

# Crossing the *Kala Pani*: Cause for “Celebration” or “Commemoration” 150 Years on? Portrayals of Indenture in Recent South African Writing

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## Summary

In 2010, the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first indentured labourers from India brought across the Indian Ocean – the *kala pani* – on the SS *Truro* in 1860, was marked in a variety of ways by the descendants of those original pioneers. One of the many letters to the press during last year asked whether cultural organisations should be “celebrating” or “commemorating” this anniversary given the harsh conditions under which indentured labour was carried out. This article picks up on this point – to “celebrate” or “commemorate”? – by seeking to assess how the topic of indenture is handled in the local press and also in fictional works of selected contemporary South African writers of Indian descent; for example, Neelan Govender’s *Girmit Tales* (2008), Rubendra Govender’s *Sugar Cane Boy* (2008), Aziz Hassim’s *Revenge of Kali* (2009) among others. These titles are all recent additions to what could be called a South African plantation literature which is flourishing at present in local writing circles, given perhaps the 150th anniversary mentioned above, but also given a coming of age for South African Indian fiction post apartheid.

## Opsomming

In 2010 is die 150e herdenking van die aankoms van die eerste kontrakarbeiders uit Indië (wat in 1860 aan boord die SS *Truro* oor die Indiese Oseaan – die *kala pani* – na Suid-Afrika verskeep is) op verskillende maniere deur die nasate van die oorspronklike pioniers gevier. Een van die baie briewe wat verlede jaar in die pers verskyn het, het bevraagteken of kultuurorganisasies hierdie jaarfees moet “vier” of “herdenk” in die lig van die moeilike toestande waarin die kontrakarbeiders hulle bevind het. Hierdie artikel bou voort op hierdie vraag, naamlik of die gebeurtenis gevier of herdenk behoort te word. Dit probeer vasstel hoe die onderwerp van kontrakarbeid in die plaaslike pers en die fiksiewerk van geselekteerde kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers van Indiese afkoms hanteer word, byvoorbeeld in Neelan Govender se *Girmit Tales* (2008), Rubendra Govender se *Sugar Cane Boy* (2008) en Aziz Hassim se *Revenge of Kali* (2009). Hierdie titels is almal onlangse bydraes tot wat ’n Suid-Afrikaanse plantasieletterkunde genoem kan word. Dit is ’n letterkunde wat tans in plaaslike skryfkringe floreer, en is moontlik te danke aan bogenoemde 150e herdenking van die aankoms, of die mondigwording van Suid-Afrikaanse Indiese fiksie in die post-apartheid era.

● On 16 November 2010, a remarkable anniversary was recorded in South Africa: that day marks 150 years since the arrival in Durban on the SS *Truro* of the first shipment of Indian labourers destined to serve a five-year period of indenture in the sugar cane fields of Natal. The harsh beginnings of what has been likened to slave labour for *girmitvas* – “from English, agreement, referred to indentured workers, those who had signed an agreement” (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 14) – defines this anniversary as a bitter-sweet one. From the

various commemorative projects launched in the course of the year, the overriding tone is one of pride at the achievements of the descendants despite their very tough start on African soil; plus celebration of their resilience, not only then but throughout their sojourn and settlement in South Africa.

This article was prompted by a letter to the press (see below) which led me to reflect on what this momentous 150th anniversary might mean to the South African Indian descendants of today, especially the writers. What is immediately evident is the growing number of fictional texts by South African Indian writers, many of which have as their topic the subject of indentured labour, as well as the number of works of historical research on the same topic. It is clear that the broad field of study surrounding South African Indians is rapidly attracting attention from many quarters, particularly from South African Indians themselves. And such attention, evident through the wealth of writing currently available, is not only from academics but from people from all walks of life: medical doctors, journalists, lawyers, accountants, teachers. It seems many people have wished to record their history, all more or less simultaneously, over the past decade. The most popular expression of this drive to record the past – whether in fiction, history, memoir, short story, article, play or poetry – has been the various “memory” projects launched by Durban-based newspapers which urge “ordinary” South African Indians to send in their story to mark this momentous anniversary. The “1860 Project” in the *Sunday Tribune* calls itself

[a] cultural campaign aimed at repairing the fabric of a community that is in danger of losing its very identity .... The 1860 Project ... aims to inspire South Africans to rediscover their culture. And by doing so, to rediscover themselves. The 150 year timeline is filled with wonderful stories of heroes, innovations and memories. It is also filled with pain, sacrifice and suffering. And although we will recognize the roles played by the great leaders (such as Gandhi and Monty Naicker) it is even more important for Indian South Africans to find out more about their own family and their own history .... Never before has anything of this scale been attempted among the Indian South African community. And hopefully, we can capture the imagination of as many Indian South Africans as possible to help preserve their unique identity for future generations.

([www.the1860project.com/Introduction](http://www.the1860project.com/Introduction))

One of the first *Sunday Tribune* issues covering the 1860 Project carried a cautionary letter by Aziz Hassim, author of *The Lotus People* (2002) and *Revenge of Kali* (2009). In it, he sounded a warning bell about the direction the various community committees seemed to be taking in marking the 150th anniversary:

Almost without exception the various organizations, whatever name they employ, are engaged in “celebrating” the arrival of the 1860 contingent of labourers. “Celebrations”? Can you “celebrate” what was essentially slavery disguised in a legalized document referred to by the lofty title of “indenture”? A document to which many innocently affixed their signatures. And that is not counting the thousands that were shanghaied and forcibly loaded on to the ship.

What we should be doing is “commemorating” that event – somberly and with empathy for those ancestors of ours who were reduced to a miserable existence on the cane fields.

And that does NOT mean lavish functions and expensive five-course dinners for the select few. It is about constructing memorials for future generations to contemplate, and to obtain an understanding of “where they are coming from”.  
(Hassim 2010: 6)

Hassim’s counterpointing of “commemoration” and “celebration” is at the heart of the anniversary: it points directly to the bitter-sweet nature of such an occasion. The contemporary gains and successes have come on the back, literally, of a very harsh start. This knife-edge of somber commemoration of the past versus a more joyous celebration of the present is one that runs through much of the writing referred to in this article – whether historical or fictional. Perhaps the answer cannot be one or the other, but a mix given both how the South African Indian population has survived and indeed prospered over the years despite great obstacles from the get go.

The stories pouring in to the *Sunday Tribune* 1860 Project certainly recall a time of reimagined hardship to begin with, and are accompanied by articles delineating the historical background of the first indentured arrivals with titles like “Indenture – A Catalogue of Shame” (Barlow Govender & Tulsidas Perumal Naidoo, 23 May 2010, p. 28), “Ruptured Families Tore the Fabric of Life” (Hilda Kuper, 30 May, 2010, p. 20), “Quest for a Home on Hostile Soil” (Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, 1 August, p. 4), and “Plucky Sisters Who Dared to Fight” (Kalpana Hiralal, 15 August, p. 4).

Another newspaper in the same Independent Newspapers stable, the *Daily News*, ran a similar project called the 1860 Settler Project. The rubric of this project is, however, significantly more upbeat: “The *Daily News* will celebrate the contribution these brave pioneers have made by telling the stories of the treacherous journey and their new life here, as handed down to the generations who followed” (*Daily News*, 29 July 2010, p. 15).

One such story carried within the pages of the newspaper was an extract drawn from Jay Naidoo’s memoir, *Fighting for Justice*, in which he records his great-grandmother’s shipping number (28330), and ironically observes that, as part of the Sweet, Food and Allied Workers’ Union, he had “to engage with the very sector that had treated my ancestors as nothing more than hard-working serfs in a feudal colony” (*Daily News*, 29 July, p. 15). An even more ironic twist is contained in the article “White Gold” carried in the *Sunday Times* (6 June 2010), which describes activities surrounding a locally made film of the same name, filmed in Tamil, Hindi and English, set to be released in November and thus to coincide with the 150th anniversary. The film tells the story of four friends who leave India as indentured labourers for South Africa and follows them and their descendants over three generations. According to the scriptwriter, Jayan Moodley, the response to the call for extras was overwhelming – more than the pay that attracted the over 200 people who pitched up, it appears. Chatsworth father, Ravi Pillay, lined up dressed in a *dhoti* for the part together with his 14-year-old son, similarly attired: “I wanted him [my son] to reflect on our culture and in some small way relive what our forebears went through and feel it for ourselves. I also wanted him to see the difference between then and the prosperity we have now. Everything we have today is because of them”.

Running parallel to the stories sent in to the press and the articles reprising the history of indentured labour in this country have been the many newspaper letters, poems and columns written this year on the question of South African Indian identity. The combination of 16 years since the first democratic

elections in 1994 and 150 years since indenture, has provoked intense debate on this issue. Some representative recent musings in the popular press are as follows:

*'Who Am I?'*  
 1860 I arrived. Classed Indian Coolie, I was called!  
 Sugar cane farms  
 Bitter conflict  
 Divided by race – African, Indian, Coloured, White  
 From humanity I was deprived  
 1946, '52, '60, '76, '85 the struggle continued  
 1990 The land filled with joyous cheers  
 So much friendship  
 Viva Mandela Viva!  
 A nation appears.  
 No more black, white, or brown or blue?  
 But ...  
 Who am I?  
 I am Indian by creed, by race I am African  
 I am Indian by religion, by race I am African  
 I am Indian by tradition, by race I am African  
 I am an African Indian in Africa  
 I am.

(Tshque Haracharan, *Sunday Tribune*, 23 May 2010, p. 6)

Here is another by popular columnist, Omeshnie Naidoo, writing in the *Natal Mercury*:

Indian South Africans born here need to claim their rightful and legitimate place in their country, whose constitution recognizes and supports all cultures. "I am an African, full stop", says political analyst Kiru Naidoo. "I eat my samp with curry and Mohammed Rafi sits happily alongside Mfaz'onyama in my music collection. My parents and theirs were born on this continent and this is where they took their last breaths. My children and theirs have this land ... as their birthright. The only minority I have ever been a part of are those that enjoy European opera. Pigeon holes are for pigeons".  
 And this perhaps is the mindset to have – to not accept not being accepted. My ancestors' roots are in India. My roots are here. I am a South African citizen – I have the opportunities today that my parents never had. These institutions are ours, too.

(Omeshnie Naidoo, *Natal Mercury*, 29 July 2010, p. 7)

Of course these debates are not new. The late Fatima Meer, in her early pioneering work *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (1969), summarised the historical context of the arrival of indentured labour to South Africa, and in so doing made a clear statement about nationality and identity in the last sentence quoted below. The passage is worth quoting in full as it also summarises very succinctly the historical context against which Indian immigration to South Africa from 1860 to 1911, when Indian legislation halted sending indentured labourers to Natal, and 1913 when South African legislation prohibited immigration for all Indians, can be understood:

The majority of Indian South Africans are the descendants of indentured workers brought to Natal between 1860 and 1911 to develop the country's sugar belt. White colonists despaired of exploiting the country's agricultural

resources, due to the scarcity of labour. Slavery had been abolished and the Zulu, relatively secure in the tribal economy, refused to market their labour. India, convulsed by the British occupation, offered a solution. Peasants and craftsmen, often deluded by unscrupulous recruiting agents, bound themselves for five years and more to unknown masters, under little known conditions, to fill the vacancies created by the emancipated slaves on the world's tropical plantations .... Free, or passenger Indians as they came to be called, followed in the wake of the indentured to Natal, but White colonists became alarmed by the competition offered by these merchants and by those whose labour contracts had expired. By 1913 Indian immigration was generally prohibited by law.

The result is today, with few exceptions, Indian South Africans are South African citizens by birth.

(Meer 1969: 7)

Just over 20 years later, Dr Goonam, in her autobiography tellingly named *Coolie Doctor* (1991), started her memoir with the problem of identity: "I was born in May Street, in Durban, in 1906 on the southern part of the East African coast. That made me African, but not quite, for my father had immigrated from South Asia and my mother from Mauritius. I would be identified as a South African Indian or Indian South African" (1991: 41). In contrast, Ela Gandhi, quoted in Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie's book *From Cane Fields to Freedom*, resists the coupling of "South African" and "Indian" in defining her identity: "I'm a South African. A very proud South African .... The Indianness comes in at the level of ... culture ... the way we eat ... the kind of things we eat, the kind of things we ... appreciate like music, drama, the language we speak .... We only enrich our country by having all these different tastes and habits. What I'm basically saying is that is where the Indianness stops" (2000: 9).

Given the large number of Indians who arrived in South Africa during the years of indenture – Diesel estimates "[a]ltogether, just over 150,000 individual Indians were brought to Natal in the fifty year period between 1860 and 1911" (in Parekh, Singh & Vertovec 2003: 34) – together with passenger Indians, and their combined descendants who, like their forefathers represent a number of trades, professions, income levels, languages etc., any uniformity on the question of identity would be unusual. Dhupelia-Mesthrie observes: "Unlike the rest of Africa, where Indians were primarily a trader class, the majority of South Africa's Indians have never constituted a homogenous group and their attitudes to significant issues such as identity and political affiliation will vary" (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 28). Ronit Frenkel, in a recently published work on the making of race in South African Indian fiction, concurs with this reading. She writes, "South African Indian identities consist of a multitude of positions, forming an elastic construct that is complex and often ambiguous" (2010: 8).

But it seems that, as the millennium turned, for many people of Indian descent in South Africa the "Indian" part of their identity came to be reinforced, emphasised, cherished. Why should this be so? Perhaps it partly has to do with the global rise of India's profile both economically and culturally: whether it is the booming IT industry, vast publishing market, the crossing over of Bollywood into the mainstream film industry, burgeoning tourism to India, "India" and things "Indian" are in popular demand. This global phenomenon, coupled with a growing pressure among Indian South Africans to recover their past both post-indenture, and also post-apartheid, may go some small way to explaining the amount of current writing focused on the Indian South African condition and culture within the country. Among South African

historians and writers, this intense interest in the past, clearly evident in the last decade, has even intensified the past five years as the build-up to the 150th anniversary approached. Whether the writers are literary critics, historians, creative writers or “ordinary” people writing their stories and sending in to the papers, there is a general recognition that there is an important process of reclamation, of recognition of the past and celebration of a distinctive present underway. Rajendra Chetty, in the Introduction of the first South African work to look specifically at South African Indian writers, stresses the importance of reclamation, of memory:

This “audit” of a marginalized sub-genre would hopefully result in a more inclusive South African literary history, an affirmation of South African Indian writers’ distinctiveness and a celebration of differences .... Writers like Farida Karodia, Ahmed Essop, Ronnie Govender, Indres Naidoo and Kesavaloo Goonam relocate the South African Indian as an integral part of the African landscape.

(Chetty 2002: 9, 21)

Desai and Vahed in their acclaimed text *Inside Indenture* (2007), reissued as *Inside Indian Indenture* (2010) to mark the 150th anniversary, explain their goal of reclamation in writing their book:

At its core, this book seeks to recover the biographies of those whom history has tried to ignore and to give “voice” to those hitherto silenced .... If the indentured system tried to turn people into numbers, then this book seeks to turn numbers into people, empirical detail into a foundation for a deeper understanding of the life of indenture, and of “our” past into a basis for reflection on the challenges of the present. You see, journeys like Shiva’s dance, are unending.

(Desai & Vahed 2007: 26, 27)

As literary critic, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden presciently notes: “South Africa at the present moment is living through a time of memory. It is a time when we are considering the past histories of individuals, families, institutions, events and periods” (2008: 9). Indenture, as shown earlier through a quick look at the newspaper projects, is providing writers with one such powerful event or sequence of events. A brief consideration of a doubtless incomplete list of published works by Indian South African writers of the past decade who, by and large, have been engaged in “memory” projects of one sort or another, often with indenture at the core, proves the point about the substantial rise in number and variety of recent published texts on this theme:

<b>Fiction</b>		
Imraan Coovadia	2001	<i>The Wedding</i> (plus others)
Aziz Hassim	2002	<i>The Lotus People</i>
	2009	<i>Revenge of Kali</i>
Pat Poovalingum	2003	<i>Anand</i>
Prabha Moodley	2004	<i>The Heart Knows No Colour</i>
Ronnie Govender	2006	<i>Song of the Atman</i> (plus others)
	2008	<i>The Lahnee’s Pleasure</i> (as novel)

Alleyn Diesel (ed.)	2007	<i>Shakti: Stories of Indian Women in South Africa</i>
Rubendra Govender	2008	<i>Sugar Cane Boy</i>
Sherin Ahmed	2008	<i>The Good Luck House</i>
Neelan Govender	2008	<i>Girmit Tales</i>
Fiona Khan	2009	<i>Reeds of Wrath</i>
<b>Non-fiction/Autobiography/Biography</b>		
Uma Dhupelia Mes-thrie	2000	<i>From the Cane Fields to Freedom</i>
Ashwin Desai	2000	<i>The Poors of Chatsworth</i>
Ashwin Desai & Goolam Vahed	2007	<i>Inside Indenture</i>
Phyllis Naidoo	2002 2007	<i>Footprints in Grey Street</i> <i>Footprints beyond Grey Street (plus others)</i>
Ashwin Desai, Vishnu Padayachee, Krish Reddy & Goolam Vahed	2003	<i>Blacks in Whites: A Century of Cricket Struggles in KwaZulu-Natal</i>
Sita Gandhi	2003	<i>Sita – Memoirs of Sita Gandhi</i> , edited by Dhupelia-Mesthrie)
Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie	2004	<i>Gandhi's Prisoner: The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal</i>
Shunna Pillay	2006	<i>Shadow People</i>
Ravi Govender	2006	<i>Down Memory Lane</i>
Riason Naidoo	2008	<i>Indian Ink – The Indian in "Drum" Magazine in the 1950s</i>
Ronnie Govender	2008	<i>In the Manure</i>
Mewa Ramgobin	2009	<i>Prisms of Light</i>
Pritiraj Dullay	2009	<i>Salt Water Runs in My Veins</i>
Devarakshanam Govinden	2008	<i>A Time of Memory: Reflections on Recent South African Writings</i>
Devarakshanam Govinden (ed.)	2009	<i>Sister Outsiders: The Representation of Identity and Difference in Selected Writings by South African Indian Women</i>
Bruce Murray & Goolam Vahed (eds)	2010	<i>Empire and Cricket: The South African experience 1884-1914.</i>
Goolam Vahed & Thembisa Waetjen	2010	<i>Dear Ahmedbai, Dear Zulei-khabehn</i>
Ashwin Desai & Goolam Vahed	2010	<i>Monty Naicker: Between Reason and Treason</i>
Goolam Vahed & Thembisa Waetjen	2010	<i>Gender, Modernity and Indian Delights</i>
Ronit Frenkel	2010	<i>Reconsiderations: South African Indian Fiction and the Making of Race in Postcolonial Literature.</i>

The number of titles speak for an exceptionally busy “time of memory”; especially considering many of these are first-time writers (in the fiction category). Others, however, notably Ronnie Govender, have been writing for a long time. These writers are not “diasporic” writers in the sense Kumar implies when he describes diasporic writers as “a product of movement. They embody travel” (2004: xvii), though examples of their work are sometimes collected in

editions of diasporic Indian writing (see, for example, Nelson 1992, 1993; Chetty & Piciucco 2004 which includes a chapter on Coovadia's *The Wedding*; Kumar 2004 which features a piece by M.K. Gandhi "In England and South Africa" from his 1927 autobiography). They are South African writers of Indian descent as Meer pointed out earlier in this paper; "home" is not India, but South Africa.

However, it is true that indentured labourers and passenger Indians did arrive on our shores through an "original" voyage across the sea. The centrality of the sea voyage, crossing the *kala pani*, is evident in a literary movement described, in the same decade under discussion in this paper, as "coolitude", which can be defined as "an intellectual interpretation, a poetic and artistic immersion into the world of the vanished coolie" (Carter & Torabully 2002: back cover). Torabully wrote in 1996:

It is impossible to understand the essence of coolitude without charting the coolies' voyage across the seas. That decisive experience, that coolie odyssey, left an indelible stamp on the imaginary landscape of coolitude .... The crossing of the Kala Pani constitutes the first movement of a series of abusive and culturally stifling situations. By making the crossing central, Coolitude avoids any essentialism and connection with an idealized Mother India, which is clearly left behind. It discloses the coolie's story which has been shipwrecked ("erased") in the ocean of a Western-made historical discourse as well as a world of publication and criticism.

(Carter & Torabully 2002: 11, 15)

An adaptation of the *negritude* and *creolite* movements which, however, focuses particularly on Indian diaspora, coolitude as an artistic movement combines the experiences of indentured labourers wherever they were sent in the colonial world. As Desai and Vahed point out, *kuli* in Tamil "referred to payment for menial work for persons from the lowest levels in the industrial labour market" (2007: 13) – the conflation of people into money neatly sums up the dehumanising effect of the indenture system. Coolitude is in essence a project of reclamation and a reimagining of the "coolie odyssey" worldwide.

The "idea of the ocean" as Michael Pearson acknowledges in his essay of the same name (Gupta, Hofmeyr & Pearson 2010: 7) is central to the following fictional texts by South African Indian writers: *The Wedding*, *Girmit Tales* and *Reeds of Wrath*. Neelan Govender recreates the apprehension and hardship of the ocean crossing in one of his *girmit* tales, "The Dowry":

There was talk of people leaving for Fiji, Penang and Natal to work in the sugar cane fields. They considered India a cursed country for the wretched and the poor. Yenamma decided she would join these people and leave India for good too. She thought about her plight carefully. She did not know what was held in store for her in the new country. She was worried about her daughter. Who would she marry in the new country? Would there be a dowry to be paid? She left the child with her elder sister with express instructions to return her to her father, whose responsibility it would become to arrange for her marriage and the payment of the dowry when the time came. He richly deserved this burden. Having discharged this task, my mother took me and sought a way of reaching Madras.

This is when my mother fell in with the grandparents of Young Archie's bride Ramanna Naidoo and his wife Jutchmee, who were also out to seek their fortune beyond the oceans. Many people advised against this madness as it was preached by the brahmins that once one ventured across the oceans, one lost



one's caste status. Tell this to the wretched, the hungry, and the homeless. What lesser misfortune can they fall into? Where has caste ever protected and nurtured them?

(Govender 2008: 169)

The passenger Indian crossing was less traumatic by far – if Imraan Coovadia's version in *The Wedding* is to be believed:

Three weeks later they found themselves on the steamer Truro bound for the post of Durban, in self-governing Natal. For propriety's sake more than affection ... Khateja sent a final line to the village: "Departing South Africa. (Signed) Khateja Haveri."

For his part, Yusuf was getting annoyed at the need for these expensive communications. "Best of Luck. Regards from all here. Keep in touch, Haveri," he fired back feeling completely frustrated at the image of shekels disappearing down the drain forever and all time, but he copied the address wrong when he gave it to the messenger boy. It never reached her.

So the two of them, beetle-backed migrants – bickering, feuding, mixing it up – disappeared from the face of India. They simply vanished. Somehow there's never enough ceremony at the migratory watershed ....

And then the ship whistled and the gangplank went up and India floated away. A mist rose up around the shoreline, great white-smoking billows of cloud that steamed about the peeling buildings and the seafront hotels.

(Coovadia 2001: 128-129)

And in the popular romance version of the crossing in Fiona Khan's *Reeds of Wrath*, the initial relief after crossing the Indian Ocean is tempered by a harsh reception:

Much to the horror of the bewildered foreigners, there were no ablution or toilet facilities. Conveniently, the Coolie Immigration Agent was not at the dockside and they had to remain guarded until their employers arrived. In the country it was obvious that time was at the leisure of the estate owners .... The whispers of families being split spread fear and anger, as they were reassured when they embarked, that all families would be kept together. Children looked wild-eyed and whispered with fear, uncomprehending the hostility and aggression of the gorawallas in a foreign land. Every person that disembarked was at the centre of bargaining and auctioning. Confused she looked around her as the Englishmen inspected every immigrant expecting lean, vapid anatomies after almost five weeks at sea, but instead finding to their satisfaction swarthy and ever humble peasants. There was the shout of the harbourmaster and the mumbling of arrivals, the blast from the barges and the shouting of bidders for labourers .... What in God's great name did they allow themselves to get lured into? She closed her eyes offering silent prayers and calling upon saints to save them from this calamity and human degradation.

(Khan 2009: 121-122)

The purple prose of this novel unfortunately takes away from any real engagement with this scene.

Crossings can become circular or "fluid", however, as Desai and Vahed point out when noting that some Indians returned to India after their time of indenture was up, if only to return again (see 2007: 26). For descendants of early Indian immigrants, the crossing in contemporary times need not be back to India, as the last pages of Coovadia's novel, *The Wedding*, which focuses on the lives of a passenger Indian couple and their descendants, show:

Having lost most of their wealth as a result of the government confiscation, my grandparents eventually moved into a small house in a segregated suburb on the hills about ten miles outside Durban, next to the reservoir. In the next decade Vikram, out-leveraging himself in an import-export deal, would go bust and open up a Chinese restaurant. Ahmedu emigrated to Australia. Charm made a great deal of money from a chain of discount liquor stores, and invested much of it into educating Disraeli at a British boarding school. The government outlawed the Communist Party, sending Joe Slovo and Yusuf Dadoo into exile in London. Mehmoud Ghani's son, Solly, opened a hardware business and was busy printing up his father's aphorisms in saleable pamphlets as a profitable sideline. Jayraj and Tejpal founded a luxury cruise travel liner that went between Cape Town and Ahmabad .... My grandparents got mentally denationalized so to speak. If something's been muscled out of the future, it's only a matter of time before it loses its grip on the past, no?

(Coovadia 2001: 265)

As other types of writing around indenture have already been drawn from, it is only possible to make some rather general comments in an article of this length about the overall commemorative and/or celebratory depictions of indentured labour in a few recent fictional works by South African Indian writers, some of which have already been referred to. But if we take just four recent novels which centrally feature indentured labour in Natal, some general trends can be perceived. These four could be *Sugar Cane Boy* (2008), *Girmit Tales* (2008), *Reeds of Wrath* (2009) and *Revenge of Kali* (2009). Coovadia's *The Wedding*, already referred to, deals with passenger Indian experience so is not included and, though some works like Ronnie Govender's *Song of the Atman* (2006) include a section of early beginnings in Natal's cane fields for Chin's father, the focus is really on Chin's time in Cato Manor, moving on to District Six, not the cane fields.

Of the four novelists and their works, Aziz Hassim's *Revenge of Kali* is the most accomplished. This is not surprising as Hassim is an established writer having won the Sanlam Literary Award in 2001 for his debut novel *The Lotus People*; the other three are first-time writers. Hassim's searing fictionalised account of the lives of indentured labourers located on the Natal sugar cane farms begins the book. As Hassim was also the author of the letter advising a lasting commemoration of the 150th anniversary rather than "ephemeral" celebration, it is also not surprising that his is a powerful story which roundly condemns indenture as slavery by another name: "It was a brilliant contrivance, brilliantly executed. By a stroke of the pen India replaced Africa as the source of slave labour .... It was a confidence trick of unequalled scale" (2009: 78). However, the different twist to this novel is that it shows oppression was not all one-way traffic: this is also a story about, again in Hassim's own words, "what Indians did to each other". Thus the role of the hated Indian *sirdars* in maintaining discipline and the pace of daily cane cutting quotas on the farms is not skirted.

Nor is this uncomfortable truth skirted in the book's progress through four generations of the descendants of Ellapen, one of the original indentured labourers. Whether the setting moves in Parts Two and Three to The Duchene or Grey Street areas of Durban respectively, oppression is shown as being complex and multiple – of one caste towards another, of one belief system set up against another, of rich landlords evicting poorer tenants, of the strong against the weak, of men against women resulting in domestic violence. Hence the title's reference to Kali – in this book she is the avenging goddess

“ensuring justice for the powerless” (p. 54). It is a justice promised by the book’s rain-soaked ending: rain that washes away, rain that causes the cane to grow, a torrent of water that allows a logjam to break through.

Despite the book’s dark and weighty themes, this is an eminently readable novel with plenty of pace and, above all, a wonderfully authentic evocation of place. *Revenge of Kali* is a deeply Durban book. Just listen to this example of a de Certeau-like urban stroll: “Careful now – take a left into Ajax Lane and you will be lost in a maze of alleys and dead-ends; unless you happen to bump into the cantankerous Mister Akoon who, depending on his mood, will take you by the hand and lead you out of the labyrinth and deposit you safely back onto Old Dutch Road – a hundred feet from the ill-famed Etna Lane, the home-base of the notorious Duchene Gang” (p. 85). It’s the street world of Benjamin’s *flaneur*, Dickensian in its twists and turns, its low life. In this respect, *Revenge of Kali* follows on Hassim’s first award-winning novel, *The Lotus People* (2002), which also had as its locus “Indian” Durban, particularly Grey Street where Hassim spent years as a *laaitie* himself.

Hassim’s prose is peppered with words from the street and everyday speech – Thiru, the central character and descendant of great-grandfather Ellapen, is variously referred to as a *bro*, *boet*, *scoten*, *laaitie*, *charou* who eats the *vadeh* and *murku* made by his Tamil-speaking granny or *parti*. The Glossary with its mix of Afrikaans, Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati and Zulu words thoughtfully provided at the end bears witness to the melting pot that was the “old” Grey Street of years gone by and, indeed, of the world of indenture which had to adapt so rapidly to a South Africa of competing cultures. This, then, is *Revenge of Kali*’s strength – it has an authentic voice set in a densely visualised place telling a South African story of survival in hard times, generation after generation. That the past needs to find expression in tales such as these is made evident in the evocative chiding of Thiru by the spirits of his forefathers whom he seeks out: “Come *kanna*. What took you so long!” (p. 14).

Rubendra Govender’s *Sugar Cane Boy* draws its setting from an Inanda sugar cane farm owned by the Murugappa family, themselves descendants of indentured labourers who made good. Set in the 1970s, it is a story of friendship between Soya Sivaraman whose family works on the farm, and Boniwe Mkhize, a fellow farm “boy”. It takes us through Soya’s teenage years on to student times at the University of Durban-Westville where he reaches political maturity. This is, however, definitely a novel of the celebratory type – the author himself being a success story as a descendant of a pioneering Indian sugar farming family risen from indenture status, a university graduate and a science teacher. From the opening pages: “Despite the harsh life, a unique spirit, culture and zest for life permeated the community” (2008: 2); to the middle: “I am a Sugar Cane Boy, just like my forefathers’, he boastfully said to Siphso, referring to those who had come to South Africa as indentured labourers” (p. 51); to the end when the hero gets his girl, the mood is one of triumph over adversity, with relatively few complications.

*Reeds of Wrath* is a “Barbara Cartland” historical romance interesting only for its subject matter showing that, like all significant world movements, indenture can be tackled from a variety of angles, in a number of genres, both seriously and popularly. The story is a family drama extending from India to Natal and focused on the trials and tribulations of Cassiopeia Pennywhistle’s daughter Jahan (an Anglo-Indian), who is tricked into working on a sugar cane farm in the 1880s, but who triumphs over adversity to marry her true love, Patrick Buchanan, a white sugar farm manager in Natal. The passionate (and

celebratory) narrative is, however, punctuated sporadically by lengthy descriptions of the terrible conditions suffered by indentured labourers, passages which sit uneasily in this frothy frolic:

Harvesting proved to be backbreaking work, as with blistered hands the labourers proceeded to gather the crop, duly delivered by wagons to the mill .... The influx of labour increased the production of sugar in a limited time, during which many were flogged to ensure the expansion of production or else wages were withheld, moreover the rations were halved.

Coolie labour atrocities had become widespread, encouraging agitation in groups resulting in fire to barns and fields especially after news had spread of a ten-year-old shepherd thrashed with a riding crop and his parents beaten on suspicion of taking food to him at night. In the north an entire field of cane had been burnt and Indians protested by abstaining from work. Labourers served imprisonment terms petitioning the governor to transfer them to a new employer, only to be disillusioned. While one stood condoned and another punished, there was nothing more painful and mortifying than being ordered to continue work for the same employer pardoned with so much as a rebuke. Their revenge was ever so sweet as they increased the workload and cut back on rations.

(Khan 2009: 170)

Finally, *Girmit Tales* consists of 14 stories told to the writer, a medical doctor, over a 40-year period during his patient rounds and retold to us, the readers. Neelan Govender, “himself a descendant of Natal *girmitiyas*” as the back cover of the book states, intends this book to be a project of memory, reclamation and, indeed, a commemoration. It begins with a facsimile of an indenture agreement (reconstructed for a modern reader); a timeline of Indian indenture 1834-1920, i.e., worldwide, not just in South Africa; a preface by Phyllis Naidoo and a foreword by Pat Poovalingam, both activists and writers, both of whom refer to indenture as slavery in their respective pieces. The stories cover accounts of indenture experience from varying individual angles – from the vantage point of a field *sirdar*, from families with rivalries carried over the water from India to Natal, from the hopeless who then hope for a better life in Natal: “In the market place he had learnt that there was a place across the ocean called Natal, where the land was so rich with gold that the chilli plants bore chillies that turned green to yellow first before turning red” (Govender 2008: 64).

They are stories of extreme misery on the part of those tricked into service by unscrupulous recruiters (pp. 86-87); of prosperity; of families of convenience formed to gain access to the boats; and finally of Zanzibaris whose lot was thrown in with Indians in Durban. The stories add to what Vijay Mishra calls for in a paper on “girmit ideology” – “What is required is a massive archeology of the ‘Girmit’ phenomenon” (in Nelson 1992: 1) – before memories fade, or die out, and the details become harder to recover.

And such an archaeology is surely underway as is evident in the plethora of writing in all genres, and in the number of historical “retrieval” projects currently in progress in this country. As Govinden pointed out in a recent talk given at the Words on Water India/South Africa writers festival in Durban last year: “Since the first democratic elections we see a further flourishing of the theme of indenture in literary writings by South African Indians. The presence of ‘girmitiya’ or ‘coolie’ texts points to the way the history of indenture continues to shape the psyche of Indians in South Africa” (2009: 8-9). Uneven

in quality as some of the offerings may be, the very number speaks to current interest in the bitter-sweet past – both that of indenture 150 years ago and of, more recently, apartheid. Perhaps the fairest answer to Hassim’s challenge to anniversary organisers, headed by the 1860 Legacy Foundation, as to whether they will commemorate or celebrate the 150th anniversary is that both approaches are inevitable given the tough experience of the indentured past, which can hardly be celebrated; and the resilience of those descendants who make up the various committee members today, surely a reason to celebrate.

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