

Indians in Mauritius and Fiji

Christine Smart, M.L.A.

The experience of Indian indentured servants in two British colonies reveals some similarities and differences according to country. Mauritius was the first colony to employ Indian indentured servants in 1834 after the end of slavery in the British Empire. Fiji was the last colony to bring in Indians to work sugarcane plantations in 1879. The ignorance on the part of Indians regarding travel, actual work involved, and plantation life was tempered by the Indian's tenacity once in country. Exploring the legacy of the past along with the current situations leads to a better understanding of multi-ethnic populations around the world.

The emancipation of slaves in the British Empire in 1833 led to the replacement of this labor by Indian indentured servants. Indian indenturement began in Mauritius in 1834 and ended in Fiji in 1916. During this eighty-year period, over one million Indians migrated into at least eight countries. Was there any difference between slavery and indenture? What were the social consequences to the Indians themselves? The focus is on these and other questions in regard to the first and last countries to employ Indians as indentured servants.

More specifically, this paper explores 1) the background of each country and why Indians were introduced; 2) the similarities and differences in the systems of indenture concerning recruitment, plantation life, and the treatment of women; and 3) repercussions of the indenture legacy in the 21st century and the political implications this legacy has for both countries.

Mauritius

Mauritius was the first British colony to import free labor from another part of the British Empire on a large scale. The small, uninhabited island was first noted on maps by Arab sailors and, by the sixteenth century, the Portuguese had used it as a stopover point between India and Madagascar. The Dutch and their slaves occupied the island from 1658 to 1710 and named it Mauritius after Prince Maurice of Orange.

The French acquired Mauritius in 1716, and renamed it the Isle-of-France. The British Royal Navy realized the problems inherent in control of this island by France when trading routes to the Indian Ocean became blocked. The English captured the island in 1810 and returned the name, Mauritius, to the island. By the time England took over, Indian traders, laborers, houseboys, jewelers, and shoemakers already lived on the island.[\[1\]](#)

The abolition of slavery in the British colonies by Parliament in 1833 was followed by a labor crisis. The freed slaves were supposed to continue working, but as paid servants for the first four years following emancipation. The period was called "apprenticeship" and was intended to teach the newly freed people some useful trade before the restoration of full freedom. This scheme did not work, as many freed slaves did not want to learn a trade or wait four more years;

consequently, many purchased their freedom before the four apprentice years expired.

The introduction of indentured Indians was the planters' response to this labor shortage. The contracts for labor were read to the recruits before they put their thumb-impressions on the agreements in the presence of the Chief Magistrate. Thus, they appeared to accept the terms of the agreement by their own volition. The planters were accustomed to slave labor on a plantation. Now they had to adjust to indentured labor on a plantation, and sometimes the distinction between the two forms of labor was blurred.

Questions arose concerning the ability of the Indians to understand these contracts of labor, but early importation gradually developed into a steady flow. Between 1834 and 1839, there were 25,458 Indians introduced into Mauritius, yet only 500 were females.^[2] Governor Nicolay (1833-40) attributed the disorder and mayhem on some estates to this paucity of women. It was in this deceitful climate that the beginning of Indian migration as indentured servants began.

Fiji

The story of indentured servants in Fiji begins with Fiji's Deed of Cession to Britain in 1874. Fiji was not a conquered nation; it asked to be ceded and was only accepted with the condition that it had to govern itself with its own means. This left the first Governor, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon (1875-1882), scrambling to devise a scheme for moneymaking that would insure the colony's self-sufficiency. Gordon was persistent in his attempt to preserve Fijian culture and society; therefore, no Fijians would be asked to work on plantations because that would contribute to the breakdown of the village system and disrupt the balancing scales between the Fijian Chiefs and Governor Gordon. He also realized that native populations were more difficult to control than an imported labor force. Gordon determined that plantation agriculture was the answer; specifically sugar.

In 1876, the Colonial Office in England allocated funds for Indian immigration to Fiji, yet the first Indians did not arrive until 1879. The delay was principally due to resistance from the planters. According to Gillion, most planters had small estates (200-1,000 acres), were in debt, and could neither afford the large initial payments needed for Indian immigrants nor the hospital requirements that were set forth in the draft Indian Immigration Ordinance.^[3]

Yet, despite protests from the planters, the *Leonidas* arrived in May of 1879 carrying 464 Indians. Gordon then contracted the Colonial Sugar Refining Company based in Australia to run all the plantations in 1880. The planters had to answer directly to the company effectively privatizing the sugar industry and creating a monopoly. Due to Governor Gordon's effort, the colony would achieve economic solvency and maintain traditional, hierarchical structures of the Fijian chiefly system.

Similarities and Differences

The systems of indenture pertaining to Mauritius and Fiji shared some similarities and demonstrated many differences, particularly in regard to the recruitment of Indians, life on the

plantation, and the treatment of women.

The competition for recruits between the colonies was stiff. As the first British colony to import Indians, Mauritius gained advantage among the Indians because many had at least heard of Mauritius or already had relatives there. Mauritius offered a short outward voyage, an inexpensive return passage, and an indenture period of five years.

This contrasts with Fiji where allotments for specific estates had to be sent to the Immigration Office before a fixed day of the year. This was a statement of the number of recruits an estate owner was requesting. The number of recruits received by a plantation, if any, was conditioned upon the status of the estate. Situations such as a proprietor in arrears, an estate without a hospital, or an unacceptable Indian mortality rate were some reasons for the denial of laborers to an estate.^[4] Such restrictions were not a part of the Mauritius system where laborers were allotted to estates by the colonial government after their arrival in country.

Recruitment tactics used to entice Indians ranged from promises of money and easy work to promises of reuniting with family members. One example involves Devi Singh, who was working in Calcutta when:

an arkatti came and told me I could get a job working in the canefields but all I would have to do would be walk around with a stick. And when I registered I was told to give my age as 20 years. I was attracted because I was offered a better wage of 12 annas per day. We were told Fiji was 700 miles, and an island. Had I known the real distance, I would not have come, it was too far from home.^[5]

The conviction of the anti-coolie-trade lobby that there was little understanding among the migrants of the locations of colonies or of the lengths of the sea voyages gained ground amidst evidence that, once confronted with the ship, some migrants threw themselves overboard rather than be carried out to sea. Traveling by sea was reserved for only certain trading castes; so crossing the ocean, for most Indians, meant the loss of caste followed by severance of familial ties. Rajcomar, for example, jumped off the ship that was to transport him to Mauritius. He had already been employed in Calcutta for two years. Part of his job was guarding Indians who were being transported from the depot to the ship. On one occasion, after marching the Indians aboard the ship, he turned to disembark, when he found he had been included on the list of embarking emigrants. He protested in vain, then, in his words:

about 20 persons from the ship came on the dhingy [sic] and seized and dragged me on board the ship; and the gentleman on board the ship struck me five or seven blows with a rattan, and forcibly detained me on board; I again remonstrated, and told him I would never go with him, as I was not a Coolie, and having said this, I jumped overboard, leaving all my clothes on board; but three dhingies being sent after me, I was taken up by one of them, and was taken on board ship with my hands tied; I then called out 'Dohoye' and said That I would kill 20 men before I would submit to be forced away. This was explained to the gentleman on board by the serang of the ship; upon which he agreed to send me to the European who came with us on board . . . the European . . . ordered his servants to confine me; but having been detained for about an hour, I

was, after some consultation with his sircar, released.[6]

Avoiding the ship and the inherent voyage was a frequent occurrence in the indenture process. The terror in the realization that *Kala Pani*, or black water, awaited was tremendous.

Plantation Life

The plantation system and its farming techniques were based on slave labor. For indentured Indians, cultivation remained the same; everything was accomplished by manual labor. The organization of an estate was generally uniform in both colonies. Administration of an estate was either under a resident proprietor or a hired manager. Directly under the manager, and in charge of a certain number of work gangs, were Overseers. Each work gang had a *sirdar* (driver). The *sirdars* were usually Indian, although there were cases in Mauritius of Creoles employed as drivers. In Fiji,

rations were provided for the first six months, whereas, in Mauritius, rations were given the entire period, including any renewed indenture period. This was to ensure that Indians had food and would not starve themselves for the sake of saving money. It should be noted that women were not indentured in Mauritius as they were in Fiji and, consequently, did not receive rations. [7] In Mauritius, housing consisted of stonewalls usually four to five feet high or palisades made from aloe stalks and thatched roofs with no ventilation except for the doors.[8] Housing in Fiji was referred to as "coolie lines" and consisted of long, rectangular buildings, each containing eight to ten small rooms divided by partitions that did not reach the metal roof. A family, however large, occupied a single room to live and raise any children. There were no separate areas for cooking or latrines within the building.

The contractual arrangements for work varied as well. In Mauritius, immigrants were bound to work for seven days a week, two hours on Sundays and nine hours on the other six days. Work on the plantation consisted primarily of task work. Task work consisted of a flat fee for a specific amount of work, whereas "time" work was paid by the hour. The task system was adopted almost universally for the indentured East Indian as it had been for the African slave before him, even in Fiji where no Africans had been used as slaves. Over-tasking was endemic in this system.

For some Indians the work was not too difficult, as was the case for an indentured Indian in Fiji who was happy tending the horses, or another who, by his own account, spent five years picking coconuts for a copra estate.[9] These examples are certainly not the norm. For most East Indian indentured workers, life on the sugarcane fields was difficult to endure and, despite regulations regarding work hours, the labor required was daunting. According to Mahabir of Fiji, not only were the days long, but if the indentured Indians balked at tasks, the overseer's response was severe in order to deter other Indians from complaining.[10] In 1865, eighty immigrants in Mauritius complained that the tasks took too long to complete in the time allotted. The Overseer's reaction to this complaint was to cut their allowance of rice in half. The complainers were imprisoned, marked absent, and two days' wages were deducted as if they were absent without leave.[11]

In Fiji, the burden of work on female workers was heavy. They not only had to work on the cane fields from the early morning to evening but also had the added responsibility of taking care of the children and preparing the family meals.[\[12\]](#) Endless work was not the only problem facing these women. The fact that women were so outnumbered in both colonies put a premium on a woman's body. Many were forced into situations not of their choosing, serving as "kept women". Arthur Gordon, the Governor of Mauritius, noted when he took office in 1870:

Too generally the planters had mistresses, usually half-castes, while the overseers and managers almost invariably lived with Indian women; and I was assured that the provision of pretty girls was almost a recognized form of hospitality on a plantation when the visitors were young men. The traditions of the time of slavery were retained.[\[13\]](#)

The chaotic effect of this arrangement proved to be a dangerous one for women. This type of relationship sometimes provoked plantation riots. On a more personal level, the argument that women on plantations could explore sexual freedom for the first time in their lives must be tempered with the Hindu male's tradition of murder for the sake of honor. It was not unknown for a husband to "chop," or brutally murder, a wife whom he believed to be unfaithful.

The Legacy

For most of the indenture period, the people of India treated emigration with silent disapproval. Recruiting was considered disreputable, and once relatives left, they usually never returned. This disapproval would not become active resistance until after the turn of the century with the political awakening of India.

In the aftermath of the indenture period, the indentured laborers actually conquered the land to which they had been brought in such humble condition. Roughly thirty percent of emigrants eventually returned to India, while the remainder stayed in country. New ties and new families kept them in their adopted countries, and possibilities after indenture were void of caste restrictions. Indians comprise sixty-eight percent of the current population of Mauritius. The Indian population in Fiji has dwindled from over fifty percent at one time to forty-four percent, ranking second to the fifty-one percent Fijian majority. The resilience and tenacity of indentured Indians and their progeny cannot be overstated.

Mauritius is currently exalted as a shining example of multi-cultural success. It is an independent republic with a constitutional monarchy consisting of an Indian President and an Indian Prime Minister. Its record of peaceful co-existence within its ethnic populations is attributed by Carroll and Carroll to: 1) widespread consultations on policy with a civic network that incorporates all interested organizations, 2) symbolic recognition of the right of an ethnic group to play a full role in social and political life, 3) power-sharing that includes all communities and leads to a perception of social justice and government legitimacy, and 4) institutional representation of the communities by the party system.[\[14\]](#) They also note that Mauritius had no indigenous population to proclaim land or aboriginal rights.

On the other hand, Fiji's once shining example was tarnished with the bloodless military coup in 1987 following the election of the first coalition government involving the Indian

influenced Labor Party. The situation erupted again in May 2000 after the Labor Party again won the election. Fijians have been characterized as friendly and laid-back, but when democratic election results appear to threaten aboriginal rights, usurping political power has proven to be the modus operandi. Indians seem to be tolerated as long as political ambition is not a factor. Within these political scenes, the Indians in both Mauritius and Fiji have maintained their cultural identity, and it is preserved today, even with the bittersweet taste of sugar on their lips.

Bibliography

Ali, Ahmed. *Plantation to Politics: Studies on Fiji Indians* (Suva: University of the South Pacific and the Fiji Times and Herald Limited, 1980).

Allen, Richard. "Indian Immigrants and the Legacy of Marronage; Illegal Absence, Desertion and Vagrancy in Mauritius, 1835-1900," *Itenario*, 21, (Spring 1997): 98-110.

Carroll, Barbara Wake and Terrance Carroll. "Accommodating Ethnic Diversity in a Modernizing Democratic State: Theory and Practice in the Case of Mauritius," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23, (Jan 2000): 120-139.

Carter, Marina. "Indian Indentured Migration and the Forced Labour Debate," *Itenario*, 21, (Spring 1997): 52-61.

Carter, Marina. *Voices of Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).

Chapman, J. K. *The Career of Arthur Hamilton Gordon First* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964).

Derrick, R. A. *A History of Fiji* (Suva: Government Press, 1946) Volume I *Fiji Sun: Indian Progress in Fiji 1879-1979*, Special Edition, 1979.

Gabaccia, Donna. *From the Other Side* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994). Pgs.1-24.

Gillion, K. L. *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962).

Girmit: A Centenary Anthology 1879-1979. (Suva, Fiji: Ministry of Information, 1979).

Hollett, David. *Passage from India to El Dorado* (London: Associated University Press, 1999).

Hutchins, Francis G. *The Illusion of Permanence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.)

Kale, Madhavi. *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indenture Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

Kale, Madhavi. "Opening Salvo; Making a Labor Shortage in Post-Abolition British Guiana," *Itinerary*, 21, (Spring 1997): 62-72.

Lal, Brij. "Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 22, (1985): 55-71.

Lal, Brij. "Veil of Dishonour: Sexual Jealousy and Suicide of Fiji Plantations," *The Journal of the South Pacific*, 20, (1985): 135-155.

Lawrence, K. O. *A Question of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875-1917* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

Mahabir, Noor Kumar. *The Still Cry: Personal Accounts of East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago During Indentureship* (Tacarigua, Trinidad: Calaloux Publications, 1985).

Mangru, Basdeo. *Benevolent Neutrality: Indian Government Policy and Labour Migration to British Guiana 1854-1884* (Hertfordshire: Hansib Printing Limited, 1987).

Mangru, Basdeo. *Indenture and Abolition: Sacrifice and Survival on the Guyanese Sugar Plantations* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1993).

Merivale, Herman. *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1967).

Miege, Jean-Louis. *Indentured Labour in the Ocean and the Particular Case of Mauritius* (Leiden: Intercontinenta No. 5, 1986).

Mookherji, S. B. *The Indenture System in Mauritius, 1837-1915* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962).

Naidu, Vijay. *The Violence of Indenture* (Suva, Fiji: World University Service in Association with School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, Laucala Campus, 1980).

Quentrall-Thomas, Diane. *In Celebration of 150 Years of the Indian Contribution to Trinidad and Tobago* (Port-of-Spain: Historical Publications Ltd., 1995).

Ramesar, Marianne. *Survivors of Another Crossing: A History of East Indians in Trinidad, 1880-1946* (St. Augustine, Trinidad: University of the West Indies, 1994).

Ramphal, Shridath. *A Heritage of Oneness* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1988).

Scoble, John. "Hill Coolies: A Brief Exposure of the Deplorable Condition of the Hill Coolies, in British Guiana and Mauritius, and of the Nefarious Means by Which They Were Induced to Resort to These Colonies". (London: Harvey and Darton, 1839)

<www.indiana.edu/~librcsd/etext/scoble/>

Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: the Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London, New York, Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1974).

Yatra: the Journey of the Indian Presence in Trinidad & Tobago 1845-1995: Indian Arrival Day (Claxton Bay, Trinidad: East Indian Cultural Promotions, 1995). Edited by Harry Amarsingh.

Biographical Sketch

Christine Smart received a B.A. in History from Henderson State University in 1989 and a M.L.A. in 2000. She currently is an adjunct instructor of Oral Communication in the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts.

[1] S. B. Mookherji, *The Indenture System in Mauritius, 1837-1915* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962), p.12.

[2] S. B. Mookherji, p. 17.

[3] K.L.Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962),. p.13.

[4] Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), p.34.

[5] Ahmed Ali, *Girmit: A Centenary Anthology 1879-1979* (Suva, Fiji: Government of Fiji Press, 1979), p.49.

[6] Parliamentary Papers 1841 (45) Calcutta Commission of Enquiry, Examination of Rajcomar, 13 December 1838, p. 83 as quoted in Carter, *Voices*, p.93.

[7] Carter, *Voices*, p. 48.

[8] Pravina Dhanda, "History of Indentured Immigration into Mauritius" (M. Ph. Thesis, University of London, 1970), p. 127.

[9] *Fiji Sun*, special edition, p. 64. Note copra is coconut that is dried with the oil intact and used for export.

[10] *Girmit: A Centenary Anthology 1879-1979* (Suva, Fiji: Ministry of Information, 1979), p. 50.

[11] Dhanda, p.106.

[12] Sumita Chatterjee, "Indian's Women's Lives and Labour: the Indentureship Experience in

Trinidad and Guyana 1845-1917” (Ph. D. diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1997)
p.137.

[13] Chapman, *Career of Arthur Gordon*, p.106.

[14] *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, January 2000. p.139.

Disclaimer: Henderson State University and the Office of Computer and Communication Services assume no responsibility for any information or representations contained in the student/faculty/alumni web pages. These web pages and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular individual or organization and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Henderson State University or its Office of Computer and Communication Services. All individuals publishing materials on the Henderson State University Web Server understand that the submission, installation, copying, distribution, and use of such materials in connection with the Web Server will not violate any other party's proprietary rights.