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## **Introduction**

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The indentured labour system saw the movement of upwards of 1.3 million Indian labour migrants to European colonies in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, South and East Africa and the Caribbean between 1834 and 1917. A formative element of the modern South Asian diaspora, indenture has been extremely controversial, at the time and since. The assumption that indenture was little better than a 'new system of slavery' was first espoused by British abolitionists in the 1830s and 1840s, and has dominated the historiography since the publication of Hugh Tinker's seminal work of the same name in 1974.<sup>1</sup> Such interpretations have had a long lasting influence, and slavery certainly threw its shadow over the early implementation of the scheme. Yet indenture was a system that lasted for nearly a century, was subject to increasingly strict regulation and, while always operating within the context of highly uneven colonial power-relations, could offer opportunities for social, spatial and economic mobility. Recent revisionist and subalternist scholars have begun to explore the various ways in which migrants were able to exert agency, influence events, and utilise the opportunities offered by migration to their advantage.<sup>2</sup> As Crispin Bates' paper in this collection suggests, the fixing of indenture within the 'new system of slavery' trope both simplifies the attitudes of the colonial observers upon which it is based, and elides the engagements, negotiations and experiences of migrants themselves, for whom indenture could offer a range of individual and collective outcomes. He argues that historians must find new ways of utilising colonial archives to uncover narratives that put human agency and creativity at the centre of the story.

The papers in this collection contribute to this ongoing debate about how to conceptualise indenture. Drawing on disciplines, including history, historical geography and artistic practice, they explore the different ways in which indentured labour migration has been perceived, managed and represented in both colonial and post-colonial contexts. From nineteenth century British abolitionists to settlers in Australia and colonial officials in Fiji, to north Indian villagers and modern artists, the papers explore how Indian indenture has been imagined, debated, contested and negotiated across the nearly two centuries since its first inception in the 1830s. The papers draw on sources from the colonial archive, from the socio-cultural world of the labour recruit, and from the post-colonial legacies of indenture. The latter have been influenced by the emergence of new diasporic cultures among migrants and their descendants, and by the 'Coolitude' movement, founded by French Mauritian poet Khal Torabully. The latter seeks to reclaim the oft disparaged 'coolie' identity and make it an icon for the more universal human experience of displacement and migration.<sup>3</sup> The final two papers in this collection both attempt to do this in different ways. Historian Marina Carter and artist Danny Flynn have collaborated to turn haunting images from the colonial archive into evocative original works of art that capture the ethos of the 'coolitude' movement. Andil Gosine reflects on the influence of his own personal and family connections to indenture and how this has informed his own artistic practice, and his response to other artists of the indenture diaspora. Both papers offer important personal creative insights into the post-colonial after-lives of indenture.

Other papers in the collection attempt to complicate our understanding of the story of Indian labour migration and the changing colonial representations of indenture. Although neither Asian labour migration, nor the process of workers indenturing on fixed term contracts began in the 1830s, the indenture system as we know it emerged in the wake of the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies and Mauritius in 1833-4.<sup>4</sup> The extent and severity of the impact of emancipation on capitalist production in the sugar colonies varied between locations. In Mauritius, labour problems that predated the formal abolition of slavery were intensified by rapid economic transformations in the first half of the nineteenth century. As Richard Allen has discussed, the decades after the capture of Mauritius from the French in 1810, and its full incorporation into the British Empire in 1814 saw the transformation of the island's socio-economic structures, as its focus shifted from trade and commerce to the production of sugar on the plantation model. The equalising of the duties on West Indian and Mauritian sugar in 1825 gave added impetus to this process; the area given over to sugar cultivation doubled in five years after the change in duties, and sugar soon came to dominate the colony's export

earnings. With such rapid growth, the available supply of slave labour soon proved to be inadequate to the demands of intensive sugar production.<sup>5</sup>

Slaves from eastern and western Africa, India, Madagascar and Southeast Asia had been a feature of the Mauritian labour force since the French colonised the island in 1721. The late eighteenth century saw a surge in their numbers, with more than 100,000 imported by the time the island was transferred to the British in 1810.<sup>6</sup> With its incorporation into the British Empire, the island became subject to the 1807 ban on slave-trafficking, but despite this an illegal trade in slaves from both India and East Africa/Madagascar continued between 1811 and 1827, resulting in the importation of a further 52,550 men, women and children.<sup>7</sup> This was not enough to offset declining numbers in the island's slave population, however, and Mauritian planters and authorities began to seek alternative sources of labour even before the abolition of slavery in 1834. The new British colonial government experimented with the use of Indian convict labour on public works projects, importing approximately 1,500 prisoners between 1815 and 1837.<sup>8</sup> Early attempts to recruit Chinese and Indian indentured labourers in the 1820s were largely unsuccessful, but they set a precedent for the potential utilisation of 'surplus' Indian labourer to mitigate the impact of emancipation on plantation labour forces. In 1834, seventy-five Indian labourers, privately recruited in Calcutta on five year contracts, arrived in Port Louis. They would be followed by a further 24,300 between 1834 and 1838.<sup>9</sup>

As indentured labourers could be expected to work longer hours, with few holidays and in worse conditions than apprentices, Seymour Drescher suggests that this largely unregulated influx of workers allowed Mauritius to weather the transition to a post-slavery labour regime better than the West Indies.<sup>10</sup> The success of the experiment with indenture, from the planters' perspective at least, drew the attention of other colonies. John Gladstone – West India proprietor and father of the future Prime Minister – famously entered into negotiations with the Calcutta based firm Messrs Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co to supply his Demerara plantations with privately enlisted Indian labourers, and thus make himself 'as far as it is possible, independent of our negro population'.<sup>11</sup> Gladstone's plan conformed to the labour recruitment practices already in place for Mauritius, and was not initially opposed by the Colonial Office. As a result 408 indentured Indian labourers were landed in British Guiana in 1838. Less well known are contemporaneous attempts to bring Indian indentured labourers to New South Wales, where they were needed to fill the gap left by the impending end of convict assignment.<sup>12</sup> As Andrea Major discusses in her paper in this collection, debates from the Australian periphery of the 'indentured archipelago' provide a fascinating alternative

perspective on the emergence of indenture and the construction of the ideal labour migrant.<sup>13</sup> The debate over 'coolie' labour continued in different parts of Australia well into the late nineteenth century, despite the failure of these early efforts to establish a labour flow between the settler colony and the subcontinent.

Indian indentured labour seemed to offer a number of advantages to planters in both Mauritius and the Caribbean. The contract system mitigated against the costs of their importation, by committing labourers to work for a fixed period of years, with the possibility of further extension. By setting the terms of the labour relationship in advance, ostensibly to the satisfaction of both parties, in theory it provided security of affordable labour supply for the planters and of employment to the labourer. The reality, of course, was significantly more complex and questions were repeatedly raised about both the economic viability of the system for the planter and the humanitarian implications for the migrant. The expansion of indentured Indian labour to the Caribbean provoked a storm of protest from the anti-slavery movement in Britain, who opposed the plan on principle, believing it was 'little more than a facile substitute for treating freedmen properly'.<sup>14</sup> Accusations of deception, fraud, and coercion in the recruitment process, and harsh regimes, abuse and oppression on the plantations soon emerged, and it was not long before British abolitionists were denouncing the indentured labour system as little better than the slave trade renewed. Others pointed to the distressingly high mortality rates on some early indenture voyages, or to the supposed ignorance and backwardness of the 'tribal' groups who made up a significant proportion of the first migrants. The image of vessels from depots in Calcutta and Bombay arriving in Mauritius and the Caribbean with 'cargoes of human beings' was used to invoke images of slave marts and the middle passage. Julia Maitland, writing from Madras in 1838, captured the tenor of popular anti-indenture feeling in India:

Emigration of Hill Coolies to the Mauritius' it is called, and diverse other innocent sounding names. In case you should ever hear anything said in its favour, here is the real state of the case. It is neither more nor less than an East Indian Slave Trade - just as wicked as its predecessor, the African Slave Trade...Numbers are kidnapped and all are entrapped and persuaded under false pretences... They are so ill-treated by their new masters that few even live to come back, and those who do bring with them the marks of the same cruelties and floggings that we used to hear of among the slaves. As the importation is legal, of course all the throwings overboard and atrocities of

the Middle Passage cannot take place; but there are great horrors from the stowing numbers in too small a space on board ship. Many die and many more have their health ruined.<sup>15</sup>

As Purba Hossain discusses in her paper in this volume, metropolitan objections to indenture were mirrored by similar campaigns against the system in colonial Calcutta, as both British and Indian anti-indenture campaigners lobbied the Government of India to put a stop to the system. The arguments were couched in humanitarian terms, emphasising abuses in the recruitment process, high mortality rates on the voyage, and brutal mistreatment of labourers on the plantations in Mauritius. Bates points out that they also reflected concerns about the impact of the outflow of labour on the Indian economy and industry. As Hossain reminds us, although opposition to indenture is more usually associated with the Indian nationalist movement of the early twentieth century, the campaign against the initial implementation of indenture represents an important early example of combined British and Indian resistance influencing the decisions of the colonial state. In response to this public outcry, in 1838 the Government of India suspended all labour emigration while it carried out an investigation into apparent problems with system.

Indentured migration to Mauritius was resumed under careful governmental regulations and controls in 1842, and between this date and its final cessation in 1910 upwards of 451,000 Indian labourers would arrive in Port Louis on contracts of indenture. By 1846 indentured Indians made up 96% of the island's plantation labour force, and by 1861 they comprised 62% of the island's population.<sup>16</sup> Sugar production also increased rapidly as a result of the infusion of new labour and new capital. Thus despite initial teething problems, and in the face of continued opposition from British abolitionists, the introduction of indentured labour to Mauritius was ultimately seen as successful, proving the viability of 'free' contractual labour in former slave plantation economies, and catalysing wider patterns of indentured emigration from Africa, East Asia, Melanesia, South Asia and Southeast Asia and European colonies in the Caribbean, Latin America, southern Africa, the south-western Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and Australasia.<sup>17</sup>

Other colonies soon joined Mauritius, Réunion, British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica in importing this new found source of labour. The French Caribbean colonies of Guadeloupe and Martinique commenced recruitment of Indian indentured labourers in 1853 and between 1856 and 1860 the British colonies of Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and St. Vincent followed suit, all

be it on a much smaller scale. Natal started recruitment in 1860 and the Danish colony of St. Croix received one ship of labourers in 1863. The Dutch began importing labourers to Surinam from India in 1873, which they supplemented with indentured labourers from Java. In 1879, Fiji became the final British colony to start recruiting indentured labourers from India. During the mid-nineteenth century the Indian indenture system therefore steadily expanded both in terms of the number of recruits and geographic scope. With the expansion of the system however, came further welfare issues which caught the attention of anti-indenture lobbyists in India and Britain. French colonies came under particular scrutiny. Indians were British subjects, and their welfare in French colonies continued to be of importance to the British and Indian Governments. After repeated cases of ill treatment and abuse, it was suggested that the French colonies take on specific labour standards introduced in British colonies, a suggestion that was not received well by the French authorities.<sup>18</sup> By 1888, the British and Indian Governments halted all transportation of indentured labourers from India to French colonies.

The system continued to transport Indians to British colonies, as well as the Dutch colony of Surinam. As the end of the nineteenth century approached, the once large importers of indentured labourers such as Mauritius decreased recruitment. Those first indentured labourer importing colonies now had settler Indian populations comprised of time-expired labourers and their descendants which created a small landholder class to continue the cultivation of sugar stemming the need to recruit as extensively. As these colonies decreased their requirement of labourers, Fiji, the last British colony to begin recruiting indentured labourers from India began to steadily increase its intake. By the 1900s Fiji was regularly recruiting over 2,000 labourers per year.<sup>19</sup> Fiji's late insertion into the British Empire and into the Indian indenture system coupled with its young sugar industry meant that it still required large volumes of labourers to be imported from India. Reshaad Durgahee's paper focuses on spatial representations of the indenture experience in Fiji. Specific language was used by Fiji's colonial administration to describe the colony's population groups. This language in turn was used to allocate specific spaces to specific ethnic and social groups, reconfiguring the colonial landscape of Fiji. As Durgahee demonstrates however, these constructed categories were often subverted by Indian labourers highlighting a subaltern agency which allowed them to permeate spaces not designated to them by the colonial administration.

As the twentieth century approached, new facets of the Indian indenture scheme began to appear. The phenomenon of remigration for example became increasingly prominent. Remigration involved indentured labourers who had completed their tenure of indenture in a

particular colony, returning to India and then either returning to the same colony, or a different colony for another indenture contract. Whilst some welcomed the prospect of recruiting labourers who had prior sugar cultivation experience, many others viewed remigrants as troublemakers and too knowledgeable about the system, able to work around regulations.<sup>20</sup> Between 1877 and 1912, there were at least 18,000 remigrants illustrating that this was not an unusual occurrence.<sup>21</sup> This calls into question the issue of personal and geographic agency, for the sheer number of individuals re-indenturing suggests that labourers were making an informed decision on their return to India about whether to leave once again for a similar work contract. In terms of geographic agency, evidence from this period demonstrates that labourers had become aware of the merits and drawbacks of individual colonies as well as their locations. As Ashutosh Kumar discusses in his paper, by the late nineteenth century north Indian peasants had developed their own vocabularies for talking about overseas emigration under the indenture system, and destination points had already been conceptually ‘peasantised’. As Kumar demonstrates, the rural communities from which indentured labourers were recruited had increasingly sophisticated networks through which knowledge about the colonies could be disseminated, even if such information existed alongside more sinister rumours about what happened to people who ‘went to the Tapu’ (islands).

In parallel to the phenomenon of remigration, the later years of the indenture system saw a proliferation of proposals by private individuals, companies and government administrations to recruit labourers to new destinations, as well as create new transportation routes. Some of these proposals were realised, such as the recruitment of time-expired labourers in Mauritius to work on the Railway and Harbour works in Réunion Island in the late 1870s<sup>22</sup> and Indians from Mauritius recruited to work in Brazil in 1877.<sup>23</sup> But these were very much one-off occurrences and halted for welfare reasons. Other new routes had more longevity such as the recruitment of labourers in Mauritius for Natal. Between 1875 and 1877, over 680 labourers travelled directly to Natal from Mauritius.<sup>24</sup> Most proposals however were consigned to the annals of colonial administration. The Government of India received applications from places which had previously not been involved in the Indian indenture system such as Guatemala in 1890.<sup>25</sup> In 1891 the colonial administration in Fiji received an application from a company in Sydney to recruit time-expired Indian labourers in Fiji for service in the New Hebrides.<sup>26</sup> Both of these proposals were unrealised due to the inability to offer assurances that the well-being of Indian labourers would be safeguarded as colonies and countries which were not officially part of the indenture system did not have the appropriate welfare infrastructure in place, such as a Protector of Immigrants and other forms of indenture related administration.



In those colonies where the indenture system was still in operation, campaigners against the ill treatment of labourers and against indenture itself were vociferous in their allegations against planters and colonial administrations. This led to a number of Royal Commissions such as the 1872 Royal Commission in Mauritius which took place in the aftermath of the Petition of the Old Immigrants spearheaded by Adolphe de Plevitz<sup>27</sup> and the 1909 Royal Commission in Mauritius in which the Indian barrister Manilal Doctor was an influential character.<sup>28</sup> Indeed Manilal Doctor, who was sent to Mauritius by one Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to instil a sense of political consciousness amongst the Indian population on the island, followed his time in Mauritius with a period in Fiji where he was similarly involved in bringing grievances of Indian indentured labourers against planters to court.<sup>29</sup>

By 1916 over 1.3 million Indian men, women and children had left the Subcontinent for sugar colonies in the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans. During a period spanning over eighty years, the British, French, Dutch and Danish empires used Indian indentured labour to ensure the continued production of sugar in their colonial possessions. Many colonies had long ceased to recruit Indian indentured labourers as they had, over time, created sufficiently large populations to rely on for labour. A handful, however were still using the system to provide agricultural labour, namely Jamaica, Trinidad, British Guiana, Surinam and Fiji. Eventually, following further commissions and enquiries such as the 1909 Sanderson Commission and the 1915 report on indenture in Fiji by C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, the system was abolished.

The papers in this special edition volume contribute to an evolving debate on the conceptualisation of indenture. In recent years, scholars have begun to question the previously unchallenged representations of indenture, of the colonies in which labourers worked and lived and of indentured labourers themselves. It is especially heartening to see scholarship on the representation of indenture emerging from different academic disciplines. Different approaches to studying indenture, whether historical, geographical, literary or artistic yield nuanced interpretations of the system and demonstrate the need for a multidisciplinary approach in order to understand the workings of the indenture system more completely. The oft cited trope that Indian indenture was a ‘new system of slavery’ has only served to detract from its immense complexity. For whilst Indian indenture did indeed follow slavery chronologically, and elements of the slavery era undoubtedly penetrated the indenture system, representing the system and labourers within that system as slaves camouflages the social, cultural, political and geographical agency that developed over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth

century. 2017 marks the centenary of the end of indentured transportation and the papers in this volume therefore seek to make a timely intervention in repositioning our thinking and representation of indenture and the men, women and children who laboured for Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Tinker *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1870-1979* (London, Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, P.C. Emmer, 'The meek Hindu; the recruitment of Indian indentured labourers for service overseas, 1870–1916', in *Colonialism and Migration; Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery*, ed. by P.C. Emmer (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1986), pp. 187-207; C. Bates, & M. Carter, *Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels: A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora*, in *New Routes for Diapora Studies*, ed. By S. Banerjee, A. McGuinness, & S. C. McKay (Indiana University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> For more see Khal Torabully, *Cale d'étoiles Coolitude* (Reunion: Editions Azalées, 1992); *Coolitude* (Notre librairie, 1996) 128, 59-71; Chair Corail, *Fragments Coolies: Poésie* (Ibis Rouge, 1999); Khal Torabully, *Les Enfants de la Coolitude* (Paris: Courrier de l'Unesco, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Though Reunion Island recruited Indian workers in the late 1820s.

<sup>5</sup> Richard B. Allen 'Capital, Illegal Slaves, Indentured Labourers and the Creation of a Sugar Plantation Economy in Mauritius, 1810–60', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36:2, 2008, 151-170.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, p. 154. See also Richard B. Allen, "The Mascarene slave-trade and labour migration in the Indian Ocean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." *Slavery and Abolition* 24.2 (2003): 33-50.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this, see Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2000). See also Clare Anderson, "Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century" *Slavery and Abolition* 30.1 (2009): 93-109.

<sup>9</sup> Allen, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> Seymour Drescher, *The mighty experiment: Free labor versus slavery in British emancipation*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this from an Australian perspective, see Rose Cullen, 'Empire, Indian Indentured Labour and the Colony: The Debate Over 'coolie' Labour in New South Wales,

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1836–1838.’ *History Australia*, 9.1 (2012): 84-109; Tony Ohlsson, ‘The origins of a white Australia: the coolie question 1837-43.’ *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 97.2 (2011).

<sup>13</sup> The term ‘indentured archipelago’ is taken from Reshaad Durgahee’s forthcoming thesis ‘The Indentured Archipelago: Experiences of Indentured Labour and Transnational Identity in Mauritius and Fiji, 1871-1916’ which brings to light the intense elite and subaltern interconnectivity between indentured labour importing colonies and territories. Durgahee suggests that these connections created an archipelago of colonies spread across the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans, bound together by their shared experience of indenture.

<sup>14</sup> William A. Green, ‘Emancipation to indenture: a question of imperial morality.’ *The Journal of British Studies* 22.2 (1983), p. 103

<sup>15</sup> Julia Maitland, *Letters from Madras during the years 1836-1839* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1846), p. 103

<sup>16</sup> Allen, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> K. Marsh, ‘Rights of the Individual’, *Indentured Labour and Indian Workers: The French Antilles and the Rhetoric of Slavery Post 1848*, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 33:2 (2012) 221-231.

<sup>19</sup> Annual Reports on Emigration, India Office Records

<sup>20</sup> PP, 1910, XXVII (Cd. 5192-5194), Report of the Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates Part II – Minutes of Evidence, Testimony of Arthur Marsden, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1909, paragraph 4947, p.181.

<sup>21</sup> Calculation based on statistics in Annual Reports on Emigration, 1877-1912, India Office Records.

<sup>22</sup> Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, Government of India to Secretary of State for India, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1879. P/1348, India Proceedings, India Office Records.

<sup>23</sup> Mauritius Protector of Immigrants report, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1879. L/PJ/6/5, File 232. India Office Records.

<sup>24</sup> Government Gazettes, National Archives of Mauritius and National Library of Mauritius.

<sup>25</sup> Foreign Office minute paper, Proposed emigration of coolies from India to Guatemala, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1890, L/PJ/6/290, File 2076, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1890, India Office Records.

<sup>26</sup> Secretary of Australasian New Hebrides Company Ltd. to Governor Thurston, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1891. L/PJ/6/311, File 2058, India Office Records.

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<sup>27</sup> Royal Commission of Enquiry to Mauritius, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1872. Royal Commission, National Archives of Mauritius.

<sup>28</sup> D. Prasad, Public Life of Manilal Doctor (Mumbai: Rite-Print-Pak, 1992)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.