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Durban's market gardeners survive another crisis- and will carry on the business they started in the 1870s. **Sayed-Iqbal Mohamed**

reports **The 'market' is a story of survival against the odds**

THE imminent abolition of an apartheid by-law has not drawn much attention. Few people are aware of what a surcharge really means as it is levied consistently with biblical passion at the early morning market or squatters' market in Warwick Avenue.

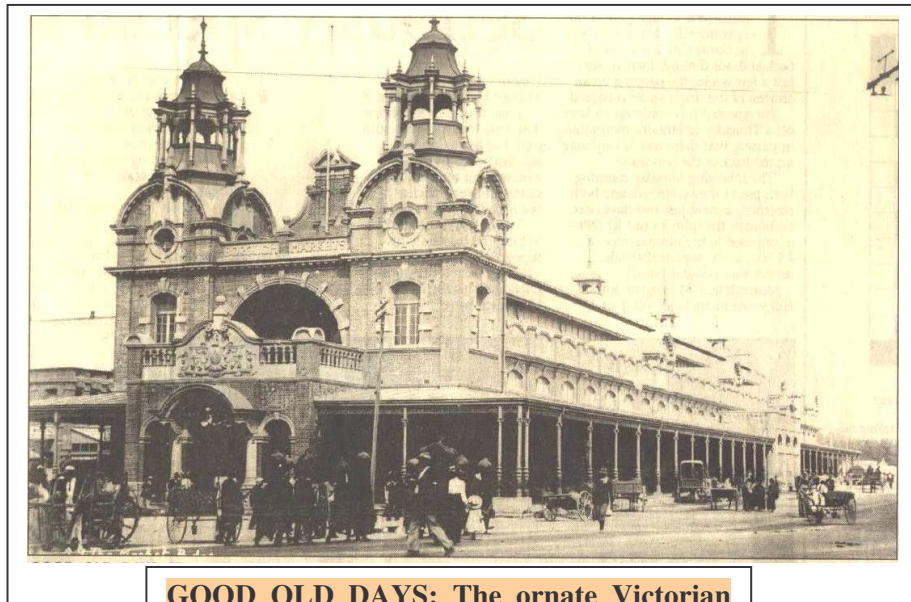
Fewer still will be able to comprehend how

struggling traders, until very recently, meekly succumbed to a law hammered and shaped on the anvil of injustice and inequity.

The market traders say business has declined for a number of reasons: competition from the street traders around the market; mounting rental arrears; and the surcharge.

The city council was informed by its informal trading department that the solution was to evict the traders and to advertise their stalls to new traders.

What would have been a mass eviction of traders for failing to pay their rentals turned out to be an amicable compromise between traders and the council when the two parties were brought together by the organisation of civic rights (OCR) two months ago. The council made several significant concessions, which would bring relief to most traders, provided



GOOD OLD DAYS: The ornate Victorian design was the hallmark of the old Durban market in Victoria Street (above), built in 1901 and demolished in 1940.

both parties keep to the letter and spirit

of the agreement that is being drawn up. As one walks through the market, it is as if one has stepped into another world. Amid the hustle and bustle cascading between traders, customers, tourists and the skilful barrow-pushers, there is a kind of tranquillity that engulfs the entire market. A

“mystical” experience that hides the anxiety and trauma of the traders as it transports one to another realm. People – total strangers one encounters here- are friendly and courteous.



Today it is business as usual in the newly constructed Victoria Street market, as a shopkeeper tells a customer his fortune

Beneath this tranquil environment is a rich history. A lesson, too, for formal businesses which wants to wish away the street traders dotting the streets and pavements of Durban.

In the 1870s, the “Indian” community had begun to establish itself as proficient market gardeners (farmers) and vegetable traders. By the late 1890s and the first few years of this century, the Indian market gardeners sold fruit and vegetables from the courtyard of the Jumma Masjid (Grey Street Mosque) in Queen Street. They later moved to the pavements of Victoria Street (western end) because of the high pedestrian flow. Here, the traders either sat on wooden boxes or “squatted” cross-legged on the pavement which led to the name

“squatters market”. The growing number of traders and an increase in customers in the Victoria Street area forced the authorities to build a permanent sheltered market.

BY 1910, a market was built to ease the public congestion in Victoria Street, which became popularly known as the Victoria Street market (the old Indian Market). Sixty-three years later, this famous market was tragically burned to

the ground. A great deal of suspicion was directed at the

city authorities for the fire. Before 1973, traders were informed of the approval of the construction of the western freeway that would uproot them from this vicinity. The market had by then become a famous tourist destination and traders objected to any idea of relocation.

The market, in its early years, attracted traders who sold different commodities such as fish, spices and curios, diversifying from the market traders who sold fresh produce only. This eventually led to the Victoria Street Market itself becoming congested and led to the relocation of the farmers or market traders and the fresh produce retailers in 1934 to Warwick Avenue.

Market director JJC Greyling said in 1976 it was the conflict between Muslim and Hindu market gardeners and traders as street traders along the Victoria Street pavements that led to the authorities in the 30s to move the Hindu market gardeners to Warwick Avenue. With time, the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim farmers improved and they later agreed to share the facilities. The 60s showed a steady decline in the number of market gardeners. Market gardening which was considered a traditional way of life for Indians, showed a decline from 2887 market gardeners and farmers in 1936 to 1000 in 1963. At this time the Natal Indian agricultural union succeeded in reserving 600 tables for farmers at the squatters' market. However, the conditions of congestion again led to relocation of most of the farmers in the mid-70s to Clairwood, to the newly built national fresh produce market.

THE number of farmers at the squatters market was reduced to about 70 and the market itself was reduced in size. The authorities in the 70s and 80s had further reduced the squatters' market by extending the Berea Station and Market road development. Despite the many setbacks, laws designed to restrict "Indian" farmers and traders, relocations and even the destruction of the market, traders hung on to their market trade and market gardening.

It is therefore understandable that the traders at the squatter or early morning market should have

welcomed the abolition of the surcharge, pegging rent increases until next year, waiving all interests on arrears and a commitment to improving conditions.

They come from a tradition of providing an invaluable service to Durban for many generations. They need to be commended. The council too, needs to be applauded for showing restraint and making big concessions. Another significant step is to accommodate the genuine struggling street traders into the market. Ironically, about R13 million was recently spent on the early morning market. It appears this happened at the cost of ignoring the poor street traders and has further extended the apartheid-colonial polarisation between African and Indian (traders)