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Introduction


Scattered across three oceans and on verdant continental littorals, to the unknowing these are a seemingly obscure collection of countries and territories. Yet they were once intrinsically connected, bound together by one commodity – sugar. For a period of approximately 90 years during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, they shared a common history – the importation and use of Indian indentured labour. In the labour vacuum that resulted from the abolition of slavery, over 1.3 million Indian men, women and children were recruited to work on the sugar plantations of the British, French, Dutch and Danish empires.¹

These men, women and children travelled across the Indian subcontinent, and then the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans to work on the plantations of empire. Their descendants today form integral parts of Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean society. This book is the product of research conducted on two indentured labour importing colonies; Mauritius, which was the first British colony to begin recruiting Indian indentured labourers in 1834 and recruited over 450,000 people in total, and Fiji, which was the last, having recruited its first group of labourers in 1879 and which recruited over 60,000 people.² The book examines the experiences of labourers in the two colonies between 1871 and 1916 – a time period that saw the beginning of connections between Mauritius and Fiji. Using two conceptual innovations, the historical geographies of indenture and imperialism are brought out more broadly.

The first concept is that the indenture system created an indentured archipelago encompassing colonies not geographically located together but which had a shared experienced of indenture – a collection of territories scattered confetti-like across the world’s tropical sugar-producing belt.
The second is subaltern careering, a concept which examines the hitherto unexplored remigration amongst Indian indentured labourers between sugar colonies and the wider colonial world. This phenomenon challenges the spatiality of empire and brings to the fore questions of subaltern agency. Analysing the lived spaces of Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius and Fiji and their movements within the indentured archipelago avoids the colonial compartmentalisation of the Indian indenture experience that has characterised much scholarship to date. This radically alters the accepted geography of the Indian indenture system.

The research considers a period that begins with the appointment of Arthur Hamilton Gordon as governor of Mauritius in 1871 and concludes with the end of indentured transportation to Fiji in 1916. By 1871, Mauritius was a seasoned importer of Indian indentured labourers. Fiji was just about to become a British colony and Gordon’s transfer from Mauritius to become governor of Fiji in 1875 connected the two colonies. In Fiji, he initiated the use of Indian indentured labour to support the colony’s burgeoning sugar industry. He oversaw the start of an era of connection between Mauritius and Fiji as colonial officials, ordinances, ideas and practices and indentured labourers themselves travelled between the two.

This book tells the stories of Mauritius and Fiji parallelly rather than merging them into a single narrative of the indenture experience. This is a deliberate strategy in order to highlight in one volume, the experiences of Indian labourers in two colonies which to date have largely been analysed in their separate geo-silos of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Focusing on two colonies enables a broader understanding of the varied experiences of indenture. By addressing trans-oceanic subaltern mobility, this book aims to reorder the way in which historical geography has engaged with movements through empire. Its archipelagic framework inverts the notion of core–periphery and places Mauritius and Fiji, seemingly peripheral parts of empire, firmly at the core of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Indo-Pacific.

By 1916, motions had been put in place to end Indian indentured transportation; only four colonies were still importing labourers – Jamaica, Trinidad, British Guiana and Fiji. Other colonies, including Mauritius, the colony which had recruited the most labourers, had already stopped, though there was a brief resumption of emigration to the island in 1924. With the recent centenary of the end of Indian indentured transportation in 2016, this geographically framed exploration of Indian indenture becomes a timely intervention.
Rewinding back to the nineteenth century, indenture was not a new phenomenon, having previously operated prior to the slavery era when labourers were recruited from Europe to work in the Americas. The system re-emerged in the nineteenth century as a direct response to the abolition of slavery and the subsequent deprivation of labour on sugar estates. This time, the labourers mostly hailed from Asia, in particular India. Labourers were recruited for a fixed period of time, usually five years, and signed agreements that promised transportation, a wage, food rations, housing and medical care.

To date, there has been little focus on the geography of the system and a lack of attention on indenture within the discipline of geography itself. This was a post-slavery labour system that was global in scale. Yet the connectivity between the colonies importing indentured labour has traditionally been glossed over in accounts of the system. Whilst acknowledging the elite linkages that were created between colonies through the movement of ‘careering’ colonial officials, this book explores primarily the subaltern interconnectivity of the Indian indenture-importing colonies of empire. It does this through the rubrics of the indentured archipelago, the collection of colonies in the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans which recruited Indian indentured labourers, and subaltern careering, the movement of indentured labourers between the sugar colonies, and beyond.

As we pass through the centenary of the end of Indian indentured transportation, and with a burgeoning interdisciplinary scholarship emerging on post-slavery labour mobility and networks of empire, it is time to reassess Indian indenture and to begin to write the historical geography of the system. The term ‘historical geography’ of Indian indenture refers to the system as a whole, emphasising the need to investigate the intricacies of the system in relation to the geographically dispersed colonies which were involved. The term ‘space’ is used when talking about the day-to-day lived experiences of labourers. In situating space at the heart of this book, the role of particular aspects of indenture in the lived experience of individuals and labourer agency are examined. It also enables the exploration of trans-oceanic movements that helped to create an indentured archipelago (Figure 1.1).

This book neither seeks to investigate the origins of the system nor the origins of the Indian indentured labourers themselves. Rather, it aims to explore the negotiation of, and manoeuvring within, space by Indian indentured labourers in Britain’s two indenture colonies in the Indo-Pacific; Mauritius and Fiji. In both colonies, Indian indentured labourers and their descendants became a large proportion of the total population.
The book takes a thematic and historical geographical approach. Both the material and human aspects of the system are navigated, showing how Indian indentured labourers negotiated space and how the insular geographies they found themselves in shaped their experience of the system. It is crucial to recognise and examine the spatiality of the system, both within and between colonies.

Figure 1.1 Colonies of the indentured archipelago, with approximate numbers of recruited Indian indentured labourers


The indentured archipelago stretched across the Caribbean, Indian and Pacific Oceans and contextualising the Mauritian and Fijian indenture experience within the archipelago is key. Arthur Hamilton Gordon's successive tenureships as governor of Mauritius (1871–1874) and Fiji (1875–1880) were the initial link between the two colonies which had hitherto inhabited separate political, socio-economic and cultural worlds. In this book, I take two Indian indentured labourer destinations and reveal the day-to-day practical experiences of life, side by side, in parallel. Looking at case studies of indentured life in Mauritius and Fiji enables a comparison of indentured
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migration in two geographically discrete locations within the indentured archipelago.

Investigating the Indian indenture experience through a spatial lens reveals the material conditions and human experiences of indenture. Exploring the lived spaces of Indian indentured labourers offers fragmentary insights into the lives of these people. The material conditions of indenture include housing, sanitation and land. These three aspects had a significant impact on the lives of Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius and Fiji. The intrinsically spatial housing regulations relating to camps in Mauritius and coolie lines in Fiji are considered, as are their effects on labourers. Sanitation in both colonies was a key component of colonial rule. Mauritius had just emerged from the Mauritius Fever epidemic of the late 1860s (subsequently identified as malaria) that had killed thousands, whilst Fiji’s population had been decimated by the 1870s measles outbreak that killed one-third of the population. Both colonies were therefore acutely aware of the role sanitation and disease control played in maintaining a healthy environment for their labour force that produced sugar for consumption, primarily in the European metropole. In Fiji, the relationship between indigenous Fijians and the land, accentuated by colonial alienation policies during the years following cession to Britain, had a profound effect on the domestic mobility of Indian labourers once their contracts of indenture had expired, adding a particularity to Fiji’s Indian indenture experience.

This book also draws attention to the human experiences of indenture: the indentured family, petitions, vagrancy and suicide. The experiences of women and children are explored, as well as petitions in relation to ill-treatment, conflict, return passages and crime. In examining both the material and human experiences of indenture, a detailed picture of the indentured spaces of Mauritius and Fiji is revealed.

The connective nature of this research is encapsulated in the concept of subaltern careering. This demonstrates the trans-colonial mobility and agency of Indian indentured labourers, not just between Mauritius and Fiji, but between all of the colonies that comprised the indentured archipelago. In considering the trans-colonial mobility of Indian indentured labourers, the wider imperial geography of the system is illuminated. The geographical scope of the indentured system was clearly much wider than has been credited to date.

The comparative approach adopted in this book draws inspiration from comparative studies in the field of Indian indenture such as the edited collection of essays on resistance by Hassankhan, Lal and Munro. It enables a
historical geographical account of Indian indenture across the Indo-Pacific and expands existing literature on the Indian Ocean arena to the Pacific, recentring Mauritius and Fiji within an Indo-Pacific arena of indenture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Labourer experiences are placed at the forefront of the indenture story. Methodologically, the comparative nature of the study utilised archives in multiple locations in the so-called metropolitan core (the United Kingdom, or UK), in the ‘periphery’ (Mauritius and Fiji), and in Australia and Canada, home to the main sugar companies operating in colonial Fiji.

Researching a fundamentally trans-colonial and trans-imperial system such as Indian indenture necessitates the interrogation of archives in multiple locations in order to tease out connections between colonies. This enables the unearthing of labourers’ journeys between colonies, the viewing of commonalities and differences between these colonies and the ability to shed light on ideas, practices, laws and ordinances which travelled via the oceanic currents of empire.

Figure 1.2, a photograph taken in 1890 of Indian labourers in Fiji with their European overseers, is just one of many similar images that can be found scattered across different archives. This particular image contains many of the themes that will arise in this book. In the photograph, Indian men, women and children including babies stand and crouch at the peripheries of the gathering, with the white overseers standing and seated at the centre of the group, visually encapsulating the plantation hierarchy in the colony.

The fact that there are women and young children here and not just men illustrates that the Indian indenture system transported women and families to the sugar colonies. The clock on the outside wall of the building and the three men sitting around a desk on the verandah radiate notions of discipline and time management. As will become apparent in this book, surveillance was at the core of maintaining an ordered labour force, both on and off the plantation. The space of the verandah takes prime position behind the assembled group and brings to the fore one of the major concerns of the indenture period, health and sanitation. Verandahs played multiple roles, allowing people to take in air and also allowing them to survey the area around the building. The elevated position of the verandah in this image in comparison to its surrounds illustrates this. Poor sanitation and a lack of control over diseases, such as malaria and plague, ravaged the sugar colonies and did not discriminate between victims.

Finally, one cannot escape the light and dark shades of the image. The faces of some of the people in the photograph appear faded as if replicating the fading out of their individual life stories. The open window on the verandah with the black space of the interior looms large over the group.
Whilst the working lives of labourers are well documented in archival records, their domestic lives are less so, and this I would argue is mirrored in the photograph. The posture of the labourers outside is clear to the consumer of the photograph, but what is going on inside the building remains shrouded in darkness, mirroring the gap between what we know of the labourers’ public and private lives during this period. This photograph conveys some of the major concerns of this book as it focuses on the lives of labourers in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Mauritius and Fiji.

**Figure 1.2** Labourers with their European overseers at an unidentified plantation, Fiji, 1890

In this book, archival sources bring to light the lives of indentured and time-expired labourers (those whose tenure of indenture had been completed) in Mauritius and Fiji, contributing to the emerging historiography of Indian indenture addressing the nature of labourers’ lived experiences. The connections formed between the two colonies reveal the fleeting creation of an Indo-Pacific indentured arena between 1871 (the beginning of Gordon’s tenure as governor of Mauritius) and 1916 (the final year of Indian indenture recruitment in Fiji) across which not only elite colonial officials and middle-ranking administrators, along with their ideas, practices, laws and regulations but also Indian labourers, travelled.
This methodology is part of a broader move within geography to analyse and interpret ways in which geographers interact with archives. Historical geography’s relationship with, and potential complicity in, the ‘colonial project’ due to its use of material from colonial archives has led to an interesting debate concerning the voices we read in archives and the problems of recovering the subaltern via the colonised elite. The issue of ethics and the censorship that researchers may encounter when dealing with ‘the traces left by former lives’ in turn relates to the relationship and complicity argument. As well as exploring the actual material we encounter in the archives, geographers have also examined the physical spaces of archives. Descriptive accounts of these institutions, how they operate and the effect of their materiality on the research carried out in them add to the impetus to understand more about where the material we are working with is housed.

Research on the future of the archive, in the wake of digitisation, shows that geographers are thinking as much about the future as they are about the past. Complementing research on archives, colonialism and ethics, others have opened up debates on creativity and how we use the material which we find in archives. The effects of researchers themselves on projects and how the positionality and historical situatedness of geographers affects the past has also been reconstructed.

The methodological encountering of material enables a re-reading of the archival research experience as not merely a means to an end, but as a focus for further interrogation. For historical geographers, this archival turn has primarily taken the shape of how we feel in the archives and the sensations we experience. Emphasis is placed on affect, method and power-relations within the archive. Working in the multilingual climate of Mauritius and in the often politically charged environment of Fiji, one can end up juggling with methodological predicaments ranging from debates on post-colonialism, the role of ethnic categorisation in Fiji’s and Mauritius’ place in the region to ethics and rights of access to archival material. The archival research here is presented in a periphery–core mode, that is, the protagonists (labourers, colonial administrators), the movements between colonies (careering), the crops (sugar) and the archives (Mauritius, Fiji) of the so-called periphery – the Indo-Pacific – is made central to the story.

As shall be seen throughout this book, there is a divide in the typology of material gathered in the different archival sites. The Mauritian and Fijian archives contain deeply personal accounts by labourers, whether first-hand in letters or contained within statements and petitions. Although forming part of the colonial administrative files, they give as much an insight into
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indentured lives as we can possibly hope to glean. They allow the reader to get closer to the subaltern stories featured here. Whilst the colonial architecture of the administration can serve to define parameters of debate on indenture, there is still much to be garnered from these documents in terms of learning about the subaltern, and in this case, indentured life. I contend that using the administrative constructs in reports and statements enable a detailing of aspects of indentured life in Mauritius and Fiji.

Material from the UK, meanwhile, in particular the India Office Records, give a more administrative view of this period, characterised by reports, statistics and wider views of the system. In privileging material from Mauritius and Fiji in this methodology, the research aims to become more proximate to the subject at hand – the subaltern Indian indentured labourer.

The Indentured Archipelago

There are ‘an infinite number of ways of dividing global space’, as Felix Driver explains. There are also an infinite number of ways to connect space, and, in this particular instance, colonial space. Taking an archipelagic approach serves to address the gap in the literature on the geography of indenture and subaltern connections. With this in mind, Mauritius and Fiji can be situated in an indentured archipelago, comprising of territories across different empires, whose populations had a shared experience of Indian indenture. With the exception of the Guianas and Natal, these colonies were all islands – though the Guianas were (and still are) cultural and linguistic islands on South America’s northern coast, and Natal was a figurative sugar island in Southern Africa.

Why an archipelago? The word itself derives from the Greek *arkhi* meaning ‘chief’ and *pelagos* meaning ‘sea’. In physical geography, an archipelago refers to an island chain with shared attributes extending out to sea, though it can also refer to a sea containing a number of islands, for example, the Aegean Sea, which was traditionally known as archipelago. I use the concept of the archipelago in a historical geographical context, applying it to the system of Indian indentured labour, with the objective of making the colonies themselves part of the narrative on indenture. I bring to the surface lateral networks and power-relations which emerged across the seascape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Braudel argued that there were several Atlantics coexisting and eclipsing each other over time. In the context of Indian indenture, this conceptual mode of thinking can be applied to the Indian and Pacific Oceans which shaped an Indo-Pacific arena that came into existence.
with the entrance of Fiji into the indenture system in 1879. The waxing and waning of such oceanic spaces across time illustrates the fluidity of spatial-temporal relationships.

The use of the term archipelago as a metaphor is not new. Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mauritius and Réunion are four islands that were not only subject to colonialism but, as Eisenlohr suggests, citing the work of French anthropologist Jean Benoist, were also born of colonialism. Benoist stressed that ‘one can neither isolate the islands from one another, nor transfer simplistically to one what applies to another. It is necessary to see them together, not as an ensemble, but as a system….’22 The Creole archipelago refers to these islands that today maintain a shared French cultural influence, most pronounced through their use of French Creole. If the Creole archipelago uses the term archipelago to bring together geographically separate islands with a shared history and common ethno-linguistic traits, then Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago (1974) draws on the raw physical attributes of an archipelago. The Gulag archipelago is set across the vast continental expanse of Eurasia, illustrating the malleability of the archipelago metaphor.

The archipelago metaphor can be used to signify both isolation and connectivity. This book contends that the colonies of the indentured archipelago did not develop in isolation, just as Solzhenitsyn articulates that the archipelago of Gulags across Eurasia ‘did not develop on its own but side by side with the whole country’.24 He writes, ‘From the depths of the tundra and the taiga rose hundreds of new medium-sized and small islands. And on the march, in battle order, a new system of organisation of the Archipelago was created: Camp Administrations, Camp Divisions, Camps, Camp Sectors…’25 This speaks to the possibility of thinking about an archipelago within an archipelago, and certainly in the indentured archipelago this notion manifests itself in terms of the emigration depot, quarantine station, immigration depot, the estate, the camp, and so forth. Kotef meanwhile draws attention to a more contemporary land-based archipelago, L’archipel de Palestine orientale, which portrays the West Bank as an archipelago buffered by the Mer d’Israël, Océan Jordanique and Canal de Jerusalem.26

By using the archipelago metaphor, the interconnection between the sugar colonies of empire and a system of imperial organisation akin to Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag archipelago is revealed. Toker argues that the Gulag archipelago pertains to a spectrum of materiality, including the stages of a prisoner’s ordeal (transportation, life in labour camps, exile), the history of the labour-camp system, the geography of the archipelago, the sociology and anthropology of the