

DIVIDE AND PROFIT

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DIVIDE AND PROFIT: INDIAN WORKERS IN NATAL by Shamim Marie
(Worker Resistance and Culture Publications, Durban: 1986. Cost is
R4,50 and R2,00 to trade union members).

This book is the first from Worker Resistance and Culture Publications. It is aimed not at an academic readership but rather at workers and is accompanied by a slide-tape package if desired. As stated in the introduction, 'It is hoped that the book will be used in a number of ways. Some may want to read it for interest and maybe enjoyment. It could be used as a resource for organisation or it could be used as part of shopsteward and worker discussion or education' (Marie:1986,5).

This is not to say that it should not be read by academics as well, however, and not only for enjoyment. For the book provides an excellent example of how to make a vast collection of material and difficult concepts accessible to a wider audience, a useful and necessary skill for intellectuals to develop.

The aim of the book is obvious and clearly stated in the concluding paragraph:

'It is only through uniting together with African workers and fighting on as workers did on the farms and mills, and in the 1940's and 1950's, that Indian workers will win a better life in the factories, in the communities and as part of the oppressed Black people of South Africa' (Marie:125).

In an attempt to contribute towards the achievement of unity amongst African and Indian workers in the trade unions in Natal today, the book seeks to explain historically, the reasons for present divisions amongst them and to show that in the past Indian workers were militant and that African and Indian workers have united as workers against employers.

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The task is a daunting one. The period covered is one of 125 years and the processes at work complex, from the development of capitalism and industrialisation in Natal, to the proletarianisation of the African population of the region. During this period, Indian workers moved from a position where, as indentured labourers they were undoubtedly at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, to a position where they became an aristocracy of labour or moved out of the working class altogether. To trace this history with detailed accuracy would be impossible in 130 pages and, in any case, this is not the aim of the book. For this reason, the book might offend scholars of the field by its brevity, its glossing over of what might be deemed crucial aspects of this history or what might be perceived as inaccuracies. However, the book is not aimed at an audience of specialists and, moreover, by virtue of its methodology, which includes a heavy reliance on interviews with workers and working class leaders of the time, their perceptions of the past necessarily prevail.

The book is divided into three parts. The first focuses on the period up to the end of indenture when Indians were mainly field and mill workers and before the development on a large scale, of manufacturing industry in Natal. This is the least contentious section as it represents a keen synthesis and presentation of the available material on the period. Accepting Hugh Tinker's characterisation of indentured labour as 'a new system of slavery' (Tinker:1974), Marie traces the reasons for the importation of indentured labour; the experiences of Indian immigrants on arrival; their treatment on the plantations, the mines and other places of work; how conditions deteriorated; the attitude and actions of the colonial state in support of employers; and the way in which indentured labourers attempted to ameliorate their conditions and fight against their exploitation, culminating in the much celebrated 1913 strike. Highlighting the theme of the book, the first section concludes:

'The story of the workers on the farms and mills is the story of the bosses who looked for ways of getting and keeping cheap labour. But it is also the story of the workers who fought back in whatever way they could in separate struggles as Indian and African workers.

The bosses used the differences that already existed among Indian and African workers to further divide and

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to create suspicion among these two groups of workers. They did this as we saw through employing African workers to beat up Indian workers on the bosses orders, through employing them in different jobs and through keeping them apart in separate accomodation (sic)' (Marie:34).

The theme of militancy of Indian workers and of the divide and rule tactics of employers and the state, is continued in the following sections.

Part two, which is the longest section of the book and perhaps the one covering the most complex issues, covers the period from the rise of manufacturing industry in Natal and the formation of trade unions by Indian workers from 1917, to the clampdown on the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in the 1960s. It deals with a number of issues which are far from straightforward, such as the relationship between the trade unions and Indian political organisations (not always concerned to represent the interests of the Indian working class within the context of communal politics, let alone the working class at large) as well as the thorny problem of the 1949 clashes between Indians and Africans in Cato Manor. In no instance are the problems whitewashed and are dealt with with sensitivity, albeit superficially. With regard to the Cato Manor riots it is concluded that 'some of the scars of 1949 remain to this day. And for as long as communities are forced to remain apart from each other it will be difficult to wipe out the feeling of mistrust that these riots created' (Marie:71).

Nevertheless, much of this section is dedicated to the celebration of instances of Indian and African worker unity, notably during the Falkirk strike in the 1930s and the Dunlop strike in the 1940s. It shows that unlike African workers, Indian workers were allowed to live in the urban areas and thus came to be seen by employers as a stable workforce and worthwhile to train for skilled jobs. Further, because legislation prevented African workers from joining unions, Indian workers came to be better organised at this time. This in turn meant that employers used unorganised migrant African workers against organised Indian workers whenever necessary. Despite factors such as these which mitigated against it, there were instances of worker unity such as at Falkirk and Dunlop, which are remembered by Marie's informants for the unity which existed amongst Indian and African workers at the time.

The final section looks at the ambivalent position of Indian workers from the 1960s. On the one hand they suffered under the impact of apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act and forced removals and were militant in their subsequent organisation in community organisations around issues such as rents. On the other hand, through comparatively better educational opportunities than Africans (due to the needs of a rapidly expanding economy and attempts by the state to 'buy off' Indians and Coloureds) Indian workers gained an advantage over African workers in the factories. Moreover, in the absence of SACTU, Indian unions affiliated to the conservative Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), becoming little more than 'benefits unions' and operating closed shop agreements with employers, which all served to distance them further from African workers. Marie argues that factors such as these serve to explain why Indian workers were relatively untouched by the growth of worker militancy and organisation from the early 1970s and why 'The unions today in the 1980's are concerned that Indian workers are not joining' (Marie:105).

The remainder of the book is concerned to point out the benefits of what are termed the 'fighting unions' affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) for the future of the South African working class as a whole and the difficulties which are posed by a divided working class, something of which employers are well aware. It concludes with the injunction for all workers to unite.

Clearly the writing of such a history is no easy task and is one that lays the writer open to all sorts of criticism from specialists and academics, particularly historians schooled in the need for 'objectivity' and the need to avoid the pitfalls of 'the concerns of the present colouring the past'. However, this is not something which should put people off. Marie's is a pioneering work and no more guilty of present concerns colouring the interpretation of the past than any other, although it is far more obvious in this respect and thus perhaps, more honest.

Furthermore, the pitfalls which are possible when taking on a project of this magnitude, for example problems of brevity, omission or distortion can be avoided or minimised, as I believe has been done with Divide and Profit, by the adoption of a certain methodology. Marie has relied heavily on interviews with some of the surviving workers involved

in the struggles of the past and her interpretation of events is coloured by their perceptions. The use of oral history is as valid a methodological choice as reliance on more conventional documentary sources. This needs to be said given that another recent publication on Indian labour history in Natal which reaches somewhat different conclusions with regard to the 1930-1950 period (Padayachee et al:1985), is more heavily dependent on written sources, although equally informed by concerns of the present.

In addition to there being methodological justification for Marie's approach and conclusions, that historical investigation and interpretation are informed by present concerns is also justifiable. In the words of Raphael Samuels with whom I would concur:

'Meaning is only made manifest retrospectively and this is not only a matter of knowing what happened - the historians peculiar if sometimes ambiguous advantage of hindsight but also of being able to offer new interrogations of the past on the basis of present day pre-occupations and experience' (Samuels:1981:xlx/xlvi).

In this regard there is one criticism I feel is necessary of Divide and Profit, and that is its failure to take gender into account, a surprising omission given Marie's concern with the position of women. Whilst already covering a vast array of material and concerns, I believe a gender-sensitive perspective would have enhanced this popular history particularly as Indian women have played such an important role in Natal's labour history, notably under the indentured labour system and in the clothing industry, but also as reproducers of labour in the household.

Bibliographical Notes:

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