

# JUXTA POSITIONS

## RE-ENVISIONING THE INDIAN LABOUR DIASPORA



**This exhibition explores the diverse lives of Indian labour migrants and their descendants in the Indian Ocean from the eighteenth century to the present day, highlighting the many contrasts and contradictions that characterized their varied experiences.**



THE UNIVERSITY  
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Arts & Humanities  
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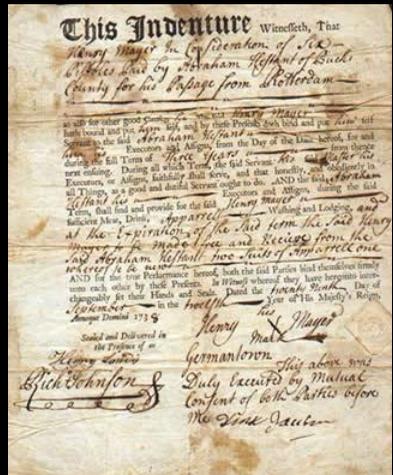
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During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tens of thousands of Indian slaves were carried to other parts of Asia, and further afield, to the Dutch colonies at Ceylon and the Cape and to the French Mascarene islands of Mauritius and Réunion. Some Indian slaves were even taken to the Americas. Many settler families in the Dutch and French colonies can trace their origins to Indian slave ancestors.

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The indenture system was not unique to nineteenth century Indian labour migration. In the seventeenth century large numbers of Europeans fleeing poverty and persecution signed indenture contracts, which tied them into onerous working conditions in return for a paid passage and economic support for a fixed period of years in the new world settlements. During the eighteenth century hundreds of Indian artisans contracted engagements to help support infrastructure building in embryonic colonies in the Indian Ocean.



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Overseas Indians in newly established colonies often enjoyed a relatively high status. Stone masons, carpenters, weavers, and other craftsmen from India brought prized skills to struggling settlements located far from European sources of labour supply. Traces of this early Indian diaspora can be seen in the tombstones and buildings which survive from this period in Mauritius, Réunion, and the Cape. Convict migrants from India played a similar role in developing colonial port cities such as Singapore.

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In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more than a million Indians signed indenture contracts for work in the sugar plantations, mines, and other industries in South and East Africa, Mauritius, Reunion, Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, and the Caribbean.

Most contracts of indenture obliged the signatories to work for a period of up to five years for an approved employer. Difficult conditions, especially in the less well regulated early years, led some observers to make comparisons with slavery, and objections to indenture were raised in both India and Britain. Some of the allegations made about indenture can be challenged by a close study of actual lived experiences of migrants and through analysis of statistical records.

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**Many overseas Indians became permanent settlers in the colonies to which they migrated - re-engaging as labourers and foremen. Those who saved, sent money home, and moved on to other forms of employment as drivers, shop-keepers, planters and market traders, helped to found successful new societies.**

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**In the early twentieth century, Indians overseas were gaining a political voice and were fighting for an improved position in the territories where they had settled, while nationalists in India were seeking to abolish the system of indenture itself. Prominent Indian activists like M K Gandhi and Manilal Doctor played an important role in shaping these struggles, whilst themselves learning a great deal from the determination and resilience of the indentured labourers and their descendants.**

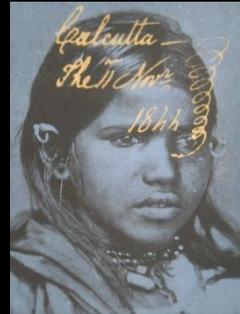




The photographs of Amol Parikh, a New York based visual anthropologist, address themes of identity preservation and adaptation amongst the descendants of Indian indentured migrants. His photographs are here contrasted with the images of indentured migrants – their unflinching gaze, direct to camera, reminds us of our responsibility to record their stories, while endeavouring not to traduce their life experiences.

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From the 1870s onwards thousands of migrants were photographed in Mauritius – either on arrival, or more commonly after indenture when they applied for ‘old immigrant’ tickets. Orphans and vagrants were also photographed.



The second half of the exhibition features the screen- process prints by Danny Flynn who draws upon the rich collection of photographs of immigrants in Mauritius and overlays them with historical documents derived from the research of the ‘Becoming Coolies’ AHRC-funded team at Edinburgh and Leeds Universities.



# 'Becoming Coolies'

Rethinking the Origins of the Indian Ocean Labour Diaspora, 1772-1920

**'Becoming Coolies' is an AHRC-funded research project, involving scholars at the Universities of Edinburgh and Leeds, which explores South Asian labour migration in and around the Indian Ocean. Criticised both at the time and since as a 'new system of slavery', indenture has been portrayed as the cynical exploitation of a passive Indian labour force. 'Coolies', the colonial-era name given to indentured migrants, have been presented as victims and dupes, who had little or no control over either the decision to migrate, or the individual or collective outcomes of migration. By exploring both the diverse experiences of colonial era migration and contemporary discourses around the issue, 'Becoming Coolies' interrogates such assumptions. This research is informed by the contemporary idea of COOLITUDE - and the work of the poet Khal Torabully - which reflects upon the identity of Indian migrant labourers and seeks to celebrate their courage, enterprise and achievement, and their contribution to the modern independent nations of the Indian Ocean and elsewhere.**

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