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INDIAN INDENTURE: SPEAKING ACROSS THE OCEANS

Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai

This paper argues that research on Indian indentured labour needs to move beyond the conceptual limitations imposed by the neo-slavery / Tinkerian paradigm, which has focused excessively on the extent to which the indentured experience was (or was not) little more than "a new system of slavery" in which indentured labourers were often portrayed as mere victims of this system. There is a need transcend the basically descriptive nature of much of the work on the indentured experience, and carefully analyse topics and issues under consideration in this volume, such as emotions, culture, and religion. Further, pre-occupation with the indentured experience in individual colonies/countries/nation-states has imposed severe limitations and there is a pressing need for truly comparative studies of the indentured experience, as has been the case in slave / Atlantic studies. In short, we argue for the need to examine the indentured experience in all of its complexity, including intra- and inter-community relations in the plural societies created by indentured immigration, immigrant life away from the plantation, gender issues, racial and ethnic identities, as well as the impact of 'free' immigrants.

The story of Indian indenture has generally been told within the confines of the various nation-states in which the indentured found themselves. This is understandable, given that history is often written from immediate circumstances and challenges. One can see this in South Africa, for example. The country was on the international radar in the second half of the twentieth century for its policy of apartheid. In this racist state, the ruling white minority National Party (NP) defined Indians as alien and sought to repatriate them. Textbooks and academic works that represented the NP perspective portrayed Indians as a "problem". In this context, many historians of Indian South Africans highlighted their long struggle to counteract racist exclusion and their South African-ness. This thread continued into the post-apartheid period with a continuing attempt to counteract divisions created by apartheid by re-thinking history as part of a national narrative. Our own history of indenture was sub-titled 'A South African Story' (Desai and Vahed, 2010).

Beginning in the 1830s, around 1.3 million Indian contract labourers were exported to Mauritius, Jamaica, British Guiana, French Guiana, Trinidad, Fiji, St. Lucia, Dutch Guiana (Suriname), Guadeloupe, Martinique, Granada and Natal in what Madhavi Kale (1998: 5) has termed 'an imperial reallocation of labor' to satisfy the demand for cheap and docile workers. Despite occasional criticism from colonial officials, medical officers, travellers, participants in the system, and numerous official commissions of enquiry that investigated indentured workers'

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living and working conditions, the British government in India allowed the system to continue. The call to end indenture was given fresh impetus when the Indian nationalist movement began agitating against indenture from the early years of the twentieth-century. Following the First World War, pressure began to mount on the British, and in 1920 the Imperial Government abolished the system of indentured labour.

The predominantly national focus does not mean that there have been no attempts to write a global story of indenture. Most notable are C. Kondapi's *Indians Overseas* and Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*. But generally the story of indenture is place-specific, especially as the colonies to which the indentured went became independent from direct (mainly British) colonial tutelage. But, as the essays in this Special Issue collectively show, we need to begin thinking once more about indenture as a system, and more specifically as a *global* system, that invites us to pose a series of often interrelated questions: How did Indian indenture tie in with other forms of mobilization of Asian and African labour by Westerners during this period? What are the similarities (and differences) between indenture and slavery? Was there a relationship between Indian indenture and Britain's Asian convict labour regime during the nineteenth century? What kinds of constraints did workers under the different labour systems face? What was the form and nature of resistance among workers? What were the perceptions of the labour migrants themselves and how did these evolve? What was the particular evolution of caste, ethnic, 'race', and gender relations in the colonies? How did North and South Indians relate to each other? How did the indentured view India? Why did the aftermath of indenture have different outcomes in different colonies?

The Local and the Global

These are all questions that cry out to be approached from a comparative perspective. Afterall, indentured Indians are seen to constitute a labour diaspora and are spoken of in homogeneous terms mainly because of common origins. Under Colonialism, Europeans settled in various colonies and the subsequent economic exploitation of these areas required labour, which locals could not or refused to provide. After slavery was outlawed, large numbers of people from India met this need in many colonies across the globe. They shared certain of the common characteristics that William Safren defines as constituting a diaspora, such as originating from a common centre; retaining a collective memory about their original homeland (physical location, history, or achievements); believing that they were not totally accepted by their host society; and continuing to relate to their homeland in certain ways (Safren, 1993: 53). Given this, the pre-occupation with the indentured experience in individual colonies/countries/nation-states imposes various limitations and there is a pressing need for truly comparative studies of the indentured experience.

In this, the twenty-first century, where in David Harvey's evocative phrase, time and space are compressed (1990), where globalization has accelerated, and satellite television cuts across borders, the historians of indenture are scrambling to make their research speak across the oceans. This volume not only brings work of different locations together but seeks to illustrate what it will require if we are to understand indenture across social, economic, political, and cultural systems and boundaries in much more profound ways. In this respect, work on slavery has led the way. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra*, which refused to confine history within the limits of the nation state, are valuable signposts for what is possible for those who seek to develop comparative studies of indenture.

The field of Atlantic history has taken on a life of its own over the past decade and there is now an extensive body of work on the Atlantic "world", which raises important conceptual issues. The Atlantic world since the fifteenth century is viewed as not simply a physical fact but a zone of 'exchange and interchange, circulation, and transmission', with the various component parts, Europeans, Africans, and Americans, "additives" to the making of this world. Trade, ships, piracy, and port cities are crucial to this history, as are the making of empires, the rise of capitalism, links to other oceanic systems, migration and diasporas; multiple cross-cultural connections, and the formation of such identities as 'race', gender, religion, and class (see Appleby, 2010; Bailyn, 2009; Baucom, 2005; and Morgan and Greene, 2009;Christopher *et al.*, 2007; amongst others).

British colonialism and capitalism were global processes. Indentured workers, and the slaves who preceded them, were crucial to processes of capitalist accumulation globally. They produced sugar, an addictive luxury item that became an indispensable part of European diets. Indian indentured workers who were transported to 'King Sugar' colonies were thus linked in fundamental ways in this global system, as they were to indentured labourers who were used in other kinds of plantations, such as tea plantations in Ceylon and Assam, and rubber in Malaya (see Amrith, 2011: 1-89). Establishing linkages across disciplines and perspectives and national borders will contribute to a richer understanding of the system of indentured labour within the capitalist system, as well as of the indentured peoples themselves.

But we need to go beyond focusing on just Indian indenture and place this migration within the context of labour systems. Afterall, there was an umbilical link between indenture and slavery in some colonies where African slavery replaced the indenture of Western Europeans, while Indian indenture replaced slavery to address the problem of the so-called labour shortage in the colonies. Colonies like Fiji and Natal, of course, did not experience either European indenture or African slavery prior to the introduction of Indian indentured workers. In some places, indenture was a "life sentence", a virtual imprisonment without parole, while in

others it was a limited duration of five or ten years. Such distinctions are important. Our understanding and comprehension of these labour systems will be enriched by a comparative perspective. For example, Sharma (2009) has examined the ways in which an Indian indentured 'coolie' migrant labour workforce from Central and South India was created for the Assam tea industry, a predominantly colonial enterprise manned by white British planters, when they found indigenous peoples to be 'lazy natives' and unreliable, and failed to attract Chinese workers in sizeable numbers. From the 1860s, according to Sharma, the British colonial government worked in tandem with Assam planters to attract indentured workers and establish a labour regime buttressed by penal legislation. Around 750,000 workers (men, women, and children) were brought to Assam between 1870 and 1900, and in time they came to constitute a racialized labouring class.

Amrith (2009, 2010) and Chanderbali examine the processes by which migration between India and South-East Asia came to be carefully regulated over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century with the establishment of new structures of government. What was unique about Indian indentured labour migration to South-East Asia (in what is now Malaysia) is that labourers' passage was paid and they were given a cash advance in return for which they were contracted to work for a specified length of time or until they paid off their debt. This kind of debt bondage was unique to Indian indenture in Malaysia. Peebles (2001) has examined the procurement of Indian labour under the *kangani* system to Ceylon when the coffee plantations were being established in the 1830s and during the rapid expansion of the tea plantations from the 1840s. Indenture was found to be unfeasible in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) because it was difficult to control movement between Ceylon and India.The *kangan*system involved short-term contracts coordinated by the *kangani* or headman, who operated as both recruiter and field foreman. The *kangani*, sent by an employer or association of employers, usually brought back friends, neighbours, and relatives from his home district and took responsibility for their food, clothing and transit overseas. This was a patriarchal system, as it was through the *kangani* that all advances (monetary and otherwise) were made. As the *kangani* was often the sole intermediary between employees and employer, the employees often found themselves indebted to him.

Anderson's (2009) provocative study calls for a change in the frame of analysis of Indian indentured migration. She argues that the discourses and practices of Indian indenture should be examined within the context of innovations in colonial methods of incarceration and confinement during the nineteenth century rather than in relation to 'a new system of slavery' framework. Existing literature on Indian indenture ignores enslavement within South Asia itself and its relationship to indentured labour, including recruitment and shipment. Crucial too is the practice from the late eighteenth century of the East India Company shipping convicts to work as forced penal labour in overseas colonial settlements. Yang (2003: 180)

points out that in the course of the nineteenth century, approximately 4,000–6,000 Indian convicts were sent to Bengkulen; 15,000 to the Straits Settlements; and several thousand were sent to Burma, Mauritius and the Andaman Islands, which was established as a penal colony after the 1857 revolt.There were many connections between these labour regimes. According to Anderson (2009: 104), 'there was a close connection between convict transportation and indentured migration, discursively, institutionally, and imaginatively.' She goes on to say that:

> …contemporaries in India framed [indenture] through the colonial discourses and practices that were associated with imprisonment and overseas transportation. Colonial administrators used established penal practices in formulating procedures surrounding recruitment, identification, and embarkation. Moreover, Indian communities imagined indenture in the context of their knowledge of overseas penal settlements… The association of migration with local practices and understandings of discipline, confinement, labour, and mobility provides a way of thinking about indenture that moves beyond the nineteenth-century rhetoric of slavery. That is not to argue thatit was 'free' or 'unfree' in character, or part of some teleological move to 'abolition', but to suggest that the boundaries between apparently distinct colonial categories were somewhat fuzzy and ill-defined, with regard to both practice and perception. As such, and in invoking notions of service and dependency, both convict transportation and indentured migration might be considered part of a broader South Asian framework of enslavement too. A further question in this respect is to what extent Indian transportation, migration, and enslavement as labour forms became intertwined in diasporic discourse, practice, and imagination across colonial contexts and continents.

This does not mean that the national framework is not important. It often forms the basis of historical work on indenture. But clearly there is an added challenge of speaking beyond the nation-state and creating conversations and contestations across borders, as new research is unearthed and scholars begin to reach out of their empirical work into theory and conceptual thinking. The broadening of research interests will allow us to move beyond, as Madhavi Kale suggests, the outdated debates about whether indentured labour was 'free' or 'unfree' (Kale 2003: 3), and rethink concepts such as (working) class, and make comparisons between various indentured regimes and indeed between forms of labour systems. While there will be methodological challenges, such as gaining access to conduct multi-archival research in different languages (English, French, Dutch), the overriding concern should be the need to expand the intellectual and conceptual parameters of indentured labour studies in more concrete and meaningful ways through the creative use of the vast, albeit sometimes problematic, archival materials at our disposal.

Reacting to Indenture

If moving beyond the intellectual confines of the nation state is one challenge before us, another is to broaden the scope of what is studied. There is much valuable quantitative work on Indian indentured labour, and vigorous debates about whether

it constituted a 'new system of slavery'. Some of this work is essentially a-historical and of a descriptive nature and there is a need for serious analysis of the topics and issues under consideration in this volume. Early literature on the indentured experience was what may be termed a 'neo-slave' historiography, following the pioneering work of Hugh Tinker. The story is one of fraudulent recruitment, arduous work on rigid plantations, and brutalisation of workers by sirdars and overseers operating in an exploitative system that regimented every aspect of their lives. Ordinary migrants had little agency in this perspective. It suggests that the colonial system and plantation structure ensured that the indentured passively complied with the requirements of the indenture-as-slavery thesis. This perspective raises questions, such as why the indentured continued to migrate to the colonies if the system was indeed a 'new system of slavery?' Is it possible that hundreds of thousands of migrants were deceived and had no idea as to where they were headed? Did the indentured docilely accept the ubiquitous power of employers and overseers?

As Allen argues in this volume and elsewhere (1999, 2001, 2011), the neo-slave perspective is one of the major conceptual limitations in indentured labour studies, made most manifest by the relentless emphasis on indentured labourers as "victims".Allen writes in this volume that the Tinkerian paradigm has 'fostered a degree of conceptual complacency, if not parochialism, that hinders the development of a fuller and more sophisticated understanding of the indentured experience and a deeper appreciation of its historical significance not only locally, but also regionally and globally'. He calls on students of indenture to go beyond the conceptual limitations imposed by the Tinkerian paradigm while, of course, not ignoring the indentured labour system's antecedents.

There is no disputing that indenture was a brutal system. The historiography is replete with litanies of labourers as victims, but this needs to be expanded to put the treatment of indentured labourers in comparative perspective. In what ways, for example, did their treatment vary from colony to colony *through time*? Why did they do so? To what extent did the treatment of indentured agricultural labourers differ from those of their contemporary industrial counterparts? These are the crucial issues related to social/labour control that need addressing through comparative studies.

Tinker's classification of indenture as a new form of slavery struck a chord in many circles. It was at the Kendra Hall in Durban, South Africa, in February 2010 that one of the first meetings was held to constitute a committee to organise the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first indentured in South Africa. The editors of this special issue attended the meeting and the most heated discussion centred on this very debate. Many in the audience equated indenture with slavery, even rejecting a suggestion that the wording be changed to 'indenture was akin to slavery' or any words that sought to differentiate the two

systems of labour bondage. As the debate unfolded, the intentions of those insisting on the word 'slavery' became evident. They were afraid that differentiating between the two would dilute the brutality of indenture.

Operating as a sub-text, this suggested a desire that those who came as indentured migrants should be distinguished from passenger Indians whose history and accomplishments, probably because of the presence of Mohandas K. Gandhi, had been fore-grounded at the expense of indentured migrants. At the insistence of the majority, the word slavery was adopted in the resolution at the end of the meeting. This incident is related here to show that public discourse about the indentured experience remains trapped by a preoccupation with "victimhood". The conflation, in the minds of the descendants of the indentured, served to reinforce the "ideology of victimhood", which would allow them to demand rights because their forebears had suffered so much.

This does not mean that the study of indenture has stood still as increasing attention is placed on the everyday lives of the indentured. A pioneer in this regard has been the Fijian scholar Brij V. Lal, now a Professor of History at the Australian National University, who has provided great insights into the lived life of indenture through an examination of his grandfather's story as well as general work on indenture in Fiji (Lal, 1983, 2000, 2005). In this volume, Lal writes movingly and poignantly of his intellectual journey and personal engagement with indenture and its historiography, pointing to various ways in which a new approach to the study of indenture can produce richer perspectives on the indentured experience. Marina Carter's work has also been illuminating in this respect and a meaningful discussion of indenture must pay homage to her exceptionally important work on Mauritius (see Carter, 1994, 1995, 1996).

We too grappled with the questions raised by Allen and Lal in this volume, and Carter elsewhere, when we were writing *Inside Indian Indenture* (2010), where we sought to build on the valuable foundation established by early scholars to fill out the life and times of the indentured. In examining indenture in broad strokes, the individual can get lost. For despite the common circumstance of the experiences of the indentured there was, indeed must have been, much that was singular. Individuals are as much shaped as they shape the social world in which they live and we sought to understand the motivations of the indentured in coming to Natal, the ways in which they reconstituted their lives in an alien environment, including establishing family, temples, and educational facilities. We sought to re-construct life stories in order to present a more nuanced picture of indenture. Afterall, the indentured went to the colonies with more than their dhotis, lotas and blankets. They took with them their religion, their culture, and various other skills, which proved invaluable as they re-established their lives and communities in countries that were being rapidly pulled into a world where capitalist relations were spreading their tentacles and challenging long held traditions.

In the course of our research, searching for the voices of the subalterns was difficult because of the lack of "their" perspective, and the overwhelming voice of the ruling classes. Official colonial records in most imperial regimes were mostly written by white men for the use of other white men to administer "natives", whose demonization served to justify their subjugation. But imperial records are amongst the few sources still available to us if we wish to construct a history of 'the de-historicized'. In utilising these sources, we followed Edward Said's pointer of searching in the direction of 'unconventional or neglected sources', of trawling the "official" archives, while simultaneously "listening" to the voices of the indentured through letters, newspaper reports, and anecdotes, and matching them with stories of the indentured in different locations (Said, 1988: vi). This approach helped to recover the biographies and voices of some of those whom history has largely ignored. This includes in particular omissions of gender. This was a difficult task for, as Verene Shepherd reminds us, 'colonialist historiography has tended to mute the voices of exploited people, and the subaltern, as female, was even more invisible' (Shepherd, 2002: 7).

While it is important to record abuses in the system, there is a danger of discounting ordinary migrants' agency. Northrup makes the point that:

> Western hegemony is incontestable in this era. Slaves, convicts, and indentured laborers were recruited by Westerners to places of employment under Western control. Western commercial interests gave such labor its value and paid the costs of its movement. Western maritime technology made possible an unprecedented movement of people. Changing Western ideas were most instrumental in ending the Atlantic slave trade. But an intriguing theme that runs through [this period] is that the less powerful were not thereby powerless(2003: 130).

As Vahed shows in this volume, the indentured did not meekly submit to the exploitative plantation regime. They were not passive. They understood how the system operated and what they could do to undermine or resist it, and did so in a variety of ways, mostly individually, and usually on a small scale (also see Allen, 2004). There were, however, rare instances of collective action by the indentured, including the murder of employers. Generally, however, the indentured undermined the system through individual acts of resistance that ranged from absenteeism to feigning illness to suicide, while others consistently courted imprisonment or deserted. New research can attempt not just to chronicle this but to contextualize it in terms, for example, of how slaves resisted their situation. The research agenda should include to what extent and in what ways acts of resistance – or other manifestations of worker "agency" – by indentured workers differed from or were similar to those by slaves, and why (or why not). And how did the indentured become part of larger overseas communities of Indians in the various colonies?

Coming to terms with the realities of the indentured experience and the lived lives of ordinary workers, demands careful, informed research. This requires us to

expand the range of topics that we cover to include such things as leisure, family, religion, culture, value systems, linguistic usage, emotions, vagrancy, illegal absence, and desertion. Particularly fascinating in the story of indenture are tradition, religion and culture. How did supposedly 'primordial' ways of living settle in the colonies? In South Africa, for example, we see the inversion of tradition in the dowry system; commemoration of Muharram not as a (Shia) Muslim religious festival but as a celebration of the indentured; and contestation and debates of what it meant to be Indian as opposed to the 'culture' of indigenous people and white colonialists.

Tiwari's paper is an outstanding example of new vistas that can be opened by broadening the research area. Tiwari examines the impact that separation had on families and friends and the relationship between migration and emotions. Following Anthony Giddens' *The Transformation of Intimacy*, there has been an increase in the study of the private life of individuals and in particular their emotional and psychic lives. Migration broke various intimate relationships and created an emotional vacuum both in the homelands and colonies, which resulted in the emergence of *bidesiabhav* (emotionality). *Bidesiabhav* involved people sitting in groups after a hard day's work and singing songs of separation. It played a crucial role in keeping alive memories of homeland which helped them to cope with the hardships of plantation life, the de-rootedness of the diasporic experience, and to subvert the 'coolie status' in their everyday lives. This is an example of the agency that we are referring to, of the innovative and creative ways in which the indentured attempted to make sense of their lives in their new setting. They were not simply browbeaten into submission.

Muharram (as it was called in Natal, but popularly known as 'Hosey' in the West Indies and 'Tazia' in Fiji)provides another example of the ways in which the indentured found space to claim agency and live a meaningful social life. Cultural resistance in the form of establishing places of prayer, leisure activities, music, religious activities, the smoking of *dagga*, and establishment of family, all helped the indentured to cope with the repressive labour regime. Muharram, or Hosey, or Taziawas the only festival that was declared a 'national' holiday on the plantations in several colonies. In Natal, workers were given three days off work. The festival was observed to commemorate the death of the Prophet's grandsons, Hassan and Hussain at the battle of Kerbala. In some colonies, such as Fiji, and in many parts of other colonies, it was a sad, slightly mysterious occasion. Men and women cried as the tinsel mausoleum was ceremoniously 'cremated' in the nearby river. Generally it was a cathartic experience of dispensing with the burdens of indentured life, if only for a moment. In the West Indies, and also in Natal, participants drank during the festival, but elsewhere they did not.

As Desai points out, while Muharram was ostensibly a religious occasion, in Natal, many participants turned it into a carnival of exuberance, exhibitionism and

"noise" as the indentured, once a year streamed out of the plantations and the barracks and took over the streets. In examining police reports, 'eyewitness' accounts, newspaper articles, and photographs, there were street scenes reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the medieval carnival as 'the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom and abundance.… Carnival celebrated a temporary liberation from the … established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges and norms of prohibitions' (Bakhtin, 1968: 44).

Muharram became a transgressive space, albeit a celebration permitted, but increasingly proscribed, by law. As the indentured mocked each other during the processions, they also mocked the morals and "rules" of the ruling class. Muharram celebrations provided an opportunity to forge wider bonds outside of one's immediate setting. The imaginary homeland that the indentured reconstructed in Natal, and virtually all indentured colonies, allowed them to not simply become victims of race and class oppression, but to create spaces of refuge against the excesses of white rule. In time, other feasts and festivals, such as Diwali, Eid, Holi, the six-foot dance, fire-walking, celebrating the building of temples, and so on, would play similar roles in helping the indentured not only to cope with indenture, but also to establish deep and spreading roots in their new environments.

Many migrants were destroyed by what the system of indenture allowed employers to get away with. The rampant diseases on plantations, the horrible living conditions, and social dislocation have been widely recorded. But this is only part of a complex story. As the papers in this Special Issue argue, how the indentured responded to the system makes for fascinating reading. Biographies are one way to get a glimpse into the shadows and ambiguities of a world that was left behind and a new life that was to be made. Indenture was not slavery. It was for a limited time and was not passed on to one's descendants, the system underwent changes over time, the plantation was not a "total" system of control, and migration was a liberating experience for some who may have sought an escape from India.

The Many Returns

Most migrants probably saw emigration as a short term measure and intended to return. There were many like Brij V. Lal's grandfather and his contemporaries in Fiji who wanted to return but did not do so (Lal, 2001). Back on what they thought was 'home' soil, returnees slowly realised that indenture had changed them and also set them apart as the 'other'. Their hallowed 'motherland' had all the appearance of a 'foreign' country. Re-integration proved difficult because of the loss of caste and social and cultural rejection by villagers. One particularly tragic story is that of Munigadu who, finding life untenable in India, returned to South Africa by walking 2,000 miles from Dar es Salaam to the Zululand border where he was apprehended and deported back to India in 1924 after a number of unsuccessful

legal wrangles (Desai and Vahed, 2010: 426-429). Govinden, in this volume, points to the example of Jhumun who returned to India from Mauritius, but came back to the colony within a year. Dew also provides a wonderful example, that of Chandrashekhar Sharma in British Guiana. Both Jhumun and Sharma, interestingly, became religious figures of note.

Govinden also discusses the quite remarkable stories of Gokoola, who arrived as an indentured worker but became a major employer of indentured labour. There are other similar narratives across the colonies. Boodha Dulel Sing (8726), a Rajput, arrived in Natal in September 1874. After serving his indenture with Glasgow Natal Sugar Co. in New Guelderland on the north coast, he bought a few acres of land in Nonoti and began planting sugar cane, tobacco and vegetables. In 1880, he married Lukhia, the colonial-born daughter of Subnath Bissoonoth Roy and Beemby Keenoo. They had five sons and three daughters. By the time Boodha Sing died on 15 November 1919, his farm 'Hyde Park' measured almost 5,000 acres, and employed over 100 Indian workers (NAB, MSCE 4800/1919).

In most colonies, the ex-indentured were given parcels of land after completing their indentures as an incentive for them to remain in the colony to augment the labour force and also because there was reluctance to fund repatriation, despite its guarantee in the Agreement of indenture.This resulted in Indians becoming a permanent part of these societies. In Mauritius, many immigrants who had served their contracts either bought or rented land for market gardening. This led to the emergence of a small but affluent rural Indian peasantry which grew in size and influence in the period after 1870 when sugar barons who were experiencing financial difficulties, sold their marginal lands to Indian immigrants. Richard Allen (1999) has written of this '*Great Morcellement Movement'*. In Natal, there was provision for land grants, but the settlers, fearing the presence of a large Indian population, only made fifty such grants and refused all further requests. This did not stop the emergence of a thriving Indian market gardening community (Desai and Vahed, 2010). In British Guiana, Indians settled in villages that seemed to replicate life in India. Many thrived as rice cultivators (Bisnauth, 2007: 134-187).We need to carefully examine the options available to the ex-indentured and the outcomes of opportunities seized.

Race and Gender

Another aspect of the indentured experience that needs to be carefully considered is gender relations amongst the indentured and gender-specific exploitation. While this issue is not dealt with separately in this volume, there are many important questions about gender and gender relations that students of indentured labour systems need to begin to address in a very direct manner. Were there differences in the experiences of men and women when it came to the recruitment process? Did men and women migrate for different reasons? Were there differences in the process

by which men and women were incorporated into the capitalist plantation economy? What were their respective roles within the family in the new setting? What consequences did the shortage of women have on both men and women, on crime, on family, on colonial societies in general? What was the reproductive role of women? What burdens, physical and psychological, did childbearing have on women? Can we provide revisionist perspectives to restore the status of women from that of Hugh Tinker's 'sorry sisterhood of single, broken creatures' into historical pioneers?

Carter (1994) has done some important foundational work, with the likes of Beall (1982), Emmer (1985), Lal (1985), Pool and Singh (1999), Poynting (1994), Reddock (1986), Seenaraine (1999), Shepherd (2002, 2002a, 1999), and Shepherd, Brereton, and Bailey (1995) also broaching the issues in various ways.At the broadest level, the literature is divided between those who argue that women were victims of the indentured system, as they suffered 'multiple oppression' and were subjected to 'sexploitation' and 'ultraexploitation', and that theirs was a story of 'freedom denied' (e.g.,Beall, 1982; Poynting, 1994; and Reddock, 1986)and those who argue that indenture allowed women to escape from a hierarchical and exploitative social system in India (e.g., Emmer, 1985 and Northrup, 1995).While there is evidence that some women were sexually and otherwise exploited by men, both Indian and white, and that structural conditions made women dependent on men as they were paid lower wages and received less food rations and, in general, that their burdens stretched beyond just issues of sustenance and labour, we cannot settle the debate here. Shepherd (2002: xviii) believes that 'it is arguable whether an either / or perspective is useful or sustainable in light of the paucity of gender-differentiated data on emigration and indentureship'.

The study of the "private lives" of indentured migrants, a field so well developed amongst slavery scholars, can help illuminate the gendered indentured experience. This will require much more in-depth research, including gender differentiated data on such things as the abuses on emigrant ships during the Middle Passage, gender differentiated quantitative data on remittances, the value of jewellery taken back to India by men and women, the real estate owned by men and women in the colonies, the savings held in the colony according to gender, and so on (Shepherd, 2002: xviii). In short, more sound empirical work is required to shed light on the questions raised with regard to gender relations in the colonies.

This volume also does not deal directly with the "race" question, though race forms an important part of the story and needs further investigation. One aspect of this is the relationship between (white) settlers and the indentured. It was easier for the white overseers and masters to exploit the indentured because they looked upon them condescendingly because of their race. From the time of the Enlightenment, a growing European discourse arose about the industrialised Europeans' intellectual, cultural, religious and scientific superiority in relation to

the rest of the world. Edward Said argued in his highly influential work, *Orientalism*, that this discourse was crucial in allowing Europeans to dominate the Orient, and other 'backward, degenerate, uncivilised and retarded' colonials. Orientals, he continues, 'were rarely seen; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined, or – as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory – taken over' (Said, 1978: 32).

Additionally, more research needs to be done on relations between indentured Indians and indigenous peoples, not just with indigenous peoples, but also with former slave populations and other ethnic communities. The preoccupation with "race" in terms of 'white-black' or 'white-brown' is limiting in the quest for a fuller understanding of the indentured experience."Race" was a factor influencing relations between *all* of the communities within the multi-cultural / racial societies often brought into existence as a result of indentured immigration. The key issue that needs examination is how, and why, different communities viewed each other in particular ways, and how and why their perceptions of both others and themselves (which brings us back to important questions about the dynamics of identity formation) *differed through time*. This is an issue that requires a conscious effort to transcend an ahistoricity and for an equally conscious effort to compare what happens in various colonies.

The introduction of indentured labour to Natal, Fatima Meer wrote, undermined the negotiating power of the Zulu vis-à-vis white settlers. Thus, whatever African 'perceptions of Indian indentured workers was in 1860, included in it must have been the suspicion, if not the knowledge, that they had been brought in … to be used against them in ways perhaps not immediately understood' (1985: 54). Much the same applied in other colonies. Settlers exacerbated tensions by placing indigenous peoples in positions of authority over Indians, as overseers and policemen, and often used them to punish Indians. Racial tensions were found in most settings, the most extreme case probably being Fiji, of which Brij V.Lal has written voluminously (see Lal, 2011 for some of these debates). One of the most remarkable aspects of the story is that despite the grave shortage of Indian women, there were relatively few recorded instances of interracial marriage between Indian men and African or indigenous women (Javanese in Indonesia or Fijians). Whether this was due to caste endogamy or religious prohibition is unclear; interracial unions were frowned upon and this was a factor in keeping racial groups apart. Another crucial question, to paraphrase Madhavi Kale, is to what extent Indians were 'victims and unwilling instruments' and to what extent they were 'cannily complicit' in the creation of a racially inflected society in colonial Natal (1999: 110–111).

Across the colonies, as the indentured and ex-indentured sought to make a life, they faced different challenges. In Fiji, the fact that Indians made up nearly half the population meant that they could contemplate the exercise of political power, but also face the galvanizing of the indigenous peoples as a response to this

mobilization. In Mauritius, Indians could exercise political power, given that they were in the majority. In the Indies this took on a different complexion in Guiana than, for example, in Jamaica. In South Africa, as indicated, much of the way in which Indians responded was determined by the existence of white minority rule until the last decade of the twentieth century.

Into the present, India once more looms large in the lives of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the indentured. There are multiple reasons for this, but it has in part been pushed by the Indian government which inaugurated the category of non-resident Indian (NRI) for both economic and political reasons in 1973. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India extended NRIs by introducing the People of Indian Origin (PIO) card in 1998 which made it easier to extend that affective link into a material one. The economic reason was to raise foreign exchange while, politically, this was part of a wider 'effort by the right-wing Indian government to convert diverse, often wealthy populations of Indian origin into a permanently attached "expatriate nation", or a "global Indian family"' (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005: 34). At the 2008 Bharatiya Pravasi Divas (Global Indian Diaspora), Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced that Indian professionals with Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards could work in India. The OCI card was introduced in 2006. There are differences between the PIO and OCI cards. The OCI, for example, entitled the holder to lifelong visa-free travel to India while the PIO was for a period of fifteen years. In early 2011, the two cards were merged.

Old Journeys, New Flight Paths

While qualitative research is important in charting the ways forward, this is not to suggest that quantitative work has no place in the story. For the most part, the history of the indentured has been captured by a meticulous checking of ship lists to reveal the names, caste, religion, height, and village of origin of the indentured. The work of Lal (1983) and later, Bhana (1991) are examples of this. This work was important and as Dew shows in this volume, we need to build on it to construct an International Indian Indentured Labour Database which has not been done in most of the colonies that received indentured labour. A statistical computer database, especially one accompanied by the digitization of sources online, will meet the growing demand for such information within the Indian diaspora. It will also facilitate comparative research into indenture and allow scholars to undertake original historical research without having to visit distant archives. Such information will enrich the field of indentured Indian research. Dew's discussion of the lives of Goeroepersad Girbaran, Jacob Ramsahai, and Chandrashekhar Sharma shows the possibilities that such painstaking and creative research holds. One example points to the possibilities of a database which allows for the tracking of the movements of Indian migrants across colonies. Goordeen Bhagoo and his wife Golaba Lalsa arrived in Natal on the *Warora* in April 1890. He was 25, she 20. They were of the

caste Ahir (cattle tender) from Lucknow, though the ship's list has them as 'resident of (French) Guadeloupe', which is located in the eastern Caribbean Sea. Born in Lucknow in 1865, Goordeen moved to Guadeloupe in 1881. After five years he returned to Lucknow, married Golaba and emigrated to Natal. He served his indenture and thereafter opened several general dealer stores in Northern Natal. He also farmed and was prominent in the 1913 strike under the leadership of Gandhi. He built a temple in Newcastle and was a renowned wrestler. He was a major community figure until his death in 1942 (Desai and Vahed, 2010: 76).

Students of indenture need to write on the agency of the indentured, and to do so by going beyond the names on ship-lists, villages and caste origins, allocations to plantations, and the authoritarian labour regimes under which they laboured, so that a richer and more complex history of indenture may be uncovered. Did any of the indentured come voluntarily? If so why? What was it that motivated return migrants? What was it that allowed the indentured to survive a repressive system? What role did culture, religion, and leisure play in this context? What economic role did indentured workers play in the plantation economies? Why did the ex-indentured choose to remain in the colonies? How exactly did indentured immigrants establish their lives in the colonies? What opportunities and constraints did the different receiving colonies offer? Our research should be guided by such questions in order to provide a solid foundation for comparisons with the Indian indentured workers who went to various countries, and beyond, with those who were indentured within India itself, or in Assam, Ceylon, Malaysia, and Queensland, and the Chinese who went to Peru, Cuba, and elsewhere, as well as with other labour regimes both during and prior to this period.

A comparative perspective will allow us to go beyond the "Indo-centrism" of so much of the work on indentured labour and expand our knowledge and understanding of the indentured experience. Even Kondapi and Tinker, who focused on Indian indentured immigration as a global process, did so to the exclusion of indentured immigration from other parts of the world, such as, for example, Africa, China, Japan, Java, and Melanesia. Only Northrup (1995) has made a sustained attempt to approach indenture as a global phenomenon, both geographically and ethnically. While the indentured labour trade began in British colonies, it soon expanded to many other locations around the world. Northrup includes Africans and South Pacific Islanders in his discussion of indentured workers during this period and provides a comparative study of the motives, conditions of travel, and creation of overseas settlements.It is on the basis of comparative work, we believe, that serious thought can be given, and theorising done, on current notions of the impact of colonialism and capitalism as it spread across the globe from the late nineteenth century, on the relationship between the indentured and the slaves and their descendants, as well as the relationship between the indentured and those indigenous to the lands in which they sought to make permanent lives, and, finally,

between diasporic Indians and those at "home" (see Lal, 2011 for an eloquent discussion of many of these themes).

In this collection we bring together research on Indian indenture from a variety of locales. We hope that it encourages a deepening of networks among those working on the story of indenture, encourages younger scholars to enter the field, and inspires much more comparative work so that the field of indentured labour studies transcends parochialism and writes across the nation-state and the oceans.

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