# Introduction

On the river Ganges in Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta), there is a small *ghat* (pier) bearing the name of a faraway South American country – the Surinam Ghat.[1] Seemingly out of place in a port city about 15,000 kilometres away from Surinam, it is named after the Surinam Depot, which used to accommodate Indian labourers migrating to the erstwhile Dutch colony as plantation workers. In fact, for a large part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the port side of Calcutta was dotted with buildings like the Trinidad Depot, Mauritius Depot, British Guiana Depot and Surinam Depot – physical remnants of an 80-year-long trade in Indian labourers. The abolition of slavery in 1833 had prompted the Indian indenture trade, whereby Indian labourers migrated to European plantation colonies to work in the production of sugar.[2] Despite being a key port in the global indenture trade and a site for debating the terms of indenture, Calcutta has remained entirely unexplored in scholarship. This book sets out to insert the British Indian capital of Calcutta into the history of indenture, offering a history of Calcuttans shaping colonial labour on a global stage. Instead of focusing on plantation colonies that labourers migrated *to*, it refocuses indenture literature on a port city that they embarked *from*.

Bringing sugar to the metropolitan plate has a long and complicated history, featuring overseas plantation colonies, absentee planters, lucrative commodity trade, labour migration across continents, slavery and various forms of unfree labour. When slavery was abolished in the British Empire, the empire straddled several plantation colonies. As Abolition deprived planters of their labour base, there was an immediate drive to seek workers to replace enslaved labour, especially since the temporary apprenticeship of ex-slaves

had failed to ensure a steady supply of labour for British sugar plantations. Sugar production was a labour-intensive process. Working on the plantations involved sowing, reaping, cutting and processing the sugar cane in sugar boiling units. Moreover, British planters had by this time invested thousands in setting up plantation estates and formed strong parliamentary lobbies to push policies that safeguarded their profits from the sugar trade. After some unsuccessful attempts at using emancipated slaves and European labourers (mainly Portuguese labour from Madeira), Indian indentured labour emerged as the most popular and long-standing post-slavery labour system.

Indian indenture was a decidedly imperial institution set against the backdrop of the British colonial regime in India and colonial plantation regimes spread across the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. Labourers were recruited from eastern and southern Indian villages, entered into five-year labour contracts (or indentures) with planters and sailed from the three major port cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Within half a decade of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, this had become a standardised, government-sanctioned system of labour migration and a true successor to the slave labour regime. By the end of the nineteenth century, 1.33 million indentured Indians had migrated to work in sugar plantation colonies (Figures I.1 and I.2).[3] Initially emigrating mainly to Mauritius and British Guiana, the Indian


**Figure I.1** Map showing Indian ports and plantation colonies that employed indentured Indians

*Source*: Prepared by the author using a stock image of world map from iStock by Getty Images (stock illustration ID: 1407115316; credit: A. Mokhtari), https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/world-map-drawn-in-outline-gm1407115316-458436202 (accessed in June 2024).

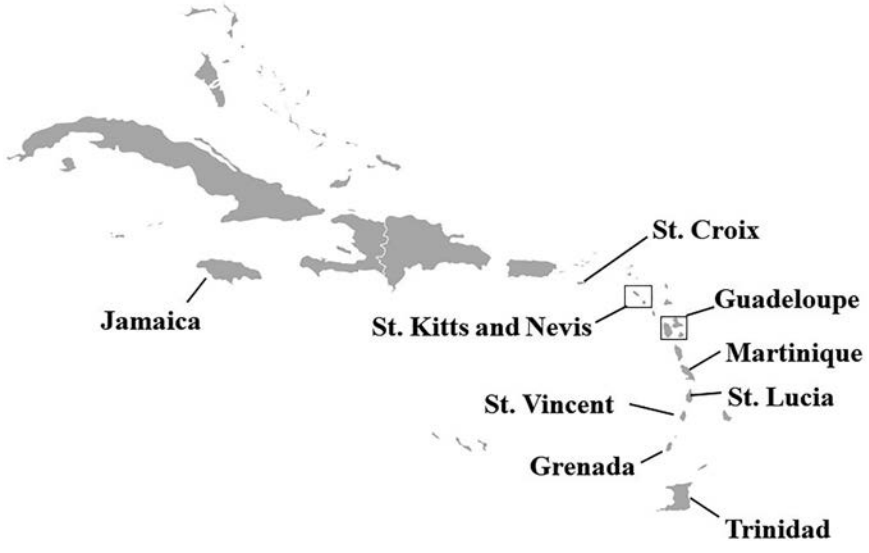


**Figure I.2** Caribbean plantation colonies that employed indentured Indians

*Source*: Prepared by the author using a stock image of Caribbean islands map from iStock by Getty Images (stock illustration ID: 1245676548; credit: Mohamed Rasik), https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/caribbean-island-map-vector-graphics-design-gm1245676548-363096041 (accessed in June 2024).

indenture trade was extended to Jamaica and Trinidad in 1844–1845; Grenada in 1856; Saint Lucia in 1858; Natal (South Africa), Saint Kitts, Saint Vincent and the French colonies of Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guiana in 1860; Danish Saint Croix in 1863; Dutch Surinam in 1873; and Fiji in 1879 (Table I.1).[4]

This migration of indentured Indians provoked an empire-wide debate. Merchants and planters with a direct stake in the continued labour trade argued that Indian indenture was indispensable for continuous sugar production. For an imperial economy heavily dependent on commodity trade, ruination of the sugar trade implied considerable damage to the British economy. Many in Calcutta and Britain, however, saw it as slavery in all but name. Drawing attention to instances of deceptive recruitment, overwork, penal sanction, planter atrocity and mistreatment of labourers during passage and on plantations, they repudiated indenture as a restrictive and exploitative system that needed to be suspended, if not abolished altogether. The indenture trade followed closely on the heels of the abolition debates in Britain, a debate that questioned coerced labour and asked whether certain

**Table I.1** Indian indentured emigration to plantation colonies

| Plantation colony | Number of Indian indentured migrants |
|---|---|
| British Guiana | 238,861 |
| Dutch Guiana (Surinam) | 34,503 |
| East Africa | 39,437 |
| Fiji | 61,015 |
| French Caribbean | 79,089 |
| Jamaica | 38,595 |
| Mauritius | 455,187 |
| Natal | 152,932 |
| Réunion | 74,854 |
| Trinidad | 149,623 |
| Others (British West Indies) | 11,152 |

*Source*: Collated by the author based on data from 'Table A.1: Decadal Exports of Indentured Migrants by Origins, Showing Intended Destinations, 1831–1920', in *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922*, by David Northrup (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 156–157; and 'Table 1: Estimates of Intercontinental Flows of Contract Labor, Gross Movements, Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in Stanley L. Engerman, 'Contract Labor, Sugar, and Technology in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Economic History* 43, no. 3 (1983): 635–659, p. 642.

labour regimes were immoral, illegitimate or even illegal. Anti-indenture petitioners therefore questioned how far removed the indenture trade was from the recently abolished slave trade, especially as indentured Indians migrated to serve in plantations that until only recently employed enslaved labour.

Indenture has often been relegated to the realm of Caribbean and Indian Ocean histories – seen as a process locally confined to the plantation colonies or as one orchestrated by the British metropole. With renewed focus on Calcutta, this book shows that processes that regulated the lives of indentured migrants were the result of a triangulated conversation between Britain, India and plantation colonies. As the colonial capital of British India, decisions about indenture were often taken in consultation with local officials in Calcutta, and revisions in the system were prompted by petitions from Calcuttans. The negotiation of pro- and anti-indenture arguments in Calcutta contributed directly to emigration legislation and led to post-slavery anxieties being written into law.

Questions around the legal and moral repercussions of the indenture trade brought forth Calcuttans as active participants in discussions within the British Empire, rather than as passive audiences. Decisions on migration, labour rights and contract were debated, criticised and cemented in Calcutta. The basic tenets of the indenture trade – including methods and targeted areas of indenture recruitment, principles of the indenture contract and length of the contract – were decided in consultation with Calcutta. Notions of migrant subjecthood and aspirational citizenship were consolidated in the interstices of these conversations, and racialised stereotypes of migrants were cemented. Indenture regulations, as a result, were not emanating from metropolitan Britain to be dutifully followed in the colonies but were informed by voices from those very colonies. Ultimately, then, this book interrogates how Calcutta and Calcuttans shaped the history of global indenture migration. It braids Calcutta's history into the history of indenture and establishes indenture as an indelible part of the social and spatial history of Calcutta. Focused on the early days of the indenture trade, it also puts a spotlight on the post-slavery empire – exploring its priorities, its moralistic tone and its anxieties around labour shortage.

## The City

Established as an urban centre in 1690, Calcutta had grown rapidly from a small riverine market into an imperial port city. One of the most productive areas of the pre-colonial Mughal Empire, the region of Bengal boasted of a strong agricultural and artisanal base supported by financial and communication networks conducive to international trade.[5] The strategic position of Calcutta as a riverine port and as a site frequented by merchants and weavers since the fifteenth century made it favourable for settlement by European traders. In 1690, the English East India Company officially secured permission to establish a mercantile settlement at the site.[6] With the establishment of Fort William by British forces and declaration of the fort as the seat of the Bengal Presidency in 1706, Calcutta was on its way to becoming the colonial capital of British India and a premier commercial port of the empire.[7] By 1773, it had become the administrative seat for the entirety of the East India Company's territories in the Indian subcontinent.[8]

Although central to the indenture experience, Calcutta has remained on the margins of indenture historiography. Scholars like Marina Carter, Dwarka Nath, Richard Allen and Rosemarijn Hoefte have written histories of indenture in individual plantation colonies, analysing how colonies like Mauritius, British Guiana and Surinam moved from the slave labour regime to the indenture regime.[9] Brij Lal and others have focused on the indentured migrant's experience of recruitment, passage, plantation and resistance.[10] Yet others have explored the development of the indenture system and the negotiation of indenture legislation over time.[11] However, besides cursory mentions of Calcutta as a point of embarkation or in scene-setting chapters about the beginning of indenture, most works on Indian indenture have relegated it to the background. This siloed approach to indenture history in disparate colonies fails to recognise Calcutta as a key site within global indenture networks, from where labourers were exported to plantation colonies and where major decisions were taken regarding the regulation of indenture. Similarly, indenture is absent in histories of Calcutta. Even though historians of Calcutta have since the late twentieth century produced several tomes on the urban, social and cultural history of the city, they have overlooked Calcutta's engagement with indenture.[12] This erasure of the history of indenture from the history of Calcutta also reflects on the public memory of the city. Calcutta is mainly remembered as a colonial capital and as the site of nineteenth-century social reforms and twentieth-century anti-colonial resistance, but not as an important theatre in the century-long trade in Indian plantation labourers.

Although neglected in public and academic memory, Indian indenture and colonial Calcutta were intimately linked. Calcutta was connected to a vast agricultural hinterland through a complex network of roads and rivers. This allowed access to labourers who could be persuaded to work in difficult conditions for prospects of a better future. Calcutta also housed shipping companies and merchant houses that helped recruit labourers for the burgeoning trade. When British planter John Gladstone first started negotiating with Indian merchant companies for a steady supply of indentured Indians for his West Indian plantations, it was a merchant company in Calcutta that he contacted. The first two ships carrying indentured labourers to the British West Indies sailed from Calcutta in January 1838. *Hesperus* and *Whitby* carried 165 and 249 Indian labourers respectively and were the first of many indenture voyages sanctioned and governed by the British parliament. John Geoghegan reported that between 1842 and 1870, a total of

342,575 men, women and children emigrated out of the port of Calcutta, as opposed to 31,761 emigrants from Bombay port and 159,259 emigrants from Madras and French ports like Pondicherry.[13] With the exception of Natal, more people immigrated into the various plantation colonies from Calcutta than from any other Indian port, as emigration from Calcutta constituted 64.2 per cent of the total emigration from India in these 28 years.[14] Thus, even though migration also took place from the ports of Bombay, Madras and Pondicherry, early migration laws used Calcutta as the main reference point when setting out provisions for indentured emigration. Indeed, in early emigration legislation, Calcutta was emblematic of port cities that exported indentured Indians.

Calcutta also saw an unparalleled interaction of the colonial and local elite in debating the indenture trade. As Europeans and Indians came together in Calcutta to discuss, defend and criticise indenture, they raised this colonial capital to a position where voices from Calcutta could influence metropolitan labour legislation. The question of how the indenture system should be revised and whether it should continue at all was vigorously debated by merchants, reformers, educationists, philanthropists, officials and missionaries in the city. Particularly between 1838 and 1842, meetings were held, petitions were signed and an investigative committee was instituted in Calcutta in response to the indenture trade. The 'coolie question' appeared 225 times in Calcutta's leading weeklies during these five years.[15] The resultant public sphere was vocal and interacted across racial boundaries, while at the same time being confined to the elites.

The very visualisation of the boundaries of Calcutta and its position within imperial networks was contingent upon its engagement with the indenture trade. Calcutta's physical borders were imagined differently by different stakeholders in the trade. For migrant workers, Calcutta represented the beginning of their journey overseas. It was during their stay at Calcutta, often in 'coolie depots', that they signed their contracts and had emigration agents explain the system to them. Thus, Calcutta became, in migrant imaginings, an extension of the global indenture networks and the site where they first realised their identity as indentured labourers. For indenture officials, the boundaries of Calcutta were more blurred. Calcutta was imagined as intimately linked with the eastern Indian hinterland through rail and road connections. Thus, labourers 'from Calcutta' were more often from eastern Indian villages, connected to Calcutta only through internal networks of migration. For the British colonial state, however, Calcutta was a port city

supplying labourers to its plantation colonies – the solution to its post-slavery labour crisis. It was also an important theatre for debates over indentured servitude, inputs from which contributed heavily to emigration regulations and to the post-slavery understanding of labour servitude.

Indenture debates came to have a very real impact on the physical and discursive spaces in Calcutta. As migrants moved from houses of recruiters to 'coolie depots' to ports and finally to ships, they became part of the Calcutta cityscape. Calcuttans recorded sightings of labourers in the city – some saw indentured migrants confined in Calcutta's houses, some wrote to newspapers to report seeing them near the port, while others recorded their domestic servants, horse groomers and gardeners being accosted on the streets by recruiters to convince them to travel to Mauritius. As Britons and Indians in Calcutta met in the Town Hall, signed petitions and helped investigate indenture, spaces of discussion transcended the traditional division between the 'white town' and the 'black town'. Calcuttans joined the conversation on indenture at a time when ideas of servitude and plantation labour were being recast on a global scale.

## The Moment

Works on indenture often suffer from a dismissal of the temporal axis of analysis. Seeing the indenture trade not as a continuous system of labour but as one framed by disparate concerns over eight decades helps understand it as a complex system responsive to the changing priorities of colonial society. Proposed in 1836 to replace enslaved labour on British plantations, the Indian indenture system was legalised by an act of parliament in 1837. As it received legal sanction, the number of indentured migrants from India increased from 26,396 in 1831–1840 to 132,738 in 1841–1850 – an increase of about 500 per cent.[16] By the end of the century, indentured Indians had migrated to the British colonies of Mauritius, British Guiana, Jamaica, Trinidad, Fiji, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Saint Vincent, Saint Kitts, Malaya, Seychelles and South Africa, the French colonies of Guadeloupe, Guiana, Réunion and Martinique, Danish Saint Croix and Dutch Surinam. Distinct from spontaneous and private ventures of labour migration from India, Indian indenture operated within a government-sanctioned framework, where labourers were bound by contract to work in sugar plantations for at least five years, and planters were required by law to provide appropriate wages, food supplies, medical supplies

and accommodation to the labourers, along with a free return passage to their port of origin. Having spread to multiple plantation colonies, the indenture system was disbanded by an act of government in 1917, finally coming to an end in the 1920s.

The history of Indian indenture thus encompasses distinct plantation geographies with their own unique historical trajectories. In a recent work, Reshaad Durgahee has coined the term 'indentured archipelago' to describe this network of colonies that were not geographically contiguous but connected by their shared experience of indenture.[17] Since its beginning in 1837, the indenture regime was extended to new plantation colonies every few years and newer regulations were introduced periodically in response to changing priorities and labour laws. The complexity of this divergent and oft-changing system of labour can only be understood by teasing out the importance of particular moments in its history. This book thus challenges scholarship that creates a continuous narrative from the beginning of indenture in 1834 to its end in 1920. It focuses on a phase much before indenture entered the political vocabulary of Indian nationalists as nationalist rhetoric began to identify indentured migrants as distinctly 'Indian'. It also exposes the methodological limitations of works that make overarching arguments about who migrated as indentured labourers, whether they were inveigled into the trade or joined of their own accord and whether the indenture trade was a highly regulated system. Indian indenture involved the movement of labourers from different social contexts (across caste, gender and class boundaries) and geographical spaces (across Bengal, Bombay and Madras presidencies) to multiple plantation colonies in the British, French, Dutch and Danish empires. Naturally, its history needs to be broken down by place and time.

Anti-slavery and abolition debates played a vital role in shaping the indenture experience in its early days, as indenture was constantly compared to slavery and framed entirely within the dichotomy of 'free' and 'unfree' labour. Acknowledging this allows for a fuller understanding of how legacies of slavery shaped global ideas of migration, servitude and plantation labour. The term 'post-slavery' is used in literature on plantation colonies to refer to the period after Abolition, but it encompasses a much more complex relationship between slavery and indenture. A post-slavery labour regime is not just one that comes after Abolition but one steeped in the legacies of slavery. As indenture came to be seen as a possible continuation of slavery, the definitions of free and unfree labour were forged in the crucible of the post-slavery indenture debates.

Indenture was discussed in Calcutta at a watershed moment in the history of plantation labour servitude. Slavery was the main rubric against which the indentured labour regime was judged. Anti-indenture activists compared the emergence of indenture to a revival of the slave regime, while merchants and planters continued to posit the difference between the two regimes as their main argument in defence of indenture. The anti-slavery movement, and its eventual culmination into the abolition of slavery, had led to a shift in both the legal definition and public opinion of plantation servitude. British parliamentarians were keen to pass laws that restricted unfree labour practices, British officials across India and the plantation colonies were keen on enforcing them, and the vocal public in Britain and India were eager to ensure that the indenture trade adhered to this post-Abolition moral framework. Thus, instead of visualising Indian indenture as a monolith, it is important to consider its early days as a time in flux – a time when the fate of the system was still being negotiated.

The slavery–indenture dichotomy has received considerable attention in indenture historiography. In *A New System of Slavery*, Hugh Tinker argued that although labourers theoretically entered into indenture freely, the indenture trade replicated conditions of slavery in recruitment, in passage and in the working and living conditions on plantation estates.[18] His work influenced other scholars of Indian indenture to focus on linkages between the two labour regimes. Although not necessarily in agreement with Tinker, scholars like Richard Allen, P. C. Emmer and William Green studied the two labour regimes within the same analytical frame – whether investigating the move from slavery to indenture in Mauritius, the linkages between early modern European indenture in the Americas and Indian indenture migration, or the connections between slavery and indenture in the context of imperial humanitarianism.[19] At the same time, Tinker's thesis faced criticism from scholars emphasising the autonomous agency of indentured labourers. His excessive emphasis on the horrors of the system drew criticism from Brij Lal, Maurits Hassankhan and Doug Munro, who questioned 'the Tinkerian paradigm of docile, non-resisting labour'.[20]

For many scholars, far from being victimised under a 'new system of slavery', indentured migrants were in a position to exercise their autonomous agency and shape their own economic futures. Crispin Bates and Marina Carter showed that indentured migrants used and extended the networks of support created by the migration of plantation labourers, domestic workers, convicts and *sepoy*s (Indian soldiers). Thus, Indians increasingly took control