



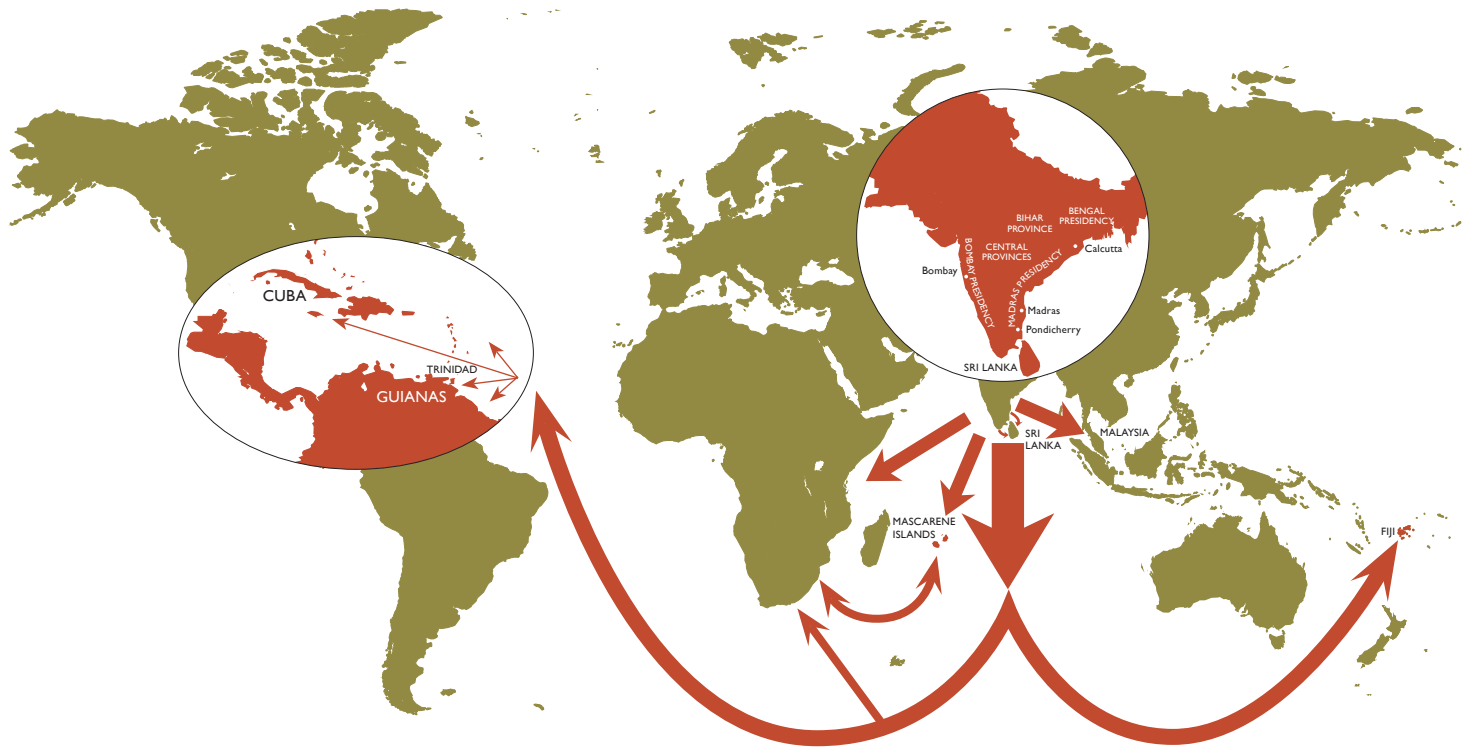
The Indian Labour Diaspora

CHART
OF THE
WORLD
ON
MERCATORS PROJECTION
CONSTRUCTED BY
HERMANN BERGHUIS
and
FR. V. STOLPSAGEL
GOTHA
JUSTUS PERTHES
1863.

A RESOURCE TEXT FOR STUDENTS

PRINCIPAL INDIAN MIGRATIONS

1834-1924



THE INDIAN¹ DIASPORA is one of the largest diasporic communities in the world. According to the World Bank there were 11.4 million Indian migrants working outside India in 2010. During the nineteenth century, Indians were shipped out to different parts of the world to work on sugar plantations, railways and other colonial enterprises. There were three forms of overseas labour migration in colonial India: Indenture, Maistry and Kangani.

While recruitment for labour in the sugar plantations of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans was initially organised using the indenture system, the plantations nearer India (for example in Sri Lanka and Malaysia) growing coffee, tea, sugar and rubber relied upon the Maistry and Kangani systems of labour recruitment. Migrants also travelled to all of these destinations as free migrants or 'passenger Indians'.

¹ India is a vast country of South Asia, whose geographical boundaries stretch from the Himalayas in the north to the Indian Ocean coastline in the South. The country was ruled by the British East India Company between 1757 and 1857 and by the British Government between 1858 and 1947 when it became independent. The present capital of India is New Delhi.

Front cover:
Portraits courtesy of National Archives of London, Kew
Map courtesy of David Rumsey Map Collection

INDENTURED LABOURERS were called 'coolies', a term for unskilled labourers derived from South India. Whilst planters in the colonies described migrants as coming only from the 'lowest' sections of Indian society (sometimes referred to as 'hill coolies'), the evidence suggests that in fact Indians from all sections of society migrated. Initially the migrants were mostly men, but increasingly entire family groups and even single women joined as the system matured. Often they travelled due to poverty, landlessness and famine (particularly after the Great Indian Uprising of 1857), but they went for many other reasons as well, including widowhood and the desire to escape from caste, gender and religious discrimination.

The introduction of Indian labour to different parts of the world in the nineteenth century is associated with the abolition of slavery in the British Parliament in the 1830s. During that decade employers imported Indian labourers to work on their sugar plantations in Mauritius. The success of the scheme led to the implementation of a controversial government-regulated system of labour migration known as indenture. This system was used to supply labour not only to sugar colonies but later on to tea plantations in Assam in India and rubber plantations in Malaysia.

The indenture was a legal contract agreed between labourers and an employer to work for a certain period of time. It originated in Europe in the thirteenth century and became a common practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when European settlers in the Americas recruited European and Chinese labour for their enterprises. It was not dissimilar to the contract of employment used in the Indian army at the time (and indeed in most armies to the present day). Under this system, labour was recruited for employers, often through intermediaries, to work for a certain period of time (usually three to five years). The employer was legally obliged to provide wages, medical care and usually lodgings and rations for the labourers. After the period of the contract had ended, the labourer could either renew his term of employment or return home.

The Indian indenture system followed a similar pattern. Emigrants had to sign a 3 to 5 year agreement to work in British and foreign colonies. The contract, in English, Hindi (Devnagri script) and Urdu (Arabic script) or Tamil (in South India), specified the type of work to be done, everyday tasks or hours of work required, holidays, remuneration, rations and other amenities to be offered, and the right of a return passage to India after an additional period of 'industrial residence' in the colonies.



Depiction of early Indian indentured migrants arriving at Mauritius

IN MOST COLONIES migrants were allowed to buy land (a notable exception being the case of Fiji) and the earliest migrants to Trinidad were given free grants of land in an effort to persuade them to stay on. Indentured migrants were permitted to leave their contracts if they paid compensation to their employer proportionate to the time served.

The recruiters were usually Indians, often returnee migrants, and workers commonly travelled as gangs or in family groups under the leadership of the recruiters (either a Sirdar, Kangani, or Maistry), who went on to act as their overseers at their destinations. Below are a set of typical terms and conditions of an indenture agreement:

Period of service. – Five years from date of arrival in the colony.

Nature of Labour. – Work in connection with the cultivation of the soil or the manufacture of the produce on any estate and domestic service.

Number of days on which the emigrants is required to labour in each week. – Every day, excepting Sunday and authorised holidays.

Numbers of hours in each day during which he is required to labour without extra remuneration. – Nine hours.

Monthly of daily wages or task work rates. – When employed at time-work every able-bodied adult male emigrant above age of fifteen years will be paid not less than one shilling, which is equal to ten annas, and every other emigrant above the age of ten years not less than nine pence, which is equal to seven anna and two pice, for every working day of nine hours; children below the age of ten years will receive wages proportionate to the amount of work done.

When employed at task or ticca-work, every adult emigrant will be paid not less than one shilling for every task which shall be performed. After the emigrant has had practice and experience he may earn much more than one shilling a day.

Conditions as to return passage. – Emigrants may return to India at their own expense after completing five years' service under indenture in the Colony.

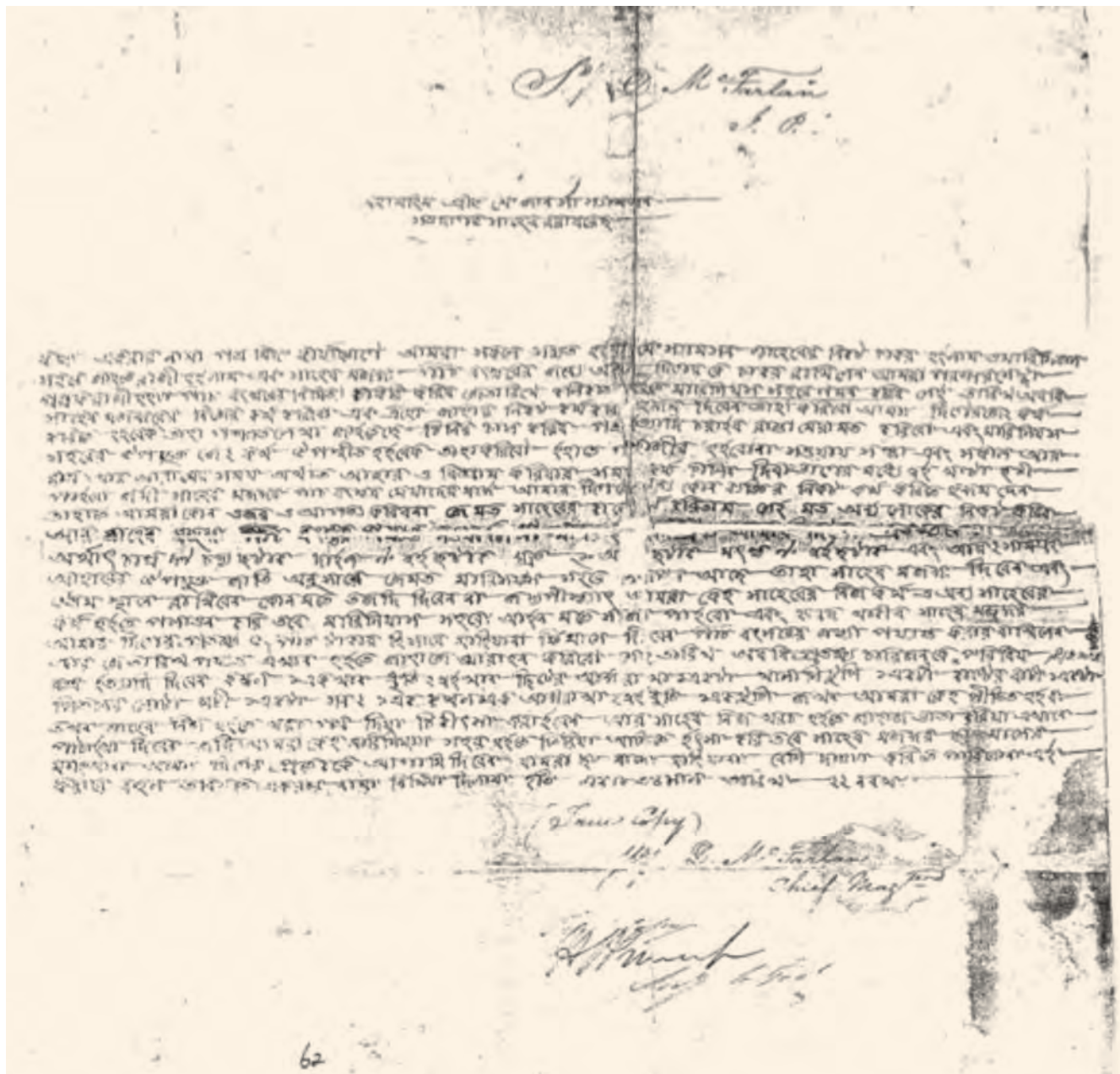
After ten years' continuous residence every emigrant who during that period has completed five years' service under indenture and any child of such emigrant, shall be entitled to a free return passage.

Other conditions. – Emigrants will receive rations from their employers during the first three months after their arrival in the Colony, according to the scale prescribed by the Government of Trinidad, at a daily cost of five pence, or annas and three pice, for each person of 15 years of age and upwards.

Each child over one year of age will receive half rations at a daily cost of two pence half-penny or two annas and one and half pice.

Suitable dwellings will be assigned to emigrants under indenture free of rent and will be kept in good repair by the employers. When emigrants under indenture are ill they will be provided with hospital accommodation, medical attendance, medical comforts and food free of charge.

HERE IS THE ORIGINAL COPY of the first indenture contract signed between Hunter Arbuthnot & C^o. of Mauritius and a group of 'Hill Coolies' from Bengal:



Source: RA 341, National Archives of Mauritius

Another group of Indentured Indian workers migrated to Mauritius from Calcutta in September 1834 and their names are given below:

List of names

Soorooop Sirdar	Lungen
Sabram mate	Callachand
Bhoodhoo	Bholah
Champah	Tisara Bhoodhoo
Bhudhoo	Sibchurn
Chooneeram	Chota bundhoo
Juttoo	Deenram
Choto bhoodhoo	Budhram
Bachoo	Muggroo
Arjoon	Jhareeah
Rammohun	Choytun
Sookram	Choolungo
Dhieram	Bhigyrath
Ghanssee	Gungaram
Bhoonum	Chota Muggroo
Chota Choneelall	Chota Dhieram
Bigna	Dookhun
Auklah	Bhomarah

In addition to the above migration, those who migrated and settled abroad permanently in South and South-East Asia between 1838 and 1924 totalled 1,164,000 in Myanmar (Burma), 2,321,000 in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and 1,754,000 in Malaysia. Many more millions migrated to these regional destinations and then returned home. The exact figures will never be known, since unlike indentured migration to the sugar colonies,

During the eighty-three years (1834-1917) over 1.3 million Indians were introduced as indentured emigrants into the colonies listed below²:

British Possessions

Sl. N°	Colonies	Period of Emigration	N° of Emigrants
1	Mauritius	1834-1900	453,063
2	Demerara/ British Guiana	1838-1916	238,909
3	Trinidad	1845-1916	143,939
4	Jamaica	1845-1913	36,412
5	Grenada	1856-1885	3200
6	St. Lucia	1858-1895	4350
7	St. Kitts	1860-61	337
8	St. Vincent	1860-1880	2472
9	Nevis		300
10	Natal	1860-1911	152,184
11	Fiji	1879-1916	60,965
12	Malay	1844-1910	250,000
13	East Africa	1896-1921	39,000
14	Seychelles	1904-1916	6315
TOTAL			1,178,818

Foreign Possession

1	Reunion (French Colonies)	1861-1883	26,282
2	Ceyenne (French Colonies)	-1883	4,300
3	Guadeloupe (French Colonies)	-1883	13,500
4	Martinique (French Colonies)	-1883	10,000
5	St. Croix (Danish Colony)	-1883	87
6	Surinam (Dutch Colony)	1873-1916	34,304
TOTAL			88169
GRAND TOTAL 'coolie' population in the above colonies			1,266,987

these migrations were not organised and closely monitored by the Government of India. Some three million indentured workers also migrated permanently to tea plantations in Assam in north-east India during the colonial period. The total movement of Indians around the world will never be known for sure, but estimates have ranged as high as 30 million.

² B.V. Lal, Chalo Jahaji: On Journey Through Indenture in Fiji, (Canberra: Suva Musium, , 2000), p.42.

THE JOURNEY

THE JOURNEY of indentured workers from India to the sugar colonies necessitated a long sea voyage. It took between 40 to 95 days to reach the various destinations.

It was a difficult journey for Indian migrants, most of whom had no previous experience of shipboard life. In the early phase of emigration, migrants travelled on wooden sailing ships, but by the second half of the nineteenth century, new technological innovations, such as the advent of steam ships, made the sea journey shorter.

During the course of the journey, many customary distinctions of caste and religion were abandoned and Indians became 'jahaji bhai' or comrades for the journey and often long afterwards.

As soon as the indenture system was introduced, the anti-slavery society of England and allied groups in India and elsewhere expressed strong opposition to the scheme. It was claimed that mortality of emigrants on the ships was unacceptably high, that disease was rife on the plantations, and food insufficient. There was also opposition from the British officials in the Government of India (especially in the Madras Presidency), who were opposed to valuable labour being siphoned away to enterprises overseas. The system therefore was closely monitored and controlled and it became over time the most highly regulated labour system in the world. As regulations were tightened, and voyage time reduced over the course of the nineteenth century the ship mortality rate declined helped by more suitable provisions and better health care offered on the voyages.

<i>Rice</i>	200z		<i>Firewood</i>	2 lbs	
<i>Dal</i>	4 oz	<i>Tobacco</i>	1 oz	<i>Gingerly oil</i>	½ oz
<i>Gbi</i>	1 oz	<i>Chillies</i>	½ oz	<i>Black paper</i>	1¼ Drm
<i>Salt</i>	10z	<i>Tamarind</i>	2 oz	<i>Mustard seed</i>	½ Drm
<i>Turmeric</i>	½ oz	<i>Salt fish</i>	2 oz	<i>Garlic</i>	½ Drm
<i>Onions</i>	2 oz		<i>Coriander seeds</i>	2 Drm	

Typical rations supplied to Indian migrants



Food being served to children on a migrant ship



A Typical 'Coolie Ship'

STATEMENTS MADE BY INDIAN MIGRANTS ABOUT THE JOURNEY:

“ *The food on the ship was far better than the food that had been served at the depot in Calcutta. But nausea prevented us to feed ourselves well. On our ship, more than half of the passengers hailed from Western Punjab and South Bundelkhand. Therefore, rice and rotis were served thrice a week while on Sundays we were given chura or biscuits. Every fifteenth day, fresh sheep meat and rotis were given to us. Daal, vegetable, tamarind chutney, tinned meat and lime juice were also provided daily... On board, there were no distinctions between high castes and low castes, Hindus or Muslims, or other racial distinction... Persons, who were rigid in their religious practices, had not been allowed aboard the ship to Surinam... There was provision of medicines and dressings for the sick and all of us were well cared for. Every week each one of us was supplied with a bar of soap to wash our clothes and take bath. If our clothes became worn out or were torn, we received new ones.* ”

Jiwan Prakash, Unpublished Hindi Manuscript, 1943

“ *I asked how far Meritch [Mauritius] was; they said five days journey and that if I pleased I could remain in service there or return; they deceived me and got me on board... there were three sardars [sirdars] and 240 coolies shipped with me... they did not state their condition to the captain, because they could not speak so as he could understand... there was plenty of room on board for the coolies; we had plenty to eat and drink: the captain was an Englishman and took great care of us.* ”

Djoram, a migrant to Mauritius. Calcutta Commission of Enquiry [CCE] 1841

“ *I left my home, and came to Calcutta to seek service... we were in all 350 men, it was a three-masted ship, we were taken to a crannee [writer or clerk] in the police, who took down our names; we were asked if we were willing to go; we replied yes; ... there was no force used whatever to put us on board; we all went willingly... we had lots of room on board; we got plenty of water and food on board, and were well treated; ... there were no complaints on the passage... I am very willing to go back to Mauritius, it is a beautiful country* ”

A former sepahi [sepoy] named Manick [Manque] of Meerghunj, Zilla Lucknow CCE, 1841

“ *I am a Pathan, and my home is at Gyah... I left my home to seek service... I met with a duffadar [junior Indian official] at Seersa, the duffadar told me I was to get 14 rupees wages, of which 7 would go for food... and he told me the food I should get was 14 chittacks of rice, two chittacks dboll, half chittack ghee, half chittack salt, and two of salt fish... and was to serve for six months at Meritch. When I arrived in Calcutta I learnt that I should have to go on board a big ship, and that I was to engage for five years... I did not mind... I was brought to this house (Captain Birch's) to have my arm punctured; I received my permit in another house; I was told by a very stout gentleman that I was to break stone and do hard work... I was told that I was to go to Meritch; I said I was very willing... we had sufficient room on board, the captain was good man; we got good food and water and were well treated... we commenced work at four o'clock in the morning, got half an hour at nine o'clock, again at twelve o'clock one half hour, and were released at six o'clock in evening... at six o'clock we were to store the sugar-cane until seven o'clock. Our general work was not very hard. Mauritius is a good country (howa panee utcha), I should not like to return – why should I?”* ”

Boodoo Khan who went to Mauritius in 1836 and returned to Calcutta in 1838 CCE 1841

← LIFE ON THE PLANTATIONS →

WHEN INDENTURED WORKERS arrived at sugar colonies, they were allotted to plantations. Once there, they had to work an average of 9 hours a day, six days a week, and were required to obtain a pass to leave the plantation.

They were given modest rooms to live in, 12 feet long and 8 feet wide for a married couple, or for three single persons to share (the same accommodation is still used in Assam in the present day). Rations provided by employers were sometimes barely sufficient for adults engaged in heavy physical labour.

Working side by side in the field, Indian workers were forced to abandon many of the customary distinctions of caste and religion that separated them in India. Over time, conditions were improved by means of a regular system of inspections overseen by a 'Protector of Migrants' in each of the colonies, who also received and acted upon complaints from the workers.

Corporal punishment was banned and planters were occasionally fined (albeit modestly) for mistreatment of their workers. This was necessary to ensure a continual flow of migrants, who were usually recruited by returnee 'old migrants'.



TOTARAM SANADHYA (1876-1947) was one of the few indentured Indians to write his memoirs. He was a poor but high caste north Indian Brahmin, unaccustomed to hard labour or the sight of women field labourers, who therefore elicited his particular sympathy. His emotive writings were used extensively as propaganda in the nationalist campaign against indenture.

“ *When women return from work, there is corpse-like shading to their faces. One is so sad to see the dirtiness of their faces at that time that it is indescribable. These women who had never been out of their village in India, who didn't know that there was a country outside of their district, who are soft and tender by nature, who never did hard work at home, these women to day, having gone thousands of miles away, in Fiji, Jamaica, Cuba, Honduras, Guyana and so forth have to do hard labour or ten hours a day.* ”

Totaram Sanadhya, 1915, p.61

A CHINESE SCHOOLMASTER in Georgetown provided the following woodcut to Edward Jenkins, an anti slavery campaigner who made

a trip to British Guiana to write a book on the condition of indentured migrants:



Edward Jenkins: *The Coolie His Rights and Wrongs*, 1871, p. 10.

Jenkins explained the illustration as follows:

The picture is a tolerably fair representation of a manager's house on its brick pillars. To the left, at the bottom of the picture, is a free Coolie driving his cattle. To the right a rural constable is seizing an unhappy pigtail [Chinese coolie] to convey him to the lock-up, being absent, as we see, from the band just above him, with his arms unbound. This indicates that he is trying to avoid the restraints of his indenture, and for this he is liable to punishment. Above him, on the right of the picture, is a group of Chinese, and on the left of the steps a group of Indians, represented with their arms bound, an emblem of indentureship. They always speak of themselves as "bound" when under indenture. At the foot of the steps, on either side, is a Chinaman and a Coolie, from whose breasts two drivers are drawing blood with a knife, the life fluid being caught by boys in the swizzle-glasses of the colony. A boy is carrying the glasses up the steps to the attorney and the manager, who sit on the left of the verandah, and who are obviously fattening at the expense of the bound people below them. A fat wife and children look out of the windows. Behind, through a break in the wall, are represented the happy and healthy owners in England; to the right, under the tree, through a gap in the fence, are aged Chinese, weeping over their unfortunate relatives. In the right-hand corner of the verandah is the pay-table, with the overseers discussing and arranging stoppages of wages. The smoking chimney of the kitchen and the horse eating his provender seem to be intended to contrast with the scene in front. This, then, gives a picturesquely sentimental and satirical aspect of the grievances likely to arise under the Coolie system.

Pitcher and Grierson, two British officials in north India, heard about a rumour known as *mimiai ka tel* during their enquiry into the recruitment of migrants in the areas where they worked. The rumour was that overseas planters drew oil from the heads of migrants, and the above cartoon includes a depiction of it. This peculiar hearsay may have its origins in the known preference of recruiters for

young able-bodied people, as it was believed that the valuable oil only came from youthful heads. Tellingly, the rumour circulated only in districts that were unaccustomed to migration. In those districts with a long history of overseas labour (due to army service for example) would-be migrants appeared to be well-informed by returnees about the merits and de-merits of different destinations.

WRITINGS OF INDIAN NATIONALISTS ABOUT THE INDENTURE SYSTEM

EARLY INDIAN NATIONALISTS believed the indenture system on colonial sugar plantations to be an extreme example of the exploitation of Indians within the British Empire. In their campaign to gain equal rights and the extension of the franchise (ie voting rights) for Indians overseas they wrote emotively and polemically on this issue.



M. K. Gandhi

About 12,000 such indentured labourers emigrate annually from India, mostly to the Fiji Island near Australia, Jamaica near South America, British Guiana and Trinidad.

Indenture is indeed a state of semi-slavery. Like the slave before him, the indentured labourer cannot buy his freedom. A slave was punished for not working; so also is an indentured labourer. If he is negligent, does not attend work for a day, if he answered back, – he will suffer imprisonment for any one of these lapses. A slave could be sold and handed over by one owner to another, so too [the] indentured labourer can be transferred from one employer to another. The children of a slave inherited the taint of slavery; much in the same way, the children of an indentured labourer are subject to laws specially passed for them. The only difference between the two states is that while slavery ended only with life, an indentured labourer can be free after a certain number of years.

It should be noted, moreover, that the indenture came after the abolition of slavery and that indentured labourers were recruited to take the place of slaves. ”

Samalochak, December 1915

Mahatma Gandhi, the famous Indian nationalist leader, first became concerned about the plight of indentured workers whilst campaigning for the civil rights of Indians in South Africa in the 1900s.

“ *GIRMIT is a corrupt form of the English word agreement. The term cannot be dispensed with. What it suggests, “agreement” does not. There is an alternative word in the language. The document under which thousands of labourers used to emigrate and still emigrate to Natal and other countries on contract for five years is known by the labourers and employers as girmit. A labourer so emigrating under girmit is a girmitio.*



“ [T]he whole of the Indian problem in South Africa has arisen out of the supply of indentured labour to Natal... It is true that it is not actual slavery, but... To take from this country helpless men and women to a distant land, ... and to make them work there under a law... which treats their simplest and most natural attempts to escape ill-treatment as criminal offences—such a system... must really border on the servile. [1910]

a monstrous system, iniquitous in itself, based on fraud and maintained by force... the victims of the system... are generally simple, ignorant, illiterate, resourceless people belonging to the poorest classes of this country and they are induced to enter – or it would be more correct to say are entrapped into entering – into these agreements by the unscrupulous representations of wily professional recruiters, who are paid so much per head for the labour they supply. [1912] ”

Gopal Krishna Gokhale

“ MY LORD, human reason and experience alike show that indentured labour is an unmitigated curse... both humanitarian and political considerations – humanitarian far more than political – demand that it should be abolished as early as possible and replaced by free labour, which is, after all, the most efficient form of labour... The system has worked enough moral havoc during 75 years.

We cannot think, my Lord, without intense pain and humiliation of the blasted lives of its victims, of the anguish of soul to which our numerous brothers and sisters have been subjected by this system... we appeal against the utterly degrading and immoral system of indentured labour [Imperial Legislative Assembly on 20th March 1916.] ”

Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya

ANTI-INDENTURE PAMPHLETS
ISSUED BY THE ARYA SAMAJ

*Save Yourself from Depot Wallas
Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!!
It is not service but pure deception.
Don't get enmeshed in their nets, you will repent.
They take you over seas !!!
To Jamaica, Fiji, Damra, Mauritius
British Guiana, Trinidad and Honduras.
They are not Colonies but jails.
Save, be careful of depot wallas,
They spoil your religion under the pretence of
service.
Don't listen to sweet talks, they are your enemies.
Dear brothers,
You will find these "arkatis" at the station, at the
bazaar and enquire if you are in need of service.
They have not got services to offer. They will take you
to Calcutta and sell you into other people's hands on
agreement.
They got money for this, by offering sweets they induce
you. They say they will offer you service. They take you
to sakebs.
Don't entangle yourself with their cajoling.
Don't listen to what they say, don't stand near them.
They have sub-depots and agencies everywhere.
Wherever you go be careful of these people, don't forget.
Circulate this news to all villages.*

Satyadeva
Satya Granthamala, Johnstongunj, Allahabad.
Printed at Swadharma Pracharak Press, Delhi

*ESCAPE FROM DECEIVERS.
ESCAPE FROM THE DEPOT PEOPLE
BEWARE ! BEWARE ! BEWARE !
It is not service. It is woe.
Don't fall in to their snare. They will ruin you.
You will weep your life long.
Instead of rupees, rubbish will fall (on you).
They are taking you across the sea !
To Mauritius, to Demerara, to Fiji, to Jamaica, to
Trinidad, to Honduras.
They are not islands; they are hell.
Do not go by mistake. By exciting your greed for money
they will destroy your caste. There will you have to
break stones. On board ship people only get one seer of
water in twenty-four hours. At stations, on pilgrimages,
in dharmasalas, in the bazaar they will ask you if you
want employment. They have no employment to give.
They will take you to Calcutta where by contract
They will sell you into the hands of sabibs.
These men are given money to deceive people. They
delude them with sweet words and sweetmeat.
Fall not into their snare.
Do not listen to their words. These men are to be found
everywhere. Proclaim this loudly in all villages.
The petitioner Purushottam Das, Vaishnav,
Muzaffarpur [Let any one who wishes, ask for this
notice free of charge.]
Every literate brother is prayed to read this to his
illiterate brethren and sisters. It will be as meritorious
as a yajna.*

Narayan Press, Muzaffarpur, no. 68, 6-6-15,
20,000 copies printed

C.F. ANDREWS AND W.W. PEARSON –
BRITISH OPPONENTS OF INDENTURE



Andrews and Pearson, c. 1914.

CHARLES FREER ANDREWS (1871-1940) born in England, served as a priest from 1896 to 1899 after which his poor health led him to India in 1904 where he took up a post as teacher at Saint Stephen's College, Delhi. William Winstanley Pearson (1881-1923), a Christian Missionary and a teacher at Santiniketan, also became, like Andrews, a critic of what they saw as the exploitation of Indians, and both opposed the indenture system. Their views were inevitably influenced by the European middle class Christian morality of their time.

Women left their husbands for the sake of jewellery and went to live with other men. They seemed to do just what they pleased, and to live just as they liked. Caste and religion were mixed together in a common jumble. Hindu girls were sold in marriage to mahomedans and vice versa. Sweepers' children were sometimes married to Brahmins. If this admixture had been due to enlightened motives of humanity and in accordance with conscience, all might have been well. But it was just the reverse, – a matter of greed and lust... these immigration department marriages are called by the Indians 'marit' and it was always necessary in Fiji to ask a man, or women, if they had a 'marit' for nothing else was legal.

Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry, 1916.



Banarsidas Chaturvedi (middle)

To expose the humiliation of the indenture system and to mobilise Indians against the so-called 'Coolie' System, Banarsidas Chaturvedi (1892-1985), a noted Hindi-language writer and journalist, assisted Totaram Sanadhya to publish his experiences in the form of an autobiography called "*Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkish Varsh*".

The book played a significant role in the nationalist mobilisation against the system of indentured labour. So successful was this movement that indentured labour came to be regarded as the most demeaning form of work and the word 'coolie' came to be widely regarded as an insult in colonies across the globe (although the term is still widely used within India).

Kuliyon ke kasht ke visbay me hamare pathak babut kuchh jante hai, parantu congress wale is visbay me kuchh bhi nahi jante. Yadi Fiji pravashi bhai Totaram ji ko apna pratinidhi banakar nahi bhejte to iski bhi asha na thi

Bharat Mitra, 1915.

Translation:

Our readers know a lot about the sufferings of coolies but not Congress, which does not have any knowledge about it. There was no hope of this either, if the Fiji overseas Indians had not sent Totaramji as their representative.

SUCCESS STORIES

ALTHOUGH OPPOSITION to the indenture system on the part of Indian nationalists and the Anti-slavery society members led to many abuses being highlighted, it is nevertheless also true that many Indian migrants earned better wages and saved more money than they could have hoped to achieve in India. They were, in fact, allowed to purchase their freedom. Some returned home and bought land in their native villages.

Others chose to re-indenture rather than return to India, negotiating better wages and conditions in the process. Many moved on to other trades and occupations within a few years, including fishing, market gardening and rice cultivation. A few families became exceptionally prosperous and became landowners and sugar planters themselves. Below are some examples of such success stories.

THE GUNGAH FAMILY OF MAURITIUS



Gungah Fowdar, immigrant no 144,334 a Bihari born in the village of Runwanee, Arrah, disembarked in Mauritius from Calcutta on 29th September 1854. The 25 year old was indentured to Deux Bras sugar estate. In 1866 he married a young Indian girl named Busmoteea, who had migrated to Mauritius with her parents from Ghazipur at the height of the troubles engulfing the region, during the Indian rebellion, in July 1857. The following year a son was born, named Dookhee Gungah. In all the couple would have 8 sons. The family worked hard and managed to acquire a plot of land at New Grove. Gungah had two more sons – Ramjuttun in 1887 and the youngest son Oodit in 1892. His offspring gradually enlarged the family landholdings. By 1920 the family possessed around 3,000 acres of land, and in 1931 the Société Dookhee

Gungah owned no fewer than seven sugar-cane plantations: La Rosa, Gros Bois, Constantin, Astroea and Quatre Soeurs, as well as a biscuit factory and a bakery.

FROM COOLIE TO PRIME MINISTER: THE RAMGOOLAM FAMILY



Moheeth Ramgoolam

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of rapid socio-economic mobility among overseas Indians in Mauritius is that of the Ramgoolam family. The teenage Moheeth Ramgoolam left the Saran district of Bihar to migrate to Mauritius in 1871 aboard the Hindoostan from Calcutta according to his immigrant number 353,639. He was following in the footsteps of his elder brother. He worked for a number of years on the Queen Victoria sugar estate in Flacq, Mauritius before becoming a sirdar. Two years later, Moheeth married a young widow, who already had a son. Kewal, later to be known as Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, was born of this union on 18 September 1900. Kewal's half brother had also achieved a position of responsibility in the plantation system: Ramlall became a marqueur, or record-keeper of the attendance and earnings of estate labourers, and later a prosperous small planter at Belle Rose, Clemencia.

The younger brother, Seewoosagur, despite the early death of his father, was supported by his elder brother and his uncle – a member of the prosperous Bhuguth family – through his education. After attending one of the best secondary schools in Mauritius he left for training as a medical doctor in England. Returning after an absence of more than a decade, imbued with Fabian socialist principles, Ramgoolam became a member of the nascent Labour Party of Mauritius, and after the island became independent in 1968, this son of Bihari 'coolies' was elected that nation's first Prime Minister. Holding this position for a number of years, and overseeing the country's emergence as a successful democratic post-colonial and welfare state, Ramgoolam is widely revered as 'chacha', the father of the nation.

C. F. ANDREWS AND W.W. PEARSON, while undertaking an independent inquiry into the conditions of Indians in Fiji found many instances of prosperous Indian ex-indentured labourers.

The following extracts from their report include typical cases of prosperous Indian growers of sugar-cane in the north of the island and further details of Indian economic success:

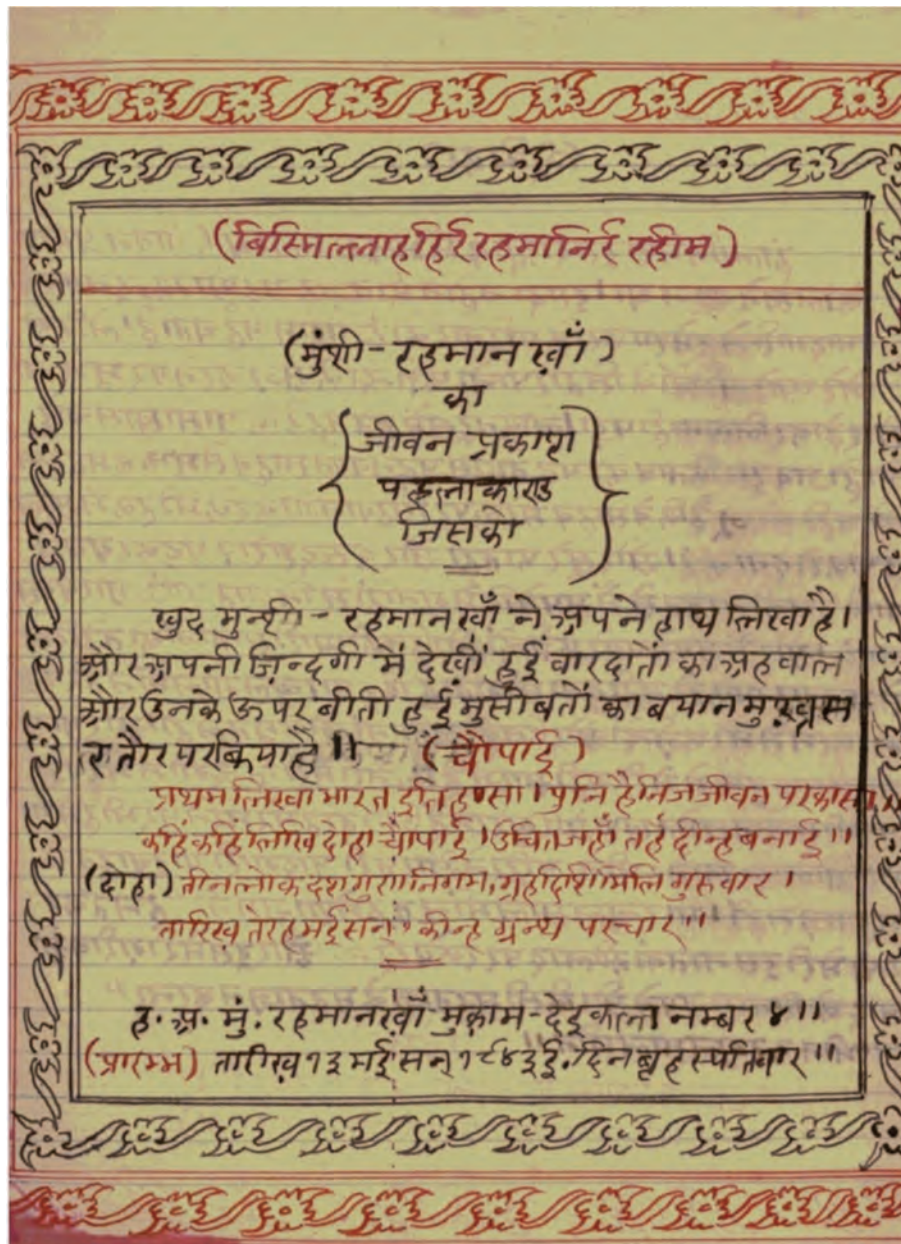
- LUCHMAN has been three years out of indenture and was able to sell his cane last year for Rs. 1635.
- NATHU, who has been five years out of indenture, has grown 531 tons of sugar-cane on twenty-three acres of land. He received for his crop Rs. 7,200. this man sold out his interest in the land and its standing crops for Rs. 13,500.
- RAM SINGH told us that he had received Rs. 12000 for his last year's crop. This sum, however, does not present the net profit. An encouraging fact is his cane cultivation by an extensive use of green manure. The small Indian holders, we were told, had not made sufficient use of scientific cultivation, with the inevitable result that their crops are inferior in quality, and the soil is gradually becoming impoverished.
- In 1914 independent Indian growers of cane supplied to the company's mills at Lautaka, on the north of side of the island, a total of 32,328 tons of cane, which realised 2,85,000 rupees, at an average of eleven shillings and eight pence per ton. In 1915 from the same source the estimate was 47,000 tons of cane which would realise 5,40,500 rupees at an average of fifteen shillings and four pence per ton. In this Lautaka district 34 % of the total sugar-cane land is already in Indian hands, and all along the north coast the percentage is ever increasing. In the district of Nadi alone there is population of 5,000 free indians and the monthly average applications for leases of land at magistrate's court was fifty. There are thus a large number of free Indians who are now growing sugar-cane, quite independently, on holdings varying from five to three hundred acres in extent. The large Indian cultivators employ numbers of free Indians to carry on the ploughing, manuring, weeding and cutting of the cane.
- A settlement of free Indians on the border of a small European plantation. These have recently come out of indenture and settled near their old employer. The planter gave to them, at a very low rate, during the last year of their indenture, a piece of ground for growing cane. He now uses their free labour, at the heavy seasons of the year, paying them full wages. In this way, he has been able to reduce the number of coolies under indenture on his estate. The Indians seemed prosperous and contented. The planter was evidently their friend, and they were some distance away from any large coolie 'lines'.
- From all this it will be clear that every year the interests of the Indian free settlers will have to be taken into consideration in an increasing measure. For the long run, if the present rate of progress continues, they will be the chief growers and producers of cane in the islands. Indeed, the time may be not for distant, when the European cane grower will give place to the Indian altogether, the organising work at the centres alone remaining in the European' hands. If the new offer of the colonial sugar refinery company to place pound 100,000 at a low rate of interest at the disposal of the Fiji government for Indians' settlement be accepted and the settlement carried out, this predominance of the Indian cultivator as a grower of sugar-cane for the company's mills will be practically assured. (Andrews and Pearson, 1916: 45).

MUNSHI RAHMAN KHAN (1874-1972), a literate Indian Muslim, and formerly an indentured labourer in Surinam, is pictured right, with his family.

He wrote his autobiography of plantation life in Hindustani. The first page of his handwritten manuscript is featured below:



Munshi Rahman Khan with his family

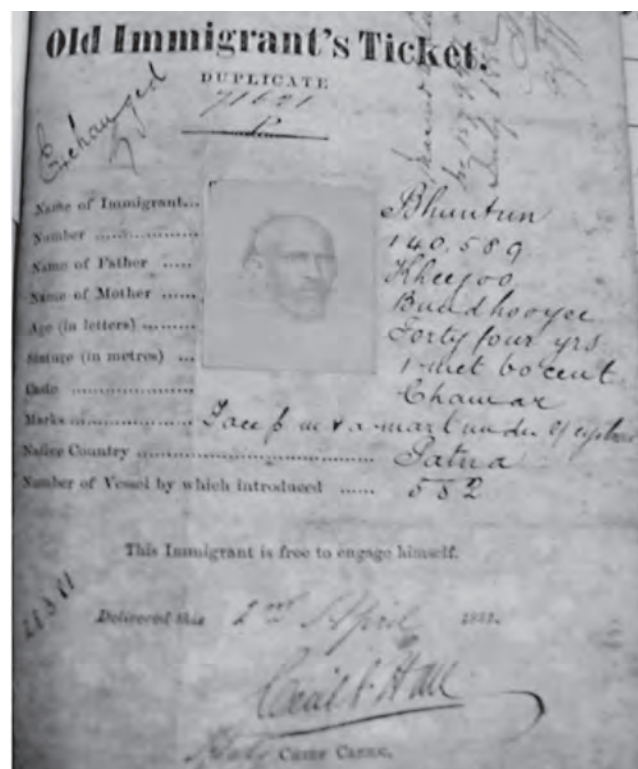


Munshi Rahman Khan: Jiwan Prakash, 1943

THE END OF INDENTURE

IMPRISONMENT FOR LABOUR OFFENCES was ended in all British colonies in 1909. Indentured migration to Natal (South Africa) was abolished in 1910, partly at the insistence of the Government of South Africa itself (who were attempting by this time to limit Indian immigration). Following resolutions by the prominent Indian lawyer G.K. Gokhale and the educationist and politician Madan Mohan Malaviya in the (Indian) Imperial Legislative Council in 1912 and 1916, the Viceroy of India committed the Government of India to ending indentured migration to all other colonies, as soon as alternative systems of recruitment could be put in place.

The last indentured migrants to Mauritius arrived in 1925. Ironically, soon after the abolition of indenture following the nationalist campaign in India, indentured workers in Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam petitioned for it to be resumed, since it provided the only means and opportunity for their far-flung families to be re-united.



Old Immigrant's Ticket, Mauritius

CONCLUSION

INDIAN LABOUR, clearing forest, building roads, railways, docks and cities, opened up economies throughout the global south. Notwithstanding their harsh life and the cruelties of the system they endured (especially in its earliest years), most Indian migrants were highly enterprising individuals. Experienced workers became clerks and supervisors within the plantations, and within a few generations their children and grandchildren had become teachers, doctors, shop-keepers and civil servants.

More than twenty-five countries recruited Indian migrant labourers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their experiences varied greatly. In most societies they have become the middle classes within the countries where they settled. They have developed a culture that embraces the best elements of both the countries in which they live and the societies they left behind. Their contribution to the development of the global south must therefore be measured as being at least as important as that of Europeans in the colonial era.



Indentured family gathering in Surinam

← QUESTIONS
FOR DISCUSSION →

1. What is 'caste' and why might some Indians have sought to migrate in order to escape from caste, religious and gender discrimination?
2. In what ways were Indian migrant labourers treated differently from other labourers in their time?
3. Countries such as Mauritius and Malaysia are regarded today as models of multi-culturalism, ranking much higher than India on indices of human and economic development. What part might Indian migration have played in this development?
4. In East Africa and Fiji, Indians have experienced racial discrimination following independence, and in Southern Africa they suffered under the policy of Apartheid. In what ways might this have influenced their views on their history?
5. What are the dangers in generalising about a system of migration that extended across the globe and lasted for more than a century?
6. Why might the 'immoralities' of plantation life in some descriptions be regarded in the present day as symptoms of freedom, and an escape from the confines of tradition, especially for Indian women?

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