

GUJARATI DUKAWALLAS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION A CASE STUDY OF NATAL (1880-1910)

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The settlement of Gujaratis is a key feature of the global Indian diaspora. Gujarati migrants settled in Fiji, North America, Australia and Africa. In the Diaspora they engaged primarily in entrepreneurial activities and the small scale storekeeper “dukawallas” became a distinct commercial element in Fiji, East Africa and South Africa. They often acquired a negative image because of their entrepreneurial skills and their ability to undersell their competitor. In South Africa, the early Gujaratis were known as “passenger” Indians, who formed the bulk of the trading class. They were often known as “Arabs”, “Bombay” and “Banyan” traders. They were predominantly Gujarati speaking Muslims and Hindu and settled mainly along the east coast, in Natal. This paper documents the early trading activities of the Gujarati “dukawallas” along the coastal districts of Natal, and shows how they were both a “menace”, a “curse” to some colonial settlers whilst for the African and indentured Indian labourers they played an important role in serving their economic needs in the colonial economy. Their narratives share similar trajectories of racial and trade biases with their counterparts in East Africa, Fiji and Rhodesia. The paper also seeks to add to discourses on maritime histories in the Indian Ocean region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Introduction

There are currently over a million Gujaratis living in the diaspora. Many have settled in North Americas, Africa and South East Asia. They are a diverse community, comprising of Muslims, Hindus, Zoroastrianism, Jains and Christians (Mukadam, 2012:2). They came mainly from present day Gujarat in western India, an area renowned for its entrepreneurial character. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the importation of indentured labour to the various parts of the British Empire led to the settlement of Gujarati communities East Africa, Fiji, Mauritius and South Africa. In Fiji, for example, they began arriving after 1900, by 1935 there were about 2,500 Indians of “passenger” origin residing in Fiji and by 1945 the “the Gujarati immigrants had established themselves as a visible Indian sub community” (Grieco, 1998: 723). From rural Gujarat and Punjab indentured labourers were recruited to work in East Africa to build the Ugandan railways in the early twentieth century. Other Indians of “passenger” status soon followed and settled in Kenya and Tanzania. In Natal, South Africa, the vast majority of Gujaratis arrived as “passenger” Indians from the late 1870s onwards and formed the bulk of the trading element in Natal. They differed from indentured Indians, in that they came under normal immigration laws, unencumbered by contractual obligations and were predominantly Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims and hailed mainly

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from what is now known as the State of Gujarat. "Passenger" migration to Natal was initially male centered, facilitated through chain migration, with fathers, relatives and friends providing financial and familial support for new arrivals. On arrival men engaged in a variety of occupations. Some engaged in both skilled and semi-skilled work: shoemaker, tailor, accountant, laundry worker, jeweler, salesmen, hawker (fruit and vegetables); a few were merchants whilst others engaged in petty trade "dukawallas" The latter dominated the African and Indian trade along the coastal districts in the 1880s and 1890s and laid the foundations of Indian commerce in Natal.

Scholarly inter-disciplinary literature on the Gujaratis in the diaspora has produced new and diverse insights of their migratory experiences in the context of identity, gender, agency, cultural capital, citizenship, transnational families, middleman minorities, religion and cultural change (Cohen, 1997; Markovits, 2000; Parekh, Singh, Vertovec, 2003; Lal, Reeves and Rai, 2007; Oonk, 2007, Oonk 2009, Oonk 2013; Mawani and Mukadam, 2012;). Studies on Gujarati global trade networks have argued that the "Gujarati diaspora was a logical outcome" largely attributed to Gujarat's sea-faring and overseas trade contacts over the centuries (Jha, 2007:41). This led to the establishment of Gujarati settlements in South East Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Gujarati traders facilitated trade through local and international trade network and credit facilities. They continued to play a dominant role in the era of British imperialism, monopolizing trade with Asia and Africa (Markovits, 2000:15) In Fiji by 1945 the Gujarati immigrants were "noted for their success in trade and commerce" (Grieco,1998:723). In East Africa Gujarati migrants were "central to the economic development of that region both before and during European colonial rule" and were credited with transforming East Africa's barter society into a money economy (Mangat,1969; Mehta, 2001:1738). The more established merchants (money-lenders) provided loans and had agents to collect taxes. The small scale trader the "dukawallas" was a visible figure who dominated the retail and caravan trade in East Africa (Mehta, 2001; Markovits, 2007: 265; Oonk 2006, 2013). Many rose from the ranks of indenture who at the expiry of their contracts engaged in trade and "formed the backbone of the class of small traders or dukawallas, which dominated trade in the interior of East Africa" (Padyachee and Morrel, 1991: 75; Markovits, 2007: 265). Recent studies on family histories in East Africa, provides a broader understanding of transnational migrant communities, more particularly Gujarati business history in the region in the context of moneylending, credit facilities and trade networks. It also illuminates the cultural, economic and social ties between Asia and Africa and reasons for Gujarati migration to East Africa (Oonk, 2009).

In South African historiography Indian commercial history has been documented from the vantage point of "passenger" Indians who dominated the colonial trade. The pioneering works by Bhana (1985, 1990) and Brain (1985,

1990) serve as a good entry point for scholars interested in the economic history of the Indian trading class in colonial Natal. Later works have sought to build on this foundation by highlighting their commercial networks and the impact of discriminatory legislation on Indian trade (Padayachee and Morrell, 1991; Hiralal, 2001, 2007). This paper adds to the current scholarship by documenting the lesser known trading activities of the Gujarati “dukawallas” along the coastal districts of Natal, such as Alexandra, Umlazi, Inanda and Lower Tugela. The Gujarati “dukawallas” was a familiar figure here and their trading activities have yet to be fully explored in this region. In colonial Natal the Indian commercial class - who were in the main petty traders “dukawallas” - were assigned various labels: “Banyan trader”, “Bombay merchant” and the most cited label in official correspondence - “Arab trader” –the latter attributable to their religious affiliation (the early traders, particularly in the 1880s and 1890s, were predominantly Muslim and their mode of dress, consisted of the “kurta” and “izaar” (trousers) and a skull cap (Turki topee). Hence in this paper I use the term Gujarati “dukawallas” and “Arab” trader synonymously. For many colonial traders the “dukawallas” was a “menace” and a “curse” to their livelihood, but for African and indentured Indian labourers they played an important role in serving their economic needs in the colonial economy. Their narratives share similar trajectories of racial and trade biases with their counterparts in East Africa, Fiji and Rhodesia. The paper seeks to add to discourses on maritime histories in the Indian Ocean region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also seeks to add to the emerging scholarship on the Gujaratis in South African historiography which has begun to gain momentum (Hiralal 2009; Hiralal and Rawjee, 2011; Bhana and Bhoola, 2011; Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2012; Hiralal 2013a; Hiralal 2013b).

Gujarati Trade and Traders in the Indian Ocean Region

Western India, given its close proximity to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea made it favourable to international trade since ancient times. Places such as Broach, Surat, Bombay (present day Mumbai) and Cambay became important trading posts in the early years of Indian history. Many Indians traded at foreign posts such as Aden and Mokha. In the seventeenth century, the arrival of the Dutch and British, boosted indigenous commerce in the form of new capital, shipping facilities and navigational technology. Gujarati traders extended their commercial ties across the Indian Ocean as far away as Manila in the 1660s. In the eighteenth century the handicraft trade flourished in Surat and became an important commercial centre (Subramanian, 1987, Kosambi, 1985: 32-34; 478; Padayachee and Morrell, 1991: 73). By the early nineteenth century the introduction of power-looms and spindles in England, and the use of steam power led to a displacement and decline in Indian handicrafts industries in western India. The poor economic conditions in western India “may in part explain why some, especially the younger, adventurous, members

of these merchant families were attracted in large numbers to Mauritius, East and south-eastern Africa from the 1830s (Padayachee and Morrell, 1991: 73).

Western India also had trading contacts along the East coast of Africa. Many Muslim traders, of the Bohra and Khoja sect, from Cutch, Kathiawad and Bombay migrated to Zanzibar. They dominated both the retail and African trade by the turn of the century (Gregory, 1971:41-43). Indian traders were also active in Mauritius, particularly the area around Port Louis. However, in the 1870s, Port Louis ceased to be an important commercial centre, as the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, created a new sea route between Europe and Asia, directly affected activities in Port Louis. It is possible that this factor, together with natural disasters (hurricanes) and outbreak of diseases, such as cholera and malaria prompted many traders and merchants to take the 'more direct route' to Natal (Padayachee and Morrell, 1991:74; Gregory, 1971: 170). Merchants and traders who arrived in colonial Natal via Mauritius in the 1870s were Aboobaker Amod, and Coovadia Hajee Hoosen Cassim. They were among the pioneer Muslim traders in Natal (Meer, 1980: 391; Swan, 1985:7)

Arrival of Gujarati Traders

The vast majority of "passenger" Indians who immigrated to Natal from the 1870s onwards was predominantly Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims. They came from small villages and towns located around the city of Surat, Bombay and the province of Kathiawad. They were motivated by both social and economic factors. For example, during the late nineteenth century Bombay and Kathiawad were hit by severe famines between 1896-1900. Many Gujarati Hindus were affected by these famines and sought better economic opportunities abroad. The presence of family and friends in Natal and tales of success provided important stimuli for emigration. Among the Gujarati speaking Muslims, the majority comprised of Memons from Porbander in Kathiawad, Sunni Bohras from Surat, and a small number of Urdu-speaking migrants from Konkan. The Sunni Bohras and Memons had for many decades established commercial links with traders in the Persian Gulf and East Africa. Gujarati Hindus hailed from Surat and the surrounding villages: Bardoli, Ghela, Kathor, Kholvad, Matvad Rander and Sisodra. In Kathiawad, the places of origin were Rajkot and Porbander and consisted of a cross section of Brahmins, Vaniks, Lohanas, Khatrees, Sonis (Pattanis and Girnaras). Many Gujarati Hindus worked as shop assistants, accountants to the more established traders, at other times ventured into business themselves. Those who came from Surat were often referred to as "Surtee" Gujaratis. Many also came from the nearby villages of Navsari and Bardoli. Those who came from Kathiawad were described as "Kathaiwaris" from the districts of Porbander, Rajkot and Ahmedabad (Bhana and Brain, 1990: 6; Hiralal 2009: 81-83). The Gujarati Hindus comprised of various caste groups which to a very large extent determined their positions in society. The caste or "jati" groupings assumed the following

hierarchical structure: the Patels and Desai belonged to the Brahmin caste; followed by the Soni's (gold and silversmiths), the mochi (shoemakers) and the dhobi (washer men). The hereditary division of labour was not necessarily rigid. Many Gujarati Hindus did engage in occupations that were outside their caste description. For example Gujarati Hindu males belonging to the "dhobi" caste group did not always adhere to caste occupations. A few engaged in the laundry trade, while others took to hawking fruit and vegetables and serving as accountants to larger Indian firms (Desai, 1997: 44–45; Hiralal, 2009:81-83).

Early Settlement in Durban

During the colonial period, South Africa was politically structured as follows: the British colonies of Natal and the Cape Colony and the Afrikaner Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The vast majority of "Arab" traders were mainly concentrated in Natal, most notably the port city of Durban and its coastal districts, whilst others moved inland to Pietermaritzburg. Durban and its coastal districts were attractive to "Arab" traders for two reasons: Firstly, the presence indentured labourers who were mainly concentrated in this region and secondly, Durban was highly developed in terms of transport and communication. In addition, the hostile and anti-Indian attitudes towards Indians in the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State, together with restrictions on land ownership and trade, led to high levels of concentration of Indian traders in the Natal region. In the late nineteenth century the region was divided into several magisterial districts. The coastal districts: Umzinto, Lower Tugela, Inanda, Mapumulo, Lower Tugela, Port Shepstone and Durban; the midland districts of Lions River, Ixopo,, Richmond, Impendle, Pietermaritzburg, New Hanover, Camperdown, Umvoti, Kranskop, Polela and Underberg; the interior districts of Klip River, Newcastle, Dundee, Bergville, Estcourt, Weenen, Msinga and Helpmekaar.

Durban, became an important sea port town during the 1850s, with retail and wholesale firms, financial institutions, a transport network and small scale manufacturing. By 1854, Durban became a municipality with an elected town council (Fair, 1955: 12; Wyley, 1986: 5). Until the 1870s the majority of Durban's urban population was predominantly white, however, the influx of ex-indentured Indians changed the demographics of the city's population. In 1875 the Indian population in Durban totaled 698, in 1891: 5488 and in 1899:9562 (Swanson: 1983:404). Many ex-indentured labourers, chose not to re-indenture and were employed in non-agricultural tasks such as waiters, servants, artisans, petty traders, hawkers, boatmen and fishermen (Arkin, 1981: 47-48). In Durban the spatial demographics of indentured and ex-indentured labourers, as well as African labourers, led to a scattering of Indian stores and homes across the city centre: the West End of West Street, northern part of Field Street, boundary of the Western Vlei. In the 1890s, the main Indian commercial centre was primarily located in

Grey Street, as well as Pine Street and Commercial road (Swanson, 1983:418). The business directory of the Natal Almanac and Yearly Register and the Voters' List for the Borough of Durban provide valuable information on the occupation and residential addresses on Gujarati traders. The List shows that the early traders settled and traded initially in West Street but later moved to Grey, Field, Commercial and Victoria Streets (Swanson, 1983: 418; Natal Government Gazette, 1885-1908). Gujarati traders also rented and owned valuable property in West Street (the main commercial street) which is indicative of their commercial success. For example between 1885 and 1886, 7 "Arabs" were renting property, and 1 owned property. In 1894, property rentals increased to 34, in 1900, property ownership totaled 27 and in 1905 property rentals totaled 30 (Natal Government Gazette, 1885-1908). By the early 1890s there were about 5,500 "passenger" Indians in Natal in a total Indian population of 41,000 (Swanson, 1983: 404). However, by the late 1890s the number of Gujarat traders owning property in the prime trading area, West Street, declined. This was largely due to anti-Indian trade hostility on the part of colonialists, who viewed the "Arab" or Indian trader as an economic threat. Their agitation led to a sustained attitude of marginalization of Indian traders, in the context of issuing new trade licenses and renewals and confining Indian trade to specific locations away from the main commercial area.

Gujarat traders were very diversified in their trade. A few were wholesale merchants whilst the vast majority were petty traders and hawkers. They sold Indian groceries and condiments such as dhol, tumeric, ghee, rice, clothing and fresh produce. A few Gujaratis invested in real estate subletting houses, offices and shops. A visitor in Durban between 1902-1903, describing the shops along the north side of West Street stated:

They were mostly clothing shops or fruiterers, kept by Indians all neat and clean....They have also spread east of Grey Street, and there is one shop, where Indian curios are sold, on the south side of the street.....One meets many respectable Indians in the streets, generally Bombay men, who are evidently traders, as distinct from the coolies who mostly come from Madras, but a few from Calcutta." (Wyley, 1986:13).

Settlement Along the Coastal Districts of Natal

Beyond Durban, Gujarati traders also settled along the coastal districts of Natal, particularly in the magisterial districts of Inanda, Lower Tugela, Alexandra and Umlazi. The presence of a large indentured population in this region provided a lucrative trade for many Gujarati traders. Many indentured labourers were employed in the tea, sugar, maize and tobacco plantations. In 1860, 782 labourers were employed along the coastal districts, in 1875: 8877, in 1880: 14035 and in 1908: 14917 (Arkin, 1981: 44).

Along the north coast, Inanda, was the chief centre for sugar production in the 1880s, employing approximately 60% of the total indentured Indian population,

approximately 9,157 indentured Indians (Fair, 1955:17). Gujarati traders settled in this region as early as 1883, particularly in areas such as Victoria, Avoca, Phoenix, Oakford, Bridgeford, Blackburn, Mt. Moreland and Mt. Edgecombe. That year the Resident Magistrate issued 32 retail shop licenses, mainly to “Arab” traders. In 1884, during the economic depression in Natal, many Indian traders continued to prosper, whilst a few colonial traders succumbed to bankruptcy. The Resident Magistrate AE Titren in 1884 penned his views on the growing economic competition in this area during the depression:

A few more Indian stores have been opened in the town of Verulam during the year, and two European stores have been closed for want of support, the Indians having entirely absorbed the petty trade, as well as that with Indians and Natives” (Annual Report by Resident Magistrate, Inanda, 1886: 35).

A perusal of retail trade licenses issued by the Resident Magistrate and his clerk for the Inanda district to “Arab” traders for the six months ending 31st December 1884, (Refer to Table 1) shows that “Arab” traders continued to prosper despite the economic depression in the region.

TABLE 1: LIST OF LICENSES ISSUED BY THE RESIDENT
MAGISTRATE FOR INANDA 1884

<i>Area</i>	<i>Whites (Colonial traders)</i>	<i>Indians (mainly “Arabs”)</i>
Victoria	4	14
Bridgeford	4	6
Blackburn	11	5
Mt. Moreland	2	6
Mt. Edgecombe	2	6
Avoca	-	6
Phoenix	-	4
Greenwood Park	-	3
Umgeni	-	17
Springvale	-	1
Inanda	1	-
Umhlanga	1	-
Location	3	-
Duff’s Road	1	4
Oakford	-	3
Total	29	75

Source: Annual Report by the Resident Magistrate, Inanda, 1886, Blue Books for the Colony of Natal, 35.

In the same year, the Town Board of Verulam, a nearby town to Inanda, issued 42 retail licenses, 14 to Whites and 28 to “Arab” traders. In 1885 “Arab” and Indian traders had secured 75% of the trade in the Inanda Division. In that year, the Resident Magistrate issued 70 retail licenses of which 12 were to Europeans, 6 to Africans and 52 to Indians. In addition, 22 wholesale licenses were issued, 5 to

Whites and 17 to “Arab” and Indian traders. Thus by 1886, at the height of the depression in the Natal colony, the “Arab” traders had firmly established themselves in the Inanda Division. The Resident Magistrate Titren reiterated, “The small shops in the town are principally in the hands of the Arabs” (Annual Report by the Resident Magistrate, Inanda, 1886: 35). Statistical evidence further attests to this fact: In 1886, 64 retail licenses were issued to “Arab traders” and 12 to Whites and 4 to Africans; 3 hawkers licenses were issued to “Arab traders” and 1 to a White, and 7 wholesale licenses were issued to “Arabs” and 5 to Whites (Annual Report by the Resident Magistrate, Inanda, 1886: 35).

The business acumen and astute nature of the Gujarati traders was most noticeable in their endeavors at exploring various avenues of profit. They forged economic ties with locals in the area, particularly ex-indentured Indians and Africans in the bartering and trading of fresh produce and commercial crops. For example in Inanda, many ex-indentured labourers took to farming after their contracts expired. They had small-holdings ranging from 3 to 5 acres, whilst the more prosperous farmer had a larger acreage ranging between 15-20. The chief commodities grown were maize and garden produce (Meer, 1980:321). Farmers living in close proximity to Verulam grew vegetables to supply the local town population as well as “Arab” traders at very “good prices”. Many ex-indentured Indians also grew tobacco, having being encouraged by “Arab” traders to do so for exportation. The keen business acumen and the prosperous nature of the “Arab” trader was reiterated by the Resident Magistrate for Inanda, WH Beaumont in his report for the year 1892-1893:

The Bombay Indians, or Arabs as they are called, are the principal storekeepers. They are, no doubt, keen and successful traders, and secure the bulk of the trade with both Indians and Natives (Annual Report of the Resident Magistrate, Inanda, in Blue Book, 1893: 54).

By the beginning of the twentieth century “Arab” traders had monopolized both the retail and wholesale trade in the Inanda division. By 1903, 85% of the retail trade was monopolized by the “Arab” traders and only 15% by the colonial traders. Table 2 shows at a glance the position of “Arab” traders in relation to the colonial trader in the Inanda Division for the years between 1900-1903.

The licenses in Table 2 also includes those issued within the town of Verulam by the Local Board. The Resident Magistrate Beaumont penned in his report in 1902:

There are very few Europeans in this Division.....The Native and Indian trade of the Division is almost exclusively in the hands of Indian, so-called Arab storekeepers, who have places of business, scattered all over the country, as well as in the villages (Annual Report of the Resident Magistrate, Inanda, Blue Book, 1902: 20).

Gujarati traders also settled further north along the coast in the Lower Tugela Division. Like the Inanda Division there were several tea and sugar plantations

TABLE 2: RETAIL, HAWKERS AND WHOLESALE LICENSES ISSUED TO INDIAN (ARABS) AND WHITE COLONIAL TRADERS IN INANDA BETWEEN 1900-1903

<i>Year</i>	<i>Retail Licenses</i>		<i>Wholesale Licenses</i>		<i>Hawkers licenses</i>	
	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Indians (mainly Arabs)</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Indians (mainly Arabs)</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Indians (mainly Arabs)</i>
1900	12	79	3	14	1	16
1902	16	93	2	15	-	3
1903	17	100	3	13	2	24
Total	45	272	8	42	3	43

that employed indentured labourers. By the 1880s Gujarati traders had firmly established themselves in the area. In 1887, 55 retail licenses were issued in this Division, 24 to “Arabs”, and 31 to Europeans. Similar reports were also noted along the South coast districts of Natal, especially in Alexandra and Umlazi. Alexandra, like Inanda and Lower Tugela, had several maize, tea and tobacco plantations that depended on indentured labour. In 1885 there were 2584 Indians settled in Alexandra County (Meer, 1980: 315). Gujarati traders were scattered all over this Division as early as 1881. They sold a variety of goods ranging from Indian groceries, such as ghee, dhol and rice to goods for African consumption. They sold their wares cheap which made them popular with the African and indentured labourers. The Resident magistrate for Alexandra GA Lucas stated in 1885, “I am safe in saying the whole of the ready-made trade is in the hands of Indian storekeepers” (Annual Report of the Resident Magistrate, Alexandra, Blue Book, 1885: 9). Gujarati traders also forged business ventures with local sugar magnates and Indian farmers on staple items. For example, rice was the chief staple diet of indentured labourers. Sugar plantation owners would purchase their bulk supply from Gujarati traders whilst the latter bought sugar to be sold for local consumption. In this way Gujarati traders were able to secure good prices for their products and sell them cheaply to the local public. Well known Gujarati pioneer traders in Natal, such as Aboobaker Amod, had contracts with colonial sugar barons to supply indentured labourers with rice. By the 1880s, Arab traders had gained a foothold in Alexandra by monopolizing both the African and Indian trade. In 1888, the Resident Magistrate Lucas stated: “The Indian storekeepers have got the whole Native and coolie trade into their hands, which means the cash trade” (Annual Report of the Resident Magistrate, Alexandra, in Blue Book, 1888: 44). Table 3 shows retail licenses issued by the Resident Magistrate of Alexandra to White and Indian traders between 1889-1897.

Table 3 shows clearly “Arab” traders between 1889 and 1902 superseded the colonial trader. In fact the former held approximately 50% of the retail trade in this Division. However, by 1903 the colonial trader displaced the Indian trader in the

TABLE 3: RETAIL LICENSES ISSUED BY THE RESIDENT MAGISTRATE OF ALEXANDER 1889-1897

<i>Year</i>	<i>White (colonial trader)</i>	<i>Arab Trader</i>
1889	10	23
1890-91	10	19
30/6/1891	9	16
30/6/1893	12	23
30/6/1894	12	20
30/6/1895	11	18
1896	11	24
1897	13	25
Total		

Source: Natal Blue Book, Magisterial Reports, 1889-1898

retail trade. This was primarily attributed to the passing of the Licensing Law of 1897 which aimed at curtailing Indian trade through the non-issue of new licenses and renewals. Along the south coast of Natal in places like Umlazi, Gujarati traders were also affected by the licensing law, particularly in places like Isipingo, Bellair and Wentworth. Their presence was most noticeable in the early 1880s. In 1884, 62 retail licenses were issued and in 1885 it increased to 75, of which a very large proportion consisted of Indian traders (Natal Government Gazette, 8 July 1884, vol. XXXVI, no. 2067: 530-31; Supplement to the Blue Book of Natal, Departmental Reports, 1884-1886).

Gujarati “Dukawallas” and the African Trade

In East Africa the Gujarati “dukawallas” are credited for engaging in a flourishing trade with Africans and became leaders in the caravan trade (Markovitz, 2007:265). In Natal, similar successes can be noted in the context of the African trade. The Gujaratis initially came to serve the needs of the indentured labourers, but soon discovered the lucrative African market. Subsequently many Gujaratis set up exclusive African stores or “Kaffir stores” (as they were known then), catering mainly in African goods such as beads, cast iron pots, wooden and steel chests, cloth (printed calico), snuff, spoons and baskets. By the 1880s they became a distinctive trade element as many Indian stores were established on African reserves or location (commonly known then as Native Locations), which were set aside for African settlement. In the 1880s there were frequent references by Resident Magistrates on the success of the “Arab” traders in the “Native” trade. In the coastal districts of Alexandra, Umlazi, Inanda and Lower Tugela “Arabs” captured approximately 80% of the African trade. Table 4 shows a list of “Kaffir-stores” held by “Arab” and White traders in the colony for the coastal districts between 1894 and 1897.

TABLE 4: "KAFFIR-STORE" LICENSES HELD BY INDIAN (ARABS) AND WHITE TRADERS IN THE COASTAL DISTRICTS BETWEEN 1894-1897. SOURCE: THE STATISTICS WERE COMPILED FROM THE REPORTS OF THE RESIDENT MAGISTRATES ON NATIVE AFFAIRS, 1894-97

<i>Coastal Districts</i>								
<i>Year</i>	<i>Alexandra</i>		<i>Umlazi</i>		<i>Inanda</i>		<i>Lower Tugela</i>	
	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Indians</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Indians</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Indians</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Indians</i>
1894	12	22	14	82	15	37	-	-
1895	12	22	15	73	8	67	16	40
1896	11	24	14	99	9	73	17	49
1897	13	25	17	109	8	82	17	53
Total	48	93	60	363	40	259	50	142

Colonial farmers and missionaries in some areas were eager to lease land to "Arab" traders. For example, MA Kajee in 1905 held an annual lease at the Mapumulo Mission Station paying an annual rent of £30. "Arab" traders were even supported by African chiefs in the Locations. For example in 1908, an "Arab" trader Moosa applied for a trade license to open a store on a farm named, "Berling" owned by Thomas Martuis. It was located near the junction of the Umvoti and Rooi Spruit, which bordered an African Location. The farm owner, Martuis supported the application but the Under Secretary of Native Affairs, SO Samuelson, rejected the application, arguing that it was the policy of the Natal Native Trust to exclude "Arab" traders from African Locations (Secretary for Native Affairs (SNA), 1/1/392:473/1908). However, the farm on which Moosa sought trading rights adjoined the location which was inhabited by Chief Nhlola and his tribe. He was supportive of Moosa' application and stated:

"...we strongly prefer an Arab store to a European store as the prices for all goods sold by the farmer are cheaper, they also give us better prices for whatever we are able to sell." (SNA 1/1/392:473/1908).

The Gujarati "dukawallas" were popular with the African population in that they sold their wares cheaply and offered credit facilities to their customers. In times of an economic depression, which the colony of Natal experienced in the 1880s, they still managed to attract customers. In 1885 the Resident Magistrate for Alexandra, GA Lucus stated:

The European storekeepers have suffered in a greater degree than Indians. 14 general stores are kept by Europeans and 12 by Indians ...these latter (Arab traders) have cut the Europeans out practically altogether in Kaffir and Coolie trade. One, if not more of Indian stores in the village of Umzinto keep all sorts of goods required by the white population and undersell the European trader. I am safe in saying the whole of the ready-money trade is in the hands of Indian storekeepers...." (Report of the Resident Magistrate, Alexandra, Blue Book, 1885:62-63).

The settlement of the Gujarati “dukawallas” at various African Locations were often resented by the colonial trader. As early as 1883, D. Rood, a storekeeper at Groutville Mission Station, near Stanger, along the Natal north coast, wrote to the Secretary of Native Affairs, JW Shepstone, claiming that three “Arab” storekeepers were trying to “get a foothold on this station” (SNA, 1/1/67:891/1881). He further added that they were persuading a cash strapped colonial storekeeper who held an erf to allow them to rent a store on his premises. He stated, “You know without my saying that to let them into the station will open a door for much evil” (SNA 1/1/67:891/1881). The Resident Magistrate of Lower Tugela held similar views. He wrote to the Secretary of Native Affairs on 12 December 1883 stating that it was “highly undesirable that Arab storekeepers should establish themselves on the Groutville Mission Station” (SNA 1/1/67:891/1881).

Many “Arab” traders also moved north along the coast and filtered into Zululand. They were particularly active in Melmoth, which was the first township to be established in Zululand. In 1888, many invested in real estate to the value of over £2000 (Colonial Secretary’s Office (CSO), 1668:994/1901; Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), 1959, vol. I: 295-96, vol II: 61). However, their presence in this region was met with hostility and between 1891 and 1893 proclamations were issued by the Zululand administration curtailing the rights of Indians to live and trade in the newly established towns of Melmoth, Eshowe (established in 1891) and Nondweni (established in 1896). Colonial Officials were also keen on preventing “Arab” traders from occupying land in this area. Governor Sir Charles Mitchell of Natal, the officer charged with the supervision of Zululand affairs was:

Anxious to avoid the difficulties and troubles ... created in Pietermartizburg and Durban as well as in the small townships of this Colony (Natal) by the Banyan Indian trader. The presence of these men in a young community is of doubtful advantage to anyone, and in my opinion, of absolute disadvantage to the Native population...(Huttenback, 1971: 70).

However, African labourers, chiefs and some Resident Magistrates’ did not share the same sentiment. African labourers in Durban often purchased their wares from “Arab” stores in the city and when they returned to Zululand complained about the absence of these traders in the region. They urged the Zululand administration to grant “Arab traders” licenses so that they could procure their goods easily and cheaply. The Resident Magistrate for Mapumulo, WR Gordon, stated in 1896:

I think the policy of keeping these people to the towns and villages a bad one; they should be allowed to extend their places of business to the locations. This would have the tendency of withdrawing them from the towns. I would very much prefer to see them in the Native Locations bartering and trading with the Natives, which is the proper place for them; instead of, as at present, being concentrated in the towns to the detriment and annoyance of the European, while the Native in the locations is pining for their advent” (Report showing the condition of the Native Population in the Division of Mapumulo, 1896, Blue Book on African Affairs: 141).

Colonial Agitation

From the above accounts it becomes evident that whilst the Gujarati “dukawallas” was popular with the local African and indentured population, they were a “menace” and an “irritation” to some colonial settlers (Meer, 1980: 315). The *Times of Natal* reported in 1907, “The real coolie curse is the traders” (*Times of Natal*, 2 January 1907). Colonial officials and members of the Natal Legislative Assembly held similar views. D. Taylor (member for Durban County), during a debate in the Legislative Assembly on 30 July 1907 on “Asiatic Traders”, stated: “...these Arabs have come along and have lived on the proverbial smell of an oil rag, and they have gradually starved the white man out” (Legislative Assembly Debates, 30 July 1907: 405). Similar attitudes of hostility and trade jealousies towards the Gujarati “dukawallas” has been documented in Fiji and East Africa (Prasad, 1978; Oonk, 2006: 25).

Some colonialists attributed Natal’s acute trade depression in the 1880s and their subsequent insolvency to “Arab” traders. RN Acutt of the firm of Reid and Acutt of Durban stated, “The Arab trading has been one of the minor causes of the present depression” (Report of the Trade Commission 1885-86: 22-26). Similar sentiments were expressed in the pro-colonial newspaper the *Natal Witness* in 1886. A correspondent wrote:

I attribute this depression in a great measure to the Arabs and Coolies. They compete against the white man everywhere. Eventually there can be nothing but the extinction of the white trading and farming classes. These Asiatics prosper on a profit that would not find white man in food.” (*Natal Witness*, 8 April 1886).

However, whilst many colonial traders did succumb to insolvency during this time, it would wrong to assume that “Arab” traders were immune to the economic depression. Many succumbed to insolvency. For example, in 1883, 26 traders (including hawkers and grocers) became insolvent of whom 21 were Whites and 5 Indians. In 1884, 30 traders became insolvent, 19 Whites and 11 Indians; 1885, 15 traders were listed as insolvent of whom 7 were whites and 8 Indians (Natal Government Gazette, 1883-1885). However, the rate of insolvency amongst “Arab” traders was not as high as the colonial traders. This can be attributed to the relatively simple and inexpensive lifestyle they followed and the fact that they “live much cheaper than Europeans” (Klip River Division, Annual Report 1885, Blue Book: 54). Furthermore, he sold his wares cheaply, worked long hours and was content to live on a small profit margin, since many of their families were still based in India.

The monopolization of the African trade in the 1880s was another serious grievance by colonialists against the “Arab” trader. HY Chambers, MJ Farrell and Andrew Wilson formed a deputation from the Natal Working Men’s Association and gave evidence at the Trade Commission (which was set up to investigate the causes of the economic depression in Natal in the 1880s), raised strong objections

to the presence of “Arab” traders interfering with “our trade.” (Report of the Trade Commission 1885-86: 8). They stated, “They act as very noxious middle-men in the Kaffir trade. They infest all the crossroads, and lurk about the European trading stations, where they influence the Natives....” (Report of the Trade Commission 1885-86: 8-9). Statistical data, to some extent, confirms the “Arab” monopoly of the African trade. For example in 1861 there were about 500 traders in Zululand, mainly whites. Between 1860 and 1871, there were approximately 200 European “Kaffir” stores in Natal; 75% of these were gradually taken over by “Arabs”. Durban was hardest hit. By 1887 there were not more than 10 European “Kaffir” stores (Meer, 1980: 375). However, the success of the “Arab” monopoly on the African trade was due to a number of factors. They sold a variety of African commodities cheaply, offered their customers credit facilities and were not hesitant in establishing stores in rural and isolated areas.

Whilst there were growing voices of dissent among the colonialists, there were however, a few, supportive of the “Arab” trader. For example, Harry Escombe, member of the Legislative Assembly, believed the presence of the “Arab” was a “benefit of the whole country”, and “No legislation will keep them out” and (Pachai, 1971:10-11). The more established merchants such as Thomas McCubbin and Beningfield and Son supported this view, claiming they “had the right to trade just like Europeans” (Report of the Trade Commission 1885-86: 26).

However, by the early 1890s the growing anti-Indian sentiments manifested itself in the passing of legislation that would curb the economic mobility of the “Arab” traders. It led to the introduction of Act 18 of the General Dealers’ Licensing Bill. This legislation proved to be a real threat to the livelihood of Gujarati traders. The legislation conferred arbitrary powers to Town Councils and Town Boards in the issuing of retail and wholesale licenses. Traders had to comply with sanitary regulations and account books had to be kept in English. Even more devastating was the fact that there was no right of appeal if a license was denied (Legislative Assembly Debates, 25 March 1897, vol. 25:97). Whilst the legislation did not specifically mention Indians it was aimed at subtly, curtailing Indian commerce in Natal. There were numerous “Arab” traders affected by the General Dealers’ Licenses act and Indian trade licenses were gradually reduced. For the “Arab” traders their economic challenge became particularly acute during the first decade of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Thus the Gujarati “dukawallas” played a key role in laying the foundations of Indian commerce in Natal. Their success can be attributed to their long working hours, a strong commercial zeal, diversification of their trade and their ability to adapt to new environments. However, the Gujarati “dukawallas”, was both a popular and a despised figure in colonial Natal. For the local population, in particular African

and indentured labourers, he catered well for their needs, stocking a variety of Indian and African wares at low prices and provided good credit facilities. For many colonial traders he was “destructive to the welfare of Europeans” and a “serious element” to their livelihood (Report of the Superintendent of Police, 1889: 16). These anti-Indian sentiment manifested itself in discriminatory trade legislation which ultimately had a severe impact on the growth and expansion on Indian trade during the first decade of the twentieth century. The Gujarati “dukawallas” survived, against great odds in the colonial economy, but their position fared no better after 1910, when South Africa became a Union.

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