

Taking Indenture back to the real world

THERE have been some interesting attempts to understand the origins of Indentured labour in South Africa, with the work of Mabel Palmer, Bridgelal Pachai and Surendra Bhana, being the most notable. However, in all these accounts the voices of the Indentured were largely silent.

In their groundbreaking and painstakingly researched book, *Inside Indian Indenture*, distinguished sociologist, activist, and critical public intellectual, Ashwin Desai, and internationally renowned historian, Goolam Vahed, present the voices of the Indentured – their trials, tribulations and triumphs. Into its second edition, published by HSRC Press, *Inside Indian Indenture* presents a fascinating analysis of their everyday lived experience – at times brutal and poignant, yet resilient – as perceived by the labourers themselves. The lives of “real people” are presented “in all their ambiguities and complexities, as the Indentured walked the uncertain edge between improvisation and resignation”.

This is best summarised by the following vignette from the introduction to the book:

“Intersections of the narratives abound: Maistry's struggle to build a new life and disenchantment with the 'home' he thought he would never lose; Wootme's tragic end as her husband's rage took its course on her body; Votti's fractured persecution and defiance; the lives of Dubar, Brijmohan, Nagishar, and Sarju ended prematurely by the executioner's axe; the legacy of ML Sultan that lives on into post-apartheid South Africa.”

Families torn apart by separation and the humiliation of poverty, alienation, resistance, struggles to forge new lives under harsh conditions, mark these tales, highlighting the multiple ways in which Indians tried to retain a measure of self-respect and autonomy in a system that sought to deny them the rudiments of bare life and dignity.

The stories that were unravelled reflect “an incredible slice of history, the impact of which resonates into the present”. The book is sensitive to gender, and the lives and experience of men and women are probed. The narrative of Votti Veeramah Somayya, 'a woman of prepossessing appearance' who challenged the system of Indenture at great personal cost, for example, dispels the myth that Indentured women were passive, docile and conservative.

In keeping with the academic backgrounds of the scholars, the book has an historical and sociological orientation – “tracking the lives of real people as well as the broader dynamics of social,



BRIJ MAHARAJ

political and economic change”. The authors are keen not to present a history that reinforces “cultural and racial bigotry”. Hence, although the central focus is the Indentured, this is not presented in abstraction from the “white presence and its relationship with the Zulu”, especially the latter’s “brutal and violent disposessions”.

Writing in a style that would appeal simultaneously to laypersons and scholars (a rare and enviable academic feat), Dr Ashwin Desai and Prof Goolam Vahed have produced a scholarly and literary masterpiece – a tour de force – which will be especially acclaimed in the world of post-colonial scholarship. Given the dominance of the ruling classes in the formal records and documentation, the authors followed Edward Said's suggestion to seek 'unconventional or neglected sources' for their primary data, which included letters (often in the vernaculars), newspaper clippings, and anecdotes that were verified. However, the official archives were not neglected, and the records of legal proceedings produced amazingly rich information.

The book has received critical international acclaim and the first edition was sold out. For example, historian Professor Brij V Lal of the Australian National University and Editor of *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, described *Inside Indian Indenture* as an 'unparalleled exploration of a world now vanished beyond recall: the world of Indian Indenture in all its gruesome and maddening complexity. This book is an achievement of singular importance unlikely to be surpassed in our time, and destined to find a permanent place in the scholarship on the subject'.

As the strains and tensions of an emergent democracy increase, minorities become anxious, and those claiming to be leaders cover in compliance, *Inside Indian Indenture* “alerts us to the fact that the Indentured were not simply prisoners of 'the system' but often imaginative, creative human beings who found all manner of means to resist, survive...”. This book **MUST** be read by descendants of Indentured labourers, as well all those still committed to a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

