

THE INDIAN PROBLEM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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PRINTED AT
THE AFRICAN CHRONICLE PRINTING WORKS,
45, AGNES ROAD, DURBAN,
NATAL, S.A.
1925

INTRODUCTION.

No excuse is needed for placing before the public this little volume, on, what is admitted on all sides to be, a very difficult problem, and, while I cannot see eye to eye with the author in all he says, I must, candidly, confess that most of the arguments he uses against the proposed Asiatic Bill are, to my mind, irrefutable.

It should, I conceive, be the aim of all legislation, so far as possible, to make for a contented people; for no country can ultimately prosper which attempts to repress an unenfranchised minority. The Bill in question is so palpably one sided—so un-British in its aims—and so patently aggressive to the Indian community as to make all fairminded people believe that those responsible for it are blind to the future welfare of South Africa. It must be remembered that the Indians were first introduced into Natal owing to the then very parlous state of the labour conditions; representations having been made to the Government of India, the latter agreed, in view of the very special inducements offered, to permit such immigration under contracts of indenture, one of the conditions of which was that such labourers should be returned to India after completion of their indentures. Subsequently, however, and with a view to retaining the Indian immigrants in the country, the Natal Government offered all who remained, plots of land as gifts! Many Indians took advantage of this offer and today we have thousands of their descendants (all born here) in our midst, a large proportion of whom are educated and own property in freehold, and yet, forsooth, it is proposed, by a stroke of the pen, to place such restrictions upon their freedom as to treat them as helots! In such drastic methods madness lies, for no country can hope to succeed, nor can any Empire endure, unless based on justice for all.

As one born in Natal and having spent nearly all his life here, I fully realize the importance of what is termed the "Indian menace." It is one which needs very serious con-

sideration, and, above all, tactful treatment to deal with—the problem is far too big to be dealt with in such a “steam-roller” method as is proposed. A very large majority of the Indians in this country were born here and know no more of India than the average European does—all their relations and friends, too, live here, yet it is deemed politic to introduce, what is wrongly termed “repatriation,” either directly or indirectly by a system of repression! Such means of dealing with the matter are doomed to failure. It is a principle of International law that no person can be sent away from the land of his birth against his will, unless as a punishment for some crime committed by him. In dealing, therefore, with this admittedly complex question, it behoves all legislators to bear in mind that, apart from the tint of their skins, Indians are imbued with the same aspirations for advancement—as are those of their rulers. Their colour alone should not, therefore, be deemed sufficient to treat them as aliens; and, if their just rights be assailed, their properties forcibly taken away from them (even though compensation be made therefor), and their freedom restricted, while having the right to be called, and deemed to be, “British subjects”—trouble must certainly ensue, not only in our midst but with the Indian Empire. History teaches us that any subject race must be allowed full opportunity for advancement, and that, if such opportunity be deliberately and ruthlessly denied, discontent and finally, serious, trouble must result. The sooner, therefore, we, as Britishers, realize that “what cannot be cured must be endured,” the better it will be for all parties concerned. The Indian is in our midst, *and will remain here*, and it is our duty to keep that fact in view. It is idle to attempt to deal with the matter without consulting the people most vitally concerned. The better class Indian has as much antipathy to have as his neighbour a low caste countryman wrongly called a “coolie” as a European has, and if, instead of treating—or attempting to treat,—all Indians alike, merely because of their “colour,” our legislators would consult with them, and seek their advice and aid, I am satisfied that good would ensue.

Another point that should be borne in mind is, that, when Natal first received her Charter, it was a special instruction to her first Commissioner “distinctly to declare that there shall not be, in the eye of the law, any distinction or disqualification

whatever, founded on mere distinction of colour, origin, language or creed; but that the protection of the law, in letter and in substance shall be extended to all alike." Moreover, when Her late Majesty Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India, she made the distinct promise that all her Indian subjects would at all times be free to travel to, and to reside in, any portion of her Dominions in like manner as all her other subjects!

I would, therefore, commend all—Europeans as well as Indians—to remember that, before any satisfactory solution can be come to of this most difficult problem, it is, above all things, necessary to approach the subject, determined to "give and take,"—a spirit of compromise is essential—and if, with such a spirit prevailing, it is also recognised that the Indian must live here, I cherish the hope that some *MODUS VIVENDI* will be evolved which, without sacrifice of principle on either side, may be the means of arriving at a satisfactory and peaceful settlement.

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11th November, 1925,
Durban, Natal.