

INDIAN SLAVES IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

A Little Known Aspect of Indian-South African Relations

Soon after Jan van Riebeeck set up a Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, to supply provisions to Dutch ships plying to and from India and the East Indies, people from India were taken to the Cape and sold into slavery to do domestic work for the settlers, as well the dirty and hard work on the farms.

A woman from Bengal named Mary was bought for van Riebeeck in Batavia in 1653. Two years later, in 1655, van Riebeeck purchased, from the Commander of a Dutch ship returning from Asia to Holland, a family from Bengal - Domingo and Angela and their three children. On May 21, 1656, the marriage was solemnised at the Cape between Jan Wouters, a white, and Catherine of Bengal who was liberated from slavery. Later in the year Anton Muller was given permission to marry Domingo Elvingh, a woman from Bengal.

From then until late eighteenth century when the import of slaves from Asia was prohibited, many hundreds, if not thousands, of persons from India - mainly Bengal, Coromandel Coast and Kerala - were taken to the Cape and sold into slavery.

Officers of ships and officials of the Dutch India Company returning to Holland usually took slaves or servants with them and sold them at high profit in the Cape. (Slaves could not be taken to Holland where slavery was prohibited). Many others were carried by Danish and British ships. While most of the Indians were taken from Dutch trading posts in India, a considerable number were also taken from Batavia as thousands of Indians had been taken by the Dutch as slaves to Batavia.

South African, American, British and other scholars have conducted painstaking research into the archives in the Cape - records of the deeds office, courts, churches etc. - and have brought out several studies on slavery in the Cape. They contain extensive, though far from complete, information on transactions in human beings, the conditions of slavery and resistance of the slaves.

The archives indicate that Mary, the first known Indian slave, was found in bed with a constable, Willem Cornelis, in 1660. He was fined and dismissed from his post but she was apparently not punished. Van Riebeeck and his family probably took her with them when they moved to Batavia in 1662.

¹ Published in *Asian Times*, London, November 20, 1990. Reprinted in E.S. Reddy, *India and South Africa: a Collection of Papers*. Durban: University of Durban-Westville, 1991.

Jan Wouters was transferred to Batavia soon after his marriage to Catherine. There is no information on Anton Muller.

Van Riebeeck sold Angela, who had taken care of his children, to Abraham Gabbema, his deputy and law officer. Gabbema granted freedom to Angela and her three children before he departed for Batavia in 1666, except that she was required to work for six months in the home of Thomas Christoffel Muller.

She integrated easily into the white community even while continuing relations with her friends who were still in slavery. She asked for and obtained a plot of land in the Table Valley in February 1667. Next year she obtained a slave from Malabar on hire.

In 1669 she married Arnoldus Willemsz Basson, with whom she had three children. Her daughter from the first marriage also married a Dutchman. When her husband died in 1689, Angela took charge of the estate which had a considerable value when she died in 1720.

Some of these early slaves - especially women from Bengal who were acquired by senior officials of the Dutch India Company for domestic work - were relatively fortunate. The great majority of those enslaved in the Cape, however, lived under miserable conditions.

The researches in the past three decades - by Anna Boeseken, Margaret Cairns, Achmat Davids, Richard Elphick, H. F. Heese, J. Hoge, Robert Ross, Robert Shell, Nigel Worden and others - destroy several myths that had been prevalent - for instance, that slavery had little economic importance in the Cape, that the treatment of slaves, especially Asian slaves, was benign, that Asian slaves were mostly from Indonesia etc. The number of slaves exceeded the number of white settlers by early 18th century and they did the hard work of developing the land. Most of the Asian slaves worked on the farms and were treated as cruelly as the Africans. There were almost as many, if not more, slaves from India as from Indonesia.

Places of Origin

The slaves were almost invariably given Christian names but their places of origin were indicated in the records of sales and other documents so that it is possible to get an idea of the ratio of slaves from different regions - Africa (mainly Guinea and Madagascar) and Asia (India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka).

Frank R. Bradlow put together available information from various scholarly studies on the places of origin of the slaves and free blacks between 1658 and early nineteenth century. The information is very incomplete after 1700 and covers only a little over three thousand persons. The figures were as follows:

<u>Place of origin</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Africa	875	26.65
India	1195	36.40
Indonesia	1033	31.47
Sri Lanka	102	3.10
Malaya	16	0.49
Mauritius	6	0.18
Other and unidentified	56	1.71
Total	3283	100.00

(Note: The number from India includes those from Bangladesh)

Source: Frank R. Bradlow and Margaret Cairns, *The Early Cape Muslims*, page 102

If these figures are representative, over 70 percent of the foreign-born slaves in the Cape came from Asia, and more than a third from India.

Of those from India, the following is a more detailed breakdown:

Bengal (including Bihar and Orissa)	498
Coromandel Coast (especially Trancquebar, Tuticorin, Nagapatnam, Pulicat and Masulipatnam)	271
Malabar Coast (including Goa, Bombay and Surat)	378
Other	36

Source: *Ibid.*

The slaves were, however, dispersed and lost their identity in the course of time. The Indians became part of the "Malay" community - so called as Malayo-Portuguese was the *lingua franca* in the Asian ports at that time - and their

descendants later came to be identified as "Cape Malays" (Cape Muslims) as the Muslim community expanded.

Kidnapping

South African scholars, with little access to sources or contacts with scholars in India, have tended to make some errors in their conclusions.

They assume, for instance, that the Asian slaves had been purchased from the "slave markets" or "slave societies" in Asia.

Many of those sold in the Cape, however, had not been slaves at all in India, but domestic servants, bonded or otherwise. The Reverend William Wright, a missionary in the Cape of Good Hope in the 1830`s, wrote of the slaves: "Some are natives of Bengal and other parts of India, who came to the colony as free servants, and were bartered or given away to the colonists." ²

In fact, there is reason to believe that many of the slaves - far too many of them were children, even less than ten years old - had been kidnapped in India. Warren Hastings, the British Governor-General of India, wrote in a Minute on May 17, 1947: "... the practice of stealing children from their parents and selling them for slaves, has long prevailed in this country, and has greatly increased since the establishment of the English Government in it... Numbers of children are conveyed out of the country on the Dutch and specially the French vessels..." ³

In 1706, a Dutch political prisoner, Jacob van der Heiden, was confined in a dungeon in Cape Town with Ari, an Indian slave charged with serious offences. He found that Ari had been kidnapped as a child while playing with other children on the Surat beach. He had been sold from one master to another and had been treated so harshly that he had run away. He joined other fugitive slaves and lived on stolen food until he was caught. He escaped torture and persecution because of the intercession of the Dutchman. ⁴

Brutal Oppression and the Spirit of Freedom

Individual slaves ran away from the harsh conditions on the farms and lived as fugitives. Most of them were caught: they were flogged, branded and sentenced to hard labour in chains.

At least two attempts were made at mass rebellion. The most remarkable was on October 27, 1808, when hundreds of slaves, including many from India, rebelled

² *Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope*, 1831

³ Quoted by Zakiuddin Ahmad in "Slavery in Eighteenth Century Bengal", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, December 1966

⁴ Marius F. Valkhoff, *New Light on Afrikaans and Malayo-Portuguese*, pages 45-

and joined a peaceful march from Swartland (near Malmesbury) toward Cape Town to demand freedom. The government sent troops and over 300 were captured. To avoid wider repercussions, it eventually charged only the leaders of the resistance.⁵

Two accounts from court records show the harsh punishments to which the slaves were subjected and their spirit of freedom.

In 1739, Cupido, a slave from Malabar, threatened his mistress with a knife to force her to listen to his story. He said he resented the work and the lack of freedom which he had enjoyed in his own country. He wished to commit suicide as that was the only way he could obtain freedom and deprive his owner of his possession.

Cupido was overcome before he could stab himself, and broken alive on the wheel, thus being subjected to slow death.⁶

Alexander, from Bengal, ran away and was captured in the 1730`s. He was flogged, branded, pilloried under the gallows and sentenced to 25 years of hard labour in chains. He managed to escape and was captured again in 1737. He was broken on the wheel after eight pieces of flesh were pulled out from him with red-hot tongs.⁷

Miscegenation

Sexual relations between whites and Asian slaves were quite common in the 17th and 18th centuries, and several studies show that half or more of the children of slave women had white fathers.

Many white settlers married or lived with Asian women and their children were accepted in the white community. Marriages between the Dutch and slave women were prohibited in 1685 but persons of mixed parentage were allowed to marry anyone, including the white settlers. Inter-racial marriages, in fact, increased from that time.

J. A. Heese, in *Die Herkoms van die Afrikaner 1657-1867*, presented the results of research from parish registers and other sources on the ancestors of the Afrikaners. He found that between 1660 and 1705, 191 of the settlers from Germany married or lived with women who were not pure blood Europeans. Of the women, 114 were born in the Cape (most probably mixed), 29 were Bengalis and 43 were from other Asian regions.

⁵ Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments*, pages 97-104

⁶ Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, page 136

⁷ Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa*, page

He estimated that in 1807, between 7.2 and 10.7 percent of the ancestors of the then living Afrikaner population were Africans and Asians. His figures were perhaps inevitably conservative. It may well be that a tenth of the present Afrikaner population has Indian ancestry.

Asian ancestry was not considered unusual. The mother of Simon van der Stel, the most prominent Governor of the Cape in the 17th century, after whom Stellenbosch is named, was Maria Lievens, daughter of a Dutch captain in Batavia and an Asian woman. The Reverend M. C. Vos, a prominent clergyman in the 18th century, mentioned in his autobiography his Asian ancestry without any comment.

Need for Research by Indian Scholars

It is a pity that there has been hardly any research by scholars in India on the export of Indians to slavery in Indonesia and South Africa, long before labourers were sent into semi-slave conditions in Natal as indentured labour from 1860 to 1911. That has left a serious gap in Indian history.

A study of the slave trade is also important to appreciate the contribution of Indians to the building of South Africa: the descendants of the slaves may well outnumber the million people now known as Indian South Africans.

Indians played an important role in the spread of Islam in South Africa: the first mosque in Cape Town was established early in the 19th century by Imam Frans and Imam Achmat, both from Bengal. The Indians contributed to the origin of the Afrikaans language which was created by slaves and the Coloured (mixed) people: the oldest book in Afrikaans was a Muslim religious text published in 1856.

It is also important to appreciate the historic blood relationship between the Indian and Coloured communities whom apartheid has tried to separate - and the significance of resistance by slaves in the history of the freedom movement in South Africa.

The Afrikaners must be helped to shed the false notions of race purity and superiority if the hopes for a new non-racial and democratic South Africa are to be fulfilled.

I hope that with the changes now taking place in South Africa, Indian and South African historians will co-operate in producing an authoritative study of the transport of Indians into slavery in South Africa and their contribution to the development of South Africa.