

CONSTRUCTIONS OF COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY
AMONG INDIANS IN COLONIAL NATAL, 1860–1910:
THE ROLE OF THE *MUHARRAM* FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT: This article is concerned with the historical construction of communities, cultures and identities in colonial Natal, in this case an Indian grouping that emerged from the heterogeneous collection of indentured workers imported between 1860 and 1911. Despite the difficulties of indenture, Indians set about re-establishing their culture and religion in Durban. The most visible and public expression of ritual was the festival of *Muhurram*, which played an important role in forging a pan-Indian ‘Indianness’ within a white and African colonial society. This was significant when one considers that the nationalist movement was in its formative stages and there was no national identity when indentured workers had left India.

KEY WORDS: South Africa, ethnicity, colonial, race.

THIS article focuses on the expressive and representative functions of *Muharram* to illuminate key features of the construction of ‘Indianness’ in colonial Natal. It is predicated on the premise that identities are not coherent and unchanging, but dynamic and multi-faceted. While the traditions, values and practices of migrants were important, community and identity were forged in the interaction of actual historical circumstances, political policies, social experience and the meanings accorded to these in daily practice and discourse in Natal.¹ Indianness was a complex construction, constituted through struggles among disparate Indians, and between them and whites and Africans in Natal where the ideas of empire, as Kale reminds us, ‘secured racial hierarchy and privilege’.² The racialization of class made race a point of reference in personal and group behaviour. While Muharram mourned the death of a Muslim martyr, the joint participation of Hindus and Muslims, and a fusion of Muslim and Hindu traditions, made it a pan-Indian festival, and an important aspect of Indian community formation. This study will fill an important void in a neglected area, that of Indian working class life

¹ See S. Hall, ‘Cultural identity and diaspora’, in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community and Cultural Difference* (London, 1990), 222–37.

² M. Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 1995), 173.

in Natal, a gap that stands in sharp contrast to the Cape where carnival/festival among Cape Coloureds has been relatively widely studied.³

ARRIVAL OF INDIANS

The arrival in Natal of 342 Indians aboard the *Truro* on 16 November 1860 marked the culmination of a ten-year struggle by British immigrants for cheap indentured labour. Subsequently, in all, 152,184 immigrants arrived between 1860 and 1911. The tendency of the Natal government to treat them as a homogenous entity should not mask the fact that there were considerable differences of class, gender, caste, religion, language and experiences of migration. Immigrants had been recruited as individuals from a vast area of India characterized by significant variation. Most were lower caste agricultural workers from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south-east, and Oudh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the north-east of India.⁴ Those from the Ganges valley spoke Bhojpuri (or Hindi), while those from the south spoke Tamil or Telugu.⁵ Two-thirds of immigrants were male, 90 per cent (137,099) were Hindu,⁶ and approximately 8,000 were Muslim.⁷

In terms of their contract, indentured workers were assigned to an employer for five years. At the end of that period they were free either to reindenture or to seek work elsewhere in Natal. Approximately 60 per cent of indentured workers were allocated to sugar estates; the rest were employed by the municipalities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, the Natal Government Railways, and as 'special servants' such as cooks, waiters, policemen, clerks and interpreters.⁸ A detailed discussion of indenture falls outside the scope of this paper.⁹ In her analysis, Swan concludes that 'overwork, malnourishment, and squalid living conditions formed the pattern of daily life for most agricultural workers'.¹⁰ Indentured Indians had few ways of resisting their exploitation as they were subject to close supervision and systematic discipline. Draconian laws viewed all contractual offences as criminal acts, and sanctioned legal action against Indians for 'laziness' and desertion. The burdens of proof and penalty were on the

³ See, for example, L. Baxter, 'History, identity and meaning: Cape Town's Coon Carnival in the 1960s and 1970s' (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1996); D.-C. Martin, *Coon Carnival: New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present* (Cape Town, 1999); B. Nasson, "'She preferred living in a cave with Harry the snakecatcher': towards an oral history of popular leisure and class expression in District 6, Cape Town, c. 1920s-1950s", in P. Bonner *et al.* (eds.), *Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality and Culture in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1989).

⁴ S. Bhana, *Indentured Indian Migrants To Natal, 1860-1902. A Study Based on Ships' Lists* (New Delhi, 1991), 19-20.

⁵ S. Bhana, 'Natal's traditional temples in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' Unpublished paper (1997), 3. ⁶ Bhana, *Indian Migrants*, 19-20.

⁷ Information supplied by J. Brain and T. Bennett, who are analyzing the ships' lists.

⁸ R. F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest: The Founding of the South African Sugar Industry, 1848-1926* (Durban, 1964), 39.

⁹ See J. D. Beall, 'Women under indenture in Natal', in S. Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* (Yorkshire, 1990), 89-115; M. Swan, 'Indentured Indians: accommodation and resistance, 1890-1913', in Bhana, *Essays*, 117-35; and M. Tayal, 'Indian indentured labour in Natal, 1890-1911', *Indian Social and Economic History Review*, 14 (1978), 519-46.

¹⁰ Swan, *Gandhi*, 26.

weaker party to the contract. Indians could not refuse any work, demand higher wages or leave the employer. They could not go more than two miles from the estate without their employer's written permission, even to lay a charge against that employer.¹¹ Resistance was difficult in a climate where Indians were spread over vast distances, there being 1,300 employers of indentured labour in Natal in 1904,¹² and where public institutions, the police, courts and law were under white control.

Indentured immigrants were followed by entrepreneurs from Gujarat on the west coast of India, who began arriving from the mid-1870s. Traders were considered by others, and considered themselves, 'Arab' because most were Muslims. Although small in number, traders became significant from the turn of the century when, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who lived in South Africa from 1893 to 1914, they gave international prominence to the plight of Indians in South Africa. A third category of Indians was 'free': Indians: the 58 per cent of indentured Indians who did not return to India but remained in Natal where they mainly took to farming, market gardening and hawking.¹³ By 1904, there were 904,041 Africans, 97,109 whites and 100,918 Indians. The majority of Indians, 63,746 (63.17 per cent), were male.¹⁴ Despite the fact that the Indians were a heterogeneous collection of people, the emergent colonial state, feeling economically, socially and politically threatened, treated them legislatively as a homogenous and discrete racial category. Within this social order, the construction of 'Whiteness' was a way for white migrants, particularly workers, to respond to wage labour. In indentured workers, they found a convenient 'other'. Joe Cunningham, chairman of the Patriotic Union, pointed out in 1907, for example, that whites should 'stop dealing with the coolie, and this question will solve itself ... Surely the coolies are eating their way into every walk of life and labour. Let there be no side issues with workers; either the coolie has to go or we go'.¹⁵ But indentured Indians stayed and expressed themselves in tenacious ways.

CELEBRATING MUHARRAM IN COLONIAL NATAL

The major Indian festival in colonial Natal was Muharram, which mourns the martyrdom of Imam Husain, grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, who was killed in battle on the plains of Karbala in Iraq by the army of Caliph Yazid I on 10 Muharram 680. Although denied water by the enemy, Husain's group survived for the first nine days of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. On the tenth, the enemy's arrows killed Husain, whose body was left to rot in the desert sun, while his head was placed on a spear and paraded in Damascus.¹⁶ While Husain's martyrdom is doctrinally important to Shias with their belief that Husain and his father Ali are part of a line of Imams deriving from the Prophet, it also has a solemn memory for Sunnis who regard Yazid as a corrupt and unjust ruler. This was

¹¹ M. Swan, 'Indentured Indians', 119. ¹² Bhana, *Indentured Migrants*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.* ¹⁴ Census of the Population of Natal, Apr. 1904.

¹⁵ Natal Mercury, 30 Dec. 1907.

¹⁶ G. Thaiss, 'Contested meanings and the politics of authenticity: the "Hosay" in Trinidad', in Akbar S. Ahmed and Hasting Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity* (London, 1994), 38-62, 40.

clearly the case in India where Titus observed that 'Sunnis are found to observe the [Muharram] ceremonies with the same regularity as the Shias do'.¹⁷ Hindu participation in the festival in India, according to Ahmed, was a function of 'the latitude in ritual available to Hindu lower castes and the love of spectacle, fanfare and group exhibition of passion inherent in the Indian character, as well as generalised superstition'.¹⁸

The Muharram was the first communal Indian ceremony to be observed in Natal. Indentured workers were granted three days annual leave during Muharram or 'Coolie Christmas' as it became known among whites.¹⁹ Thus, when requesting permission for workers to attend the festival, Abdul Kadir informed the Protector²⁰ that the 'Moharram alias Coolie Christmas will begin on the 3rd of January 1878'.²¹ A letter from H. Peron of the Victoria Planters Association to Protector Graves in September 1885 suggests that the festival was widely celebrated, and climaxed with the convergence of Indians from various plantations:

Which is the proper day for the conclusion of the Coolie Christmas festival? I have the honour to request you to be good enough to make enquiries amongst the leading Mohammedans in Durban so that the doubt and uncertainty, which have hitherto existed, may this year be done away with. Coolies on the estate being generally uneducated and illiterate were unable to fix the date accurately and that until they have found out what day coolies on other estates in the neighbourhood had fixed upon they were unable to inform their employers on what day they wished to meet to put their gods in the river.²²

Indians also demanded the right to observe Muharram. In October 1886, when police stopped a Muharram procession in Ladysmith in northern Natal, Indians petitioned the governor of Natal that other towns in the colony allowed:

the religious procession through the public streets of people making much noise by musical and other sounds, following their Creed unmolested by the Police. Therefore your Petitioners humbly pray that when your Petitioners desire to practice the religion of their Fathers they may be free from the hardship of arrest.

Although a Hindu, Ratansamy Pillay, presented the petition and while only nine of the 25 petitioners were Muslim, the festival was regarded as their 'creed'.²³ This is not surprising because in the areas from which most indentured Indians were drawn, particularly Oudh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, Hinduism and Islam were mutually reinforcing, although Hindus were the

¹⁷ Murray T. Titus, *Indian Islam: A Religious History of Islam in India* (New Delhi, 1979 [original 1930]), 92.

¹⁸ Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (New Delhi, 1964), 157.

¹⁹ Natal Archives Repository (NAR), Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) 299/1910, Protector Polkinghorne to Town Clerk, 11 Nov. 1909.

²⁰ An 1872 Commission of Enquiry recommended that a 'Protector' of Indian Immigrants be appointed to visit each estate at least twice a year, attend to Indian grievances and publish an annual report. A Deputy was later appointed to assist him.

²¹ NAR, Indian Immigration Papers (II), 1/3, 520/1877, Abdul Kadir, Indian interpreter, to Protector Graves, 1 Dec. 1877.

²² NAR, II, 1/30, 1253/85, 28 Sept. 1885.

²³ NAR, Natal Provincial Papers (NPP), 645, Petition 18 of 1886, 18 Oct. 1886.

majority population.²⁴ Another petition by twelve 'Mahomedan Natives of India at present residing in the Boro of Durban' warned the Protector that if the police interfered with 'our religious matters it may cause some disturbance'.²⁵ The Deputy Protector reported in February 1885 that there was 'much talk about matters such as leave for the Moharram' when he visited plantations.²⁶ In 1890, Police Superintendent Alexander informed the Mayor of Durban that he had been 'besieged with applicants representing the various classes to take part in the Festival'.²⁷ In 1896, another Hindu, Kistnasamy Naidoo, requested permission for public processions until midnight on five nights in Muharram, which were to include 'displays of fireworks', and to 'cast the tazzias into water on the tenth'.²⁸

Muharram was a common festival for Indians from various plantations who could gather, dance, play music, parade and make merry. From the sketchy evidence that is available we can piece together a story of the unfolding and organization of Muharram. It included two elements, public processions by neighbourhood groups, and their converging on the tenth to immerse tazzias in water. The tazzia, which translates into 'mourning', was a replica of the martyred Husain's mausoleum at Karbala.²⁹ It was an ornately decorated, gaudy simulacrum of the tomb. James Meldrum, an Englishman visiting Natal in 1893, described the tazzia as 'made of a light framework covered with muslin, adorned with wonderful emblematic designs in all colours of the rainbow, and surrounded with bannerettes'.³⁰ Tazzias ranged between 15 to 25 feet in height and consisted of three levels, each rising from within the other with the base, about 10 feet square, being the largest. They were built with great care and the task was passed from generation to generation. Family folklore believed that failure to continue this tradition would lead to tragedy.³¹ The Baccus family were among typical early tazzia builders.³² In an incident recorded by the protector in November 1882, Hassein and Kaddar Baccus 'spent five days making Coolie cages and the Idol for the approaching Indian festivities'. They smoked Indian hemp (dagga) during this period and a heavily drugged Hassein Baccus committed suicide by slitting his throat on the evening of the fifth day as a result of

²⁴ A. Khan, 'Homeland, motherland: authenticity, legitimacy and ideologies of place among Muslims in Trinidad', in P. van der Veer (ed.), *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora* (Philadelphia, 1995).

²⁵ NAR, II, 1/1, 105/1877, Mohammed Ali Shah Qadri and Petitioners to Protector, 26 Mar. 1877.

²⁶ NAR, II, 1/24, 1418/85, Report on Estates Visited by the Deputy Protector of Immigrants, Feb. 1885.

²⁷ NAR, Durban Town Clerk (DTC), 5/2/5/3/5, Police Superintendent Richard Alexander to Town Clerk, 20 Aug. 1890.

²⁸ NAR, II, 1/96, 820/96, Naidoo to Mayor of Pietermaritzburg, 12 Apr. 1896.

²⁹ Legend has it that this particular form of celebration originated in India at the end of the thirteenth century with the Shia wife of Emperor Timur, who had taken a vow to visit the mausoleum of Husain annually in Iraq. When illness prevented her from doing so, a replica of the mausoleum was placed before her during Muharram. See Thaiss, 'Contested Meanings', 41.

³⁰ J. Meldrum, 'The Moharrem festival in Natal'. Title of journal unknown, dated 1893. Housed at the Killie Campbell Library, PAM 297 MEL.

³¹ F. Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (Durban, 1969), 21.

³² Interview with Mr F. Baccus, 4 Dec. 1999.

'hallucination'.³³ Competition among Indians for the most attractive tazzia gave Muharram a competitive edge that was detrimental to public order. According to Alexander, 'there was natural jealousy between the different parties respecting their ability to build pagodas and other 'Artistics devices'.³⁴

Muharram festivities began on the first and lasted until the tenth. Close to the site where the tazzia was built stood the 'imam bada', an area that served as a place of worship for devotees during the ten days. Each tazzia group built 'panjas', which were replicas of the human hand; participants told Meldrum that panjas were models of the right hand of Husain. According to tradition, when Husain was going out to battle and his wife enquired when they would meet again, he raised his right hand and replied, 'At the Day of Judgement'. Panjas were clothed in green and smothered in garlands of flowers brought by devotees, who believed that they had the power to cure problems. Meldrum observed panjas being immersed in water, 'thereby, it is supposed, removing the sins of the faithful'.³⁵

From the fifth to the ninth, Indians marched through neighbourhoods with their tazzias, drumming continually and beating sticks. James Meldrum observed that 'for some days previous to the actual celebration the tom-toms were almost continually beaten'.³⁶ This was a source of great nuisance to whites. According to one newspaper, 'the nerve shrieking yells of these almost naked fanatics, together with the monotonous thumping of tom-toms are sufficiently convincing that participants in the festival know nothing of the history of the patron saints'.³⁷ The religious role of this practice was notional,³⁸ it became more an excuse for the display of high spirits and assertion of neighbourhood pride. In 1890, Alexander informed the Mayor of Durban that 'tom-tomming has on many occasions been stopped by your police and the offenders prosecuted'.³⁹ But the practice continued. Alexander reported the following year:

On Sunday morning during the Divine Service the public were distracted by Tom-tomming carried on in the Railway compound. I went myself to stop it. I found about 1500 half drunk Coolies enclosed in this compound nearly a mile away from the Railway station, the whole in charge of a couple of Coolie Policeman and in Indian Sirdar, none of whom I could find. I stopped the Tom-tomming but heard it again before I reached home.⁴⁰

In 1896, W. Goodwin and '215 other Europeans' petitioned the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg to stop 'this nuisance of tom-tomming' because it was 'a very great annoyance and dangerous to sick persons'.⁴¹ As a report in the *Natal Mercury* in 1910 shows, police action failed to eradicate this practice.

³³ NAR, II, 1/11, 1176/82, Report on Suicide of Hasein Baccus, no. 10.999, 13 Dec. 1882. ³⁴ Recollections of Superintendent Alexander, *Natal Advertiser*, 23 Apr. 1902.

³⁵ Meldrum, 'Moharrem festival'. ³⁶ Meldrum, 'Moharrem festival'.

³⁷ *Natal Advertiser*, 23 Apr. 1904.

³⁸ According to Edwardes, drumming is 'primarily designed to scare away evil-spirits ... this is a relic of pure Hinduism, of aboriginal self-belief, and has in the course of centuries been gradually associated with the great Muhammadan Festival of tears'. S. M. Edwardes, *The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island*, 1 (Bombay, 1909), 188.

³⁹ NAR, DTC, 5/2/5/3/5, 20 Aug. 1890.

⁴⁰ NAR, II, 1/64, 4740/91, Alexander to Mayor of Durban, Aug. 1891.

⁴¹ NAR, II, 1/96, 814/99, Godfrey to Mayor of Pietermaritzburg, 19 May 1896.

More important, it also shows that drumming was not simply senseless noise made by ‘naked fanatics’, which was the dominant impression created by whites:

All the processions without exception had a tom-tom band. The throb of tom-toms filled the air for miles around. Let no dog bark at the tom-tom, for it is an institution at least as important as the English ‘waita’. Its manipulation is quite a high art, and to some ears no doubt it is inspiringly musical, though to European ears a trifle monotonous ... the tom-tom music touched every plane from an insinuating purr to a wild hullabaloo. The tom-tom beat so furiously that presently the ears of the artistes – trained to a finer perception in these matters than those of laymen – detected that the instruments had got out of tune, and forthwith there was a cessation while little fires were lighted, and the drums held over them till the contraction by the heat had tightened the skins up to concert pitch again. It was curious to watch how the instrumentalists tried their instruments with their fingers, as seriously as any piano-tuner, to see if they had attained the right tone, before discontinuing the shrinking process.⁴²

While groups took part individually, they were united and bound by the events at Karbala and particularly the final convergence on the tenth. On this day, groups of Indians gathered around each *tazzia* and pulled it by hand, all the while singing ‘*marsiyas*’ or laments to the memory of Husain, beating on drums, dancing wildly or carrying out stick fights. Participants believed in the potency of the *tazzia* and offered fruits, vegetables, sugar, money and other objects in return for the birth of a son, long life, cure from illness, and so on. The tenth began with a ‘*gatka*’, a play in which some participants represented Yazid’s army and others Hussain, to symbolize the actual battle. Men dressed as women if the play included a woman. For example, Moonean, who was giving evidence in a rape case, mentioned that ‘I went to it [the Muharram festival] and dressed myself as a woman’ because he played the role of a woman in the play.⁴³ Consumption of alcohol was part of the festivities. In her evidence against an alleged rapist, Patchay, wife of Patchamoolloo, testified that some men had ‘forcible connection’ with her after a heavy bout of drinking rum.⁴⁴ The *Natal Advertiser* reported that ‘from sunrise yesterday, coolies were lingering chiefly in the vicinity of coolie bars. They were not allowed to eat food but their religious regulations did not prevent them from imbibing freely in the viles of all liquors sold within the Colony’.⁴⁵

Depending on the number of *tazzias*, the fragmented processions that made their way to an assembly point could be several miles long. The assembly point was always close to a river or sea because *tazzias* were immersed in water to remind participants of the suffering that Husain endured when he was denied water.⁴⁶ In Durban and surrounding districts, *tazzia* processions marched through the neighbourhoods towards the Umgeni

⁴² *Natal Mercury*, 9 Dec. 1910.

⁴³ NAR, II, 1/51, 1017/1889, Statements of Certain Indians with reference to the Rape of Patchay, Indentured to Robbins of Umhlali, Aug. 1889.

⁴⁴ NAR, II, 1/51, 1017/1889, Statements of Certain Indians with reference to the Rape of Patchay, Indentured to Robbins of Umhlali, Aug. 1889.

⁴⁵ *Natal Advertiser*, 23 Apr. 1902.

⁴⁶ Garcin de Tassy (trans. M. Waseem), *Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1995), 56.

River, which a contemporary newspaper referred to as 'Coolieland'.⁴⁷ Dancers known as 'tigers', who painted their faces and body and wore masks to resemble tigers, led *tazzias*. Participants told Meldrum that 'tigers' represented real tigers in India who often attacked participants.⁴⁸ The *Natal Advertiser* described 'tigers' as larger than life: 'by their dilated eyes and eccentric actions it could be seen that the strain on their nerves had almost overpowered their mental faculties'.⁴⁹ Large crowds were attracted annually to Umgeni:

From sunrise yesterday, little assemblies of painted coolies were seen all over town. As the forenoon wore on the little bands moved on towards Umgeni, the majority of them joining the larger procession which they met en route. By two o'clock, the assembly exceeded 10,000, while carriages and rikshas continued to arrive with hundreds of passengers. The slopes for hours prior to the ceremony were crowded by Indians, and the brilliant coloured clothing of the Indian women showed up vividly against the green of the banks.⁵⁰

Participants, contemporary records suggest, experienced great enjoyment during the festival, which represented a world very different to their rigidly controlled work environment. Stick fights, wrestling, food and alcohol, various festivities and the immersing of *tazzias* in water were all part of the day's activities. Stick fights especially captured the attention of the crowds. According to one report:

'Sammy' is never tired of watching that process which resembles a single-stick encounter, and where this was going on the crowd was dense. The Indian likes his pleasures served up with a certain amount of ceremonial, for in this stick business the first nine minutes are occupied in rhythmic circling around one another with the seriousness of a sacred rite, and then in the tenth someone gets a crack cross the shoulders. The object at first is to be as far away and look as fearsome as possible, and to get in one good smite before the end.⁵¹

Wrestling featured prominently during Muharram. 'Tigers' were usually champion wrestlers and represented their district of plantation in *kushti* (wrestling) competitions to determine the best wrestler.⁵² It was a source of great pride for a neighbourhood to have its representative win. One report described a confrontation between 'tigers':

Clad in their traditional costumes of little fabric and much paint, they danced and curvetted in more or less rhythmic movements before the admiring multitudes. They unmistakably rolled forth a challenge when two rival schools of 'tigers'

⁴⁷ *Natal Mercury*, 9 Dec. 1910. 'Coolie' was a derogatory term used by whites to refer to Indians. As Valentine Daniel has shown, 'coolie' is a mixture of Gujarati and Tamil terms that has to do with a denial of personhood. It carries suggestions of someone devoid of morals. See E. V. Daniel, 'The making of a coolie', in H. Bernstein, E. V. Daniel and T. Brass (eds.), *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia* (London, 1992). ⁴⁸ Meldrum, 'Moharrem festival'. ⁴⁹ *Natal Advertiser*, 22 Apr. 1902.

⁵⁰ *Natal Advertiser*, 23 Apr. 1902.

⁵¹ *Natal Mercury*, 9 Dec. 1910. Indian males were called 'Sammy', most probably because many Hindu surnames ended with the suffix 'samy', such as Appalsamy, Munsamy and Ramsamy. Women were called 'Mary', the origins of which are unknown. Both were regarded as derogatory by Indians.

⁵² There were several wrestling clubs at the Magazine Barracks in Durban, for example, where municipal workers lived. See P. Murugan, *The Lotus Blooms on the Eastern Vlei* (Chennai, 1998), 76–82.

found themselves facing one another in a cleared space in the middle of the road. One party was daubed all over with green and yellow war paint, and grovelled in the road beneath a lurid standard whereon two fearsome wild beasts faced one another on opposite cliffs. As the opposing parties drew near the accompanists thumped and thundered louder than ever and, as if in reply, the dancers danced and leaped more furiously than before. The native police thought well to stand back.⁵³

According to Meldrum, 'like Christmas', the Muharram 'seems largely altered from fast to feast' as a result of the various festivities:

Around the pagoda was a 'motley crowd: Mohammedans in white and in red, with turbans generally in pure white; masquerades, dressed up to represent tigers, who rushed through the crowd, pretending to assault the worshippers, in imitation of the real tigers which frequently attack the procession in India; Hindoo men and women in costumes which nearly defy description, all possible colours and materials seem to have been used. Jewellery was abundant: earrings, nose-jewels, necklaces, bangles, rings, anklets, toe-rings – all of the most gaudy description ... The din was terrific. Above the noise of the drums and tom-toms came the yells of the groups of those engaged in mimic battle with long sticks, while the rest of the faithful vied with each other in producing strange weird sounds.⁵⁴

The day ended with tazzias being immersed in water. Flowers and coloured paper on the tazzias was thrown in the river while the wooden structures were immersed in water and taken home to construct the following year's tazzia.⁵⁵ Tazzias were submerged in the river from around 4 pm. 'Each conveyance was accompanied by a large cheering crowd, and the applause was kept up as the various contingents went down to the river.'⁵⁶ Meldrum observed:

The pagoda (British colonial name for tazzias) was taken to the river, where, after great beating of tom-toms and wild dances, the emblems were immersed, most of the faithful also sprinkling their heads with water. Many children were also baptised by their parents. The top of the pagoda was then covered with white cloth, and the lower part opened. From it were taken basins of what appeared to be boiled rice, which was eagerly fought for and devoured. Thus ended the celebration.⁵⁷

The records also suggest that at least until the 1890s some participants killed animals ritually. When Alexander arrived in Natal in 1878 he was 'staggered' by the first Muharram that he witnessed. In Bamboo Square in Durban he saw a 'horrible case of cruelty, where the "tigers" were worrying a young goat, endeavouring to tear the throat and drink the blood'. Alexander shot the 'nearly killed' goat to put it out of its misery. According to Alexander this 'demonical practice was put down' in Natal through his efforts.⁵⁸ However, when evidence was being given in 1889 in the alleged rape of Patchay in Verulam on the North Coast, Mooneaa testified that he has missed the festival but 'was at the pig killing at 2 o'clock',⁵⁹ raising questions about whether the practice was totally eradicated, and when. In the

⁵³ *Natal Mercury*, 9 Dec. 1913.

⁵⁴ Meldrum, 'Moharrem festival'.

⁵⁵ Interview with Mr F. Baccus, 26 Jan. 2000. ⁵⁶ *Natal Advertiser*, 7 Feb. 1906.

⁵⁷ Meldrum, 'Moharrem festival'.

⁵⁸ Recollections of Superintendent Alexander, *Natal Advertiser*, 23 Apr. 1902.

⁵⁹ NAR, II, 1/51, 1017/1889, Statements of Certain Indians with reference to the Rape of Patchay, Indentured to Mr Robbins of Umhlali, Aug. 1889.

absence of more evidence one can only speculate on the reasons for this practice. It was probably due to deeply entrenched notions of blood sacrifice and identity, or perhaps the strong faith of Indians in the curative power of blood.⁶⁰

MUHARRAM CONFLICT

Local authorities did not take kindly to the Muharram because heavy drinking, fighting and the spilling of blood at the slightest provocation made it a raucous and boisterous affair. Many whites came to regard Indians as 'fanatical' beings who erupted at the slightest opportunity. The *Natal Advertiser*, for example, concluded:

The Mohurram, or Coolie Christmas, as celebrated in Durban, has now become an occasion for the Easterns on which all their innate fanatical ideas seem to let loose. What religion could tolerate such series of scenes as those enacted in Durban during these last few days cannot be imagined. The hideously decked 'tigers' and gaudily attired women, alike, become insane. The nerve shocking yells of those almost naked fanatics, together with the monotonous thumping of tom-toms are sufficiently convincing that participants know nothing of the history of the patron saints whose sad deaths they pretend to commemorate.⁶¹

Religious grief, large crowds, streets packed with observers and participants, and tazzias jostling for public space produced a potent combination that could explode into spontaneous or even planned violence. The patterns of Muharram conflict differed. There were conflicts between processionists and the police, participants and white civilians, and between Indians from different plantations or neighbourhoods. Tazzia groups usually had a geographical base, linked as they were to specific plantations or neighbourhoods, which often coincided with occupational category. The restriction of Indians to plantations and the curb on their mobility served also to foster neighbourhood pride and identity. In this climate, the superiority of tazzias, in terms of size, appearance, splendour or numbers, strength of procession and excellence of wrestlers were invariably contentious matters. Some conflicts followed predictable precedents when Muharram triggered existing tensions, while others exploded randomly over specific incidents. In November 1884, for example, when the medical officer of Isipingo, Dr Green, had gone with his wife to 'view the Coolie Christmas Festival', his carriage inadvertently ran over and injured an Indian child, Raminguru. The crowd became 'enraged ... and as the doctor drove along they threatened to retaliate ... The procession met him on the road, seized the reins of the horse and assaulted him'. Only quick action by the police saved his life.⁶²

There are many other references to violence. Mr Hunter, manager of the Natal Government Railways, complained to the Protector that a Sulehman:

Got leave all day for the Coolie Festival on the 12th. He was there all day, but he did not return here at night as he should have; he had been fighting and all next day he was lying about doing nothing. I had to engage a free Indian at higher wages to take his place.⁶³

⁶⁰ See W. Crooke, *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (Allahabad, Government Press, North-Western Province and Oudh, 1894), 196-7.

⁶¹ *Natal Advertiser*, 23 Apr. 1902.

⁶² *Natal Mercury*, 3 Nov. 1884.

⁶³ NAR, II, 1/16, 1071/83, 4 Nov. 1883.

The rape in 1889 of Patchay, wife of Patchamoolloo, who was indentured to Robbins of Umhlali, further confirms that violence featured in the Muharram. On the tenth, Patchay left the estate with Veeramah and Tirumalay to attend the 'Coolie festival near the river'. After drinking rum, some men had 'forcible connection' with Patchay.⁶⁴ Perumal and Koman Nilladoo were imprisoned for 12 months for assaulting Chattiah 'with intent to do grievous bodily harm' near Verulam on the North Coast. During Moharram, on 4 August 1892, an altercation between different processions resulted in Chattiah being stabbed in the head and chest:

The man was so badly injured that he was paralysed, and for some time his wife was in danger. Other people were injured severely, and witnesses came into the box with marks of the fray upon them ... Even women were engaged in the altercation.⁶⁵

The *Natal Advertiser* reported in 1906 that 'there was a large section of police at Umgeni as yearly there is a tendency to indulge in fisticuffs by the various contingents'.⁶⁶

Rivalries specifically connected to occupation also led to conflict. This was the case, for example, with employees of the railways and municipality. In 1891, Sirdar Parnee of Magazine Barracks, where employees of the Durban municipality lived, requested police protection because residents of the railway barracks had collected pieces of wood, bottles and stones to use against them during Muharram. Parnee pointed out that Railway Indians had prepared two pagodas so that one would remain intact after the confrontation. Parnee also told Alexander that Indian hawkers, kitchen boys and waiters had joined the Railway Indians during previous altercations.⁶⁷ On the tenth, Parnee's group set off for Umgeni under the supervision of twelve mounted policemen. En route they met the Railway Pagoda with 300 men, a hundred of whom were armed with 'long heavy sticks and pieces of iron bars'. When Alexander instructed their leader, Sarakan, to return to the city until Parnee had completed his rituals, a 'clamour and threatening with sticks commenced' before they obliged. At Umgeni a fight was already underway between 'Logan's Coolies' and another group, which the police stopped after 'some ugly blows were dealt'.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, Sarakan's group, forced by police to return to the city, destroyed the pagodas of another procession from Cato Manor and attacked Constable Bird. Heavy police reinforcements stopped Sarakan's procession and arrested eleven of his men.⁶⁹

The roles were reversed in 1902 when municipal employees attacked Railway Indians, who were proceeding to Umgeni, with 'a volley of stones and bottles'. The result was that 'a number of coolies are now lying in hospital, and the recovery of several is doubtful'. During the altercation, 'the air was blackened with a shower of missiles, mostly chunks of road metal, stones, bottles, sticks, etc'. When the police separated the groups, they

⁶⁴ NAR, II, 1/51, 1017/1889, Statements of Certain Indians with reference to the Rape of Patchay, Indentured to Mr Robbins of Umhlali, in Aug. 1889.

⁶⁵ *Natal Mercury*, 15 Oct. 1892. ⁶⁶ *Natal Advertiser*, 7 Feb. 1906.

⁶⁷ NAR, II, 1/64, 4740/90, Parnee to Alexander, 13 Aug. 1891.

⁶⁸ NAR, II, 1/64, 4740/90, Alexander to Mayor, Aug. 1891. ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

'turned on the officers, and many of them had narrow escapes from serious injury ... The Indians, worked up to such a frenzy, were ready for almost anything'.⁷⁰ That evening, when municipal employees were returning home, the police asked them to use an alternate route in order to bypass the railway barracks. They refused, on the grounds that 'if we sneak home this way they will think we are afraid of them'. As municipal workers passed the railway barracks, they 'were pelted with a storm of missiles of every description, mostly coal'.⁷¹ The following morning, railway workers challenged municipal workers to a fight. 'The invitation was promptly accepted, and they swarmed out in hundreds.' The police forced both parties to retire to their barracks. At railway barracks about a thousand Indians stoned the police, who 'at first had to retreat, so dangerous was the "fire" to which they were subjected'. Constable Welsh was hurt in a 'cross fire of stones ... which will likely incapacitate him from duty for several days. After some time peace was restored'.⁷²

This attack on the police was not isolated. In another incident, a policeman who tried to stop a confrontation between warring factions was knocked unconscious when both groups turned on him. When the police heard of this, 'the kaffirs [Africans] with their knobkerries were sent out'.

As soon as they saw a tazzia, 'they fell upon the crowd, the Indians ran for their lives and the pagoda was smashed to smithereens'. It later transpired that the police had destroyed the tazzia of an innocent party. When the wronged Indian, 'with a heap of tinsel', wanted to lay a charge against the police for destroying his 'god', Alexander gave him a sovereign to settle the matter.⁷³ Alexander felt that many of the approximately 3,500 Indians who were arrested annually in Durban used the Muharram as an opportunity to 'take advantage and settle old scores' against the police.⁷⁴ The preconceived notions that they were dealing with 'fanatics' resulted in the police reacting harshly against Muharram processions. Meldrum witnessed police violence that he considered unwarranted. He reported that while Indians were marching with their pagodas the police 'decided that in defiance of custom the procession not move any further in that direction. Result: what had been a playful cat turned into a growling tiger'.⁷⁵

The authorities were determined to bind and regulate Muharram processions. The Durban Town Council (DTC) wanted to ban street processions in 1887, but the Colonial Secretary advised that a gathering only became unlawful if it acted in 'a violent and turbulent manner to the terror of the people'. The fact that a lawful gathering such as the Muharram might subsequently become unlawful was not sufficient grounds to impose a ban.⁷⁶ The Mayor of Durban informed the Colonial Secretary in 1891 that the festival 'has become an intolerable nuisance, resulting only in drunkenness and riot'.⁷⁷ In 1891, Alexander urged the authorities to 'put a stop to this absurd annual Indian Pagoda parading business about our streets ... [Other-

⁷⁰ *Natal Advertiser*, 22 Apr. 1902. ⁷¹ *Natal Advertiser*, 24 Apr. 1902. ⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Recollections of Alexander, 23 Apr. 1902.

⁷⁴ Annual Police Report, 1902. University of Durban-Westville Documentation Centre, Accession No. 957/2059. ⁷⁵ Meldrum, 'Moharrem festival'.

⁷⁶ NAR, CSO, 2752/87, Colonial Secretary's Office to Mayor of Durban, 12 Sept. 1887.

⁷⁷ NA, II, 1/64, 4740/91, Mayor of Durban to Colonial Secretary, 1 Oct. 1891.

wise] we may expect shortly to have an army of these scull-breaking fanatics taking charge of our Borough'.⁷⁸ In July 1892, Alexander queried from the town clerk what the 'wishes of the Council are upon the Coolie Christmas after the result of the festival last year, and the Indians themselves wish to know their position'.⁷⁹ The confrontation between railway and municipal Indians in 1902 was the last straw for Alexander, who was determined to regulate the festival. He urged that 'in future this festival tomfoolery be suppressed ... The Indians have no right to carry out this debauchery in our main streets'.⁸⁰ In 1902, Alexander opined that the Muharram was 'nothing more than an excuse for drunkenness, riotous conduct, and vengeful feelings towards those parties they may have a grudge against, particularly the police'.⁸¹ In a memorandum to the mayor in 1902, Alexander considered the Muharram a danger to the public 'especially situated as we are in the midst of a large Native population, who are becoming yearly more interested in this festival. The fact is, the hordes of Indians who carry out this fanatic ceremony have no religion at all, and do not in any way follow the instructions laid down in the Koran'.⁸²

As a result of Alexander's clamourings, measures were eventually introduced to regulate the festival. From 1902, police were given instructions to prevent the 'unseemly noise made on the Tom-Toms', to bar Indians 'insufficiently clothed or in any dress likely to frighten children from the public thoroughfare', and to prevent pagodas from obstructing public roads.⁸³ The new measures satisfied Alexander, who reported in 1904 that with the exception of two Indians arrested for disobeying the police, 'the Indian community generally behaved better than on any previous occasion'.⁸⁴ Alexander was pleased that in 1905 the 'principal day passed off very quiet and orderly'; yet 'the night previous was to most intolerable'. Alexander was determined to prohibit the night parades preceding the festival because they were a source of 'annoyance' to white citizens and the heavy consumption of alcohol had a harmful affect on Indian behaviour on the tenth. He therefore appealed for a 9.00 pm curfew on the night preceding the tenth.⁸⁵ In 1906, Alexander again called on the government to 'stop the hideous night parade in our streets and reckless consumption of drink'. This time the government relented. Night parades were prohibited and Indians were only allowed one day, the tenth, to observe the festival.⁸⁶ The enforcement of these laws, which were made more stringent in subsequent years, modified the form of the Muharram and limited the potential for violence by introducing strong police control over proceedings.

⁷⁸ NA, II, 1/64, 4740/91, Alexander to Mayor of Durban, Aug. 1891.

⁷⁹ NAR, DTC, 5/2/5/3/5, Alexander to Durban Town Clerk, 4 July 1892.

⁸⁰ *Natal Advertiser*, 24 Apr. 1902.

⁸¹ Annual Police Report, 1902.

⁸² Memorandum from Alexander to Mayor, 23 Apr. 1902. University of Durban-Westville, Documentation Centre, Accession No. 957/2057.

⁸³ Annual Police Report, 1902.

⁸⁴ NAR, 3/DBN, 5/2/5/4/1, Report of the Superintendent of Police, 6 Apr. 1904.

⁸⁵ NAR, 3/DBN, 5/2/5/3/2, Report of the Superintendent of Police, 3 Apr. 1906.

⁸⁶ *Natal Advertiser*, 5 Feb. 1906.

MUHARRAM AND THE HINDU REFORM MOVEMENT

In addition to pressure from the police and government, educated Hindus and religious leaders also attempted to curb Hindu participation in the Muharram, albeit towards the end of the period under review. The early opportunities offered by mission schools resulted in the emergence around the turn of the century of a small western-educated class of colonial-born Hindus. Some of them were critical of the practices of the Hindu masses. An editorial in 1906 in *African Chronicle*, whose editor P. S. Aiyar personified this elite, argued that local Pandits (Hindu religious leaders) who had very little formal education were exploiting the belief of the masses in superstition and idolatry.⁸⁷ *African Chronicle* noted in another editorial in 1909 that 'it is the lowest strata of the labouring classes, just for fun and frolic, that make all the fuss, and noise, and disgrace themselves ... We do not see how these confounded Tom-Tomming and hideous display of fantastic figures, can have any sanction from true religious doctrine'.⁸⁸ "Bhessmasoor" complained in April 1907:

Hindoos ought to consider that the world is laughing at them on their moral degradation and stupidity in taking part in the Festival of Mohammedans. Let me hope that the Colonial-born Hindoos would try to put a stop to their compatriots taking part in this festival.⁸⁹

B. Mahatho considered it:

Very grievous that the Hindi community, ignorant of the fact that Hussain was murdered by another Muslim took part in a celebration that is opposed to a part of the Mahomedan section, and still more so to the lofty religious views of the Hindoos and it is equally opposed to common sense.⁹⁰

Aiyar also condemned Muharram as a 'waste of money [which] benefits no-one but the beer shops and the Tom-Tom drummer ... Our countrymen would do better service by utilising the same amount for some national purpose'.⁹¹

Despite these individual objections, local educated Hindus were too few in number and powerless to have a discursive impact on the mass of Indians. It was only with the arrival of missionaries from India that they cohered as a group and were able to take up issues that were of concern to them. Missionaries who began arriving from India from 1905 were adherents of the Arya Samaj movement, founded in Bombay in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1825–83). The Samaj focused on restructuring Hindu society by abolishing the caste system and eradicating rituals considered outside the fold of Hinduism.⁹² The first Hindu missionary to visit Natal was Bhai Parmanand, who arrived on 5 August 1905. He formed in 1906 the Hindu Young Men's Society (HYMS), which implored its members to study Tamil, to visit India to understand their culture and religion, and educate their children.⁹³ His mission was continued by Swami Shankeranand, who arrived in October 1908 to work 'for the betterment of the Hindu nation and Indians generally'.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ *African Chronicle*, 4 May 1906.

⁸⁸ *African Chronicle*, 13 Dec. 1909.

⁸⁹ *African Chronicle*, 24 Apr. 1909.

⁹⁰ *African Chronicle*, 2 Jan. 1909. ⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² T. Naidoo, *The Arya Samaj Movement in South Africa* (Delhi, 1992), 7.

⁹³ *African Chronicle*, 4 May 1907.

⁹⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 21 Mar. 1908.

The arrival of these missionaries and formation of HYMS resulted in a more sustained condemnation of the participation of local Hindus in Muharram. At Umgeni Temple, the Swami 'in strong terms, denounced and rebuked the Hindoos for taking part in Mohurram but ignoring their own festivals, yet insisting on being called Hindoos'.⁹⁵ The Swami was annoyed that employers granted Hindus leave during Muharram but not Diwali, the festival of lights, which Hindus celebrate as a sign of joy at the homecoming of Shri Ramachandra to Ayodha approximately 3,000 years before. The Swami asked the government to set aside 12 November 1909 as a religious holiday for indentured Indians to celebrate Diwali. The Protector refused because he believed that Diwali was essentially celebrated by 'better class' Indians. He was 'not at all convinced that the general indentured population of the Colony would wish this day set apart'.⁹⁶

In January 1910, the Swami distributed circulars on plantations calling on Hindus to boycott Muharram and to observe Diwali. The Protector again warned that 'care will have to be taken lest the opinion of the few people living in Durban should be regarded as representing the opinions of the Hindoo Indians in the Colony'.⁹⁷ In October 1910, the Swami pleaded with the Protector to grant Hindu workers leave during Diwali:

Should not this day be made a general holiday for the Hindus you should not expect the common labourers to understand their interest. You will help them immensely if you stop the Pagoda holiday and will substitute the same with Devali. By so doing you could save them from the evil influence of the Mohammadans.⁹⁸

This time the Protector asked the Durban and Pietermaritzburg municipalities to consider granting leave to Indians to celebrate Diwali on 1 November 1910.⁹⁹ While the Durban municipality granted leave to its employees,¹⁰⁰ the town clerk of Pietermaritzburg replied that Indians desiring leave should apply in the ordinary way and 'favourable consideration' would be given if services were not disrupted.¹⁰¹ HYMS also reported in January 1910 that the Education Department had declared Diwali a school holiday.¹⁰²

Despite these efforts on the part of missionaries and local educated Hindus, the majority of Hindus continued to participate in Muharram during the period under review. The Deputy Protector reported in 1910 that Muharram was well attended by Hindus 'although it is a Mahomedan occasion of mourning'.¹⁰³ The medical officer of Verulam supported this when he informed the Protector in October 1910, 'I have no information before me to justify, at present, any change. I do know that where the Indians

⁹⁵ *African Chronicle*, 9 Jan. 1909.

⁹⁶ NAR, CSO 299/1910, Protector Polkinghorne to Durban Town Clerk, 11 Nov. 1909.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ NAR, II, I/177, 12437/10, Swami Shankeranand to Protector Polkinghorne, 22-31 Oct. 1910.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Pandit Vedalankar, *Hindu Awakening in South Africa* (Durban, 1949), 18.

¹⁰¹ NAR, II, I/177, 12437/10, Pietermaritzburg Town Clerk to Protector Polkinghorne, 25 Oct. 1910.

¹⁰² Report of the Secretary T. M. Naicker, Durban Hindu Young Men's Society, Fourth Annual General Meeting. Published in *African Chronicle*, 22 Jan. 1910.

¹⁰³ NAR, II, 8/5, Report of the A. R. Dunning, Deputy Protector of Indian Immigrants, 1910.

were consulted they stated they did not want any change in the custom which has prevailed'.¹⁰⁴ As late as April 1909, the editor of *African Chronicle* complained that Hindus continued to participate by 'tom-tomming, the donning of hideous disguises, illicit drinking and a regular general jollification'.¹⁰⁵ It was only after Hinduism was placed on a more organized basis with the formation of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha in 1912,¹⁰⁶ at the instigation of the Swami, that the crusade of the Swami and other Hindus had a significant discursive impact on Hindu behaviour. Aside from Hindu organization, which was crucial in constructing new practices, changes in the character and form of Muharram after 1910 were also related to the end of indenture in 1911, urbanization, education, the changing socio-economic status of Indians, police pressure and debates among Muslims themselves about the 'true' custom and meaning of Muharram.

CONCLUSION

The extended length of the Muharram celebration, ten days, was perfectly suited to building a collective spirit. Through Muharram, which was a common cultural festival attracting the participation of the mass of Indians, Indian workers challenged official, white, definitions of respectability and culture in Natal. They did not restrain themselves, even though there was strong opposition to many of the activities associated with Muharram. Despite the fragmented nature of the 'community', Indians asserted their right to public spaces. Muharram was the only opportunity for Indians from self-contained plantations to meet in an environment that militated against this. It promoted intra- and inter-group cohesion through joint involvement and mutual cooperation. While group violence between Indians from different occupations and neighbourhoods was potentially divisive and perhaps reflected the rivalries of daily life, there was overall ritual unity between participants who were bound by the memory of Husain and the events at Karbala, the festival's time limit and convergence on the tenth. Muharram had a multi-religious participation and reflected significant Hindu influences. Collective participation had an integrative function that promoted fraternal feeling and 'Indianness'. Muharram provided an opportunity for developing and expressing a self-conscious local community identity, in the first instance, but also signalled the participation of Indians in a broader collective. Muharram strengthened links between the individual and 'community', and was important in constituting a diverse collection of people into a collectivity, while also excluding others, whites and Africans, notwithstanding local educated Hindus and religious missionaries from India whose efforts began to unravel distinct Hindu and Muslim identities in the period after 1910.

The festival of Muharram was an important aspect of Indian community formation, which must be understood in the context of the instrumental dimension of indentured labour. Indentured workers were imported to Natal as 'scabs', as a result of the refusal of most Africans to labour for white

¹⁰⁴ NAR, II, I/177, I2437/10, Medical Officer, Verulam to Protector Polkinghorne, 24 Oct. 1910.

¹⁰⁵ *African Chronicle*, 24 Apr. 1909.

¹⁰⁶ See G. Vahed, 'Swami Shankeranand and the consolidation of Hinduism in Natal, 1908-1914', *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 10 (1997), 3-35.

settlers. The laws and regulations that were framed in colonial Natal, racial attitudes that came to prevail, the geographic distribution of Indians, their distinctiveness in food and clothing preferences and so on, were shaped by this fact. Racial hierarchy and privilege were part of the imperial order, and the multiracial Natal setting was no exception. As Edward Said has pointed out, in a context of domination and submission the expanding colonial powers reduced the complexity of the Orient into a 'definite order of types, characters and constitutions'. The rationality of the Occident was contrasted with the social stationariness and child-like behaviour of the colonized to 'define, control and manipulate Orientals'.¹⁰⁷ Descriptions such as 'innate fanatical ideas', 'hideously decked', 'lurid', 'gaudily attired', 'strange weird sounds', 'fearsome' and 'naked fanatics' in the reports of newspapers and officials are indicative of the prejudices that whites created and harboured about Indians in Natal. The latter were seen as irrational, absurd, garish, over-zealous and fervent. Thus, I. M. Hunter, manager of the railway barracks, proposed in 1891 that the solution to Muharram violence was to 'have a white man living near the Barracks, who can exercise a moral influence over the people residing'.¹⁰⁸ While Muharram drew Indians together, the ideas associated with it led whites to create fears and prejudices about Indians. This led to the formation of a status hierarchy that was used to discriminate against Indians and to separate whites, Indians and Africans in schools, at work, in hospitals, jails and places of residence became the Natal norm.

¹⁰⁷ B. S. Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism* (London, 1994), 21.

¹⁰⁸ NAR, II, I/64, 4740/91, Hunter to Town Clerk of Durban, 18 June 1891.