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The Incredible Journey of Freddy Reddy

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2. FREDDY'S WORLD

2.1. THE INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Most South African Indians are descendents of immigrants who came to South Africa as indentured labourers between the years 1860 and 1911. Bill Freund estimates that around 150 000 indentured workers arrived during that time,[4] recruited from India to cultivate the sugar plantations of the British Colony of Natal. Notwithstanding a substantial local African population, colonial authorities were pressed by large-scale sugar planters to import labour.

> *Natal was part of the country of the Zulus, but these were a proud military people who would not then, as they do today, accept the inducements of Western wages and submit to regular employment by Europeans.*[5]

By 1860 various other British Colonies, including British Guiana and the islands of Mauritius and Fiji,[6] had already implemented systems of indentured labour. Freund summarises the system of indenture as follows:

> *The indenture contract allowed for the employment of wage workers, under conditions giving a very high level of control to employers and usually involving transportation, for a fixed term. Masters were virtually entirely free to set the terms of work…*[7]

After the period of indenture, labourers were offered a free passage back to India or the option to remain in South Africa as 'free' citizens. Given the dire poverty of India though, only a small minority chose to return, opting instead to stay and enter other employment or cultivate small plots of land. Hilda Kuper comments:

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[4] B. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders – The Indian Working Class of Durban 1910-1990*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995. pp. 1-5.
[5] H. Kuper, "The Indians of South Africa," in *The Condensor* Vol.III No.4, December 1956. p. 21.
[6] B. Freund*, Insiders and Outsiders*, pp.2 ,7.
[7] B. Freund*, Insiders and Outsiders*, pp.2.

They chose to remain, because even at this early period South Africa had changed them, and repatriation would have been expatriation.[8]

In addition to the indentured labourers, a far smaller number of immigrants had arrived as self-supporting 'free passengers', who came to start small businesses. By 1956, the year before Freddy Reddy left Durban, there were an estimated 400 000 Indians living in South Africa, the majority of whom resided in conditions of poverty or in low income households, notwithstanding an increasing number of relatively well off businessmen and professionals.[9]

The distinction between formerly indentured and 'Passenger' Indians was said to have informed class divisions at least up until the time of Reddy's departure, though the dividing line was by no means definitive. In addition, the practice of caste distinctions had diminished in South Africa, unlike the form in which it was still practiced in India by that time. Around 70% of Indian South Africans were considered Hindu, about 16 % Muslim and 6% Christian.[10]

The Department of National Education funded a film in the late 1970s summarising the history of Indians in South Africa. Notwithstanding instances in the film revealing the political underpinnings of the day – such as images and narration sympathetic to the philosophy of separate development of the Indian community, including separate residential areas and educational institutions – there is ample evidence that the conditions of discrimination and historical grievances of the Indians are accurately represented. So for example the film highlights instances of anti-Indian sentiment by the white population, the 1894 proposal by the Natal Government to disenfranchise the Indians, and the end of political rights for Indians after South African union in 1910.[11]

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[8] H. Kuper, "The Indians of South Africa", p. 21.
[9] H. Kuper, "The Indians of South Africa", p. 20.
[10] H. Kuper, "The Indians of South Africa", p. 20.
[11] *The History of the Indian South African, 1980.* Department of National Education (copyright Government Communications and Information System).

The film also gives a succinct overview of Ghandi's passive resistance campaigns in South Africa in 1913 and the Three Pound tax levied on former indentured Indians – which tax was later revoked as a result of the protests.[12] By the time immigration from India was halted, it is fair to say that Indians must have felt a deep sense of insecurity in their future in South Africa.[13]

In 1947 India received independence from British Colonial rule while a year later the National Party came to power in South Africa introducing the policy of apartheid and entrenching white rule for another four and a half decades. The late 1940s saw violent race riots between Indians and Africans, which left deep scars on the Indian community. By the 1950s the government was enforcing the Group Areas act, removing people to dwellings in Indian-only areas like Chatsworth and Phoenix outside Durban.

In 1957 Freddy Reddy was a twenty six year old man with a primary school education.[14] In the three years preceding his departure he lived with his grandfather in the Titren Road area of Durban. It was a road where whites, blacks and Indians lived, although interaction between the races was limited.[15] Though the Group Areas Act came into being in 1950,[16] forced removals followed as late as nine years later. The removals left certain areas as 'whites only' neighbourhoods while Indian inhabitants, like their Coloured and African counterparts, were relocated to race specific locations.

In the documentary I do not make all of the historical references as outlined above, opting instead for a general introductory sense of the distinctly Indian cultural presence in the city of Durban. In addition to this I include some information from the film archives that briefly describe and show evidence of the new group areas reserved for Indians, intercut with scenes of people, and an Indian dance sequence accompanied by music. In the short

[12] *The History of the Indian South African.*
[13] *The History of the Indian South African*., H. Kuper, "The Indians of South Africa", p.23.
[14] Reddy asserts that it hadn't occurred to his parents that he should study beyond that stage. An illness had kept him out of school for several months whereafter he simply never returned, attempting instead to get some form of work that would supplement the household income. From the interview with FR, January 2005. Not included in the documentary.
[15] Interview with Freddy Reddy, January 2005. See documentary.
[16] B. Freund*, Insiders and Outsiders.*

dance and music sequence, I intentionally dissolve from a black-and-white (desaturated) image to a colour image within the same 'cut' to indicate both the passage of time – where colour footage is more recent – and my presence in the process of mediation. It also serves to provide some of the background I mention above.

Mostly, I was looking to access the aspects of Indian history in Durban through Reddy's recollections of his youth – of his childhood in the Cato Manor area and of his time spent living in Titren Road. In both instances the camera observes Reddy revisiting these scenes and telling of his memories, as he re-inhabits the spaces of his own history. He is heard, and on a few occasions seen, talking to an interviewer-companion, who it is understood is the documentary filmmaker. During these sequences I juxtapose archival still photographs from the past, with images from the present while his voice serves to narrate.

2.2. THE EXILE NARRATIVE

Long is the road to freedom
Your impatience
Will not make it shorter comrade
I know heart
Is bursting with anger
Your brain burning
With the heat of vengeance

Waiting tortures
Waiting waiting waiting
Here there nowhere and everywhere
Longing
Lingering questions
Suspicion
Who is who isn't
I know your pain
Many have felt it from time began

Unpraised burial without lamentations
Many have trod on this road
Before you
Often bloody footprints

Landmarks
For you and me
To follow
The long uneasy road to freedom.[17]

On a 1993 visit to Durban, Freddy Reddy was interviewed by several local newspapers, at least two of which ran profile articles on him shortly thereafter.[18] One of the reports highlighted some of the story surrounding his arduous journey, while the second pointed to Reddy's psychiatric background and experience. The main emphasis of both stories was of the visiting exile back in his home town, who spoke about the 'new' South Africa and the exile experience.

Reddy had a ten year stint as psychiatrist to the refugees and exiles of African National Congress camps around central and southern Africa in the years preceding the organisation's unbanning.[19] In the articles, he speaks about the tensions and emotional distress faced by many of the exiles during his work with them. An exile himself, the newspaper articles have him referring to the lingering effects that past struggles have on individuals, groups and society as they enter in to the future.[20] Reddy is portrayed as the visiting exile, with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow, and with valuable insights into the exile experience.

The kind of narrative that emerges from Bernstein's *The Rift* is, similarly, couched within an exile discourse of hundreds of stories of flight out of South Africa, lives abroad and feelings about being simultaneously connected and disconnected with their home country. While they felt connected through their personal histories, families, and ongoing commitment through political struggle, they felt disconnected through a long-lasting, sometimes permanent geographic and ideological separation.

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[17] F. Reddy, "The Road to Freedom", a poem in *Southern African Freedom Struggles 1950-94*, from the *Digital Imaging South Africa (DISA)* online archives, http:/disa.nu.ac.za
[18] F. Moodley, "Joy and Sorrow for Visiting Oslo Exile" in *The Post*, 20 January 1993 and F. Ismail, "Anguish of ANC Refugees Recalled" in *The Sunday Tribune*, 14 February 1993.
[19] During this time he was probably based in Oslo, making various trips to visit the camps.
[20] F. Moodley, "Joy and Sorrow" and F. Ismail, "Anguish".

Bernstein speculates that between 30 000 and 60 000 people could possibly fit into the category of exile[21] as understood in the context of apartheid South African history: those who fled South Africa because of resistance to the politics of apartheid between the late 1950s and early 1990s. These were people who left with the intention of returning, who had not chosen to emigrate *per se* and who were not refugees either.

The reasons that people went into exile were varied. Several examples are sited:

> *Some left because their parents took them into exile; the children did not choose exile. Some women left to be with a husband or boyfriend who had been driven into exile; some young white males left to escape conscription into an army fighting in the townships and Angola. Some were sent out by the organisations to which they belonged, either on specific missions, or their own situation had become too dangerous to themselves or their colleagues. Many were driven out by the various 'bans' they were placed under – a teacher would be banned from entering any school or educational establishment, an industrial worker from any factory, a journalist or writer from publishing or writing anything whatsoever…many were students who had been participating in school boycotts…some had already suffered imprisonment…*[22]

But Bernstein suggests that not all exiles were or had been political activists. Some merely left to further their education outside of South Africa. These exiles' opposition to apartheid emerged from abroad, thus entrenching them as exiles only once they had already spent some time outside the country.[23]

Freddy Reddy's experience seems to resemble this last mentioned category. He had left South Africa with the intention of studying law in London after which his plan was to return to the country.[24] Reddy made his journey together with an acquaintance, the two of them doing so as much out of desperation and adventure as political motivations. At the

[21] H. Bernstein, *The Rift*, p.xii.
[22] H. Bernstein, *The Rift*, p.xiii.
[23] H. Bernstein, *The Rift*, p.xiii.
[24] Reddy explains that he thought of London as in the story of Dick Whittington, where a young man goes to the city to find his fortune. From the July 2004 interview. Not in the documentary.

time of his leaving he had no connection with any of the political organisations, he had not been banned, nor had he participated in large-scale political boycotts.

In the years immediately preceding his departure though, Reddy had been instrumental in successful worker wage and labour disputes at the King Edward VIII hospital in Durban were he was employed. But these actions had not been co-ordinated by any union or political organisation. They were, in fact, merely local disputes between the hospital management and workers, of which Reddy had been appointed spokesman.[25] Although he had emerged as a leader and spokesman for some of the hospital staff, Reddy had no involvement and very little knowledge of any of the political movements opposing apartheid in South Africa. His opposition had initially been a personal reaction. It was an unmentored and intuitive response, not informed by political agitation.

Though Reddy's journey could be seen in the light of the exile narrative, particularly given the preceding references to him in print, including his own poem, I decided to take the documentary in a different direction. In this regard the documentary does not attempt to rely on the exile or struggle narratives or refer to other narratives which have accumulated in South African history presentations and the popular memory. It does not seek to be framed within the exile discourse *per se.* This is merely to assert that though defined by the reality of apartheid and his opposition to it, Reddy's journey is not *only* defined by this, particularly not in the years of the actual journey itself.

At the film's essence is a personal journey. It is the journey of an ordinary person whose story is inspiring. In post-apartheid South Africa the word exile has come to connote several meanings other than the denoted 'outcast' or 'banished'. The concept of the exile through the discourse of the exile narrative in recent histories and the popular imagination includes not merely 'political activist' but 'leader' or 'future leader' and perhaps even 'socio-political elite'.

[25] Interview with Freddy Reddy, July 2004.

The documentary hopes to function as the history of a single man's personal experience, whose journey, though a flight into exile, is more of a personal odyssey of sorts, both adventure and necessity, but more personal than political. This is not to ignore the relevance of understanding something of the political and historical milieu within which Reddy was moved into action, but it is a conscious *de-politicising* of his history.

I chose to do this because I sensed a fatigue of sorts, at the insistence of many historical narratives, and particularly historical documentaries in South Africa over almost the last two decades, to conform to anti-apartheid themes to the exclusion of other potentially relevant and interesting topics.

Historian Nicholas Waddy in a recent paper observes a similar tendency that has developed; to interpret all of the previous century's South African history in terms of apartheid and its consequences. Many historians choose exclusively to study the period of National Party rule post 1948, and analyse and interpret preceding periods of the century from the perspective of apartheid and in terms describing the origins of apartheid. As such, the historiography of South African history in the twentieth century is overwhelmingly 'slanted' toward one particular era.[26]

As a result, he asserts, official and favoured narratives emerge which support certain views of history, which in turn are aligned with certain current assumptions about the meaning of the past. He points to the world in which South Africans lived as a more intricately complex place where apartheid was not necessarily the dominant force in people's lives, certainly not before 1948 and possibly not even as late as the 1960s.[27]

So, for example, the documentary might otherwise ignore possible alternative influences on Reddy's 1957 decision, such as currents of caste, or more correctly, class which might have informed relations, roles and expectations within the Indian community itself. Or to

[26] N. Waddy, "The Presentist Obsession with 'apartheid' in South African History," *Historia, Journal of the Historical Association of South Africa.* Vol.49 No.2, November 2004. pp. 59-78.
[27] N. Waddy, "The Presentist Obsession".

see his journey in terms of his later involvement with the anti-apartheid movement in Europe.

In stead, I chose to interpret Reddy's journey as a consequence of factors I have already mentioned – personal ambition, a sense of adventure, and an individual's response to racial discrimination and lack of educational and economic opportunities in South Africa.

My intention was a less overtly ideological offering, if not free of ideology then at least aware of its pervasiveness in the history of South African narratives pertaining to exiles and participants in the struggle against systemic racial prejudice. I tried to avoid conforming to the prevailing 'orthodoxy' surrounding the expressions and discourse of the exile in history. The film in this regard is somewhat open-ended though fairly conventional in its structure and format.