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Introduction

Indentured Emigrants in the Literature

Aaye hum sab hind se karan naukari het,
'Girmit' kati kathin se fir sarkari khet.

Kamisnari Allahabad me zilah Hamirpur naam,
Bimbar thana hai mera mukam bharkhari gram.
Siddhi niddhi vasu bhumi ki varshisvi pay,
Mas shatru tithi terahvi Dutch-Guaiana aay.
Girmit kati panch varsh ki kothi Rustumlost,
Sardar raheu wahan bis varsh lau niche manyar Horst.

We came from India to do service here,
Completed *girmit* (agreement) with difficulty and then toiled on government field as well.
My district is Hamirpur in Allahabad Division,
My village is Bharkhari in Bimbar Police Station.
With good and bad of the land and the year,
Came to Dutch-Guayana on 13th April [1898].
Finished [my] girmit of 5 years at the field of Lust and Rust,
I served as sardar for 20 years under manager Horst.

– Munsi Rahman Khan (1874–1972), an indentured labourer in Surinam[1]

Introducing himself as an emigrant from Hindustan, Munshi Rahman Khan describes a system, popularly called *girmit*, through which he went to Dutch Guiana (Surinam) to work as a plantation labourer in 1898. More than one million Indian workers, like him, left their native country to work in the sugar plantations of British and European colonies in the Caribbean, southern Pacific, and Indian Oceans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This emigration was initially triggered by the revocation of slavery by the British parliament in 1833, which compelled colonial planters to look to India for labourers to overcome the industrial depression that followed the emancipation of their Afro-Caribbean slaves.

In 1834, the British government in India introduced what came to be known as the 'indenture system', through which Indian labourers could go overseas to work on the colonial sugar plantations on fixed-term contracts. From 1834 to 1920, the recruitment of Indians to work on the colonial plantations of various islands was organized through this system. The model of Indian indenture system was borrowed from a practice that originated in Europe in the thirteenth century, but it became a common practice in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when European planters in the United States deputed European and Chinese labourers on their plantations. South American planters used this policy to obtain Chinese labour from the Portuguese settlement of Macao. Under that system, labour was recruited for the planters by their agents to work for a certain period of time (usually five years), during which the employer was legally obliged to provide fixed wages, medical attention and other amenities for the labourers. After the period had elapsed, the labourer could either renew his/her term of employment, or return to his/her native land.[2]

The Indian indenture system had largely the same general terms and conditions, with only minor variations between the different colonies. The main feature of the Indian indenture system was that emigrants had to commit themselves to a fixed term of labour in advance by signing an agreement, popularly known as '*girmit*', which committed them to work for five years in their destination colony[3] (Appendix I). A form of agreement was available where the preconditions of engagement were declared in English, as well as in regional languages such as Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, Kannada and Telegu, etc. The agreement form clearly mentioned the kind of work to be done, hours of work and remuneration, and the availability of various other facilities such as accommodation, hospital and rations etc. (Appendix II). Another technically attractive and significant provision of agreement was an optional return passage at the emigrants' own expense after the end of the first five years or a free return passage to India at the termination of a further five years of 'industrial residence' in the colonies.[4] The extent to which migrants were able to fully understand, or planters were willing to genuinely uphold the terms of these agreements has been the subject of much debate, at that time and since.

Writing on indentured labour migration is almost as old as the system itself. From the late 1830s, humanitarians connected with the anti-slavery movement raised their voices against what they deemed a 'new system of slavery', which simply replaced the slave labour supply to sugar production in various British colonies with another equally reprehensible form of bonded labour. As many of the ongoing debates about the nature of indenture as a system have their

roots in this early nineteenth-century response, this introductory chapter will begin with a brief survey of the contemporary reporting and writings on 'indenture'. It will then move on to focus on the various strands in indentured migration scholarship.

Among the earliest writers to 'expose' the horrors of indenture was John Scoble, a British abolitionist campaigner, who visited many plantations in British Guiana during 1838–1840 and published his findings on the indenture system in a pamphlet titled *British Guiana: Facts! Facts! Facts!*[5] Scoble termed the transportation of Indian coolies as a 'slave trade' and contended that it was heavily based on 'kidnapping' of 'ignorant and inoffensive Hindoos'.[6] He quoted the 3 January 1838 issue of the *British Emancipator*, which had denounced such transportation as 'giving birth to a new slavery', and detailed the infamous conduct of *Chokedars* [*Chaukidar*] who were put on guard over coolies who 'had to be forced on board':

> The trade of kidnapping coolies had been extensively carried on, and that prison depots had been established in the villages near Calcutta for the security of the wretched creatures, where they were most infamously treated, and guarded with the utmost jealousy and care, to prevent their escape, until the Mauritian and Demerara slavers were ready for their reception![7]

After visiting the various plantations of British Guiana, Scoble provided the details about the treatment of coolies. In extracts that often echoed anti-slavery accounts of the early nineteenth century, he sought to show the 'brutality' and 'hidden horror' of the system by citing eye-witness accounts of mistreatment:

> The coolies were locked up in the sick-house … they were tied to the post of the gallery of the master's house; I cannot tell how many licks; he gave them enough. I saw blood. When they were flogged at master's house they rubbed salt pickle on their backs.
>
> – Elizabeth Ceaser

> Their hands were tied behind their backs; they were beaten with a rope; … when licked, they put the breast to the post with hands stretched out; some tie the hands before, some behind. Coolies run away because they are licked.
>
> – Narrain[8]

Scoble was one of many who spoke out against the indenture system. Others included William Garland Barrett, Joseph Beaumont and Edward Jenkin

who visited the various plantations of Demerara, Jamaica and British Guiana to look into the working of the system and life of Indian indentured workers on the plantations.[9] These anti-slavery society members published their field trip accounts of the working of the indenture system and contended that the system was a new form of slavery. According to them, considerable numbers of coolies died during transportation, the medical and food provisions were no better than those provided to slaves, and fraudulent methods were employed in the recruitment of migrants. The law under which they had to work was a kind of confinement through legal means, from which it was impossible for a coolie to buy his/her freedom. They alleged scanty wages, bad treatment on plantations, and a large number of prosecutions against workers.

These contemporary writings, amounting to only a few of the important pamphlets and booklets by Englishmen touring the former slave colonies of the Caribbean during c. 1840–1870, though full of local colour, do not fully recognize the differences between the pre-existing slave-based sugar plantations and the ones run on the indenture system. Focused mainly on West Indies colonies, where the culture of plantation-slavery was deep-rooted, it came naturally to ex-slave planters to deal with the indentured Indian coolies in a similar manner. Many of these pamphlets were a continuation of the anti-slavery polemic of the abolitionist and seem to have run their course by the 1870s when the indenture system became fully institutionalized by colonial officials on the Indian side.

On the other hand, there is a curious lacuna regarding indenture as far as nineteenth-century mainstream Indian political and politico-economic discourse is concerned. A reading of the secondary work suggests that in the anti-*firangi* grievances and proclamations that fuelled the Great Rebellion of 1857 (about the loss of religion, contamination of food substances with impure substances, aggressive missionary activity, etc.), there was hardly any mention of the shiploads of Hindu and Muslim peasants that were sent to distant lands across the black waters on special indenture vessels. That was how the indenture system could have appeared in the widespread critiques in the religiously inflected discourse of Company Raj of those times. Similarly, the issue of indenture (its benefits and drawbacks) seems to have been entirely absent in the wide-ranging economic critique of the British Raj by the early nationalists. Indeed, the word 'indenture' is absent from the classic work on the subject and its equally detailed index.[10]

For its part, the vast 'colonial archive' on agrarian society of north India – epitomized in the massive compilations, district-wise settlement reports and

district gazetteers' dealing with land tenure, peasant production and rural economy – did not carve any space for the treatment of this phenomenon on indenture labour from these districts. There sure were columns on migration in these official compilations, but this was discussed largely within the boundaries of India and not from India overseas. That is perhaps the reason that the theme of indenture was not touched upon, even cursorily, in much recent scholarly writings on rural north India.

Indentured labour from India did not attract much specific attention from historians until the 1970s. In the 1940s and 1960s, the issue was addressed primarily within the capacious fold of empire historiography, and in surveys of Indians overseas.[11] Here I. M. Cumpston and K. L. Gillian were the pioneers, though they each had quite different emphases. Cumpston provided a detailed analysis of the early period of emigration, deploying considerable statistical information and a delineation of key events to contend that the 'coolie trade' was not only extremely expensive in terms of human life, but contributed significantly to the beggaring of colonial treasuries. He did not believe, however, that the introduction of Indian emigration affected culture and language in any fundamental way, and further argued that the return of indentured Indians, enriched with their savings, skills and experience, contributed to the rapid appearance of nationalism in India and a growing demand for independence.[12]

K. L. Gillian's work on Fiji Indians marked a new direction in the historiography of labour migration from India to the colonies. It was the first time that a study went beyond looking at indenture only as a political or administrative issue. Gillian presented a balanced picture: 'though the indentured system was temporary servitude, but through this a new society arose with great potentialities for development for the Indian labourers'.[13] Gillian argued that indenture provided new social and economic opportunities to thousands of poor labourers who migrated from India. There was, he suggested, far more social equality in Fiji; women had more freedom, and the children were healthier. Religious divisions remained, but the degree of tolerance was remarkable, with caste becoming unimportant. According to Gillian, despite the various evils of the indenture system, overall it offered an improvement on the conditions the Indian migrants experienced at home, and that on the whole those who went to Fiji were for the most part better off than their kin who had remained in their north Indian villages.[14]

The pivotal moment in the study of indenture came with the appearance of Hugh Tinker's seminal work *A New System of Slavery*, published in 1974.

Writing in the aftermath of decolonization in Africa, Tinker took a liberal anti-colonial approach to the issue of indentured emigration that contrasted strongly with Gillian's earlier work.[15] According to Tinker, the foundations of the indenture system were laid by the slave system that preceded it, and in that sense it was itself a legacy of slavery. Tinker stressed the shipboard mortality during voyages, the absence of respectable family life on plantations and the role of kidnapping and fraud in the recruitment process. For Tinker, the indenture system was a new form of slavery in all but name, which replaced the, now illegal, previous formal slave system. 'There was one factor, and only one,' Tinker argued, 'in which indenture differed from chattel slavery: that it involved temporary servitude rather than a permanent condition'. Otherwise, indenture was an utter setback for those caught in its meshes. For Tinker, it was ironic that Indians exchanged a society and a living community for a system in which production and products determined everything.[16] In this assessment, Tinker was heavily influenced by the positions taken by the above-mentioned late nineteenth-century humanitarians, who were the first to view indenture as approximating to slavery. These nineteenth-century discourses on indenture were deeply embedded in the social and political context of their time, however, and were bound to a wider set of both humanitarian and commercial and imperial agendas.

Though very different in their arguments and emphasis, both Gillian's and Tinker's writings provided much needed momentum to students of the history of indenture. In the early 1980s, Brij V. Lal's studies brought a new dimension to the historiography of indentured emigrants and effectively destroyed stereotypes about the indentured Indians. Lal, the grandson of an indentured labourer and Gillian's student, brought a novel dimension through quantitative analysis of the indenture-slips of 45,439 migrants who migrated to Fiji from north India. It is important to note that most of the scholarship and research on indentured emigration have been meagre qualitatively as well as quantitatively . Lal's major contribution lay in the detailed statistics he provided on the emigrants' social, economic and geographical background.[17] In a sense, his detailed work elaborates on a theme explored by Gillian in the early 1960s. Basing his research on actual emigration certificates and other archival material in Fiji and in the Department of Revenue and Agriculture records for British India, Lal showed that the *girmitiya* were of varied social backgrounds: fewer than 22 percent came from the lower castes. Moreover, emigration to Fiji was an extension of existing mobility within the internal wage labour market, which was a result of poverty-related 'push factors' caused by uneconomic holdings,

deaths and famines. Lal convincingly punctured the myth that the recruiters were the 'scum of the earth', were low class/caste or belonged exclusively to 'untouchable' communities. Rather, the bulk of recruiters reflected the actual distribution of castes in the villages of UP and Bihar. He further argued that colonial recruitment was a vast, well-organized operation and that the high percentage of cancelled licences showed that it was difficult to defraud and deceive the people without detection. A high percentage of rejections on the grounds of fitness by the medical inspector confirmed that there was, in fact, very little space for deception. Based on archival records, Lal rejected many of the certitudes of traditional historical writings: for instance, the stereotypical idea that indentured women were mostly stray and 'loose' and did not belong to 'respectable castes'. On the contrary, the agreement tickets showed that 'of all the females who came to Fiji consisted, 4.1 percent Brahmins, 9.0 percent Kshatriyas, 3.0 percent Banias, 0.3 percent Kayasthas, 31.4 percent middle castes, 29.1 percent low castes, 2.8 percent tribals, and 16.8 percent Muslims'.[18] In other words, women emigrants came from the entire spectrum of castes in UP.

In his methodology and findings, Lal's writings were, and are, clearly path breaking, though he revisited the issues in a series of articles and papers and modified somewhat his earlier emphasis on the 'agency' of the indentured migrants. It is true that the *girmitiya*s might be expected to undertake back-breaking labour, and diseases and the vagaries of elements could administer harsh blows to precariously balanced labour budgets. Yet while hardship might be an integral part of the indenture labourer's existence on the plantations, this was not the whole story. Despite the presence of several difficulties, it is also true that *girmitiya*s, through indenture, gained the opportunity to determine their future in ways not open to them in India. Thus, Lal concluded that the *girmit* became, simultaneously, the symbol of both slavery and liberation.[19] Brij Lal found that

> For many immigrants, indenture, for all its hardship, still represented an improvement over their condition in India. This was particularly so for the lower castes which were permanently consigned to fringes of rural Indian society as untouchables, tenants-at-will and landless labourers with little hope of betterment in this life or the next. The routine of relentless work on the plantations was nothing new to them. In Fiji, at least, their individual worth as human beings in their own right was recognised and their effort rewarded on the basis of their achievements rather than ascription.[20]

In addition to his quantitative and archival research, Brij Lal tapped the experience of his *girmitiya* grandfather and conducted fieldwork in the *girmitiya* hinterland in UP, to try and fathom the complex world of the peasants who agreed to board the *tapu*-bound ships. According to him, 'the indenture experience led to the creation of a new kind of society among Indian communities overseas...The progenies of the indentured Indians differed significantly from their forbearers in terms of thought and behavioural patterns, worldview and values. They were more individualistic and pragmatic, more self-oriented, more egalitarian, sometimes extravagantly proud of their ancestral cultural heritage, but not enslaved by its rituals and cultural protocols.'[21] In a popular tract published by the National Book Trust, New Delhi, Lal observed that overseas journey leading beyond the kalapani levelled down social hierarchies and obliterated oppressive cultural practices. New relationship grew. Among these relationships, the relation of *Jahajibhai* (shipmates) was the most prominent emotionally. This *jahaji* relationship was as deep and caring as blood relationship.[22]

Brij Lal's writings had an important impact on indenture scholarship. The 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of works and theses on various aspects of the indenture system, including some written by the grandchildren of *girmitiyas*. These included work by Vijay Naidu, Ahmed Ali, Rajendra Prasad on Fiji; Clem Seecharan, Basudeo Manguru, Madhavi Kale on the West Indies; Surendra Bhana on South Africa; and other scholarly works were by John D. Kelly on Fiji and Marina Carter on Mauritius.[23] Through these works, important themes have emerged around the socio-economic conditions of the indentured migrants in both their home country and host countries. They have provided corrections to the Tinkerian approach through the quantitative analysis of data as well as by placing the 'agency' of workers at the centre of their analysis. Despite this, the question of whether indenture was comparable to slavery or to what extent it could be considered 'free' labour has continued to dominate the debate.

Basudeo Manguru compared the features of indenture and slavery to underscore two basic differences between the two systems, though these were overshadowed by certain similarities. First, the slave was private property and slavery implied permanence. The indentured person, on the other hand, was an instrument of production – one whose freedom was temporarily frozen by his/her contractual obligations. Second, Victorian slavery was immoral. It was incompatible with personal liberty, whereas, by contrast, indentured labour was expedient because it prevented freedom from degenerating into vagrancy and

idleness. Theoretically, indenture was a compromise designed to ensure the planter the labour he desired, and immigrant the rights he possessed, although in practice such rights hardly ever existed.[24] After examining the government policies regarding indentured system, Manguru also argued that the Indian government intervened in the emigration process at three stages – if fraud and coercion were discovered during enlistment, if sanitary and safety precautions in transit were ignored, and if colonial legislation tended to coerce labour. But according to him these legislations could not put a complete stop to fraud and coercion in the recruitment process.[25] Thus, while there were clear differences in the structures and processes of the indenture system, compared to those of slavery, and the government in India was prepared to intervene to maintain them, in practice these could not always be upheld.

Madhavi Kale has analysed the significance of empire for indentured labour migration from India and argued that the British Guiana experience was a 'scandal of empire' that galvanized anti-slavery forces to again protest the activities of British sugar interests.[26] Championing the cause of free labour against paternalist restrictions, the empire successfully defused the anti-slavery critics of indenture, whose assumptions about the Indian capacity for 'free labour' were embedded within prejudiced idea about race, gender and class derived from or reinforced by Britain's experiences of their empire. Kale also argued that opinion-forming media like parliamentary papers and colonial office records helped in broadcasting and normalizing the issues involved. In her work on Mauritius, Marina Carter differentiated between slavery and indenture and argued that the immigrants were not merely passive players in a colonial drama.[27] She analysed the interactions of indentured labourers with Sirdars (foremen) and laid a good deal of emphasis on the strategies of labour mobilization by the government and planters. She focused on the returnees who played a significant role in labour mobilization, and on Sirdars as socio-cultural leaders of early indentured settlers in Mauritius. She has paid special attention to family, culture and religion as well in the plantation context, arguing that indentured labourers restructured their social and religious life in the colony.[28]

Despite studies such as those by Lal, Kale and Carter that focus on the agency and subjectivities of migrants themselves, many scholars, including Prabhu P. Mohapatra and Gail Omvedt, continue to uphold the view propelled by Tinker. In these analyses, migrants are primarily regarded as victims of various forms of greed, deception, colonial coercion and manipulation.[29] The absence of freedom, these scholars argue, is the distinguishing character of indenture, inasmuch as workers were unable to withdraw their labour power,

bargain or (re)negotiate the terms of their contract to secure better wages and living conditions. They were misled and misinformed by recruiters regarding the nature of plantation work and were even made captives and transported to foreign countries against their will. In these cases, migration, they contend, cannot be characterized as a 'free choice' (as defined in European bourgeois debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Workers were furthermore often drawn into debt bondage by their labour recruiters and the contractual relations between the employers and the employees were not in fact voluntary. These scholars thus emphasize the use of such extra-economic and penal methods by employers to control labour, thereby forcing workers to live in a state of virtual bondage. Little if anything at all is said about the agency of the workers themselves, who are depicted as the largely passive and unconscious victims of over-arching systems of exploitation.

By contrast, other scholars have suggested that migration entailed substantial economic, social and cultural benefits. According to P. C. Emmer, a leading revisionist, the long-distance migration stream under the government-supervised indenture system was seen by many recruits as an 'escape hatch' through which they could break free from economic and social problems at home.[30] He also argues that 'indentured emigration was usually the result of a choice made by the intending emigrant by himself, albeit not always based on rational grounds'.[31] Crucially, for Emmer, the indenture system not only created homogeneity among the different caste groups but made it possible for the lower castes to transcend oppressive, previously rigid socio-cultural parameters.

In recent decades, a significant trend has emerged in the historiography of indenture towards looking at the experiences of women. There are two broad approaches: one portrays women under the indenture system as a 'sorry sisterhood', subject to sexual exploitation;[32] a second approach highlights the possibilities created by indenture for women to escape socio-cultural oppression within Indian society.[33] Rhoda Reddock argues that while indentured women may, albeit cautiously, have made the decision to travel to Trinidad to become workers, colonial plantation policies exploited them and made women dependent on men. On the other hand, Emmer and Northrup state that, for the first time, the indenture system provided opportunities for Indian women oppressed by the patriarchal norms of Indian society. Marina Carter argues that although the plantation experience was harsh for Indian women migrants, their role as contributors in public life was empowering in their struggles to