

**R B Chetty**

**by**

**V Chetty**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ROOTS PROJECT

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The trading Indians come from the class of free immigrants commonly but erroneously called Arabs in Natal. Indian merchants did well, especially during the war and in some cases amassed considerable fortunes. This was certainly true in the case of Mr Ramswami Balaguru Chetty.

#### BACKGROUND AND REASONS FOR DEPARTURE FROM INDIA

He was born on the 8 June 1874 in the village of Thitay 2 miles from Sirkati Station situated approximately 180 miles south of Madras. His birth was recorded in the village record book. Mr R.B. Chetty was the third child of a family of four:- an elder brother, sister and a younger brother. His mother and father died when he was seven years and nine years and nine years old respectively.

Mr R.B. Chetty came from a business class who were by caste cloth merchants (Senaithalaivier). His father however had a partnership in a shipping company but went bankrupt after losing a fleet of ships in a severe gale, between Burma and Singapore. After his parents death, life became very difficult especially since his sister was a young widow. His eldest brother worked in Seychelles. When he was about 12 years old, his brother sent for him to come to Seychelles which he did.

In Seychelles he worked in a bar, washing and polishing glasses. He also ran errands for them. Two years later he went to Mauritius where he worked for a large retain company that had many branches. The owners of this business also came from S. India and came from the same sub-caste. His duty here was to deliver goods and collect cash. Here he worked his way up and was about to become a partner in the business when the owners wanted him to marry their daughter. He felt that he was too young and that all his money would become tied up in the partnership. He then decided to come to South Africa because he thought that he could make a lot of money here.

ARRIVAL IN SOUTH AFRICA AND SUBSEQUENT OCCUPATIONS

He arrived in South Africa in October 1896 at Durban harbour. Here he stayed with the K.R. Pillay family in the Point area. Having paid his passage he was a privileged British subject and therefore did not have the problems that restricted indentured labourers. Mr R.B. Chetty had recalled that the Ridge Road area in Overport which was then known as the Hartley Estate was called the Elephant area where elephants roamed freely. He stayed in Durban for a few weeks and then went to Pietermaritzburg. Here he lived with a Chetty family in Burg Street. These people owned a fresh produce shop. The owner of the shop wanted to go back to India because he had a wife there. He wanted Mr R.B. Chetty to take over the shop and marry his daughter so that he would be free to go back to India. R.B. Chetty turned down his offer and went to Johannesburg.

There were many South Indians in Johannesburg and they lived in compounds which they called "luckows". These compounds consisted of ten rooms, two kitchens and toilets. (Living conditions here were bad and because of the high ratio of males in relation to females, the women were shared by the men. Most of these South Indians were hawkers. Those that did hawking on a large scale had big carts, compared with the smaller hawkers who carried baskets. R.B. Chetty became a hawker and sold butter and eggs, which he bought at the market. At this time butter came in huge blocks which had to be cut up and divided into pound blocks.

Among hawkers in the compound there were strict unwritten laws. At night they would play card games. The person who won the game did not go to work the next morning. The winner then sold out his baskets. R.B. Chetty made about 5 pounds a day, which was quite a large sum at the time. He then had to buy out an area where only he could hawk his goods. He later went out on his rounds twice a day and made a considerable amount of money.

The/

Boer war started and he had to leave Johannesburg. He was on the last train to Natal. The train was packed, and there was a rumour going around that they would shoot the British subjects. When the train stopped at Komatipoort some people panicked and decided to walk to Lurenco Marques thinking it was near. The train however finally reached Natal.

In Durban he attempted to do a similar type of business but it did not work; so after a while he went back to India. He came back after hostilities in 1902. On his return he moved into the wholesaling business - he dealt in leaf tobacco which he bought from farmers and sold to retailers. While in this business he decided that cigar manufacturing was a lucrative business. He then bought a partnership in Cigars Ltd. of which he later became sole owner.

In 1904 he bought the Star Building which was situated at the corner of Umgeni Road and Newmarket Street. He operated his cigar factory from this building. By 1906 he became the biggest cigar manufacturer with a staff of about 120 men. He also grew his own leaf tobacco.

In 1918 he bought 5000 acres of land from Marshall Campbell in Spitzkop near Verulam. Here he planted a mixed crop which he sold to stallholders in the market. He also leased the present day Windsor Park golf course on which he planted beetle leaves - because of this he bought 4 or 5 beetle leave stalls in the market which he later sold.

In 1920 a strike took place at his Cigar factory which was called Imperial Cigar Manufacturing and Trading Co. The workers demanded to use a more sophisticated technique in cigar manufacturing which would have increased production as well as costs. They also wanted an increase in wages and better working conditions. The strike was widely publicised by newspapers. However, although the strike went on R.B. Chetty easily found "scabs" to replace the workers. Indian workers in railway sheds went/

on a solidarity strike and White foreman could not cope with the situation.

The South African League used this situation to discredit the strike and generally slur the Indians. The South African Leagues attitude towards Indians is clearly indicated in this excerpt of a newspaper article:-

"Asiatics - chiefly Indians - who are now in unfair competition with Europeans in practically every branch of trade, industry, and occupation suitable for White people, owing to the apathy and lack of unity amongst the various classes of White workers, and selfish indifference to anything except their own achievement on the part of the majority of the employing classes. A natural result of this peaceful penetration of the Asiatics has been the very large amount of landed property acquired by these people, in commercial and residential areas formerly owned and occupied by Europeans".<sup>2</sup>

The strikers gained community support and R.B. Chetty tried to calm them down by reminding them that during the time of the rice price increase and shortage; he had bought all the available rice and sold it at cost to his compatriots. The Union later decided to fine the strike breakers and after some hesitation the fine was paid and work at the Cigar factory was resumed.

2. NATAL MERCURY, 12 October 1920, Pg. 4.

In 1928 R.B. Chetty started a printing press which was called Rex Printing Co. This company was started in order to satisfy the growing needs of the cigar factory in terms of labels, boxes and packets for the packaging of cigars. The printing business was later expanded and office stationery and exercise books were produced. The cigar and printing business was run by Mr R.B. Chetty and his son Mr B.S. Chetty. In 1939 Mr R.B. Chetty bought Peters lounge which was a cafe from a Mr S.M. Naidoo who later started Goodwill Lounge. This business was run by his two sons, Mr J.B. Chetty and Mr B.A. Chetty.

<sup>2</sup>NATAL MERCURY: 12 OCTOBER 1920 PAGE 4

Due to the Group Areas Act of 1950, R.B. Chetty lost large pieces of land which he owned in the Durban North and Bluff areas. The Group Areas wanted to buy the land in Durban North in order to build the Athlone Bridge because of the increase in traffic on Queens Bridge. He sold the land to them on condition that an act would not be passed preventing Indians from buying land and living in this area. However a short period later, an act was passed preventing any landowner to sell to Indians. This was the Anti-Asiatic Clause.

### FAMILY LIFE

Mr R.B. Chetty resided first at Star Building but later moved to 145 First Avenue. His house here was called the Golden "Threshold".

He married his first wife Thyiniagi Chetty in 1903. She however died in 1904 while giving birth to her first child which died a few days after her.

( His second marriage in 1906 was to a woman named Janeki. She came from Calcutta, India as an indentured labourer in 1902. She was a widow and came with her son who was about 5 years old at the time. She worked at a railway hospital in Somsteu Road. She bore him six children - 4 sons and two daughters. They are Mr J.B. Chetty, Mr B.A. Chetty and Dr B.T. Chetty and Dr B.S. Chetty, Mrs M.S. Chetty and Mrs B .

In 1909 Mr R.B. Chetty's sister got wind of the fact that he 'had a woman' in South Africa. His sister did not consider this to be a proper marriage and sent for him to come to India; which he did. He was then married to Vadvimambal a woman belonging to his caste. She bore two children - Mr B.S. Chetty and Mr R.B. Chetty. After this marriage he went to India every two years.

He married for the fourth time in 1915. His sister in India had consulted his horoscope and said that he should get married again. So on his trip to India in 1915 he married **KOGIELAMBAL** who had two children - a son and a daughter.



## MR R.B. CHETTY'S ROLE IN POLITICS

In the early 20th Century the Natal Indian Congress was extremely right wing. To Mr Chetty the improvement of the lot of the workers was seen as impossible. He was a member of the Natal Indian Congress. Most important to him was to obtain permits for traders. Basically they were there to protect the interest of the business classes. In 1908 he represented South African Indians at the Indian National Congress held in Madras. Here he explained the hardships of the indentured labourers and advocated the removal of the system of indentured labour.

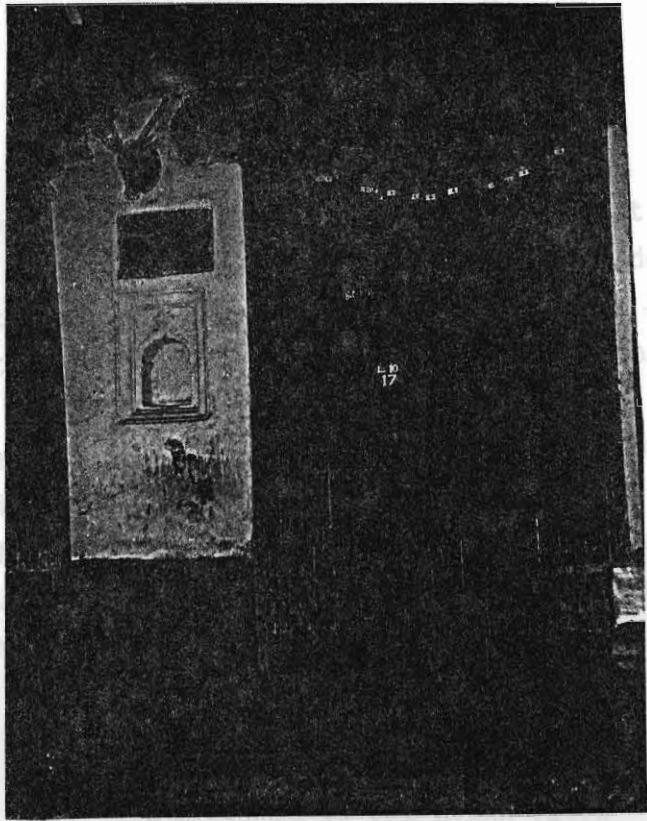
On 17 January 1919 there was a mass meeting of Natal Indians and R.B. Chetty was elected as a delegate.

In the 1930's Trade Unions came into prominence and were getting fairly powerful. The Trade Union at this time was the forerunner of the democratic movement; the initial stages of which, the Forward Bloc was formed. In 1948 Mr R.B. Chetty's son Dr B.T. Chetty joined this movement. His father however was Pro-British - he was a royalist and celebrated coronations and anniversaries. (He believed in loyalty to the rulers and this is an indication of his attitude towards the manner in which he dealt with his workers. He felt that if workers were given higher wages they would be in his position. He felt that if they were not satisfied with their lot they could look elsewhere.)

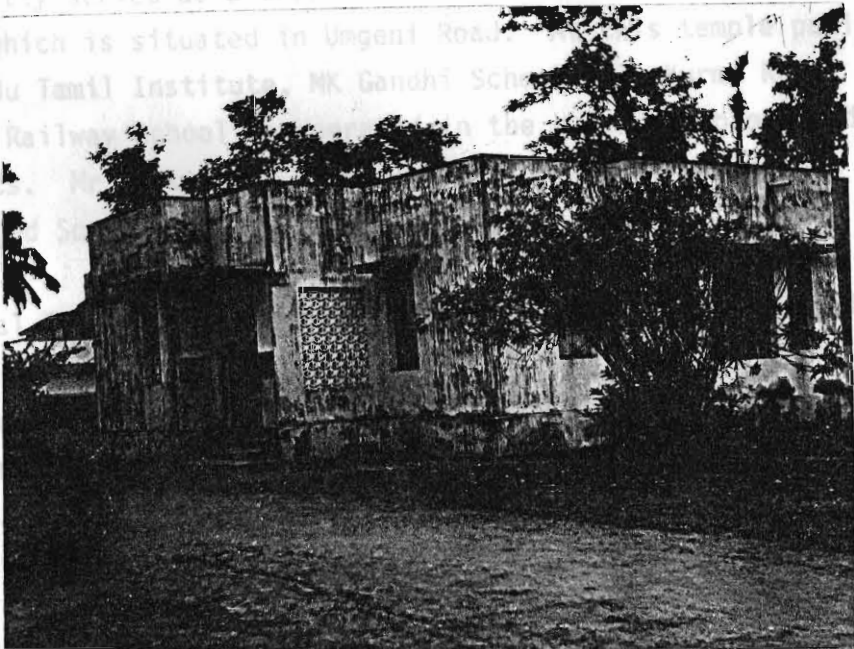
Mr R.B. Chetty was also known as one of the wealthiest supporters of Gandhi although he did not take part actively in the Satyagraha-movement. (He was also closely associated with Gandhi and named his house in India after his wife - "Kasturbai Villa".)

## EDUCATION

Mr Chetty's/



M. K. GANDHI STAYED IN THIS HOUSE : MAY 1915



PORAYAR HOSPITAL : OPENED 29 JUNE 1953

greatest contribution was in the field of education. It was during a discussion over lunch with Strinivasa Sastri that the idea of Sastri College was conceived. R.B.Chetty donated 300 pounds. He also gave donations amounting to 2 000 pounds to M.L. Sultan Technical College.

He did not believe in co-educational institution and was a member of a deputation which interviewed the Education Department for the establishment of schools for Indian girls, and raising salaries for Indian teachers. He was also a trustee of the Gandhi Tagore Lectureship Trust, and the Gandhi Centennial School.

### RELIGION

R.B. Chetty was a staunch believer in the Hindu faith. He meditated for 2-3 hours daily. He also made large contributions to religious institutions and was a patron of the Indian culture.

R.B. Chetty served as a trustee at the Shree Vaithianatha Easperar Alayam which is situated in Umgeni Road. At this temple pupils of The Hindu Tamil Institute, MK Gandhi School, Sir Kurma Reddi School and the Railway School co-operated in the celebration of Hindu noteries on Saints. Mr Chetty was also a patron of the Hindu culture and encouraged South Indian drama.

The Natal Tamil Vedic Society was formed on 26 September 1951. This society was an amalgamation of the Hindu Tamil Institute and Young Men's Vedic Society. R.B. Chetty served here as honorary Life President.

Mr Chetty also served as President of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha from 1942-1947 and as vice-president from 1947 to 1949. The Hindu Maha Sabha was established in 1912 the year that Mr Chetty was just/

# ***Prominent Officials of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha***

***(Past and Present)***



**S. R. Pather**  
Jt. Hon. Secretary: 1912-41  
Chairman of Council:  
1942-45  
President: 1952-54



**T. M. Naicker**  
Jt. Hon. Secretary: 1912-41  
Chairman of Council:  
1949-52



**V. S. C. Pather**  
Chairman of Council:  
1933-1942



**B. M. Patel**  
President: 1940-41



**R. B. Chetty**  
President: 1942-47



**Govan Mani**  
Jt. Hon. Treasurer:  
1942-45-47  
President: 1954-59

President of S.A. Hindu Conference. The Sabha was formed in order to promote common religious and other community interests. In 1944 while Mr Chetty was President the Sabha resolved to approach the Natal Education Department to urge the provision of Hindu religious instruction to Hindu children. After much debate and discussion it only came into being in 1958. In 1944 the Sabha realised that temples as centres of worship could play an important role in spreading religious ideas to the masses. To promote and establish social unity of the different linguistic sections of the Hindu Community a common prayer was published and circulated for use in 1945.

#### CONCLUSION

Mr R.B. Chetty's success can only be attributed to the fact that he was disciplined and determined in achieving his goals. He has always served as a source of inspiration to our family and community.

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