

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-16 The Indian Community

November 10, 1962  
Pretoria, Transvaal  
Republic of South Africa

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

People of Indian descent have lived in South Africa for over one hundred years; they know no other home. More than 95% of their present half-million population have been born and raised here, a percentage larger than that of the European community. Yet it was only last year, 1961, that they were officially recognized as a permanent part of South Africa. Until that time they had been considered temporary residents whom the Europeans hoped would someday return to India.

In the early days - an "open arms" policy

From 1860 to 1911 Indians came to South Africa as indentured labourers, primarily for the sugar estates in Natal. After they had served a three to five year period they were free to leave, but they had the option of indenturing themselves again and getting free passage home or land of their own in South Africa.

Because the Natal sugar farmers found the Zulus unreliable labour, this immigration of Indian workers was an economic necessity. Beginning in the 1870's the Natal Government paid out about \$30,000 annually for 25 years just to further Indian immigration. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there also came to South Africa "passenger" Indians, generally merchants who were able to pay their own way. While they augmented the Indian population, 9/10 of today's South African Indians are descendants of those who worked for their freedom.

As time went on and the Indian population increased, the European began to feel they were a threat to his way of life. He was afraid he would be engulfed by a people whose religions, languages and customs were quite foreign to his own; he was afraid he would suffer financially if there were unrestricted competition and that he would perhaps lose control of the economy; he was afraid the value of his property would be lowered and slums would develop if Indians were able to buy land in "European areas". Finally he was afraid that if there were unrestricted franchise he would eventually be out-voted and a non-European Government instituted in Durban and Natal, where the Indians were most heavily concentrated. Thus, when his labour requirements had been met, he looked for ways to encourage the Indian to go home.

...to speed the traveller on his way....

With this easy solution to the "Indian problem" - to get the indentured Indian to go home as soon as he finished his contract - the Natal Government initiated steps to speed their departure. In 1891 the grant of land to those who had served two periods of indenture was withdrawn and, in fact, a \$8.40 head tax was levied on those who chose to stay in South Africa. The Government continued to stress, meanwhile, their offer of a free passage to India.

Ways were also sought to limit the movement of Indians within South Africa. In 1885 the British Government gave the Transvaal Republic permission to exclude Indians from citizenship and the right to purchase property. While the latter part of this measure was not strictly enforced it did provide that Indian homes and businesses had to be in specific separate areas. The Orange Free State, not controlled by the British, decreed in 1890 that no Asiatic could stay in the territory for longer than two months. The Cape Colony in 1904 prohibited Indians from entering most of the Eastern Cape (Ciskei, Transkei, East Griqualand) and two years later further restricted Indian migration by an act that limited entry only to those people who could write a European language. A year after the Transvaal was granted independence in 1906 it imposed the same language requirements demanded in the Cape.

Natal sharply restricted the entry of passenger Indians in 1897 and the newly formed Government of the Union of South Africa climaxed all such restrictions by its Immigration Regulations Act of 1913. This Act stopped the further entrance of Indians into the country except for the wives and children of men already here, and even this immigration was halted in 1953. Since they can't move about from province to province without a permit they have been largely confined to Natal where some 40% of the total Indian population of the country live in the Durban area.

Until 1883 Natal Indians had the right to vote if they could meet property qualifications of \$140. Later this qualification was almost doubled in an attempt to reduce the growing Indian vote. In 1896 their parliamentary vote was taken away and in 1924 they lost their municipal franchise. (Those Indians whose names were already on the register could continue to vote but no new names could be added. Thus a few months ago one of the very few Indians still on a municipal roll in Natal was elected to a second term on Stanger's town council by a European electorate in spite of the fact that his opponents were European.) In 1946 the Smuts Government offered the Indians a communal franchise whereby they could collectively elect a total of five Europeans to Parliament to represent their views. This was so strongly rejected that it was not put into practice.

Since the 1880's, when Indian businessmen survived a depression better than their European counterparts, measures to contain the threat of Indian competition have increased in severity. In 1897 the issuance of dealers' licences to Natal Indians was legally restricted. During the 1920's and '30's their employment opportunities, limited for the most part to the cane fields, coal mines, domestic help and the railroad, were further curtailed by the Government's non-legislative "civilized labour policy" (JCB-9). For instance, Indian employees of the Government-managed railroads decreased from 2113 to 521 in the period from 1924 to 1936. Since 1936 all railroad and Government civil service positions have been closed to them with the exception today of the Department of Indian Affairs. (A few months ago this Department announced that 25 of its 102 positions were held by Indians.)

The Apprenticeship Act of 1944 made it difficult for Indians to learn skilled trades and official and unofficial job reservation further restricted the fields in which they can find employment.

Ways to control Indian ownership and occupation of land were urgently demanded by Natal Europeans in the 1920's after Indians made inroads into their neighborhoods. In 1922 Natal made legal anti-Asiatic clauses in title deeds and in 1925 further spiked Indian freedom to purchase land by a Class Areas Reservation Bill. This legislation was dropped a few years later when the Government entered an agreement with India that it would "uplift" Indians who remained in South Africa in exchange for India's cooperation in encouraging South African Indians to repatriate. As this possibility dimmed and the expansion of Indian land holdings in Durban became more pronounced, the Government passed the so-called "Pegging Act" (Transvaal and Natal Restriction Bill, 1943) which disallowed further land transactions



Indians are seen by most Europeans in the familiar role of waiter.



Market gardening is important to South Africa's Indians and provides much of Durban's fresh produce. Land available to Indians under Group Areas, however, is inadequate for intensive farming.

between Europeans and Indians. When this lapsed two years later the Government enacted what the Indians called the "Ghetto Act" (Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill) which defined the areas in which Indians could live and buy land. This legislation was violently opposed by the Indians, caused India to break off diplomatic relations and resulted in strong attacks against Smuts and South Africa at the UN. It was superseded by the Nationalist Government's Group Areas Act of 1950 which provided the machinery for the total separation of each racial group into an area of its own. Now land purchase, business location and home ownership of Indians come under strict Government control.

### Why don't they go home?

Such measures, in the 50-year period up to 1962, encouraged about 40,000 Indians to leave. But that number appears insignificant when contrasted with the expansion of the Indian population in the same period. Since 1911 it has increased from 95,000 to just under a half-million. And only about 750 Indians have repatriated in the last 15 years.

So finally, contrary to its stated party policy, the Nationalist Government acknowledged in 1962 what had been quite obvious for some time - that repatriation was no longer a feasible solution to the "Indian problem". In order for that problem to be solved in the context of the race policy of the present Government, Indians must be accepted as permanent residents.



Mr. W.A. Maree,  
head of the newly  
formed Department  
for Indian Affairs

When Mr. W.A. Maree was appointed Minister for Indian Affairs at the creation of that Department last August, he made it very clear that "the Indian inhabitants of South Africa are the permanent responsibility of the Republican Government." As residents of South Africa they would be treated equally with the country's other racial groups; their concerns will be dealt with systematically and separately as is done with the Coloured and the African; "they will be encouraged to develop as an independent group in their own area." He added that "Indian organizations and leaders quickly said that they would not work with this new Department. This is because they do not want a Department of Indian Affairs but equal political rights. But if we give them this we will be overwhelmed, not by the Indians but by the Bantu. I appeal to all Indians not yet blinded by political agitators to help in this important step to build better relations between Whites and Indians."

While Indian leaders welcomed the recognition of "the fact that the Indian in South Africa is a South African", they were opposed to separation and the creation of a Department to support it. P.R. Pather, head of the Natal Indian Organization said, "Poverty, unemployment, and the restriction of the avenues of employment and housing are grave issues which are confronting the leaders of the Indian people. If these problems are to be assuaged, the Government should think in the larger interests of the country and not just tinker."

It was soon obvious that the Government's new attitude toward the Indian did not mean that those restrictions which have hampered him economically and politically would be lifted. Rather they would be used to keep Indians and their development to Government-prescribed areas. Just as the Group Areas Act was a logical extension of the previous segregatory legislation and practices, so was the creation of a special Governmental Department to handle only Indian affairs a logical extension of Group Areas. Both were fundamental steps toward the Nationalist Party's larger goal of complete race separation.

#### Which Indian culture?

Apartheid has meant that each racial unit would be encouraged toward cultural self-government. With the African this meant his traditional ways would be enlivened and encouraged. There is Native law for the African as well as European law. African children are no longer taught primarily in a European language but in their own vernacular. Tribal chieftainship and customs are emphasized and provide the basis for the African's political development. Did this mean separate development for the Indian would be carried out in a similar fashion?

The Indians who came to South Africa brought with them several languages; religions, including the Moslem faith as well as a number of Hindu sects; and customs originating in the various parts of India in which they were born. If these differences have been bridged at all it has been by a process of Westernization. They have learned to live under European law. Other than one wife and her offspring, the wives and children of an Indian who practiced polygomy in accordance with his custom and belief have not been legally recognized. Indian children have been taught in English. They have been expected to know English if they want to work for the European or cater to him in their shops. European-oriented Christian churches have sought and gained some 30,000 members and probably an additional 50,000 adherents. The European way of life has made great impact in almost every phase of their lives. Those Indians who treasure the traditional have an increasingly difficult time keeping the newer generation tied to Indian custom. Many Indian children attend vernacular religious schools after public

school classes so that they won't completely lose touch with their parents' particular language and religion.

Europeans have always complained that the major thing they hold against the Indian is his Asiatic way of life, his "unassimilable nature", so it would seem fairly easy to halt the Indian's Western acclimatization and encourage the Asiatic culture by official reinforcement.

This doesn't seem to be the case. The only way the Indian's culture will be encouraged is through his separation from Europeans and others. His political development will be along European lines and he will live under European law. English will not be dropped as the Indian's language medium in school. "There must be a common language bridging the many Indian dialects," I was told. In addition, I was assured, vernacular schools will be encouraged.

To represent the Government....

The local Indian Affairs Department representative in Durban was extremely nervous as he explained to me his plans for the future. His job is to smooth the way for the creation of Indian townships and the establishment of local government with representative Indian committees. He had previously served as the "Protector of Indians", looking after the interests of those who were descendants of indentured workers. Now he is supposed to relate the concerns of all the Indians to the work of the Government.

He eagerly located for me those areas north and south of the city which will eventually be Indian townships. Each municipality will



be separate from Durban and related to the Province as are other towns and cities. Most Indians have no objections about moving into these areas, he assured me, since the housing there will be a tremendous improvement over the kind most of them have now. Rich Indians will be able to buy their own homes in a beautiful

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The Indian beach in Durban, an early amenity provided through separate development.

separate area west of Durban, and Indians who live in economic housing areas can either rent or buy with low payments. Sub-economic housing will be provided for those who can't afford much rent. Sites for light industry have also been established in each area and plans are being made to step up the training of Indians in skilled labour and then apprentice them to people in their own area. Each area is to have shops of its own to serve its needs.

Former barracks in Salisbury Island across the harbour from Durban have been converted into an Indian University. Previously Indians had attended the University of Cape Town, Witwatersrand, and especially the "separate but equal" facilities of the University of Natal, where some students are still taking medical and law courses not yet offered by the new college. These in time will also be transferred. While the facilities on the island are not ideal, improvements are under way and there are already ample and adequate laboratory facilities. At first enrollments were slow since most of the students look with disfavor on an all-Indian education. Now they are steadily increasing because it is the only University open for them.

#### The official attitude?

I asked the Indian Affairs official if the large down-town area of shops and warehouses owned by Indians were to be moved, and he answered that it had not been decided. "However," he continued, "It is a good thing for the Indians to have their businesses in their own

areas where they can be more free from restrictions and competition with Europeans. This can't help but improve relations between the two groups."

He considers the Indian community

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Students at the new Indian University ferry over from Durban for their classes



as a single unit. There are differences, he admits, between Moslem and Hindu and Christian. There are political differences between the Indian Congress "which tries to undermine what we do" and the Indian Organization "which is more representative and constructive." But he sees no problem in these differences when dealing with the community as a whole.

"They are quite Westernized," he confided. "But they are actually different from us. All you have to do is to go down to the Indian area, the Arcade for instance, to see the difference. They think of democracy in a different way. We get together, elect our representatives and they speak for us and lead us. Not so with them. The rich man is the important person and he speaks for them; what he wants is what all the Indians want. He never considers the poor man whom we are trying to help. True, these wealthy Indians give generously to many social welfare organizations but how do they get their money? There is a wage law. These Indian employers pay that to their labour but then in another room as they leave, the employer takes half of it back. Most rich Indians have much investment in industry in Durban; they have virtually taken over the clothing industry.

"Of course, some people will tell you differently. You can't believe what they say - they will only tell you what will benefit them.

"I try to look at them objectively but I have to deal with reality. I can't say these things don't exist. This is what goes on. It is widespread. I assure you that my sources are very reliable, although I have to keep them confidential."

His feeling reflects the way most Europeans in Natal look at the Indian. They seem somehow to have kindlier feelings for the menial Indian labourer than for those Indians whose wealth, culture and education may perhaps exceed their own.

In some ways the position of the Indian in Natal could be summed up by this description of Jews in Europe before World War II:

"A minority group separated from the majority by religious observance, physical appearance and tradition. Deprived by prejudice and law from participation in normal occupations he is often extremely poor and earns dislike because of the degradation of poverty. A few in commerce and finance, if successful, are hated all the more for their success."

#### And how the Indian sees it...

Europeans compare the condition of the South African Indians with the poverty in which many Indians in India must live. The Indian



rather compares his position with that of the European South African. This difference in approach is all-important to an understanding of how often the European and the Indian cannot begin to understand the thinking of the other.

The European says:

"We count the Indian's blessings,  
Count them one by one,  
And say, 'Aren't you astonished  
What a lot we've done?'"

The Indian says:

"Counting our blessings,  
Counting two by two  
We are really astonished  
At what you do for you!" (1)

Indians with whom I have talked don't deny that some Indians are rich or that some Indian businessmen are just as unscrupulous as some of their European counterparts. They also point out that Indians, as well as Europeans, do business where they have an opportunity for profit and where they can gain an economic advantage. However, Indians are forced into certain kinds of trade because there are restrictions on the professions they might choose. "Why do you suppose there are no Indian architects, civil engineers, quantity surveyors or chemists, for example?" I was asked. "Because we are untalented or not interested in these things or because the kind of education and jobs we are allowed prevents us?"

They talk of the difficulties they have with matters that should not be difficult. One school teacher said, "We have to exert a tremendous amount of energy whenever we plan to go on a holiday or travel by train or bus, or enroll our child in school or in a University, or buy or rent a home, or get a job or a license for a shop." A prominent businessman in the Cape told me that "So much waste of creative energy has gone into opposition, modification, compliance and circumvention of Group Areas. European officials are often bribed; some expect to be paid by Indians if they do something kind for them. Such a policy leads to moral corruption in the Europeans in charge of it and in Indians trying to get around its horrible consequences."

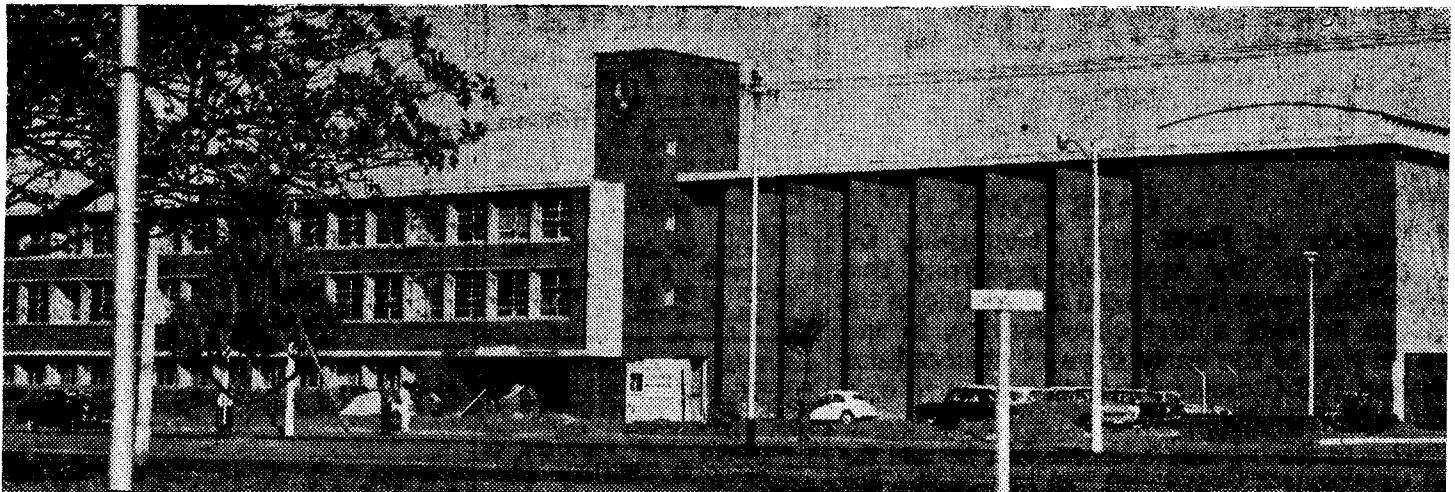
While a few Indians are wealthy by European standards most (70% according to one estimate) live below the poverty line and suffer the consequences of it. According to a University of Natal survey made in 1951, the average annual per capita income for Indians was 1/8 that of the European and lower than that of the Coloured or African. There has been no appreciable improvement in the Indian position in the last ten years so that this wage relationship would

probably be about the same today. The average earnings of an Indian family today would be about \$33 a month, and an estimated \$50 a month is needed for minimum subsistence.

This economic condition is aggravated by the large and increasing number of Indian unemployed, a condition which has been serious for years. And because of the large Indian birthrate there are more and more potential workers coming on the market every year for fewer jobs.

Since most Indians do not bother to register their unemployment and some gain partial employment with relatives it is difficult to know the full extent of those out of work. It appears to be somewhere between 15,000 and 30,000. A number of Government spokesmen have indicated that the problem could be alleviated if Indians helped each other as they should. Mr. Maree has appointed an Indian Unemployment Committee to deal with the problem but he has also suggested that Indians should invest in "their own" industries and so provide more work for their people.

A prominent Indian businessman told me, "We are eager to play our part in the field of employment and in the development of industry. But if there is to be industrial discrimination we are going to make little headway. We have taken the attitude that there cannot be separate industries in separate areas, for the facilities would be unequal. The idea of having Indian factories beside Indian residential areas sounds excellent in theory. In practice it doesn't work out. We would be cut off from our market,



The J.H. Sultan Technical College in Durban offers progress in the field of technical education for Indians. Money comes from Mr. Sultan who started his life in South Africa as a cane worker.

from adequate transportation, and we wouldn't be able to use the resources that would be available in an unrestricted area." Other Indian businessmen agree that industrialization under the present circumstances would not be able to provide many jobs for Indians. They believe the best way to remove unemployment, aside from the insurmountable colour bar, is to remove the two elements which contribute the most to it: an education level which, while improving, is for most Indians very low when compared to that of the European; and a lack of energy and poor physique caused by poverty.

The close relationships within Indian families have helped them to make the most of what money there is. The family has been a cushion of security against cultural changes, discrimination and unemployment. And it has been the most effective organ of raising the educational level of the Indian. Families not only go together to help a promising child get a higher education but they also give of themselves so there will be schools for their children to attend. In most areas of Natal they must take the initiative and supply 50% of the funds if there is to be a school. The Province will then supply the other half. Indian families have given an average of \$30,000 a year above taxes for the last 30 years to get schools for their children. Natal doesn't have the funds, says a Provincial official, to furnish schools for all Indian children and to make education compulsory. However it is interesting to note that while Natal has fully supplied public schools for almost 90% of the European children (the others go to aided or private schools) it has only been able to do so for 22% of the Indian children now in school.

Now the cushion of the family, the Indian pattern of several



Government-built Indian housing in Durban with a Mosque in the background

generations living together in one dwelling, may soon be a thing of the past. It is impossible in the New Indian areas, as Government-built houses are smaller and health regulations permit only so many people to a house. This change is bound to affect the family's solidarity and its ability to lessen the financial strain.

Many Indians admit that their housing has been in an appalling state. They appreciate the new houses which the Government

is putting up. But they are worried about the non-financial cost. It may be too high. They feel they are paying for this new adequate housing with their freedom. They consider the new houses a small repayment for being dispossessed from land they once owned.

But what can you do about it?

With all this, the number who have participated in active protest has been small. Most Indians are so concerned with their day to day existence that only a small percentage are members of any political party and a still smaller number are active.

The Natal Indian Congress (NIC), founded by Gandhi and the largest of the two major Indian parties, had an estimated membership of 35,000 at its peak; the number is now probably much less. This doesn't mean, however, that the Indian Congress or its partner, the Natal Indian Organization (NIO) have little influence. The action taken by NIC in times of crisis has generally had the wide support of the community. The help which the NIO can give is continually sought. The difference between the two organizations is mainly one of approach; how much to cooperate with the Government.

Both condemn the Government's new policy and the creation of the Department of Indian Affairs. They agree that the Indians don't want to be further segregated but rather wish to be treated as South Africans. Leaders of both groups have doubts about Mr. Maree, Leader of the Nationalist Party in Natal as well as head of the new Indian Department. Mr. Moolla, a leader of the Indian Organization commented at the time of the appointment, "He has not been kindly inclined towards the Indians in the past and it will require him to change very considerably if he is to do any good for the Indians."

Yet Mr. Moolla's organization is willing to cooperate with the Department and with Mr. Maree because it hopes to do what it can within an unfavorable framework. The NIC prefers to change that framework for one more favorable.

The Indian Organization is made up generally of merchants, the more affluent and conservative Indians. Most of them are Moslem and are descendants of passenger Indians. Its membership is small but it has contact through its leaders with most Indian educational, religious and cultural groups. Financially its members are far better equipped to help the needs of such groups than is the NIC. Because of this wide representation it has informed Mr. Maree that he need not consider the special creation of an Indian Advisory Committee as the NIO by its very nature already fills that need. Mr. Maree has yet to act on this advice.

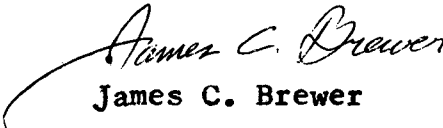
The NIO came into existence when its leadership withdrew from the NIC in 1946. At that time the NIC leadership was taken over by

a younger element who wanted more fight and less compromise. A prominent educator who has the ear of both groups has said he considers both groups needed: One continually to challenge the Government to change its policy and the other to work from within to make the implementation of Government policy as humane as possible. Neither can do both jobs at the same time.

Since 1946 the NIC has come to realize the problems that they face are also faced by other South Africans. Campaigns against the Government launched in 1946 and 1952 were in cooperation with Africans and some Europeans. While neither protest moved the Government to change any of its policies it appears to have had considerable influence on the development and education of African leadership, particularly in the use of non-violent techniques. Today the group considers its problems are one with the discriminatory problems which confront all the South African people, especially the non-Europeans.

Even the most conservative Indians will not admit that their future lies more with the Africans than with the Europeans. But they have also the gnawing realization that there is as much prejudice and hostility toward Indians among the Africans as there is in the European community. They are in the middle. And they will probably suffer as much from an all-African Government as from an all-European one. Perhaps not. But these are concerns which have made many educated Indians South Africa's most dedicated workers for a truly multi-racial state.

Sincerely yours,



James C. Brewer

(1) Poem by Maurice Webb  
Pictures courtesy The Natal Mercury, Die Burger and the South African Information Office.