

FROM CANE FIELDS TO BOARD ROOM

Who could imagine what was going through the mind of indentured labourer Nagarapu Subrayadoo Naidoo (number 73795) when, on August 2, 1898, he arrived in the Durban Harbour aboard the SS Umlazi? Coming from a small village in south India, Nagarapu came to South Africa to work as a cane cutter for Reynolds Brothers Sugar Estate on the south coast of Natal. It is unlikely that at that time he would have dreamt that one day his great grandson would come to be a key role player in the South African sugar industry as Chairman of CANEGROWERS, the national organisation representing all of South Africa's sugar cane growers. The Naidoo family of today has a great sense of pride that they came to come here as labourers and, through hard work, tenacity and sheer determination, became land owners, trading store owners and leaders in the sugar industry.

Nagarapu settled into his work with Reynolds Brothers who quickly saw him as a perspicacious and hard working person and promoted him to a sirdar (supervisor) and then as chief supervisor.

On completion of Nagarapu's five year indenture contract, he was given the option of a free passage to India or in lieu of the passage, a piece of 'crown land' equal in value to the cost of the return passage. Whilst this land was not the best agricultural land, he decided to stay in South Africa and farm sugar cane and soon came to realize that a 2.5 hectare plot was insufficient for sugar cane and started a poultry farm instead which his wife Chinama. During this time Nagarapu continued employment with the sugar and, using income from the poultry farm, purchased neighbouring land - eventually owning 30 hectares. Nagarapu died at the age of 70 and left the farm to his son, Subbaroyadu who worked the farm on a part time basis.

Three generations later in 1991, his great grandson Suresh Naidoo, a BCom graduate, completed his articles and decided to purchase the farm from his father. Suresh had an emotional tie to the land and from the age of 11 was already driving tractors on the farm. Just like his great grandfather Suresh was a hard worker and, despite entering the sugar industry during the worst three-year drought in its history, a 25% hike in interest rates and a drop in the world sugar price to US\$5c/lb, he managed to persevere and expanded the 30 hectares to 160 hectares – and that was the catalyst to Suresh's meteoric rise through the sugar ranks.

In 1992 Suresh joined the council of the newly formed Umzimkulu Local Grower Council and it was not long before he was elected as Chairman. From there he moved on to serving on the Board of Directors of CANEGROWERS where, after two years, he was nominated by his fellow growers to the Executive Committee of CANEGROWERS and not long after that he was elected as vice-chairman of CANEGROWERS. In July 2009, he took up the position of Chairman of both CANEGROWERS and the South African Sugarcane Research Institute. Since taking up the position of Chairman, Suresh has represented South Africa's cane growing sector in numerous international forums including the World Association of Beet and Cane Growers.

“It says a lot about the support structures that a person from a disadvantaged background, a descendent of a cane cutter, can come through the ranks of land ownership and leadership so quickly.” Suresh Naidoo

Sugar cane has been grown in KwaZulu Natal by the Indian community since the 1870's. While some of the cane farmers were also settlers who had made their own way from India to Natal, many of these farmers came to Natal as 'indentured' labourers in the 1860's and did not re-indenture after the completion of initial contracts. Although originally indentured as labourers, these industrious people, many with agricultural backgrounds in their own country, soon began cane farming and many families built up large land holdings which are still being farmed to this day. While many of the descendants of the initial Indian immigrants diversified out of the sugar industry to develop as administrative clerks, storekeepers and in industry, the initial bond with the sugar industry was never lost and, indeed, strengthened. Their influences spread both North and South of Durban. There is no doubt that the South African sugar industry has been enriched by their involvement and participation.