

Coolies of the Empire

This book studies labour migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that involved millions of Indians traversing the globe in the age of the Empire. Initially employed as replacement for slave labour in the sugar plantations of Caribbean, these migrant labourers, employed on indentured labour contracts, played a crucial role in the development of the industrial and plantation economies of Mauritius, Réunion, South Africa, Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Fiji, etc. It looks at their impact on the history of globalization and the emergence of multiple new societies and economies in the global south. Within this narrative, the author focuses on the social and cultural world of Bhojpuri-speaking migrant labourers from the flood and drought-prone plains of Bihar and United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) in north India, who provided the earliest and largest volume of recruits.

This study delves deep into the lives of indentured workers who called themselves *girmityas*; and their experiences in India and in the sugar colonies. It foregrounds the alternative world view of the *girmityas*, and their socio-cultural and religious life in the colonies. The book describes ways in which they managed to survive and even flourish within the indentured labour system, and how considerably the experience of migration changed over time – post slave-emancipation in 1833, thus defying the generalizations behind most conventional interpretations.

This book will be of interest to academic researchers in the fields of migration and colonial studies, labour studies, overseas Indians and diaspora studies. It will also be a valuable resource for graduate and postgraduate students of South Asian history and South Asia studies.

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Figure 1: A collage showing East Indian immigrants, CO 1069/355



Photo courtesy: The National Archives of London, Kew.

Coolies of the Empire

Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920

Ashutosh Kumar



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*For
Shahid Amin,
my teacher and supervisor*

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Preface

Between the 1830s and the 1910s, over a million Indian peasants were shipped overseas to European, largely British-owned, sugar estates in the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean and across the Pacific to the island of Fiji. This book tells the story of the indenture system within the British Empire, with India as the ‘mother country’ of ‘coolies’, who post-slave emancipation (1833), raised cane on far-flung plantations. Many of these long-distance migrants did not return to their natal villages after the completion of their ‘indenture’, or five to ten years of ‘industrial contract’.

Following the analogy of peasants, who with industrialization were turned into ‘mill hands’, from the 1830s, began the long journey of Peasants of the Raj whose lives were to be reshaped far away from home as ‘sugar hands’. I focus equally on the lived experiences of these individuals and their families in north Indian villages, the pasts that they brought with them, the journey on indenture ships, and their economic and social lives in the ‘coolie lines’. The present work covers distant places such as Mauritius, Natal, Surinam, Fiji and British Guiana. The work does not confine itself to rehearsing the sturdy debates on whether the indenture system was a ‘new kind of slavery’, was it the lure and pull of newer horizons, or the poverty and morass of Indian villages that pushed and propelled the poorest into the parabola of indenture.

Based on archival and fieldwork in India, United Kingdom, Mauritius, Natal and Fiji, this book also underscores the heterogeneity of experience against the cautiously constructed homogeneity of seemingly uniform plantation lives. It also explores, the anxiety of high and Indian trading castes and non-indenture Indians, including Gandhi towards the end of his South African sojourn, at being clubbed with the rest of the plantation emigrants as ‘coolies’. This is a label, that for good reasons, has sought to be repudiated by second and third generation descendants of indentured labourers.

Thus, the use of that pejorative, demeaning and black word calls for some explanation. Of debatable origin, the term ‘coolie’ has been used in India for specific sorts of labourers, largely those pressed into service, or hired for lifting

or transportation of heavy loads; where part of a regular and often unpaid or underpaid transportation as in hilly regions, it took some of the characteristics of *corvée*. Outside the system of lordly domination, the connotation of term ‘coolie’, as applied to porters on railway stations or the docks, were, and are, limited to particular sorts of non-agricultural work. When the British used the word ‘coolie’ for indentured workers, this was taken as a racial slur. After independence, the use of term ‘coolie’ has imbued with two very different ideological significations among the descendants of indentured Indian diaspora. While for a large majority, the term continues to be untouchable, yet some other inheritors of fractured and indentured family pasts have invested the term ‘coolie’ with retrospective pride. In this transition, Rajkumari Singh, a prolific Guyanese poet to Gaiutra Bahadur, a granddaughter of indentured woman from Bihar, and an acclaimed writer, has played a lead role in ‘reclaiming’ the word by overturning the pejorative ‘coolie’ into a defiant badge of honour. As Bahadur puts it in her exquisitely crafted work, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, “Coolie’ may bare a jagged edge, like a broken bottle raised in threat. But it also ricochets still down dirt lanes in the Guyanese village where I was born in far more complicated ways, in greetings that are sometimes menacing but also often affectionate and intimate, signifying a sense of shared beginnings ... It bears the burden of history’.

The formulation of ‘Coolitude’, parallel to ‘Negritude’, by noted Mauritian poet Khal Torabully reflects the sense of worth of the people’s past and present, of Indian indenture now spread across the globe in the former sugar colonies, and equally, in the second and third generation of North Indian ‘coolies’, now resident in Amsterdam, Sydney and Queensland. Through the concept of ‘Coolitude’, Torabully has deconstructed the opprobrium attached to the coolies of the Empire and emphasised the specificities of first generation ‘coolie’ experience, together with their descendants spread globally today. Writing in the wake of Torabully and Gaiutra, this work also seeks an analogous recapture of meaning and of history. From an Indian point of view, the ‘coolie’ identity for all emigrants, irrespective of caste hierarchy, was of great significance as it provided a ground to create a casteless society which, in Brij Lal’s terms, was reflected in such enduring relationships as *Jahajibhai* (indenture-ship-brother) and *Jahajibehan* (indenture-ship-sister).

This book would have not been completed without the support of fellowships at various stages of my research. I am deeply grateful to SEPHIS, The Netherlands, for providing the grant during my doctoral work, which allowed me to research in the archives and libraries of the UK, Mauritius, Fiji and Australia. The manuscript was partially revised while I was a Fellow at Indian

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Some of the ideas of this book were thrashed out at an Indenture Conference under the 'Becoming Coolies' project, which I jointly organized with Dr Ravikant at Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), and co-sponsored by its Director, Professor Sanjay Kumar in New Delhi in March 2016. I am beholden to Dr Ravikant, the participants and panelists – Khalil Ali, Brij Maharaj, Maurits Hassankhan, Sujatha Boodhun, Indira Prasad, Archana Kumar, Professor Shahid Amin and Dr Prabhu Mohapatra for contributing to the conference and the making of this book.

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Abbreviations

ANU	Australian National University
BL	British Library
BRP	Baba Ramchandra Papers
C&I	Commerce and Industry
CID	Central Investigating Department
CO	Colonial Office
CSOMP	Colonial Secretary Office Minute Papers
CWMG	Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi
CUP	Cambridge University Press
GoB	Government of Bengal
GoI	Government of India
GoM	Government of Madras
HC	House of Commons
IESHR	Indian Economic and Social History Review
INC	India National Congress
IOR	India Office Record
MGI	Mahatma Gandhi Institute
NAI	National Archives of India
NAD	National Archives Depot, Pieter Maritzburg
NAF	National Archives of Fiji
NAL	National Archives, London
NAM	National Archives of Mauritius
NMML	Nehru Memorial and Museum Library
NWP	North Western Provinces
OUP	Oxford University Press
PP	Parliamentary Papers
R&A	Revenue and Agriculture
RNN	Report on Native News Papers
SoS	Secretary of State
UP	United Provinces

Map 1: Map of Bengal with Sikkim



Source: Imperial Gazetteer of India, Volume 26, 1931, Bihar and Orissa, p. 31.

Map 2: Map of United Provinces



Source: Constable's 1893 Area Maps, NWP, West Nepal and Oudh, 1893.