages was unappealing to the Chinaman's idea of emigrating in order to make money.³² The *Mercury*, nonetheless, applauded the initiative of the Umzinto Sugar Company.³³ For the rest, 1858 turned out to be a bleak one as far as the labour needs of coastal planters were concerned. There was, therefore, much expectation that Scott would announce new developments as regards procuring labour when he opened the special session of the Legislative Council in November. But the occasion proved naught for the planters' comfort. Instead the Governor made it clear that no further help or co-operation was to be made available in recruiting African labour. In effect he gave the sugar planters no alternative but to pursue the goal of imported Indian labour.³⁴

But whatever the labour needs of coastal planters were at that time, the issue of indentured labour scarcely featured in the politicking which occurred ahead of the March 1859 Legislative Council elections. Only in the coastal counties of Durban and Victoria was there a loose reference to it when Adolph Coqui pledged that he would support 'any judicious steps to place the supply of labour on a more reliable footing, either by local measures or by immigration'.³⁵ Henry Milner, a sugar planter from the Springfield estate and a successful candidate like Coqui, expressed the view that indentured labour should be introduced only as a last resort.³⁶ J.R. Saunders, an ardent proponent of indentured labour, was not a candidate in the election. However, he won election to the Council a year later following Milner's resignation of his seat to travel abroad.³⁷

Uncharacteristically, even the *Mercury* adopted a reserved stance on the labour issue. In an editorial reviewing the election results it ignored the issue and listed the state of the port as a matter deserving of urgent attention.³⁸

At the opening of the new Council in April 1859, Governor Scott did strike a hopeful note as regards the prospects of imported Indian labour when he announced that 'the advisability of introducing a moderate number of coolies from India ... will be brought under your consideration'.³⁹ But this proved insufficient for the *Mercury's* editor who expressed his exasperation with Scott's dilatoriness as follows: 'The fate of the Colony hangs on a thread and that thread is labour. Enterprise ... in sugar growing has been extended in faith of labour being forthcoming ... The Legislature must at once open the way for the introduction of coolies ...'.⁴⁰ By 1859, with equipment no longer scarce and with capital more available, cane growing was increasing. In that year there were 21 mills in operation and exports had reached a record of £8 368.⁴¹

1859 proved a watershed year in the debate about and momentum towards the procurement of indentured labour. In this respect the *Mercury* again was outspoken. 'We want coolie labour; it is essential to the successful progress of our colonial enterprise. We want, therefore, laws and regulations conformable to the requirements of the Indian Government in sanctioning emigration'.⁴² In May several petitions requesting the resolution of the labour shortage were submitted to the Legislative Council. They came from a wide area of the Colony, namely, Durban and Pietermaritzburg counties

as well as from Isipingo and Lower Umkomaas.⁴³ A Select Committee was appointed to consider ways of resolving the labour issue and as a result three Bills on indentured Indian labour were introduced in the Council on 31 May.⁴⁴ Within three weeks the Council had committed Natal to a new labour dispensation following the promulgation of Laws 13, 14 and 15.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Scott described the proposed scheme merely as 'an experiment' which he envisaged as being on a small scale.⁴⁶

Of the three laws only Law 14 provoked some debate outside of the Council Chamber⁴⁷, the reason being that it enabled the Natal Government to introduce labourers from India 'at the public expense' and under conditions similar to those in operation elsewhere in the British Empire where indentured labour was used. The *Natal Witness* objected to the public funding of a labour scheme which, it felt, was exclusively for the benefit of coastal planters.⁴⁸ The *Mercury* retorted by claiming that the success of coastal enterprise was for 'the general good of all'.⁴⁹

Law 14 resulted in the establishment of what was called a Coolie Immigration Department. Amongst its first tasks was the dispatch of a Coolie Immigration Agent to India to inaugurate the labour scheme. The corollary of all this was a public expense which, by 1894, would amount to £250 000.⁵⁰ Costs included the passage of those Indians who immigrated as indentured labourers to Natal, paying for those who died in transit, providing for the return of those who availed themselves of the free passage, as their contracts specified, upon completion of two five-year

terms and paying for the repatriation of those incapacitated.⁵¹

The Indian Government also required some fine-tuning of Law 14 in respect of wages that indentured labourers would be paid in Natal. The minimum wage was set at 10 shillings per month for the first year increasing to 12 shillings per month within three years. Another demand made by the Indian Government was that a certain proportion of women should accompany each batch of Indians to Natal. Although a ratio of 35% of women was proposed per batch, Natal's Coolie Agent, W.M. Collins, succeeded in reducing the proportion of females to 25% for the first batch. However, the Indian Government did admit that in making up the proportion of women it enlisted large numbers of prostitutes and that no evidence of the legality of marriages was required.⁵²

In the meanwhile, rumblings of discontent featured in the colonial press. An editorial in the *Natal Witness* suggested that the introduction of Indians would bring infectious diseases such as smallpox and cholera into the Colony.⁵³ The *Natal Star* wrote of 'the evils' that would ensue from the arrival of Indians and welcomed the critical remarks expressed by the *Witness* and the *Natal Courier* on the subject.⁵⁴ However, as Mabel Palmer points out, 'only the smallest fraction of the population in Natal seems to have realised that continuous immigration was certain to lead to the establishment of a permanent Indian community ... So greedy for cheap labour were the planters that the government and the press were blind to the inevitable results of the immigration policy.'⁵⁵ References to a fraction is appropriate, for in 1859

there were only 48 established sugar farms stretching across the three coastal counties (Victoria, Durban and Alexandra) and not all of the planters were necessarily avid supporters of indentured labour.⁵⁶

On 1 November 1860 the *Mercury* informed its readers that the Indian Government had granted the go-ahead for indentured immigration to Natal. Three weeks later, in announcing the arrival of Natal's first indentured Indians, John Robinson, who had succeeded his father George as *Mercury* editor, wrote: 'At last, after discussion of years and extinction of hopes innumerable, the planters' pet project has been realised'.⁵⁷ In truth, however, the introduction of indentured labour to Natal was every bit as much the *Mercury's* pet project. Years later, recalling the arrival of the first indentured Indians, John Robinson wrote: 'I well remember one evening late in 1860 watching from a height overlooking the sea, the ship *Truro* sail up to her anchorage. Her white canvas towered over the blue sealine, and we all regarded her as the harbinger of a new dispensation. And so she proved to be, though in a sense far wider than we expected'.⁵⁸

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 *Natal Mercury*, 6 December 1860.
- 2 Coqui made this claim in a pamphlet published in London in 1857 entitled 'Practical remarks on the Colony of Natal, South Africa'. Quoted in R.J.H. King, 'The career of Adolph Coqui in Southern Africa,' unpublished BA (Hons) thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1973, p. 47.
- 3 Joy Brain, 'Indentured and free Indians in the economy of Colonial Natal,' in Bill Guest and John M Sellers (eds.) *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony* (Pietermaritzburg, 1985), p. 199.

- 4 *Natal Witness*, 9 January 1852.
- 5 Charles Ballard, *John Dunn – the white chief of Zululand*, (Johannesburg, 1985), pp. 38–39. The number of Zulus living in Natal at that time was estimated at some 90 000 to 100 000. See: Mabel Palmer, *The History of Indians in Natal*, (Cape Town, 1957), p. 10.
- 6 L.M. Thompson, 'Indian Immigration into Natal 1860–1872' (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1938), p.13.
- 7 Mabel Palmer, *History of Indians*, p. 13.
- 8 *Natal Mercury*, 20 January 1853.
- 9 At that time the *Mercury*, like other colonial newspapers, was published weekly. On 2 January 1878 it became the first daily newspaper in South Africa.
- 10 *Natal Mercury*, 1 March 1855.
- 11 *Natal Witness*, 23 March 1855.
- 12 *Natal Mercury*, 25 April 1855.
- 13 R.F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest: the founding of the South African sugar industry 1848–1926* (Durban, 1964), p. 204. Saunders had worked on sugar plantations in Mauritius between 1837 and 1854.
- 14 *Natal Mercury*, 2 May 1855.
The practice of indentured labour commenced after the termination of slavery in 1834 in the British Empire. It involved the voluntary emigration of individuals, under contract, to perform manual labour for terms of five years in duration, renewable for further five year terms. Upon expiry of indentured labour terms, contracts specified free repatriation to the respective ports of departure. Following complaints of abuse, the system was revised in 1842 and a Protector of Immigrants was appointed to oversee the welfare of indentured labourers. Nonetheless, as a system it gave rise to numerous human rights abuses. Noteworthy in this respect was the high mortality rate in Fiji and the West Indies.
- 15 *Natal Mercury*, 20 June 1855.
- 16 *Natal Mercury*, 20 January 1859; 24 February 1859.
- 17 *Natal Mercury*, 9 November 1855.
- 18 L.M. Thompson, 'Indian Immigration', p. 21.
- 19 *Natal Guardian*, 25 March 1856.
- 20 *Natal Mercury*, 7 March 1856.
- 21 R.F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest* p. 62.
- 22 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. 9, No. 435, 24 March 1857.
- 23 Between 1845 and 1856 Natal was a district of the Cape Colony. The Charter of Natal promulgated in July 1856 created Natal as a separate Colony and gave it a limited form of representative government.

- 24 JTH, *Natal Asiatic Problem: Who brought it about?* (Durban, 1923), p. 15.
- 25 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. 1, 1857, p. 40.
- 26 GH 1589, Report of Select Committee, 21 April 1857.
- 27 GH, Despatch No.71, Lieut-Governor Scott to Secretary of State Labouchere, 6 August 1857, CO 179/46.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 GH 32, Natal No. 1, Lytton to Scott, 25 June 1858.
- 30 GH 1211, Despatch No. 67, Scott to Lytton, 2 November 1858. St Lucia began receiving indentured labour in 1856.
- 31 *Natal Mercury*, 11 February 1858.
- 32 B. Pachai, *The International aspects of the South African Indian Question 1860–1971*, (Cape Town, 1971), p. 19.
- 33 *Natal Mercury*, 11 February 1858.
- 34 *Natal Mercury*, 20 November 1858.
- 35 *Natal Mercury*, 20 January 1859.
- 36 *Natal Mercury*, 24 February 1859.
- 37 *Natal Witness*, 30 March 1860; Government Notice No. 38, 8 May 1860.
- 38 *Natal Mercury*, 24 March 1860.
- 39 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. 11, No. 545, 26 April 1859.
- 40 *Natal Mercury*, 28 April 1859.
- 41 R.F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest*, p. 58–59.
- 42 *Natal Mercury*, 5 May 1859.
- 43 Natal Parliamentary Papers, Vol. 236, 1859.
- 44 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. 11, No. 550, 31 May 1859.
- 45 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. 11, No. 556, 12 July 1859.
- 46 GH 1212, Despatch No. 51, Scott to Lytton, 28 June 1859.
- 47 Law 13 concerned the introduction and engagement of immigrants from territories east of the Cape of Good Hope. Law 15 made provision for persons to introduce immigrants from India at their own expense. Law 14 contained 43 clauses and three schedules, yet, like the other two laws, it was rushed through the Council in a day.
- 48 *Natal Witness*, 15 and 22 July 1859. The *Natal Star*, in an editorial on 3 March 1860 asserted that the introduction of Indian labour was ‘to propitiate the sugar-growing interest’.
- 49 *Natal Mercury*, 28 July 1859.
- 50 Mabel Palmer, *History of Indians*, p. 26.
- 51 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. 11, No. 556, 12 July 1859.
- 52 Mabel Palmer, *History of Indians*, p. 28.
- 53 *Natal Witness*, 6 July 1860.
- 54 *Natal Star*, 20 October 1860. The *Star* went out of circulation at the end of 1863. The *Courier* was incorporated into the *Mercury* in 1864 and subsequently emerged under a new title –*Times of Natal*. See: Terry Wilks, *For the Love of Natal: The Life and Times of the Natal Mercury 1852 – 1977*, (Pinetown, 1977), p. 47–49.
- 55 Mabel Palmer, *History of Indians*, p. 26.
- 56 See R.F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest*, pp. 179, 203, 259, 275.
- 57 *Natal Mercury*, 22 November 1860.
- 58 Sir John Robinson, *A Lifetime in South Africa: being the recollections of the first premier of Natal*. (London, 1903), p. 75 – 76.