

RECOGNISING INDENTURED INDIAN GRAVESITES AS HERITAGE SITES

by *Tholsi Mudly*

BETWEEN 1860 and 1911 more than 152 000 indentured Indians were shipped to Natal. Owners and managers of sugar estates and mills in Natal snapped up most of this human cargo, who were to become their workhorses. This short note describes a journey to find the graves of some of our ancestors who came to Natal, but because of local laws could not be cremated according to Hindu tradition.

History turning a blind eye bore him
not witness;
History standing mute told not his
full story;
That unknown, forgotten, im-
migrant
He who first had watered this land
with his sweat and blood
The first immigrant, he, son of
this land
He was mine, he was yours, he was
our very own.¹

Many of us have indeed forgotten about our forebears; the sacrifices they made for us their descendants; their trials and tribulations; and, most importantly, where their mortal remains lie.

Cremation, since the earliest Vedic times, was the most common way to dispose of a body. During cremation Agni, the fire deity, was invoked to carry the departing soul to the realm of Varna, the God of death.²

How did indentured Indians, the majority being Hindus, end up being buried? The colonial government deemed cremation an un-Christian practice and felt that the cremation of corpses would encourage crime.³ If there was a murder and the corpse

was cremated, there would be no evidence to prove that a crime had been committed. In January 1908, U.M. Shelat from Estcourt sent a telegram to the Acting A.U. Secretary requesting permission to exhume the body of an Indian woman and for permission to cremate the corpse. This matter was labelled ‘pressing’ by the Acting A.U. Secretary. Furthermore, the authorities asked, ‘Is it necessary in this case for authority to be also granted for the cremation of the body?’ The Assistant Protector then requested more information about the procedures for cremation in India.⁴

The response from Shelat was that Indian people did not need the permission of the Indian Government for cremation and a doctor’s certificate was not necessary as most people in India could not afford doctors’ fees. It was the responsibility of the local *Panchayat* and municipal clerk to ensure that there was no foul play and then give the go-ahead for cremations.

Further correspondence requesting permission to cremate Hindu corpses was submitted by the secretary of the Hindu Smashan Fund of Durban, M.M. Diwan, to the Colonial Secretary in 1908. In his letter, Diwan explained that for a certain section of the Hindus cremation was a religious obligation.

Detective Waller from the Durban CID was then tasked to carry out further investigations into cremation procedures in India. The CID’s report was a repetition of that provided by Shelat mentioned earlier. However,

its last sentence stands out: 'in this country Indians can afford to call in a doctor and obtain a death certificate'. The Colonial Office then informed the Health Office that exhumation and cremation could only proceed if the latter granted permission.⁵

One would assume that permission would be granted for cremations to take place as they were of great religious significance to Hindus. But the Attorney-General responded: 'these people came here prepared to conform to our Law and they leave their customs behind them to do so.' Permission was not granted for cremations.⁶ Here was one aspect of the Hindu culture being lost. The British were determined to break the spirit of Indians by denying them the right to follow certain customs and traditions.

M.K. Gandhi then wrote privately to John Bird from the Natal Colonial Office to plead for this decision to be rescinded. The Colonial Secretary and Attorney-General stuck to their decision: 'They regret that they are unable to agree that the request of the Hindu Smashan Fund should be acceded to'.⁷ Gandhi was also approached by the Hindu community in Johannesburg to assist in the building of a crematorium. After much negotiation with the Town Council, land in the Brixton Cemetery was allocated for this purpose. This, the first Hindu crematorium in Johannesburg and in Africa, was built only in 1918, after Gandhi had left the country.⁸

In Natal, with so much negativity from the authorities, Hindus usually buried their dead in the vicinity of the estates on which they worked. They

fought a long battle for cremation to be allowed; and by 1916 it was. Early cremations took place on open pyres.⁹ Later, crematoria were built in towns, but many of the estate Indians were too far away to make use of them. Many employers granted employees pieces of land for burials.¹⁰ These were situated along or near rivers and swampy areas, or land that was unsuitable for cultivation. Most people could not afford headstones, so trees or pieces of metal served as markers.

Robert Osborn describes 56 sugar estates and sugar mills in Natal between 1848 and 1926.¹¹ With so many mills and estates, one would expect to find much evidence of the presence of indentured Indians. This is not the case as most of the estates on which they and their families lived no longer exist. There was new development and families were forced to relocate. After a while, the memory of loved ones who had passed on also faded. Now, even if you want to visit a burial site there are many factors to take into account. The property may be under new ownership, there are security risks involved, or these sites are in rural areas. Many people are also superstitious.

It was a genealogical search that led to three burial sites of Indian pioneers. To learn about history one needs wise old men and women. It was through their wealth of knowledge that these three burial sites were rediscovered. The Inyaninga Memorial Garden, in which the pioneer indentured Indians of the Inyaninga Sugar Estate are interred is within the precinct of the King Shaka International Airport, government property. The relevant authorities were informed.

Investigations were carried out; an archaeologist and environmental officer were brought in; and three headstones were discovered. The KwaZulu-Natal provincial government bestowed the ultimate honour upon the pioneers by declaring this a heritage site.

A second burial site is on the property of Ushukela Milling in KwaDukuza. Here, there were no headstones or markers. In 1987, cyclone Demoina had washed them away. On this particular area, the owners had attempted to plant sugarcane, but what we saw were just stumps. Obviously, the dead did not want to be forgotten! Ushukela Milling agreed that this site would be preserved. No one could disagree about the location of the gravesite as a map that pinpoints it still exists. Amafa, the provincial heritage conservation agency, was brought on board and declared it a provincial heritage site.¹² Sappi, as part of its social responsibility programme, cemented the area around the marker and donated indigenous trees for the site.

A third site, on private property, is alongside the Shakaskraal railway station. Employees from the now closed Shakaskraal Mill and Estate are buried here, together with family members. Some headstones go back to the 1930s and so far six have been located. Indians were greatly influenced by the colonists with regard to dress, architecture and in other ways. Even in death, the British influence can be seen in the elaborate and expertly crafted headstones erected on graves. On 19 November 2015 this site was declared a heritage

site and Amafa erected an impressive memorial to the pioneers.

Descendants and community members pay their respects to their elders at such sites at annual gatherings. Many of the gravesites served as final resting places for Indians both Hindu and Christian and for their African neighbours. The Muslim community buried their dead in separate areas.¹³

Our advocacy group consists of just ordinary people, people who are passionate about our history, and we have persevered despite many challenges. There are still many more gravesites hidden in the undergrowth. We need to speak to the elders to jog their memories about them. We cannot save all gravesites, but we can make every effort to preserve wherever we can. In order for future generations to learn about their history, it is the responsibility of us elders to educate them. Nic Wolpe, the Liliesleaf Farm Trust chief executive had the following to say, reported in *The Star* in February 2013: ‘We cannot forget our history or the history of this country. It is history, good or bad that moulds us.’

The indentured Indians arrived here with just two dhotis, a jacket, a cap and a turban; and the women had two saris and a jacket. Some had a few coins.¹⁴ Within a few years these very people were able to build places of worship and schools; all this through sheer tenacity, selflessness and community spirit. We are here today because of these brave men and women who had the foresight to ensure that their descendants enjoy comfortable lives. It is our duty to honour the pioneers.

There are many monuments and memorials in South Africa that pay tribute to people who have played very important roles in the building of this land. Now let us show our appreciation to the thousands of ordinary but extraordinary Indian settlers who also served to build South Africa by recognising their burial grounds as heritage sites.

By rediscovering and revisiting the gravesites of the Indian settlers one is not stuck in the past. By bringing these gravesites to the fore, the community is reminded about the valuable contributions that their people have made despite the many challenges they faced.

NOTES

- 1 Abhimanyu Unnuth, 'The unknown immigrant' a poem translated by Ramesh Ramdoyal.

- 2 S. Dasa, 'Hindu funeral rites' (2003) <http://www.finaljourneyseminars.com/?pageid=438> (accessed September 2005).
- 3 Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), 3/PMB 4/3/277, 79/1935.
- 4 PAR, CSO volume 1850, 1908/569.
- 5 PAR, CSO volume 1852, 1908/1413.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 Johannesburg, Directorate of Arts, Culture and Heritage, *Johannesburg Monuments and Memorials* (n.d.), p. 16.
- 9 M. Mahabeer, *Clare Estate Cemetery and Crematorium 1904–1985* (n.d.).
- 10 PAR, SGO volume III/1/209, SG2498/1906.
- 11 Robert F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest: The Founding of the South African Sugar Industry 1848–1926* (Durban, South African Sugar Association, 1964).
- 12 Amafa was established as a statutory body in terms of the KwaZulu-Natal Heritage Act (1997). It is now known as the KwaZulu-Natal Amafa and Research Institute.
- 13 *Daily News*, 19 January 1983.
- 14 PAR, PMB 4/3/277, 325/1938-340/1938.