

150 years after crossing the Indian Ocean: Challenges facing descendants of indentured labourers in South Africa

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Introduction

In 1860 the *Truro* and the *Belvedere* anchored on the shores of Port Natal. Out of its holds emerged a human cargo of indentured labourers from the Indian sub-continent. The journey had replaced their names with numbers and their future was to be cogs in the white man's machine. Hardly had they landed on *terra firma*, they were separated and bundled off to sugar plantations to labour under conditions of near slavery. As historian P.S. Joshi argues that, the indentured labour system was introduced by the British as a substitute for 'forced labour and slavery. The indentured 'coolies' were half slaves, bound body and soul by a hundred and one inhuman regulations' (Joshi 1942:4).

Reflecting on the history of indentured Indians on the occasion of the visit of the Indian President Abdul Kalam in September 2004, the then Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Mr S'bu Ndebele said:

I wonder what it must have been like to be wrenched from your small village in India, hounded into a compound in Calcutta and forced onto a ship. How difficult it is to comprehend the horror of the pain inflicted on young men and women. And once here to have to labour under slave-like conditions for a pittance...¹

The 150th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers in South Africa provides a vantage point and an opportunity to reflect critically on the past, as well as to analyse the present as a basis for future projections.

The Indian question in South Africa featured prominently on the national agenda for the greater part of the last century. Politicians from diverse white parties were unanimous on one issue – the Indian population in South Africa should be reduced to the minimum possible. The main mechanisms to achieve this were denial of political rights, limited employment opportunities, restrictions on their ownership and occupation of land, and repatriation. Indians managed to survive the economic and political onslaught primarily because of their rich cultural and religious heritage, community survival strategies, and the importance they attached to education. Furthermore, compared to the indigenous population, there was differential incorporation into the economic system. For example, there was space for the merchant class, albeit circumscribed, to own buses, and to own land in the city, while Africans were 'temporary sojourners' in terms of the Urban Areas Act of 1923.

Traditionally, South African Indians have been viewed as a homogeneous community, because they were herded together as one race group, and they organised and mobilised against apartheid from this base. There was always two kinds of responses, one broadly

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collaborationist and one not. Furthermore, there were various divisions and tensions, related to class, religion, language, geographic origins, and associated changes with the passage of time and remoteness from India. The post-apartheid, democratic era has witnessed the resurgence of ethnic and sub-ethnic identities. It would appear that some are trying to re-invent the divisions of 1860. These issues came to the fore as discussions and debates to observe the 150th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers in South Africa. Political matters permeated the discussions and the following issues were at the forefront, and will be the focus of this paper which is divided into five sections: post-apartheid anxieties; purpose of celebrations; who represents the 'Indian'; the Indian Government and the Pravasi; and the ANC Government response.

Post-apartheid Anxieties

Given the atrocities of apartheid, the ANC leadership was astounded when two-thirds of the South African Indians voted for the National Party in the first democratic elections in 1994. While the disappointment the ANC leadership was understandable, the party has failed to engage with issues affecting the community, and this has exacerbated the vulnerability of Indians. The contradictions of apartheid and the complexities of a fractured society played an important role in influencing political affiliations. Local Government Deputy Minister, Yunus Carrim emphasised that the

... presence of Indians poses interesting challenges for the tasks of nation-building and non-racial, democratic transformation in South Africa. The ways in which and the degree to which Indians are integrated into the post-apartheid society will be a not unimportant measure of how successful a non-racial democracy South Africa has become (Carrim 1994:19).

Ethnic minorities throughout the world have fears about majority domination. Indians constitute the most vulnerable ethnic minority in the country, and have been 'sandwiched' between the economically dominant whites and the African majority. As racism, ethnic chauvinism, xenophobia, cronyism and the celebration of mediocrity become more pronounced in the new South Africa, and the ruling elite blatantly flout democratic principles forged on the anvil of struggle, the descendents of indentured labourers increasingly feel disillusioned, marginalised and excluded from the rainbow nation, and anxiously retreat into their religious and cultural cocoons which is sometimes interpreted as a form of racism. The various depreciatory comments and racial slurs made over the last decade may well be an appropriate warning to the South African Indian community to awake and arise from their apathetic slumber

However, racism is clearly not the preserve of one community. If Indians are prone to withdraw into their own culture, other communities are just as much swayed by racial considerations. The nascent tensions and conflict between Africans and Indians have resurfaced periodically (especially during the Mbeki era when the non-racial project was betrayed), and have increased the vulnerability of the minority group, who also believed that they were being sidelined in affirmative action and black economic empowerment schemes. While those in the business and professional sectors thrived in the post-apartheid era, and jostled with the political elites for power, privilege, patronage and

position, working class Indians increasingly feel disillusioned, marginalised and excluded from the rainbow nation.

The new generation Indian elite, with a few exceptions, like their other South African counterparts, selfishly pursue mindless material accumulation and conspicuous consumption, which is quite often accompanied by social and moral degeneration (e.g. as victims and perpetrators of crime). Simultaneously, there has been a retreat from a proud tradition of self-help, sacrifice and community upliftment.

What, Why, and How?

There were robust public debates in the media, as well as in political and civil society circles, about the need to recognise the 150th anniversary as a significant milestone in the history of South African Indians: how this event should be observed, and the nature of connections with India. Professor Goolam Vahed raised the following concerns:

What is it that we should remember, celebrate, and commemorate? Memory and identity are selective and subjective representations and the challenge is to stitch together a collective memory of the past without ostracising anyone. What does this (ethnic/racial) commemoration mean in a country whose constitution is committed to non-racialism? ... Post-apartheid South Africa has seen the mushrooming of religious, language and ethnic identities among Indians. Speaking in the collective about a common “Indian” experience goes against the grain of the historical and contemporary experience (Legacy Foundation 23 March 2009).

There were some discussions about whether the focus should be on commemoration or celebration. There was a view that it would be inappropriate to celebrate ‘enslavement and oppression’: ‘In as much as we are proud of what has been achieved we must not let the brutal oppression of our forbears be forgotten. In my mind this would be a tragic erasure of history’(Ismail 30 March 2010).

Inevitably, there were concerns over divided loyalties, and the associated implications (Ismail 26 May 2010). In this regard, Ahmed Kathrada, who spent 25 years with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, was very clear: ‘We are first and foremost South Africans and owe our loyalty to our national flag and national anthem. We may be of Indian origin and have cultural and other ties with India, but we are all South Africans’(Subramoney 4 April 2010: 3).

Former Head of the South African Human Rights Commission, and Chairperson of the 1860 Gauteng Legacy Foundation, Jody Kollapen, maintained that the celebration should reflect the South African diversity (Moodley 18 May 2010). In a similar vein, Cyril Ramaphosa, member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC, maintained that there should be a South African celebration, ‘given the centrality of the South African Indian community in the body politic of our nation, it is distinctively a celebration by South Africans, for South Africans and about South Africans’.² Pravin Gordhan, Minister of Finance, also argued for a non-racial, South African celebration: ‘It is not a

generation of Indians we are celebrating, but a single democracy of non-racial, non-sexist South Africa' (Naidoo 2010).

Political scientist and activist, Lubna Nadvi contended that the purpose of the commemoration was 'to remember both the suffering/trials and successes of the indentured labourers, as well as to locate the current generation of Indian South Africans in a contemporary African context with a sense of place and purpose' (Nadvi 23 December 2010). The Chairperson of the Eastern Cape Legacy Foundation similarly contended that 'we need to also emphasise the role that Indians have and will continue to play in the development of our young democracy'.³

Eastern Mosaic, a weekly national television programme which has an Indian lifestyle focus, summarised the issues and challenges pertaining to the 150th anniversary:

How does one do justice in recollecting, and honoring, the journey through one and a half centuries of an Indian community who has been viewed, for the greatest part of that period, as a minority and as insignificant to the country they've adopted as home – a country far removed from their motherland, and alien to their culture, religion and ways of life? How does one not only commemorate but also empower the memory of such a people, and address their unique contribution to such a country, in the most solicitous and worthy of terms?⁴

A related issue was about representation, and whether it was possible for the South African Indian community to organise and mobilise as a collective.

Who Represents the 'Indian'?

Linked to debates about whether there should be 'celebration' or 'commemoration', a major issue was who legitimately represented the 'Indian'. There was a view that the demise of the Natal Indian Congress (established by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894) was premature, and that it should be revived. Fortunately, this suggestion was rejected, and a return to cabal politics avoided. Former Secretary of the NIC, Dr Farouk Meer said:

While understanding the feelings of marginalisation being experienced by Indians and the need among sections of the community for a progressive home outside the ANC ... it would not, at this stage, be appropriate to revive the NIC. We feel it is important that the specific concerns of Indians be taken up with the ANC and that Indians become more active within the structures of the ANC. It is the ANC as the governing party that has the power to address the concerns, needs and interests of Indian South Africans, and it is to the ANC that we must turn for help (Naran 2008).

A major problem has been a dearth of astute, credible leadership in the community, which can genuinely represent the working class and the poor, and this was succinctly captured by journalist Ami Nanackchand:

A community which never had a homogenous political base since the curtain came down on the Natal Indian Congress, suddenly finds itself trying to acquire one; a community with a rich history of political thought and leadership, is now in search of a savior from the trauma of multi-faceted attacks, abuse and internal dissension; a community that bonded with other exploited fellow countrymen in passive and in militant consciousness across racial, ethnic, religious and a mélange of divisions; now finds itself designated once again with that familiar ‘*coolie girmitiya*’ identity ... and like an *amakwerekwere*⁵ should return to its native ‘Bombay’... Indo-South Africans are confronting the search for leadership (Nanackchand 2009).

Three organisations focus on the 150th anniversary: a major issue was legitimacy and representation. The 1860 Heritage Foundation was basically a ‘family’ organisation that had no sustained record of public accountability and transparency, with some controversial links with India, especially with the RSS and VHP:

The Antar Rashtriya (Sahayog Parishad) with which Mr Gokool wants to co-celebrate has very close links to the RSS. We will gladly provide the research should anyone want to check but any Google search will show you the strong links. We respectfully submit that any such co-celebration with a RSS linked group will be very detrimental to the harmony and long term vision of the LF (Legacy Foundation) and the manner with which we have come together and request that the 1860 LF rejects this (Sulaiman 20 August 2010.).

The 1860 Commemoration Council had been in existence for about 10 years but not much is known about its modus operandi. There was a view that there was a need for a new, representative, democratic organisation to focus on the 150th anniversary. Since the beginning of 2009 several public meetings were held to establish such a structure. The leaders of the Heritage Foundation and Commemoration Council participated in these meetings. The new organisation that emerged was the 1860 Legacy Foundation which was officially launched on 23 March 2009 in Durban.

The process followed to establish the 1860 Legacy Foundation was democratic, transparent and public. The mission statement, aims and objectives of the committee were in the public domain for two months for scrutiny and critical comment. The mission of the Foundations was:

To co-ordinate a structured and integrated programme of local, provincial, national and international events and, to mobilise all South Africans, irrespective of race, creed, linguistic, religious, social or any other affiliation into a united effort that acknowledges the Indian contribution while enhancing the building of a non-racial society in South Africa (1860 Legacy Foundation launch presentation 2009.).

The vision of the 1860 Legacy Foundation was to co-ordinate the 150th year commemoration and celebration of the arrival of people of Indian origin to South Africa in a manner that:

- Acknowledges the contribution, sacrifice and commitment of these early settlers
- Represents the current interests and aspirations of all stakeholders wishing to commemorate this auspicious milestone and
- Advocates for the continued involvement of people of Indian origin in all facets of South African Society with the emphasis on nation building (1860 Legacy Foundation launch presentation 2009.).

The meeting to elect the 150th anniversary committee was the largest and most representative gathering held in the South African Indian community in the post-apartheid era. While there was no deliberate ‘social engineering’, the committee elected reflected the class, religious, and linguistic diversity of the community, with a healthy blend of experienced and emerging leaders (Table 1).

Table 1: Members of the 1860 Legacy Foundation (May 2009)

Ashwin Trikamjee	President of South African Hindu Maha Sabha
Mickey Chetty	President of South African Tamil Federation
Shireen Moonsamy	Author and Immediate Past President of Gopio
A.V.Mohamed	Chairman of the Juma Masjid
Vasugi Singh	Educator, Bharatha Natyam Scholar and Arts Patron
Usha Desai	Gujeratji Hindu Sanskruthi Kendra and Arya Samaj
Lubna Nadvi	Academic, University of Kwa Zulu Natal
Orlean Naidoo	Women’s Rights Activist
Kishore Morar	Sports Administrator
Sushie Moodley	South African Andhra Maha Sabha
Satish Dhupelia	1860 Commemoration Council
Roshan Ramdin	School Principal, Community Activist
Aslam Ismail	South African Muslim Networking Forum
Faisal Suleiman	South African Muslim Networking Forum
Brij Maharaj	Academic, President: South African Sanathan Sabha
Faisel Khan	Lecturer, Media
Sindhu Bhogal	Youth Leader , Arya Samaj South Africa
Seelan Archery	1860 Commemoration Council
Brandon Pillay	Youth Leader and Activist
Krish Gokool	1860 Heritage Foundation
Dasrath Chetty	President Gopio
Solly Pillay	Gopio
Lazarus Pillay	Representing the S.A. Christian Community

Initially, there was a Durban bias, and this was stressed by ANC member Dr Farouk Meer:

...the 1860 Legacy Foundation was democratically elected to represent Durban. To create the impression that it is now a body that represents the province and the nation is not true. Clearly, there is (a) problem with the structure of the body (Dorasamy 2010).

This imbalance was addressed as committees were subsequently established in other provinces (including Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Gauteng and Free State). A KwaZulu Natal branch was also established in which the ANC had more influence. A national weekly newspaper, the *Post*, which focusses on the South African Indian community, described the optimistic mood as follows:

The countdown has commenced for the 150th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers in South Africa ...To this end, national, regional and local organizations have been established, to ensure that this event is observed across the length and breadth of South Africa, culminating with the grand finale in November 2010. Religious, sporting, cultural and welfare organizations have been galvanised into action ... There have been robust debates about the links between Africa and India, too, which, no doubt, will be explored further.⁶

Sensitive to divisions in the community, the *Post* also emphasised the need for unity:

Leaders and those aspiring to such positions need to take a leaf from the books of our ancestors. When the 100th anniversary of the indentured arrival on these shores was observed in 1960, leaders from across the political, ideological, language and religious spectrum, straddled the divisions and forged a sense of unity of purpose, at the height of brutal apartheid oppression. There is no reason to believe that this cannot be achieved again 50 years later. Let's avoid reports of 50 years later that today's leaders had failed this community in 2010.⁷

There was agreement that the commemoration of the arrival of indentured labourers should be rooted in an African context. In this regard it was necessary to heed historian Goolam Vahed's warning that honouring the past should not 'lead to ghettoisation and isolation from historical relationships with other 'racial' groups in post-apartheid South Africa'.⁸ The intention of the legacy foundation was to 'mobilize all South Africans, irrespective of race, creed, linguistic, religious, social or other affiliation into a united effort that celebrate the Indian contribution while enhancing the building of a non-racial society in South Africa'.⁹ The establishment of the 1860 Legacy Foundation had been endorsed by the South African and Indian governments, with the latter arranging a regional or 'mini' Pravasi Bharati Divas.

Pravasi Bharati Divas

The Indian Government supported the 1860 Legacy Foundation. However, it went ahead with and organised a regional Pravasi Bharati Divas (PBD) on 1-2 October 2010 at the International Convention Centre in Durban, independently of 1860 Legacy Foundation. According to the Indian Government, the Pravasi Bharati Divas

... will provide an opportunity for the global Indian community living in the African continent to learn more about each other and how their strengths could be leveraged for greater economic and other benefits. The exchange of ideas, success stories and best practices, will generate enthusiasm and synergies which will benefit not only the Indian community but also their countries (Sharan 2010).¹⁰

The conception of the Durban Pravasi is not clear, and the nature of local consultation was limited, selective and confined to the compliant elite. Regardless of how honourable the intentions might have been, the majority of the descendents of the indentured labourers would not benefit in any way whatsoever from the PBD, and the registration fee of between R400-800 for the event determined that most could not attend. It would appear that any connection with the 150th anniversary and the PBD was actually a veneer, an expensive public relations exercise, ostensibly in the name of indentured labourers, and at great cost to the South African and Indian taxpayers, and commercial sponsors.

The PBD was not concerned about the South African Indian masses in Chatsworth, Phoenix or Lenasia, nor the African masses in Inanda, Umlazi or Alexandra. An 'Indian' event that is perceived to exclude the majority is doomed to fail, and possibly increase tensions for the descendents of indentured labourers in South Africa. Responding to such criticism, the Indian Consul-General in Durban contended:

We are a foreign government and we are here to form a relationship with South Africans, and that includes cultural events, business and academics. We have always maintained that everything was open to the public (Pillay 2010).

When the BJP Government introduced the PBD in 2003, the intention was to attract those with dollars, pounds and Euros to invest in India (a proportion of which went into the coffers the Sangh Parivar). There was no interest in the descendents of indentured labourers in countries like Malaysia, Fiji, Trinidad, Surinam, Mauritius and South Africa (who possibly remind India of its less sophisticated past). The majority of South Africans have no direct links with India, except as an abstract, spiritual motherland (which many pilgrims find disappointing as the faith has been commodified, and religion betrays the poor and disadvantaged).

The 150th year commemoration represented an historic opportunity to raise crucial issues affecting both countries in an era where globalisation has favoured the few and brought untold misery to the majority, for example, the dire state of rural poverty in both countries. The extravagant expenditure incurred for the Pravasi could have been far better spent on urgent social priorities relating to health, welfare and education for the poor who comprise at least more than two-thirds of the total population in both countries.

The High Commission of India contended that 'overseas Indians have emerged as important constituents of their adopted countries and are playing a strategically important role in shaping the future course of development in India'.¹¹ How do the descendents of the indentured influence events in India? This statement is far-fetched and can only be read as hyperbole. As fully fledged citizens, South African Indians owe no allegiance to

India. What is more important is to begin to ascertain the influence of the India connection on South African Indians. Already attempts, albeit unsuccessful, have been made to introduce the religious and violent communal divisions of India into South Africa, through right wing Hindu organisations which are virulently anti-Muslim and Christian. The relationships between religions are fairly harmonious in South Africa and this has been significantly influenced by the way in which Indians participated in the struggle for democracy.

An associated development has been subtle attempts to reintroduce the abominable caste system which had virtually disappeared in South Africa. More specifically, for thousands of NRIs pursuing dollar-based incomes in South Africa, caste is the only basis for engagement with anyone of Indian descent. And they pejoratively refer to the descendants of indentured labourers as *yah gana katne wale log kya jante hai* (What do these cane cutters know?). The local indigenous population are viewed literally as evil characters from the scriptures. Interestingly, the motherland could benefit from the indentured diasporas:

When you come to think of it, we of the Indian indentured diaspora ... have a lesson to teach the world, especially Mother India. We have demonstrated how, in certain circumstances and under certain conditions, apparently divinely ordained social and cultural institutions and practices deemed immutable can, in fact, change. The way the caste system has broken down in the Indian indentured diaspora is a good example. Religious tolerance is another (Lal 2008).

What makes this orgy of extravagance and elitism all the more disturbing is that both India and South Africa have witnessed heightening inequality and poverty. It bears remembering that the poorest 20 per cent of South Africans receive 1.6 per cent of total income while the richest 20 per cent receive 70 per cent. The Indian Planning Commission recently reported: 'As the responsibility of the State for providing equal social rights recedes in the sphere of policymaking, we have two worlds of education, two worlds of health, two worlds of transport and two worlds of housing, with a gaping divide in between' (Expert Group to Planning Commission 2008).

The 150th year commemoration represented an historic opportunity to raise crucial issues affecting both countries in an era where globalisation has favoured the few and brought untold misery to the majority, for example, the dire state of rural poverty in both countries. Rather, the local Indian Consulate has used the moment to host a dinner (paid for by our government) and create a platform for business links. The intellectual side of the PBD is simply a sop, a cover for the meeting of elites.

The minority new elite in India and South Africa (beneficiaries of neo-liberalism) selfishly pursue mindless material accumulation and conspicuous consumption, and will benefit from the new economic and trade agreements negotiated at the Durban PBD, while hundreds of millions in the former (caste riddled society) and millions in the latter barely subsist (victims of neo-liberalism). This is a violation of the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi to which the governments of both countries pay politically expedient lip

service. For example, in his keynote address at the closing banquet of the PBD, President Zuma said:

Gandhi walks through our histories leaving imprints that still direct the paths of both India and South Africa. Gandhi's philosophies remain as relevant today as they were during his lifetime. It is these beliefs that have ensured the continuity of our relations over the years and led to the strengthening of political, economic and social ties between our two nations. His ideology of empathy, respect for one another irrespective of race, appreciation of one another and each other's beliefs, and understanding, have been the foundation of most countries' constitutions (Hassen 2010:14).

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ANC Government Response

It was evident that the South African Government was keen to support some form of celebration/commemoration, and this is perhaps best encapsulated by the following statement by President Zuma on his state visit to India in June 2010:

When we celebrate the 150 years of the arrival of Indians in South Africa we do so fully conscious of the value that our compatriots of Indian descent add to the diversity and unique character of our beloved country, South Africa. In those 150 years, we have seen Indians who were brought to the country as slaves in the sugar plantations toil their way out of the dehumanizing and demeaning garments of slavery, to excellence in different fields. These have impacted positively in South Africa's development programmes.

This long, hazardous yet worthy journey has unleashed many heroes and heroines who have left an indelible mark in the collective memory of the nation, also at a political level. Many outstanding freedom fighters of Indian ancestry in our country continue to inspire us because of their bravery and commitment. Like many of us, these giants of the struggle for justice and peace were inspired by the giant extraordinary, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi... When we cite names of prominent Indian South Africans, the tendency is to focus only on those who are politically inclined. As we celebrate the 150th anniversary this year, we will also celebrate the achievements and contribution in the fields such as sports, commerce, cricket, legal, social cohesion and others.¹²

The ANC Government supported the establishment of the 1860 Legacy Foundation for several reasons. The Government had been inundated with requests for financial assistance from various organisations across the country to support 150th commemoration events. It envisaged that the Foundation could play a major role in co-coordinating events as well as serving as a fiduciary agent for public funds. By the end of January 2010, the Foundation had received funding applications totalling R75m for projects such as documentary films, monuments, museums, art displays, feeding schemes, books, websites, and cultural programmes. The Foundation revised the budgets of the different projects and the total was reduced to R45m and this was submitted to the KwaZulu-Natal Government.

A major tension was that the ANC appeared to be keen to use 150th anniversary events as a platform to mobilise the Indian community to support the party. An issue of concern was whether the 1860 Legacy Foundation could become a surrogate of the ANC. The majority of the members of the Legacy Foundation with progressive credentials, and who were leaders and activists in civil society (Table 1), were more independent and critical in terms of public political affiliations.

KwaZulu-Natal Premier, Dr Zweli Mkhize, was quick to dispel that the ANC support for the 150th anniversary was a vote catching ruse; acknowledged the Indian economic, social and cultural contribution to the country; and affirmed financial support for commemoration events:

We are supporting the 1860 celebrations not to buy votes or curry favour but to support the legacy of Indians in South Africa (which) should not be viewed strictly as an Indian affair. It will be inclusive, embracing all people of the province... Economically, Indians have helped build and maintain our economy. From a social and cultural perspective, mosques, temples and churches have provided stability to our country ... A final amount has not been decided, but we plan to help fund the individual celebrations throughout the province (Saib 2010).

However, at a public meeting convened by the Premier's office on 28 August 2010, community and civic organizations were informed that the KZN Government did not have funds for disbursement for 1860 legacy events:

The Premier apologised profusely ... for not acknowledging receipt of funding applications from the 1860 Legacy Foundation ... and admitted that this was an error ... but not intentional. He reassured us that the 1860 Legacy Foundation was recognized ... as the central organisation co-coordinating the commemoration of the 150 years and that if funds were available then this body would be the recipients (Brief Report 2010).

It was possible that the failure or reluctance to provide funding was related to a deliberate marginalisation of the 1860 Legacy Foundation because it adopted a critical public position on matters affecting the descendants of indentured labourers which often conflicted with ANC policy. For example, the Legacy Foundation hosted two public meetings to oppose the Durban Metro's plans to destroy the historic Warwick Early Morning Market (EMM) which was intrinsically linked to the descendants of indentured labourers, displace poor traders and deny them their livelihoods. The Indian leadership in the ANC had endorsed the destruction of the EMM. A mass meeting convened by the Legacy Foundation on 28 July 2009 resolved:

That the historical and cultural legacy of the Early Morning Market building and surrounds must be preserved as a tribute to the struggle and courage of indentured labourers and all other oppressed people who made a living of the land and who

sustained themselves through the EMM ... That the livelihood of all traders, irrespective of race, creed or political persuasion must be protected.¹³

The reaction from the different organisations that had applied for government funding via the Legacy Foundation was one of dismay and disappointment, and is encapsulated by the following response:

It is sad to see that once again the Indians are ignored. This has reared its ugly head time and time again. We fought for freedom side by side with the blacks of this country. Our people lost so much. Yet when freedom came the very oppressors become the brothers and kinsmen to the blacks. How quickly they forget. ... Indians are resilient and will prosper as we always did in the face of exceptional odds. The Government must not feel that by withdrawing funding for this event will faze us. Remember this (is) just another month in the thousands of years that Indians have walked the earth. In as much as this date is significant for Indians in South Africa it will pale in comparison to time. I am saddened but not fazed...this for me is a realisation as I am sure it is for many South Africans of Indian descent that we need to claim back our dignity (Timmal 21 October 2010).

Sensitive to such sentiments, the central and provincial government agreed to fund one national event in Durban, in partnership with the 1860 Legacy Foundation and other civil society formations on 4 December 2010. By all accounts, this national event was very successful and well supported, and the opening ceremony was broadcast on radio and television. In his keynote address at the function the national Minister of Arts and Culture, Paul Mashatile, paid tribute to the contribution of Indians in the economic and education sectors, as well as in the struggle against apartheid, and affirmed their status as South African citizens:

On this important occasion, we wish to reiterate once more that the South African Indian community, whose fore-fathers came from India to work as indentured labourers, 150 years ago, are today as South African as any other citizen of our country. As we mark this anniversary we do so to remember not just the arrival of those brave Indian labourers, but also to celebrate the contribution of the South African Indian community to the overall development of our society. ...We honour the courage, the spirit of sacrifice, hard work and love for our country that was demonstrated by those early Indian labourers, who had to endure harsh working conditions that were reminiscent of slavery. Like their fellow African brothers and sisters, they faced multiple forms of exclusion, denial, discrimination and even humiliation... As we today celebrate the proud legacy of the Indian community in South Africa, and their triumph against slavery, oppression and discrimination, we must recommit ourselves to the ideal of united, non racial, non sexist, democratic and prosperous South Africa.¹⁴

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the politics, the 1860 commemoration and celebrations served to galvanise and mobilise a vulnerable, minority community. While those in the business

and professional sectors thrive in the post-apartheid era, working class Indians increasingly feel isolated. A significant outcome of commemoration events was an affirmation of their status as South African citizens at the highest level. Cynics may well argue that this was largely rhetorical.

The sobering thing is like Shaka's Day, the 150-year commemoration became an Indian event. It points to the fact that we are still divided and the danger, despite the best intentions of the organisers, is that these kinds of commemorations can rebound by reinforcing rather than sundering boundaries. It is interesting to note that many local Indians preached by day the need to use the 150th anniversary to build Indo-African relations and ensure that the events are accessible to the poor, while at night they cavort with those who seek to build an insular Indian identity of the privileged and the connected.

Professor Goolam Vahed warned ominously that the 'commemorations should not become a tool of the political elites to curry favour with the powers that be, but consideration should be given to measures that can be instituted to improve the lot of the thousands who face a bleak future and for whom the commemoration will have a very different meaning' (1860 Legacy Foundation launch presentation 2009). From a diaspora perspective, the connection with the motherland, India, was weak.

A silent unspoken question was whether it was possible to build a democratic, progressive platform from the grassroots level that could articulate the problems and challenges facing the South African community, without harking back to the ethnic politics and feuding of the tri-cameral era, or becoming the surrogate of any political party? It would appear that the national strategies to co-ordinate the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the arrival of indentured labourers in South Africa could provide the catalyst to establish such an organisation. Regardless of what form it may take, a challenge for the new organisation would be build national monument dedicated to the memory, history and culture of the indentured Indians – a long overdue project. After all, 'South Africa at the present moment is living through a time of memory' (Govinden 2008).

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Endnotes

¹ <http://saiva-sithantha-sungum.org/pg037.html> (accessed 1/10/10).

² www.1860legacygauteng.co.za/index (accessed 10 December 2010).

³ Press Release: South African Indian cultural day on 12 May 2010 at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

⁴ Eastern Mosaic commemorates 150-years since the first indentured Indian labourers arrived in South Africa (http://www.easternmosaic.net/pdf/150_Years_2.pdf, accessed 10 October 2010).

⁵ Disparaging term for migrants to South Africa from other parts of Africa.

⁶ *Post* editorial, 'Let there be unity of purpose over 1860', 11-15 November 2009, p. 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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¹⁰ Sharan, A.K., Consul General of India, 'Celebrating India's years of freedom', *Post*, 11-15 August 2010, p. 16. A.K. Sharan was the Consul General of India.

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¹³ Resolutions adopted at the Mass Meeting convened by the 1860 Legacy Foundation, 28 July 2009.

¹⁴ http://www.dac.gov.za/speeches/minister/2010/4_12_2010.html