INTRODUCTION

Crispin Bates and Ashutosh Kumar

This book concerns what has been called the 'first wave' of Indians who travelled overseas to work on colonial plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[1] It was a migration facilitated and supervised by the British colonial government of India under what became the indentured labour scheme. Under this scheme, workers would sign a contract, popularly known as a *girmit*, or agreement, which bound them to work for a single employer at a fixed wage for a fixed period of three–five years.[2] Indentured migrants identified themselves with specific terms such as *angaze* in Mauritius, *kontraki* in Suriname and *girmitiya* in Fiji. However, the British commonly called them 'coolies' – a term already familiar to them from its usage in South India and China.

The indenture system was introduced to overcome the crisis that emerged from the banning of slavery in the British Empire by the British Parliament in 1833. The system attracted huge criticism and opposition from the very beginning; however, it continued until 1917 when it was finally abolished, under pressure from Indian nationalists and the greater importance of moving troops and supplies during the global conflict of World War I. Another reason was the crisis in the sugar industry as the production of sugar beet undermined the demand for plantation sugar cane in global markets.

This volume explores the transformative experiences of those who migrated, and the memories of those who did not return after expiration of their contract, but chose to stay in their respective host countries. These communities of South Asians abroad struggled to adapt to their new situations, standardizing the languages spoken and preserving some cultural

and folk traditions, whilst discarding others (notably many of the distinctions of caste) – in short, forging for themselves entirely new identities as 'diasporic Indians'.

Many books and essays concerning the history of Indian indentured migration in the colonial period begin with numbers. They attempt, with overused tropes, to generalize in a few lines the experience of labour migration across multiple destinations throughout the globe and a period of more than a century. However, the numbers themselves are uncertain. Many more millions of South Asians migrated without contracts of indenture as 'free migrants', otherwise known as 'passenger Indians'. And many re-indentured, or re-migrated from colony to colony, without ever returning home (what Reshaad Durgahee has termed 'subaltern careering') – thus evading enumeration in official statistics.[3] We know most about the lives of workers who were indentured in the Indian subcontinent to work overseas, since their migration was required by law to be carefully documented by the various colonial governments involved. It is these migrants and their descendants who are the subject of this volume.

Too often the study of South Asian overseas labour migrants has concentrated on the most difficult experiences of pioneers in the early years between the 1830s and the 1860s. Rarely do they go beyond, into the era of steam travel, when conditions were vastly different.[4] Many accounts also tend to generalize based upon statistics and discussions of colonial policy, which predominate in colonial archives. Rarely do they allow much agency for the migrants themselves. In more recent research – especially that coming out of the diaspora itself – this has begun to change.[5] While the grand paradigm of victimhood was challenged by historians in the 1980s,[6] other recent writings on labour migration in the nineteenth century have contextualized and apparently diminished the importance of indentured Indians.[7] Historians have also highlighted the uniqueness of the indenture system among systems of labour employment, both in in terms of workers' rights and welfare, and the legal framework that provided a new language of freedom and contract.[8] Other publications have emerged offering a more global and longer-term perspective on the experience of South Asian migration. The 'Tinkerian' paradigm, as it has been called, of perpetual victimhood has been set aside. There is more emphasis instead on indentured migration as part of a global system of labour power, which industrially transformed the Global South.[9]

In this volume, our focus is not on the economic aspects of migration, but on issues of memory and identity and the ways in which South Asians

migrated and adapted to their overseas destinations. Diasporic communities are constantly adapting and positioning themselves in relation to the new societies in which they live. In describing his own experience of migration, Stuart Hall observed that

> identity is not a set of fixed attributes, the unchanging essence of the inner self, but a constantly shifting process of positioning. We tend to think of identity as taking us back to our roots, the part of us which remains essentially the same across time. In fact, identity is always a never-completed process of becoming – a process of shifting identifications, rather than a singular, complete, finished state of being.[10]

Thus, the experiences which migrants choose to remember about their past play a large part in determining their social and political experiences in the present day. They can be memories of rupture and loss and a sense of liminality or in-betweenness. They can be memories of solidarity, assertion and resistance. They can be memories of nostalgia or memories of integration and achievement. What is remembered and how it is represented in the stories we tell ourselves (as argued by Hayden White) play a large part in the construction of identities in the present. They also help to delineate the 'third space' described by Homi Bhabha in which alternative possible futures are imagined, including the possibilities for hybridity in which 'we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves'.[11]

ORIGINS

This volume is presented in two halves: 'origins', narrating the experiences and memories of the very first South Asians who migrated as indentured workers, and 'afterlives', describing the memories, transformative adaptation and quest for identity among those migrants overseas following the end of indentured migration, the collapse of European global empires and the establishment of sovereign independent nations in their wake.

The motives of those South Asians who migrated overseas were diverse and played a significant part in determining whether they stayed or eventually returned home. These could include the desire of the landless to acquire land or to escape religious, caste or gender discrimination. Otherwise, many were motivated by the quest for economic security, to acquire the means to marry

or to escape the immiseration of widowhood. The largest number of migrants came from the fertile, but agriculturally unstable riverain districts prone to flooding in Bengal, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP), Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. But poverty and famine in colonial India could strike anyone at any time, and research has shown that migrants came from all sections of society.[12] The most famous critics of indenture, who wrote of their experiences in Fiji in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were Baba Ram Chandra and Totaram Sanadhya: both high-caste Hindus, who migrated as indentured workers, loathed the experience and returned home to north India at the earliest opportunity. The only other surviving memoir of indenture (a far more positive account) was written by Munshi Rahman Khan, who enlisted to work as a labourer in Suriname in 1898 – a role which he soon escaped by buying land, becoming a farmer, marrying and raising a family.[13]

The very earliest labour migrants, recruited to work on sugar plantations in Reunion, Mauritius and Martinique, were predominantly male. However, most colonies were not content to recruit only able-bodied men on a short-term basis, but were keen to establish self-sustaining communities to feed the demand for labour. Thus, Mauritius, the largest destination for indentured migrants, offered free passage to women and children from the 1840s.[14] A similar policy was pursued in South Africa until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the post-Boer War economy fell into recession, and the South Asian community had become so numerous (and successful) that the official attitude towards migration reversed and increasingly became hostile.

In the first decades of indentured migration in the nineteenth century, barely one in five migrants was female, a clearly unsustainable proportion for orthodox community life to be established, so a target of around 30 per cent (or 100 men and 40 women) was set by most colonies.[15] This target was difficult to achieve, not least of all as it was hampered by a profound prejudice in the originating districts against the migration of females who were neither attached to a father nor a husband. In the first chapter in this volume, Kalpana Hiralal examines these and other issues arising in the recruitment of women immigrants under indenture. Attempts to overcome the disparity between the sexes created many problems for recruiting agents, colonial officials and employers. Socio-economic conditions, the difficulty in gaining consent to the legally required medical examinations, and the patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes of colonial officials stood in the way of recruiting female workers. Through an examination of these aspects of indenture, Hiralal provides

rich insights into recruitment practices and procedures concerning women workers and the factors that shaped their decision to emigrate.

In the second chapter, Archana Kumari scrutinizes life for labourers under the indenture system on the sugar plantations of South Africa and Fiji, examining their everyday experiences, ritual observances and social interactions. The chapter uses memoirs and contemporary sources to enrich our understanding of the changes wrought by migration upon those who entered into contracts of indenture. The social background of migrants in their home country is also briefly analysed in order to form a basis for this evaluation. The testimonies used reveal the discriminating mentality of the Indian Brahminic system, but crucially they also expose how the disruption of this institution in the colonies gave birth to a new society and a community which was forced to be less partisan. This was not necessarily borne out of an anti-caste consciousness, but rather the circumstances in which people found themselves. In further examining the impact of indentured migration on life, marriage and relationships, the celebration of religious and cultural festivals and the working conditions of migrants are discussed. The prevalence of malpractices and the challenges faced by women in their working lives are included in the complex picture that emerges. The core contention of this chapter is that migration fundamentally altered the sociocultural lives of migrants. However, this does not mean that indentured Indians did not retain many important religio-cultural practices of their homeland, including festivals such as Holi, Diwali, Muharram and Muruga. These religious practices were a syncretic composite of previous Indian beliefs and practices, which came in the colonies to elide what were in India profound differences. In this way, Indian indentured migrants formed a distinctive culture in relation to other ethnic groups in the colonies. Plantation life was filled with hardship, struggle and injustice, but it simultaneously provided a unique environment that unavoidably impacted the economic, social and cultural dynamics of migrant society.

During the period from 1834 to 1916, Indians were enlisted as indentured labourers in countries as far-flung as Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad, Natal, Suriname and Fiji. Native societies were greatly changed by the influx of Indians, and the lives of these indentured migrants in their 'receiving countries' are well documented. However, lives were changed at their point of origin in the Indian subcontinent as well. In the third chapter, Ashutosh Kumar explores the folklore of *girmitiya*s, which has been passed down through oral culture, and endeavours to identify the continuities and changes

within it. The songs of Bhojpuri migrants stemmed from north Indian songs that lamented the separation which accompanies the joy of marriage for women, as well the sadness attendant to the world of migratory work. While discussing the content and context of folk songs in Bhojpuri–Hindi collected in Fiji and Suriname, Kumar argues that their new home compelled Bhojpuri migrants to modify their folklore as they came into contact with new languages, cultures and societies. For indentured Indians, folk songs especially were a form of expression through which *girmitiya*s expressed their pain and sorrow and memories of the experiences of their ancestors. Hence, Kumar argues that the content and context of folk songs became an important means for plantation workers to express their humanity. They can also be seen as a form of resistance, not only on the colonial sugar plantations of the past, but against discrimination experienced in the present day as well. Folk songs are thus an important resource for historians. They are cathartic and poetic forms of expression and should not be received naively as immediate reflections of reality. Nonetheless, they allow us an insight into a creative aspect of the culture of migrant workers and their descendants as they struggled to establish new lives for themselves overseas, an aspect which is otherwise obscured in political discourse and the dry statistics and policy documents of the colonial archive.

When the ships carrying the first indentured migrants from north India docked in Suriname in 1873, they encountered a society in which only a small proportion of the inhabitants was Dutch. The majority of the population were of African, Chinese or Portuguese descent or were indigenous Indians. The dominance of Creole and European culture in Suriname meant that Indian indentured labourers had to reconstruct their identity upon arrival, amending their social habits and adapting to their new environment. The fourth chapter, by Sarojini Lewis, uses archival Surinamese photographs, particularly those that feature Bhojpuri women, to interrogate the ways in which Surinamese society influenced the sitters' identity formation. These photographs can be mined not just for their historical value as documents but also for what they aesthetically communicate through their staging. The ethnicities present in Suriname were divided under the colonial system through ethnographic photographic projects, their allocated daily labour and physical living arrangements. However, the photographs featured in this chapter point towards mixed ethnicities and identities, and sometimes even reflect the potential agency of the Bhojpuri-speaking women who arrived on those boats. By exploring these images and their social context, and by

comparing them to colonial photographic studies made elsewhere in the Indian diaspora, Lewis argues it is possible to access aspects of the realities of cultural diversity in Suriname in the colonial era.

In the fifth chapter, Bobby Luthra Sinha examines how the first generation of indentured Indians came to terms with an ageing body, in an environment designed primarily to be a place of work rather than a home. Pointing to the gap on this issue in academic and non-fictional studies, Sinha argues how ageing in the context of indentured Indians cannot be seen only as a simple biological process of moving towards the 'end of life'. Their bodies became a site of contestation between those aspiring to control Indian labour and the aspirations of the labourers themselves, who might not wish or even be able to return to families in India to live out the final years of their lives – as colonial officials and planters might prefer. Elderly *girmitiya*s who survived their 'cooliehood' had to be content with scarce social planning and limited familial resources for managing the fragilities of old age. An example is taken from Natal in South Africa, where in the early 1900s the first generation of indentured Indians found avenues to manage their old age, despite the absence of extended families to whom they might turn for support. The chapter points to the need to look at the ageing body of indentured labourers from a contextual view of ageing on sugar plantations, where even 35-year-olds could be considered too old and unfit for work in the field. This was a new situation, in which men were forced to share an experience more common to women in India, of ageing and dying alone, without the benefit of offspring to support them. The chapter points to the need for a grounded, ethnographic understanding of ageing, and the various private and state-led humanitarian recourses and initiatives that were taken as newly formed migrant societies began to assume responsibility for their citizens at each and every stage of life.

AFTERLIVES

Subsequent to the winding down of indentured labour migration during and after World War I, substantial communities of Indians – Hindus and Muslims, Tamil, Telugu and Bhojpuri speakers, and many others – were left scattered across the globe in former plantation colonies. In some countries, such as Malaysia, they remained a valued and welcome addition to the sparse local labour force. However, in other destinations, they were victimized

by racist, local nationalist movements, which demanded that employment opportunities be reserved for locals alone. The first such movement arose in Canada and the United States from the 1870s, then South Africa in the aftermath of the Boer War and finally in Burma (Myanmar) during the years of the Great Depression, as recounted by Adam McKeown (2008). These measures were resisted both in London and New Delhi. However, eventually, in 1943, the Government of India felt obliged to respond by introducing the Indian Reciprocity Act, which legislated sanctions against colonies, countries and their citizens in India that mirrored the legislative restrictions placed on Indians in those areas. The sixth chapter, by Heena Mistry, contextualizes the Indian Reciprocity Act of 1943 within the politics of the Indian diaspora between the two world wars. Following the abolition of indenture, so-called Indian moderates who sat at imperial decision-making tables appealed to the idea of imperial reciprocity to guarantee the extension of white settler rights to British Indian subjects settled overseas – an idea which met with support in some circles, but also encountered powerful local resistance. Mistry argues that debates surrounding the Indian Reciprocity Act indicate the dialogue between imperial reformism and anticolonial nationalism in the Raj's final years, especially when thinking about the future of the relationship between Indians overseas and those in India.

As the independent nations of India and Pakistan were finally born in 1947, whatever ties remained between the two new nations and Indian-born subjects overseas were abruptly ruptured. The aftermath of Partition was awful enough, without India or Pakistan having to cope with a tide of returnees from around the globe. The then Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, therefore strongly encouraged Indians overseas to remain where they were and to become loyal citizens of the countries in which they found themselves. Not everyone did so, and several mass migrations ensued, but those who chose to remain were faced with the need to rethink their identities once again. In the Caribbean islands furthest away from the Indian subcontinent, whence the possibilities of return were always more remote, this process had already been ongoing for some time. In the seventh chapter, Satnarine Balkaransingh uses the occasion of the 2017 centennial anniversary of the end of indenture held in Trinidad to reflect on the changes South Asians had brought to the Caribbean and the changes the Caribbean had wrought upon them.

When indentured Indians disembarked in Trinidad, they carried their entire worldly possessions tied up in bundles on their heads or their shoulders. This was their *jahaji bandal* – a reference to this baggage coming off the ship,

or *jahaj*. The bundle was, however, not only physical. Inside their heads and their hearts were, figuratively speaking, bundles containing their spiritual, philosophical, religious, intellectual, linguistic, artistic and other cultural characteristics, their norms of behaviour, attitudes, values, traditions, heritage and rituals, and feasts and festivals. Prior to their arrival, Trinidad already hosted a mosaic of races and cultures (its twin-island, Tobago, has always been less economically industrious and therefore more homogeneous). This diversity was the result of its separate and distinct historical antecedents and heritages and remains reflected in today's population statistics. Balkaransingh argues that this diversity is also manifested in the performative traditions of Trinidad: its fasts, feasts, rituals and festivals. Within these, the Indo-Trinidadian contribution is significant. Following the recent centennial anniversary of the end of the Indian indenture system, he asks: what does Trinidad and Tobago have to show, artistically, for the presence of successive generations of Indians in the country? In this regard, he identifies eight diverse events or traditions that take place in both India and Trinidad and seeks to compare and contrast them, endeavouring to trace common influences and the impact of cultural adaptation. The festivals examined include Ramlila, Diwali, Christmas, Maha Shivaratri, Carnival, Phagwa and Hosay. The argument that follows reveals significant continuities and changes in them in terms of form, format, festivities and gender relations that contribute to the unique phenomenon that is Indo-Trinidadian culture.

Aside from ethnicity and culture, caste remains a much diminished but still important issue within the Indian diaspora. In the eighth chapter, Gajendran Ayyathurai argues that caste-based exclusion, historically associated with the invention and oppression of self-privileging-caste groups in India, is also to be found within the Indian diaspora, and that the diaspora is often described in terms of a falsely homogenous Hindu and Brahmanical identity. However, Ayyathurai contends that this is not the only discernible narrative; many Indians emigrated against caste or casteism and found religio-cultural self-emancipation overseas, collectively transforming their social life in faraway lands, such as the Caribbean. Following the introduction of indentured labour, the virulence of colonialism and casteism may have continued to 'disembed' marginalized Indians from their local life-worlds, but contracts of indentured migration allowed them to 're-embed' themselves in a casteless time and space overseas. Ayyathurai explores how migration enabled migrants to forge new identities. This process allowed those Indo-Caribbeans who believed in privileged castes to claim Brahmin and Kshatriya ancestry,

but more compellingly, allowed others to reject the labels of caste altogether. A detailed comparison between the brahmanical and non-brahmanical Kali or Amman temples and religious practices of the Indo-Guyanese today highlights the continued existence and inclusive character of the 'caste-free' Indian diaspora. The active connection between the modern diaspora and its formative years in the nineteenth century is thereby revealed.

Whilst the transition to freedom in Mauritius, Trinidad and Guyana was comparatively smooth, by Indian standards, in South Africa, a whites-only political organization, the National Party, seized power in 1948 and began enforcing policies of rigorous racial segregation. What became known as the apartheid regime confined Indians and Africans to the status of second-class citizens and lasted, despite sanctions and international condemnation, for the next 46 years. The largest Indian community was that in Durban in the Natal province, which soon found itself ghettoized within discrete areas of the city. One of these was the Grey Street Complex, a long-established hub of Indian and, more broadly, South Asian enterprise. In a study based upon historical records as well as oral evidence, the ninth chapter, by Tashmica Sharma, explores nostalgia, memory and the reality of culture and education in the Grey Street Complex in downtown Durban. The aim of this chapter is to assess the rise of cultural hubs in the Grey Street Complex during the apartheid era, presenting a historical background to the area and analysing the role of culture, memory and nostalgia in influencing the historical connection of former and current residents. The precinct (presently renamed after Yusuf Dadoo, an anti-apartheid activist) formed the node where many former indentured and passenger Indians in Natal established cultural bodies and educational institutions from the late-nineteenth century onwards. Often called 'home away from home' for former Grey Street residents, this complex encapsulated a rich and rare cultural ambience (religious, educational and recreational). Even though apartheid ended in 1993, and to some extent the Indian community has since become more dispersed, it is evident that the community of the precinct still share a strong spatial connection with the Grey Street Complex. This they recall in their memory of common events, similar experiences at particular locations in the precinct and a shared yearning and nostalgic sentiment based on their mnemonic attachments.

Following the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, Indians in Durban acquired a new-found confidence; there was a renewal of ties between India and South Africa and a heightened interest in the descendants of indentured migrants seeking to trace their roots to the 'motherland'. The final chapter in