



Bill Freund. *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1995. xv + 132 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-435-08961-0; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-435-08959-7.

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Bill Freund's *Insiders and Outsiders*

Durban is a port on the eastern coast of South Africa that became significant after Britain annexed the Colony of Natal in 1843. It thereafter developed into the leading commercial gateway for the Transvaal Republic.

During the 1860s an Indian immigration scheme was inaugurated, mainly to provide indentured labour for the expanding sugar plantations. Most of these Indians settled in Natal once their indentures expired, to become either peasant farmers or traders. Many in turn eventually migrated into the burgeoning harbour town. It is this latter group that particularly interests Bill Freund and that is the primary subject of his latest book, *Insiders and Outsiders*.

Freund is a professor of economic history at the University of Natal (Durban), where he was recently honoured with the title of Fellow of the University. He is the author of *The African Worker* and *The Making of Contemporary Africa*, and he has a host of journal articles to his name.

Insiders and Outsiders is primarily a study in economic history. The author attempts, he says, to look at economic development and institutions "from below" in terms of the "interplay of social forces and initiatives" of particular classes and cultural formations "at grassroots level." "How and why," he asks, "did Durban become the city that it is?"

Freund saw the Indian working class as a "particular analytical challenge" in that, although they suffered from discrimination and had a history of poverty, they nevertheless contrasted with the African working class by having "no barriers to free movement of labour" and "no restrictions on combining into trade unions." The reason, he says, is that few Africans settled in Durban until the 1940s, which made the Indian working class a unique and extremely important entity.

The publication, Freund states, is merely a "first introduction" to some of the themes in the cultural and social

history of the Indian community in Durban. It is intentionally a short book, he says, which is focused on "large structural concerns" rather than an in-depth study "that might be pursued over many years." He warns that it should not be seen as a history of the Indian community as such (pp. xi-xii). Instead, the book is divided into six relatively short chapters that have no obvious links to each other.

CHAPTER 1: "A Passage from India: Indentured Immigrants Come to Natal, 1860-1911"

Freund's opening chapter gives an overview of the introduction of Indians into Natal from 1860 until 1911, at which point the immigration and indenture schemes were discontinued. It was, he points out, purely a labour procuring strategy but which would nevertheless solve problems for both the Whites in Natal and for the Indians themselves: it would provide labour, especially for the growing sugar industry, but at the same time would help in alleviating conditions of overpopulation and poverty in India (pp. 1-5).

The writer examines the indenture system under which the Indians lived and which he sees as being much akin to slavery (pp. 6-7). He then gives an all too brief overview of the construction of organised Indian religion and the place of the caste system or the lack thereof. This is followed by a brief discourse on the evolution of the Indian language in Natal (pp. 8-9).

In a sense, Freund's determination to provide merely an overview is the reason for this chapter's being rather thin. He leaves so many questions unanswered despite his attempt at singling out other works on the topic. One also has the feeling that he is attempting to approach the subject too much from a late-twentieth-century "politically correct" (South African leftist) analysis. There is little attempt at understanding either the people or the events of the time but rather a simplistic acceptance that it was a form of neo-slavery, despite indications given in

the text that the Indian immigration was to the mutual benefit of both sides: the Indians and the employers.

CHAPTER 2: "Heaven on Earth in Springfield Flats: The Peasant Option"

This is another overview chapter which looks mostly at the peasant Indian on the urban periphery. Freund examines the two types of peasant: those closer to Durban who lived on small plots and concentrated on market gardening and those further from the town, whose chief concern was in the production of sugar cane (pp. 11-23).

The writer thereupon takes a sweep of history through the interwar period, to the 1940s with its movement toward industrialisation, to the 1950s with the introduction of Verwoerdian apartheid with its special scheme for Indians, to the sanctions era of the 1970s and 1980s (pp. 23-28). It would seem almost too big an overview to handle, but it is possible that the author is gearing us for the second half of the book where he needs to presume some of this information.

CHAPTER 3: "The Edge of Town: Durban and the Indian Working Class, 1900-1930"

The third chapter is a loosely knit exposition of what Freund calls "the phase of post indenture settlement." It is an examination of the conditions under which the working class Indians lived and worked. From a brief description of the evolution of Durban from commercial port to an industrialised city, the writer analyses a medley of features of Indian urban settlement, from labouring skills to types of housing, family and social units, sport and recreation, poverty and hygiene, and finally the movement toward trade unionism.

CHAPTER 4: "'It Is My Work': about Segmentation and Militancy, 1935-1960"

This is one of the better chapters and in many ways it is a pity that the book did not begin at this point. Freund takes a fresh look at Indian worker militancy which arose during the 1940s and tries to explain why it occurred and why it ended, with an attempt at interpreting its significance. In doing so he refers to several case studies of Indian strikes during the period.

The analysis is well put together and convincing. The writer argues that the episode hinged on the "racially segmented labour market and its stresses," the interplay of "class and ethnic identities and struggles" and the attempt by the White capitalists to use the race issue to divide the workers and so destroy the militancy.

CHAPTER 5: "Destroying Communities: The Impact of Group Areas, 1950-1980"

Another good chapter, in which the author examines the impact of Grand Apartheid on the Indian community after 1950. Freund argues that, although apartheid was naturally linked to earlier attempts by the Durban municipality to move Indians so as to wipe out slums and to make more land available for industrialisation, the Group Areas Act was more draconian in that it moved some 80% of the Indian population into new areas demarcated along lines of both race and class.

The author examines the background to this movement, showing that it was not necessarily unwelcome to the Indian community, many of whom scored by it. He also shows how the movement was never fully implemented so that, with the collapse of apartheid during the 1980s, many people had succeeded in resisting the forced removals to new areas.

CHAPTER 6: "Insiders and Outsiders: The Working Class of the Apartheid Era, 1960-1990"

This final chapter looks at a number of themes relating to the working class during the apartheid era. Freund examines the evolution of the Indian bourgeoisie during the twenty-five years of rapid economic growth after World War II and the various effects that this had on the Indian proletariat. There emerged, he says, the view amongst Whites that the Indian was a hard-working and thinking person. This in turn resulted in a shift away from the negative attitudes of White employers so that Indians began to be given preference over Africans in the work-place. The years of increasing prosperity also led to the emergence of Indian women in the work place (pp. 77-80).

Freund then goes on to discuss other crucial elements of the apartheid era. He looks at the acceptance of the fact that the Indian was indeed a permanent feature of the South African landscape but at the same time not equal to Whites. This therefore led to the creation of separate Indian educational and political institutions. The majority opinion amongst the Indians, however, was that apartheid was a system under which they could thrive, despite the negative aspects to it. At the same time there was a breakdown of some of the old traditions and institutions, like the extended family, which fragmented into smaller units identified along class lines (81-86).

There follows a brief analysis of the evolution of Indian religion, particularly with the inroads made by the fundamentalist Christian sects as well as the development of neo-Hinduism. Finally Freund examines the political structure leading up to and following the 1994 elections, where he interprets voter patterns as revealing little allegiance for the ANC but rather growing support for

the rejuvenated National Party (pp. 87-91).

Despite the abundance of statistical information and carefully constructed tables, this book remains frustrating in that it glosses quickly over so many tantalising aspects of Indian society. Freund's evaluations of such things as class structure, religion, and politics are fleeting. Moreover, there is no adhered-to thread in any one chapter but rather a broad theme in which numerous smaller threads are woven, often making the work look patchy and incomplete.

Furthermore, although the book is ostensibly about the Indians of Durban, this is taken rather fluidly. The work is more about Indians than about Durban, and often the statistics include such places as Hammersdale and the Kwazulu border industries, which cannot be included within the Durban metropolitan area. Moreover, by no stretch of the imagination can it be said that the book answers Freund's question: how did Durban become the city that it is?

This I think is the book's real weakness: it is "bitty"

and contains no real continuity from chapter to chapter. Indeed, one gets the impression that the main purpose of the work is to weave together several papers that have been read to academic audiences at various times, where the only common theme is that they all deal with the Indians of Natal, and not necessarily those of Durban.

In short, *Insiders and Outsiders* is like the curate's egg: good in parts. But it is the parts which are good that make this book valuable. Once Freund gets going on the real subject of this work, namely the Indian working class of Durban, he puts across his point forcefully and clearly. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 add a great deal to our perception of the Indian community, and I for one wish that the author had not only kept to this theme but, indeed, fleshed out the many fascinating tableaux that he presents here.

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