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Chapter Title: 'Such a long journey': The story of indenture

Book Title: Levelling Wind

Book Subtitle: Remembering Fiji

Book Author(s): BRIJ V. LAL

Published by: ANU Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvr7fcdk.8>

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# 2

## ‘Such a long journey’: The story of indenture<sup>1</sup>

But the past must live on,  
For it is the soul of today  
And the strength of the morn;  
A break to silent tears  
That mourn the dream of stillborn.

— Churamanie Bissundayal<sup>2</sup>

*Between 1834 and 1920, over 1 million Indian men and women were transported across the seas to serve as indentured labourers to sugar colonies around the world. Most never returned to their homeland. Their descendants today comprise an integral part of the larger mosaic of the Indian diaspora. The history of indenture is no longer an area of darkness as it once was, though there are many aspects of the indenture experience that still await scholarly attention. The following chapter provides the larger historical context of Indian indenture, from recruitment in India to life on the plantations. Fiji in 1879 was the last major sugar colony to import Indian indentured labour. It played a significant role in the struggle to end the indenture system worldwide.*

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1 Originally appeared as ‘Indian indenture: Experiment and experience’, in *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Joya Chatterji and David Washbrook (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 79–95.

2 Churamanie Bissundayal, ‘The arrival: Part 1’, in *They Came in Ships: An Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry*, ed. Ian McDonald, Joel Benjamin, Lakshmi Kallicharan and Lloyd Seawar (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1998), pp. 214–15, at p. 215.

On 9 September 1834, 36 lost-looking Dhangars (tribal people from the Chota Nagpur region) met some recruiters in Calcutta and were asked if they would be willing to go to Mauritius as indentured labourers. The absence would be of short duration and remuneration attractive. Mirich Dwip (Mauritius) was said to be just off the coast of Bengal, and they would be back home before their absence was noticed in the village. The Dhangars agreed, for they had come to Calcutta looking for employment in the first place. Thereupon, they were taken to the chief magistrate at the Calcutta Police Court, who read out and 'explained' the terms and conditions of the contract to be signed. The men affixed their thumbprints on the document, affirming their understanding of what was on offer and that they were emigrating voluntarily. The Vice-President in Council of the Government of Bengal approved the transaction and authorised the departure of the indentured labourers. The tentative venture proved successful after initial teething problems. Between 1 August 1834 and the end of 1835, 14 ships were engaged to transport emigrants from Calcutta to Mauritius. By the end of 1839, over 25,000 Indians had been introduced into the colony. Other colonies elsewhere soon followed suit. Thus began a massive and unprecedented experiment in unskilled labour recruitment and migration. By 1870, Mauritius had 352,401 Indians, British Guiana 79,691, Trinidad 42,519 and Jamaica 15,169.<sup>3</sup> In 1907, Guiana's total population of Indians had swelled to 127,000, Trinidad to 103,000 and Natal to 115,000. By the time indentured emigration ceased in 1917, over 1 million indentured Indian immigrants had been transported across the dark, dreaded seas, the *kala pani*, to the 'King Sugar' colonies in the West Indies, Fiji, Mauritius and South Africa. Their descendants now constitute an important segment of the larger mosaic of the Indian diaspora.

## Origins

Indian indentured emigration was started in direct response to the shortage of labour in the tropical colonies caused by the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 and by the termination of the system of apprenticeship (for six years) under which, until 1838, the planters had been able to obtain slave labour. Once freed, the former slaves understandably refused to return to their old jobs. As one official wrote:

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3 In this chapter, both Guyana and Guiana are used. Guiana was used prior to independence in 1966. The country is now called Guyana.

For the greater part ... the Negroes abandoned not only field labour, but service of every kind, almost as soon as they were at a liberty to do so. No present kindness, or memory of past benefits, no persuasion or pecuniary inducements could prevail upon them to remain; and it is to be feared that the time is yet distant when motives of interest, or the press of necessity, will bring them back to serve as agricultural labourers.<sup>4</sup>

The apprenticeship system failed because it was riddled with contradictions and paradoxes, the most important of all being the inherent ambivalence in relations between the labourers and the planters. Once freed, the labourers refused to succumb to the regime imposed on the slaves. The pattern of resistance was the same in the West Indies as it was in Mauritius.

The failure of the apprentice experiment forced the planters to look elsewhere, to Africa and Europe. Between 1834 and 1837, some 3,000 English, 1,000 Scots and the same number of Germans and a sprinkling of Irish were introduced into Jamaica and a smaller number into St Lucia. The emigrants were brought privately on contract for three to five years, although Jamaica also offered a bounty from public funds. But this experiment, too, failed because of the high mortality rate caused by insufficient sanitary precautions, 'the unsuitability of raw, un-acclimatised Europeans for field work in the tropical sun, with the added temptation of unlimited drink'.<sup>5</sup>

Trinidad attempted to procure labour from neighbouring Grenada, St Christopher and Nevis, engaging captains of small trading vessels with a bounty, and the promise of returning labourers to their homes after the completion of their contracts. But the bounty system, with no legal provisions specifying the terms and conditions of service, or making the contract enforceable, 'being ill-contrived and injudiciously managed', also succumbed to failure. The planters then turned to Africa but, given its former history of slavery, this was never a realistic prospect.<sup>6</sup>

4 Home Legislative Department (Emigration), A Pros. 14, 8 May 1847, National Archives of India [hereinafter NAI]; also D.W.D. Comins, *Note on Emigration from the East Indies to British Guiana* (Calcutta: Government Printer, 1893).

5 D.W.D. Comins, *Note on Emigration from the East Indies to St Lucia* (Calcutta: Government Printer, 1893), p. 3; House of Commons [hereinafter HC], Parliamentary Paper, 35 (1844), p. 316.

6 See, generally, David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (eds), *Across the Dark Waters: Ethnicity and Indian Identity in the Caribbean* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1996); Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783–1962* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1989), pp. 96–100.

China proved a better prospect. One official described the Chinese labourers in 1844 as:

well made, robust, and active, inured to field labour, and able to work during the heat of the day, in fact, they are equal to our best Creole field labourers; they are eager for gain, and will do anything for money; they are quiet and very intelligent for their class, and not lazy. They value money, and are shrewd; and I do think no class of men can be better adapted to our wants than they are.<sup>7</sup>

But the very qualities for which the Chinese were praised made them unsuitable as long-term plantation workers. Being ‘further developed in civilisation’, as one official put it, the Chinese tended to move out of the plantations at the earliest possible opportunity to set themselves as market gardeners and small shopkeepers, becoming in time rivals to the very planters whom they were supposed to serve.

These failures focused attention on India as a reliable and enduring source of labour. In the nineteenth century, India remained the principal source of labour supply to the sugar colonies of the British Empire. An important attribute of the Indian indenture was that it was state regulated, not privately contracted. It was conducted on the basis of a written and supposedly voluntarily accepted contract or ‘agreement’ (dubbed *girit* in Fiji), which the emigrants signed (or, more commonly, affixed their thumbprints to) before leaving India. In the early years of indentured emigration, the terms and conditions were not uniform; indeed, they varied widely in content and application. But by the 1870s, a more or less uniform document was in place for all the indentured labour-recruiting colonies. The contract stipulated, among other things, the nature and conditions of employment (dealing principally with work related to the manufacture of sugar cane), remuneration for labour on the plantations, entitlement to medical and housing facilities and, above all, the availability of a return passage to India after a period of ‘industrial residence’ in the colonies, usually 10 years after the date of arrival. There can be little doubt that the majority of the emigrants intended their excursion out of India to be a brief sojourn, a temporary expedient to cope with their fluctuating economic fortune at home. Many did return: up to 1870, 21 per cent of the emigrants had returned, and in the decade after 1910, one emigrant returned for every two who had embarked for the colonies.

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7 HC, Parliamentary Paper, 35 (1844), p. 551.

But for the overwhelming majority, an intended sojourn was transformed into permanent displacement in the course of time and in response to the prevailing circumstances.

The early shipments of labourers to Mauritius drew attention to reports of neglect and ill treatment, which led the Government of India, responding to pressure from antislavery quarters, to instruct the Indian law commissioners to provide firmer legislative cover to the operation. These were incorporated in *Act V of 1837*. Among other things, the Act provided that the emigration of contract labourers was to be subject to orders from authorities from India; that the emigrants should be required to appear before an official appointed by the provincial government; that the contract, in English and the mother tongue of the emigrant, must specify wages and the nature of employment in the colonies; that contracts for a period of over five years, which did not include the provision for a return passage, were not to be approved; and that recruiters who obtained labourers through fraudulent means were to be fined or imprisoned.

## The imperial dimension

Over the next several years, critics and opponents of Indian indentured emigration pointed to the disparity between the rhetoric on paper and the realities on the ground. Reports continued to reach the public of fraudulence and violence in the recruitment and shipping of labourers and of the terrible conditions of employment on the plantations. For a while, emigration was halted but it soon became clear that the prohibition of emigration could not be maintained for too long. Reports from the colonies acknowledged hardship and problems but claimed that these were exaggerated by the critics. Indeed, they claimed that immigrants in the colonies were better off than their counterparts in India.

The result of the voluminous correspondence between the colonies, the imperial government and the Government of India was the passage of the Government of India's *Act XV of 1842*, the first comprehensive legislation of its kind to provide control and supervision of the trade. The Act provided for the appointment, on fixed salary, of an emigration agent at the ports of embarkation in India. The agent, who might act for several colonies because the recruitment seasons for different places varied, was required personally to examine each emigrant and to ascertain that he or she fully understood the contract they were signing. All the

emigrant ships were to be fully licensed by the government and required to conform to certain prescribed standards; dietary and medical supplies for the emigrants were prescribed, as were the accommodation facilities and indeed the length of the voyage itself. The Act was a good start, but it had no provision for the enforcement of the regulations. Nonetheless, this piece of legislation formed the basis for further reforms and amendments in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Was there room for further government involvement? In 1875, Lord Salisbury, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote to the Government of India enquiring whether, under proper regulation, and with due regard to the interest of the labourers, the Government of India 'might not more directly encourage emigration and superintend the system under which it was conducted'. In Lord Salisbury's view, indentured emigration, properly regulated, would benefit everyone: India, the United Kingdom and the emigrants themselves:

While, then, from an Indian point of view, emigration, properly regulated, and accompanied by sufficient assurance of profitable employment and fair treatment, seems a thing to be encouraged on grounds of humanity, with a view to promote the well-being of the poorer classes; we may also consider, from an imperial point of view, the great advantage which must result from peopling the warmer British possessions which are rich in natural resources and only want population, by an intelligent and industrious race to whom the climate of these countries is well suited, and to whom the culture of the staples suited to the soil, and the modes of labour and settlement, are adapted. In this view also it seems proper to encourage emigration from India to the colonies well fitted for an Indian population.<sup>8</sup>

Salisbury went on to suggest a number of ways in which the Government of India might intervene directly to encourage and facilitate indentured recruitment and emigration and to reduce its various deficiencies. He urged it to exercise direct control over the type of emigrants recruited by allowing the authorities in India to 'help and counsel' the colonial agents and, in times of difficulty, to even directly recruit labourers themselves. It might also directly involve itself in ensuring that the terms

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<sup>8</sup> Lord Salisbury to Governor-General of India, 24 March 1875, cited in K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 22.

and conditions of the contract the emigrants had signed in India were observed in the colonies by appointing its own agents there. In the last paragraph of his dispatch, Salisbury added:

Above all things we must confidently expect, as an indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements [that] the Colonial laws and their administration will be such that Indian settlers who have completed their terms of service to which they are agreed as return for the expense of bringing them to the Colonies, will be in all respects free men, with privileges no whit inferior to those of any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies.<sup>9</sup>

Salisbury's dispatch was sent to all the Indian provincial governments for their comment and consideration.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of Bengal, all the other provinces were against the proposals. Bombay feared the loss of labour and therefore loss of revenue. Madras thought that greater involvement on its part could be misconstrued as its support for the colonial planters at the expense of the interests of India. The United Provinces (UP) Government doubted if greater encouragement would necessarily give the colonies the kind of immigrants they wanted. And so the Government of India told the Secretary of State for India that greater involvement was not feasible: 'Our policy may be described as one of seeing fair play between the parties to a commercial transaction, while the Government altogether abstains from mixing itself in the bargain.'<sup>11</sup> Emigration would have an 'infinitesimal effect' on the population of the districts where recruitment was most popular. Moreover, direct involvement might put India in the invidious position of having to reconcile the interests of the colonies with those of the emigrants. Perhaps most importantly, the Government of India feared being held accountable for abuses and irregularities in the recruitment process. It was this reason, more than any other, the fear of being tainted by the evils of the indenture system, that led the Government of India to abolish the indenture system in 1917, despite protest from the colonies.

9 *ibid.*

10 For detailed discussion, see Basdeo Mangru, 'Indian Government policy towards indentured labour migration to the sugar colonies', in *Across the Dark Waters*, ed. Dabydeen and Samaroo, pp. 162–74.

11 Brij V. Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan tree: Origins and background of Fiji's North Indian migrants, 1879–1916: Vol. 1', PhD thesis (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1981), pp. 73–74.



## Origins of indentured labourers

Indian indentured labourers sent to various parts of the world came from different parts of India. Predominantly, they came from the north and embarked for the colonies from the Port of Calcutta. From 1856 to 1861, 66 per cent embarked at Calcutta and 30 per cent at Madras.

### South India

South India has probably always been the most migration-prone region of India. Even in prehistoric times, its inhabitants were known to have established contact with other countries. Systematic, large-scale labour migration from this region, however, began in the nineteenth century. The largest importers of South Indian labour were the Colonies of India System—Burma, Ceylon and Malaya. The exact volume emigrating is difficult to ascertain, but according to one source, between 1852 and 1937, 2,595,000 Indian emigrants settled in Burma, 1,529,000 in Ceylon and 1,189,000 in Malaya.<sup>12</sup>

Much of this migration took place under the supervision of the middlemen called *kanganis* in the case of Ceylon and Malaya and *maistries* in the case of Burma.<sup>13</sup> In Ceylon, this system was prominent from the outset while in Malaya it operated alongside indentured emigration. These middlemen, trusted and experienced employees of the plantation or the estate, were sent to their villages to recruit their fellow villagers and kinsmen. They were usually given an advance to cover the costs of recruitment and transportation but the labourers were expected to refund the amount spent on them after a period of employment. The middlemen were not mere recruiters, however; at work they were often the sole intermediaries between the workers and their employers, a position that lent itself to the possibility of corruption and extortion. The absence of comprehensive protective legislation that governed indenture, and the absence of written and legally enforceable contracts served to enhance their grip on the labourers.

12 Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 99.

13 See, among others, K.S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement, 1786–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); N.R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); R. Jayaraman, 'Indian emigration to Ceylon: Some aspects of the historical and social background of the emigrants', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 4(4) (1967), pp. 319–59, doi.org/10.1177/001946466700400402.

Malaya was the largest single importer of South Indian indentured labour; some 250,000 between 1844 and 1910. The predominance of South Indians was due partly to the reluctance of the Government of India to sanction recruitment in other parts of the country and the perception that North Indians were 'troublesome elements'. Geography, too, played its part. Indentured immigration to Malaya was different in form, if not in spirit, to that for the sugar colonies. In the case of Malaya, recruitment was carried out by speculators and the private agents of employers, while for the sugar colonies it was carried out by licensed recruiters appointed by the emigration agents and under the supervision, however minimal, of local authorities in the districts. The contract for Malaya was for one to three years; and it was not always a written document. Further, the emigration agents for the colonies assumed responsibility for the cost of recruitment and transportation, while for Malaya, the indentured labourers, like their *kangani* counterparts, had to repay a certain amount from their wages. Finally, because indentured immigration to Malaya was not strictly state regulated, the Government of India was unable, in many cases, to demand the fulfilment of certain conditions stipulated in the *Emigration Act*. In the case of the sugar colonies, for instance, the government was able successfully to insist that 40 women accompany 100 men on each shipment, but was unable to do much in this regard for Malaya.

To the sugar colonies, South India contributed upwards of 290,000 migrants: Mauritius 144,342 (32 per cent of the total); Natal 103,261 (68 per cent); Guiana 15,065 (6 per cent); Fiji 14,536 (24 per cent); West Indies 12,975 (7 per cent); Reunion 2131 (8 per cent); and French West Indies 330 (2 per cent). In the case of Mauritius, about 77 per cent had migrated before 1870. It was a similar story for Guiana and the West Indian islands. Immigration to Natal began in 1860 but increased after the 1880s. The first South Indians went to Fiji in 1903.

In South India, the labourers came from certain regions. Malaya and Ceylon drew their recruits mainly from the Tamil-speaking areas, with a sprinkling of Telugus from Andhra Pradesh and Malayalis from the Malabar Coast. Migrants to Burma came largely from Vizagapatnam and Godavari in Andhra Pradesh and, to a lesser extent, from Tanjore and Ramnad. The sugar colonies drew their immigrants from these areas

as well. For Fiji, for instance, most of the South Indian emigrants were recruited in North Arcot, Madras, Kistna, Godavari, Vizagapatnam, Tanjore, Malabar and Coimbatore.<sup>14</sup>

## Bombay

Bombay was not a major port of embarkation. The indentured labourers who left Bombay for the colonies, especially before the 1870s, came mostly from Poona, Satora, Ratnagiri, Nagpur and Sawantwadi.<sup>15</sup> After 1870, Bombay and Karachi (mostly Karachi) accounted for 43,221 embarkations. Of these, 36,902 were bound for Mombasa, 538 for Seychelles and 5,781 for other places. The immigrants for Mombasa came mostly from the Punjab region; they were recruited to work on the railways there, and most returned at the expiry of their contracts. In the wake of indentured emigration, small groups of free migrants (traders and artisans), mostly from Gujarat, left from Bombay for other colonies, but theirs is a different history.

## French ports

India's French ports accounted for the smallest number of indentured embarkations. Altogether, between 1842 and 1916, 49,890 emigrants boarded the ships there for the colonies.<sup>16</sup> Of these, 20,770 (42 per cent) had left before 1870, of whom 16,000 went to the French West Indies and 4700 to Réunion. After 1870, 29,000 left for the French West Indies, Réunion and French Guiana. Embarkation from French ports was prohibited after the promulgation of the Indian *Emigration Act of 1883*, which restricted departures to the ports of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay.

## Calcutta and North India

Calcutta was, of course, the most important port of embarkation for indentured emigrants destined for the sugar colonies. Interestingly, there were few Bengalis among the emigrants; indeed, they were conspicuous by their absence.<sup>17</sup> The overwhelming majority of the Calcutta departees

14 See, among others, Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal, 1860–1902: A Study Based on Ships' Lists* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1991), pp. 41–49; C.G. Hennings, *The Indentured Indian in Natal, 1860–1917* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1993), p. 21.

15 See G. Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India* (Calcutta: Government Printer, 1874); Panchanan Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour, 1834–1900* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970); J.S. Mangat, *A History of Asians in East Africa, c.1886–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

16 Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India*; HC, Parliamentary Papers, various years; C.L. Tupper, *Note on Colonial Emigration during the Year 1878–1879* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1879).

17 For discussion of North India, see Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983).

were 'upcountry men'. Before the 1870s, many came from the tribal and plains areas of Bihar. The ship lists for the *Hesperes* and the *Whitby*, which left for British Guiana in 1838, show that of the 405 emigrants aboard the two vessels, 72 came from Hazaribagh, 49 from Bankura, 36 from Ramgarh, 27 from Midnapur and 20 from Nagpur. Dhangars furnished 34 per cent of the emigrants, Muslims 8 per cent, Rajputs and Kurmis 5 per cent each, Bauris and Bhuiyas 4 per cent each, and Kshattriyas, Gowalas and Bagdis the rest.

The tribal emigrants proved popular with the colonial planters for their supposed docile disposition and because 'they are willing to turn their hands to any labour whatever, as far as they are capable',<sup>18</sup> for their simple way of life and their adaptability to the hard conditions on the plantations. Further, they were in ample supply in the crowded quarters of Calcutta, where they had drifted in search of employment as their former homeland came under settled occupation. Hindu and Muslim traders, speculators, moneylenders and others in the early decades of the nineteenth century began 'to exploit simple and unsophisticated aboriginals, who were dispossessed of their holdings sometimes by legal process and sometimes by illegal means'.<sup>19</sup> But a high mortality rate of the 'tribals' on crowded and unsanitary voyages and the availability of appropriate employment opportunities closer to home, such as in the Assam tea gardens and the Bihar indigo plantations and coal mines, reduced the attractiveness of employment on the colonial plantations.

The decline in the volume of tribal emigration shifted colonial recruitment northwards into the settled areas of Bihar. Among the largest recruitment districts in Bihar in the 1850s and 1860s were Arrah (Shahabad), Sahebganj (Gaya), Hazaribagh, Patna, Purulia, Ranchi and Chapra (Saran). But these areas also proved a disappointing hunting ground for colonial recruiters in the long run. Like the tribals, these people too were attracted by employment opportunities nearer home. At the same time, encouraged perhaps by the advent of railways, large numbers of Biharis were turning towards Bengal, especially Calcutta, where they were in great demand as *palki*-bearers, *pankah*-pullers, peons, *lathials* (guards) and

18 John Mackay, 'Additional memoranda, 22 May 1837, submitted for the consideration of his Excellency the Governor, and to be laid before the Legislative Council, should his Excellency consider it proper', Appendix No. 2, Memorandum on Indian Immigration in *Accounts and Papers: Seventeen Volumes*, (5), *Colonies: Emigration; Australia; Prisons; West Indies; &c.*, Session 15 November 1837–16 August 1838, Vol. XL, p. 24, no further details available.

19 Lal, *Girmittiyas*, pp. 75–76.

general labourers. The advantage of internal over colonial migration was that it enabled the immigrants to return to their villages in the planting and harvesting seasons.

From the 1870s onwards, the focus of indentured recruitment shifted to the UP of Agra and Oudh, as they were called, and they remained the principal suppliers of labour for the remaining period of indentured emigration.<sup>20</sup> Within the UP, it was the eastern (*poorbea*) districts that furnished the bulk of the emigrants—districts such as Basti, Gonda, Faizabad, Sultanpur, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Allahabad and Ghazipur. Many factors explain their popularity: a depressed economy, dwindling property rights, fragmentation of landholdings, subdivision of property, heavy population density, the effects of periodic droughts, floods and famine and, finally, an established pattern of migration. The number of *poorbeas* enumerated in Bengal increased significantly over the last quarter of the nineteenth century: 351,933 in 1880, 365,248 in 1891 and 496,940 in 1901.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, according to one informed observer, there was hardly a single family in the entire Benares region that did not have at least one member in employment in other places. It was from this uprooted mass of humanity that the indentured emigrants came. In an important sense, colonial emigration was an extension of the process of emigration. Contrary to popular perception, migration was an established fact of life in the eastern districts of UP. In Azamgarh, it was ‘known to be considerable’, and in Allahabad, ‘at all times an appreciable proportion of the population is absent in search of employment far afield’. In Gonda, migration in such adverse ‘circumstances was a natural way out of the difficulties with which the population did not know how to cope’.<sup>22</sup>

Migration meant remittance. In Sultanpur, the migrants remitted INR1,627,700 between October 1894 and September 1897. In Azamgarh, the settlement officer noted that in the 1890s, yearly remittances amounted to INR1.3 million, rising to INR2.2 million in years of scarcity.

20 For figures for Surinam and Trinidad, see Steven Vertovec, “‘Official’ and “‘popular’ Hinduism in the Caribbean: Historical and contemporary trends in Surinam, Trinidad and Guyana”, in *Across the Dark Waters*, ed. Dabydeen and Samaroo, pp. 108–30, at pp. 112–13.

21 Figures derived from the *Census of India* (1921). For a contextualised study of internal migration, see Ranajit Das Gupta, ‘Factory labour in Eastern India: Sources of supply, 1855–1946: Some preliminary findings’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 18(3) (1973), pp. 277–329.

22 Figures and assessment are derived from *Settlement Reports*, which are, by far, the most comprehensive sources for the study of rural Indian society.

In Ghazipur, an important migration district, emigration since 1901 had assumed 'extraordinary proportions', the proof of which was 'to be found in the immensely increased passenger traffic of the railways, and also in the remarkable amounts remitted to the district through the agency of the post-office'.<sup>23</sup> A result of migration in the district was that labour was becoming dearer each year. Even the cultivating classes no longer relied solely on the produce of their fields, for savings of the emigrants were almost equal to the entire rental demands, the same thing occurring in Ballia and Jaunpur.<sup>24</sup>

It was often asserted by opponents of the indenture system at the time and by popular writers even today that the recruits were either kidnapped or otherwise fraudulently enticed by unscrupulous recruiters into emigrating.<sup>25</sup> This accords with the conventional view that Indians by nature are not migrants but a sedentary people confined to their familiar surroundings by the strictures and protocols of caste and religion. But by the nineteenth century, migration was not a strange phenomenon in rural India. There can be little doubt that a degree of fraudulence and violence was ever present in the recruitment process, as it is even today. Tall tales of easy opportunity awaiting them in the colonies trapped the greedy and the gullible. But deception should be placed in its proper context. The rural population was already uprooted and in search of employment; the recruiters' soothing words made the decision to migrate easier.

## Social background

I have been assured by every native from whom I have enquired, and by most Europeans, that only the lowest castes emigrate, and that nothing will ever induce men of higher class to leave.

Thus wrote G.A. Grierson in 1882.<sup>26</sup> This view has persisted over time and was periodically invoked by the planters and colonial governments to sanction discrimination against their Indian settlers, deny them equal political rights and remind them of their proper place in society—at the bottom. The most comprehensive and exact data on the social background

23 Lal, *Girmitiyas*, p. 93.

24 *ibid.*, pp. 93–94.

25 This theme is emphasised in Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). It is echoed in the published literature on the subject about a generation ago. More recent studies allow greater agency for the recruits.

26 In *Emigration Proceedings, A Pros.*, 12 August 1882, NAI. This view is widely reflected in most official and popular accounts.

of the indentured migrants are from Fiji, and it can safely be assumed that the pattern for Fiji obtained in other sugar colonies as well.<sup>27</sup> Of Fiji's 45,000 North Indian migrants, Brahman and allied castes numbered 1,686; Kshatriya and allied castes 4,565; Bania 1,592; middling agricultural and artisan castes (Kurmi, Ahir, Jat, Lodha) 15,800; menial and low castes (Chamar, Pasi, Dusadh) 11,907; and Muslims 6,787.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the emigrating indentured population represented a fair cross-section of rural Indian society. And this is not surprising, for it was the cultivating castes, without social or institutional protection, that bore the brunt of the deteriorating economic situation in the country in the late nineteenth century: increases in land rent, often demanded in cash rather than kind, increasing fragmentation of ownership rights and subdivision of property, which particularly affected the lower-order cultivators, while the widespread decline in the handicraft industry in UP was ruinous to the artisan class. To many in distress and despair, migration offered a way out. Prolonged absence was not contemplated, but in time an intended sojourn was transformed into permanent separation.

Men migrated as well as women. Migration of men is understandable, but that by rural, illiterate Indian women is less easy to explain. Consequently, stereotype and (male) prejudice become substituted for explanation. It is the common view that the indentured women were people of low moral character, the refuse of society, who fell easy prey to the wily recruiters. C.F. Andrews wrote about Indian-indentured women in Fiji:

The Hindu woman in this country is like a rudderless vessel with its masts broken ... being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so.<sup>29</sup>

Australian overseer Walter Gill, who saw the last days of indenture in Fiji, wrote that the Hindu woman in Fiji was:

as joyously amoral as a doe rabbit. She took her lovers as a ship takes to rough seas, surging up to one who would smother her, then tossing him aside, thirsting for the next.<sup>30</sup>

27 See, for example, Verene Shepherd (in *Transients to Settlers: The Experience of Indians in Jamaica, 1845–1950*, Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1993, p. 47), where she says the Fiji data 'would be replicated in Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica. What evidence is available supports that assumption'.

28 See Lal, *Girmityas*, pp. 68–90.

29 C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth: Privately published, 1918), Appendix, p. 6.

30 Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1970), p. 73.

Indeed, so pervasive was the negative stereotype of Indian women in Fiji that they were held primarily responsible for the high male suicide rate, allegedly because they sold themselves to the highest bidder and then moved to the next, leaving the man to take his own life in despair and shame. The records, when read against the grain, tell a different story.

Why women emigrated is lost to us, but scattered data provides some clues. We have already mentioned the pervasiveness of migration in the Indo-Gangetic Plain. Most of the internal migration within India was male dominated, and if the amount remitted to the village was not enough or if the man did not return, the life of the wife could become very difficult. Tolerated for a while, she could be tossed out of the household and forced to fend for herself in times of hardship and difficulty. The following folksong captures some of the anguish of the wife:

The sun is cruel and bright  
A lot of work is still to be done.  
People have returned to their homes  
Yet no call for meals has come for me.  
Here, in these lonely fields  
I, the unfortunate, work alone.  
My lord being in a distant land  
Who will tell me thy lord has come  
The day of their happiness has dawned.

Constant domestic disputes could be another reason to contemplate escape:

Alas, I will have to run away with another man  
For my beloved has turned his mind away from me  
How eagerly as I cook rice and dal do I pour the ghee  
But as soon as we sit for dinner, you start quarrelling  
My heart is weary of you  
I put hot fire in the basket  
Carefully I make the bed  
But as soon as we lie down to rest, you start quarrelling  
My heart is weary of you.<sup>31</sup>

To women in desperate, distraught, circumstances the recruiters' soothing words must have been godsend. They left. The tragic story of Sukhdei recounted in Chapter 4 is instructive.

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31 These two folksongs, which I collected in the UP, appear in Lal, *Girmityas*, pp. 113–14.



Indentured emigration was, by necessity as well as choice, an individualised phenomenon. Nonetheless, there were families migrating on virtually every shipment to the various colonies. In the case of Fiji, 70 per cent of women migrated as individuals, but the remaining 30 per cent migrated as members of families. The majority, 70 per cent of the women, were accompanied by their husbands only, 15 per cent by their husbands and children and 12 per cent by their children only. Some families were formed in the depots at the ports of embarkation and others on the long voyage out and still more on the plantations. The fact that women were prepared to leave a life of drudgery lived on the sufferance of others for distant unknown places across the ocean would suggest that these were women of pride and determination and enterprise and self-respect. These were certainly the values they inculcated in the children and grandchildren.

Once recruited, the potential emigrants would be taken to the district depot, where they would be examined by the district magistrate or his deputy. Around 18–19 per cent would be rejected for various reasons, mostly because they were found to be unfit. At the port of embarkation, a similar percentage would fall off the list because they were found unfit or because they deserted or simply refused to embark. All told, more than a third of those recruited had been dropped or dropped out before the ship left.

The journey from districts of recruitment to the ports of embarkation involved more than just physical relocation. For men and women from the landlocked villages, a journey of several hundred miles was a novel, traumatic experience. Many were seeing the sea for the first time. In the crowded country depots and in the living quarters in Madras and Calcutta, people rubbed shoulders with those of unknown castes, something that would never have happened in the villages regulated by age-old norms and protocols of social intercourse that respected hierarchy and separation. Old adhesives of society were slowly loosening, such as the caste system. Occasionally men and women were finding partners from different social backgrounds. A sense of togetherness, of being passengers in the same boat, was slowly taking shape. As Ken Gillion has written, ‘Most of their caste scruples gone, without their traditional leaders and elders and generally without kin, they were resigned to the future and very vulnerable.’<sup>32</sup> New bonds of friendship formed on the long voyages, which could take up to three months on the sailing ships. None was more important than the

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32 Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 67.

relationship of *jahajibhai* (brotherhood of the crossing), which provided a degree of much-needed emotional attachment and security in an alien and alienating environment against the alienations and asperities of the outside world, and which persisted long after indenture itself was over. The process of fragmentation and reconstitution would continue apace on the voyage out and on the plantations in the colonies.

## Life and work on colonial plantations

Just as recruitment and shipment of labourers was regulated by legislation, so too were the conditions of employment on the plantations. By the late nineteenth century, a uniform set of rules and procedures had been finalised. The provisions of the Guiana Ordinance of 1891 were closely followed in most other colonies, including the Dutch colony of Surinam.<sup>33</sup> It amplified the precise terms and conditions of employment, the provision of accommodation and medical facilities, sanctions for the breaches of the labour laws, the administration of justice, the terms and conditions of reindenture, and so on. On paper, the ordinance was as comprehensive a piece of legislation as it was possible to imagine, but it was the glaring disparity between the words on paper and the reality on the ground that became the main source of the problem. It was stated, for instance, that indentured men would get 1 shilling per day's work and women 9 pennies, but it took a long time for the workers to achieve this sum. The days absent at hospital were added to the indenture contract. Once contracted to a particular estate or plantation, the labourer could not change his or her employer no matter how genuine the demand for the change. The penal sanctions for breaches of the labour ordinances were more effectively invoked by the planters than by the workers. Indenture was a system of structured inequality between the workers and their employers.

Upon arrival in the colonies, the indentured labourers would be allocated to the various plantations on the basis of orders placed before the colonial government by the planters the year before. Care was taken not to separate families, although on the same plantation, husband and wife could, and

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33 A copy of the ordinance is reproduced in Brij V. Lal, *Crossing the Kala Pani: A Documentary History of Indian Indenture in Fiji* (Canberra: Division of Pacific and Asian History, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, and Suva: Fiji Museum, 1998), pp. 49–94.

often did, work in different sections. But an effort was made to break up groups of people (who might come from the same district in India, for instance), to prevent strikes. The working day began early. The workers were mustered between 5 am and 6 am, had a hurried breakfast and worked till 4 pm.<sup>34</sup> During harvesting time, the hours could be longer. Most of the work related to the cultivation and manufacture of sugar cane: ploughing, hoeing, weeding, harvesting and planting cane.

The labourers were promised that they would do either 'time work' or 'task work'. The new arrivals were usually allotted time work but as they became accustomed to the working conditions on the plantations, they were assigned task work—a task being defined as six hours of continuous work that an able-bodied man could be expected to accomplish. In Trinidad, by 1913, almost 90 per cent of the work was by task.<sup>35</sup> In most cases, it was the overseer who decided what task was appropriate. Sometimes, tasks were defined on the basis of what a few chosen men could accomplish. And the task could be varied. If a worker accomplished his work in good time, he could return the next day to find his task extended. Sometimes, the standard from one plantation could be applied to another without considering the topography of the fields. And sometimes the workers would be paid nothing at all for a partially completed task.

The labour ordinance provided a very large number of offences for which the employers could prosecute their labourers. In Trinidad between 1910 and 1912, the most important prosecutions included desertion (1,668); absence from work without a lawful excuse (1,466); refusing to begin or finish work (1,125); and vagrancy (983).<sup>36</sup> Other breaches included malingering, using threatening words and breach of hospital regulations. In Fiji, the employers were able to obtain 82 per cent of all the cases that

34 See, generally, Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*; Marianne Soares Ramessar, *Survivors of Another Crossing: A History of East Indians in Trinidad, 1880–1946* (St Augustine: School of Continuing Studies, University of the West Indies, 1994); Shepherd, *Transients to Settlers*; Clem Seecharan, *Tiger in the Stars: The Anatomy of Indian Achievement in British Guyana, 1919–1929* (London: Macmillan Education, 1997); Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *Inside Indenture: A South African Story, 1860–1914* (Durban: Human Sciences Research Council, 2007); and Marina Carter's many works on Mauritius, including *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996).

35 Shepherd (*Transients to Settlers*, p. 59) has claimed that '[t]asks were generally preferred in all colonies'.

36 See Ramessar, *Survivors of Another Crossing*, pp. 44–45; K.O. Laurence, *A Question of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana, 1875–1916* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1994), pp. 131–66; and studies in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834–1920* (London: Croon Helm, 1984).

they brought before the courts. Indentured labourers were punished for not registering their marriages, when the idea of registration probably did not occur to them, especially if their marriages were carried out according to Hindu and Muslim rites. And the labourers knew that they could have a week's pay docked or face a month in prison if they 'committed nuisance' within 60 yards of a stream running through a plantation. Indentured labourers convicted of breaching the labour ordinance could either be fined or imprisoned. Neither, however, was the end of punishment for the indentured labourer, for the planters were legally entitled to recover lost work by extending the contract by the number of days they were absent from the plantation.

Labourers were entitled under the ordinance to lay charges against their employers for assault and battery, nonpayment of wages, not supplying tools or proper rations, using 'insulting language', requiring illegal work, overtaking, falsifying pay lists and so on. But laying charges involved considerable risk. The labourers had difficulty getting permission to leave their plantations. Those who bore the odds became marked men. And there was no guarantee that, after all the risks had been taken, the courts would give them a sympathetic hearing. In Surinam between 1873 and 1916, only 10 per cent of employers who were charged under the labour laws were successful, while the employers were able to secure 75 per cent of the charges they brought against their labourers. When provoked beyond the limits of endurance, the workers either retaliated violently against those in authority—such as by murdering overseers, or striking. But striking was risky at all times, and not easy to organise. The planters had all the power in their hands. The colonial government had a prudent appreciation of the economic contribution of the big companies. The labourers themselves were often disorganised and diffident. When strikes did occur, as Maureen Swan has written of Natal, they were 'short-lived, rarely transcended the accommodation units or work gangs into which plantation work gangs were divided, and were generally concerned with specific abuses of contract'.<sup>37</sup> The strikers were quickly apprehended and dispersed to different locations with the result, as S.J. Reddy has written of Mauritius, 'experience acquired by one group in wresting some concessions was lost as they dispersed to take employment elsewhere'.<sup>38</sup>

37 Maureen Swann, 'Indian Indians: Resistance and accommodation, 1890–1913', in *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*, ed. Surendra Bhana (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1988), pp. 117–35, at p. 128.

38 S.J. Reddy, 'Labour protest among Indian immigrants', in *Indian Labour Immigration*, ed. U. Bissoondoyal and S.B.C. Servansing (Moka Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1986), pp. 116–35, at p. 132.

The indentured workers had a prudent appreciation of the reality that confronted them. They often engaged in quiet everyday acts of resistance or adopted strategic accommodation with authority as a way out of their difficulties.

Indenture, clearly was a grim time for those who experienced it: the relentless pace of work on the plantations; the violence; the disease; the frequent indifference of those in authority; the denial of the humanity of the workers. Many were broken by it but many also survived. In some places, such as the Caribbean, indenture lasted for generations, with attendant consequences for social and cultural identity. Links with India were broken for long periods of time. People lived in isolation from their ancestral culture for long periods, losing their mother tongue in the process. Indenture, in short, was a life sentence. But elsewhere, such as in Fiji, it was a limited detention for five or, at most, 10 years, after which the migrants were free to settle on their own or return to India. And contact with India was never really lost.

It was simultaneously an enslaving as well as a liberating experience for many. There were many in the indentured population whose birth had confined them to the lower stratum of Indian society, a fate ordained by divine injunction, it was said, from which there was no escape in this life or the next. To them, migration and indenture offered the possibility of realising their individual humanity. Everywhere they grabbed the opportunity with relish. Indenture was a crucible in which was forged a new society. Old notions of purity and impurity, taboos regarding food, diet, social space, the rituals of prayer and worship collapsed over time to be replaced by new norms and conventions. Caste, as a social institution, became anachronistic; its protocols of approved behaviour unenforceable.<sup>39</sup> Remuneration during indenture was based on the amount of work accomplished, not on social status. The paucity of women necessitated marriages across caste and sometimes religious lines. Everywhere, people continued to 'play' at caste long after indenture had ceased, but its relevance and legitimacy were gone.

Fragmentation was accompanied by the process of reconstitution. Women everywhere played an important part in that process. Women emerged from indenture as productive workers in their own right, enjoying or

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39 See Chandra Jayawardena, 'The disintegration of caste in Fiji Indian rural society', in *Anthropology in Oceania: Essays Presented to Ian Hogbin*, ed. L.R. Hiatt and Chandra Jayawardena (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), pp. 89–119.

negotiating a measure of independence that would have been unimaginable in India. They survived the burdens of both racism and sexism. They raised families in often inhospitable circumstances and played a critical role in facilitating 'the transmission and practice of folk religion and of tradition-based sanctions'.<sup>40</sup> In Guiana, writes Jeremy Poynting, women 'were the main preservers of Indian domestic culture,' which, he argues, was 'initially the principal means whereby Indians maintained their identity'.<sup>41</sup> The presence of Indian women in the colonies was important in another way: it discouraged relationships between Indian men and non-Indian women, to varying degrees, in the sugar colonies.

Religion played an equally important role in the protection of Indian culture and identity in the different colonies. It is commonly assumed that the religious practices and protocols of Hinduism and Islam collapsed suddenly on the colonial plantations. This is not true. The various groups of people who went to the colonies brought with them their own family (*kul*) or village (*gram*) deities and the associated rituals and ceremonies. Some involved animal sacrifice while others invoked the dark forces of the underworld. Over time, everywhere, these were replaced by a more universal form of Brahminised Hinduism.<sup>42</sup> And the colonial planters were not always opposed to the perpetuation of the migrants' religious practices. 'As the planters became increasingly dependent on Indian labour,' writes Basdeo Mangru about Guiana:

they correspondingly endeavoured to make estate life as attractive as possible so as to induce the indentured workforce to prolong their residence through reindenture. One certain way of substituting a temporary sojourn for permanent residence was to permit the Indian labourer to practise his religion, which was an inseparable part of his [*sic*] life.

[Further, to] create a sense of belonging and facilitate reindenture for another five years, some prudent estate managers not only attended the festivals, but generously granted holidays and made regular and substantial contribution towards the festivals.<sup>43</sup>

40 Marina Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy: The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Rose Hill, Mauritius: Edition l'Océan Indien, 1994), p. 142.

41 Jeremy Poynting, 'East Indian women in the Caribbean: Experience and voice', in *South Asian Women Writers: The Immigrant Experience*, *Journal of South Asian Literature* 21(1) (Winter-Spring 1986): 133–80, at p. 133.

42 See Vertovec, "'Official" and "popular" Hinduism in the Caribbean', p. 114.

43 Basdeo Mangru, 'Tadjah in British Guiana', in *Indo-Caribbean Resistance*, ed. Frank Birbalsingh (Toronto: Tsar, 1993), pp. 13–26, at p. 18.

One festival that was celebrated across all the colonial plantations around the world was Tazia (Fiji), known as Tadjah (Guiana) and Hosein, Hose or Hosay (Trinidad and Jamaica). The festival commemorated the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussein, grandsons of the Prophet Mohammed. Holi, or Phagua, was also regularly celebrated.

In some places, such as the Caribbean, Christianity was able to make significant inroads into the Indian community, promising liberation and the prospect of upward mobility in an environment characterised by closed and low glass ceilings, but in other places, such as Fiji, it was insignificant. In an important sense, religion became a tool of resistance. As Roy Glasgow writes of Guyana:

The Indian's emphasis upon the value and worthwhileness of his [sic] culture was really a mode of expression of his desire to be treated on terms of equality within the Guyanese universe.<sup>44</sup>

This was successful to varying degrees in different places. In Fiji, within a decade of the beginning of indentured migration, the basic texts of popular Hinduism were circulating among the indentured Indians.<sup>45</sup> These included *Satyanarayan ki katha* (a collection of five stories from the 'Reva' chapter of the *Skanda Purana*), *Sukh Sagar* (a discourse on the different incarnations of Lord Vishnu), popular versions of the Bhagvada Gita, *Danlila* (a devotional verse in praise of Lord Krishna) and, above all, the Ramayana, the story of Lord Rama in some 10,000 lines of verse in the Avadhi dialect of Hindi familiar to most of the North Indian migrants. Rama's story, enacted in the *Ramlilas* and sung communally to the accompaniment of rudimentary music, struck a particular chord with the indentured labourers. Rama was exiled for 14 years for no fault of his own, but he did return; good ultimately triumphed over evil. His story gave the labourers hope and consolation; one day, their ordeal, too, would come to an end.

And it did. All indentured emigration ceased in 1916 and the system was abolished soon afterwards, although in some places, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the peak of emigration was long over. Reports by C.F. Andrews, among others, drew the attention of the Indian public, slowly awakening to nationalist sentiments, to the social problems

44 Roy Arthur Glasgow, *Guyana: Race and Politics among Africans and East Indians* (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1970), p. 79, doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-3213-1.

45 See Brij V. Lal, 'Hinduism under indenture', in Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, pp. 239–60.

of indenture, especially the abuse of women on the plantations that outraged Indian public opinion and finally forced the Government of India to end indenture despite protests and pleas from the colonies. As Lord Hardinge said:

No matter how great might be the economic advantages, the political aspect of the question is such that no one who has at heart the interests of British rule in India can afford to neglect it. It is one of the most important subjects in Indian political life today, and its discussion arouses more bitterness, perhaps, than that of any other outstanding question. Indian politicians, moderate and extremist alike, do not consider that the existence of this system which they do not hesitate to call by the name of slavery, brands their whole race in the eyes of the British Empire with the stigma of harlotry.<sup>46</sup>

Upon the expiry of their indenture, the Indian settlers had no alternative but to be independent. Some experimented with other occupations, but limited opportunities, family obligations, kinship ties and lack of education and marketable skills forced most to depend on agriculture; cultivating rice and sugar, principally, but also such crops such as maize, tobacco, sweet potato and yam, in time monopolising market gardening.<sup>47</sup> Expediency, contingency and tolerance born of need or circumstance, rather than social status and prestige, determined relations among the settlers. They built temples and roads and schools, and tried to create a semblance of life on bits and pieces of a remembered past. The old pattern of village India could not be reproduced in the new environment. The emergence of new settlements of freed Indians, with their temples and mosques, rudimentary schools and established homesteads, was also symbolically important for those still under indenture. They served as beacons of inspiration, nurturing the hope that they too would be free one day. It lightened the burden of the relentless plantation routine.

46 Cited in Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 180. See also Mangru, 'Indian Government policy towards indentured labour migration to the sugar colonies', pp. 171–72. Andrews's role is considered in K.L. Gillion, 'C.F. Andrews and Indians overseas', *Visva-Bharti News* (February–March 1971), pp. 206–17.

47 See, for example, Surendra Bhana and Joy Brain, *Setting Down Roots: Indian Immigrants in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1989), pp. 43–52; Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, pp. 136–63; Shepherd, *Transients to Settlers*, pp. 118–49; Seecharan, *Tiger in the Stars*, pp. 147–215; Ramessar, *Survivors of Another Crossing*, pp. 77–118.



Wherever the Indian indentured labourers went, they encountered people who were either indigenous to those places (such as in Fiji) or imported earlier as labourers themselves (as in the West Indies). Relations between the two groups were characterised by prejudice and the suspicion that one was the nemesis of the other. In Trinidad, the blacks could not but notice the degrading conditions in which the Indian indentured labourers lived and worked and their low occupational and social status. The Indians' culture and religion appeared strange and incomprehensible. The Creole and the 'coolie' found little to admire in each other's way of life. 'The coolie despises the negro, because he considers him a being not so highly civilized as himself,' wrote an observer of Trinidad:

while the negro, in turn, despises the coolie, because he is so immensely inferior to him in physical strength. There never will be much danger of seditious disturbances among East Indian immigrants on estates as long as large numbers of negroes continue to be employed with them.<sup>48</sup>

In other places, the perception of Indians working for lower wages than the blacks poisoned relations. In Fiji, the colonial state prohibited social intercourse between Fijians and Indians and transgressions were punished at law. Everywhere, the seeds of prejudice, suspicion and hostility, planted during the early years of indenture, continued to bear fruit long after the system itself was abolished. Colonial policies exacerbated the gulf between the communities created by culture and history and circumstances beyond their control. The descendants of the Indian indentured immigrants found themselves suffering and living on the sufferance of others, excluded from the corridors of power, disempowered. It was a difficult journey; there was a lot of despair and disappointment along the way. But there was also defiance. In the words of Guyanese poet Rooplall Monar:

Generations nurtured from my seeds  
will clasp their hands and say  
our ancestors carved those fields  
which have given us meanings  
meanings to stand tall  
This land is ours too.<sup>49</sup>

48 Malcolm Cross, 'East Indian-Creole relations in Trinidad and Guyana in the late nineteenth century', in *Across the Dark Waters*, ed. Dabydeen and Samaroo, pp. 14–38, at pp. 28–29. See also Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad*, p. 110.

49 Rooplall Monar, 'Babu', in *They Came in Ships*, ed. McDonald et al., pp. 203–205, p. 205.