

Breaking the Silence: Un-covering the voices of Indian Indentured Labourers in Trinidad & Tobago and Guyana

Ankit Chowdhury

*M.A in Dependency and Slavery Studies,
Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn*

ABSTRACT: *Labourers from British India, China, and south-east Asia were transported inhumanely in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to British colonies around the world, including the Caribbean and Fiji. Since slavery was abolished in the West in 1830, many Western thinkers believe that this has replaced slavery. As a result, the plantation owners in those colonies, in particular the Caribbean and Pacific islands, faced a severe labour shortage and began to import labourers from China and South East Asia. However, this wasn't enough for them, so they started importing labourers from British India. Indians at that time experienced a huge land scarcity due to the British implementation of complex land policies and several workers left India voluntarily in search of better employment opportunities as well as many were forcibly abducted by the "Agents". After all, those innocent souls didn't know what they have to face soon in future. They experienced numerous forms of physical, racial, and mental exploitation once they arrived at those colonies. In the end, they challenged the system, create their community with people of various backgrounds, and contribute to the Caribbean's vibrant and diverse culture. This paper argued the reason for starting Indian Indentureship in the Caribbean and the several recruitment processes and how different perspectives such as caste, finding new opportunities played a huge role behind this and the subsequent exploitation of those workers on and off the field, and eventually the means of emancipation from this laborious process, with an emphasis on the region of Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago.*

Keywords: Coolies, Caribbean, Indentureship, Colonialism, Exploitation, Slavery, Imperialism

British colonialism not only caused Indians to suffer from exploitation and torture but there is also a huge chapter of that era that is often neglected from the history books of India, the chapter of "Indenture labour". After the abolition of slavery in the early 19th century, the plantation owners of the Caribbean and Pacific Island faced several labour shortages; Dutch and British colonizers hired cheap labour from China and South East Asia to work in

those fields. However, this wasn't enough for them, so they began to bring labourers from British India. More than 500,000 labourers were brought to the British West Indies under the terms of an indenture between the abolition of slavery in 1834 and the onset of the First World War. Later, the number rose, and by the middle of the twentieth century, about more than 1.5 million Indian workers had travelled to the various islands in the Caribbean and the Pacific to work on cotton and sugar plantations. The Indian indentured labour system emerged as a result of the British colonies in the Caribbean's expanding need for labour after slavery was abolished, because, the cost of maintaining a slave workforce increased, plantation owners began employing indentured workers from India as a replacement for slaves. Between 1838 and 1917, British colonial authorities in the Caribbean, including British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Suriname, recruited more than 1.3 million Indian labourers.¹ But, in Trinidad & Tobago and British Guiana, it started in the year 1845, the difficulties that the Indian labourers deployed to the Caribbean experienced were long travel durations, unfamiliar working conditions, and linguistic and cultural barriers. Many of them were forced to labour long hours in hazardous conditions for little to no pay and with little access to healthcare and education.

The article has three sections. The first section discusses the socio and economic rationality behind the starting of Indian indentureship in the Caribbean and the second one discusses the fatal nature of the process used to recruit indentured labourers from various parts of India, the role played by colonial superior officers, representatives of the West Indian Association, "agents," and the abandonment of the plantations, as well as coherence of caste politics in India and willing to leave the country to search for better opportunities. The third one discusses the misery of being exploited while working there, medical uncertainty, working overtime without gaining proper compensation, ration shortages, and appalling living conditions also the active agency of the workers.

Socio-Economic rationale

In March, 1837, a representative of the West Indian Association and the owner of a sugar plantation in British Guiana, John Gladstone, requested by letter a meeting with Lord Glenelg and Sir George Grey. He stated in the letter that "unless a system of regular continuous labour is then adopted, the cultivation of the sugar cane cannot then be carried on to a productive result." Gladstone was eager to acquire hill coolies from Bengal as indentured workers for a five-year term.² This meeting marked the beginning of the notorious Caribbean chapter of Indian Indentureship Exploitation. Behind this another factor was that leading British politicians during that period supported the *laissez-faire*, or free trade, ideology. In the summer of 1846, the Conservative government of British Prime Minister Robert Peel repealed the Corn Laws, allowing imports of inexpensive food. Soon after, Lord Russell as the new premier carried the Sugar Duties Act permitting the importation of cheap

enslaved-grown sugar into Britain. Russell tried to steer a moderate course between the domestic needs of British workers and the demands of plantations. Russell allowed the immigration of free labour, first from other West Indian territories like Barbados and then, when that failed, from Africa, to help address the issue of a labour shortage in the British West Indies. As a haven for free Africans, Sierra Leone and the African coast along the Kroo were a new supply of labour starting in 1841. According to free trade ideology, if Africans could be brought to the West Indies in large numbers, they would increase the population-to-land ratio, increase wage competition, raise the standard of labour for wage earners, and most importantly, allow the planters to sell their sugar at a lower price, this was another reason behind switching their view towards recruiting Indian workers.

To oversee the emigration of British citizens, the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission was founded as early as 1840.³ A limited amount of emigration from Sierra Leone was also encouraged by the Treasury, which claimed that it would benefit Africans, West Indians, and British tax consumers equally. However, after a brief spike, emigration from Sierra Leone quickly fell off. Only after African emigration had failed carried out a new Colonial Secretary, Lord Stanley, work with the Indian government to restart Asiatic emigration in 1844. In addition to rules governing the distribution of immigrants at their destination, 'Agents' were set up in Madras and Calcutta.

From 1838 to 1853, the condition of the West Indies sugar plantations was already dire, with many plantations being abandoned, which is illustrated by the table below:

Year	Under cultivate (no.)	Abandoned (no.)
1838	308	—
1846	251	57
1847 (January 1)	235	16
1848 (June 30)	210	25
1849 (December 31)	196	14
1852 (June 30)	183	13
1853	173	10
Total Abandoned	1556	135

Source: Adamson, Sugar without Slaves, derived from CO 111/242; CO 111/255; CO 111/291; report of J G Austin in Barkly to Newcastle, no. 178, 10 Nov. 1852; CO 111/332, Walker to Newcastle, 31/12/1861

And there were 201 execution sales between 1838 and 1853, during which 175 estates, and nearly 60% of the plantations in cultivation at the time, underwent ownership changes as a result of bankruptcy levels that border on the pandemic. Estates are running up enormous debts as a result of rising production expenses and free labour costs.⁴

The West Indian planters all broke out in outrage at the Sugar Duties Act and expressed their ruin. Incongruously criticizing Russell for putting money before morality was his former employers of slaves. Now, the Acting

Committee of West Indian Planters and Merchants invoked the principles of free trade to demand unfettered access to the African coast and other locations to recruit immigrants. The Colonial Office received a number of petitions requesting compensation for the colonists, and these petitions were successful in persuading Russell and Grey to lower the differential duties on sugar for the following six years.

A critical factor in the revival of West Indian sugar colonies, especially Trinidad and Guiana, was the immigration of indentured Indian labour. Planters ultimately agreed to Russell's offer of an immigration loan that was funded by the Treasury. However, the expense was excessive. Between 1845 and 1848, 21,784 Asian immigrants arrived in the sugar islands, bringing with them rations,⁵ medical care, and lodging costs, amounting to a daily fee of two dollars and thirty⁶ in Jamaica alone. In Trinidad, Governor Harris found that after subtracting the cost of labour, planters were suffering a dead loss of £10 per immigrant during the first year of acclimatisation. Governor Harris wrote to Grey in a letter, "It may further be asked whether many of the estates now in cultivation could ever recover from such an enormous charge on them that this system of immigration must entail". Between 1838 and 1848, Trinidad expended £155,042, with £83,048 of that amount coming from just the 1846–1847 period. Harris complained to the Colonial Office that immigrant workers who paid for their passage through bonded labour were not required to re-contract with their initial employer and that indenture contracts were only valid for a year. New ordinances governing the work, pay, and freedom of movement of labourers were not enacted until much later, in 1854.⁷ In 1840 indentured labour migration was viewed as a means of relieving public pressures for selective reform of the sugar duties; by 1850 it was seen as the only means of redressing the damage occasioned by general tariff reform. From the 1850s indentured immigration guaranteed West Indian planter profits, a productive export economy and economic and social stability in the free British West Indian colonies.

Processes of Recruitment

In an address to the Jamaican legislature on October 25, 1842, Lord Elgin, the governor of Jamaica, said that the West Indian colonies were the setting for a major experiment, the outcome of which could determine the fate of millions of people who were yet to be born as well as thousands who were currently held in servitude. The abolition of slavery in the sugar colonies was a test of monumental importance for many people of Elgin's generation, including men like Lord John Russell, Lord Stanley, and the third Earl Grey, concurrent Colonial Secretaries of Britain during this time. Could sugar be grown more affordably by free labour than by colonies that rely on slavery? As a result of this, Indentureship starts in the Caribbean.

The first ship, *Futtle Rozack*, carrying 225 Indian labourers to Trinidad and Tobago and British Guiana, left the port of Calcutta on May 30, 1845. The procedure continued with the ship named *Ganges* until 1917 when 1,47,592

workers had already been sent to those two regions of the Caribbean. There were other ports used at that time besides Calcutta; 1,09,880 labourers left the Port of Madras between the year 1858 to 1906. The registration of those ships demonstrates how substantially they regard caste, gender, and sex in addition to the body remarks of the Indian workers.⁸

British government generally relied on private contractors or recruiting agents to source Indian labourers for the colonies. These agents would travel to different parts of India, often to rural areas and convince individuals to migrate to those colonies by making promises of high wages, good living conditions and opportunities for advancement. There are several theories regarding this phase of indentureship, the process was often marred by deception and coercion. Brinsley Samaroo argued, recruiting agents often resorted to false promises and fraudulent practices to convince Indians to leave their homes and families and migrate to the colonies. Many were deceived about the nature of the work and the wages they would receive and the conditions of employment.⁹ British government implemented schemes that also played a huge role behind this notorious process of recruitment, such as; the 'Gladstone Scheme' in 1884, which involved the mass recruitment of Indian labourers by the use of governmental agents, coercion and even kidnapping and was carried out by the Indian recruiters who were often seized by force, sometimes with the aid of Indian police and transported to the recruitment depots.¹⁰ The recruiting agents, armed with cash and other incentives, roamed the villages and towns, persuading the people to emigrate to the colonies, giving 'false' hopes and many fell for their wily ways.

In the hiring process, the British government's assertive approaches played a part, but the employees' conditions in India at the time also contributed to their decision to leave the country in search of better opportunities and also to avoid casteism. These two reasons are also equally important to discuss this part of history and this also portrayed the cohesive nature of Indian society at the time, as the early twentieth century India faced several land scarcities because of the implementation of the complex British land policy and casteism always been a huge problem in Indian society, as one worker who migrated from India to Trinidad & Tobago in the early twentieth century stated that, 'we were told that we would get higher wages in the West Indies, in India, we were poor and lived in crowded conditions. We heard that the living conditions were better in the West Indies and that we would get a house to live in and would not have to worry about food, another worker stated, 'In India, I was a low caste woman and couldn't move around freely. Here I can go where ever I want and do whatever I want. I've more freedom here than I ever had in India'. Indian workers were not just passive victims of British imperialism at that time, rather they were active agents of their own situation, who sought to improve their working conditions, assert their identities and resist exploitation. Many workers even left India as they were offered lands in the Caribbean and ready to establish businesses after their five-year 'Girmit' or indenture contract ended.¹¹ They frequently didn't

realise what was in store for them; below, I discussed the exploitation there.

Exploitation

To discuss the Indian indentureship in the Caribbean, I looked into the effects of imperialism and how power struggle of the society; which caused several issues, I agree with Foucault's concept of institutional power in this case since it describes the condition of the workers. Imperialism, as an institution, created those individuals' subjectivities; its core not only sets boundaries around and influences their conduct, but also shapes it.¹¹ As soon as they set foot in the Caribbean, they were compelled to work overtime while being physically and mentally abused by the owners and managers of the plantations; eventually, they even began to resist; this is the function of active agency that I previously stated as well as the situation of institutional power dynamics. In the year 1839, the famous newspaper at that time 'British Emancipator' which used to control by the party BFSS, sent their two investigators' Messrs Scoble and Anstie to the British Guiana to investigate the situation of the 'Coolies' or Indian Indenture workers, as they interviewed stipendiary magistrate of the colonies, plantation managers as well as Coolies, and after many observations, they stated in the 'British Emancipator' in 9th January, 1839

'I see the British public have been deceived with the idea that the Coolies are doing "well"; such is not the fact; the poor friendless creatures are miserably treated, at least I can speak confidently of plantation Bell Vue. On this estate, they have made two attempts to escape ...'¹²

Indian indenture workers suffered from the beginning of their journey to the Caribbean, as In May 1838, Gladstone's ship landed 419 "coolies," of whom 38 had passed away and 70 were still on the sick list a few months later.¹² Many people died along the route, including children, during this time, Justice Coleman, a stipendiary magistrate, was chosen to look into the mysterious death of a 10-year-old child and the alleged mistreatment of labour, he and his team find out they were not only facing the exceedingly difficult journey but also, they faced many physical cases of abuse by the officials, then, three men were found guilty of brutally attacking the "coolies" and were either fined or put in jail. An excerpt from the investigation is provided below, even the "sick-house" (probably a hospital) was described as "heart-rending" by an eyewitness.

'The house itself was wretchedly filthy, the persons and the clothes of the patients were filthy also; the poor sufferers had no mats nor mattresses to lie on; a dirty blanket was laid under them and their clothes wrapped together formed a kind of pillow.'¹³

According to the report on the Belle Vue estate, 29 employees developed ulcers and were "wretched" after contracting another 20 diseases in the colony. When presented with the proof, the estate's owner, Mr. Colville, claimed that his manager and overseers were too responsible for the misdeeds. After that, John Gladstone's estate, Vreed-en-Hoop, was examined

and found to be deficient as well, with claims of flogging and salt being applied to wounds. A devastating accusation of the actions of General Manager, Mr. Sanderson, and his overseers was made in a letter from Mr. Young, the Colonial Office official, to Gladstone's counsel. Speaking of the resident manager of Vreed-en-Hoop, Mr Young stated:

'Mr Sanderson, either did know or ought to have known of these transgressions; under the most charitable supposition, his ignorance must be esteemed highly culpable.'¹⁴

The negligence of the British government made the situation worse and worse for the workers in the Caribbean. In the case of 'Footprint of Kunduppa' in Trinidad & Tobago referring to the medical negligence by the authorities, Mr. Walkinshaw, who was a plantation owner of the Clydesdale cottage estates, was later accused of his atrocious practices and while held in the court for this, the state of the Trinidad & Tobago produced this case. Kunduppa was one of many victims of this notorious exploration, and the footprint of Kunduppa indicated the parts of his foot that were infected by chigoe worms and which were subsequently amputated. Possibly the strongest piece of state evidence, this elderly 'coolie' man on the Clydesdale cottage estate, was deployed into this truth-seeking inquiry to raise the issue of medical neglect by the planter and estate medic. The chigoe worm ate his toes and soles, producing further inflammation and sores that eventually disabled his walk. The morning he died, he had crept to the hospital on his knees from the mill where he had not received medical attention and food as punishment for not going to the estate hospital. It seems as if Kunduppa was brought to his death through a slow and torturous application of practices (Similar to Foucault's "a thousand death").¹⁵ Kunduppa's dead foot is akin to Foucault's body of the condemned, whose torture is instrumentally aimed at obliging 'coolie' docility and compliance, and more so reflective of Walkinshaw's will to salvage for the planter an absolute and autocratic sovereign power.

Physical abuse was a major problem for the coolies at that time, there were many cases of rape, even also several times the male workers faced sexual abuse from the managers and overseers. The case of Lilawattie Munroe is worth studying regarding this, who was an Indian indentured labour in Guyana (British Guiana), in 1914, she was raped by her employer, who was her plantation manager. The case gained a lot of attention when the victim reported the assault to the police, was threatened with deportation, and her perpetrator went unpunished.¹⁶ This is another example of coolie's active agency towards the power dynamics at that time and their different forms of resistance against the system, while also being threatened with deportation. Another case was the case of Ramabai, who also was an Indian Indentured labourer in Trinidad and was raped by her employer in 1916, during that time she was just an 18-year-old girl working as a servant in a rich merchant house. Police ignored her complaint of the assault when she reported it to them; nevertheless, after the matter got to trial, the defendant was found

guilty and given a four-year prison sentence. This case was hailed as a turning point in the struggle against indentured women's sexual abuse and exploitation,¹⁷ Similarities between this condition and Trans-Atlantic slavery exist, because the slaves in the North experienced comparable treatment and considering it's equally significant to the history of slavery, I believe that a significant portion of this period of history is still being ignored. The British government's ignorance caused the situation to worsen, as they acted in a particular way towards the community of coolies and created a fear of deportation from their working life. There were likely many more instances of this type of crime that were not being recorded at the time, which shape the history of indentureship in the Caribbean. This rape instance justifies the theory of deportation as the idea of controlling individuals in society.

Slavery and indentureship in history have had terrible effects on society's sociological, economic, and psychological conditions. However, there is still a significant difference between the two. In general, indentured labourers in this part of the story were active participants as they were able to resist the system and were often forced to leave India to overcome obstacles that were not an option for slaves in the Americas. Slaves didn't have any agency towards their bodies in the United States of America, which makes the situation of slavery way worsen. However, we shouldn't compare the memories of those slaves and coolies in this dreadful period of history; instead, we should work together to uncover the individual tales that underlie each historical era and subject.

The coolies of the Caribbean did what oppressors around the world have done throughout history after being tortured for some time through several exploitative methods, whether that resistance was successful or not. Here worth mentioning is the revolt of Canje in British Guiana in 1913, A trade unionist and political activist by the name of Hubert Critchlow was in charge of the uprising. Critchlow was a vociferous opponent of the colonial authorities and the sugar planters who controlled the local economy. In 1913, he orchestrated a revolt of sugar workers that swiftly descended into violence as workers fought with law enforcement and armed troops. Throughout the lengthy uprising, Critchlow and his supporters waged guerrilla warfare against the colonial army. As the rebels were ultimately routed, Critchlow was taken into custody and given a prison term. One of the earliest great anti-colonial uprisings in British Guiana, the Canje Rebellion was notable for this reason. It also sparked the labour movement in the region, with Critchlow emerging as a hero to many activists and workers. Later, Critchlow rose to prominence in British Guiana's labour movement and played a crucial role in the nation's eventual liberation from British colonial rule in 1966,¹⁸ here by the side of Critchlow, Indian indentured labourers also broke away from their plantations and burn the cane fields and factories. The 1919 strike in British Guiana was one of the most important and noteworthy events of that time, which had a major impact on the labour movement and the struggle for worker's rights. Workers at the Demerara Bauxite Company, a large mining

and refining company, started the strike in early April 1919 in protest of unfavourable working conditions, low pay, and discrimination against Indian workers. The railway and other businesses were soon joined by thousands of workers nationwide as the strike quickly expanded to other sectors of the economy, such as sugar plantations. The colonial government violently put down the strike, sending in troops to disperse picket lines and detain strike leaders. Workers continued to strike despite threats and coercion for several weeks. The colonial government made substantial concessions before the strike was eventually called off, including the creation of a commission to look into the employees' complaints. British Guiana was irrevocably altered by the 1919 strike, which sparked the expansion of the labour movement and the creation of trade unions. The strike also drew attention to the severe racial and economic disparities that existed in the colony, especially between Indian and Afro-Guyanese workers, and it helped to energize opposition to colonial control. The strike of 1919 had an immense impact in the region of the Caribbean, the strike raised awareness of the poor working conditions and low pay that many British Guianan workers were subjected to. This contributed to raising awareness of the rights of workers and the necessity of better labour laws and protections. Also, significantly, many employees had a greater political awareness as a result of the strike, which helped to energize opposition to colonial rule in British Guiana. As a result, there was an increase in activism and involvement in political movements that sought to abolish colonialism and gain independence.¹⁹

Despite all of these Indian indentured labourers overcame challenges and endured the most difficult time as immigrants in a new country before finally finding their release from this exploitative circumstance with the help of their own willingness and revolt and later by the push of the Indian government. Ultimately, they did manage to establish their community in the Caribbean and as a result, that region's culture is one of the most distinct in the world. Many people may think of this system as the replacement for slavery, but if we consider slavery to be when a person loses all of their agency and someone else controls that agency, then indentureship shouldn't be remembered as the replacement of the slavery but a horrible dark chapter of Caribbean history.

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