turbans and top hats...

THE INDIAN PATRIOT, FRIDAY EVENING, APRIL 16 1909

We publish to-day an appeal to his brethren in South India by Mr. Naidu, a Madras emigrant in Natal, who describes life and labour there in the most terrible language. The Hon’ble Mr. Kesava Pillai, it will be remembered, asked a series of questions in the Legislative Council at its last sitting. Under the Indian Immigration Law of 1891 immigrants are bound, in the absence of a definite agreement, to work for nine hours each day, except Sundays and Government holidays. The same law provides the assignment of females and younger persons for such lighter varieties of labour as they are fitted for. The wages are settled also, as the conditions of return are agreed upon. The Hon’ble Mr. Weir was able, in his reply to Hon’ble Mr. Pillai’s interpellation, to acknowledge that the Government did receive annual reports on Indian immigrants in Natal; these reports can be had for sale, and contain the nature of treatment that the labourers receive at their employers’ hands. We have had no occasion to peruse any annual report of the Protector of immigrants in Natal, but if the Hon’ble Mr. Weir was enabled to give the replies that he did, much of the information contained in the report could be easily imagined. That, evidently, is an official report, written on the information supplied by agencies or sources of information equally interested. Oppression of the labourer, therefore, though it might exist, would not find mention in a report of this kind, and whatever might be belief of our Government, the appeal which Mr. Naidu makes to-day, will not fail to impress the public, alike by the revelations that it makes, the oppression that it describes and the dangers that it mentions. The appeal, in spite of the information
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Supplied by the Government, might be regarded as explaining the actual situation; for the information on which it is based is first-hand, and not the report of an officer who writes because it is his duty, and never enquires whether the materials supplied are true, or whether the sources of information on which he builds his official account of the treatment and condition of Indian labourers in Natal are reliable.

It is not incredible, because custom and usage would have given it the hardness of a settled fact, that the Indian labourers are engaged in their fields from three o’clock in the morning to six in the evening. Thus they do fifteen hours’ work a day. To them, as the appeal points out, Sunday brings no cessation of work. Throughout the term of the indenture they are compelled to observe a routine so taxing in its pressure and so pressing in its relentlessness. Unaccustomed to such hard work, they apply themselves with vigour and devotion to their business; for the Indian realises that he has agreed to the arrangement which he is bound to observe. Protest or grumbling on account of undue hardship will never be made, because will never be heeded. On the other hand the white employer might resent it and resort to tortures. The white man is not a man, but a man who is bound to oppress the black man whenever he could, but he is essentially a business-man who has an eye on his profits and losses. More work extracted is more profit achieved; and any merchant knows that to allow a protest or a growl to spread is fatal to his interests. To suppress them therefore, either by torture or by starvation is, when looked by the factory proprietor, part of his duty. The colour of the skin is an enemy of the Indian, only so far as it makes him, in the eyes of the white man, less of a human being. The latter could not realise that a black skin can carry, within it, the passions and the prejudices with which he is actuated in life. The Madras Government almost immediately repeated, in an order, the warning that we made. Mr. Naidu, in his appeal to-day, warns his ‘brethren’ against emigrating to Natal; he points out that none goes there from Bombay or Bengal; and patriot as he is, he is concerned that his countrymen should succumb to artful allurements and leave the land of their birth, never to return. The emigrant might die at the hospital, or in the field where he works for fifteen hours a day, or beneath his employer’s feet which kicks him in anger. If he escapes disease, the rigour of the climate or the capitalist, he has yet the rigour of the country’s laws which enslave him in a distant land; tax is piled upon tax; the boy, the girl, the man, the woman, each of them has the poll-tax and the additional tax to pay. To fail to pay is to have the horrors of the gaol let loose upon them, irrespective of sex, position or punishment. Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Naidu have been inmates of gaol, and both of them have had experience of the worst type, of the South African prison. The fate of Indians abroad is, however, too well understood to require an explanation to our people; and we make no doubt that Mr. Naidu’s appeal will make the impression that it deserves it should. A non-official commission from India could find fields for much research and enquiry in Natal, provided they could effect a landing and attend to their work without the finger-print or the cooli quarters. The Madras Government could call upon the Protector of Immigrants to prosecute detailed enquiries and demand closer attention to the treatment of those entrusted to his care; if neither is practicable, the Protector should be dispensed with, who cannot give protection at all, and emigration discouraged, which is attended with dangers and hardships.
The following appeal has been sent to us for publication by Mr. Naidu from Durban, Natal.

Brethren.—At present most of the emigrants to Natal are proceeding chiefly from the Madras Presidency. As a rule none comes here as an immigrant from the Bombay Presidency. Following this example, no one migrates to this country from Bengal also for the last one year. In the Southern India depots are established at several places for collecting immigrants. Agents are appointed for canvassing emigrants and for every emigrant that is sent from Madras the Agent is paid Rs. 35. Although the sufferings which the Indians undergo in this country have been vividly described through the Indian Patriot the agents are mindful of their own gain and seriously continue their work as if they knew nothing about these sufferings. This shows that they are heartless and unpatriotic.

Immigrants who come to Natal for the purpose of working at the sugar, tea and coffee plantations, shall have to work hard for nearly 12 hours a day during the whole period of their agreement. Though Sunday is a holiday to them in theory, yet on no occasion it is possible for them to take rest. In some places they should work both day and night. What their white masters will is law.

Every one used to get up at 3 o'clock in the night and would finish his cooking business. Taking the food with them, they would start with all their co-workers to their working place nearly 2 miles distant, where they should begin their work by 5 a.m. During piercing winter and rainy seasons or the hot season they should work without needing any physical suffering. They must return home at 6 p.m. after work. Both males and females should thus work alike with hardly any tiffin time allowed them and if at all they are allowed tiffin time it should not exceed ½ an hour.

Thousands of Indians may be found in a weak condition as the result of hard work. Hundreds are sent to hospitals, being helpless to protect themselves from sickness. Numorous persons are sent to prison being unable to work with vigour. Some commit suicide being unable to endure the punishments inflicted on them by their masters. Of the workers many are the persons who have lost their hands or legs owing to inexperience in working at the mills and many pass away their time by brooding over the kicks and knicks which they receive.

With all these hard sufferings they get 10 shillings or Rs. 7/- each month. Time or space will not suffice to describe the sufferings of our Indians by agreeing to become slaves for 5 years to the white masters.