



Going down memory lane:

Revisiting the Grey Street Casbah



PRATAP KUMAR

THIS year marks the centenary of the end of the Indian indenture system around the world.

Incidentally, it also marks the centenary of Crescent School in Pine Street. In 1917, as the curtain on the Indian indenture system was finally drawn, the birth of the Crescent School opened up a new opportunity for the Indian children to attend, for the first time, a school that combined religious and secular education. Perhaps unconnected to each other, the two historic events marked the end of a significant chapter and the beginning of a new one, respectively, in the lives of the Indian community 100 years ago. But, as per South Africa, the indenture system formally ended in 1911.

Grey Street Casbah has evolved organically in the central business district. The west end of West Street, which is where most Indians began to settle and do business, was known among the white community as "Coolie Location" and others referred to it as the "Imperial Ghetto". But the Indians chose to call it "the Casbah".

The prolific growth of the Indian businesses in the CBD evidently irritated the white administrators of the city so much that they referred to Indians as "rabbits", considered to be "destructive to the welfare of Europeans". As early as 1871, attempts were made to contain the Indian presence.

The modus operandi to contain the growing Indian presence in the CBD was through residential segregation, political exclusion, and suppression of commercial interests of Indians. And this was achieved through the promulgation of Licensing Acts, disenfranchisement, and restriction of immigration.



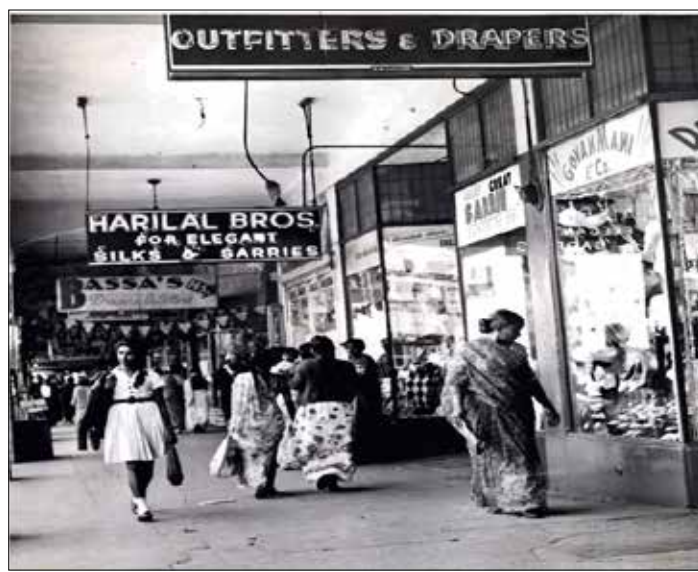
Scenes from bygone days in Grey Street, now Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street.

The Group Areas Act of 1950 merely built on this past legislative history, but this time with a clear directive to introduce population classification.

In the last few years, there has been a tremendous upsurge in remembering the Grey Street complex – also known as the Casbah – largely due to the establishment of a Casbah Facebook page and eNewspaper by Ishaan Blunden and Buddy Govender. One could figure out why it was called "Coolie Location/Town" and "Imperial Ghetto", but no one could tell me why and how the Grey Street complex came to be called "the Casbah".

Casbah is an Arabic term used to refer to a citadel or fortified city/town. The term Qasba (Anglicised as Casbah) was introduced to Indian society through the French connection in Algiers. In many parts of North India, fortified cities going back to the Mogul era – with their entrance and exit gates – are well known. They were originally built to protect the chief, and the citizens within, from the external invasions. But, over time, these Qasbas became what we today call "market towns". However, not all market towns in India are fortified.

As the Casbah evolved into a market town, it acquired a unique status of an in-between place, of being neither a village nor a town. During the British colonial era, these market towns created vibrant economies for the local people. Village folk



would bring their produce to these market towns and sell them and enjoy a day of urban life.

By the mid-19th century, as these market towns in India evolved, a typical market town would have a bus stand, a post office, a government revenue office, a police station and a magistrate's court. Much of the market town revolved around the bus station as the focal point where everyone arrived to do their business. Market towns also gradually became centres of entertainment, and breeding grounds for the Mafia.

There is generally a symbiotic relationship, where the businesses fund the Mafia who, in turn, protect the businesses. The

market town is a contested space between the village folk and the urban folk, between business and the Mafia; and, when the town is pretty much closed at the dead of night, the Mafia wakes up to contest its territory from the rival Mafia.

All of these features of the market town were present in the Durban Casbah. Farming communities from as far as Mount Edgecombe, Verulam and Tongaat in the north – and Chatsworth, Isipingo and eManzimtoti in the south – came to buy their goods and weekly rations and enjoy a day's entertainment, eating, and watching a movie. As the Casbah evolved, so too, the transport to bring people into the market town evolved.

They came initially by ox wagons, then by lorries that were converted to carry human cargo as well as goods, and then by rickety buses that served as reliable transport for hundreds of families coming into town for one thing or another.

The Durban Casbah provided the space for bureaucracy, bustling markets and restaurants and sports fields. The colonial soldiers marched up and down the Soldiersway (hence the name of the road), with an army base on Natal Mounted Rifles (NMR) Avenue, with the Durban Light Infantry, the Old Fort on Old Fort Road – all representing the vicarious presence of the state that inflicted order on the residents. Derby Street, with its school, temple and racecourse; Carlisle Street with factories, community halls, shops, girls high school, church; Lorne Street with the Blind Society, medical centres; Beatrice Street with the busy bus rank, YMCA, and a clinic; Leopold Street as a cul-de-sac housing the Old Natal Table Tennis building – the Casbah was an urban centre to which village folk came to shop and watch movies at the Avalon and Raj cinemas, ate at the famous Victory Lounge on Grey Street, held Eisteddfods at the Tamil Vedic Society Hall on Carlisle Street, bought prayer goods on Bond Street, printed wedding cards at the Lakshmi Vilas Printing Press at Warwick Avenue.

Once-famous media that

catered to the Indian views and lifestyle were found in the Casbah – Radio Truro Station on Lorne Street, Leader and Graphic design place at the Good Hope Centre on Grey Street.

Not only do the food recipes, cafés, cinemas, racecourse, football clubs, music bands, and even the gangs evoke memories of the Casbah, they also are the glue that bonds them to the place, even if they know it from the memories of their forebears. The Casbah represented the worldview in which people found meaning and a sense of orientation.

As we remember Grey Street Casbah's role in Indian life, we should also remember the many sacrifices Indians made during those formative years.

To reflect on this past, there will be a symposium held on November 4 at the 1860 Heritage Centre (Old Documentation Centre) in Derby Street, Durban.

For more information on the symposium, contact symposium conveners Kalpana Hiralal via e-mail at Hiralal@ukzn.ac.za or Betty Govinden at herbyg@telkomsa.net or Selvan Naidoo at snaidoo@nwood.co.za, cell 082 498 2614. A detailed programme of the symposium is published on the 1860 Heritage Centre's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/1860heritagecentre/>.

● **Professor Pratap Kumar is Emeritus Professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal**

BEE – A conduit for cabals, clans, cliques, coterie and crooks?

THE South African constitution laid the foundation for a democratic, non-racist, non-sexist society democratic country, and embedded dignity and human rights. Given the vast, apartheid spawned socio-economic inequalities, and the imperatives of transformation, affirmative action policies and legislation such as the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Act (2003) was introduced to redistribute resources and opportunities to previously disadvantaged communities.

BEE represented a "commitment to redressing injustices of the past" as well as promoting "economic participation and wealth redistribution to the majority of the population who were previously systematically disenfranchised and refused the right to participate in the economic wealth of South Africa". BEE was also intended to benefit "women, workers, youth, and people with disabilities and people living in rural areas".

Notwithstanding its honourable intentions, the implementation of BEE has become a sensitive and controversial issue in South Africa, especially in terms of who qualifies for benefits. After 23 years into democracy, the majority remained disadvantaged, and the benefits appear to have been reaped by a narrow group of cabals, clans, cliques, coterie and crooks, with close connections with the ruling ANC government.

Not surprisingly, some have cynically referred to BEE as "Black Elite Enrichment" or "Black Elite Entitlement", and who are disconnected from the disadvantaged in every possible way.

In September 2015, a demographically representative survey of 2 245 South Africans (1 757 blacks, 203 coloureds, 63 Indians and 223 whites), conducted by the Institute of Race Relations, revealed that 85% did not benefit from BEE policies, and 87% believed government appointments, contracts and tenders must be based on merit.

A contentious issue is who qualifies as "black", and according to the Empowerment Act, this includes "Africans, coloureds and Indians". There have been several public threats against South Africans of Indian origin, who are perceived to be historically privileged vis-à-vis the African majority, and especially the view that third and fourth generation descendants of indentured labourers should return to India.

On October 15, a Sunday paper reported Sihle Zikalala, KZN MEC for Economic Development (and "chairperson" of KZN ANC Exco), had submitted a proposal to National Treasury that Indians and coloureds should be excluded from state contracts exceeding R50 million.

In addition, Zikalala wanted "to ensure that in a procurement, BEE is increased in favour of the Africans and blacks in general. This thing of defining blacks and Africans in general terms is also a problem... We must know who is an African and blacks in general".

IFP leader Blessed Gwala argued, "all these targeted people, especially Indians, contributed to the country's economy". MP Nkosi Zwelivelile Mandela, grandson of Nelson Mandela, also maintained that Zikalala's "proposal flies in the face of the significant contribution that other sectors of the historically disadvantaged have made to the struggle for freedom, justice and democracy. How insensitive and crass can you get to imply that the sacrifices of the Indian and coloured communities were somehow lesser?"

According to Brad Cibane, lawyer and editor of the blog, Law Thinker, "while the apartheid system favoured Indians over Africans, it did not improve the lives of all Indians. Indians got better homes, better schools, better



BRIJ MAHARAJ

jobs but they were subject to similar economic, political and social prejudices". He also drew attention to the class and socio-economic differentiation, noting, "inequality is as rife in Indian communities as it is in African communities. While some Indians have made fortunes, others endure the same degree of poverty and need so prevalent in African communities. But those Indians are far fewer in number".

The disappointment and angst of layers of Indian origin was palpable on social media as captured by this post on Facebook: "Indians have never truly been accepted into South Africa".

There was also concern that Zikalala's proposal was unconstitutional. This was emphasised by Ashwin Trikamjee, president of the SA Hindu Maha Sabha, the constitution "guarantees freedom of trade, and more significantly, it guarantees the right to economic freedom".

Therefore any dilution of that right or, for that matter, a restriction to free economic trade constitutes a breach of that right".

In an open letter to Zikalala, veteran journalist and activist, Dennis Pather said: "I believe your attempt at political engineering runs counter to the spirit and ethos of our constitution and violates my inalienable rights as a citizen... your proposal appears to be strictly race-based, which is unbecoming of a party that spearheaded the historic campaign that gave rise to the demise of racial segregation".

Human rights activist, Prithvi Datta who had also been in exile, argued on Facebook: "If you (Zikalala) focus attention on the treasonous corruption of the ANC at every level that steals money designated for people's upliftment instead of fidgeting with rearranging the deck chairs (on the Titanic?), you would have added value to our democracy".

While acknowledging that in terms of the apartheid hierarchy, Indians and coloureds were not as adversely affected as Africans, Dr Faizel Suliman of the SA Muslim Network contended that Zikalala's retrogressive proposal "sends the wrong signal and is an incorrect way to address redress". Suliman was critical of politically connected cronies who benefited from government contracts: "We all want to see the distribution of wealth to the people, particularly the previously disadvantaged, but not to people linked to comrades of any political affiliation".

Wits Professor William Gumede warned ominously that those countries, which had to legitimately introduce redistribution policies to address to historical dispossession and inequalities, are "particularly vulnerable to corruption, state capture and mismanagement. The big danger is that economic transformation, economic freedom and decolonisation only benefit small elites, often the leader of the governing party, allies and their associated families".

No prizes for guessing which country and leader.

● **Professor Brij Maharaj is a speaker at the 100 year commemoration of the formal abolition of indenture on November 4 at the 1860 Heritage Centre, Derby Street, Durban.**

BEE: Let's grow the economic cake

WE HAVE noted with concern the distortion of the proposed amendments to the BEE legal framework. The distortions seek to portray a complete exclusion of Indians and Coloureds from having any BEE status. This is simply not true.

The crux of the proposals is that Black Africans should be the beneficiaries of at least 60% of state procurement. This means that 40% of state procurement would still be available for Indian, Coloured and White beneficiaries.

Most people would regard this as reasonably fair having regard to the fact that Black Africans make up 87% of the people of KwaZulu-Natal whereas Indians, Coloureds and Whites make up the balance of 13%.

It is important to unpack why it was necessary to develop this proposal. As the ANC, as a government and even as individuals, our track record in fighting racism is there. Our provincial government took Mazibuye African Forum to court and interdicted their unacceptable threats.

We have confronted and contested all racism or any conduct that is inconsistent with our constitutional values. I am proudly a South African of Indian origin and always urge all South Africans to claim their space. For this, we need fair and equitable economic opportunities.

Part of our response to the threats and prospect of instability was to commission an investigation into xeno-

phobia. An eminent panel, led by Judge Navi Pillay, prepared a comprehensive report and recommendations. Provincial government also appointed a special committee on social cohesion, precipitated in the main by worrying Indian-African tensions.

Both reports concluded that economic inequality was the main cause of inter-racial tension. Even prior to that as the provincial government, we were dealing with allegations and perceptions that procurement opportunities were skewed in favour of a small racial minority. Our provincial government responded at that time by calling a procurement indaba.

Statistical analyses tabled at the indaba revealed that approximately 34% went to Whites, 32% to Indians and 30% to Black Africans. The worrying part of this statistic was that the Black African stake had dropped from 38% a few years earlier. We must be alert to that anomaly and correct it.

In certain specific fields, the figures were outrageously disproportionate. The demographic profile of landlords from whom the government leases buildings for instance is alarming – 80% of the landlords are white or Indian. This kind of pattern is not politically, socially or economically sustainable.

It was in this context that the proposals were developed to seek a more equitable formula. The BEE proposals do



MEC Ravi Pillay, centre, with his Public Works executive team.

not seek to exclude but rather to be inclusive in a fair, proportionate and defensible manner.

Of course, our priority remains to grow the economy for everyone. A shrinking economic cake poses disaster for all. We need a strong social compact. We understand that we must build confidence in the business sector. We have been engaging them. We think business understands this political imperative and is embracing it. Soon there will be a summit that includes the Top 100 companies operating in KZN.

Stereotyping the Indian community and putting them

into one basket is wholly incorrect. The overwhelming majority of the Indian community are not rich. There are a very significant number who are poor and working class.

These proposals are not intended to impact nationally but to respond to specific issues in KwaZulu-Natal. A friend of mine remarked the other day that KZN has always been unique, it is unique because of the English, it is unique because of the Zulus, it is unique because of the Indians.

There is in fact a serious side to that flippant statement but we have always been consistent about being a non-ra-

cial, socially cohesive society.

We believe that Indian business people and professionals have a special contribution to make in growing our economy. Their enormous skill, creativity, discipline, commitment and patriotism can add to their already enormous contribution to the growth and development of our country in general, and our province in particular.

The Struggle credentials of activists from the Indian community are a powerful platform to build on. This community chose to be on the right side of history by standing firm for social justice and many paid a high price for that. We must

applaud the ongoing and sterling charitable and humanitarian work done by organisations like Al Imdaad, Divine Life, Ramakrishna Centre, Gift of the Givers and legions of others.

There can be no doubt that there is the capacity to embrace the new political imperatives in the same manner that the Indian community has done throughout its history.

● **Ravi Pillay is the MEC for Human Settlements and Public Works in KwaZulu-Natal and a member of the Provincial Executive Committee of the ANC.**