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## **‘Hill Coolies’: Indian Indentured Labour and the Colonial Imagination, 1836-38.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper uses debates about Indian migrant labour that took place in New South Wales in 1836-8 to problematize enduring tropes about indenture and the ‘typical’ Indian labour migrant, which have their roots in British anti-slavery discourse of the late 1830s. By juxtaposing abolitionist assumptions against ongoing debates about Indian labour migration in other parts of the British Empire, it explores the economic, political and moral/ideological imperatives that underpinned the representation of indenture during this formative period. By placing metropolitan British anti-indenture literature alongside arguments for Indian migration made by settlers from the Australian periphery of empire, it explores the ways in which racial, imperial and commercial discourses intersected in the representation of the so-called ‘hill coolie’ as the quintessential Indian labour migrant. In doing so, it seeks to destabilise persistent representations of the Indian migrant as passive victim of indenture and suggest a more complex set of identities and interactions.

**Keywords:** India, Indenture, Anti-slavery, Australia, Empire, Labour Migration.

### **Introduction**

In 1836-7 former Mauritian resident J. R. Mayo and Bengal indigo planter John Mackay lobbied the government of New South Wales to subsidise a scheme to import indentured Indians to work as shepherds and farm hands. Labour shortages were a serious problem in the fledgling settler colony, and access to land vastly outstripped the manpower available to work it. Schemes to attract the ‘right sort’ of European immigrants failed to offer any immediate relief, and the situation only seemed likely to deteriorate as the end of convict assignment loomed. ‘The want of labor is at present felt to an alarming extent, throughout the Colony;’ the signatories of a letter to the Colonial Secretary lamented, ‘that in many cases the plough remains idle; and that in order to wean the last spring lambs, flock-owners have been obliged...to place two flocks of sheep...under the care of one Shepherd.’<sup>1</sup> Mayo and Mackay

believed they had found a solution to these problems in Mauritian experiments with Indian indentured labour from 1834 onwards, which they reported has been 'a complete success'.<sup>2</sup> Proposals to import bonded Indian workers seemed at first to find favour with the local press. 'The notorious scarcity of labor at the present moment, is felt severely in all parts of the country;' noted the *Sydney Gazette*, 'and as this is an increasing evil, which, unless checked at once, must spread with alarming rapidity and to a fearful extent, we consider it no less our duty than it is our inclination, to afford every publicity and assistance to an undertaking which can scarcely fail to be productive of much good, without the possibility of doing any harm.'<sup>3</sup> The Legislative Council also initially seemed open to the idea, and minutes of evidence were collected and published by the Committee on Immigration into New South Wales in 1837. As the debate progressed, however, concerns about the social, political and racial implications of importing non-white workers into the colony emerged, while the upsurge in humanitarian opposition to indenture among abolitionists in Britain from 1838 onwards soon soured the appetite of many colonists for the scheme. In the end only a handful of Indian labourers were imported, and these by independent settlers without government subsidy or support. Thus while indenture was to become a staple of colonial economies in the Mascarene Islands and Caribbean for nearly a century, New South Wales remained resistant to the system and imported Indian labour only in much more limited way.

Previously little discussed, debates about importing Indian labour into Australia in the 1830s and early 1840s have received increased attention from historians in recent years. This work has largely explored debates over Indian immigration in the context of its relevance for Australian history, seeing it primarily as a precursor to the 'White Australia' policies of the 1850s onwards. Thus scholars such as Rose Cullen, Tony Ohllson, Janet Doust and Angela Woolacott have used these debates to elucidate emerging Australian ideas about race, class and identity.<sup>4</sup> They have been less concerned with the light these debates shed on wider histories of indenture across the empire, or on metropolitan and colonial British attitudes towards Indian labourers themselves. Conversely, studies of British abolitionist and humanitarian responses to indenture have tended to take an 'Atlantic-centric' approach, concentrating primarily on the intersection between indenture and debates about 'free labour' in the sugar colonies.<sup>5</sup> Both William Green's account of the motivations for British state support of indenture, and Madhavi Kale's discussion of the Clapham Saints' opposition to it place the emphasis firmly on the western hemisphere.<sup>6</sup> Green argues that Indian indenture was deemed an acceptable risk because 'the nation's greater humanitarian policy in the Atlantic basin, specifically her struggle to eliminate slavery and the African slave trade, would have suffered a serious, perhaps

irreversible, setback if the emancipation experiment in the free sugar colonies was allowed to fail.<sup>7</sup> On this basis, he suggests that indentured labour migration to the Caribbean colonies should be understood as 'a vital, if disagreeable, bulwark in a basically humane Atlantic strategy, not the calloused or willful adoption of a "new system of slavery".<sup>8</sup> Neither Green, nor Kale pay significant attention to the intersections between concern about the implications of indenture for the West Indies and concurrent debates about Britain's humanitarian responsibilities in the east, or with debates about labour, colonisation and emigration in other parts of the Empire.

This paper argues that debates from the periphery of what Reshaad Durgahee refers to as the 'indentured archipelago' provide important insights into British colonial attitudes toward Indian labour migration, at a time when the supposedly inexhaustible manpower reserves of the subcontinent were becoming increasing, and controversially globalised. Abolitionists in Britain protested indignantly about abuses being perpetrated against ignorant and helpless Indian 'hill coolies'. The term 'hill coolies' has become synonymous with indenture. In the early nineteenth century it was applied, with little ethnographic precision, to various 'tribal' groups from the uplands of what is now Jharkhand in eastern India. These groups made up a significant portion of the earliest indentured migrants and were presented as the most backward and vulnerable of all the inhabitants of India by those who sought to oppose their exploitation in the overseas labour market. Yet who the so-called 'hill coolies' actually were, how they related to the rest of the mobile Indian labour market, and why they were deemed suitable candidates for indenture remained vaguely and imprecisely articulated in most abolitionist accounts.<sup>9</sup>

The proposals put forward by supporters of Indian immigration to New South Wales provide an informative counterpoint to the abolitionist depiction of indentured Indians as quintessential victims, presenting more detailed (though perhaps no more accurate) descriptions of the class of Indians they wished to attract, and the characteristics that made them desirable labourers.<sup>10</sup> Produced by men who wished to apply their own personal experiences in Mauritius and India to the very different context of New South Wales, their proposals predate the upsurge in anti-slavery interest in indenture in Britain, and the arrival of news of that campaign in Australia. As a result they do not engage directly with abolitionist attacks on indenture, nor are they embedded in concurrent debates about the future of the post-emancipation sugar colonies. This is not to suggest that their accounts do not contain their own agendas and distortions; they were written with a view to persuading the government and the public of New South Wales of the

desirability of importing Indian labour into a predominantly white settler community, and their depiction of the ideal Indian migrant is constructed accordingly. They are thus deeply embedded both in the immediate context of New South Wales, and in wider orientalist tropes about the nature of Indian labour. They also, however, offer an oblique angle into debates about Indian labour migration that are often otherwise dominated by the dynamic between metropole and sugar colony.

### **The Origins of the Indenture Debate**

The backdrop to the indentured labour experiment was the end of slavery in the sugar colonies of the British Empire. With the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1833, and the early termination of apprenticeship in 1838, Mauritian and then West Indian planters began to look for a reliable alternative labour source. Arguments in favour of 'assisted labour immigration' revolved around the commercial necessity of continuing sugar production in the former slave colonies. This, the planters maintained, could only be achieved via the plantation model, which would have to expand to meet the ever-increasing demand for affordable sugar.<sup>11</sup> Without immigration 'colonial planters would go to the wall: cultivation would cease, a monopoly of sugar production would pass to foreign slave-labour producers, and productive districts... would be reclaimed by the sea.'<sup>12</sup> The result would be ruin for the planters, misery for the former slaves and economic and social disaster for the islands. Their concerns were shared by British observers such as free trader, academic and future Colonial Secretary Herman Merivale, who called for 'copious immigration' to the larger sugar colonies in order to bring down the cost of labour and redress the threat of serious scarcities and high sugar prices.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, debates about convict transportation and assignment in Australia presaged an end to another channel of coerced labour, raising questions about how best to secure a suitable workforce for that colony. Influenced by seemingly successful experiments with Indian indentured labour in Mauritius in the early 1830s, by the middle of that decade planters, settlers and entrepreneurs in various parts of the empire were looking to India for a potential solution to their labour problems.

Those who supported the indenture scheme claimed it offered Indian migrants a chance to improve their condition and escape from intolerable conditions on the subcontinent. It was generally assumed that India had a bottomless pool of underexploited labourers that could be tapped at little cost to this overpopulated region. Frequent famines like the one that ravaged the Agra region in 1837-8, and widespread agricultural distress reinforced the idea of overseas

migration as a desirable escape route for a section of the Indian peasantry. Thus Governor of Mauritius Sir Lionel Smith, speaking in favour of indenture, remarked that 'in the vast population of India, poverty and distress but too often appear in the most appalling forms. Among the few resources open to the sufferers for escaping these calamities, one is emigration to Mauritius, where a constant and large demand for their labour exists.'<sup>14</sup> Under these circumstances, supporters of indenture argued, labourers who were already used to undertaking internal migrations in search of employment and to escape hardship should not be deprived of the 'outlet' which Mauritius and the Caribbean could potentially provide. 'It is not proposed to seize on poor helpless savages, and send them closely packed in a filthy slave-ship to a country where they will be forced to labour for others,' *The Courier* declared, 'It is simply proposed to convey men, who are starving on wage scarcely sufficient to keep body and soul together, to a country where they will immediately receive much higher wages.'<sup>15</sup>

Plans to fill the labour needs of European planters by exporting Indian labourers under five year contracts of indenture represented a disturbing new challenge to the free labour ideals of the anti-slavery movement. Experiments with indentured migration to Mauritius, where there was already a significant South Asian community as a result of the Indian Ocean slave trade and convict transportation, had begun in 1834 but had initially gone under the radar of the British abolitionists. It was the attempted entry of Caribbean planters into the Indian labour market that drew their attention to indenture, which appeared little better than a 'new species of slavery'.<sup>16</sup> Deeply invested morally, ideologically and economically in the success of emancipation, abolitionists opposed the introduction of a cheap and malleable labour force that might threaten the position of the newly freed Afro-Caribbean communities. The experience of Mauritius in the early, unregulated years of the system reinforced fears that coercion, abuse and mistreatment were unavoidable corollaries of indenture, while suggestions that the glut of labour had driven down wages, resulting in the eviction of newly emancipated slaves, acted as a stark warning of the dangers of unrestricted immigration. As a result the Government of India suspended all labour emigration in 1838 while it carried out an investigation, and a heated debate took place in both Britain and India about the moral, social and economic implications of indenture.<sup>17</sup>

Indenture has remained a polarising subject in historiographies of labour migration. The nineteenth-century abolitionist assumption that Indian indenture was qualitatively different from European forms of labour migration has had a lasting impact on attitudes towards the system, and towards the migrants who were caught up in it. The counter-arguments of

supporters of Indian labour mobility, on the other hand, have largely been dismissed as the self-interested justifications of a planter capitalist class bent on exploiting cheap bonded labour. The idea that indenture represented a 'new system of slavery' became embedded in recent historiography with the publication of Hugh Tinker's seminal work of the same name in 1974.<sup>18</sup> In it Tinker followed nineteenth century abolitionists in presenting indenture as little better than the slavery it was introduced to replace, describing it as a 'long saga of dumb, patient endurance' for the unfortunate individuals involved.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, William Green, writing in 1983, summed up the prevailing position by declaring that 'Indenture implies unfreedom, the exploitation of people forced into exile by misfortune or misadventure.'<sup>20</sup> More recently, revisionist and subalternist scholars have taken a more nuanced approach to migrant experiences, exploring various ways in which they were able to influence individual and collective outcomes, and utilise the opportunities offered by migration to their advantage. P.C. Emmer has argued that indenture offered opportunities for free labour and social mobility to Indian labourers, while Marina Carter and Crispin Bates demonstrate that pre-existing networks and patterns of re-migration meant that migrants often made informed decisions about whether and where to migrate.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, they question the traditional 'victim narrative' of indenture, as it has evolved from Victorian abolitionist characterisations of the 'coolie trade' to more recent historical, literary and cultural studies. The abolitionist accounts upon which many enduring assumptions are based were not simply disinterested exposes of humanitarian abuses, but were inextricably linked to wider practical and ideological debates about the nature of labour, migration and colonial commodity production in a still emerging post-emancipation empire. Discussions of indenture therefore negotiate not only the actual experiences of migrants, but the legacies of evangelical attitudes, imperial imperatives, and racial discourses.

### **'Ignorant and Helpless Beings'**

Although they were to become strident critics of the indenture system, British abolitionists were not opposed to labour migration in principle. Indeed, the General Anti-Slavery Convention, organised by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) in 1840 saw a number of proposals for immigration to the Caribbean discussed. Yet there were also concerns about what might constitute genuinely free labour, and who might realistically enter into labour arrangements with the planters without being reduced to a slave-like state of bondage. European migration was considered the epitome of free labour, but proved to be problematic in practice; British Guiana experimented with Portuguese immigration from Madeira, and Jamaica managed to recruit several thousand North Europeans, but these turned

out to be unsatisfactory workers being 'intemperate, unruly, and sickly.'<sup>22</sup> Another potential source of labour was the 35,000 strong free black population of the United States. BFASS members were not ideologically opposed to the immigration of 'intelligent, and civilised, and Christianized' free blacks from other Caribbean colonies and from America, providing 'sufficient guarantee can be obtained for securing [their] entire freedom and equal rights.'<sup>23</sup> All of the larger West India colonies attempted to tap into this labour pool, with about a thousand actually arriving in Trinidad, and a lesser number in British Guiana and Jamaica. This line of recruitment also proved to be a dead end, however, as negative reports of plantation life deterred potential recruits.<sup>24</sup> Thus despite anti-slavery support for 'free' labour migration schemes, as Green points out, 'At every turning, immigration strategies undertaken before 1840 failed.'<sup>25</sup>

Immigration might be considered desirable under some circumstances, but only when prospective migrants were deemed capable of fully understanding the rights and responsibilities engendered by their contracts, and of entering into them voluntarily. For various reasons Indian 'hill coolies' did not fall into this category and abolitionist support for labour migration categorically did not extend to importing 'ignorant and helpless beings' from India.<sup>26</sup> Thus although he was generally supportive of supplying the labour gap in the Caribbean with 'healthful emigration from North America,' when pressed on the issue of Indian migration Daniel O'Connell summed up the feelings of many present at the Convention by pronouncing himself to be decidedly against the use of Indian indentured labour in the Caribbean. 'I am fully persuaded that you might as well proclaim the slave trade again as proclaim the admission of the Hill Coolies into our West India colonies;' he declared, 'and I am equally convinced that the planters in Mauritius are the worst guardians that could be appointed to protect these labourers. I would rather be a party to the total annihilation of that unfortunate race, than to their being subject to a new species of slavery.'<sup>27</sup>

BFASS's rationale for excluding Indian migrants from the global labour market was based on an essentialist understanding of the inherent racial characteristics of the Indian labourer, his lack of information about the world, and his supposed place within a static, timeless and unchanging village India. As Lord Brougham put it in Parliament, 'What hopes can we entertain of ever being able to make a Hindoo, a coolie from the inland territory of the country, a poor native who has never seen the ocean, or any sheet of water larger than the tank in his village, or the stream in which he bathes – comprehend the nature of a ship and a voyage, the discomforts of a crowded hold, the sufferings of four months at sea, the labours of a sugar

plantation...<sup>28</sup> The Indian's lack of accurate information, or world experience beyond the confines of his village made him susceptible to unscrupulous recruiters and incapable of fully understanding the magnitude of the agreement he was entering into. As abolitionist orator and East India reformer George Thompson put it

Look at his ignorance; he was ignorant of the character of those by whom he was first engaged; he was ignorant of the geography, and knew not the position nor the relation of the country to which he would be sent; he was ignorant of the elements and considerations which constituted a fair and equitable bargain; he was ignorant still more of the character of those by whom he was to be employed; he knew nothing of their avarice, their subtlety, their love of power, their past treatment of their coloured slaves, and the means which they possessed, through common interests and close combination, of setting aside and rendering nugatory the most important clauses in the paper contract which had been mutually signed in India.<sup>29</sup>

Thus while Europeans and even free North American blacks might be considered free agents, capable of exercising the right of workers to carry their labour to the highest bidder, the prospective Indian labour migrant lacked the knowledge to exercise this right effectively. Moreover, this perceived ignorance was not predicated solely on a lack of information, but on inherent racial characteristics that made him eternally incapable of exercising rational agency in the decision to migrate. As Julia Maitland put it:

There is a great deal of verbiage in the Government newspapers about the Coolies carrying their labour to the best market, and so on, but the fact is these poor creatures are far too ignorant and stupid to have any sense or choice in the matter. Some slave agent tells them they are to go, and they go – they know nothing about it. A Hindoo does not know how to make a choice, it is an effort of mind quite beyond any but the very highest and most educated among them. Gentleman's native servants are very superior in sense to those poor wild Coolies, but once or twice I have quite innocently puzzled and distressed some of our servants exceedingly, by giving them their choice about some affair that concerned only themselves...<sup>30</sup>

Such racial assumptions are important, because by implying that Indians were inherently and permanently incapable of strategic decision-making, opponents of indenture could assert that

no regulations or safeguards could ever be put in place that could turn vulnerable Indians into legitimate free labour migrants.

As well as reflecting pressing concerns over appropriate labour strategies in the post-emancipation sugar colonies, the debate on indenture also coincided with an upsurge in concern over the impact of colonial expansion on indigenous societies in both the settler colonies and in India. The 1835-37 Commons' Select Committee on Aborigines was followed by the formation of the Aborigines Protection Society in 1837, while the British India Society split from the former organisation in 1839 in order to devote its full attention to the plight of the 'countless inhabitants of Hindustan'.<sup>31</sup> The decision to focus on India raised important questions about the definition 'aborigine', however, for while some Indian 'tribal' groups seemed to naturally fit this description, the majority of the Indian population were deemed too advanced to be truly aboriginal.<sup>32</sup> In order to render the inhabitants of India appropriate subjects of colonial philanthropy, they first had to be configured as helpless victims, rather than active agents who had complex and diverse experiences of and encounters with colonialism. As a result, the rhetoric of the Aborigines Protection Society and British India Society tended to present the multitudes of India as an undifferentiated mass, struggling under the grinding poverty and catastrophic famines that resulted from East India Company misrule.<sup>33</sup> Within this larger discourse, the socially and economically marginalised, disempowered and displaced 'hill coolie' represented a particularly appropriate focal point for humanitarian concern.

In keeping with the homogenising tendency of colonial philanthropy, abolitionist discourse slipped between discussing indentured labour in the context of marginal, 'tribal' subsets of Indian society, and imagining the whole of the Indian peasant population as at risk. As Bates and Shah point out, while in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries colonial observers distinguished between the inhabitants of the hills and forests and those of the plains, it was not until the 1840s that groups such as the Bhils and Kols began to be clearly delineated as distinct 'aboriginal, forest, or hill tribes'.<sup>34</sup> More research would be needed to determine how colonial applications of loosely tribal identities to early indentured labours contributed to these ethnographic shifts. Certainly the term 'hill coolie' implied someone from the geographic, social and religious margins of Indian society, although terms like Dhangar, Bhooneah, Oraon and Kol were also invoked freely and with little precision in the decades before the ascendancy of the 'ethnographic state'.<sup>35</sup> Tinker claims that the term Dhangar referred to 'a hill-man who works as a yearly labourer' and follows Victorian ethnographer H. H. Risley in suggesting that the word may simply be the Oraon for 'adult', or refer to wages paid in *dhan* (unhusked rice).<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, *Hobson Jobson* notes that the etymology of the word Dhangar is doubtful, but that it refers to 'members of various tribes of Chutia Nagpur [sic], but especially the Oraons...when they go out to distant provinces to seek employment as labourers ("coolies")... A very large proportion of those who emigrate to the tea plantations of E. India and also to Mauritius and other colonies, belong to the Oraon tribe.'<sup>37</sup> Noting how the pacification policies and economic encroachments of the colonial state forced tribal groups from their traditional homelands and lifestyles and into migrant contract labour, Kaushik Ghosh laments that ‘

The very meaning of the word ‘Dhangar’ – a hired labourer or seasonal farm hand – signified this new bondage with startling accuracy. An entire civilisation and various societies all flattened out within the confines of one term, the Dhangar. All the specificities of language, of religion, of proud histories of autonomy from sedentary states; all that was wiped out rapidly and was replaced by a monolithic identity beaten out from the labour contracts that were the last hopes of survival.<sup>38</sup>

Whatever its precise implications, from the 1830s onwards the phrase 'hill coolie' became synonymous with indentured labour as a catch-all term for those on the margins of Hindu society, whose supposed poverty, backwardness and ignorance made them particularly vulnerable. According to abolitionist John Scoble, Messrs Gillanders and Co., who supplied John Gladstone's original shipment of indentured labourers, described the Dhangars as 'always spoken of as more akin to the monkey than to the man. They have no religion, no education, and, in their present state, no wants, beyond eating, drinking and sleeping; and to procure which, they are willing to labour.'<sup>39</sup> Such descriptions, which set the 'hill coolie' apart as belonging to a lower stage of civilisation than his caste Hindu compatriots, were mirrored in abolitionist accounts. As George Thompson put it in a speech denouncing indenture, the 'hill coolie' was vulnerable precisely because he was 'one of the most ignorant members of the vast community to which he belongs; a mere burden bearer, valuable on no account but for his muscular energy; desired only that he might discharge the work of a superior beast.'<sup>40</sup> Yet relatively little was said about their specific origins, or social and economic worlds they were leaving behind. Indeed, while detailed descriptions were given of the nefarious practices of the recruiters and planters, the terrible conditions of the voyage, and mistreatment on the plantations, the 'hill coolies' themselves remained largely anonymous figures - 'miserable beings' with no identity, or agency within the system, mere ciphers for the planters' evil intent.

The figure of the 'coolie' became synonymous with labour exploitation, exile and hardship, even after the indenture system itself changed dramatically in terms of demographics, regulation, and functioning.

### **'A Good Set Of Labourers'**

If abolitionist accounts left the identities and social worlds of the 'hill coolies' or Dhangars vague, those proposing to import indentured labour to New South Wales were very clear about the type of migrants they required. Noting the impossibility of securing enough emigrants and convicts from the 'Mother Country' to fulfil the settlers' labour needs, Mackay impressed upon Governor Richard Bourke 'the urgent necessity which exists of sending to Bengal for Shepherds, Cowherds, Labourers, and Household Servants, where they may be had in numbers, willing to emigrate, and of sober, honest, and industrious habits.'<sup>41</sup> Mackay was very specific about which group of Indians to import:

The description of labourers preferred by me and others, where those commonly known by the name of the Hill Coolies, Dhangurs, or Boonahs. This race or tribe of people occupy portions of the districts of Ramghur, Beerbhoom, and Nudnapore, and the country denominated Chuta Nagpore and Singboom, situated about seventy miles (in a direct line) to the westward of Calcutta, and extending westerly to Chuta Nagpore [sic], about 220 miles to the westward (in a direct line) of Calcutta; and north easterly by Ramghur to Boglipour on the Ganges, which last-mentioned place is about two hundred and seventy-five miles from Chuta Nagpore, and 220 miles (in a direct line) to the northward and westward of Calcutta, comprehending about two degrees of latitude (from 23° to 25°).<sup>42</sup>

Mackay is describing precisely the groups traditionally associated with early indentured migration to Mauritius and the Caribbean. Recent demographic studies suggest that these groups were not the only, or even necessarily the most numerous migrants in the early years of the system, yet the image of the 'hill coolie' soon became synonymous with indenture. 'Many came from the social and economic margins, even if they were not simply the poorest of the poor,' David Northrup writes, adding that indenture drew heavily on the 'impoverished and hardworking Dhangars and other 'hill-people' of the north-east'.<sup>43</sup> The planters had a range of reasons for preferring this group of migrants, which went beyond issues of economic vulnerability, and ease of recruitment. Mayo and Mackay were keen to show that far from being

the dregs of Indian society, these labourers had various qualities that made them intrinsically suitable for work in the colony. Indeed, Mayo was very clear that importing the wrong kind of Indian labourer could be catastrophic. Using Mauritius as a cautionary tale he remarked:

When the importation of Indian Labourers into the Isle of France first commenced, it was undertaken in complete ignorance... The first batch sent to the Mauritius were from Madras, and the people were taken from the refuse of the population in the City. They turned out a complete failure, and, I believe, the whole of them were sent back. This event, for some time, discouraged the Planters from importing any more. Afterwards some Planters, connected with India, obtained a good set of Labourers, who turned out very well. It then became a mania. Some Planters and Merchants appointed Agents to proceed to India; others wrote to their Correspondents in that Country; in each case the remuneration was so much per head. Like the Native Agents many of these thought only of the greatest profit they could make, and procured the most worthless objects that presented themselves, or entrapped them by false representations; the consequence was, many bad hands were introduced.<sup>44</sup>

The experiment with indenture had ultimately been a success in Mauritius, despite the fact that 'many inferior persons' had also unfortunately been introduced. If properly managed, and restricted to the 'right kind' of labourer, Mayo maintained the scheme was sure to 'serve for the like purposes in this Country'.<sup>45</sup>

What made the 'hill coolies' a 'good set of labourers' in the eyes of the Mauritian and West Indian planters, and of those who sought to introduce them to New South Wales? Parliamentary abolitionist Lord Brougham had famously wondered how Indian migrants would cope with 'the labours of a sugar plantation, the toils of hoeing, and cutting, and sugar boiling under a tropical sun – toils under which the hardy Negro is known to pine, and which must lay the feeble and effeminate Asiatic prostrate in the scorched dust'.<sup>46</sup> Yet such comments reflected incongruous racialized depiction of the Indian labouring body drawn from the colonial discourse on the 'babu' (middle class, non-labouring Indian) and an ignorance of the real labour regimes from which indenture migrants were drawn. Indeed, one of the attractions of the 'hill coolies' for Mayo, Mackay and others was precisely their perceived propensity for hard labour, as well as their familiarity with patterns of temporary migration. The Dhangar and Kol tribals, to whom the label 'hill coolies' was applied, came from a social and economic world in which labour migration was already a deeply embedded survival strategy. A culture of labour mobility

and seasonal migration in north India can be traced back to at least the fifteenth century. As Dirk Kolff has demonstrated, the military labour market of pre-colonial India involved seasonal, long distance migration, while others might travel for trade, or for service in skilled or manual labour.<sup>47</sup> As Ashutosh Kumar discusses in his paper in this collection, songs, poetry and other forms of popular culture dating back centuries focus on themes of separation, loss and longing caused when the husband travelled away from the home to find employment or take service, suggesting that labour mobility was already a well-established feature of Indian village life long before the arrival of the British. The EIC state itself preferred settled, taxable agricultural communities. The appropriation of common lands and the hardening of internal and external borders all disrupted traditional patterns of migratory behaviour for traditionally nomadic and itinerant groups. At the same time colonial rule catalysed new types of labour mobility. The labour needs of colonial state, and of independent planters created new opportunities, while economic depression, industrial revolution, high tax demands and the disruption of traditional sources of income exacerbated rural poverty and existential insecurity. This was particularly true in areas like the Chotanagpur plateau. As Uday Chandra notes, 'the progressive breakdown of social order in the jungle zamindaris from the 1780s onwards, owing to increasing subinfeudation and rent burdens on those previously paying little or no rents, released massive flows of labour into the rest of early colonial Bengal, including Calcutta.'<sup>48</sup> Bates and Shah remind us that the disruption caused by colonial appropriations of the Indian forest was experienced in similar ways by groups labelled 'tribal' and by other poor peasantry living in the area, as both suffered dislocation due to the colonial shift towards commercial forestry.<sup>49</sup>

Pro-indenture spokesmen claimed that a 'superabundance of labour' existed in Bengal which prompted 'hill coolies' to 'wander in search of work not only over all the Bengal provinces, but as far to the northward as Delhi'.<sup>50</sup> Of course, the idea of a super-abundance of Indian landless labour should be treated with caution, as inaccurate simplifications of the pre-colonial, or early colonial reality. As Michael Anderson points out, in the late eighteenth century there was a pool of mostly low caste labourers without rights in land, but there were also frequent bitter European complaints about wage demands, unwillingness to work and specific labour shortages.<sup>51</sup> EIC land policies directly affected labour conditions for the Indian peasantry, and for tribal and nomadic groups. The commercialisation of land rights under the Permanent Settlement and the state's appropriation of common and forest areas made land a scarce resource, tying peasants to their plots, increasing the power of landlord intermediaries over peasant production, and leading to the proletarianisation of tribal groups. Moreover, excessive land

tax, lack of investment in agricultural improvements and the influx of cheap European goods had all had a negative impact on local Indian economies, leading to a decline in industry and a depression that spanned the 1820s, 30s and 40s. 'The manufactures of India have been destroyed by this country' Thomas Fielder lamented, referring to the influx of cheap machine-made cloth that had all but destroyed the once vibrant Indian textile industry.<sup>52</sup> As a result, many ordinary cultivating families and tribal communities resorted to various forms of migrant labour in order to sustain household incomes, including indentured migration to plantations within India and overseas. This did not necessarily reflect a surplus Indian workforce, however, so much as a shifting survival strategies, as colonial policies impacted local economies within India.<sup>53</sup>

The groups loosely referred to as 'hill coolies' in colonial and abolitionist accounts were already established labour migrants by the 1830s.<sup>54</sup> As Chandra discusses, tribal groups from the Chotanagpur plateau were migrating to find work on colonial infrastructure projects from at least the early nineteenth century onwards. Collector S. T. Cuthbert reported in 1826-7 that the Dhangars 'emigrate in great numbers annually during the agricultural off season in search of employment', noting that in a family of four or five people, two were usually left at home to take care of family affairs and cultivation while 'the rest go abroad to seek service'.<sup>55</sup> Writing from the vantage point of 1868, W. W. Hunter wrote that Santal and Dhangar 'hill-men' could be found living apart from the Hindu population on the plains of West Bengal, wherever manual labour was needed:

Patient of labour, at home with nature, able to live on a penny a day, contented with roots when better food is not to be had, dark-skinned, a hearty but not excessive toper, given to pig hunting on the holidays, despised by the Hindus, and heartily repaying their contempt, the hill-men of the west furnish the sinews by which English enterprise is carried on in West Bengal.<sup>56</sup>

This might mean construction work in the colonial capital Calcutta, forest clearance in the Sunderbans, or labouring on the indigo and tea plantations of Bihar and Assam respectively. As Chandra points out, whether building the public edifices and private residences of the 'white town', sweeping and removing waste from the streets, or clearing the forests on the *jungli* frontier, both the colonial capital Calcutta, and the surrounding countryside relied on migrant Kol workers to function.<sup>57</sup> Such relationships predated the arrival of the British, as pre-colonial state formation and the Bengali landholding elite were dependent on their forest-clearing labour to expand the arable frontier.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, competition for the services of these valuable labourers

may explain why indentured emigration was so unpopular among the Bengal elite, some sections of the planter class, and EIC stockholders in Britain, as indenture was seen to channel useful labourers out of the country. It also belies the abolitionist assumption that indentured migrants were plucked unawares from static, unchanging village communities.

In a minute of 1832, EIC official Charles Metcalfe commented that the 'quiet inoffensive character [of the Kols] and their industrious habits cannot but be known to...the numerous European Gentlemen in the Lower Provinces, who have been accustomed annually to employ large bodies of these people in the manufacture of indigo.'<sup>59</sup> It was just this prior association with this informed John Mackay's proposal to import them to New South Wales, and he drew on his personal experience of their habits and character to recommend them for the colony. As he told the committee:

They are tractable and good tempered, and appear to be fond of their women and children; but when they leave their hills to search for employment in Calcutta, and on the plains, which most of the men generally do for a period of from three to nine months yearly, they leave their women and children 'at home. I have known some of them, however, remain away for years, and, in one instance, about twenty families remained seven years at a factory belonging to me — a few going to their own native country occasionally, and returning. The men form themselves into gangs, consisting of from ten to perhaps one hundred; one of whom is nominated by each gang as their Sirdar, or headman, whom they agree to obey, and who acts an interpreter, and makes bargains for job work, or as to the rate of wages at which they are to be employed.<sup>60</sup>

In Mackay's depiction the 'hill coolies' are not only physically capable workers, but are experienced in labour organisation and collective bargaining over wages, terms and conditions. 'I never knew any of them able to read or write;' Mackay continued, 'but they will travel a distance of five hundred miles in search of employment, and know the value of money, and carefully save the wages they earn in Calcutta and on the plains, and carry them back to their country to spend with their families.'<sup>61</sup> He also added that he was 'doubtful as to their consenting to the retention of part of their wages in the hands of their masters, for the purpose of forming a fund to pay for the expense of their returning to their own country; they like to have the management of their own money and are generally very capable of taking care of it...'<sup>62</sup> This is not to suggest, of course, that these groups were not socially and economically vulnerable, nor that their relationships with indigo planters in Bengal and Bihar were not skewed by the uneven

power relations attaching to their relative positions under the colonial state. It was the 'hill coolies' very marginality to Hindu society that necessitated the adoption of long distance labour migration strategies for survival, and that condemned them to some of the most physically demanding and socially demeaning forms of employment once they got to their destinations. It does, however, clearly challenge and complicate the abolitionist depiction of the Indian indentured labourer as a passive victim plucked from a static rural community, entirely ignorant of the world beyond his village, and incapable of understanding the nature of a contract, or of engaging creatively with the process and opportunities offered by labour migration.

### **'Free From Caste'**

The 'hill coolie's' marginality to mainstream Hindu society, which abolitionists emphasised as exacerbating his vulnerability and unsuitability for labour migration, was presented by his aspiring employers as a positive benefit. Chandra maintains that it was not 'racialised notions of tribal and primitive labour' or 'popular notions of caste animated by principles of ritual purity and pollution' that made the Dhangar/Kol an attractive labourer, but their 'situation at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder' and the fact that they had already developed a reputation as physically able and hardworking labourers.<sup>63</sup> That said, it is clear from the Australian planters' accounts that ideas of caste and tribe played a significant part in shaping the discourse of overseas labour migration. Specifically, the 'hill coolies' status as 'tribal' meant that they could circumvent various problems involved in the employment of caste Hindus. 'For Agricultural, and general purposes', Mayo declared, 'I should prefer employing the Hill Coolies of Bengal, especially as they are not only a fine race of people, but free from Caste.'<sup>64</sup> Of course, this was a period in which the ethnographic dichotomies between castes, and between caste Hindus and tribal 'others' were only just emerging, and as a result colonial depictions of their precise social and ethnic status were confused. Chandra notes that colonial officials referred to them variously as 'the lowest kind of Hindoos', 'wild savages' and as 'a free, independent, and industrious peoples'.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, he cites one EIC military official's description of them as 'A race distinct from the great Hindu family both in manners, language, religion and appearance, inferior in some respects to the common inhabitants of the hills in point of civilisation, but superior to them in courage and industry and possessing large and flourishing villages with extensive tracts of well cultivated land.'<sup>66</sup>

Employing caste Hindus was seen to raise all sorts of problems, including their fabled reluctance to cross the *kala pani*. 'The Hindus have a strong prejudice against leaving their country,' Mackay remarked. 'I do not think that Hindoos of high castes could be persuaded to

go on salt water, out of the sight of land.' Caste also brought with it limitations to the types of employment individuals might undertake; 'A man of one caste will not, on any occasion, do the duty of another' Mackay warned.<sup>67</sup> Thus while Mayo noted that once out of their own country and 'no longer trammelled in the prejudices of caste and Brahminical Priesthood' they could be persuaded to adopt new implements and ways of working, 'hill coolies' were preferred as they would turn their hand to any type of labour.<sup>68</sup> Fastidiousness in terms of diet was also seen as a drawback of caste Hindus.<sup>69</sup> As Mayo put it:

Natives of Caste require certain kinds of food, certain forms of cooking, and other observances. Of several Castes, in the same gang, one will not eat with the other, nor allow their food to be cooked by any other than one of their own caste. But in several parts of India there are people to be found who have no Caste; especially the Hill Coolies of Bengal, a fine athletic race of people, who eat fresh meat or any other kind of food without a scruple. They are quite free from the prejudices of the Hindoos and Mahomedan.<sup>70</sup>

The absence of religious prejudice among the 'hill coolies' might have been a pragmatic benefit to their potential employers, but it was served to mitigate concerns around non-white immigration. Several newspapers commented that they would have been adverse to any scheme that would introduce Hinduism or Islam to Australia; the 'hill coolies' apparent lack of religion made them less of a threat to the sensibilities of the settled British community. 'We could not altogether approve of introducing Mahometans into a new country in any considerable numbers,' the *Sydney Gazette* reflected, 'but this difficulty we perceive is at once overcome by the fact that the "Hill Coolies" of Bengal, as well as the Dangurs - classes of men equal to Europeans as labourers - are not subject to Mahometan prejudices.'<sup>71</sup> Thus while scholars like Jayeeta Sharma warn against assuming that planters' preference for these workers was based on 'the tenets of race science', rather than on their reputation as low cost, hardworking manual labourers, it does seem that their position as non-Muslims outside the caste Hindu hierarchy was seen as a positive pragmatic benefit - however loosely these interpretations might have been linked to formal ethnographic notions of 'tribal' identities.<sup>72</sup>

In a context where the newly emancipated labour force of the West Indies and Mauritius were struggling to assert terms, maintain wages and establish a secure social and domestic world, abolitionists in Britain wanted to be sure that any immigrants would contribute to, rather than disrupt the realisation of their ideals. This meant not only the emergence of a free labour market, but also of a stable society based on evangelical prescriptions of respectable behaviour

and domestic norms.<sup>73</sup> Abolitionist concerns with Indian indenture thus focussed not only on the potential distortion of the emerging labour market, but on the perception that 'wild heathens' from India would disrupt the development of social stability and evangelical domesticity among the former slaves. Referring to the marked gender imbalance in Indian imported labour, Scoble declared:

It is easy to conceive, that, from this frightful disparity of the sexes, the most horrible and revolting depravity and demoralisation must necessarily ensue; and that such large masses of ignorant and degraded beings must carry with them the most corrupting influence on others. We must confess that we cannot contemplate this fact without a shudder; and the most painful conviction is forced on our minds that, however immoral the negro in Mauritius was, he has been rendered more so by his contact with the Coolies.<sup>74</sup>

Such concerns were, as Madhavi Kale discusses, deeply embedded in the socio-religious and gender expectations of the abolitionists themselves. As Catherine Hall notes, the 'friends of the negro' were often also the 'friends of missions' and the promulgation of Christian morality was a key element of the imagined future of former slaves in the sugar colonies.<sup>75</sup> Their interpretation of the potential impact of 'hill coolies' reflected a set of colonial and evangelical discourses around the nature of Indians that were embedded in both the missionary assassination of the Hindu character, and East India reformers' characterisation of the undifferentiated masses of India as sunk in poverty, ignorance and misery. Yet this was not the only interpretation of the 'hill coolies' character, and other accounts presented them in a more positive light. Mayo, for example, reported that 'there is one great advantage to be derived from the Indian character, they are temperate, and are particularly trustworthy where sobriety is absolutely necessary...'<sup>76</sup> Concerns from these quarters were not with the corrupting influence of the 'coolies' might have on the existing population, but with the measures that might be needed to preserve of their own innocence. 'In their own country they were sober and industrious,' Thomas Fielder told the Court Of Directors at EIC House, 'but send them to a place where idleness, vagrancy and profligacy prevailed, and their character would soon become debased and deteriorated; they would speedily be lowered in the scale of humanity.'<sup>77</sup> Mackay and Mayo concurred, and warned that the Hill Coolies should be kept away from the mass of low class European labourers because 'such is the force of example for good, but more unfortunately for bad, that several of them have taken to the drinking of spirits, which shows the necessity of keeping the Indians free from the contaminating influence of European

intemperance.<sup>78</sup> 'If allowed to mingle with Europeans addicted to intemperance, or any other bad habits,' Mackay warned, 'I am afraid the Indians would be easily led astray, and induced to follow their example.'<sup>79</sup> Such accounts might seem close to positioning the 'hill coolie' as a 'noble savage' who needed paternalistic protection against the impositions of others - a feature of the emerging colonial discourse on aboriginal tribes more generally. It also reflected pragmatic concerns about effective labour in the context of the kinds of roles they would be expected to fulfill, about the character of the current European labour force of assigned convicts and ex-convicts, and about potential public discomfort with ideas of racial mixing in the Australian context.

### **'Cheap Labour in Any Country'**

Mackay concluded his proposal to the Legislative Council by citing a letter from a fellow planter in Mauritius, who assured him that the Dhangars '...are quiet, docile, and industrious...and the total cost, including passage here and back...together with food, clothing, is no more than...five shillings per week, which you will allow is cheap labour in any country.'<sup>80</sup> Other witnesses were quick to emphasise the cost-effectiveness of Indian labour, stressing that Indian migrants' needs - from square footage on the voyage, to accommodation, food and clothes on arrival - were considerably less than the average European immigrant. 'Hill coolies' were particularly attractive in this respect, as they already represented a well-established source of cheap labour within India. Mackay, for example, noted their lack of habitual comforts:

Unlike the Hindoos or Mahometans, the Dhangars entertain no prejudices of Cast or Religion; and they are willing to turn their hands to any labour whatever, as far as they are capable. Neither are they unwilling to partake of any kind of animal food, the worst description of which would be luxury to them. In their own country they have but little rice, and eat snakes, lizards, rats, mice, &c. Their clothing is simple and scanty, and they eat only once, rarely twice, in twenty-four hours. Their habitations are equally simple and confined-any dry place, twenty feet square, and eight feet high, would suffice for twenty men. They are unacquainted with the luxury of a bed beyond a dry floor, upon which they repose in their blankets in the cold weather and a remnant of thin cotton cloth in the summer season. For any kind of labour requiring great muscular strength, they are not equal to stout Europeans; but since my arrival in this country, I have seen many Europeans earning three shillings per diem, the result of whose

labour, individually, would not equal that of an industrious Danggur, receiving only one third of the European's pay, food and everything included.<sup>81</sup>

Such accounts were meant to prove economic viability of indentured immigration, but clearly they also hint at the miserable material conditions that might be considered acceptable for Indian labourers. Similarly, although Mayo and Mackay claimed that 'hill coolies' were hard-working compared to their Hindu compatriots, concerns over the best way to maximise their exertions were expressed. With Indian labourers, Mackay maintained, it would be necessary to place them in the charge of reliable European overseers, 'to teach them the use of our tools and implements, and to enforce their regular and continued exertions.'<sup>82</sup> The methods that might be used to achieve the desired results are not elaborated, but can reasonably be assumed to be corporeal. Thus while Mayo, Mackay and others put forward a more nuanced view of the 'hill coolies' than can be gleaned from early abolitionist discourse on indenture, this should not obscure the coercive and exploitative elements that underpinned their proposed scheme. Indian indentured labour was attractive because it was cheap, and because it was easily subjected to various forms of coercive labour discipline.<sup>83</sup>

Some supporters of indenture might defended it on the grounds that the labourers would have 'higher wages and much greater comforts secured to them than they could ever have hoped for in their native land', but these seemingly benign pronouncements were undermined by an economic logic of indenture, which was based primarily on the cheapness of Indian labour.<sup>84</sup> The poverty of the Indian peasantry had long been a standard assumption in debates about India's potential for colonial commodity production. As early as 1796, the cheapness of Indian sugar was explained on the grounds that 'the natives of Bengal have fewer wants and the wages of labour are less'.<sup>85</sup> Old India hands maintained that Indian peasants' apparent impoverishment did not cause them misery or distress, but rather represented a 'voluntary acceptance of limited material wants.'<sup>86</sup> Orientalist ideas about Indian passivity, idleness, and spirituality underpinned the assumption that 'beyond the attainment of a mere existence, which in this fruitful and genial climate is easily acquired, the mass of inhabitants will never labour for the possession of luxuries, or even what we deem the conveniences of life'.<sup>87</sup> Writing in 1798, Rev. William Tennent remarked:

The labour of all the common people is moderate and their food and clothing so simple as hardly to admit of degrees...Scarcity here arises often to be famine, while the great body of the people, from the benignity of the climate, live almost

without clothing, or house for shelter. There is no provision for a time of difficulty; a man who has nothing but his labour to subsist upon, and perhaps does not possess the value of two days provision, is not supposed in distress, and is often actually happy; at least he takes no thought for tomorrow... In every warm country clothing is less necessary lodging almost superfluous, hence the people are indolent and improvident to a degree that in your northern climes would prove fatal.<sup>88</sup>

Such assumptions were used to excuse low wages, poor standards of living and existential insecurity for India's 'free' peasantry. Ironically, the British anti-slavery movement did not see these things as a barrier to championing the use of cheap Indian labour in the 1820s. Indeed, abolitionists such as James Cropper actively promoted Indian 'free' labour as a moral and economical alternative to the slave system of the Caribbean, and East India sugar was marketed as 'not made by slaves'. The West Indian planters, on the other hand, questioned whether their supposed 'freedom' compensated Indian peasants for exposure to agricultural distress and famine, accusing the EIC of exacerbating 'the oppression and misery of the lower orders...'<sup>89</sup> Critics of Cropper quickly picked up the inherent contradiction in arguments that tied the production of cheap sugar in India to humanitarian interests:

If it be said that by encouraging the cultivation of sugar under proper regulations the condition of these poor people may be improved, I answer that that would defeat the main object, the production of *cheap* sugar. It is only, I conceive, because the labourers are obliged to work for next to nothing that sugar can be made in the East Indies so cheap as is asserted. However, then, the matter may be debated on political and commercial grounds, let us hear no more of the superior *humanity* of employing labourers at 3d per day in the East, rather than slaves in the West, to whom every comfort consistent with their humble position is undoubtedly afforded.<sup>90</sup>

Such comparisons between the conditions of West Indian slaves and the wretched lives of 'free' but underpaid and poverty-stricken Indian peasants echoed longstanding pro-slavery assertions that slaves were better off than sections of the British working class; an argument used to counter both abolitionist attacks on slave conditions and their absolute moral preference for 'freedom' at any cost. It also throws into sharp relief the inconsistencies in an abolitionist

campaign that was willing to make use of cheap Indian labour on the subcontinent, yet feigned moral outrage at their export to and conditions in the sugar colonies.

At the core of the debate over indenture was the question not of whether Indians should labour, and where and for whom. The late 1830s saw an upsurge in metropolitan interest in India as a potential free labour supplier of a range of slave-grown commodities. In order for 'free-grown' Indian sugar, cotton and other products to be produced in sufficient quantities to challenge the products of the American South, Cuba and Brazil, however, cultivation needed to expand, which would require workers. India's large, accessible and inexpensive potential workforce thus represented an important resource that East India reformers were keen to see put to work in India, not shipped to rival colonies overseas.<sup>91</sup> The BIS framed their interest in India as a humanitarian intervention - the uplift of the vast, impoverished multitudes of India through the regeneration of her agricultural sector - but as Dwarkanath Tagore's biographer Blair Kling notes, the organisation was apparently prepared to benefit from what he describes as 'semi-slavery' of Indian low wages.<sup>92</sup> No mention was made of developing Indian industry or raising Indian wages in plans that cast India as a new supplier of raw materials and a market for British manufactures.<sup>93</sup> Opposition to Indian indentured migration, then, was deeply embedded in an emerging vision for India as a colonial commodity producer among certain sections of the abolitionist community, rather than on the comparative lived realities for Indian labourers both on the subcontinent and overseas.<sup>94</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The proposals put forward by Mayo, Mackay and others to import Indian workers into New South Wales in 1837 predated the upsurge of anti-slavery opposition to indentured labour in Britain and were initially met with qualified approval by the colonial press. As news of the metropolitan campaign against indenture arrived in the colony, however, enthusiasm waned rapidly and the 1840s saw heated debates about non-white immigration. Candidates stood for election to office on a 'no coolie' platform, and the press was bitterly divided between support for controlled Indian immigration and outright opposition to any such scheme. In the course of these debates, humanitarian ideas imported from Britain became intertwined with local social, economic and racial politics and concerns.<sup>95</sup> The result was that no Indian indentured migrants were imported under government subsidy. Not to be deterred, Mackay imported thirteen Indian labourers at his own expense in late 1837 and set them to work as shepherds and general labourers. It was not a happy experiment, and the labourers soon absconded. When discovered

they refused to return to work, and instead took Mackay to court for breach of contract, accusing him of failing to provide them with adequate provisions and clothing. The labourers eventually lost the case, on the grounds that they had been supplied with the items stipulated in their contracts. Their decision to press charges against their erstwhile employer over breach of contract destabilizes colonial narratives about the passive Indian labourer, however, even while the eventual outcome reinforces the unequal power structures within which they attempted to exert their own agency to (re)negotiate their material condition and assert their position as a right's bearing subject. This paper has sought to problematise some of the influential and long lasting assumptions about Indian indentured labour migration by juxtaposing abolitionist accounts against those of would be settler and planters in New South Wales, and contextualising them within longer colonial discourses about the nature and character of the Indian labourer. In doing so, it has sought to de-centre the discussion of the origins of indenture, moving the focus away from the Atlantic region and the ongoing confrontation between slavery and anti-slavery and position it within wider debates about India's place, and the role of Indian labour within an expanding post-emancipation empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from certain flock owners in New South Wales to the Honourable Colonial Secretary, in *Indian Immigration*, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Sydney Monitor*, 9 June 1837, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 10 June 1837, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Rose Cullen, 'Empire, Indian Indentured Labour and the Colony: The Debate Over 'coolie' Labour in New South Wales, 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): Janet Doust, 'Setting up boundaries in colonial eastern Australia race and empire', *Australian Historical Studies*, 35:123, 2004.

203. Angela Woollacott, 'Manly authority, employing non-white labour, and frontier violence 1830s-1860s.' *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 15 (2013): 23.

<sup>5</sup> A key exception to this is Richard B. Allen, *European slave trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850*. (Ohio University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> William A. Green, 'Emancipation to indenture: a question of imperial morality.' *The Journal of British Studies* 22.2 (1983): 98-121. Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Green, 100.

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<sup>8</sup> Green, 100.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of how colonial pacification strategies and labour demands led to the reconceptualization of ‘savage’ tribal groups as ideal labourers, see Kaushik Ghosh, ‘A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of colonial India’ in Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (eds) *Subaltern Studies X* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> These proposals are recorded in Legislative Council of New South Wales *Indian Immigration: On the Introduction of Indian Labourers* (Sydney: A. Cohen, 1836-7) (hereafter *Indian Immigration*) and *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Committee on Immigration, Indian and British, Into New South Wales* (Sydney: H. Statham, 1837) (hereafter *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*). They were also covered extensively in the Sydney press.

<sup>11</sup> Kale, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Green, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> Green, p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38, p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> *The Courier*, cited in *The Spectator*, 21 July 1838, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel O’Connell, *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention* (London: BFASS, 1840), p. 383.

<sup>17</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London: Hansib, reprint 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Tinker, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Green, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> See Pieter 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*, (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), pp. 187-207; Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, ‘Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora’ in S Banerjee, A McGuinness & SC McKay (eds), *New Routes for Diaspora Studies*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 67-92 for some examples.

<sup>22</sup> Green, p. 102.

<sup>23</sup> Kale, p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Green, p. 102.

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<sup>25</sup> Green, p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> Kale, p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel O'Connell, *Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention* (London: BFASS, 1840), p. 383.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Kale, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38, p. 207.

<sup>30</sup> Julia Maitland, *Letters from Madras during the years 1836-1839* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1846), p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> For more on these organisations see Charles Swaisland, 'The Aborigines Protection Society, 1837–1909', *Slavery and Abolition* 21.2 (2000): 265-280; Zoe Laidlaw, 'Integrating Metropolitan, Colonial and Imperial Histories-The Aborigines Select Committee of 1835-37', *Writing colonial histories: comparative perspectives* (2002): 75; Christopher M. Florio, 'From Poverty to Slavery: Abolitionists, Overseers, and the Global Struggle for Labor in India' *Journal of American History*, 102.4 (2016): 1005-1024; S. R. Mehrotra, 'The British India Society and its Bengal Branch, 1839-46', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 4.2 (1967): 131-154

<sup>32</sup> Laidlaw. p. 305-6.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, *Speeches, Delivered at a Public Meeting, for the Formation of a British India Society* (London: British India Society, 1839).

<sup>34</sup> Crispin Bates and Shah, Alpa (eds.) *Savage attack: tribal insurgency in India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2014), p. 2. Of course, as Bates and Shah point out, in reality the distinction between tribal groups and other peasants living in the same area was never absolute.

<sup>35</sup> E.T. Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnography of Chota Nagpur* of 1872 represented the first concerted attempt to measure and designate the tribal population of the region. See Bates and Shah, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Tinker, 47

<sup>37</sup> *Hobson Jobson*, 1903, 296.

<sup>38</sup> Ghosh, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> John Scoble *Hill Coolies: A Brief Exposure of the Deplorable Condition of the Hill Coolies...* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1840), p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38, p. 207.

<sup>41</sup> *Sydney Herald*, 19 June 1837, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 7.

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- <sup>43</sup> David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*. (Cambridge: CUP Archive, 1995), p. 67.
- <sup>44</sup> J. R. Mayo, *Indian Immigration*, p. 7.
- <sup>45</sup> J. R. Mayo, *Indian Immigration*, p. 7.
- <sup>46</sup> Cited in Kale, p. 111.
- <sup>47</sup> Dirk Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market of Hindustan, 1450-1850*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- <sup>48</sup> Uday Chandra, 'Kol, Coolie, Colonial Subject' in Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad, and Kenneth Bo Nielsen (eds), *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 24.
- <sup>49</sup> Bates and Shah, p. 4.
- <sup>50</sup> Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Tribal and indentured migrants in colonial India: modes of recruitment and forms of incorporation' in P. Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 167.
- <sup>51</sup> Michael Anderson, 'India, 1858-1930: The Illusion of Free Labor' in *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955*, Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (eds), (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 424.
- <sup>52</sup> Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38, p. 196.
- <sup>53</sup> See Bates and Carter.
- <sup>54</sup> Northrup notes that the Dhangars were 'already accustomed to migrant work on Bengal indigo plantations'. Northrup, p. 67.
- <sup>55</sup> Chandra, p. 22.
- <sup>56</sup> W. W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (New York: Leypoldt and Holt, 1868), p. 226.
- <sup>57</sup> Chandra, p. 24.
- <sup>58</sup> Chandra, p. 24.
- <sup>59</sup> Cited in Chandra, p. 25.
- <sup>60</sup> John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 8.
- <sup>61</sup> John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 10.
- <sup>62</sup> John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 10.
- <sup>63</sup> Chandra, p. 28.
- <sup>64</sup> J. R. Mayo, *Indian Immigration*, p. 8.
- <sup>65</sup> Chandra, p. 20.
- <sup>66</sup> Cited in Uday Chandra, p. 20.
- <sup>67</sup> John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 9.

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- <sup>68</sup> J. R. Mayo, *Indian Immigration*, p. 6; John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 9.
- <sup>69</sup> John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 9.
- <sup>70</sup> J. R. Mayo, *Indian Immigration*, p. 6.
- <sup>71</sup> *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 10 June 1837, p 2.
- <sup>72</sup> Chandra, p. 27. For more on ideas of caste in this context, see Ghosh, pp. 20-22.
- <sup>73</sup> See Kale, p. 117-8.
- <sup>74</sup> John Scoble, *Emigration from India: The Export of Coolies, and Other Labourers, to Mauritius* (London: BFASS, 1842), p. 7.
- <sup>75</sup> Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
- <sup>76</sup> J. R. Mayo, *Indian Immigration*, p. 8.
- <sup>77</sup> Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38, p. 198.
- <sup>78</sup> J. R. Mayo, *Indian Immigration*, p. 8.
- <sup>79</sup> *The Australian*, 8 August 1837, p. 5.
- <sup>80</sup> Thomas Blythe, *Indian Immigration*, p. 5.
- <sup>81</sup> John Mackay, *Indian Immigration*, p. 4.
- <sup>82</sup> John Mackay, *Immigration: Minutes of Evidence*, p. 11.
- <sup>83</sup> For more on this see Ghosh, p. 24.
- <sup>84</sup> *The Courier*, cited in *The Spectator*, 21 July 1838, p. 14.
- <sup>85</sup> *The Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 16 April 1796.
- <sup>86</sup> Marshall, 'The Moral Swing', p. 80.
- <sup>87</sup> Cited in Marshall, 'The Moral Swing', p. 80.
- <sup>88</sup> Tennant, *Indian Recreations*, p. 134.
- <sup>89</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 Aug 1821.
- <sup>90</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 Aug 1821.
- <sup>91</sup> See Debate at East India House, 22 June 1842, *Asiatic Journal*, vol. 38, 1842 for examples of these views.
- <sup>92</sup> Blair Kling, *Partner in empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the age of enterprise in eastern India* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1976), p. 177.
- <sup>93</sup> Kling, p. 177.
- <sup>94</sup> See Ohlsson for more details on this.
- <sup>95</sup> *Commercial Journal and Advertiser*, 28 February 1838, p. 2.