Natal becomes a British Colony - 1843

British settlers began experimenting with sugar. Sugar was seen as a viable export commodity but there was a serious shortage of labour. The fate of the colony "hangs on a thread; the thread is labour (Natal Mercury April 1859).

The Zulus were not accustomed to selling their labour, tilling the soil was women’s work, while the men hunted and protected their villages.

After the abolition of slavery in 1834 there arose an alternative form of cheap labour. They called it the "Indentured System", a compromise between slavery and the free-market system.

Meanwhile, thousands of indentured Indians from India emigrated to areas such as British Guiana, Fiji, Jamaica, Trinidad, Reunion and Mauritius to escape the poverty. The Natal planters petitioned for the introduction of Indian labour as a consequence, Indians arrived in the Colony in their thousands to toil their fortunes. Sometimes, recruiting agents were unscrupulous, the unsuspecting peasants being carried off without knowing where they were going. On the ships passengers were huddled together and many caste violations prevailed.
When the first immigrants arrived, there was no fanfare, speeches or crowds to welcome them. While the plantation owners welcomed them as financial assets, the White colonists on the other hand, held strong reservations about the new arrivals. Despite this, between 1860 to 1911, a total of 152,184 Indian settlers came to South Africa.

After disembarkation, the immigrants were first taken to Barracks and thereafter assigned and dispatched to their respective employers. The SS Truro and Belvedere arrived in November 1860.

Each passenger was identified by a unique number and recorded in the ships register together with their name, height, caste, age, area they came from, the port of departure and ship details.

Arrival in Boats from Paddle Steamers

"The Coolies Here" - Natal Mercury, Nov. 22 1860
By Law 14 of 1859, the terms and conditions of employment were set out:
1. Free passage to Natal.
2. Fixed wage for the first 5 years (10-14 shillings), thereafter could re-indenture or remain in employ of choice.
3. Free lodging, ration and medical services.
4.Strict rules relating to employment, penalties, punishment.
5. Free passage to India after 10 years or grant of Crown Land (withdrawn in 1891).

For the poor, unemployed and those escaping the conditions in India, the inducements appeared attractive.

While most indentured Indians were assigned to the sugar estates, others went to the coal fields, railways, municipality, tea and wattle plantations. Others came as special servants, as waiters, cooks and drivers.

Discharge Certificate
Service Contract
The Indian Immigration Trust Board, set up in 1874, saw to matters of recruitment, repatriation, income and expenditure, remitting monies to India and the general welfare of the Indian, yet the indentured Indian suffered many hardships. Returned immigrants complained of conditions in Natal.

The Coolie Commission (1872) highlights some of their problems:

The barracks were unsuitable as it did not permit the escape of smoke. They built their own thatched huts. Wage and rations were paid irregularly, assault and flagellation by employers, enforced deductions when absent or ill, excessive fines, poor medical services, extra working hours, poor drinking water were some of the complaints.

As a result many resorted to taking dagga to escape their cares while others committed suicide. One Rangasamy, who gave evidence pleaded for the building of temples and schools, the increase in the number of women to the colonies and proper interpreters in the courts.

Recommendations and Changes:

New set of Laws: Indian Immigration Laws (1872)
Employers to keep wage book, regular visits to estates, appointment of Protector of Indian Immigrants, registration of births, death and marriage of Indians, provision of education for children, improved medical services.
The imposition of the 3 pound tax (Immigration Law Amendment Bill, Act 17 of 1885) on free Indians heightened their plight. Unable to pay the exorbitant tax, many returned to India were forced to re-indenture while some ran away from their families or sold their children to avoid the tax. The Afrikaans Chronicle (1998) under P. Ayer, champions the cause of the oppressed labourers and calls for the abolition of the tax.

On 'treatment of Indians: 'a mere chaffed, a machine, a commercial asset to be worked to its fullest capacity, regardless of the human element... the system lends itself to heartlessness and cruelty, if not on the part of the employers, then on that of his sisters and overseers "..."for it is slavery and nothing else'. In tea factories young children were working 11 hours per day. [Henry Poolk – Gandhi Associates, editor Indian Opinion]

Nevertheless, these changes did little to improve the quality of life. Following a resolution of Mr. Gokhale, who visited South Africa, the Government of India, Gazetted (April 1911) that as from 1st July "All immigration to Natal would be prohibited", thereby putting an end to the scheme. Thereafter, they prospered despite the many trials and tribulations that they faced.