# Situating the 'Coolie Question': Indentured Labour and Post-Slavery Debates in Mid-Nineteenth Century Calcutta

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own, except where work which has formed part of jointly-authored publications has been included. The contribution of the candidate and the other authors to this work has been explicitly indicated below. The candidate confirms that appropriate credit has been given within the thesis where reference has been made to the work of others.

Some of the source materials contained in this thesis, especially in chapter 2, have been used in a jointly-authored book chapter: Purba Hossain and Sudipto Mitra, 'Protests in Print: Resistance against Indian Indentured Labour in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in *The Nation and its Margins: Rethinking Community*, ed. by Aditi Chandra and Vinita Chandra (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), pp. 90-108. The arguments derived from these sources, however, were developed by the author of this thesis alone. She was responsible for the sections focusing upon early and mid-nineteenth century Calcutta, which are the first two sections in the chapter.

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# Abstract

This thesis explores how voices from Calcutta—the colonial capital of British India—contributed to debates on the use of Indian indentured labour in British sugar plantations. The abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 had led to an immediate need for plantation workers. Indian indentured migrants filled this need through a standardised, government-sanctioned movement of labourers based on contracts or indentures. Between 1837 and 1920, around 1.3 million Indian indentured labourers migrated to overseas plantation colonies.

As the site of embarkation and disembarkation, Calcutta occupied a unique position in the global indenture networks—where local personages and periodicals participated in discussions on indenture. However, in spite of its significance within these networks, Calcutta has remained an unexplored node. This thesis addresses this lacuna. Instead of focusing on plantation colonies that indentured migrants immigrated *to*, it refocuses literature on a port-city that labourers embarked *from*. In doing so, it explores how pro- and anti-indenture voices from Calcutta framed the indenture trade, contributed to emigration regulations, and impacted upon post-Abolition understanding of 'free' and 'unfree' labour.

The main research outcomes of the thesis are three-fold. Firstly, it explores the role of Calcutta within global debates on indenture, thus centring Calcutta in indenture historiography. Secondly, it analyses the importance of the 'post-slavery' moment in defining ideas of servitude in the British Empire, and in framing the indenture debates. Thirdly, it uses the debates at Calcutta to comment on the nature of the British Empire, and to explore how metropolitan decisions and ideas of labour servitude were affected by inputs from geographically-disparate parts of the empire. In doing so, it contributes to a more multifaceted understanding of the British Empire, and helps highlight Calcutta's position within it.

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| APS | Aborigines Protection Society |
| BFASS | British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society |
| BIS | British India Society |
| BL | British Library, London |
| EIC | East India Company (also referred to as 'Company') |
| FOI | Friend of India |
| GG-MSS | Glynne-Gladstone Manuscript Collection, Gladstone's Library, Hawarden, Wales |
| IOR | India Office Records, British Library, London |
| NAI | National Archives of India, New Delhi, India |
| NL | National Library, Kolkata, India |
| NMML | Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, India |
| SAGK | Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge |
| WBSA | West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, India |

# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Arkatti | Middleman or Local Labour Recruiting Agent |
| Bhadralok | Members of the Bengali social class, generally prosperous and educated |
| Chakor | Servant |
| Coolie/Cooly | Indian indentured labourer |
| Dal | Group or cohort |
| Dhangar/Dhangur | Caste designation, often used to refer to physical labourers, or those with menial jobs |
| Dhobi | Washerman |
| Dohae/dohye | A cry for help. Literally, ‘have mercy’ |
| Duffadar | Agent or middleman in labour recruitment |
| Ghat | Pier, or a flight of stairs leading down to a river |
| Haat | Local, temporary (often weekly or bi-weekly) market |
| Kagaz | Paper or document |
| Kala Pani | Literally, ‘black water’. Refers to caste taboo on crossing the seas |
| Kangani | Foreman or middleman in labour recruitment |
| Khidmutgar | Servant, generally domestic servant |
| Kulin | Member of upper-caste brahmin or kayastha families |
| Lascar | Indian sailor or militiaman employed on ship |
| Para | Neighbourhood |

| | |
|---|---|
| Ryot | Peasant cultivator |
| Sati | Hindu practice of widow immolation in the pyre of deceased husband |
| Sepoy | Indian soldier serving under British orders |
| Sirdar | Foreman |
| Syce | Horse keeper or groomer |
| Zamindar | Landowner |

## Note on Terminology

The terms ‘indenture’ and ‘indentured migration’ do not apply exclusively to the labour trade between India and plantation colonies in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. There have been several intercontinental streams of migration of bonded labour, including the movement of white contractual labour to Spanish America, or of English, French and German indentured servants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[1] Even after slavery was abolished, European and Chinese indentured workers were employed in British plantation colonies. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the terms ‘indentured labour migration’ or ‘indenture trade’ refer specifically to the migration of Indian indentured (contract-bound) labourers to European sugar plantation colonies in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

In this thesis, the term ‘Calcutta’ has consistently been used to refer to the erstwhile British Indian capital. Although today renamed to ‘Kolkata’ to highlight the local pronunciation of the place-name, I use the older term to stay true to its historical use, especially as records from the time use ‘Calcutta’ to refer to the city.

Further, in this thesis, ‘Bengal’ refers to the Bengal Presidency, which was established in 1765 and soon emerged as the largest subdivision of British India. In the early- and mid-nineteenth century, this included parts of modern-day West Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. ‘Bengali’ refers to people who speak the Bengali language and consider themselves part of the Bengali culture. ‘India’ refers to the geographical area of the Indian subcontinent as a whole, unless mentioned as British India, in which case it refers only to the areas under British colonial rule. The term ‘Indian’, similarly, refers to people from the Indian subcontinent, and has often been used to highlight the fact that not all Indians who participated in the indenture debates in Calcutta were Bengali.

Indian names have been spelled variously in different records. For consistency, I have tried to stay true to the spellings of names in official records. For instance, the name of the Indian member of the Calcutta investigative committee has been spelled in

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[1] P.C. Emmer, *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), Introduction.

this thesis as Russomoy Dutt (not ‘Rosomoy’, which would be a more correct transliteration), because that is how his name is spelled in the Report of the Calcutta investigative committee. The British Caribbean colony has been spelled as British Guiana (not Guyana) for consistency.

All translations from Bengali, Hindi/Hindustani and French are by me (with the help of respective dictionaries), unless otherwise mentioned.

The use of the terms ‘coolie’, ‘coolie trade’ and ‘coolie question’ are explained in the introduction. The use of the term ‘public sphere’ to refer to the discursive space in colonial Calcutta has been explained in chapter 2.

# Introduction

On the east bank of the river near the Calcutta Port, there is a small 'ghat' (pier) bearing the name of a Caribbean Dutch colony—the Surinam Ghat. Seemingly out of place in a port-city about 15,000 km away from Surinam, it is named after the 'Surinam Depot' that used to accommodate Indian labourers migrating to Dutch Guiana (or Surinam)—a practice that started in 1873 with the sailing of the *Lalla Rookh* from Calcutta. For a long stretch in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the port-side of Calcutta was the site of several depots or warehouses—the Trinidad Depot, Mauritius Depot, British Guiana Depot and Surinam Depot—that bore testimony to Calcutta's involvement with the Indian indenture trade. Variously termed the Indian indenture trade or the 'coolie trade', this involved the movement of Indian labourers to European plantation colonies to work in the production of sugar.[2] In spite of its significance within global networks of indenture as a port-city and a site for debating the indenture trade, Calcutta has remained relatively unexplored in the literature on indenture. This is the lacuna that the present thesis addresses. This thesis explores debates on Indian indentured migration, and analyses the role of the British Indian capital of Calcutta in shaping ideas of labour and servitude in nineteenth-century British Empire. Instead of focusing on the plantation colonies that indentured migrants immigrated *to*, it refocuses indenture literature on a port-city that labourers embarked *from*. In doing so, this thesis investigates the ways in which voices from South Asia shaped the Indian indenture trade, and is the first comprehensive study of the role of Calcutta in the history of indentured labour and migrant mobility.

Empires have always been defined by movement—whether of goods, ideas or peoples. Bringing sugar to the metropolitan plate has a long and complicated history, involving overseas plantation colonies, absentee planters, lucrative commodity trade, labour migration across continents, slavery, and other forms of unfree labour. When slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, the empire straddled several plantation colonies. As Abolition deprived planters of their labour base, there was an

[2] The term 'coolie' is problematic because it bears a history of colonialism, stigmatisation and prejudice. It has been used in this thesis (within quotes) to reflect the complex historically-specific identity that the term invokes. Its use is discussed further in the 'Approach to Sources' section.

immediate drive to seek labourers to replace slaves in plantation colonies, especially since temporary apprenticeship of ex-slaves had failed to ensure a steady supply of labour for British sugar plantations. Sugar production was a labour-intensive process. Working on the plantations involved sowing, reaping, cutting and processing the sugarcane in sugar boiling units. Moreover, British planters had by this time invested thousands in setting up plantation estates, and formed strong parliamentary lobbies to push policies that safeguarded their profits from the sugar trade. After some unsuccessful attempts at using emancipated slaves and European labourers (mainly Portuguese labour from Madeira), Indian indentured labour emerged as the most popular and longstanding post-slavery labour system. Set against the backdrop of the British colonial regime in India, and colonial plantation regimes across the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, Indian labourers were recruited from eastern and southern Indian villages, entered into five-year labour contracts with planters, and sailed from the three major port cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

Just as the movement of commodities like sugar had necessitated the migration of labour across the British Empire, the movement of Indian indentured labourers immediately provoked an empire-wide debate on the validity of the trade. Merchants and planters in Britain and Calcutta had a direct stake in continued labour trade, and argued that the Indian indenture trade was indispensable for continuous sugar production, and by implication, maintenance of the British economy. Merchant views were most apparent in parliamentary debates, letters between British merchants and planters, and pro-indenture petitions from Calcutta and plantation colonies to the British government. But some in Calcutta and Britain saw it as slavery in all but name—a restrictive and exploitative system that needed to be suspended, if not abolished altogether. They questioned how far removed it was from the recently-abolished slavery, especially as it faced allegations of planter atrocity and deception during recruitment. This drew from the fact that the Indian indenture trade followed closely on the heels of a massive and empire-wide debate about the legitimacy of slavery—a debate that had opened up questions over whether certain kinds of labour regimes could be considered immoral and even illegal. Although traditionally studied as a discourse confined to metropolitan Britain, the ‘coolie question’ was in reality debated across Britain, Calcutta and the Caribbean—indenture regulations being formulated at the metropole with contributions from disparate parts of the British Empire. As the premier colonial capital, Calcutta also emerged as an arena for such questions, and emigration

policies came to be crafted (and often moulded) in accordance to reports from Calcutta. Moving away from the focus on the metropole and plantation colonies in most works on indenture, this thesis asks how Calcutta contributed to this debate, while also offering a new reading of the Calcutta public sphere.

Of the various spaces in which the indentured labour system operated, Calcutta had a central position. As the site of embarkation, accommodation and disembarkation of migrant labourers, it was key to the procurement of labour. As a space for the discussion of both pro- and anti-indenture arguments, however, it had impact beyond geographical and temporal boundaries. From a legal view-point, the indenture debates in Calcutta contributed directly to changing emigration regulations and led to post-slavery anxieties being written into law. From a discursive and ideological view-point, it had more far-reaching impact. Debates around the legal and moral consequences of the indenture trade help us understand wider post-slavery changes in the definition of labour, and also help situate Calcutta as an active participant in discussions within the British Empire, rather than a passive audience. This allows us to explore the indenture debates as not emanating from metropolitan Britain to affect its colonies, but as informed by debates and historical events from disparate parts of the empire. In doing so, this thesis reinserts Calcutta into the narrative of Indian indenture.

Analysing Calcutta's role in the indenture debates demonstrates that the post-slavery moment was an equally important unit of analysis that has remained unexplored in historical works on indenture. Debates over slavery, negotiations between merchants and anti-slavery organisations over its continuation, and the process leading up to Abolition affected how the indenture debates operated and impacted the rubrics used to judge the legal and moral validity of the indenture trade. Acknowledging the importance of the post-slavery moment in the history of Indian indenture helps us understand how legacies of slavery affected global ideas of movement, servitude and plantation labour. The debates at Calcutta thus not only highlight how voices from Calcutta contributed to colonial structures of power and the understanding of servitude, but also that the debates were coloured by a perceived relation between slavery and Indian indenture. As this thesis will demonstrate, the most visible marker of the post-slavery nature of the indenture debates was the explicit and constant comparison to slavery, and a tendency to frame the debate entirely within the dichotomy of 'free' and 'unfree' labour.

This thesis thus takes a triangulated approach to the history of indenture—exploring the importance of the city of Calcutta, the post-slavery moment, and the transnational networks in impacting this century-long labour system. In doing so, it addresses three interrelated research questions: How did Calcutta contribute to global debates on the legitimacy of the indenture trade? How important was the post-slavery moment in defining servitude and the parameters of 'free labour'? And, how were ideas of indentured servitude affected by inputs from disparate parts of the British Empire? This introduction is accordingly arranged to reflect this triangulated approach. The first three sections introduce the main analytical themes that frame this thesis. They discuss the importance of the city, the moment and the imperial network in separate sections, before going on to explore the position of this thesis in indenture historiography, the sources used for this study, and a breakdown of the thesis chapters.

## Framing the Thesis

### The City: Calcutta

How did Calcutta feature in the indenture debates? Established as an urban centre in 1690, the city of Calcutta had grown rapidly from a small riverine market into an imperial port city and ultimately the administrative capital of British India.[3] As port, *entrepôt* and colonial capital, Calcutta straddled commercial, political and administrative roles. As one of the most productive regions of the Mughal Empire, the region of Bengal boasted a strong agricultural and artisanal base supported by financial and communication networks conducive to international trade.[4] The strategic position of Calcutta as a riverine port and as a site frequented by merchants and weavers made it favourable for settlement. With the establishment of Fort William by British forces and declaration of the Fort as the seat of Presidency in 1706, this urban settlement transcended its commercial role as *entrepôt* and embarked on the process of becoming

[3] The site had been frequented by traders since the fifteenth century, but in 1690 the English East India Company officially secured permission to establish a mercantile settlement at the site. John Archer, 'Paras, Palaces, Pathogens: Frameworks for the Growth of Calcutta, 1800–1850', *City & Society*, 12:1 (2000), 19-54.

[4] Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and the Colonial Uncanny* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 8.

the colonial capital of British India and a premier city in the empire.[5] By 1773, it had become the administrative seat for the entirety of the East India Company's territories in the subcontinent.[6]

Calcutta was central to the global indenture networks by virtue of its position as a premier port and colonial capital of British India, and its geographical congruity to a hinterland with a steady supply of labour. This vast agricultural hinterland provided access to labourers who could be persuaded to work in difficult conditions for prospects of a better future—a situation that continued to encourage their recruitment as soldiers or *lascars* in the twentieth century. Calcutta also housed shipping companies and merchant-houses that helped recruit labourers for the burgeoning trade. When British planter (and father of four-time Prime Minister William Gladstone) John Gladstone started negotiating with Indian merchant companies to start a steady supply of indentured Indians to replace slave labourers in his West Indian sugar plantations, it was a merchant company at Calcutta that he contacted. Thus, it was in Calcutta that the establishment of the indenture trade was discussed, and it was from Calcutta that the first two ships carrying indentured labourers to the British West Indies sailed.[7] Calcutta was not the only port of migration, of course, but it was definitely the most significant. As the colonial capital of British India, decisions about indenture were often taken in consultation with local administrators, and legal conditions were added and changed according to opinions expressed in local meetings and news media. Moreover, early migration laws often used Calcutta as the main reference point when setting out provisions for indentured emigration, followed by acts that extended these provisions to Bombay and Madras. Indeed, in early emigration legislation, Calcutta was emblematic of port-cities that exported indentured Indians.

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[5] Farhat Hasan, 'Indigenous Cooperation and the Birth of a Colonial City: Calcutta, c. 1698–1750', *Modern Asian Studies*, 26:1 (1992), p. 70.

[6] Meera Kosambi and John E. Brush, 'Three Colonial Port Cities in India', *Geographical Review* (1988), p. 43. Calcutta remained the capital city of British India till 1911, when the seat was moved to Delhi.

[7] The two ships *Hesperus* and *Whitby* sailed from Calcutta in January 1838 to the British West Indies, carrying 165 and 280 Indian labourers respectively. This was the first of many voyages within a centrally organised system of labour, sanctioned and governed by the British parliament.

Calcutta maintained a pervading presence in contemporaneous literature on indenture, but has surprisingly remained on the margins of the historiography on indenture.[8] While Calcutta is mentioned in most works on Indian indenture—mainly as a point of embarkation or in a scene-setting chapter about the beginning of the indenture trade—it tends to be relegated to the background. Few works on indenture have explicitly sought to position Calcutta within the history of Indian indenture. Even when Indian indentured migration is studied within a particular geographic location, or in relation to certain physical spaces, it tends to be rooted in the plantation colony the migrants immigrated to, rather than the colonial capital they emigrated from.[9] Such works have failed to assert the centrality of Calcutta in contributing to global debates around indenture, and have especially failed to highlight the development of an active interest of the Calcutta public (albeit only a niche public) and the print media in the indenture question. This thesis addresses this lacuna by highlighting the importance of voices from Calcutta, thus fracturing the narrative of Calcutta as a mere port-city or *entrepôt*. It locates Calcutta within the global 'web' of indenture, from where labourers were exported to plantation colonies and where major decisions were taken regarding the regulation of the indenture trade. In a nutshell, it explores the role of Calcutta in shaping ideas of labour and servitude in the British Empire.

While literature on Indian indenture on the one hand has neglected to study the role of Calcutta within global networks of indenture, historians of Calcutta have also failed to analyse the city's century-long engagement with indenture. The history of Calcutta has been studied since the late-twentieth century, producing several analytical

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[8] Here I refer to histories of indentured migration to overseas plantation colonies. The importance of Calcutta, and especially the role of Brahmo Samajists, has been studied by historians of the inland 'coolie trade' to Assam tea plantations. See Samita Sen, 'Commercial Recruiting and Informal Intermediation: Debate over the Sardari System in Assam Tea Plantations, 1860–1900', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44:1 (2010), 3-28; Nitin Varma, *Coolies of Capitalism: Assam Tea and the Making of Coolie Labour* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2016); Jayeeta Sharma, ''Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43:6 (2009), 1287–1324; Kanailal Chattopadhyay, 'Assam Tea Plantation Labours and the Role of the Brahmo Samaj', in *The Varied Facets of History: Essays in Honour of Aniruddha Ray*, ed. by Ishrat Alam and Syed Ejaz Hussain (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011); Amar Datta, *Assam-e Cha-Coolie Andolon o Dwarakanath* [Tea-Coolie Protests in Assam and Dwarkanath] (Kolkata: Granthamitra, 2009).

[9] Such works have been discussed in the 'historiography and approaches' section.

accounts of the city.[10] However, the role of the city in global networks of labour migration, and in the Indian indenture trade in particular are rarely referred to in historical works on Calcutta. This erasure of the history of indentured labour from the history of colonial Calcutta also reflects on the public historical memory of the city, where Calcutta is mainly remembered as a premier colonial capital and the site of anti-colonial resistance throughout the twentieth century, but not as an important theatre in the century-long trade in Indian plantation labourers.

Although neglected in public and often academic memory, the indenture trade and debates over it were central to the colonial history of Calcutta. On the one hand, Calcutta's physical borders were imagined differently by different stakeholders in the indenture trade—the migrant, the indenture official, and the British state. For migrant workers, Calcutta represented the beginning of their journey overseas—the site where they realised their identity as an indentured labourer. It was during their stay at Calcutta, often in 'coolie depots', that they signed their contracts and often had emigration agents explain the system to them. Thus Calcutta became, in migrant imaginings, an extension of the global indenture networks. For indenture officials, the boundaries of Calcutta were more blurred. Calcutta was imagined as intricately linked with the eastern Indian hinterland through rail and road connections. Thus labourers 'from Calcutta' were most often from eastern Indian villages, connected to Calcutta only through internal networks

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[10] Key works on the history of Calcutta include J.S. Grewal ed., *Calcutta: Foundation and Development of a Colonial Metropolis* (Chandigarh: Urban History Association of India, 1991); Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Calcutta: 1964. A Social Survey* (Bombay: Anthropological Survey of India, 1968); Nisith Ranjan Ray, *Calcutta: Profile of a City* (Calcutta: Calcutta Press, 1986); Pradip Sinha, ed., *The Urban Experience: Calcutta, Essays in Honour of N.R. Ray* (Calcutta: Riddhi-India, 1986); Pradip Sinha, *Calcutta in Urban History* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1978); S.N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta, Myths and History* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1977); Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Calcutta, The Living City, Volume I: The Past* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990); Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Calcutta, The Living City, Volume II: The Present and Future* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1995); P.T. Nair, *Calcutta in the 18th Century: Impressions of Travellers* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1984); P.T. Nair, ed., *Calcutta in the 19th Century: Company's Days* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1989); P. J. Marshall, 'Eighteenth Century Calcutta', in *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context*, ed. by R.J. Ross and G. Telkamp (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), pp. 87-104; Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*.
Growth and town planning in Calcutta has been studied in works like Jeremiah P. Losty, *Calcutta: City of Palaces. A Survey of the City in the Days of the East India Company (1690-1858)* (London: British Library, 1990); Archer, 'Paras, Palaces, Pathogens'; Samita Gupta, 'Theory and Practice of Town Planning in Calcutta, 1817 to 1912: An Appraisal', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 30 (March 1993), 29-55.

of migration. For the British colonial state, however, Calcutta was a port-city supplying indentured labourers to its plantation colonies—the solution to the post-slavery labour crisis. It was also an important theatre for debates over indentured servitude, inputs from which contributed heavily to emigration regulations, and to the post-slavery understanding of labour servitude. Thus, the very visualisation of the boundaries of Calcutta and its position within imperial networks was coloured by its role in the indenture trade.

On the other hand, the coming together of Europeans and Indians in Calcutta to debate the indenture trade also contributed to the consolidation of a vocal public sphere in Calcutta, and raised this colonial capital to a position where voices from Calcutta could impact metropolitan legislation. Besides being central to the physical migration of indentured Indians, Calcutta also saw an unparalleled interaction of the colonial and the local elite in discussions around the system, rising as a key point in the global network of indentured labour.[11] This included landholders, merchants, reformers, educationists, philanthropists, Company officials, clerks, and missionaries. The question of how the indenture system should change or whether it should continue at all was vigorously debated by merchants and anti-indenture voices in the city. In fact, the importance of the indenture debate to the Calcutta public sphere is evident in the fact that it appeared about 225 times between 1838 and 1842 in news reports of 6 leading Calcutta periodicals (most of which were weeklies).[12] Both European and Indian residents of Calcutta came together in urban spaces such as the Town Hall, the meetings of organisations, and committees to debate the indenture trade. They closely followed the changes in emigration policies and commented on them, creating a space for discussions around the indenture question. In studying their contribution, this thesis demonstrates how the Calcutta public sphere in the mid-nineteenth century was vocal and interactive across racial boundaries—a characteristic that was central to Calcutta's contribution to global debates on indenture.[13]

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[11] Chapter 2 demonstrates how this interaction was 'unparalleled'. Indenture debates were one of the earliest discussions that brought Indians and Britons together over issues of common public interest.

[12] These include *Bengal Hurkaru, Bengal Spectator, Calcutta Courier, Calcutta Star, The Englishman,* and *Friend of India*.

[13] The nature of the Calcutta public sphere is discussed in chapter 2.

This thesis argues that voices from Calcutta played a significant role in influencing policy-making and public opinion of the indenture trade at the metropole and colonies. This was apparent in how frequently the debates at Calcutta were represented in British newspapers, and how they emerged as a point of discussion in official correspondence. In the British parliament, petitions from Calcutta were received and discussed in the House of Commons, and the recommendations of the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40 (an investigative committee led by prominent Calcutta citizens) were reflected in the 1842 emigration regulations. Moreover, as the following chapters will demonstrate, certain themes that emerged from the Calcutta debates were unique to its Indian context. This includes especially the idea of imperial responsibility towards its citizens, the racialisation of indentured migrants as ignorant and in need of spokesmen on their behalf, and the framing of both labourers and vocal Calcuttans who spoke in favour of their rights as citizens of the empire. In exploring these themes, this thesis brings together two questions—how did voices from Calcutta affect the indenture trade, and how can we use post-slavery indenture debates to enrich the history of Calcutta and its relationship with the wider British Empire.

**The Moment: 'Post-Slavery'**

This section discusses the second element of the triangulated approach—how important was the post-slavery moment in framing the indenture debates in Calcutta. Legalised by an act of government in 1837 and disbanded in 1917, Indian indenture was an eighty-year long labour system that was constantly changing according to reactions from pro- and anti-indenture voices. Instead of situating this labour system within a singular analytical framework, this thesis highlights the changes in the labour regime over time, and explores the debates on indenture in its early days. Focused on the contribution of Calcutta to indenture debates, this thesis emphasises how the indenture trade was discussed at this watershed moment after Abolition, when both at home and in the imperial sphere, the British government was concerned with defining 'free' labour, servitude, and the post-slavery labour regime. This section highlights the importance of the 'post-slavery' moment, and explains why this thesis focuses on the brief period between 1836 and 1842. This period not only brings to the fore the post-slavery concerns over free and unfree labour systems in the British Empire, but also coincides with a period of vigorous public debate over indenture in Calcutta. In focusing on this moment, this thesis considers the Indian indenture question mainly in terms of two historical contexts—the empire-wide debate on the legitimacy of slavery and Abolition,

and the changes in British labour legislation and the perception of employer-employee relationship with the passing of the Masters and Servants Acts.

Proposed in 1836 as a labour regime to replace slave labour on British plantations, the Indian indenture system had by 1837 emerged as a standardised system of labour migration regulated by imperial policies. After legal sanction of the indenture trade, the number of indentured migrants from India had increased from a total of 26,396 in 1831-40, to 132,738 in 1841-50—an increase of about 500%.[14] In fact, by the end of the nineteenth century, around 1.3 million Indian indentured labourers had migrated to the British colonies of Mauritius, British Guiana, Jamaica, Trinidad, Fiji, St. Lucia, Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Kitts, Malaya, Seychelles and South Africa, the French colonies of Guadeloupe, Guiana, Réunion and Martinique, Danish St. Croix, and Dutch Surinam. Distinct from spontaneous and private ventures of labour migration from India, the Indian indenture trade operated within a government-sanctioned framework, where labourers were bound by contracts (or indentures) to work in sugar plantations for at least five years, and planters were required by law to provide appropriate wages, food supplies, medical supplies and accommodation to the labourers, along with free return passage to their port of origin. Continuing in individual plantation colonies under changing emigration regulations, the indenture system ultimately came to an end in the early-twentieth century. It was disbanded by an act of government in 1917, and outstanding indentures were terminated gradually in individual colonies, all coming to an end in 1920.

The history of Indian indenture is complex—spread across various geographically disparate units with their own unique historical trajectories. Since its beginning in 1837, the indenture regime was extended to newer plantation colonies every few years, and changing emigration regulations (often in response to inputs from planters, indenture officials, and anti-indenture lobbies in parliament) was a defining feature of this labour system. This thesis addresses this complexity by teasing out the importance of particular historical moments in the history of Indian indenture. Instead of visualising the Indian indenture system as a monolith, this approach allows us to focus on its specificities—namely the effect of the post-slavery moment and voices

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[14] David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 156-57.

from Calcutta on the indenture debates. Ultimately, it seeks to highlight the centrality of both the city of Calcutta and the post-slavery moment in the scholarship on indenture.

Within Calcutta, the brief period between 1836 and 1842 was one of intense debate over the legal and moral repercussions of the indenture trade. These two rubrics developed through discussions over slavery and its abolition, and determined whether the indenture trade could be considered legally and morally acceptable after a law had been passed to delegitimise similar forms of plantation servitude. In meetings, petitions and news reports, British and Indian residents at Calcutta debated whether the indenture trade represented an exercise in free labour movement, or a revival of slave conditions. In response to petitions from both pro- and anti-indenture voices, the metropolitan government set up investigative committees in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Mauritius in 1838, discontinuing the indenture trade in 1839. The trade was only re-opened under planter-pressure in 1842 with several changes in regulations to cater to these criticisms. The 1842 regulations addressed many of the criticisms of indenture, mainly by increasing surveillance over recruitment and implementing most of the recommendations of the Calcutta investigative committee. This led to a steady decline of public debates on the legitimacy of indenture after 1842 in Calcutta. However, the processes and discussions that took place within the span of these few years came to determine the central tenets of the indenture trade.

Constant comparison between slavery and indenture had emerged as the most defining feature of this post-slavery moment—a comparison that was reflected in the debates, in petitions to discontinue the trade, in parliamentary speeches, as well as in questions posed by committees that investigated the abuses alleged to exist in the indenture system. The very nature of the Calcutta debates was thus shaped by the specific historical moment in which they were taking place. Slavery remained the main rubric against which this new labour regime was constantly judged. In a post-Abolition environment, the term ‘slavery’ held political weight and strengthened the anti-indenture argument. The notion of labour servitude that had been defined and consolidated in the immediate post-Abolition environment was based on a complete and immediate revocation of the Atlantic slave trade. Naturally, the labour regime created to replace slave labour was evaluated along the rubric of the recently-condemned slave trade.

This led anti-indenture activists to compare the emergence of the indenture trade to a revival of the slave regime, while merchants and planters continued to posit the difference between the two regimes as their main argument in favour of the indenture trade. The anti-slavery movement, and its eventual culmination into the abolition of slavery, had led to a distinct shift in both the legal definition and public opinion of the limits of servitude. Thus, British parliamentarians were keen to pass laws that restricted such unfree labour practices, British officials across India and the plantation colonies were keen on enforcing them, and the vocal public in Britain and India were eager to ensure that the indenture trade adhered to this post-Abolition moral framework. The lasting influence of slavery on interpretations of indenture has been studied by Hugh Tinker and other scholars to argue *whether* the indenture trade was similar to slavery.[15] This thesis takes that argument forward to analyse *why* comparison to slavery remained the defining feature of the indenture debates in its early years, and *how* this framed the indenture debates and resultant emigration regulations. This thesis's focus on the post-slavery moment and how it impacted global debates on indenture showcases how massively and permanently Abolition had changed the world-view of the British public. Thus, the point is not to write the history of a decade, but highlight how important this moment was in the century-long history of indenture.

This thesis thus uses 'post-slavery' as a conceptual premise to describe a particular juncture in labour discussions. Although this term has been used in literature on unfree labour to refer to the phase after slavery, or in works on plantation colonies to discuss the time period after emancipation, this thesis introduces the idea that the move from slave-regime to post-slavery labour regime represented a shift in moral and legal definitions of acceptable forms of labour. Much like the 'post' in postcolonial, a post-slavery labour regime is not only one that comes after Abolition, but one that highlights its legacies. Thus, the indenture labour regime was frequently seen as a continuation of slave-regimes and judged against it. Debates during the move from slave labour to Indian indentured labour constantly made reference to slavery and Abolition debates—a framework that determined what was seen as acceptable labour regimes, and what was seen as exploitative. By addressing the importance of the post-slavery moment, this thesis further engages with how Abolition affected how 'free' and 'unfree' labour systems were envisaged.

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[15] This has been discussed in the 'historiography and approaches' section.

Just as the legalisation of the indenture trade in 1837 saw heated debates on the legal and moral repercussions of the system, the resumption of emigration under revised regulations in 1842 saw the gradual petering out of anti-indenture voices in Calcutta. India saw two more waves of debate around the indenture trade after this—the Assam debates at the end of the nineteenth century where members of the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal raised their voice against inland emigration to tea plantations in Assam, and twentieth-century debates around the abolition of overseas indentured migration led by nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and Gokhale.[16] By focusing on the mid-nineteenth century, this research challenges historiography that creates a continuous narrative from the first attempts at indentured migration in 1834 to its abolition in 1920. It also questions works that posit the anti-indenture movement at the beginning of the twentieth century as the first challenge to the indenture scheme from South Asia. While they make an important contribution to the history of indenture, such approaches negate the contribution of mid-nineteenth century debates around indentureship to the changing emigration policies and debates on free labour.

This thesis argues that the early wave of indenture debates in the mid-nineteenth century was critical, since it contributed to trans-imperial conversations about labour servitude, and set a rubric for debating indentured migration. The mid-nineteenth century debates not only left indelible marks on colonial emigration policies and questions of labour and servitude, but also contributed to how later reports on indenture, or discourses around inland emigration to Assam in late-nineteenth century Calcutta engaged with issues such as labour rights and planter privileges. For instance, discussion and criticism of the inland indenture trade to Assam tea plantations often followed the same line of questioning as in the mid-nineteenth century—questioning the recruitment system as misleading, highlighting mistreatment during passage and in plantations, and criticising the system as an exploitative mode of plantation servitude. Questions discussed in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta about recruitment, contractual obligation and mistreatment were often repeated during the Assam debates, or by late-twentieth century government reports on indenture—consolidating the importance of

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[16] The twentieth-century debates have been explored in Mrinalini Sinha, 'Premonitions of the Past', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 74 (2015), 821–41; Ashutosh Kumar, 'Indian Nationalists and the End of Indentured Emigration', NMML Occasional Paper, *History and Society*, 48 (2014).

the post-slavery moment in understanding the histories of indenture, servitude and mobility.

As much as the indenture trade was dependent on labour migration networks within the subcontinent, the legal framing of indentured servitude drew upon understandings of labour in the metropole, rather than labour relations in South Asia.[17] Thus, this moment was also influenced by debates over British labour legislation—especially the master and servant laws, which defined the relationship between employer and employee. In *Masters, Servants and Magistrates*, Hay and Craven point out that for more than 500 years, the master and servant laws 'fixed the boundaries of "free labor" in Britain and throughout the British Empire'.[18] They argue that there were similarities to English master and servant law across the empire, making these laws one of the many legal ligaments that helped make the British Empire a conceivable whole.[19] Although varied across times and spaces, there are three defining characteristics of the master and servant laws that help contextualise the legal provisions of the Indian indenture trade. Under these laws, employment relationship was governed by private contracts between individual employers and employees, the contract could be summarily enforced by magistrates, and its breach by uncooperative workers could be punished by whipping, imprisonment, forced labour, fines or forfeiture of all wages.[20] As Hay and Craven argue, master and servant legislation, including the Master and Servant Act of 1823, was 'a catalog of constraints and incentives'.[21] They determined

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[17] Alessandro Stanziani argues, for instance, that indentured labour as defined and practised in the colonies was tied to the definition and practice of wage labour in Europe. Alessandro Stanziani, 'Local Bondage in Global Economies: Servants, Wage Earners, and Indentured Migrants in Nineteenth-Century France, Great Britain, and the Mascarene Islands', *Modern Asian Studies* (2013), 1218-1251.

[18] Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, ed., *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 1. Since the fourteenth century, several acts had been enacted in Britain to govern employer-employee relationship, including the Master and Servant Act of 1823 (which codified the general use of penal sanctions for contract breach), the Master and Servant Act Reform of 1844 and the Trade Union Act of 1871 (which officially legalised unions). Appendix 1A: Enactment and Enforcement of Master and Servant Law, in Suresh Naidu and Noam Yuchtman, 'Coercive Contract Enforcement: Law and the Labor Market in Nineteenth Century Industrial Britain', *American Economic Review*, 103:1 (2013), 107-44.

[19] Hay and Craven, *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates*, pp. 2-3.

[20] Ibid, pp. 1-2.

[21] Ibid, p. 33.

constraints on ‘freedom’ across the British Empire, while also framing contractual relationship and penal sanctions.

Although statute law was often ignored or misapplied in the colonies, the tenets of the master and servant laws governed colonial employment relations. These laws determined punishments for breach of contract, including mobility-related offences (such as absenteeism and desertion) and breach of workplace discipline (such as misdemeanour, disobedience, neglect of duty, etc)—tenets that were central to the indenture system as well. By the 1830s and 1840s, certain provisions such as imprisonment for breach of contract and using the law to crush trade union activity came to be challenged in Britain.[22] It was in this context that the indenture debates brewed. Debates around Abolition and the master and servant laws provided an opportune moment for challenging prevailing notions of servitude and employer-employee relationship. The post-slavery debates at Britain and Calcutta thus also need to be considered in this historical context, where the limits of servitude and the understanding of contractual obligations between employer and employee were being challenged and negotiated. As this thesis argues, a major aspect of the indenture trade that makes its relation to slavery and anxieties around its revival clear is the emphasis on contracts—a remnant of Abolition debates and English labour legislation.[23]

**The Network: ‘Web of Empire’ and the Global Movement of Labour**

This section addresses the third element of the triangulated approach—how did the indenture trade and debates around it operate within wider networks of labour, migration and empire. Firstly, the Indian indenture system was not the only migrant labour system at this time. Therefore, its history has to be framed within the histories of internal labour migration (such as to indigo plantations) and overseas migration of convict and domestic labourers by discussing how Indian indenture interacted with these prevailing systems of labour movement. Secondly, a thesis that studies indenture debates across colonial boundaries, and especially highlights the development of emigration regulations with inputs from Calcutta, has a bearing on the nature of the British Empire. By exploring the indenture debates as not emanating from metropolitan Britain to affect its colonies, but as informed by debates and historical events from

[22] Ibid, p. 8.

[23] The question of contract is detailed in chapter 3.

disparate parts of empire, this section explores the position of Calcutta within wider imperial networks.

The British Empire was contingent upon the movement of commodities, peoples and ideas across borders. The abolition of slavery in 1833 marked an important juncture in the imperial and labour history of this empire. In a physical sense, it led to the beginning of a government-sanctioned system of migration of Indian indentured labourers to replace slave labourers in British plantation colonies. In an epistemological sense, it fostered the circulation of ideas and arguments that came to define labour and servitude in the British Empire. However, this change in the labour situation, and this shift in ways of thinking about 'free' and 'unfree' labour, have to be studied in context of wider networks of labour migration. Works such as that of Hardeen, Hurgobin and Amrith have situated Indian indentured migration within wider contexts of trans-colonial migration.[24] Hardeen coined the term 'Brown Atlantic' to show that even though their contribution was distinct and crucial for understanding post-slavery society, the movement of Indian indentured labourers has remained unrecognised in Atlantic studies.[25] Thus, even though working within separate historical contexts, a history of Indian indenture has to be written in context of and with awareness of networks of internal and external labour migration in nineteenth-century South Asia.

Within the Indian subcontinent, the agrarian nature of pre-colonial and early colonial economy often necessitated seasonal migrations in search of employment. The colonial state and its large economic projects, on the other hand, provided opportunities for employment in tune with the agrarian calendar. It was thus common for villagers to migrate outside harvesting seasons, and be temporarily employed in agricultural plantations and public works.[26] At the same time, warfare, economic contingencies,

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[24] Devi Hardeen, 'The Brown Atlantic: Re-thinking Post-Slavery', in *Black Atlantic Resource Debate*, in <https://blackatlanticresource.wordpress.com/2012/07/10/the-brown-atlantic-re-thinking-post-slavery/> [accessed 20 January, 2020]; Yoshina Hurgobin and Subho Basu, '"Oceans without Borders": Dialectics of Transcolonial Labor Migration from the Indian Ocean World to the Atlantic Ocean World', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 87 (2015), 7-26; Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*: *The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[25] Hardeen, 'The Brown Atlantic'.

[26] Prominent works that highlight the relationship between labour mobility and agrarian conditions in South Asia include Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Sugata

forest enclosures, increased rent and such also affected migration patterns.[27] Internal mobility networks in India supplied men for public works, military labour, domestic labour, convict labour and plantation labour.[28] These linkages are crucial for understanding the indentured labour regime, since the prevalence of South Asian migrant workforces in international labour markets since the seventeenth century and the presence of internal labour networks in the subcontinent made India an obvious choice for the procurement of indentured labourers in the first place.

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Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Anand Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Anand Yang, 'Peasant on the Move: A Study of Internal Migration in India', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10:1 (1979); Ian Kerr, 'On the Move: Circulating Labor in Pre-Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial India', *International Review of Social History*, 51:S14 (2006), 85-109.

[27] Crispin Bates, *Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience* (Edinburgh: Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 6-8.

[28] For labour-use in public works, see Peter Marshall, 'The Company and the Coolies: Labour in Early Calcutta', in *The Urban Experience, Calcutta: Essays in Honour of Professor Nisith R. Ray*, ed. by Pradip Sinha (Calcutta: Riddhi-India, 1987).

The military labour market has been explored in Gavin Rand and Kim Wagner, 'Recruiting the 'Martial Races': Identities and Military Service in Colonial India', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 46:3-4, (2012), 232-254; D.H.A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Domestic labour has been studied in Nitin Sinha, Nitin Varma and Pankaj Jha, ed., *Servants' Pasts: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia*, Vol I (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2019); Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma, ed., *Servants' Pasts: Late-Eighteenth to Twentieth Century South Asia*, Vol II (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2019); Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

Key works on convict labour include Clare Anderson, 'Transnational Histories of Penal Transportation: Punishment, Labour and Governance in the British Imperial world, 1788–1939', *Australian Historical Studies*, 47:3 (2016), 381-397; Clare Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century', *Slavery & Abolition*, 30:1 (2009), 93-109; Clare Anderson, ed., *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), Introduction and Chapter 8; Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

Inland plantation labour has been explored in works like Samita Sen, 'Commercial Recruiting'; Rana Behal, 'Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule', *International Review of Social History*, 51:S14 (2006), 143-172; Rana Behal, 'Coolies, Recruiters and Planters: Migration of Indian Labour to the Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations during Colonial Rule', *Crossroads Asia Working Papers Series*, 9 (Bonn, July 2013); Nitin Varma, *Coolies of Capitalism*; Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Plantation Labour in Colonial India', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19:3-4 (1992), 173-198.

Even outside the Indian subcontinent, the use of migrant Indian labour was not a new phenomenon, and formed a part of global migration schemes that generally operated within the remits of modern empires. For instance, between 1838 and 1843, 527 'European' and 'native' convicts migrated from Calcutta to work in places like the Australian colonies, Burma and Singapore.[29] As Clare Anderson points out, between 1789 and 1939, the British transported around 108,000 Indian, Burmese, Malay and Chinese convicts to penal settlements around the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, with convicts emerging as a 'highly mobile workforce that was vital to British imperial ambitions.'[30] Their labour was exploited for land clearance, infrastructural development, mining, agriculture, cultivation, and also to settle lands and establish villages.[31] The migration of domestic labourers, often called 'ayahs' or 'native servants' was also common at this time. Records of the General Index attest to the migration of several 'native servants', 'native female servants' and 'Portuguese servants' to Europe between 1835 and 1842.[32] Besides convict and domestic labour, the transnational labour networks also comprised of military and maritime labour.[33] Moreover, records from this time also reflect the migration of unskilled and skilled workers (like wood-workers and

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[29] Judicial (Criminal) Index, 1838-43, WBSA.

[30] Clare Anderson, ed., *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), chapter 8.

[31] Ibid.

[32] General (General) Index, 1835-42, WBSA.

[33] Some works on military labour and its movement overseas include 'Projecting Power: The Indian Army Overseas', and 'Recruiting Sikhs for Colonial Police and Military', in Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
Maritime labour and Indian seamen have been studied extensively in Gopalan Balachandran, 'Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers, and the State, 1890-1939', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 39:1 (2002), 71-100; Michael Fisher, 'Working Across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and In Between, 1600–1857', *International Review of Social History*, 51:S14 (2006), 21-45; Michael Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism*; Ravi Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination—Networks of the Subordinated: The Ordered Spaces of South Asian Maritime Labour in an Age of Imperialism (c. 1890-1947)', in *The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region*, ed. by Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer Tiné (London: Routledge, 2008); Ali Raza and Benjamin Zachariah, 'To Take Arms Across a Sea of Trouble: The "Lascar System," Politics, and Agency in the 1920s', *Itinerario*, 36:3 (2012), 19-38.

gardeners) from India to Europe.[34] Thus, it was not uncommon to find Indian workers abroad even before the indenture trade was introduced.

Recently there have been works that situate indentured labour within other labour systems of the empire. They point out that instead of framing the history of indenture in terms of a linear historical trajectory from slavery to indenture, it can be studied as part of a broader movement of Indian merchants, labourers, convicts, *lascars* and servants overseas. For instance, Clare Anderson has explored how the indenture trade and the experiences of indentured migrants were informed by Indian experience of penal servitude, and colonial innovations in incarceration and confinement.[35] Sunil Amrith's work on movements across the Indian Ocean emphasises that indentured migration was only one of many movements—that of traders, soldiers, slaves, convicts, artisans and workers.[36] Crispin Bates' work also argues that 'rather than occupying discrete categories rooted in South Asia, ['coolies', servants, sepoys, convicts and such] may be viewed as a composite itinerant class'.[37] Although it is not possible to explicitly explore these connections in the micro-historical approach that this thesis takes, it takes into account that the indenture trade was not a standalone system. Recruiters for the indenture trade tapped into existing networks of internal and external migrations, and discussions about the indenture trade in Calcutta often considered 'coolies' in relation to other labour movements. For instance, one testimony for the Calcutta investigative committee used the example of indigo workers who could never be persuaded to stay on for longer than a year to argue that Indian villagers would never knowingly leave the country for five years, and hence indentured migrants must have been deceived into joining the trade.[38]

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[34] See, for instance, Letter to Captain F.W, Birch, Superintendent of Police, requesting 10 native gardeners to Mauritius, December 5, 1838, No. 30; Letter on labour migrating for public works, May 24, 1837, No. 14-15. In General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[35] Clare Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century', *Slavery & Abolition*, 30.1 (2009), 93–109.

[36] Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*.

[37] Crispin Bates, 'Courts, Ship-rolls and Letters: Reflections on the Indian Labour Diaspora', in *Creating an Archive Today*, ed. by Toshie Awaya (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies: Centre for Documentation and Area-Transcultural Studies, 2005), pp. 131-158.

[38] Testimony of Dwarkanath Tagore', November 9, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the [Calcutta Investigative] Committee, from 22 August 1838 to 14 January 1839', in *Letter from Secretary to Government of India, to Committee on Exportation of Hill Coolies: Report of Committee and*

At the same time, the indenture debates were also part of a wider network in the British Empire that connected metropolitan Britain, Indian port-cities and overseas plantation colonies through the movement of indentured labourers. In *Imperial Connections*, Thomas Metcalf argues that in the colonial schema, India was not one of many colonies, on the periphery, but a *nodal point* from which peoples, ideas, goods and institutions radiated outwards.[39] This thesis builds upon Metcalf's understanding to explore the indenture debates as not emanating from metropolitan Britain to affect its colonies, but as informed by debates and historical events from disparate parts of empire. In reality, debates on indenture and the empire's relation with its migrating labouring population operated with inputs from its plantation colonies and port-cities, of which Calcutta was a major one.

Metcalf's argument draws heavily upon Tony Ballantyne's idea of the 'web of empire', where he stated that the empire comprised of networks and exchanges that linked the various colonies to the metropole. In 'Rereading the Archive', Ballantyne pointed out that adopting a more mobile and transnational approach to history was important to radicalise studies of the nation-state and the discipline of history as a whole, since it eschews the metropolitan or national focus of colonial histories and helps imagine the empire as dependant on connections across disparate locations—'a series of crucial horizontal linkages among colonies'.[40] He argues:

> it is productive to conceive of the empire not in terms of a spoked wheel with London as the 'hub', where the various spokes (whether flows of finance, lines of communication, or the movement of people and objects) from the periphery meet, but rather in terms of a complex <u>web</u> consisting of horizontal filaments that run among various colonies in addition to the 'vertical' connections between the metropole and individual colonies.[41]

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*Evidence* (East India House: Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, February 12, 1841), Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons) 16, No. 45. Henceforth, 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[39] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[40] Tony Ballantyne, 'Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation-State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (and Beyond)', in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation,* ed. by Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 104, 112.

[41] Ibid, pp. 112-13. Emphasis added.

This argument was taken forward by Metcalf, who not only points to the non-unilateral exchange of ideas between the metropole and the colony, but argues that the empire was maintained by Indians and Britons trained in India—including Indian troops, Sikh diaspora and indentured labourers.[42] The notion of the web captures the integrative nature of imperial cultural traffic, helps visualise how the empire connected disparate points in space into a complex mesh of networks, and helps study cross-national linkages.[43] In doing so, it challenges traditional imperialist historiography that constructed a world-system emanating from the European 'core', and assumed a binary, hierarchical relationship where the colony existed *only* in relation to the metropole. Later works on the nature of the empire, such as the edited volume by Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, have evoked Metcalf to argue that the British Empire was an instrument rather than a catalyst of globalisation—highlighting the contribution of colonies in shaping the empire.[44]

Drawing from such conceptual frameworks, this thesis argues that the position of Calcutta within indentured labour networks, or indeed broader imperial networks cannot be defined by the conventional core-periphery binary. By focusing on how voices from Calcutta contributed to the indenture debates, this thesis challenges the traditional image of empires as consisting of a unilinear flow of ideas—decisions taken in the metropole and dutifully followed in colonies with no space for colonised voices. Employing the notion of the British Empire as a 'web', it locates within its networks the city of Calcutta, and investigates the ways in which voices from South Asia shaped the British Empire. Calcutta was, to use Ballantyne and Metcalf's framework, a nodal point in the global 'web' of indentured migration, from where labourers were exported to plantation colonies, and where major decisions were taken regarding the regulation of indentured migration. The city contributed to the indenture debates through Town Hall meetings, petitions, news reports, and the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40, while also providing the physical space for indentured migration in its various roles as port, site of embarkation and capital. The role of voices from Calcutta in effecting

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[42] Metcalf argues that India remained a central site during the years of colonial conquest and consolidation—'a flourishing network of ideas, institutions, and movements of people, radiating out from India across the Indian Ocean arena.' Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, p. 214.

[43] Ibid, pp. 112-13.

[44] Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, ed., *Decentring Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006), Introduction.

changes in colonial emigration policies, influencing new regulations, and arguably even contributing to the suspension of indentured emigration to Mauritius in 1838, indicates its strategic position within the 'web of empire'.

Indian indenture was a cross-imperial institution. Thus, locating Calcutta, plantation colonies and Britain as disparate but equally important nodes of empire helps us understand the dispersal of power and pressure-points in nineteenth-century British Empire. It demonstrates how the British Empire operated with inputs from its colonies. Moreover, as chapter 4 will demonstrate, the very involvement of inhabitants of Calcutta in debating the indenture trade helps imagine the empire as a single whole—where both the migrants who moved between nodes of the empire, and those who participated in the indenture debates, transcended local and national identities to emerge as citizens of the empire. Ultimately, this approach helps promote a deeper understanding of colonial South Asia by emphasising how Indians played an active role in determining global ideas of servitude and contributing to colonial structures of power.

## Historiography and Approaches

This section offers a discussion of indenture historiography, and explores how this thesis contributes to the scholarship by highlighting the importance of the city of Calcutta and the post-slavery moment. The history of Indian indenture is diverse and has been written from various perspectives—that of plantation colonies, of indentured migrants, of lawmakers, and anti-indenture perspectives. Works like that of Carter, Allen, Hoefte and others have explored the history of Indian indenture in individual colonies, by highlighting how colonies like Mauritius, Guiana, Surinam and Natal moved from the slave regime to the indenture regime.[45] Carter, Roopnarine, Lal and

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[45] See Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Dwarka Nath, *A History of Indians in British Guyana* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1950); Rosemarijn Hoefte, *In Place of Slavery: A Social History of British Indian and Javanese Laborers in Suriname* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Lomarsh Roopnarine, 'The First and Only Crossing: Indian Indentured Servitude on Danish St. Croix, 1863–1868', *South Asian Diaspora*, 1:2 (2009), 113-140; Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal, 1860-1902: A Study Based on Ships' Lists* (New Delhi: Promilla and Co., 1991); K.O. Laurence, *A Question of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana, 1875–1917*

others have approached the history of Indian indenture from the perspective of the indentured migrants and their experience—highlighting their experience of recruitment, passage, plantation and resistance.[46] Others have focused on its administrative history, with special focus on changes in emigration regulations.[47] However, as the above section on the city demonstrates, Calcutta's role in global debates around indenture has rarely been considered in detail in such works. Besides cursory mentions of Calcutta as a point of embarkation of labourers, or in scene-setting chapters about the beginning of the indenture trade, most works on Indian indenture have relegated it to the background. This thesis thus offers the first comprehensive account of the role of Calcutta in the history of indentured labour, and discusses how voices from Calcutta contributed to changing emigration regulations, the understanding of 'free' and 'unfree' labour, and the imagination of the ideal post-slavery labourer.

A central question in the historiography of indenture has been whether indentured labour was a perpetuation of slavery—a question that especially gained ground with the publication of Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*.[48] Tinker argued that although labourers theoretically entered into the indenture trade freely, the Indian

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(London: Ian Randle Publishers, 1994); Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993); Thomas Metcalf, 'Hard Hands and Sound Healthy Bodies': Recruiting 'coolies' for Natal, 1860–1911', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 30:3 (2002), 1-26.

[46] Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Burns and Oates, 1996); Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Tribal and Indentured Migrants in Colonial India: Modes of Recruitment and Forms of Incorporation', in *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, ed. by Peter Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 159-85; Lomarsh Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2007); Maurits Hassankhan, Brij Lal and Doug Munro, ed., *Resistance and the Indian Indenture Experience: Comparative Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2014); Adrian C. Mayer, *Indians in Fiji* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Rattan Lal Hangloo, *Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean: History, Culture, and Identity* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2012); Brij Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983).

[47] The focus on administrative and regulatory changes is exemplified in works such as Panchanan Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour 1834-1900* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970); Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism*; Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (Hertford: Hansib Publications, 1993); S. B. Mookherji, *The Indenture System in Mauritius, 1837-1915* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1962).

[48] Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*.

indenture trade replicated conditions of slavery in recruitment, passage, plantation work and living conditions on plantation estates. According to Tinker, the very tangible link between the slave and post-slavery labour regimes in plantation colonies made the indenture system a 'new system of slavery'. Following Tinker's work, the question of 'free' and 'unfree' labour, and the resemblance to slavery has become a central point in studies of indentured migration. His work has influenced other scholars of Indian indenture to focus on linkages between the two labour regimes. Even though not necessarily in agreement with Tinker's argument for a direct link between slavery and indenture, works like that of Richard Allen, P.C. Emmer and William Green have studied the two labour regimes within the same analytical frame.[49] Allen analyses the move from slavery to Indian indenture in Mauritius, Emmer's edited collection brings together early modern European indentured migration to the Americas and post-slavery Indian indentured migration to explore the linkages between colonialism and migration, and Green explores the connections between slavery and indenture in terms of imperial humanitarianism.[50]

At the same time, Tinker's thesis also faced criticism, especially from scholars who emphasise the autonomous agency of labourers in choosing employment. His excessive emphasis on the horrors of the system and the analogy to slavery has drawn criticism from Lal and Hassankhan, who 'resist the Tinkerian paradigm of docile, non-resisting labour'.[51] Tinker's silence on the agency of the 'return coolies' has been criticised in Davis' and Mohapatra's works, who argue that a large number of migrants had ultimately returned to India, in keeping with the terms of their contracts.[52] Bates and Carter have used reports from individual migrants to argue in favour of 'subaltern

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[49] Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers*; Richard Allen, 'Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism and the Global Origins of the Post-Emancipation Indentured Labor System', *Slavery & Abolition*, 35:2 (2014), 328-348; P.C. Emmer, *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986); William A. Green, 'Emancipation to Indenture: A Question of Imperial Morality', *Journal of British Studies*, 22:2 (1983).

[50] Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers*; Emmer, *Colonialism and Migration*; Green, 'Emancipation to Indenture'.

[51] Hassankhan, Lal and Munro, ed., *Resistance and the Indian Indenture Experience*, Foreword.

[52] Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); Prabhu Mohapatra, 'Longing and Belonging: The Dilemma of Return Among Indian Immigrants in The West Indies, 1850-1950', Research in Progress Papers, *History and Society*, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (March 1998).

agency', arguing that indentured migrants used and extended certain networks of support created in context of the migrations of coolies, domestic workers, convicts, and *sepoys*. Thus, Indians increasingly took control of their migratory patterns in the Indian Ocean region, often organising their own repatriation and terms of settlement, and even re-emigrating to other places overseas.[53] Scholars such as Roopnarine, Emmer and Northrup also argue against the notion that indentured migrants were coerced or deceived into indenture by highlighting how migrants shaped their identity and economic future in the plantation colonies.[54] For instance, Roopnarine argued that migrants resisted and manipulated the indenture system through feigned sickness, strikes and riots, as well as by creating a social space outside the planter-class hegemony and having meaningful social existences outside of the dominant colonial framework.[55]

This thesis engages closely with such existing literature on Indian indenture to argue that while current historiography is fully justified in bringing indenture out of what Bates calls the 'well-worn dichotomies of 'slavery' and 'free labour'', it was this very dichotomy that defined the indenture debate in the mid-nineteenth century.[56] The imagination, framing, implementation and discussion of indentured labour was shaped by the legacies of its preceding labour system—the slave labour regime. Thus, instead of commenting on *whether* the indenture trade represented a continuation of slavery or an exercise in voluntary migration, this thesis investigates *why* the question of similarity to slavery (or lack thereof) was central to the indenture debates. In doing so, this thesis moves focus away from structural similarities between the slave and indentured labour regimes, to explore how legacies of slavery influenced the operation of the indenture trade, and framed the debates around its continuation. As this thesis will demonstrate,

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[53] Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels: A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora', in *New Routes for Diaspora Studies*, ed. by Sukanya Banerjee, Aims McGuinness, and Steven McKay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012). See also Crispin Bates, 'Some Thoughts on the Representation and Misrepresentation of the Colonial South Asian Labour Diaspora', *South Asian Studies*, 33:1 (2017), 7-22; Bates and Carter, 'Tribal and Indentured Migrants'. Bates and Carter traced the notion of indenture-as-servitude to the twentieth-century nationalists' stigmatisation of 'coolie labour', and their misconceptions or exaggerations about deception and subsequent exploitation of indentured migrants.

[54] Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture*; P.C. Emmer, 'The Meek Hindu: The Recruitment of Indian Indentured Labourers for Service Overseas, 1870-1916', in *Colonialism and Migration*, ed. by Emmer; Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism*.

[55] Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture.*

[56] Bates, 'Some Thoughts on the Representation and Misrepresentation', p. 7.

the proponents of anti-indenture used examples of deception and mistreatment during recruitment to compare indenture to slavery, while those in favour appealed to the sense of independence and 'free' movement of labourers to argue for its continuation.[57] Such an approach brings to the fore the importance of the post-slavery moment in determining global debates on indenture.

Besides the importance given to the slavery-free labour dichotomy, most works on the indenture trade have focused on administrative changes, or the experience of migrants in individual plantation colonies. The experience of indenture migrants within India, or debates over indenture in India have received very little attention—often in a piecemeal way in works where labourers are the protagonists of the narrative, and their experiences in India form the subject of one of many chapters.[58] Moreover, while the works discussed above offer insight on the structural continuities between the two *regimes,* or lack thereof, they have failed to explore the continuities in *debates* and emerging notions of servitude. Jonathan Connolly's work on continuities between emancipation debates and indenture debates as evident through British newspapers, Rachel Sturman's work linking indenture debates to the early conceptualisation of international labour regulations and human rights, and Madhavi Kale's study of anti-indenture perspectives of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) have been the few substantive works that address the importance of debates in the history of unfree labour.[59] All three works, however, focus heavily on voices from metropolitan Britain, and fail to address the cross-imperial nature of the indenture debates. This thesis addresses this lacuna by exploring the indenture debates in Calcutta in conjunction with debates and official decisions in the metropole. In doing so, it shifts historiographic focus from the physical movement of indentured migrants to the debates it provoked—debates that affected emigration regulations, determined the understanding of servitude

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[57] This is discussed in detail in chapters 3 and 5.

[58] This includes works such as Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*; Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[59] Jonathan Connolly, 'Indentured Labour Migration and the Meaning of Emancipation: Free Trade, Race, and Labour in British Public Debate, 1838–1860', *Past and Present*, 238:1 (2018), 85-119; Rachel Sturman, 'Indian Indentured Labor and the History of International Rights Regimes', *American Historical Review,* 119 (2014), 1439-65; Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

in the empire, and contributed to nineteenth-century understandings of race and citizenship.

Besides bringing Calcutta to the fore, this thesis highlights the post-slavery nature of the indenture debates by exploring how the indenture system was judged against the slave-labour system,. This relates back to my underlying argument that this historical phase is best understood in terms of the post-slavery moment, when every subsequent labour regime was evaluated along the rubric of the recently-condemned slave trade. Moreover, moving focus from the physical trade to the debates allows scholars to highlight the transnational nature of the British Empire, where not only peoples and commodities, but also crucial ideas and arguments moved between nations.

## Approach to Sources

The ruling authority of the home government in British India was maintained through a complex system of writing, documenting and reporting emblematic of Martin Moir's '*kaghazi raj'*.[60] It is these very documents—correspondences, petitions and reports—that have been used in conjunction with periodicals, publications and institutional records to construct the history of indenture debates in Calcutta. This thesis has drawn from several colonial and institutional archives in India and Britain, including records of the British colonial government from the India Office Records (IOR), the West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), and the National Archives of India (NAI); personal collections, correspondences and manuscripts from the British Library, the Gladstone Archives in Hawarden (Wales), and the Rabindra Bharati Museum Collections at Kolkata. It has also drawn upon digital records of British Parliamentary papers, and nineteenth-century periodicals and publications from the British Library, the National Library (Kolkata), the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi), the Brahmo Samaj Library, the Town Hall Archives (Kolkata), and the Rammohan Library (Kolkata).

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[60] Martin Moir, 'Kaghazi Raj: Notes on the Documentary Basis of Company Rule: 1783–1858', *Indo-British Review*, 21:2 (1993): 185–93. Here, 'kaghazi' refers to the obsession with documents, or *kagaz*.

There are limitations to using colonial archives to write history—limitations that have been extensively discussed in the works of Guha, Stoler, Burton and others.[61] As historians are increasingly pointing out, archives are neither repositories of unquestionable 'objective' facts, nor 'complete' in their information. Antoinette Burton argues that 'archives do not simply arrive or emerge fully formed; nor are they innocent of struggles for power in either their creation or their interpretive applications.'[62] Archives thus have the power to shape *how* history is written, and *whose* history is written. In fact, scholars have shown that far from being neutral repositories of historical information on British India, the colonial archive has been 'instrumental in the production of imperial discourse and ideology'.[63]

Moreover, there is a lack of sources on the early indenture trade, resulting in an undue dependence of researchers on colonial archives. The geographical and temporal scope of this thesis—its focus on voices from Calcutta in the post-slavery moment—has also limited the kind of sources it can draw from. For instance, it is difficult to find letters and depositions from indentured migrants in the period between 1836 and 1842, and the Dead Letters' Office at Kolkata does not hold any letters from the period

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[61] Stoler, Burton and others have questioned the objectivity of archival records and pointed to the importance of exploring archival provenance and how archives affect the writing of history. Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories', in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. by Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science*, 2:1-2 (2002), 87-109; Ann Laura Stoler, ''In cold blood': Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives', *Representations*, 37 (1992), 151-189; Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science*, 2:2 (2002), 1-19; Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Unarchived Histories: The 'mad' and the 'trifling' in the Colonial and Postcolonial World* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013). This shift in archival discourse has been crucially influenced by the works of Foucault and Derrida, and their focus on how power structures and forces of inclusion and exclusion affect archives. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[62] Burton, 'Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories', p. 6.

[63] Peter Mitchell, ''The Centre of the Muniment': the India Office Records and the Historiography of Early Modern Empire, 1875-1891' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of London, Queen Mary, 2013).

either.[64] The history of early indenture debates thus has to be constructed without records from the migrants themselves. Moreover, the Maritime Archives and Heritage Centre at Kolkata does not hold any emigration records or passenger lists from before the 1860s—records that would have been useful for exploring the language used to denote indentured migrants in official records.

I have addressed these limitations mainly through multi-archival methodology—by analysing sources from archives, and using sources from outside the colonial sources (like nineteenth-century periodicals, personal correspondence and institutional records) to corroborate information from the colonial official records. Pro- and anti-indenture petitions from Calcutta, local periodicals, and the report of the Calcutta investigative committee (1838-40) have been crucial for constructing and analysing the indenture debates in Calcutta. The testimonies of returned emigrants in Calcutta Committee report, one of the very earliest records of the voice of the indentured migrant, have been key for analysing early impressions of the trade and the various allegations against it. Official records such as copies of the indenture acts and contracts, parliamentary debates, and the correspondence between governments at Calcutta and metropolitan Britain have been significant for understanding official reactions to the indenture trade, and analysing how voices from Calcutta contributed to these changes. British planter John Gladstone's personal correspondence with merchants and parliamentarians (from Gladstone's Library, Hawarden) has been critical for analysing the pro-indenture argument, and exploring how the indenture debates created an ideal image of the migrant. Periodicals and publications, on the other hand, have been crucial for gauging public opinion over the trade. Piecing together this historical narrative from multiple archives by looking at the same event from different perspectives—that of colonial officials, petitioners from Calcutta, merchants, planters, labourers and British parliamentarians—has helped overcome limitations such as paucity and state-selection of sources.

Further, I have found Stoler's emphasis on questioning colonial social categories and Guha's close-reading techniques very helpful when writing this thesis. The close-reading and reading against the grain techniques exemplified in 'Chandra's Death' have

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[64] This is possibly because in the early years of the indenture trade, such transnational epistolary links had not yet been formed.

been useful for how I have analysed sources like the report of the Calcutta investigative committee.[65] As Guha points out that archives mainly showcase 'elite', 'official' voices, reading his works has made me aware of the need to question colonial archives, and especially their treatment of non-official voices (such as the testimonies of migrants).[66] Stoler, on the other hand, has pointed out that the question of what is absent in the archive is as important a question as what is present. Moreover, her works have made me recognise that there are 'hierarchies of credibility' in colonial narratives—especially when reading how the testimonies of labourers were weighed against that of indenture officials in the report of the Calcutta investigative committee.[67]

As Stoler argues, scholars of colonial societies need to not only read against the grain of archival sources, but question the very grains—the social categories—that these archives produce and perpetuate.[68] One such social category perpetuated in colonial records, correspondences and news reports is that of the 'coolie'. As pointed out in an earlier footnote, the term 'coolie' is problematic because it bears a history of colonialism, stigmatisation and prejudice. It has historically been used as a derogatory term to refer to descendants of Indian migrants. While scholars like Khal Torabully have reclaimed the term for migrant Indians and coined the term 'coolitude' to refer to the cultural interactions of the Indian diaspora, others like Lomarsh Roopnarine remain critical of its usage (calling it the 'c-word' of indenture).[69] However, the term has been used consistently in colonial archival records throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century to refer to Indian indentured labourers who were contract-bound to work in plantations—whether overseas or inland. Those protesting against the indenture trade also used this term in correspondences, petitions and news reports.

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[65] Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death', in *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. by Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1987), pp. 135-65.

[66] Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. by Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1982), pp. 1-8.

[67] Stoler, 'In cold blood'.

[68] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain.*

[69] Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002); Lomarsh Roopnarine, Review of *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* by Ashutosh Kumar, *Labor History*, 60:5 (2019).

As the indenture trade was sanctioned by the British parliament and the indenture debates became more common in the early-nineteenth century, it became important to denote indentured migrants by a single term. A term that was initially used in British India as an umbrella-term for all kinds of physical or manual labourers—whether working on roads, railways, construction sites or as military labour—was co-opted for official purposes and came to very specifically mean Indian indentured migrants. The very process of naming, classifying and cataloguing the experience of the indentured migrant led to the consolidation of the term 'coolie', and it came to be used in parliamentary debates, official publications and news reports, possibly to differentiate indentured migrants from other kinds of Indian labour forces.

This thesis uses the term 'coolie' to stay true to the complex historically-specific identity that it invokes. The thesis title, for instance, draws upon the fact that debates at Calcutta were frequently referred to as the 'coolie question' in English newspapers from Calcutta, as well as in colonial correspondence and published works on the indenture trade. At the same time, this thesis engages with the term 'coolie' as a social category that colonial archives produced and perpetuated, questioning its usage and studying its trajectory in archival documents. As chapter 4 will discuss, this term homogenised an entire group of heterogenous people, and flattened their diverse social identities into a singular term that defined the person solely in relation to their position and their usefulness in the indenture trade. In studying the term 'coolie', this thesis thus engages with the very archival grains that Stoler asks scholars to read along.

## Structure

This doctoral thesis is divided into five thematic chapters. The first chapter explores the relationship between Calcutta and the indentured networks, while also discussing early negotiations around the indenture trade. By introducing both the Indian indenture trade and its relation to Calcutta, this chapter helps frame the main arguments of this thesis.

The second chapter explores the 'Calcutta public sphere' that engaged with the indenture debates—highlighting who its members were, where they met, why they came together on certain issues of common public interest, and whether the term 'public sphere' is the most accurate description of this space. It introduces the two spaces within which the Calcutta public sphere vocalised their concerns—physical spaces like the town hall and meetings of associations, and non-physical spaces like periodicals,

which encouraged wider participation and ‘constant vigilance’ over the trade in a way that official networks could not.

After these two chapters have established the central position of Calcutta within indenture networks and identified the spaces in which the debates brewed, the following chapters analyse in detail the arguments in favour of and against the indenture trade. The third chapter explores how the indenture debates in Calcutta contributed to the rhetoric that defined the indenture trade as a ‘new system of slavery’. In the post-Abolition environment, the assessment of labour movements was based on a complete and immediate revocation of the slave trade. The anti-indenture debates in Calcutta thus came to highlight instances of mistreatment, deception and exploitation to argue against the indenture trade—constantly comparing it against the slave labour regime.

The fourth chapter continues the analysis of anti-indenture debates in Calcutta to reflect on how issues of race, citizenship and imperial responsibility emerged from the Calcutta debates. Besides affecting networks of sugar trade and the lives of thousands of migrants, the movement of indentured Indians created a racialised understanding of Indian labour. The very trope that considered Indian indentured migrants as primitive, ignorant and undifferentiated in terms of race and religion, also celebrated them as ideal labourers. Moreover, the voices from Calcutta not only defined migrant labourers as mobile citizens of the British Empire, but in the process of debating the indenture trade, they themselves emerged as vocal citizens of the empire. Thus, while exploring themes such as labour policies and urban spaces, this chapter engages closely with how notions of race, citizenship and labour rights emerged in the indentured debates at Calcutta.

The final chapter explores the vastly under-studied merchant and planter argument in favour of the indenture trade. It explores petitions from merchants and planters across the empire—from Calcutta, Mauritius, West Indies and metropolitan Britain—to consider their impact on the indenture debates. The merchant argument was especially transnational in nature and highlights connections between Calcutta and the rest of the empire. Thus, in considering the pro-indenture stance, this chapter not only points to Calcutta as a site of negotiation between pro- and anti-indenture voices, but also situates it within a transnational network of labour discussions.

Taken together, these chapters use official and personal correspondence, news reports, government reports, petitions, parliamentary papers and commission reports to

show that the indenture debates at Calcutta had crucial impacts on the indenture trade and the discourse around it in the mid-nineteenth century. Studying the post-slavery moment highlights why contracts and the constant reference to slavery—whether in parliamentary debates, or in the public sphere—were central to the discourse around Indian indenture. Re-focusing the literature on indenture on Calcutta, on the other hand, helps highlight how voices of British and Indian residents in Calcutta had three major impacts. Firstly, they contributed to changing emigration regulations by bringing concerns with the trade to metropolitan view. Secondly, they helped citizens of Calcutta vocalise their concerns and criticise government policy. Thirdly, they defined for posterity the image of the ideal plantation labourer in post-slavery British Empire.

# Chapter 1:
# Indenture Networks and the City of Calcutta

> *'I have frequently passed along a street called, I think, Tuntunniah-street, and observed a number of men always on the top of one of the houses on that street [...] I believe it was about the 11th of September last I was passing, between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, and there was a much larger number than I had seen before [...] The people on the top of the house were crying out, "Dohye Sahib"—"Dohye Company." I asked what was the matter, and the people around my palanquin told me they were a parcel of Coolies confined there, who were to be sent to the Mauritius.'*
>
> *- David Hare, Testimony to the Calcutta Committee, October 8, 1838.*[1]

In his testimony to the Calcutta investigative committee in 1838, prominent Scottish watchmaker and philanthropist David Hare recounted his experience of observing a large group of men on top of a building in north Calcutta shouting for help. On entering the building, he saw more than a hundred men confined behind bolted doors, guarded by police watchmen. They explained that they had been kidnapped on their way to Calcutta and to nearby pilgrimage sites, and were to be sent to Mauritius to work on sugar plantations. They complained of being held against their will, locked up, beaten and mistreated, and urged that they would sooner die than go to Mauritius. David Hare, after a prolonged negotiation with the watchmen and the Calcutta police, helped release them. With detailed reports in newspapers, this incident, and the image of labourers being migrated overseas against their will, soon became the popular image of Calcutta's encounter with indentured migration.

A walk through Calcutta in the nineteenth century was likely to bring citizens in contact with indentured labourers—whether confined in houses of north Calcutta, or in the various 'coolie depots' (warehouses) that dotted the Hooghly river-bank. As the primary site for the export of indentured labourers to replace slave labour after Abolition, Calcutta has had a long-drawn relationship with plantation colonies. Moreover, as the administrative capital of British India with linkages across the empire, it was in a unique position to participate in indenture debates. In fact, Kapil Raj terms

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[1] Testimony of David Hare, October 8, 1838, in 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee', p. 53.

Calcutta a 'contact zone' that was at the intersection of different networks of knowledge circulation.[2] This chapter explores the relationship between Calcutta and the indenture networks, while also discussing early negotiations around the indenture trade. By introducing both the Indian indenture trade and its relation to Calcutta, this chapter helps to frame the main arguments of this thesis.

The first half of this chapter analyses the position of Calcutta within imperial and indenture networks, and explores its relationship with the hinterland. It highlights how the location of the city and its character as a port and administrative centre made Calcutta conducive to the growth of indenture networks. By discussing Calcutta's position within migration networks, introducing 'spaces of indenture' in the city, and exploring the beginning of the trade in Calcutta, this section helps to frame the main arguments of this thesis. As pointed out in the introduction, this thesis refocuses literature from the plantation colonies migrants immigrated *to*, to the colonial capital they emigrated *from*. In doing so, this chapter analyses the physical spaces within which the indenture trade operated—mainly 'coolie depots' and merchant houses.

The second half of this chapter introduces the system of Indian indenture, and sets out the main global events between 1833 and 1844—the timeframe that this thesis engages with. It discusses the establishment of the indenture trade as a post-slavery labour regime in plantation colonies, explores official spaces within which the indenture trade was discussed and legitimised, and introduces the early indenture regulations. Ultimately, by discussing Calcutta's position within indenture networks and introducing early negotiations over the trade, this chapter sets the scene for a more detailed discussion of how voices from Calcutta affected the indenture trade in later chapters.

## Migration Networks and the Hinterland

Calcutta was central to the global indenture networks by virtue of its position as a premier port and colonial capital of British India, and its geographical congruity to a hinterland that provided a steady supply of labour. On the one hand, Calcutta was a major port on the eastern coast—central to Indian trade connections with Southeast Asia. About half of India's exports of cotton, silk, sugar, jute, saltpetre and indigo were

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[2] Kapil Raj, 'The Historical Anatomy of a Contact Zone: Calcutta in the Eighteenth Century', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48:1 (2011), 55–82.

shipped through Calcutta during the colonial period.[3] On the other hand, Calcutta was connected to a vast agricultural hinterland through a complex network of rivers, channels and roads. This section discusses Calcutta's relationship to its hinterland, the migration networks that the indenture trade tapped into, and recruitment patterns.

As Janet Ewald argues, British transport, especially by sea, 'demanded a controllable, flexible, and mobile labor force'.[4] Thus, the city's links to river channels and oceanic routes across the Bay of Bengal not only attracted migrant labour, but also made it easier to transport them within the subcontinent and abroad. Sunil Amrith highlights the importance of visualising the Bay of Bengal as a separate entity, stating that the migration of labour made the region 'the most economically important segment of the Indian Ocean world'.[5] The Bay was a maritime thoroughfare traversed by numerous overseas labour movements—including convict labour, domestic and skilled labour, slave labour, indentured labour and labour on board ships such as *lascars*. At the same time, it was a distinct space connecting indentured movement from different Indian ports (such as Calcutta, Madras and Pondicherry). Although the ports were at different locations and maintained separate identities, they made use of Bay of Bengal networks and the littoral of the Bay to maintain connections. The development of this 'transcontinental regime of labour', of which indentured labour was an important part, was facilitated by the political and economic context of imperialism and the expansion of shipping in the nineteenth-century.[6]

Calcutta's physical connections with the hinterland through a complex network of roads, rivers and channels, and its position within existing networks of migration, employment and pilgrimage networks also aided the growth of the indenture networks. Its position as port and colonial capital made it possible for indenture recruiters to tap into networks of labour migration within the subcontinent—whether of public workers,

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[3] Tai-Yong Tan, 'Port Cities and Hinterlands: A Comparative Study of Singapore and Calcutta', *Political Geography*, 26:7 (2007), 851-865.

[4] Janet Ewald, 'Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914', *The American Historical Review*, 105:1 (2000), p. 71.

[5] Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 28.

[6] Ravi Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c. 1900–1960', *International Review of Social History*, 51:14 (2006), p. 111.

plantation labourers, or domestic workers in Calcutta homes.[7] A part of this migration is traceable to new employment opportunities in the burgeoning city, such as construction of roads, houses and the new Fort William (c. 1757-75).[8] Labourers from eastern India were also employed in Calcutta as menial workers who swept streets, cleaned canals and performed similar public works.[9]

Brij Lal argues that in the nineteenth century, 'migration [did] not appear as an aberration or an unnatural phenomenon, but as a rational and conscious act'.[10] The seasonal nature of agricultural work necessitated migrations in search of employment. As Anand Yang points out, the local agriculture calendar allowed for extensive labour during June to November, but December to May was a slack period.[11] It was thus common for villagers to migrate outside harvesting seasons, and be temporarily employed in agricultural plantations, public works and factories. Migrants from Bihar, for instance, worked as field labourers, did the earthworks for eastern Indian railways in the late-nineteenth century, and worked in mills, public works and day-labouring in the vicinity of Calcutta.[12] This flow of mobile labour contributed directly to the successful setting up of indenture networks around Calcutta as recruiters tapped into such existing networks to recruit indentured labourers. Moreover, merchants like John Gladstone used these labour networks as precedence to actively argue for the migration of indentured Indians from Calcutta to plantation colonies.

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[7] For Calcutta's relation to *sadr* towns and suburbs, which are less relevant here, but still speak to its economic and political centrality in the region, see Tania Sengupta, 'Between the Garden and the Bazaar: The Visions, Spaces and Structures of Colonial Towns in Nineteenth-Century Provincial Bengal', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 12:3 (2011), 333-348; John Archer, 'Colonial Suburbs in South Asia, 1700-1850, and the Spaces of Modernity', in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. by Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 26-54.

[8] See, for instance, Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, 'The New Fort William and the Dockyard: Constructing Company's Calcutta in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Studies in History*, 32:2 (2016), 231-256.

[9] Sangeeta Dasgupta, ''Heathen Aboriginals', 'Christian Tribes', and 'Animistic Races': Missionary Narratives on the Oraons of Chhotanagpur in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 50:2 (2016), pp. 446-47.

[10] Brij Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (Acton: Australian National University Press, 2012), p. 112.

[11] Anand Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 199.

[12] Anand Yang, 'Peasants on the Move: A Study of Internal Migration in India', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10.1 (1979), p. 56.

Anand Yang argues that the 'predominant form of movement [in eastern India] was seasonal migration directed increasingly towards the districts of Bengal where opportunities existed for the maximization of income.'[13] While permanent migration involved risks, seasonal migration was a viable option that helped peasants maximise resources and pay off dues to landholders and moneylenders.[14] Thus, movement by desertion or migration was a common means of mitigating peasant hardships in the nineteenth century.[15] Although Yang's work is focused specifically on a single district (Saran in Bihar), it is exemplary of peasant mobility in eastern India as a whole. A large part of his research was based on retracing the steps of Saran's inhabitants, who joined the initial stream of emigrants to colonial sugar plantations.[16] Drawing on this research, Yang argues that the early indentured emigrants were from Chhotanagpur but in the 1840s and 1850s labourers were increasingly drawn from eastern UP and Bihar.[17] The agrarian situation in eastern India—rising rents, the seasonal nature of agricultural work, and the position of peasants as low-paid agricultural labourers rather than landowners—was a central factor in determining migration patterns of indentured Indians.

Late-nineteenth century records of the indenture trade—especially colonial reports and reports of the Protector of Emigrants appointed at Calcutta to regulate the trade—offer detailed accounts of villages or districts that labourers came from. However, information on the origins of migrant labourers is scarcer and more piecemeal in the earlier years (especially before the 1850s) and has to be drawn largely from interviews and testimonies in government-sanctioned investigative committees. According to the Report of the Calcutta investigative committee (1840) for instance, indentured migrants to Mauritius in 1838 were mainly drawn from Bankura, Purulia and Manbhoom districts of eastern Bengal.[18] In terms of occupational background, many

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[13] Ibid, p. 57.
[14] Ibid, p. 57.
[15] Yang, *The Limited Raj*, p. 181.
[16] Yang, 'Peasants on the Move', p. 43.
[17] Yang, *The Limited Raj*, p. 191.
[18] 'List of the Men who went to the Mauritius from Various Villages, 1838' in Appendix to 'Report of the Committee appointed by the Supreme Government of India to Enquire into the Abuses alleged to exist in Exporting from Bengal Hill Coolies and Indian Labourers', dated October 14, 1840, in *Letter from Secretary to Government of India, to Committee on Exportation of Hill Coolies: Report of Committee and Evidence* (East India House: Ordered by

migrants were agricultural labourers, domestic help, artisans, petty tradesmen or urban workers (such as barbers or *dhobis*). For instance, the Royal Commissioners who visited the Mauritius immigration depot in 1837 reported that of the 207 immigrants who came on the *Hindoostan*, 156 had worked as agricultural labourers and the rest were artisans, servicemen, clerks and *sepoys*.[19]

To give an overview of indentured emigration trends from Calcutta in the nineteenth century, *Annual Reports on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies*, which began to be published in 1843, demonstrate that most indentured labourers from Calcutta hailed from modern-day Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal. For instance, in 1876-77, 1877-78 and 1878-79, 46.5% of the 6384 emigrants came from the Northwest provinces (United Provinces), 27.9% from Oudh, 16.2% from Bihar, 5.4% from Bengal and the rest from various parts of western and central India, including princely states.[20] Recruiters frequented the Gangetic plains in northern India, such as Chhotanagpur, Northern Bihar, United Provinces and Benaras. As Marina Carter argues, recruitment was ultimately contingent on famine and economic oppression under *zaminders* and moneylenders on the one hand, and demand from labour recruiters and planters on the other.[21] The caste background of migrants is difficult to ascertain, but contrary to official claims that most migrants came from lower caste backgrounds, emigration reports reflect a more diverse social background. For instance, Geoghegan's report of 1872 showed that of the 1943 labourers migrating to Mauritius in April-July 1872, 355 were from higher castes, 633 from respectable agricultural castes, 222 from artisan castes, 449 from lower castes and 284 were Muslims.[22] The 1857 Uprising provided further impetus for emigration. A minute from the Calcutta emigration department pointed out that '[p]rior to the Mutiny the monthly

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the House of Commons to be printed, 12 February, 1841), pp. 184-92. In Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons) 16, No. 45. Henceforth, this report (including its appendices) is referred to as 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[19] Cited in Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars, and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 108-09.

[20] 'Annual Report on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies for 1876-77' (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1877) in Leela Gujadhur Sarup, *Colonial Emigration, 19th-20th Century: Annual Reports from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies* (Kolkata: Aldrich International, 2007).

[21] Carter, *Servants, Sirdars, and Settlers*, pp. 37-38.

[22] John Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1873), p. 68.

average of Mauritius Emigration was about 700, […] but suddenly shot up to two times and then three times by the end of 1859'.[23]

Recruitment for the indenture trade generally involved the participation of intermediary recruiters (variously referred to as *sirdars*, *arkattis* and *duffadars* in eastern India).[24] Serving as middlemen between labourers and recruitment agencies, their services were solicited by Calcutta-based merchant houses to procure migrant labourers from Indian villages. They formed the vital link between the port-city and the hinterland, and facilitated a smooth and continuous process of recruitment by appropriating and making use of pre-existing networks of migration. Referring to them as 'in part a foreman, in part a headman, and in part a recruiting contractor', Tirthankar Roy points out that the middlemen recruiters were an indispensable part of labour organisation in mills, mines, ports and plantations.[25] Planters or their representative merchant houses generally requisitioned a certain number of laborers from recruiting agents, who in turn recruited *duffadars* and *arkattis* to procure labourers from port-cities like Calcutta, or from villages further into the hinterland. It was also common to engage returned migrants, who had already spent some time in overseas plantation colonies, as recruiters. Returnees often recruited from within the extended family, or in the same village, where it was easier to make use of kinship networks to advertise indentured migration.[26] As Crispin Bates and Marina Carter point out, the role of labour intermediaries in recruitment evolved significantly between the 1820s and 1860s, with

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[23] Quoted in Brinsley Samaroo, 'The Caribbean Consequences of the Indian Revolt of 1857', in *Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean: History, Culture, and Identity*, ed. by Rattan Lal Hangloo (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2012), p. 79. Samaroo showed that there was a strong coincidence between the major areas of the uprising and the main recruiting areas—Kanpur, Lucknow, Faizabad, Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, Allahabad, Arrah, Chhapra, Patna, Gaya and Hazaribagh.

[24] For a detailed assessment of their role, see Tirthankar Roy, 'Sardars, Jobbers, Kanganies: The Labour Contractor and Indian Economic History', *Modern Asian Studies*, 42:5 (2008), 971-998; Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Sirdars as Intermediaries in Nineteenth-Century Indian Ocean Indentured Labour Migration', *Modern Asian Studies*, 51.2 (2017), 462–84; Amit Kumar Mishra, 'Sardars, Kanganies and Maistries: Intermediaries in the Indian Labour Diaspora During the Colonial Period', in *The History of Labour Intermediation: Institutions and Finding Employment in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Sigrid Wadauer, Thomas Buchner and Alexander Mejstrik (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015), pp. 368-87.

[25] Tirthankar Roy, 'Sardars, Jobbers, Kanganies', p. 972.

[26] Testimonies from migrant labourers in 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee' attest to this.

returnees increasingly replacing *arkattis* and *duffadars.*[27] At the same time, intermediary recruiters were generally remunerated according to number of labourers recruited, or from a cut of the wage advance given to labourers before sailing, which provided scope for misusing their power.[28] Fraudulent recruitment practices became central to the debates around indenture, which is discussed in detail in chapter 3.

John Archer argues that one of the central problems of urban history is its conceptualisation of the city as 'wholly differentiated from the hinterland'—considering the city and country in binary terms.[29] In the case of Calcutta, these linkages actively contributed to the indenture trade by encouraging access to a vast migrant labour pool. Linkages with the hinterland coincided with available networks of trade, army recruitment, and occupational migration (including railway, plantation, port and agricultural labour). It was these connections that put Calcutta at the centre of the indenture trade, and consequently at the centre of the indenture debates. The process of recruitment brought potential migrants to the city of Calcutta, where they interacted with the physical and official spaces accessible to them.

## Spaces of Indenture: The 'Coolie Depots'

The arrangement of the city-space facilitated Calcutta's interaction with the indenture trade, its engagement with government rules, and the expression of public opinion. Meera Kosambi and John Brush argue that like most colonial port-cities in the subcontinent, Calcutta was composed of a central fort adjacent to the commercial waterfront, residential areas generally divided across race and class lines, a peripheral manufacturing zone, and an outlying military zone.[30] The colonial state arranged the city-space into functionally distinguishable areas, which allowed for the development of both official and public spaces to discuss the indenture question. The way the public

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[27] Bates and Carter, 'Sirdars as Intermediaries', p. 467. Carter states that this system of labour recruitment became more popular after renewed government controls in 1842. Marina Carter, 'Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The Recruitment of Indentured Workers for Mauritius', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19:3-4 (1992), 229-245.

[28] See 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'; Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars, and Settlers*, pp. 41-42.

[29] John Archer, 'Paras, Palaces, Pathogens: Frameworks for the Growth of Calcutta, 1800–1850', *City & Society*, 12:1 (2000), p. 19.

[30] Meera Kosambi and John E. Brush, 'Three Colonial Port Cities in India', *Geographical Review* (1988), p. 33.

spaces were arranged—including merchant houses near the administrative and commercial district, and 'coolie depots' near the port—influenced both the trade and debates around it. Moreover, careful urban planning gave the city an official administrative position within the empire, which underlines its contribution to indenture debates. This section explores such spaces in Calcutta. In particular, it explores the emigration depot, which represented the beginning of the labourer's journey, and whose presence in Calcutta demonstrates the importance of the city in the indentured labour networks throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Several urban spaces in Calcutta bear testimony to the indenture trade. The Surinam Ghat on the river Ganges being named after the erstwhile Surinam depot is a prime example of this. Certain places bore (or still bear) the term 'coolie', such as Coolie Darwaza and Coolie Ghat near Fort William and Coolie Bazaar near Hastings. However, it is difficult to determine whether these were named in reference to indentured migrants specifically, or manual labourers designated as 'coolie' in colonial rhetoric.[31] Official maps have rarely recorded names of places eked out to accommodate the indenture trade—places demonstrative of the actual physical impact of the indenture trade on the city space. As Keya Dasgupta argues, urban cartography was focused on military strategy and defence in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, and land use and sanitation in the late-nineteenth century.[32] Only in the late-nineteenth century did a few maps start recording spaces frequented by indentured migrants, prime examples of which are 'The Plan of the Mauritius Emigration Depot, Bhowanipore' (1861) and 'Detail of Garden Reach' (1887).

The former is a hand-drawn layout of one of the earliest depots, highlighting spaces such as the hospital, dispensary, living spaces, cooking sheds and the water tank. The latter is a detailed map of the Garden Reach area near the Calcutta port that highlights six 'coolie depots' (including the Trinidad, British Guiana and Jamaica depots), 'coolie lines' or accommodation spaces, and a 'coolie line' temple.[33] The map

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[31] 'Coolie Bazar', for instance, was named after the large influx of manual labourers to the area during the building of the new Fort William according to P.T. Nair. P. Thankappan Nair, *A History of Calcutta's Streets* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1987).

[32] Keya Dasgupta, *Mapping Calcutta: The Collection of Maps at the Visual Archives of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences* (Kolkata: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 2009).

[33] R.B. Smart, 'Detail of Garden Reach', Sheet 7 [Garden Reach] of the Hooghly Survey, 1887. IOR/X/9126/7, British Library.

makes clear that depots were situated between jute mills, cotton mills, coal-sheds and dock yards. In fact, J.G.G. Grant's report from 1883-84 mentions that the river-banks at Garden Reach 'afford great conveniences for the establishment of depots, as most of the houses in that locality was suitable for residence and office in one; and, having extensive garden grounds attached, are admirably adapted for depots'.[34] The port-area thus attests to physical evidence of the indenture trade, the migrant labourers, and the spaces they frequented for almost a century.

One of the earliest interactions that indentured migrants had with the city was in the emigration depots, where they were accommodated before being shipped to the destination colonies. These also served as spaces of interaction with emigration officials and other labourers, and became one of the earliest sites where the labourers came in direct contact with the system of indenture and those involved in the trade. Indentured migrants in the depots not only came in contact with agents of their future employers, but also the Emigration Agent, Surgeon Superintendent, and other government officials that the prevailing regulations demanded.[35] Such interactions became more regulated with changing emigration policies (especially with the need for certificates to attest to the labourers' good health and willingness to emigrate), but functioned within limitations imposed by the large number of potential emigrants, and the limited time the agent could accord to each. Moreover, labour contracts were generally discussed and signed in the depots, making it central to discussions around the trade and its legitimacy. Tinker has shown that migrants were issued standard clothing in the depots—for Mauritius the kit included a cap, and a 'Guernsey frock', while for the West Indies and Fiji, warm clothes were issued for the journey. Women also wore flannel jackets, woollen petticoats, stocking and shoes, besides sarees.[36] Ultimately, these

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[34] Margriet Fokken, *Beyond Being Koelies and Kantráki: Constructing Hindostani Identities in Suriname in the Era of Indenture, 1873-1921* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2018), pp. 90-91.

[35] Testimonies of migrants and indenture officials in 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee' attest to this.

[36] Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (London: Hansib Publishers, 1993), p. 140.

'coolie depots' represented the start of the labourer's journey overseas—the site where migrants first realised their identity as indentured labourers.[37]

Although this thesis is focused on the mid-nineteenth century, when official 'coolie depots' were yet to be established, their presence in Calcutta demonstrates the importance of the city in the indentured labour networks throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Marina Carter points out that in the 1830s, recruits were mainly kept at the *duffadars*' homes until the ship's departure, with nominal (and often non-existent) inspection.[38] While not an emigration depot eked out to accommodate indentured labourers, these houses still served the same purpose by initiating the labourer into the indenture trade. With the resumption of indentured migration under revised regulations in 1842, the Bhowanipore Depot was opened in Calcutta (while recruits at Madras and Bombay were still accommodated in warehouses). The Bhowanipore Depot was initially meant to accommodate emigrants to Mauritius, but soon came to serve as the emigration depot for Trinidad, Jamaica and Demerara. Later, separate depots for men and women destined for Trinidad, Fiji, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts, Saint Helena and British Guiana came up closer to the port at Garden Reach.[39] Depots were later opened in more interior parts of Bengal, including modern-day Orissa, Assam, Bangladesh, Bihar and Jharkhand.[40] Often referred to as 'coolie sheds', these regional depots served to accommodate labourers proceeding to Calcutta, and provided food and other provisions. The position of such depots not only facilitated the movement of migrant labourers, but also gained public attention. News reports from the time, including David Hare's testimony from above, mention spotting 'coolies' at

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[37] For detailed accounts of 'coolie' depots in Calcutta and the experience of indentured migrants in the depot in the late-nineteenth century, see Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*; Fokken, *Beyond Being Koelies*.

[38] Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*, p. 78.

[39] For instance, migrants moving to Demerara, Natal and the Caribbean Island of Nevis were accommodated at a depot at 25 Garden Reach, those moving to Surinam at 20 Garden Reach, and those migrating to Cayenne, Guadeloupe and Martinique at 76 Garden Reach. The last two depots were managed by the Dutch and French governments respectively. Captain C. Burbank, *Annual Report on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies for 1864-65*, dated May 23, 1865, No. 299 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1865); J.G. Grant, *Annual Report on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies for 1873-74*, No. 609/A (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1874).

[40] Index to General Department (General) Proceedings, 1835-42, WBSA.

different parts of the city.[41] Letters to editors of contemporary newspapers, such as the *Calcutta Star*, the *Friend of India*, the *Englishman* and the *Bengal Hurkaru*, often mentioned 'coolies' being recruited on the streets, or spotting them near docks and depots. The Calcutta city-space, and labourers' interaction with the city and its public, was thus central to the discourse on indenture.

The development of the indenture system in Calcutta was facilitated as much by its position within migration and mobility networks, as by the presence of merchant houses in Calcutta.[42] Managing agency houses, originally founded as British merchant enterprises that worked on commission, often acted as labour contractors and agents for planters. Mercantile groups such as Henley, Dowson and Bestel, Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co., and Jardine, Lyall Matheson and Co. find mention in most early indentured contracts, since they mediated between the emigrants and plantation-owners, and often signed the contracts on behalf of planters.[43] At the same time, agency-houses served as commercial enterprises where European and Indian merchants and entrepreneurs held joint stake. In fact, the jointly-held Carr, Tagore and Co. has been hailed as one of the earliest examples of European-Indian collaboration.[44] These merchant houses acted as representatives of overseas planters and merchants based in the plantation colonies for legal and emigration purposes. Thus, they played a crucial role in appointing recruiters to procure a suitable emigrant labour force, and in overseeing the process of embarkation and the signing of indentured contracts. As Stephanie Jones points out, the managing agency system began in the 1830s when the East India Company lost its trading monopoly, allowing for private trading.[45] Merchant houses had since been involved in coal mining, indigo plantation and shipping enterprises, and thus were experienced in both procuring migrant labourers and arranging their travel to plantation

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[41] Testimony of David Hare, October 8, 1838, in 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee', p. 53.

[42] For details on the managing agency system in India, see Blair Kling, 'The Origin of the Managing Agency System in India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 26:1 (1966), 37-47; Blair Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Maria Misra, *Business, Race, and Politics in British India, c. 1850-1960* (Wotton: Clarendon Press, 1999); Stephanie Jones, *Merchants of the Raj: British Managing Agency Houses in Calcutta Yesterday and Today* (Berlin: Springer, 1992).

[43] Index to General Department (General) Proceedings, 1835-42, WBSA.

[44] See Kling, *Partner in Empire*.

[45] Jones, *Merchants of the Raj*, p. 1.

colonies. The presence of several such merchant houses in Calcutta, with commercial and personal links to merchants in metropolitan Britain and planters in British plantation colonies, made Calcutta the centre of continued and reliable trade in indentured labourers.

## A New Labour Regime

The availability of labourers and recruitment agents in Calcutta contributed to the beginning of a new labour regime in the British Empire—one that replaced slave labour in plantation colonies, but was at the same time embroiled in similar debates over servitude. The questioning of unfree labour systems that was introduced with the Abolition debates, continued with the passing of the Slave Trade Act of 1807 (which prohibited slave trade within the British Empire), and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 (which prohibited the use of slave labour within the British Empire).[46] By 1837, about half a decade after Abolition, negotiations between sugar planters and the metropolitan government had created a standardised, government-sanctioned system of labour migration based on five-year labour contracts or indentures. This represented a significant and distinct moment in the history of labour and servitude, since the use of Indian indentured labour raised questions about the legitimacy of unfree labour regimes. This section analyses the establishment of the indenture trade by discussing early indentured migration, the establishment of the labour contract, the relevance of the post-slavery moment, and the position of Calcutta within this discourse.

The post-Abolition era was characterised by planter discussions on alternative labour forces. In spite of monetary compensation to planters and the apprenticeship system, post-Abolition economic problems included, besides trade depression across the empire and rising costs of commodities like sugar and rum, the immediate need for migrant labourers to replace slave labour in plantation estates. Scholars like Madhavi Kale argue that importing labour from overseas was not just a tactic for fulfilling the post-Abolition shortage of labour, but also a strategy for challenging the Afro-

[46] Notably, India was excluded from the 1833 legislation as being under the jurisdiction of the East India Company rather than the British government. Slavery in India was not de-legalised until 1843.

Caribbean worker's position in the local labour market.[47] In this search for post-Abolition plantation labour, the precedence of South Asian migrant workforces in international labour markets since the seventeenth century, and failed experiments with other groups of labourers, made Indian migrants appear an appropriate choice.

As demonstrated in the introduction, overseas migration was a common theme of the early-nineteenth century. Records from the time mention Indian migrants employed in military labour in India, domestic work in Europe and Britain, convict labour in Moulmein (Burma), Australian colonies (New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land) and Araccan (Burma), and skilled labour across the empire. Indentured migration was only a part—even though a major and constant part—of these wider migratory trends. Although each labour system followed its own distinct set of regulations and migration policies, they often employed from the same labour pool. Moreover, indentured labour exporters like Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. were often involved in the recruitment and migration of both indentured and overseas domestic labourers.[48] The indenture networks thus followed on from experimental and short-lived schemes for the transportation of agricultural and convict labour to plantation colonies. These included the employment of Indian convict labour in Mauritius in 1815-17 in public works projects, the emigration of Indian labourers from Pondicherry and Karikal (both French colonies) to French Bourbon (Réunion) by a decree in 1826, and the transportation of 150 men from Bengal to Bourbon in September 1830 for labour.[49]

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[47] Madhavi Kale, 'Projecting Identities: Empire and Indentured Labor Migration from India to Trinidad and British Guiana, 1836-1885', in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. by Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 73-92; Madhavi Kale, ''Capital Spectacles in British Frames': Capital, Empire and Indian Indentured Migration to the British Caribbean', *International Review of Social History*, 41:S4 (1996), 109-133. The question of post-Abolition labour shortage and arguments based around this trope are detailed in later chapters.

[48] See, for instance, Letter from Mr. Gillanders and Arbuthnot and Co. requests return of a deposit on account of a native servant named Chand Khan who proceeded to Europe with Mr. W.T. Robertson on board the Duke of Argyle. Dated January 22. January 22, 1835; and Letter from Messers Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. request return of deposit made on account of a native female servant named [Mohum Hinghun] who had accompanied Mrs. Minchin to England. Dated December 18. December 20, 1837, No. 46-47. General Department (General) Proceedings, 1835-42, WBSA.

[49] Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815-53* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 6; Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, p. 61; Panchanan Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour 1834-1900* (Calcutta: People's Publishing

Such contractual arrangements continued into 1834-35, as the years saw more frequent indentured migration under detailed contractual arrangements. One of the earliest indentured contracts was signed in December 1834, when 151 Indian labourers entered into five-year contracts to work in the sugar plantations of John Shaw Sampson in Mauritius, and 48 others to that of W. West.[50] In 1835, the Chief Magistrate of Calcutta reported the emigration of 270 labourers to serve in sugar plantations in Mauritius.[51] These early contracts defined conditions of indentured employment, and in many ways set the tone for emigration regulations. The contracts signed in 1834, for instance, mentioned the kind of work labourers were expected to carry out on the plantations, their working hours, the amount of wages, and the food and clothing provisions that planters were contractually bound to provide them with.[52] Similar provisions were continued in indentured contracts after the migration system was sanctioned by the British government.

One of the earliest proponents of the indenture trade was British planter John Gladstone (father of four-time Prime Minister William Gladstone). His negotiations with the colonial government resulted in Act V of 1837, and a lasting indentured labour regime under legal sanction of the colonial government. A trader of sugar and cotton, and owner of plantation estates in Jamaica and British Guiana, John Gladstone (1764-1851) actively represented planter interest in public discussions on Abolition and

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House, 1970), p. 22. The last example is particularly similar to the Indian indenture scheme since it involved the negotiation of terms of service with the colonial government, and the formulation of contracts that allowed for five years of service against a promise of rations and a fixed monthly salary of eight rupees.

[50] Letter to the Chief Secretary to the Governor of Mauritius, dated December 1, 1834. December 1, 1834, No. 29; Letter to the Chief Secretary to the Governor of Mauritius, dated December 29, 1834. December 29, 1834, No. 24; and Letter from D. McFarlan to H.T. Prinsep, dated November 27, 1834. November 27, 1834, No. 26. In General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[51] Letter from D. McFarlan to H.T. Prinsep, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated February 12, 1835. February 21, 1835, No. 12; and Letter from D. McFarlan to G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government, General Department, dated July 23, 1835. July 29, 1835, No. 54. In General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[52] Letter to the Chief Secretary to the Governor of Mauritius, dated December 1, 1834. December 1, 1834, No. 29; Letter to the Chief Secretary to the Governor of Mauritius, dated December 29, 1834. December 29, 1834, No. 24; and Letter from D. McFarlan to H.T. Prinsep, dated November 27, 1834. November 27, 1834, No. 26, General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

emancipation.[53] He recognised the threat that Abolition posed to planters and traders, and started negotiating with British parliamentarians to allow for the procurement of plantation labourers from India. In this, he was aided by the Calcutta-based firm Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co.

Established in 1819 by John Gladstone and Captain F.M. Gillanders, this firm had long been involved in the emigration of Indians as servants or labourers to England, the Cape, and plantation colonies.[54] For instance, G.C. Arbuthnot (a partner in the firm) had arranged for the emigration of thirty-nine labourers from India to Mauritius in 1834, and of fifty labourers 'of the Dhangur cast [sic.]' to Mauritius for five years in 1835.[55] This firm further served as agents for the emigration of labourers to Mauritian sugar planters such as Edward Worthington, Robert Edie, Captain Harvey, Mr. Sanders and Mr. Griffens in 1835.[56] The location of agency-houses, Calcutta's position as port and capital, and the existence of such migratory networks had led Gladstone to contact Calcutta merchants to facilitate a trade in Indian labourers for his plantations. This correspondence between Gladstone and Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. not only

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[53] H.G.C. Matthew and Brian Harrison, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. 22 (Oxford University Press, 2004). For Gladstone's involvement in West Indian sugar plantations and Abolition debates, see Richard Sheridan, 'The Condition of the Slaves on the Sugar Plantations of Sir John Gladstone in the Colony of Demerara, 1812-49', *New West Indian Guide*, 76:3-4 (2002), 243-69; Trevor Burnard and Kit Candlin, 'Sir John Gladstone and the Debate over the Amelioration of Slavery in the British West Indies in the 1820s', *Journal of British Studies*, 57:4 (2018), 760-782.

[54] See, for instance, letter from G.C. Arbuthnot requesting return of a deposit on account of a native female servant who proceeded to England. October 21, 1835, No. 3; Letter from G.C. Arbuthnot, dated September 9, 1835. September 9, 1835, No. 38-40. In General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA; Stephanie Jones, *Merchants of the Raj*, pp. 5-6.

[55] Letter from the Chief Magistrate of Calcutta D. McFarlan to H.T. Prinsep, dated March 30, 1835. April 1, 1835, No. 18, General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA. Also included in letter from D. McFarlan to H.T. Prinsep dated September 19, 1839, Calcutta Police Office, 'Copy of Agreement Between Parties on the Subject of Dhangur Coolies Embarked for the Mauritius', Enclosure in No. 32 in *Copies of All Orders in Council, or Colonial Ordinances, for the better regulations and enforcement of the relative duties of Masters and Employers, and articled servants, tradesmen and labourers, in the colonies of British Guiana and Mauritius and of correspondence relating thereof* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 2 March 1838). Henceforth, this document is referred to as 'Masters and Employers'.

[56] Letter from McFarlan to H.T. Prinsep, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated February 12, 1835. February 21, 1835, No. 12; Letter from McFarlan to G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government, General Department, dated July 23, 1835. July 29, 1835, No. 54. In General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

represented the beginning of a more legal system of indentured migration, but also highlighted the historical importance of Calcutta within indenture networks from its very inception.

In a letter on January 4, 1836, Gladstone asked Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. about the viability of employing 'hill coolies' from Bengal in West Indian estates. He wrote:

> You will probably be aware that we are very particularly situated with our negro apprentices in the West Indies, and that is [a] matter of doubt and uncertainty [as to] how far they may be induced to continue their services on the plantations after their apprenticeship expires in 1840. This, to us, is a subject of great moment and deep importance in the colonies of Demerara and Jamaica. We are, therefore, most desirous to obtain and introduce labourers from other quarters, and particularly from climates similar in their nature […] it has occurred to us that a moderate number of Bengalees, such as you were sending to the Isle of France [Mauritius], might be very suitable for our purpose.[57]

Citing the labour shortage experienced in his estates and drawing attention to the labour migrations that Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. had aided in 1834, Gladstone asked for a hundred labourers to be exported from Bengal for his estates in the West Indies—*Vreedenhoop* and *Vriedenstein*. He wrote that the labourers needed to be 'young, active, able-bodied people' to be bound in labour for five to seven years, and 'their wives disposed to working the field as well as they themselves'.[58] In exchange, he offered wages according to contract, comfortable housing, medical assistance and a free passage to British Guiana.[59]

Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. were satisfied with the proposal and soon replied: 'within the last two years, upwards of 2000 natives have been sent from [Calcutta] to the Mauritius. [W]e are not aware that any great difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies, the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they go

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[57] Letter from John Gladstone to Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co., dated January 4, 1836. Enclosure No.1 to Gladstone's letters to Lord Glenelg dated February 28, 1838, in *Masters and Employers*.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

to or the length of the voyage they are undertaking.'[60] Gladstone's communication with this Calcutta-based firm represented the beginning of a journey towards establishing a legal, systematic network of indentured migration, with a view to replacing slave labour in overseas plantation colonies after Abolition. The back-and-forth over Gladstone's proposal came to determine the primary principles of the indentured contract and passage, including ship size, food and clothing provisions, proportion of male and female labourers, the importance of a surgeon on board ship, and the provision of five years of contract-bound labour.[61]

The contractual nature of the indenture trade, the finiteness of the scheme, and its image as the solution to the post-Abolition labour shortage were crucial in accepting the indenture trade as a post-slavery labour regime. In this immediately post-Abolition environment, contracts became the basis of differentiating between slave and post-slave labour regimes. On the one hand, planters and merchants used the presence of contracts to argue that the indentured labour regime represented an exercise in 'free' labour. The very presence of contracts was seen as security against exploitation or 'unfree' labour systems. On the other hand, those against the indenture trade used problems and inadequacies of the contracts to criticise the regime and term it as a continuation of slavery. Abolition had changed the rubrics of defining servitude and unfree labour. Understanding contracts is thus critical for understanding the post-slavery discourse around indenture.

Merchant demand for labourers and the willingness of Calcutta firms to procure them was not enough to initiate a continuous trade in indentured labourers—it was important to win the support of the British government. To that end in February 1837, Gladstone wrote to the President of the Board of Control for India, to ask permission for 'moving workers, under agreed indentures, from India to the West Indies'.[62] Highlighting the uncertainty of labour-procurement under the temporary apprenticeship system, Gladstone argued in this letter that Indian workers offered the best chance of

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[60] Letter from Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. to Gladstone dated June 6, 1836. Enclosure No.1 to Gladstone's letters to Lord Glenelg dated February 28, 1838, in *Masters and Employers*.

[61] Letter from Gladstone to Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. dated March 10, 1837 and May 20, 1837, in Enclosure No.1 to Gladstone's letters to Lord Glenelg dated February 28, 1838, in *Masters and Employers*.

[62] Letter from Gladstone to Hobhouse, dated February 23, 1837, Enclosure 1 in No. 5, in *Masters and Employers.*

saving the sugar trade. For Gladstone, Indian labourers were not only a better fit for plantation labour than Europeans, but were also supposed to create competition for local labour and thus induce the apprentices to meet the wishes of the employer more readily.[63] Here he appealed not only to the apparent suitability of Indian labourers to the tropical climate, but also the failure of previous labour regimes, namely emancipated slaves and European labourers (mainly Portuguese labour from Madeira).[64] Such letters between Gladstone and parliamentarians like Hobhouse and Lord Glenelg created the main provisions for the indenture trade and helped make decisions around its legal tenets.

This was not an easy question for the British parliament. In the immediate aftermath of the anti-slavery movement, the questions of 'free' and 'unfree' labour regimes had become central to emigration regulation. Some members of the British public were suspicious that the indenture scheme was a 'new system of slavery', and the anti-slavery lobby pushed parliament for the abolition of any form of unfree labour remotely akin to slavery. In spite of the clash of pro- and anti-indenture voices in Britain, the British parliament ultimately gave its nod to the scheme. Although opposed within the House of Lords, an Order-in-Council was issued in 1836, agreeing to the introduction of Indian labourers in British Guiana under five-year contracts. In the next

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[63] Ibid.

[64] The link between climate and race has been discussed in chapter 4.

Emancipation in the British Empire and its impact on labour shortage and sugar production has been explored in works such as William Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Emanuel Riviere, 'Labour Shortage in the British West Indies after Emancipation', *The Journal of Caribbean History*, 4 (1972), 1-30; Richard Sheridan, 'The West India Sugar Crisis and British Slave Emancipation, 1830-1833', *Journal of Economic History* (1961), 539-551; Stanley Engerman, 'Economic Change and Contract Labor in the British Caribbean: The End of Slavery and the Adjustment to Emancipation', *Explorations in Economic History*, 21:2 (1984), 133-150; William Green, 'The Planter Class and British West Indian Sugar Production, before and after Emancipation', *The Economic History Review*, 26:3 (1973), 448-463; Michael Moohr, 'The Economic Impact of Slave Emancipation in British Guiana, 1832-1852', *The Economic History Review*, 25:4 (1972), 588-607.

Madeiran immigration into the West Indies has been explored in works like K.O. Laurence, 'The Establishment of the Portuguese Community in British Guiana', *Jamaican Historical Review*, 5:2 (1965), 50-74; Brian Moore, 'The Social Impact of Portuguese Immigration into British Guiana after Emancipation', *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, 19 (1975), 3-15; Jo-Anne S. Ferreira, 'Madeiran Portuguese Migration to Guyana, St. Vincent, Antigua and Trinidad: A Comparative Overview', *Portuguese Studies Review*, 14:2 (2006/7), 63-85.

year, parliament passed the Act V of 1837, which came to govern the principles of recruitment and passage.

This was a crucial move in the history of Indian indenture. The correspondence with officials not only made the planters' need for labour an official problem, but it also introduced Indian migrants as a viable replacement for the slave labour regime. Indians had long been involved in long-distance migration for labour, but Gladstone's intervention aided the transformation of this private and often spontaneous system of labour migration into an organised scheme of contractual labour migration, legally sanctioned by the colonial government and regulated by imperial policies. Gladstone was not the only planter who pushed for the establishment of the indenture trade. But his plantation estates in Demerara and Jamaica, his presidency of the Liverpool West India Association, membership of the British Guiana Association, and close familial links to merchant houses at Calcutta made him exemplary of merchant voices during the change from slave labour regimes to post-slavery labour regimes. Gladstone used his relationship with important parliamentarians and other planters to become one of the most prominent voices in favour of Indian indenture—negotiating the tenets of the trade through letters, publishing his views by writing to the British press, and pushing for emigration laws to make the regime official.

The new labour regime was thus established through negotiations between a British planter with West Indian interest, a Calcutta-based merchant firm, and the British parliament. This highlights both the trans-imperial nature of the indenture networks, and the importance of Calcutta within it.

## Forces of Change: Regulating a Trade in 'Coolies'

In its early days, such as the arrival of Indian labourers to French Bourbon in January 1826, or the migration of 150 men to Bourbon in September 1830, indentured migration was a private enterprise. However, as it became legalised by the Act V of 1837, the indenture trade drew significant official and public attention. With the emergence of both anti and pro-indenture sentiments, Britain soon emerged as the epicentre of what came to be identified as the 'coolie question'—the site of decisions, emigration regulations, and negotiations over the indenture trade. In this, it was aided by voices from Calcutta and from other parts of the empire, which played a significant role in changing emigration regulations. This section focuses on early negotiations over Indian

indenture trade that facilitated a constantly changing labour regime, to explore how this labour regime responded to inputs from colonies, and highlight how the discourse around indenture was written into law. It offers an overview of the emigration acts and the indenture question in Britain, which formed the backdrop to the indenture debates in Calcutta.

The establishment of the Indian indenture trade was not a simple process of passing an emigration bill, but a long, drawn-out process of negotiation between pro- and anti-indenture voices in Britain and the colonies. West India merchants mostly resided in Britain and were in a position to exert economic and political pressure to support merchant interest. Planters based in the colonies could also promote their interests through petitions, memoranda and pressure groups in Britain.[65] With the Abolition debates and the rise of an increasingly strong anti-slavery lobby, the position of planters and merchants became more precarious. Thus, after the Abolition Act of 1833, the energy that planters and anti-slavery lobbyists spent on debating the legitimacy of slavery was redirected into the indenture debates. Just as British planters came to negotiate with the government over emancipation and financial compensation in reaction to Abolition, they also continued to push for alternative sources of plantation labour. In fact, British merchants and planters argued that the Indian indenture trade was, by virtue of having started after slavery was abolished, an exercise in free labour. It was a legal and lucrative employment opportunity for labourers, and also indispensable for continuous sugar production. Similarly, there were stakeholders in Calcutta—merchants, shipping companies and recruiters—who welcomed the indenture trade as a lucrative opportunity. For them, Indian labour not only represented the solution to the post-Abolition woes of British and West India planters, but also heralded the beginning of a new trade from India that traders based in the East could profit from.[66]

At the same time, the early-nineteenth century saw the emergence of a strong voice against unfree labour. Anti-slavery organisations such as the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society and pressure-groups saw in Indian indenture the continuation of slave conditions, and took up the indenture issue as one of prime and immediate

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[65] M.D. North-Coombs, 'From Slavery to Indenture: Forced Labour in the Political Economy of Mauritius, 1834-1867', in *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920*, ed. by Kay Saunders (London; Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984).

[66] Merchant arguments are detailed in chapter 5.

concern. Instead of visualising Indian indenture as a solution to the post-Abolition labour deficit and an exercise in 'free labour', they saw it as slavery in all but name. The anti-indenture argument maintained that the indenture trade recruited labourers through misinformation, and was a new form of unfree labour not so different from the recently-disbanded slavery. This argument was circulated in Britain by parliamentarians, petitions, periodicals (like *Anti-Slavery Reporter*), pamphlets and publications, but was also evident in voices from Calcutta.[67] Its proponents alleged that instead of acting as a replacement for slave labour, indentured labour migration perpetuated the actual conditions of slavery through forceful recruitment, a lack of information about living and working conditions prior to reaching the plantation colonies, pitiable conditions of passage synonymous to the middle passage, penal sanction, and the continuation of service under overseers in plantations that used to employ slave labour. Such pro- and anti-indenture voices in Britain also had their counterparts in Calcutta, whose arguments and demands added to the global discourse on indenture.

The Act V of 1837 was the cornerstone of the indenture trade. Passed by the Governor-General in Council on 1st May 1837, it provided a detailed schema for indentured migration from India. Even though emigration laws underwent changes over time in response to feedback from parliamentarians, the anti-slavery lobby, the British public, and voices from the colonies, the central tenets of this act continued to define the trade. This Act made contracts the central focus of indenture legislation. Under the provisions of the act, it was legally binding for the labourer and a representative of the planter to be examined in person by an appointed official. The indenture officer would then produce copies of the contract in English and in the mother tongue of the emigrant (or any other language they understood). The labourer himself was to be strictly examined to ensure that he understood the terms of the contract. The act further offered strict regulations on provisions of food, water and medical supplies, and made it legally binding for appointed officials to inspect ships and their provisions before allowing embarkation. At the end of service, the emigrants had the right to repatriate to their port of departure.[68] This act was specific to the Bengal Presidency and allowed for

[67] These views are discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

[68] Emigration Act V of 1837, passed by the Governor-General in Council on May 1, 1837, Home Department, Public Branch, Annex Building, National Library, Kolkata (NL).

emigration only through the port of Calcutta. After Act XXXII of 1837 was passed, the scheme was extended to the ports of Bombay and Madras.[69]

Taken together, the Acts V and XXXII of 1837 allowed the emigration of labourers to plantation colonies under legally-sanctioned regulatory measures. In no uncertain terms, they stated that emigration under the indenture scheme could only continue with a legal contract of service ratified by an authorising officer, and labourers' right of repatriation at the end of five years. Simultaneously, a new administrative position was created for granting permits to migrating labourers, who was responsible for signing off on the contract, allowing or disallowing emigration, and checking that provisions on board ships were of an acceptable standard.[70] Many of the provisions specified by the acts of 1837 drew from early labour contracts, which identified things that needed to be regulated by law, such as limits of the contract, repatriation at the end of five years, and food, water and medical provisions on board. All subsequent regulations related to the emigration of Indian indentured labourers had to adhere closely to these acts.

At the same time, just as the abolition of slavery had paved the way for indentured labour migrations, it had also created a situation in which concerns about 'free' and 'unfree' labour became central to regulations in the British Empire. Negotiations between pro- and anti-indenture voices in the metropole and colonies played a crucial role in determining the trajectory of the indenture system. Since its very inception, the indenture trade had been a contentious issue, with the early regulations being accompanied by criticism of the system and calls for its abolition. The passing of the Act V of 1837 had drawn public attention, and British anti-slavery societies soon took up indentured labour as a point of immediate concern. The British Parliament itself was divided over the issue. In a session of the Parliament in 1838, prominent abolitionist Lord Brougham described Indian indenture as the establishment of the slave trade, vehemently opposing 'this infernal trade' on grounds that it replicated slave conditions.[71] In a meeting on July 16, Lord Brougham showed indignation at the fact

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[69] Emigration Act XXXII of 1837, passed by the President of Council of India in Council on December 15, 1837, Home Department, Public Branch, Annex Building, NL.

[70] Orders by the Governor, dated May 17, 1837, No. 1. General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[71] Quoted in Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India*, p. 9.

that 'these poor and ignorant creatures, the hill coolies, were smuggled away under the idea that Mauritius […] was a village belonging to the East India Company.[72] Compromise was reached when parliament proposed a regulatory bill in 1838 titled 'East-India Labourers' Bill' to put several restrictions on the indenture trade.[73] Yet protests became more systematised as public societies and influential members of the Court of Directors demonstrated concern with the indenture trade.

On the one hand, there were protests from inhabitants of Calcutta, and government officials in Calcutta and Mauritius questioning the legitimacy of the indenture trade. Debates in Calcutta especially questioned the efficacy of the indentured contracts, highlighted allegations of mistreatment and deceptive recruitment of labourers, and compared the indenture trade to slavery. Protests in Mauritius were focused more on neglect and personal chastisement of labourers on plantation estates. For instance, an 1838 report from Special Magistrate Charles Anderson, who was appointed as part of an investigative committee in Mauritius, stated '[w]ith a few exceptions they [indentured labourers] are treated with great and unjust severity, by overwork and by personal chastisement […] and in cases of sickness [there is] the most culpable neglect'.[74]

On the other hand, anti-slavery activists in metropolitan Britain, such as the Aborigines Protection Society and the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society questioned the alleged difference between slavery and indenture. An investigation into Gladstone's West Indian plantations by the Anti-Slavery Society also exposed instances of corporal punishment, ill-treatment, and lack of adequate medical facilities.[75] Under

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[72] Ibid.

[73] This bill posited that Indian indentured labourers could not embark except from the ports of Calcutta, Bombay or Madras, that contracts written both in English and in the mother tongue of the labourer had to be examined and verified from a government-appointed official, that such contracts would contain details of all clauses and be valid only for five years, that ships carrying labourers should have a surgeon and enough medical stores on board, and that special officers be appointed to ensure against abuses at all ports of embarkation and disembarkation. East-India Labourers' Bill, passed December 31, 1837, in Enclosure No. XLVI to *Papers Respecting the East-India Labourers' Bill* (London: J.L. Cox and Sons, 1838), pp. 221-36.

[74] Cited in Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, p. 69.

[75] Quoted in John Scoble, *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: Johnston and Barrett, 1840), pp. 15-17.

increasing censure—not least from Calcutta in the form of petitions and public resolutions—the indenture trade was suspended, and investigative committees were formed across India and plantation colonies to enquire into the alleged abuses.[76] With the passing of the Act XIV on May 29, 1839, indentured migration to Mauritius, Demerara, Réunion, Ceylon and the Australian colonies (New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land) was prohibited, with a fine of 200-rupees or three months imprisonment for flouting the ruling.[77]

Even with the temporary prohibition of indentured migration, the British parliament remained divided over the issue. Lord Auckland argued that 'no strictness of regulation, and no vigilance on the part of the authorities, would immediately prevent the frequent infliction of grievous oppressions and deceits upon large numbers of persons helpless from their poverty and from their utter ignorance and inexperience.'[78] Lords Brougham and Ellenborough continued to criticise the indenture system and in a July 1839 meeting, declared that the 'mortality and massacre of the voyage far exceeded the African middle passage itself.'[79] In context of Gladstone's selling of his estate in Demerara along with his labourers in 1841, Her Majesty's Attorney and Solicitor General declared, 'such transactions, certainly, have very much the aspect of a sale of the services of the coolies, as if they were slaves for a limited time'.[80]As the following chapters will show, such constant comparison between slavery and indenture, judging the indenture trade against the tenets of the slave trade, and the importance given to regulations and upholding of contracts were hallmarks of the post-slavery understanding of labour servitude and were also reflected in the indenture debates at Calcutta.

Despite such opposition to indenture, many British planters maintained that the migration of indentured labourers was central to the economies of both the sugar colonies and metropolitan Britain, vehemently protesting the suspension of emigration. In fact, a petition from Mauritian planters, merchants and traders to the Court of

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[76] Extract from Proceedings of the President in Council, dated July 11, 1838, in letter from the Government of Bengal, dated June 6. August, 1838, No. 5, General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[77] Emigration Act XIV of 1839, passed by the Honourable the President of the Council of India in Council on the 27th May, 1839, Home Department, Public Branch, Annex Building, NL.

[78] 'The Cooly Trade', *Friend of India*, March 31, 1842.

[79] Quoted in Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India*, p. 9.

[80] *Leicester Chronicle*, July 24, 1841.

Directors called the suspension 'unconstitutional'.[81] Planters and merchants maintained that the suspension amounted to disaster for plantation economies and curbed the labourers' right to choose their employment. They further argued that the abuses alleged to exist in the indenture trade could be remedied by further regulations. In light of increasing pressure from such interest groups, Parliament declared the resumption of indentured emigration, but under stricter regulations.

In December 1842, the Act XV was passed, which removed previous restrictions on the trade and resumed emigration from Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. However, it included several regulatory measures to ensure protection from some of the abuses alleged to exist in the trade. The Act increased regulation of shipping conditions, made it legally binding on the colony to grant return passage to each labourer, and proposed that officers be appointed at each port to supervise the trade. It declared that water and food provisions should be specified and surveyed by the Emigration Agent, the duration of voyage determined by ordinances, and the details of emigration be kept on record, with penalties for non-compliance, fraud or export by false imprisonment or intoxication.[82] The Marine Surgeon was made responsible for producing fitness and vaccination certificates for emigrants. This regulation addressed, and in some ways answered, the concerns raised in the debates over indenture in 1837-42. Thus, after 1842, there was a gradual decline in anti-indenture arguments from Calcutta.

Although relegated to the peripheries in works on Indian indenture, Calcutta was involved in this process of negotiation throughout the mid-nineteenth century. Gladstone's detailed conversation with the Calcutta-based Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. helped establish some of the central features of the indenture system—including the contract, the labour pool, and the system of labour recruitment and supply. Petitions and public resolutions from Calcutta that criticised the indenture trade added to the growing pressure against its continuance. The report of the Calcutta committee of 1838-40 was used by the anti-indenture lobby to point to the problems of the trade, and its recommendations were incorporated in future acts. Many of the revisions in regulations in 1842—such as the creation of the post of emigration agent and Protector of

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[81] Quoted in *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 19, 1839.

[82] Act XV of 1842, Colonial Emigration Acts (Bombay Education Society Press, 1842), Home Department, Public Branch, Annex Building, NL.

Emigrants, or the institution of penalties for those who flouted emigration rules—coincided with recommendations of the Calcutta investigative committee.

Moreover, as the introduction points out, early legislation prioritised Calcutta and considered it emblematic of port-cities that exported indentured Indians. For instance, Act V of 1837 allowed emigration only from Calcutta and Act XXXII of 1837 extended it to Madras and Bombay ports. Similarly, when indentured emigration was resumed after its brief suspension, Act XXI of 1843 restricted emigration to the port of Calcutta, while Act XX of 1844 extended the provision of emigration to Jamaica, British Guiana, Trinidad and other West Indian colonies from all three ports (Calcutta, Bombay and Madras).[83]

The decline of anti-indenture voices after 1842 was also reflected in Calcutta. Although some periodicals continued to oppose the resumption of the indenture trade, the period after 1842 saw a gradual decline in discussions over indenture in public spaces and newspapers.[84] For instance, 1843 editions of the *Friend of India* show a distinct move away from news of indentured labour (which tended to be first-page news in 1838-42), losing prominence and priority by 1844. Although regulations continued to be modified according to inputs from emigration officials across the empire, Act XV of 1842 represented the ultimate legal sanctioning of indentured labour migration. The regulatory measures in these acts undercut the immediacy of prohibition of indenture. More importantly, resumption was proof that the imperial government had no immediate plans of discontinuing the programme. Questions about the efficacy of the trade and regulations would continue, but after this moment, the very validity of the trade would not be questioned till the beginning of the twentieth century, partly in conjunction with the Indian nationalist movement.

Early emigration regulations thus responded to pressure from metropolitan officials, abolitionists, planters in destination colonies, merchant interests, as well as public opinion expressed in newspapers, meeting and petitions in Calcutta. These regulations were crucial because they reflected how the debates were legitimised and

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[83] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*, p. 77.

[84] For instance, the *Friend of India* argued that the revised regulations of 1842 did not make provisions for supporting the family of the labourer, better medical facilities, or preventing the re-export of labourers from Mauritius. *Friend of India*, April 21, 1842.

how their concerns were written into law. They also demonstrated how indenture regulations were constantly changing on the basis of feedback from disparate parts of the British Empire—the metropolitan government that wanted laws true to post-slavery ideals, the merchants and planters who wanted an uninterrupted and guaranteed supply of labour, and the anti-indenture proponents who wanted to regulate unfree labour systems. Just as the abolition of slavery had created a need for alternative labour forces, it had also created a platform for anti-indenture arguments—a product of the post-abolition society that had created a yardstick of 'free' and 'unfree' forms of labour. In the historical context of changing labour legislation in Britain and with the emergence of a new yardstick of acceptable and unacceptable forms of labour, the question of servitude remained central to the indenture debates. What was decided as a result of this debate and the constant three-pronged negotiation between the planters, the anti-indenture proponents and the British parliament, came to determine the definition of servitude in post-slavery empire.

## Conclusion: Calcutta and the Indenture Networks

Calcutta's position within the indenture networks was not just determined by its role as a port-city, but also by its contribution to the global debates on indenture. As this chapter has pointed out, the indenture trade was a highly contested system of labour migration, and voices from Calcutta became a constant part of these negotiations in the metropole through letters, petitions, and reports. Calcutta was not the only port involved in the emigration of migrants. Madras and Bombay were two major ports emigrating labourers to plantation colonies, as were smaller ports like Pondicherry. However, as the following chapters will demonstrate, Calcutta was at the centre of the legal and discursive networks of indenture, and was unique in the extent of interaction the city and its inhabitants had with the indenture system. While its physical location made it conducive to the growth of the indenture trade, its position as an administrative capital whose inhabitants discussed the indenture trade put it at the centre of the indenture debates. The indenture question thrived in both physical and official spaces in the city, and as the following chapter will show, in intellectual spaces as well.

Reflecting on port cities and their relation to the hinterland, Tai-Yong Tan defines them as places of contact that serve as transit points for the movement of goods, labour and capital, and as nodal centres for the reception and transmission of culture, knowledge and information. Therefore, the urban, social, cultural and political identity

of the port city are determined by the relationship between the port city, the dominant hinterland, and the external economic space it serves.[85] Calcutta was this and more, mainly owing to its dual character as port and capital. This dual nature made it conducive to activities of merchants, administrative officials and labourers alike, encouraging the growth of the indenture trade. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, it also made it favourable to the growth of a vocal public with connections across (and beyond) the British Empire. Discussion of the city space is central to this thesis since it was conducive to the growth of discourses around the indenture trade and labour rights.

[85] Tai-Yong Tan, 'Port Cities and Hinterlands: A Comparative Study of Singapore and Calcutta', *Political Geography*, 26: 7 (2007), pp. 853, 862.

# Chapter 2:
# City, Spaces, Encounters

In the early half of the nineteenth century, a distinct discursive space grew in Calcutta where Europeans and Indians participated in discussing issues of public interest. The presence of public spaces of interaction (such as town hall, associations and societies) and a developing news media provided spaces for discussion on migrant labour. This chapter explores how city-spaces in Calcutta were crucial to the growth of a discursive space around the indenture trade. It analyses the Calcutta public sphere, highlights physical and non-physical spheres of interaction in Calcutta, and demonstrates how British and Indian communities participated in global debates on indenture. This chapter thus not only foregrounds how concepts such as migration, labour and servitude were discussed and defined within urban spaces, but also sheds light on the public sphere in nineteenth-century Calcutta, teasing out its importance in the cross-imperial discourse on Indian indenture.

The circulation of debates around the indenture trade operated at two levels: within Calcutta city-space, and between Calcutta, plantation colonies and the metropole. This was mainly facilitated by petitions, news articles and letters. For instance, colonial legal networks that regulated the indenture trade drew upon decisions of colonial officials at the metropole, who created and disseminated laws that governed migration. Colonial officials at Indian ports and plantation colonies implemented these laws and included their own suggestions on how to facilitate better emigration. These continuous discussions between colonial officials at different parts of the empire through letters and commentaries on acts had a very real bearing on how the trade operated. Besides official networks, planters from destination colonies and merchants from Calcutta petitioned metropolitan government to express their concerns with the trade, while some vocal inhabitants of Calcutta petitioned to remove Indian indenture—public petitions emerging as a common way of expressing grievances against the indenture trade. The metropole, which was physically removed from the trade, formed a complex and crucial linkage between planters, merchants, colonial officials and the Parliament. Imagining the British Empire as a web helps highlight how these various nodes—port-cities, plantation estates and metropolitan Britain—were inter-connected, and how information

and ideas moved between them.[1] I situate the city of Calcutta within this complex mesh of movement and interaction across the empire.

Calcutta in the mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of both pro- and anti-indenture debates. A Town Hall meeting in July 1838 was one of the earliest public spaces where Europeans and Indians came together to voice their opinions on the indenture trade and take the decision to petition the colonial government for suspending the trade. Although this petition for investigating abuses and suspending the indenture trade was immediately followed by a counter-petition from Calcutta merchants and planters, it represented the earliest negotiation with metropolitan Britain over indentured emigration. Over time, it became common for Calcutta's inhabitants to use public spaces to voice their opinion, negotiate emigration regulations through government petitions and locally instituted investigative committees (such as the Calcutta Committee of 1838-40), and use the local news media to represent and formulate wider public opinion. This thesis takes the Town Hall meeting of 1838, pro- and anti-indenture petitions from Calcutta in 1838, the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40, and consistent focus on the indenture trade in periodicals as major analytical points in the history of the indenture debates in Calcutta.

Even though subject to exclusion based on class, caste, gender, and proximity to the ruling power, this discursive space in Calcutta became central to the growth of indenture debates in Calcutta, strengthening the position of the city within global networks of indenture. This chapter focuses on the members of this vocal public sphere, and discusses the physical and non-physical spaces within which these debates manifested. This thesis uses the term 'public sphere' when discussing how European and Indian residents of Calcutta came together to voice their concerns with the indenture trade. Before moving into a full-length discussion of the city-spaces and who participated in the debates, the next section explores why 'public sphere' is the most suitable term to refer to this discursive space.

## A 'Public Sphere' in Calcutta: Conceptual Considerations

The concept of a public sphere, as coined by Jürgen Habermas in 1962 as a 'society engaged in critical public debate' has been central to scholarship on societies and

[1] See Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*; Tony Ballantyne, 'Rereading the Archive'.

spaces.[2] Introduced in a 1962 work, Habermas' work was translated into English in 1989 and has since been consistently engaged with.[3] By engaging with the term 'public sphere' and considering its suitability to Calcutta society in the mid-nineteenth century, this thesis brings the term out of European discourses and into the colonial Indian context.

Offering an etymological explanation, Habermas stated that similar to its German counterpart (*Öffentlichkeit*), 'public sphere' implied both the collective body that constituted the public, and the social spaces where they articulated their concerns. 'Public' here referred not to general accessibility (as in public authority or public building), but to the carrier of public opinion.[4] In a later work, he defined the public sphere as 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. […] Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest.'[5] This sphere was distinct from both the private sphere and the official sphere—a physical or imaginary space where citizens met to discuss public matters, and where such

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[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 52.

[3] The concept of the public sphere was introduced in Jürgen Habermas' 1962 work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied am Rhein: Luchterhand, 1962). Once translated into English in 1989, Habermas' work has been engaged with, primarily in context of Europe, in works like P. Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); J. Cohen, 'Why More Political Theory', *Telos*, 40 (1979), 70-94; D. Held, *An Introduction to Critical Theory* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1982); T. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978); Hanco Jürgens, 'Habermas For Historians: Four Approaches to His Work', *Forschungsberichte aus dem Duitsland Instituut Amsterdam*, 5 (2009), 158-70; Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, ed., *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004). The concept also came to be used in other works on the public, civil society, and related subjects, such as T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660-1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Habermas continued to engage with the concept himself in works such as Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', *New German Critique*, 3 (1974), 49-55.

[4] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 'Introduction'.

[5] Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, 'The Public Sphere', p. 73.

discussions served as counterweight to political authority.[6] Recently, scholars have criticised Habermas's conceptualisation of society as exclusive—his ideal bourgeois public sphere was limited to upper-class landholding members and actively excluded the poor, women, slaves, migrants and criminals.[7]

Scholars of South Asia have engaged with this term to conceive it in particular historical or colonial terms, or have offered alternative terms more appropriate in the historical and cultural context. Ideas of publicness in colonial Bengal have often been understood in terms of separation between European and Indian spheres, where Indian social identity developed with explicit (often juxtaposed) relation to the colonial state. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Sumit Sarkar have explored how nineteenth-century Bengal was moulded by colonial interaction, especially exploring spaces where Indians interacted with the colonial official class.[8] Partha Chatterjee defined colonial society in terms of the juxtaposition of the outer/material public sphere and the inner/spiritual private sphere. The inner domain represented tradition and sovereignty and was kept separate from the outer domain, in which Bengali culture coexisted with and even imitated the West.[9] Both Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty argue that ideas of publicness in colonial Bengal were not in keeping with the Habermasian public sphere, since it derived not from ideas of a bourgeois self, but from Bengali family and kinship

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[6] Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 2.

[7] An edited collection by Craig Calhoun (Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992)) was one of the first thorough engagements with the concept of the public sphere, offering a trenchant criticism of its Habermasian definition. Similar critiques have been made by postcolonial and feminist scholars, such as Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, 25:26 (1990), 56-80.

[8] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993); Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially chapter 5. Sarkar argued that systems of education, the printing press, and clerical jobs in government or mercantile offices contributed to the experiences of a middle-class ('urban bhadralok') particularly situated within such newly-emerging institutional networks, 'professionalism' and channels of sociability.

[9] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments.*

structures.[10] Such a conceptualising of Calcutta society, however, often underestimates the degree of Indo-British collaboration reflected in the indenture debates at Calcutta.

Highlighting the disparity between European and colonial cities in the nineteenth century, Sudipta Kaviraj points out that while European public spaces were characterised by large gatherings and spectacles, there existed relatively few public arenas for self-representation in colonial societies. Moreover, most public interactions challenged existing modes of governance and regulations within constraints, and were characterised by their non-seditious and non-dissident nature.[11] Scholars have also pointed to the semantic differences between the public *space*, which had more physical connotations, and the public *sphere*. For instance, it was possible to participate in the public sphere (through writings or by proxy) without having physical access to public spaces in the city. Ultimately, the term 'public sphere' has been rarely used in the colonial Indian context, except in Francesca Orsini's work on the 'Hindi public sphere' in the twentieth century.[12] Emphasising the relationship between Hindi language, linguistic change and Hindi nationalism, Orsini used the term 'public sphere' while also critiquing its exclusionary tendencies.

Such works that highlighted problems of uncritical derivation of the term 'public sphere' were complemented by scholarship that offered alternative terms that were historically pertinent—terms such as ecumene, public culture, arena and 'age of reform'. In context of north Indian society in the early-colonial period, C.A. Bayly uses 'ecumene' to demarcate the form of cultural and political debate that was rooted in pre-colonial forms and spread through letter writing, placards and political congregation, but developed in conjunction with the emergence of networks of publicity (like the press) in the colonial period.[13] This ecumene 'spilled over the bounds of caste,

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[10] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[11] Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Filth and the 'Public Sphere': Concepts and Practices about Space in the City of Calcutta', *Osterreichische Zeitschrift fur Soziologie*, 21 (1996), especially p. 96. The non-dissident feature that Kaviraj highlights also pervaded the public sphere that debates the indenture trade in Calcutta.

[12] Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[13] C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); C.A. Bayly, *Recovering*

community and sect; it encompassed a dialogue between elite and popular political culture'.[14] He highlights the role of the printing press, public debate in newspapers and the use of the English language in the development of the ecumene.[15] Elsewhere, Bayly also refers to civil society, stating that drawing from the pre-colonial ecumene, Indian liberalism made sustained attempts to develop a civil society by promoting 'civic responsibility, morality, Indian political representation, progressive religion and a free press'.[16] Faisal Devji, in response to whether people excluded from power under colonial rule could author a theory of progress and power, has argued that in fact, political thought was uniquely possible under colonialism since exclusion from power and office allowed the luxury of reflection.[17] Bayly supports this, by stating that even when excluded from most positions of authority, Indians were constantly forced to confront and consider political power.[18]

Although working under disparate historical contexts, similar processes were involved in the formation of the discursive spaces in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Emerging print culture and public associations allowed educated Calcuttans to take a prominent role in social and cultural life and create an arena where, as Sanjay Joshi puts it, 'a formerly insignificant social group could become a major player in the social, cultural and political world'.[19] The same members of the Calcutta public who came together in public meetings and associations, also played an active role in the

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*Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); C.A. Bayly, 'Empires and Indian Liberals', in *Race, Nation and Empire: Making Histories, 1750 to the Present,* ed. by Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[14] Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 204, 210.

[15] Bayly, *Empire and Information*; C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Bayly in fact went on to say that 'printing press, public debate in newspapers, the English language, libraries and dense archives transformed Indian society in the nineteenth century more thoroughly than colonial capitalism transformed its economy'. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 9.

[16] Bayly, 'Empires and Indian Liberals', p. 74. Notably, South Asian scholars have used the term civil society, or civil society organisations time and again to refer to the social sphere that was distinct from the official. See Michael Edwards ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[17] Faisal Devji, 'Apologetic Modernity', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4:1 (2007), 61-76.

[18] Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, p. 7.

[19] Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Colonial Middle Class in North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 43

dissemination of knowledge through print media. In fact, the local print media allowed for the participation of a much wider public in the issue, even those without physical access to discursive spaces such as voluntary associations.

In his work on Surat, Douglas Haynes uses the term 'public culture' to describe how the Surat elites defined the realm of the public and adopted European idioms of participatory politics.[20] This public culture involved the Surat notability adopting language from their colonial rulers, constantly reinterpreting the meaning of these concepts, and appropriating a British civic idiom to forge a new style of politics centring on concepts of public good. Anne Hardgrove uses the same term to explore the public identity and spheres of interaction of the Marwaris of Calcutta.[21] She draws from Sandria Freitag and Douglas Haynes' idea of how local systems and populations opened up new spaces to articulate their identity under colonial rule (mainly in terms of collective activities in public spaces), and Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge's understanding of public culture as transnational spaces of cultural production, created through the circulation of people, goods and ideas.[22] Alternatively, Swati Chattopadhyay uses the term 'arena' for public spaces to highlight their role 'as theatrical stages', where the public 'players' made conscious decisions about performing to an audience and were conscious about their role on shaping public attitude.[23]

Traditional historiography has referred to this period as that of the Bengal Renaissance, focusing mainly on reformist personages rather than historical trends.[24] On

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[20] Douglas Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India: The Shaping of a Public Culture in Surat City, 1852-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[21] Anne Hardgrove, *Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta, c. 1897-1997* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[22] Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Douglas Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual*; Haynes, 'From Avoidance to Confrontation?', in *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, ed. by Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 239-289; Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, 'Why Public Culture?', *Public Culture*, 1:1 (1988), 5-9; Carol Breckenridge, ed., *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

[23] Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 14.

[24] The idea of the Bengal Renaissance has been discussed in the next section.

the other hand, Joseph Hardwick refers to this period as the 'age of reform', arguing that the language of public opinion that developed and flourished in these spaces were a reflection of similar processes at work in metropolitan Britain.[25] Processes in both spaces were concerned with the organisation of a public that could share power with the state, and centred around ideals of free press. Hardwick traces the origins of a European reform movement in Bengal to vestry politics in the St. John's church in Calcutta, where the issue of whether the vestry should be open or closed became conducive to the emergence of a distinct and vocal public eager to express their opinion and institute changes in governance.[26] This prepared the ground for later campaigns for free trade, judicial reform and representative legislature. Hardwick highlights that the vestry controversy taking place at a time of debate over the identity and legitimacy of the public in India, made it conducive to determining whether the Calcutta public were capable of possessing the rights associated with the publics of Enlightenment Europe.[27]

Thus, notions of the public sphere, ecumene, civil society, public culture or public arena have been employed by scholars over time to negotiate the position of the public in the colonial state, and to delineate the terms of interaction and participation in colonial society. Many of these conceptualisations focus on defining a community with common cultural, linguistic and racial markers, rather than highlighting how both Britons and Indians often came together to discuss issues like the indenture trade. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, the term public sphere has been used with due regard to other conceptualisations of this interactive urban space. In spite of works that caution against an uncritical derivation of the term 'public sphere', this term best describes the discursive space at Calcutta, and is devoid of the Indian/non-Indian binary that colours some of the other terms used in historical works on South Asia.

The Habermasian public sphere exhibits many conceptual similarities with the discursive sphere that emerged in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta. Firstly, the spaces for discussion in Calcutta were also defined by their separateness from official and

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[25] Joseph Hardwick, 'Vestry Politics and the Emergence of a Reform 'Public' in Calcutta, 1813–36', *Historical Research*, 84:223 (2011), 87-108.

[26] Ibid. Hardwick argues that although the public was defined narrowly as European parishioners paying church rates, debates over the meaning of the 'public' was a reflection of metropolitan discussions about the role of public opinion in the political process, and the rights and representations institutions available to the public.

[27] Ibid, p. 95.

private spheres, and the coming together of vocal inhabitants to express public opinion and debate public matters or decisions of the state authority. Secondly, in keeping with Habermasian tenets, there were both physical meetings (in Town Halls and meetings of associations, corresponding to the European salons and coffee houses) and discussions in the mass media (such as periodicals). Finally, the function of the public sphere according to Habermas was to mediate between state and society, as its members exercised their right to freedom of assembly and to form associations. This was also a crucial feature of the Calcutta public sphere.

At the same time, the Habermasian public sphere is a distinctly European concept, defined by its unique historical trajectory in the eighteenth century, when national and territorial states replaced the feudal foundations of power and the private and public in Europe emerged as separate spheres.[28] Thus, the 'public sphere' that made possible public discourses on emigrant labour and indentured servitude in Calcutta was different from the Habermasian public sphere, which sits within a specifically and almost exclusively European context. The Calcutta public sphere was a colonial public sphere with a distinct historical trajectory, but also one that retained many of the original tenets that Habermas had outlined—including its position as mediator between state and society, and the role of meetings and mass media in its operation.

## Indenture and the Calcutta Public

Early-nineteenth century Calcutta housed a mix of European and Indian inhabitants with varied and often multiple roles in society. The urban sphere created under colonial rule had given rise to particular communities with common interests, the ear of the colonial government, and spaces where they could interact—formulating a distinct public sphere. The vocal Indian community tended to be English-educated and close to the ruling structure—generally landholders, merchants, reformers, educationists, philanthropists and such. British society in Calcutta, on the other hand, included Company and civil officials, merchants, commercial agents, clerks, craftsmen, soldiers and missionaries. Working together, they set up societies for social, economic and philanthropic purposes,

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[28] Habermas, *Structural Transformation,* pp. 10-11. Craig Calhoun remarks that it was a 'historically specific phenomenon of the bourgeois public sphere created out of the relations between capitalism and the state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.' Craig Calhoun, 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* ed. by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), p. 5.

founded societies to disseminate learning, and helped the proliferation of early periodicals in Calcutta.[29] They also worked hand-in-hand on issues of migration and indenture. This section explores who constituted the Calcutta public and how they vocalised their concerns with the indenture trade.

As British public employment opportunities expanded with colonial expansion, British society in Calcutta came to include people from all walks of life. For instance, the 1837 census counted 3138 'English', the 1850 census counted 7534 'Europeans', and the more rigorous census of 1866 counted 11,224 Europeans in Calcutta.[30] Increasing European population also led to rising influx of Europeans serving as coachmen, domestic servants, artisans, footmen and ladies' maids. Others professionals included builders, tailors, shoemakers, coach-makers, craftsmen, clerks, bookkeepers, missionaries and such.[31] Thus, European society was fractured into groups of civil servants, army officers and the non-official community.[32] This non-official European community, far from being obedient to the objectives of the colonial state, maintained a measure of autonomy.[33] They were vocal in political campaigns and actively participated in discussing and debating socio-political issues, one of the earliest of which was the migration of indentured Indians from Calcutta. Moreover, British society in Calcutta included a large merchant community that became central to the indenture debates at Calcutta, whose role has been detailed in a later chapter.[34]

The Indian society in Calcutta, on the other hand, was variegated and divided along lines of class, caste and gender. The vocal Indian community who commented on social and public issues was largely merchants, reformers and philanthropists, many of

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[29] Peter Marshall, 'British Society in India under the East India Company, *Modern Asian Studies*, 31:1 (1997), 89-108.

[30] Peter Marshall, 'The White Town of Calcutta under the Rule of the East India Company', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34:2 (2000), 309-311.

[31] Peter Marshall, 'The White Town of Calcutta'. See also Peter Marshall, 'British Immigration into India in the Nineteenth Century', *Itinerario*, 14:1 (1990), 25-44.

[32] Peter Marshall, 'The Whites of British India, 1780–1830: A Failed Colonial Society?', *The International History Review*, 12:1 (1990), p. 43.

[33] For non-official Britons and their relationship with the colonial state, see Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[34] Marshall argues that Calcutta had a relatively small commercial community in the nineteenth century due to Company monopoly and restrictions on trade—this changed only at the turn of the century. Peter Marshall, 'British Society in India'.

whom were close to the ruling structure, or to Europeans by virtue of their trade.[35] C.A. Bayly points out that the transformation of Calcutta from merchant settlement to administrative centre led landowning and money-lending Indian elites to define their relationship with Europeans.[36] Many such vocal Indians actively participated in the indenture debates, mainly by attending meetings, signing petitions, and acting as evidence for the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40.

British and Indian inhabitants came together in Calcutta to discuss the indenture trade. For instance, the town hall meeting of 1838, which set the ball rolling for the indenture debates at Calcutta, was attended by merchants and entrepreneurs like Dwarkanath Tagore, clergymen and missionaries such as Rev. James Charles, W.H. Meiklejohn and Rev. A.F. Lacroix, prominent social reformers such as Krishnamohan Banerjee (educationist and missionary), and several such British and European inhabitants of Calcutta.[37] Similarly, those who had petitioned the Calcutta sheriff to call the meeting included T. Dealtry (Archdeacon), Longueville Clarke (barrister), Thomas Dickens (merchant), Roger Dias (court pleader), Rustomjee Cowasjee (merchant and entrepreneur), Manick Chunder Sein, Govindo Haldar, Woopendey Mohun Tagore and others—an eclectic mix of entrepreneurs, merchants, reformers, Company officials, missionaries and non-official Britons.[38] When an investigative committee was set up at Calcutta to look into abuses of the indenture trade, it comprised of Bengal civil servant J.P. Grant, Major Archer, merchant William Dowson, missionary and social reformer Rev. James Charles, Supreme Court advocate Theodore Dickens, and judge and

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[35] Key works on the Indian society in Calcutta and their visualisation of the city include Bayly, *Indian Society*; Sukanta Chaudhuri ed., *Calcutta, The Living City: The Present and Future* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ranajit Guha, 'A Colonial City and its Time(s)', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 45:3 (2008), 329-351; Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*.

[36] Bayly, *Indian Society*, p. 73.

[37] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLIV, 1838, p. 311.

[38] Letter to Alexander Ross (President of the Council of India and Deputy Governor of the President of Fort William) from James Young (Sheriff of Calcutta), [Petition] on behalf of those assembled at the Town Hall Meeting in Calcutta, dated July 10, 1838. August 1, 1838, No. 1, General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

educationist Russomoy Dutt.[39] Witnesses for the committee also included (besides returned indentured migrants, ship captains and indenture officials) merchants such as Alexander Colvin, W.F. Fergusson and John Mackay, civil servants such as J.H. Patton, D. McFarlan, Arthur Onslow, George Witchlow and William Cracroft, clergymen such as Rev. Anthony Garstin and Rev. Thomas Boaz, and the aforementioned Clarke and Tagore.[40]

Alongside agitations for the Press Act (1815) and protests against land tax, the indenture debates represented one of the earliest uses of public spaces in Calcutta for debating issues of public interest. Studying Indo-British interaction on the Indian indenture trade is thus crucial for understanding the indenture debates and the nature of the public in a colonial city like Calcutta. Indo-British relationships were often based on commercial partnership or common political and commercial interests.[41] Common points of disagreement, such as the East India Company's monopoly and powers in trade brought together reforming *zaminders* like Dwarkanath Tagore and Anglo-Indians like Longueville Clarke in associations, pressing for the end of restrictions on immigration.[42] Moreover, the emergence of English education among the Bengali middle-class gave them access to public debates and the emerging print culture. Members of public associations also worked hand-in-hand on issues of public interest. In fact, Dwarkanath Tagore had once stated in a mass meeting that it was non-official British 'interlopers' and not colonial officials who had most consistently concerned themselves with the welfare of the Indians. In this speech, he cited examples of their help in repealing the Press Act, and their support in the movement against resumption of

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[39] *Letter from Secretary to Government of India, to Committee on Exportation of Hill Coolies: Report of Committee and Evidence* (East India House: Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, 12 February, 1841), Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons) 16, No. 45.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Indo-British commercial relationships in nineteenth-century Calcutta have been explored in Amales Tripathi, *Trade and Finance in the Bengal Presidency, 1793-1833* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979); Blair Kling, 'The Origin of the Managing Agency System in India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 26:1 (1966), 37-47; Blair Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

[42] Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, p.110.

revenue-free tenures, building the Hindu College, obtaining for Indians the right to sit on juries, and opposing the indenture trade to Mauritius and Bourbon.[43]

Calcutta's identity as the colonial capital and as the site of some of the earliest movements for social reform in British India made it conducive to the rise of resistance against indenture. This period from the late-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century has been dubbed by some as the era of the 'Bengal Renaissance'—highlighted by the emergence of social reform movements such as the Brahmo movement, the abolition of sati in 1829 and the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, and often studied in conjunction with the activities of reformers such as Rammohun Roy, Ishwarchandra Bandyopadhyay and Keshub Chandra Sen.[44] Introduced initially as a concept in the mid-twentieth century, the idea of the Bengal Renaissance was complicated by later scholars, who questioned the context within which social reform worked in the nineteenth century, and often defined reformists as part of an intelligentsia working within the limits of colonial hegemony.[45] The term and concept continues to be popular among social historians of nineteenth-century Bengal.[46] As discussed above, other terms

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[43] *Report of a Public Meeting held at Town Hall, Calcutta, on the 24th November 1838* (London: Stuart and Murray, 1839). Cited in Blair Kling, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859-1862* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), p. 104.

[44] Early works on the idea of a Bengal Renaissance include Amit Sen, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1946); Susobhan Sarkar, *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970); A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Social Ideas and Social Change in Bengal, 1818-1835* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); Jogeshchandra Bagal, *Unabingsha Shataker Bangla* [Nineteenth-Century Bengal] (Calcutta: Ranjana Publishing House, 1963); Sivanath Sastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj* [Ramtanu Lahiri and Contemporary Bengali Society] (Calcutta: New Age Publishers, 2001 [1903]).

[45] Such later works include Barun De, 'Role of David Hare in Colonial 'Acculturation' during the Bengal 'Renaissance'' (Unpublished paper presented at the Asiatic Society, September 1972); Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Colonial Context of the Bengal Renaissance: A Note On Early Railway—Thinking in Bengal', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 11:1 (1974), 92-106; Sumit Sarkar, 'The Complexities of Young Bengal', *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 4 (1973), 504-534; Sumit Sarkar, *Essays of a Lifetime: Reformers, Nationalists, Subalterns* (New York: SUNY Press, 2018), Section I.

[46] This includes Subrata Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007); Pulak Naranyan Dhar, 'Bengal Renaissance: A Study in Social Contradictions', *Social Scientist* (1987), 26-45; Sumit Sarkar, 'Calcutta and the Bengal Renaissance', in *Calcutta, the Living City: The Past I*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 95-105; T.G.

used to denote this period include an era of social reform movements, an 'age of reform', or one of liberalism.

Although the indenture debates cannot explicitly be considered a part of the wider history of social reform movements in the early-nineteenth century, this reformist context underlined the Calcutta public space and many reformers engaged directly with the 'coolie question'. However, scholarship on whether the early-nineteenth century represented an era of Bengal Renaissance is a well-trodden, inward-looking historical trope that isolates India from the rest of the empire, underplays the interconnectedness of its different regions, and understates how debates at one node of empire could affect its disparate parts. Even as some refer to the impact of global intellectual influences on Indian reform movements, a vast majority of such works have focused solely on social issues and reforms within India and within Calcutta society. By exploring how the Calcutta intelligentsia interacted with the indenture question, this thesis brings the study of early- and mid-nineteenth century Calcutta society out of works on the Bengal Renaissance. It demonstrates that mid-nineteenth century Calcutta involved a larger degree of Indo-British collaboration, and more involvement and public interaction from those members of society not considered under the 'great men' narrative. Moreover, it highlights how such voices and ideas from Calcutta had a global impact.

Timeframe is also key here. Most works on Calcutta society have either focused on social reforms within geographical limits of British Bengal and 'great men' of the early-nineteenth century without commenting on the interactive nature of the public sphere, or have focused on the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the clash between the Indian and the European became central to conceptualising both Indian or Bengali identity, and Indian society as a whole.[47] This thesis moves focus to the mid-

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Skorokhodova, 'The Bengal Renaissance: Idea, Term and System of Symbolical Description', *Modern Research Studies: An International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2:4 (2015), 738-768; Sumit Sarkar, *Bibliographical Survey of Social Reform Movements in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1975); Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); V.C. Joshi, ed., *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1975).

[47] For key works on the former, see above footnotes. Works on Calcutta society that highlight the clash between Indian and British identities include Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New

nineteenth century, when the interactive nature of Calcutta society made possible their deep and crucial interaction with the global indenture debates.

At the same time, this was an elitist space where the voices of the indentured migrants seldom came through. Migrant voices rarely formed part of the indenture debates, and even when it did, their voices were confined to spaces where they responded to specific questions on the indenture trade (such as in reports of investigative committees) rather than narrating their experience or offering their opinion. The gendered nature of the Calcutta public sphere also merits attention. Peter Marshall states that during Company rule, the British community in India was mostly male.[48] Women were doubly removed from public spaces due to low population of European women in Calcutta, and the separation of private and public spheres. As a result, their voices are absent in the discourse on Indian indenture. In fact, none of the signatories of the Calcutta petition or attendees of the Town Hall meeting were women, and only one woman testified in the Calcutta investigative Committee as a returned migrant (whose particular problems were ignored in the Committee Report of 1840).

Social and cultural encounters within urban spaces had given rise to an interactive discursive space in Calcutta where issues such as labour and indenture were debated. Even if operating under constraints of race, class, gender and proximity to ruling powers, these debates on emigrant labour became a significant voice in the formulation of emigration regulations. Such an understanding of Calcutta society in the mid-nineteenth century contradicts traditional histories of Indian cities where exclusive British societies had limited interaction with Indians and inhabited separate residential and cultural spheres.

## Spatial Division: The Black Town-White Town Dichotomy

Studies that conceive of the colonial city of Calcutta as disparate blocks of European and Indian residence with a strict demarcation between each community often use the category of the urban *bhadralok* as representative of the most vocal and active class of urban Indians in the nineteenth century. The urban *bhadralok* was conceived of as an

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York: Manchester University Press, 1993); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*; Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*.

[48] Marshall, 'The White Town of Calcutta'; Marshall, 'British Society in India'.

undifferentiated new urban class who gradually moved to Calcutta when it was transforming from a commercial *entrepôt* inhabited by traders to a colonial capital inhabited by administrators, traders and citizens alike.[49] Peter Marshall argues that in cities like Calcutta, the British maintained 'an almost exclusively British community with a strictly British life style', and any Indians who penetrated this social veneer had to be 'willing to participate on British terms'.[50] Such a conceptualisation of the city as inhabited by a singular and undifferentiated Indian urban class who maintained their distance from the rural aristocracy and the colonial ruling class, reinforces the idea of Calcutta as divided along racial lines with little chance of intermixing. It essentialises both the identity of the urban Indian, and the process of development of the urban space.

In actual practice, however, both residential and discursive spaces in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta were shared and interactive rather than exclusive—punctuated by spaces where official policies could be questioned, discussed and debated. Britons and Indians (including the *bhadrolok*) came to occupy similar public spaces and voiced their opinion on platforms that the urban sphere provided—such as periodicals, public meetings and voluntary associations. Discussions and decisions around indenture at Calcutta—whether through meetings, petitions, debates or local news media—affected global indenture networks and regulations governing it. Wider participation within what can be identified as an emerging urban public sphere at the colonial capital played a crucial role in negotiating emigration regulations and defining global indenture debates, while also setting the framework for discussions of migrant labour and plantation servitude in colonial India.[51]

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[49] S.N. Mukherjee defines the Indian 'bhadralok' class as those who 'held a common position along some continuum of the economy, acquired high status through English education or administrative service or some other secular channel, and shared a common life style'. S.N. Mukherjee, 'Daladali in Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 9:1 (1975), pp. 62-63.

[50] Peter Marshall, 'British Society in India', pp. 101-02. He goes on to argue that it was accidental diffusion of architectural styles and intellectual events from the 'white town' rather than planned diffusion that added to this public sphere: 'Any attempts made by the East India Company to propagate western knowledge, through educational grants after 1813, the founding of colleges or official encouragement of the use of English, probably had less practical effect than the largely accidental diffusion of western culture by the British elite of the white town of Calcutta.' Marshall, 'The White Town of Calcutta', p. 308.

[51] For instance, the next debate on plantation servitude in India was on inland indentured emigration to Assam in the late-nineteenth century. Discussion and criticism of the inland

The analysis of Calcutta, as with most colonial cities, often involved an implied dichotomy between the white town and the black town. John Archer argues that Calcutta was divided into a 'white' town (largely European settlements within and around Fort William), and a 'black' town (peripheral local Indian neighbourhoods with densely packed houses organised along caste and occupational lines).[52] The white town was defined by its well-planned residential, administrative and mercantile hubs, European-influenced architectural style, systemic uniformity, broad thoroughfares and discrete city blocks, while the black town was defined by its narrow streets, spatial division on the basis of caste and religion, and traditional *para*-s (neighbourhood) and *haat*-s (temporary markets).[53] For Archer, it was this constant, complex process of negotiation between 'indigenous tradition, colonial intervention, local resistance, and social transformation' that defined the urban fabric.[54]

In actual practice, however, these boundaries were blurred, and Indian merchants, commercial agents and servants constantly frequented the so-called 'white town'. In a later essay, Marshall points out that not only was there intermixing in business premises and 'intermediate towns' inhabited by poor whites, but Indian Christians of mixed race and other Indians were also resident on the boundaries of the white town.[55] Moreover, as Partho Datta has pointed out, British officials often lived in areas of north Calcutta considered within the black town, while prominent Indian settlements could be found in the heart of the 'white town'.[56]

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indenture trade would follow the same rubrics as the indenture debates in the mid-nineteenth century—questioning the recruitment system as misleading, highlighting mistreatment during passage and in plantations, and criticising the system as an exploitative mode of plantation servitude.

[52] Archer, 'Paras, Palaces, Pathogens'. See also Eric Beverley, 'Colonial Urbanism and South Asian Cities', *Social History*, 36:4 (2011), 482-497.

[53] Archer, 'Paras, Palaces, Pathogens'.

[54] Ibid, p. 49.

[55] Marshall, 'White Town of Calcutta', p. 317.

[56] Datta wrote: 'Clive lived in Dum Dum, Charles Perrin had a garden house in Bag Bazar (the heart of north Calcutta), and there was a European settlement in Chitpur. Similarly, Indian settlements were found south of the fort in Hastings (Cooly Bazar), in Garden Reach and in Bhowanipur. Nor was town planning restricted to European initiatives. The deposed Awadh monarch, Wajid Ali Shah, laid out an elegant garden township in Garden Reach […] which at its peak accommodated 40,000 inhabitants.' Partho Datta, 'Review Essay: Celebrating Calcutta', *Urban History*, 19:1 (1992), 84-98 (89).

Swati Chattopadhyay rejects the black town-white town dichotomy as a politically-motivated move that frames Calcutta as a British creation, and points to the fractures within each area in terms of class, caste and ethnicity.[57] In fact, the colonisers' desire for separation and exclusivity was severely constrained due to the indispensable role of Indians as servants and servicemen in colonial households and administration.[58] Chattopadhyay argues that this assumed dichotomy fuels a narrative where colonisers are the *only* active agents, the colonised population having been relegated to the periphery as passive inhabitants.[59] She maintains that the notion of Calcutta as a British city was disseminated through maps, paintings and historical narratives that perpetuated imperial domination through their representation of the coloniser and the colonised as occupying disparate physical spaces.[60] In the historical representation of Calcutta, a singular narrative was created, which moved seamlessly from the founding of the city by Job Charnock, to the Battle of Plassey in 1757, to the granting of the Diwani of Bengal to the East India Company in 1765—while denying the 'native' any agency or representation in such narratives. Chattopadhyay's reading of nineteenth-century Calcutta matches the image of the public sphere that emerges from analysing the indenture debates.

This thesis does not question that the Indians who participated in debating the indenture trade belonged to an English-educated middle-class *bhadralok* community, but questions the assumption that this community maintained strict distance from Europeans in Calcutta. In her work on mixed-race women in colonial India, Durba Ghosh has referred to 'colonial contact zones'.[61] Indo-British encounters at such contact

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[57] Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, Introduction; Swati Chattopadhyay, 'Blurring Boundaries: The Limits of 'White Town' in Colonial Calcutta', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 59:2 (2000), 154-179.

[58] Swati Bhattacharya and Jayesh G, 'Postcolonial Global Cities: The Indian Experience', *The Newsletter*, 57 (Summer 2011), p. 4.

[59] Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, p. 10.

[60] Chattopadhyay writes that maps and paintings (such as that by Thomas and William Daniell) focused on representing a few selected buildings with a non-proportional representation of the European and Indian populations, which were purported to represent Calcutta. The representation of the city was thus determined by structures of power, where documenting the Indian landscape and architecture served as tangible symbols of increasing authority and knowledge. Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, Introduction.

[61] Durba Ghosh, 'Who Counts as Native?: Gender, Race, and Subjectivity in Colonial India', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 6:3 (2005), p. 18.

zones made the Calcutta indenture debates possible. Ultimately, the indenture debates at Calcutta as it took place through meetings, petitions and news reports, could only have operated in an urban space where the white town-black town dichotomy was blurred. The spatial imagination of the city as more interactive than exclusive (albeit limited across lines of class and gender) with common spaces of interaction was thus crucial for the indenture debates to emerge. By demonstrating that the white town-black town divide was often bridged in discussions of the indenture trade, this thesis pushes Chattopadhyay's narrative into the 1830s and revises current understandings of how interactive Calcutta society was in the mid-nineteenth century.

The layout of the city and the presence of spaces of interaction allowed for the creation of an active and vocal public that constantly negotiated with the colonial government and amongst themselves over questions of labour, migration and servitude. Diverse groups with varied economic, political and cultural interests jointly inhabited this space and encountered each other in physical spaces (such as Town Hall, meetings of associations, public investigative committees and public societies) and non-physical spaces (such as through petitions, letters and news articles). These encounters prompted each individual or group to articulate their opinions and inhabit the urban interactive space with varying degrees of understanding and participation. This section has explored who constituted the interactive urban public and how they negotiated the spatial division of the city. The next few sections will highlight how the indenture debates flourished in both physical and non-physical spheres of interaction.

## Print and Protest: Indenture Debates in Non-Physical Spaces

The Calcutta public sphere engaged with the indenture question in a multitude of ways, mainly within two kinds of spaces—physical and non-physical. Physical spaces included the Town Hall, committee meetings or meetings of associations, where inhabitants of Calcutta came together to weigh in on discussions around recruitment, work conditions, and indenture's similarity to slavery. The non-physical spaces included newspapers and periodicals. Extensive coverage of the indenture debates in periodicals brought the issues to the attention of the public, and allowed for further public commentary through letters to editors. Thus, even in the absence of physical meetings, the indenture debates could flourish within Calcutta with inputs from its citizens, and be disseminated across the empire. This section explores the non-physical spaces in detail, and the next focuses on the physical spaces of interaction.

Bengal has been at the forefront of printing in British India—the site of the first vernacular press and one of the earliest indigenous printing and publishing industries in the colony. The coming of print impacted indigenous scholarship, literacy and access to learning, and it was this rise in the literate public that encouraged the emergence of periodicals, and the discussion of social issues within them.[62] Starting with the publication of *Hicky's Bengal Gazette* in 1780, periodicals started to become more commonly published and read by the beginning of the nineteenth century. By the 1840s, there were several English periodicals in Calcutta, including the *Calcutta Gazette, Bengal Hurkaru, Government Gazette, Calcutta Monthly Journal, Calcutta Journal, John Bull, Bengal Herald, Reformer, India Gazette, Calcutta Courier, Asiatic Annual Register, Asiatic Journal, Friend of India*, and *Calcutta Christian Observer*.[63] The first newspapers in Bengali emerged in 1818, and by 1842 there were at least 44 Bengali newspapers—the most popular of which included *Sambad Koumudi, Samachar Chundrika, Bangadut, Sambad Prabhakar, Gyananweshan, Sambad Purnachandrodaya* and *Sambad Bhaskar.*[64] Some of these were established by missionaries (such as the *Friend of India* and *Samachar Darpan* from the Serampore Missionary Press), some were established, maintained or funded by prominent Bengali reformers (such as *Sambad Prabhakar* of Ishwar Chandra Gupta and *Sambad Koumudi* of Rammohan

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[62] The impact of print on readership and social reform movements in India has been studied in Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007); Máire Ní Fhlathúin, 'The Campaign against Thugs in the Bengal Press of the 1830s', *Victorian Periodicals Review,* 37:2 (Summer, 2004), 124-140; Chandrika Kaul, *Communications, Media and the Imperial Experience: Britain and India in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778-1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[63] Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha* [Representation of Past Times in Newspapers] (Calcutta, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1996), Introduction; Benoy Ghose, *Selections from English Periodicals of Nineteenth Century Bengal, 1815-33* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1978); Muntasir Mamun, *Unish Shatake Bangladesher Sambad-Samayikpatra, 1847-1905* [Nineteenth-Century Newspapers and Periodicals of Bangladesh] (Dhaka: Bangla Akademi, 1985). The first two are anthologies of excerpts from nineteenth-century periodicals.

[64] Bandyopadhyay, *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha;* Ghose, *Selections from English periodicals;* Mamun, *Unish Shatake Bangladesher Sambad-Samayikpatra.*

Roy), and some by prominent Britons (such as the *Calcutta Journal* of James Silk Buckingham).[65]

Scholars like David Zaret argue that mass petitions, the development of printing and the emergence of newspapers were crucial for the formation of a politically discursive public sphere in seventeenth-century Europe.[66] Something similar was happening in nineteenth-century British India. Joseph Hardwick argues that the formulation and publicising of 'native' public opinion in Calcutta can be attributed to negotiations around free press, which made it possible to institute a new form of government based on opinion and dialogue between the ruler and the ruled.[67] As Chandrika Kaul points out, the emergence of print media extended communication links, as well as helped in the emergence of a viable reading and debating public.[68] Although operating within constraints of class, caste, and access to both English education and exclusive discursive spaces, the movement for free press led to the participation of several inhabitants of Calcutta over public concerns with colonial governance and facilitated discussion and changes in emigration policies. In this use of discursive spaces to express public opinion, the indenture debates had parallels with the anti-slavery movement—parallels that strengthen the contention that the post-slavery moment is an important frame of analysis for studying the indenture debates. In fact, some of the techniques of organisation (like the use of petitions and public meetings)

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[65] For detailed history of the press in Bengal, see Reba Chaudhuri, 'The Story of the Indian Press', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7:9 (1955); Anindita Ghosh, 'An Uncertain 'Coming of the Book': Early Print Cultures in Colonial India', *Book History*, 6 (2003), 23-55; Julie Codell, 'Introduction: The Nineteenth-Century News from India', *Victorian Periodicals Review* (2004), 106-123; Ghosh, *Power in Print.*

[66] David Zaret, 'Petitions and the 'Invention' of Public Opinion in the English Revolution', *American Journal of Sociology*, 101:6 (May, 1996), 1497-1555.

[67] Hardwick, 'Vestry Politics', p. 93.

[68] A large majority of historical scholarship on print in colonial India being focused on books, only recently have scholars focused on periodicals and their impact on the public sphere. This includes Kaul's analysis of the role of media in shaping the political, economic, social and cultural dynamics of the British colonies, and Peers and Finkelstein's volume on British coverage of Indian issues in the nineteenth century. Kaul, *Communications, Media*; Chandrika Kaul, *Reporting the Raj: The British Press and India 1880–1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); David Finkelstein and Douglas Mark Peers, ed., *Negotiating India in the Nineteenth-Century Media* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

and methods of information dissemination (through publications, periodicals and pamphlets) were common to both movements.[69]

As many of these periodicals emerged as the site of discussion and social reform, especially in face of government control over press and censorship, various affairs of the subcontinent were discussed within these pages—education, government, trade, justice, public health, and the 'cooly trade'. In the period between 1837 and 1844, periodicals such as the *Friend of India*, *Calcutta Courier*, *Bengal Hurkaru*, *The Englishman, Calcutta Gazette*, *Samachar Chundrika*, *Calcutta Star* and *Bengal Spectator* discussed emigration regulations of the colonial government and the debates over indenture in Calcutta. Reporting mostly in English, they commented on changing emigration regulations, discussed acts of government and Town Hall meetings, and weighed in on whether the Indian indenture trade should continue. This local print media provided spaces of interaction outside the confines of more formal associations and meetings, where public opinion could be expressed and heard. As the following discussion will show, periodicals in Calcutta espoused both pro- and anti-indenture arguments, and played a central role in disseminating information on the trade, moulding public opinion, and encouraging wider participation.

Their foremost engagement with the indenture debates was through detailed and continuous reports of events concerning the trade. Having coined the phrase 'the coolie question', periodicals kept a close eye on changing regulations, meetings and petitions from Calcutta, and reports of deceitful recruitment or imprisonment of labourers. In the period between 1837-1842, reports on the indenture trade were frequent in leading newspapers—mentioned at least once a week in reports, letters to the editor, or reprints

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[69] For works on the impact of popular petitioning and mobilisation on the anti-slavery movement, see Seymour Drescher, 'Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade', *Past & Present*, 143 (1994), 136-166; Seymour Drescher and Christine Bolt, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Seymour Drescher, *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), Part I.

Jonathan Connolly's recent work has explored parallels between abolitionist and indenture debates to argue that supporters of indenture in Britain appropriated anti-slavery language to their own ends, thus paving the way for significant expansions of the indenture system during the early 1860s. Jonathan Connolly, 'Indentured Labour Migration and The Meaning of Emancipation: Free Trade, Race, and Labour in British Public Debate, 1838–1860', *Past and Present*, 238:1 (2018), 85-119.

of reports from other periodicals. While periodicals like the *Friend of India, Bengal Hurkaru* and *The Englishman* held strong anti-indenture views, the *Calcutta Courier* held a staunch pro-indenture policy and often spoke in favour of British merchants and planters. The argument over the Indian indenture trade thus played out publicly in the print media, mirroring the polarity of opinions in Calcutta and metropolitan Britain. In fact, while proponents and critics of the indenture trade rarely came into conversation within meetings or petitions, this was common in print. News reports frequently questioned and challenged rival reportage, quoted their reports while undermining them, and sometimes printed letters to the editor that offered alternative views. Notably, the editor of the *Bengal Hurkaru* called the *Calcutta Courier*'s editor 'the solitary champion of the trade in coolies' while undermining their reports as biased against the labourers and challenging their sources.[70] Similarly, the *Calcutta Courier* frequently challenged the *Hurkaru's* reports, saying of its editor: 'He is all for the Cooley, and careth not a button for the Agent'.[71]

A majority of periodicals were in favour of increased regulation, or complete suspension of the indenture trade. They resonated the anti-indenture sentiments of the city, critiquing both the manner in which the trade is operated, and the policy behind it. Such reports highlighted abduction techniques employed to procure labourers, miseries of the voyage overseas, number of deaths on board, and bad living and working conditions in plantations.[72] Many reports suspected that due to the fresh memory of the slave trade, indentured labourers were subjected to harsher treatment both during passage and on the estates.[73] Some also argued that the only argument in favour of Indian indenture was a commercial argument pointing to the importance of continued

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[70] *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 13, 1838.

[71] *Calcutta Courier*, August 10, 1838.

[72] Key news reports on misrepresentation and deception in recruitment include *Bengal Hurkaru*, August 10; August 11; August 13, 1838. These include eye-witness accounts of kidnapping, unlawful detention and relatives complaining about the loss of loved ones to indenture. For instance, an official from the district of Purulia complained in 1838 of the procurement of non-tribal labourers on false promises: 'a few persons are occasionally taken away by men, who I have reason to believe, represent themselves to be servants of the Government.' Friend of India (FOI), August 16, 1838. Others questioned whether indentured migrants understand the nature of their contracts. *Bengal Hurkaru,* August 2 and August 8, 1838.
Key news reports on the mistreatment of indentured migrants on passage and plantations include *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 6; August 1; August 18, 1838; FOI, May 23, 1839.

[73] See FOI, October 20, 1842.

production and trade for both individual planters and British economy as a whole. Indentured emigration was thus strategically based on 'the wants of the Colonies, rather than the wants of the labourers'.[74] Besides commenting on the problems of the indenture trade, the periodicals also reflected the negotiations over the trade, and often commented on the nature of the public sphere. The *Friend of India* wrote in 1842 that Calcutta could boast of 'a vigilant public, fully alive to the danger of the new system, and a free and almost mistrustful press'.[75]

On the other hand, newspapers such as *Calcutta Courier* and the *Courier de Pondicherry*, represented merchant interest and often acted as the mouthpiece of merchants and planters. They frequently countered the claims of anti-indenture reports, pointed to the importance of indenture in plantation colonies, and condemned the attack on continued indenture trade as an unfair and undeserved vilification of planters, merchants and recruitment agents.[76] Reports in such periodicals often claimed that there was no kidnapping, confinement or assaulting involved, and that the numbers for kidnapping and deaths on passage were exaggerated by rival newspapers.[77] Even when the indenture trade was reintroduced in 1842 and most periodicals stopped reporting on it, such pro-indenture arguments continued in the *Calcutta Star*. The *Star* reported on the success of the changed regulations, frequently questioning reports that pointed to wrongful imprisonment or the plight of returned emigrants.[78]

Thus, reports on indenture in Calcutta periodicals mirrored the arguments made in meetings and petitions, and tropes produced in one space were reproduced or referred to in the other. While periodicals were reporting on meetings and petitions, public meetings and testimonies also referred to things that speakers have read in newspapers as evidence. At the same time, as Janette Martin has pointed out, newspaper reports from public meetings can be unreliable due to bad acoustics, cramped accommodation,

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[74] FOI, September 29, 1842.
[75] Ibid.
[76] For instance, a 1838 report stated: 'dust has been thrown in the eyes of the public, and they have been illogically asked to jump to the conclusion, that because the duffadars and crimps of Bengal are great villains; therefore, the planters at the Mauritius and the government authorities there, and in other colonies, are equally bad.' *Calcutta Courier*, July 14, 1838.
[77] *Calcutta Courier*, July 9, 1838.
[78] *Calcutta Star*, August 30; August 14; August 28; September 19; September 14; October 20; October 19; and November 22, 1843.

mumbling speakers, and noisy venues.[79] Thus, in a way, periodicals were not only repeating speeches made in public meetings, but creating a narrative of the indenture trade on their own—becoming the mouthpiece, although often unreliable, of those who were vocal about the indenture trade.

There were two crucial points of difference between the indenture debates in news reports, and those in meetings and petitions. Firstly, the tone in news reports was stronger and more inflammatory. Most petitions and meeting reports on the indenture trade from Calcutta were loyal and non-subversive, highlighting their belief in the benevolence of the colonial state. News reports, however, were more subversive and challenged government decision more firmly. This was exemplified in reports that questioned government acts, asked for the immediate redress of problems they highlighted in the trade, and firmly challenged decisions without referring to imperial benevolence or the loyalty of its subjects. This reached its peak in an 1838 report that warned: 'If England, deaf to the voice of humanity, should determine to perpetuate the system [and] allow the exportation to be extended from the East India to the West India Islands, it will only remain to enquire, whether Britain is any longer worthy of being entrusted with the improvement of India.'[80] This attitude was not confined to news reports but also extended to letters from the public, possibly emboldened by the anonymity that such publications offered. A letter to the editor of the *Bengal Hurkaru*, for instance, signed off as 'no trader in human beings', while another called the indenture trade 'a trade of human flesh', thus defining themselves by their moral abhorrence of the indenture system.[81]

Secondly, their detailed reportage kept the indenture question in public memory throughout the period between 1837 and 1843 and maintained a constant vigilance over the issues in a way that other spaces could not. The *Friend of India* argued that the indenture trade epitomised that iniquity which characterised the African slave trade and could only be prevented from becoming an instrument of oppression through the 'utmost

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[79] Janette Martin, 'Popular Political Oratory and Itinerant Lecturing in Yorkshire and the North East in the Age of Chartism, 1837-60' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of York, 2010), especially chapter 4.

[80] FOI, August 9, 1838.

[81] Letter to the Editor of the *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 7, 1838.

vigilance of the public authorities'.[82] Periodicals made this vigilance practicable. The indenture question entered public memory through physical meetings, changed regulations or petitions only at particular junctures, but news was ubiquitous and frequent. It was possible for any reader of English periodicals to gain a good understanding of the indenture debates at Calcutta, stay updated on any changes in regulation or incidents of kidnapping, formulate their opinion on the debates, and weigh in on it through letters to the editors.[83] It was not uncommon for many of the periodicals to write on the 'coolie question' every week—commenting on where labourers have been sighted in Calcutta, reporting on meetings and petitions on indenture, and consistently repeating their views on recruitment, regulations, conditions of work, and whether the trade should be allowed to continue. The frequency of reporting and repetition of arguments—whether against or in favour of continued trade—not only kept the issue in consistent focus, but is also an indication of how significant it was in the public mind.

The impact of periodicals on the indenture debates is best understood through the example of a case of kidnapping and unlawful confinement from 1838, which brought the problems of the trade to public view and created pressure on colonial government to regulate the trade. The way in which this case was picked up by periodicals and made it to colonial records highlights the role of the non-physical sphere in the indenture debates. As referred to in the previous chapter, David Hare came across a group of labourers confined in a building in north Calcutta, who claimed to have been kidnapped and held against their will. This prompted Hare (and prominent barrister Longueville Clarke) to bring the matter to the police, involving the Superintendent of Police Captain Birch and Police Magistrate Mr. Robison, and ultimately releasing the confined labourers.[84]

Hare's discovery of such evidence of kidnapping and wrongful confinement, and his subsequent complaint to the police received wide coverage in periodicals. *Bengal*

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[82] FOI, June 7, 1838.

[83] It is unclear why most periodicals that engaged with the indenture issue were in the English language (with the exception of *Samachar Chundrika* and the bilingual *Bengal Spectator*), but it was probably a nod to the Indo-British collaboration on the issue, or an indication that Bengali periodicals catered to a separate reader base that concerned itself with social issues more geographically confined to Bengal.

[84] Testimony of David Hare, October 8, 1838. 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

*Hurkaru* and the *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany* cited this incident to highlight the inefficiency and indifference of the Calcutta police, pointing especially to the police magistrate's remark that the confined labourers 'were unworthy of sympathy, as they had broken their contracts.'[85] Although it is unclear at first, the confined men and Mr. Robison later confirmed that those confined had already signed their indentured contracts and been paid an advance. Thus, while the police continued to point to the legitimacy of the indentured contracts and the problems of breaching them, periodicals countered it with accusations of illegal confinement and the use of police forces to imprison 'coolies'.[86] As this incident became widely publicised, colonial officials commented publicly on the incident, and on the need for keeping the 'evils' of the indenture system under check. Following this, concerned officials publicised how indenture recruitment worked, and assured that any complaints of maltreatment and imprisonment would be promptly taken up by the police.[87]

This back-and-forth represents an important moment when the accountability of the colonial state to public demands became apparent. The publicising of events in news reports not only made the problems of the indenture trade public, but also created a situation where the police and other wings of the state became aware of the ramifications of public scandals around indenture. The initial news reports on the Hare incident were thus followed by frequent explanations and assurances from the government, as well as multiple reports from the police to senior members of government explaining their decisions.[88] As this case study demonstrates, the constant vigilance over the indenture trade that became possible through news reports also served as an indication of public opinion. With the help of periodicals, the indenture question thus spread from the administrative to the public sphere, emerging as a subject of public attention and a point of public pressure.

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[85] *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany,* Volume 28, January 1839, p. 11.

[86] 'The Liberated Coolies', Letter from C.K. Robison to the editor, *Bengal Hurkaru*, September 17, 1838.

[87] Letters in Judicial (Criminal) Proceedings, November 6, 1838, No. 1-8, WBSA.

[88] See Letter to the Editor from C.K. Robison, *Bengal Hurkaru*, September 17, 1838; Letter from Chief Magistrate D. McFarlan to F.A. Halliday (Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Department), dated September 27, 1838; Letter from J.W. Birch (Superintendent of Calcutta Police) to Chief Magistrate D. McFarlan, dated September 26, 1838. In Judicial (Criminal) Proceedings, November 6, 1838, No. 1-3.

The decline in the indenture debates after 1842 is also best observed through periodicals. Till 1842, the 'coolie question' was widely discussed in prominent periodicals. The *Friend of India* and *Samachar Chundrika* still maintained that the abuses of the indenture trade were inseparable from the system and hence prohibition was the only real solution, but most periodicals came to gradually accept the resumption of emigration under new regulations.[89] However, after 1842, periodicals gradually moved onto other pressing issues such as education, legal cases and slavery in India. 'The Coolie Question' was no longer first-page news. Moreover, unlike the 1838 reports that appealed to the British sense of morality and justice, the language of resistance had changed to one of critical analysis and compromise by 1842; losing prominence and priority by 1844 (which is when several colonies opened their gates to indentured migration).[90]

Even though preserved in colonial archives today, periodicals are a crucial source that developed outside the colonial archive and beyond the official processes of record-keeping in the colonial Indian state.[91] Although it was still affected by power relations in colonial Calcutta society, and the pro- or anti-indenture stance of certain periodicals often reflected that of their owners, they can be used to corroborate information on the indenture debates in Calcutta. They gave rise to a body of evidence that offers multiple narratives of key events in the city, such as the Town Hall meeting of July 1838, or the Calcutta Committee Report of 1840-42. Ultimately, periodicals allowed a more constant vigilance over the trade, acted as eyes of the city, gave voice to members of the public through 'letters to the editors', and become a parallel space for public debates on indenture. On the one hand, it responded to public demands for reports on indenture, and

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[89] See, for instance, reports on false recruitment in *Bengal Spectator*, April 10 and October 24, 1843 and *Bengal Hurkaru* April 4, 1843, reports on drawbacks of the newly introduced post of the Protector of Emigrants in *Englishman*, September 21, 1842, and commentary on the efficacy of the changed regulations in *Bengal Spectator*, Vol 1 No. 2; Vol 2, No. 2 and Vol 2, No. 32, 1843. Reports in the *Calcutta Star* generally supported the indenture trade and reported on the success of the changed regulations. See *Calcutta Star*, August 30; August 14; August 28; September 19; September 14; October 20; October 19; and November 22, 1843.

[90] The periodicals I used were all accessed in the form of microfilm or physical copies. As it was not possible to use the text-search function, this allowed me to see where news reports on the indenture news occurred in a page, and what were the other issues reported at the time. This made it possible to see when the interest in the indenture trade wanes.

[91] The periodicals used in this thesis were consulted at the British Library, the National Library (Kolkata), and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (New Delhi).

on the other hand, it moulded public opinion and created a separate and accessible space for discussing the legitimacy of the indenture trade. They also helped the indenture discussion cross geographical boundaries. Periodicals contributed towards the creation and maintenance of crucial linkages between the various 'nodes' of empire—such as the metropole, the plantation colonies, and Calcutta. This interaction with global networks via print media reflects how the multidirectional flow of ideas and information between the metropole and its colonies simultaneously *reflected* and *influenced* public opinion across the empire.

## Associational Culture and Physical Spaces of Interaction

In contrast to news reports, physical spaces of interaction offered the inhabitants of Calcutta the opportunity to meet in person with other inhabitants or stakeholders in the indenture trade, and discuss it in further detail. Such spaces mainly included buildings such as the Town Hall, meetings of various voluntary associations that had grown in Calcutta at this time, and proceedings of the investigative committee founded in Calcutta in 1838. English as a common medium of communication fostered interaction, and education in English provided a common point for many active members of the Calcutta public sphere.[92] This section explores the associational culture of contemporary Calcutta as relevant to the indenture trade, and highlights the use of spaces like the Town Hall to contribute to the indenture debates.

British social historians have pointed to the importance of public meetings and oratory in building reform movements, arguing especially that oratory remained central to the formation of public opinion.[93] The same was true for Calcutta, where public meetings had become common by the turn of the century. Although early public

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[92] For instance, English educationists like Sherbourne and Martin Bowles started schools in Calcutta and merchant-entrepreneur Dwarkanath Tagore was educated at the former. Many of those who weighed in on the indenture issue (such as David Hare, Dwarkanath Tagore and Russomoy Dutt) were themselves educationists, or involved in the establishment of the Hindu College or schools like the Oriental Seminary. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *Socio-Political Currents in Bengal: A Nineteenth Century Perspective* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), pp. 6-7.

[93] Martin, 'Popular Political Oratory'. See also Joseph Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Owen Ashton, 'Orators and Oratory in the Chartist Movement, 1840-1848', in *The Chartist Legacy*, ed. by Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Roberts (Suffolk: Merlin Press, 1999), pp. 48-79.

meetings were held in taverns and amusement halls such as Wright's New Tavern, Moore's Assembly Rooms, Le Gallais Tavern, the Harmonic Tavern, the Exchange and Public Rooms, and the Old Court House, the need for a common space for public meetings was soon felt (especially in the absence of municipal organisations).[94] In February 1804, inhabitants of Calcutta formally petitioned to have a Town Hall, and with finances from public lottery, it was opened in 1813.[95] The Calcutta public were thus crucially involved in the creation and use of public spaces for discussing affairs of the city—one of which was the indenture question. The Town Hall meeting on indenture in 1838 and the anti-indenture petition that emerged from it became pivotal to the indenture debates at Calcutta, signifying one of the earliest instances where the vocal public came together to discuss the trade. Some of the other issues of public interest discussed in the Town Hall included abolition of the stamp regulation, abolition of extra duties on Indian goods, erection of memorials, establishment of the Calcutta School Society, gathering aid for victims of the Irish Famine (1822), and the need to establish a trade association for European merchants.[96] Most such meetings involved the participation of both Indians and Britons, whom contemporary newspaper regularly referred to as 'inhabitants of Calcutta' and 'British subjects', highlighting their relationship with the colonial state.[97]

Just as the Town Hall provided a public space for meetings, early-nineteenth century Calcutta also saw the emergence of a distinct 'associational culture' that created

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[94] Basudeb Chattopadhyay, *The Town Hall of Calcutta: A Brief History* (Calcutta: A Homage Trust, 1998), p. 12. James Long's account from 1852 demonstrates that the old Court House was being using as a Town Hall, but it being in a 'ruinous condition', a decision was taken to erect a new Town Hall. James Long, 'Calcutta in the Olden Time—Its Localities', *Calcutta Review*, July-December 1852.

[95] Bhattacharya, *Socio-Political Currents in Bengal*, pp. 27-28.

[96] Anil Chandra Das Gupta ed., *The Days of John Company: Selections from Calcutta Gazette, 1824-1832*, (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1959); Benoy Ghose, *Sections from English Periodicals*; Chattopadhyay, *Town Hall of Calcutta*. The use of the Town Hall was not limited to public meetings. The earliest account of a social gathering there was Lady Nugent's account of a public breakfast held in honour of her husband (Commander-in-Chief of India) in December 1814. Indigo planter William Huggins wrote in 1824 that the Town Hall also hosted public balls. Chattopadhyay, *Town Hall of Calcutta*, pp. 21-22.

[97] Swati Chattopadhyay argues that the Town Hall was seen as a product of colonial authority and dominated by Anglo-Indian residents, but came to be appropriated by elite Bengalis as part of claiming public spaces as their own. While this may be true of later in the century, mid-nineteenth century meetings in the Town Hall tended to be more interactive between Indians and Britons. Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, p. 14.

spaces of discussion around policies of the colonial government. Jose Harris coined the phrase to refer to 'a richly variegated, autonomous, and self-governing multiplicity of associations and societies that were cradles of citizenship, mutual assistance and social reform'.[98] Scott and Ingram argue that this associational culture in colonial India echoed 'the liberal rhetoric of the British state' and claimed to represent not only public opinion, but also public good.[99] The beginnings of such an associational culture can be traced back to mid-nineteenth century Calcutta. C.A. Bayly argues that although created initially as a British tutelary project to spread European learning in the colony, such associations made space for robust intellectual contention between Indian spokesmen and non-official Europeans, and promoted civic responsibility, political representation and free press.[100] The presence of such associations allowed unfettered Indo-British interaction, and thus influenced Calcutta's role within global networks of indentured labour.

The associational culture was especially affected by the emergence of distinct communities of non-official Britons in colonial India, who remained critical of Company policy and took part in petitions, protest meetings and associations aiming to influence both parliamentary and public opinion in the metropole.[101] Many of the Indian members, on the other hand, tended to be young, English-educated and close to the reformist strand of the Derozian or Young Bengal movement. Unsurprisingly, debates around indentured migration at Calcutta also brewed within such interactive spaces, and many who participated in discussions on the indenture trade were members of such organisations. Members of many of these societies—such as Krishnamohan Banerjee of the Bengal British India Society, Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasanna Coomar Tagore, Theodore Dickens and David Hare of the Landholders' Society, and George Thompson and Lord Brougham who interacted with Calcutta through the British India Society—

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[98] Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Carey Watt, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association, and Citizenship* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[99] J. Barton Scott and Brannon D. Ingram, 'What is a Public? Notes from South Asia', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38:3 (2015), 357-370.

[100] Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, p. 140; Bayly, 'Empires and Indian Liberals', p. 74.

[101] Key works on associations at the time include S.R. Mehrotra, 'The Landholders' Society, 1838-44', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 3:4 (1966), 358-375; Mehrotra, 'The British India Society and its Bengal Branch, 1839-46', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 4:2 (1967), 131-154; Muntasir Mamun, *Unish Shatake Purba Banglar Sabha Samiti* [Nineteenth Century Associations in Eastern Bengal] (Dhaka: Dana Prakashani, 1984).

were directly involved with the indenture question, and weighed in on the debates through meetings and petitions. Some members often worked hand-in-hand with British organisations, and this was one of the many ways in which the indenture question entered the Calcutta public sphere.

The close interaction of Britons and Indians is evident in the membership of societies such as the Landholders' Society, Bengal British India Society, and Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (SAGK), as well as merchant-houses jointly owned by Indians and Europeans such as the Carr, Tagore and Co.[102] The Landholders' Society was established in 1838 by Dwarkanath Tagore to discuss issues relating to rent, land and agriculture, soon becoming a common space for meetings between landholders in and near Calcutta.[103] A contemporary periodical dubbed its establishment 'the result of that mixture of European and Asiatic, which is taking place all over the British Indian dominions'.[104] The British India Society was founded in London by British abolitionist George Thompson in 1839. Although its Bengal branch was established only in 1843, Thompson's coming to Calcutta on the invitation of Dwarkanath Tagore and engaging with members of the SAGK opened up conversations around the question of servitude. Together, the SAGK (established in 1835), the Deshahitaishini Sabha or Society for the Amelioration of India (of 1841), and the Indian activities of the British India Society created platforms to address social issues. The Bengal British India society in fact emerged from the ranks of the SAGK, which frequently published on social issues, such as the condition of *ryots*, female education, *kulin* polygamy and Bengali widowhood.[105] The London branch of British India society also presented two petitions to Parliament on the indenture question: 'one denouncing

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[102] Peter Marshall also highlights the importance of voluntary associations like the Asiatic Society (1784), Agricultural and Horticultural Society (1820), Mechanics Institute, Medical and Physical Society (1823), Library Society (1819) and the Calcutta Public Library (1836), which offered space for participation in affairs of the city in the absence of representative institutions. Marshall, 'White Town of Calcutta', pp. 321-22.

[103] See Mehrotra, 'The Landholders' Society', p. 365. For details, see *Bhumyadhikar Sabhar Brittyanto* [Annals of the Landholders' Society], Vol I (Calcutta: Bishop College Press, BS 1245 [1838]).

[104] *The Englishman*, March 19, 1838.

[105] For details on the Bengal British India Society, see Mehrotra, 'The British India Society'; 'On the Formation of Bengal British India Society in Calcutta', *Bengal Spectator*, 1843, in *Bengal, Early Nineteenth Century: Selected Documents*, ed. by Gautam Chattopadhyaya (Calcutta: Research India Publications, 1978).

the late attempt to revive that measure, the other praying for a select Committee of the House of Commons, in order that it may be established by evidence that the deportation of the natives of India is contrary to humanity, justice, and sound policy.'[106] This anti-indenture stance was partly derived from the fact that the British India Society had emerged from the anti-slavery movement in Britain, and considered India an appropriate source of alternatives to slave-grown sugar from the West Indies and cotton from the USA—suitable to promote 'the natural and peaceful extinction of transatlantic slavery.'[107]

Participation in associations was voluntary, but involved a hierarchy where only the English-educated elite, Company officials, merchants and those close to the ruling class could be vocal. Swati Chattopadhyay maintains that there was an inherent dichotomy even in elite participation in the public sphere.[108] By participating in voluntary associations and debating colonial policies, the Calcutta elites were claiming the political rights they had been denied under colonial rule, even as direct interaction with the British in such spaces threatened socio-religious boundaries they were expected to maintain.[109] Voluntary associations, with their individual membership, constitution, recording of minutes, and publication of proceedings, differed from the *dal* (group), the predominant formal mode of physical association among Bengali men in the first half of the nineteenth century.[110] Between 1815 and 1876, around 200 formal voluntary associations were created and affected the structuring of political relations within Bengali communities.[111]

Douglas Haynes writes of the emergence of similar interactive spaces in Surat with the rise of a powerful 'notability', who held local authority and served as intermediary between the Anglo-Indian ruling group and the wider public.[112] In colonial cities like Surat (and Calcutta) they appropriated British civic idiom to formulate a new

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[106] *Report of the British India Society, Read at the First Annual Meeting held at Freemason's Hall* (London: Printed for the British India Society, 1840), p. 8.
[107] Ibid, p. 3.
[108] Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta,* p. 141.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid, p. 15. See Mukherjee, 'Daladali in Calcutta'.
[111] Rajat Sanyal, *Voluntary Associations and the Urban Public Life in Bengal* (Calcutta: Riddhi-India, 1980), p. 14.
[112] Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual*.

political sphere based on concepts of the public and public good. This provided spaces for the elites to participate in municipal organisation and public philanthropy, and to make political and commercial decisions on behalf of the broader public.[113] In fact, as Francesca Orsini argues, by accepting public petitions, testimonies, and addresses from Indian experts and associations before official commissions of enquiry, British administrators encouraged educated Indians to act as spokesmen and representatives of public opinion.[114] This thesis pushes Haynes' argument back in time to refer to the emergence of a similar political and public sphere in Calcutta in the 1830s.

The Calcutta public sphere brought both British and Indian notables together to discuss political and commercial questions on behalf of the Calcutta public. This was a sphere not born out of state initiative (even though operating within limits set by the colonial state structure), but a negotiable and interactive space. At the same time, in contrast to the anti-colonial sentiment of the latter half of the century, most such public debates emphasised their loyalty to the benevolent British state.[115] As this section has highlighted, Calcutta provided both physical and non-physical spaces of interaction that its inhabitants not only frequented, but were actively involved in creating. The resultant public sphere can thus be characterised as Indo-British spaces of interaction where issues of public interest were being actively discussed and their decisions being made known to the British government through petitions and news reports. The next section fleshes out why certain inhabitants of Calcutta came to participate in the indenture debates.

## Vested Interest and the Role of 'Merchant-Reformers'

The argument of merchants, shipping-companies and planters in favour of continued trade was straightforward—continued indenture trade was the only way for them to maintain profits from sugar trade in the aftermath of Abolition. Arguments against the

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[113] Ibid, p. 108.

[114] Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere*, p. 25.

[115] For instance, the meeting for the formation of the Bengal British India Society in 1843 stated: 'the society shall adopt and recommend such measures only as are consistent with pure loyalty to the person and government of the feigning sovereign of the British dominions, and the due observation of all law and regulations promulgated for the Government of the people of the country; and shall discountenance every effort to subvert legal authority, or disturb the peace and well-being of society'. Chattopadhyaya ed., *Bengal, Early Nineteenth Century*, p. 223.
This emphasis on loyalty and the benevolent state is discussed further in chapter 4.

trade, however, were more complex. Some critics of the indenture system were themselves merchants, but actively criticised the system of indenture and pressed for its abolition. It is important to explore the involvement of such 'merchant-reformers' in issues around indenture, given the apparent dichotomy between their merchant and reformist interests. This final section focuses on the coming together of commercial, reformist, humanitarian, political, and imperial interests in negotiations around the indenture question, to assess how these interests did not operate in isolation, but in a space where the urban elite straddled various roles at once.

Crispin Bates and Marina Carter argue that many of those who resisted indentured migration—including Chairman of the Calcutta investigative committee Theodore Dickens, and prominent anti-indenture voice Dwarkanath Tagore—were railway and colliery managers, landholders and indigo planters. By virtue of their profession, they were involved in labour-intensive enterprises and thus had a vested interest in challenging the export of mobile Indian labour.[116] In other words, for them, it was a question of *where* labour was employed, and not *whether* indentured labour was employed at all. This argument is in keeping with prominent barrister Longueville Clarke's speech in the Town Hall in 1838, where he argued that 'the opposition to coolie exportation originated in local interests.'[117] He stated: 'If the trade would be prevented, it might injure the sugar colonies, to the benefit of the sugar planters here [in Bengal]. It might also give the planters here the benefit of that labour which would otherwise be abstracted. [However] […] If the trade were not injurious to the coolie himself, then never mind the planters, […] the labourer had a right to seek employment abroad without reference to the interests of those cultivators at home.'[118] Planters in Bengal, according to Clarke, had to gain from the abolition of indenture, both in terms of reduced competition from West Indian sugar, and a larger labour pool to choose from in the absence of indentured emigration.

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[116] Crispin Bates and Marina Carter. 'Tribal and Indentured Migrants in Colonial India: Modes of Recruitment and Forms of Incorporation', in *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, ed. by Peter Robb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 173-74.

[117] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLIV (July 1838), p. 315.

[118] Ibid.

Many of those who argued against the indenture trade were reformists and educationists—men with no commercial stake in either the continuation or the abolition of the indenture trade. However, participants such as Dwarkanath Tagore and Rustomjee Cowasjee represented merchant interests as well. Tagore was a landholder and entrepreneur with interest in indigo and sugar production. He also owned shipping companies and held shares in other shipping, trading and banking organisations. Rustomjee Cowasjee held interest in a shipping business between India and Mauritius. In view of such potentialities of profit in recruiting, accommodating and shipping indentured labourers from Calcutta to plantation colonies, both Tagore and Cowasjee's resistance to the trade seems counter-intuitive. Moreover, as a landholder and indigo plantation-owner, Tagore especially fits Bates and Carter's description for merchants who resisted indentured emigration.[119]

While Bates and Carter's argument would definitely apply to some, I argue that the situation was more complex than commercial interests can explain. Complexities created by a study of protestors who often straddled *zamindari*, merchant and reformist interests creates the need to look into alternative motivations for the arguments they espoused. Many who supported the indenture trade played both a commercial and socio-cultural role in society, and may not be judged solely in terms of their profession. The motivation behind a distinct anti-indenture stance among the Calcutta intelligentsia can thus be variously attributed to reformist interests, concerns that indentured migration caused a shortage of domestic labour, the intellectual pressure of abolitionists from across the empire, and the example of social reform movements at home. The latter two especially spoke in favour of individual rights and against exploitation. These interests did not operate in isolation, but influenced each other in an urban sphere where the individual did not have a singularly commercial or reformist role in society, but straddled various roles at once. The next few pages explore the careers of Dwarkanath Tagore and Rustomjee Cowasjee to discuss their anti-indenture stance in context of other public debates they participated in. Tagore and Cowasjee were two prominent Calcutta merchants who also participated in the anti-indenture debates, and are thus exemplary of this unique merchant-reformer experience.

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[119] The use of 'coolies' or physical labourers in Tagore's indigo plantations and coal-mines are attested to in 'Memoirs of William Prinsep', Vol. 3, 1838-42. MSS Eur D/1160/3, BL.

Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1847) was one of the most famous 'native' faces of resistance in Calcutta. Besides an entrepreneur and philanthropist in his own right, Dwarkanath Tagore was the father of prominent Brahmo Samajist Debedranath Tagore, grandfather to Nobel Prize-winning litterateur Rabindranath Tagore, and great-grandfather to prominent artists of the Bengal School of Painting, Gaganendranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore.[120] A leading entrepreneur and industrialist, he was the first Indian to become the director of a bank (the Union Bank) in 1828, and established the first Anglo-Indian trading agency (Carr, Tagore and Co.) in 1832. Besides the ships he employed for trading, Tagore also held shares in some Company ships.[121] He held *zamindari* land in eastern Bengal and was a shareholder in the Commercial Bank, the Laudable Society and the Oriental Insurance Society. As Carr, Tagore and Co. gained traction, Tagore expanded into industrial ventures in eastern India—setting up an indigo factory at Silaidaha, sugar factories in Baruipur, Ghazipur and Pabna, managing coalfields in Raniganj, and reviving work at the government silk factory at Kumarkhali.[122] As witness to the Calcutta investigative committee, he stated that he was 'the first person who commenced cultivating sugar-cane by the European process, and under European superintendence, in India.'[123] During the economic crash of 1833, he personally took the risk for merchant-houses, accepted the risk of settling all debts of the Commercial Bank when it was economically hit in 1828, and took steps to

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[120] Key biographical works on Dwarkanath Tagore in English and Bengali include Krishna Kripalani, *Dwarkanath Tagore: A Forgotten Pioneer, A Life* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1981); Hiranmay Banerjee, *The House of the Tagores* (Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati Press, 1985); Kissory Chand Mittra, *Memoir of Dwarkanath Tagore* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1870); Kshitindranath Thakur, *Dwarkanath Thakurer Jiboni* [A Biography of Dwarkanath Tagore] (Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati University Press, 1969); Debabrata Palit, *Dwarkanath Thakur* (Calcutta: Abinash Art Press, 1995); Bagal, *Unabingsha Shataker Bangla*. His commercial enterprises are explored in Kling, *Partner in Empire*; Farhat Hasan, 'Indigenous Cooperation and the Birth of a Colonial City: Calcutta, c. 1698–1750', *Modern Asian Studies*, 26:1 (1992), 65-82; Kling, 'Managing Agency System'.

[121] Among others, Tagore was part owner of the Opium Clipper *Water Witch*. 'Memoirs of William Prinsep', Vol. 2, 1822-38. MSS Eur D/1160/2, BL.

[122] Coalfields at Raniganj made Tagore one of the earliest suppliers of energy for steamships in Bengal. In his sugar factories, he used Chinese and Mauritian sugarcanes as well, and introduced various new technologies of sugar production, such as the steam engine. Bagal, *Unabingsha Shataker Bangla*, pp. 28-33. See also 'Memoirs of William Prinsep', Vol. 2, 1822-38. MSS Eur D/1160/2, BL.

[123] Testimony of Dwarkanath Tagore, November 9, 1838, in 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee', pp. 71-72.

revive the Bengal economy.[124] He was involved in several profit-making agencies at once, and was an active and vocal member of associations such as the Landholders' Society.

Tagore also had a longstanding history of charitable activities. He funded hospitals for leprosy patients, was an active member of the Native Relief Committee, and funded and accompanied the first group of Bengali medical students (along with Professor Goodeve) to London, who later became the first F.R.C.S. doctors of Indian origin.[125] A contemporary news report states that he donated Rs. 500 to the Leper Asylum, Rs. 200 for the relief of Indian paupers, Rs. 100,000 for the relief of blind paupers in 1838, Rs. 500 for relief during the Calcutta fires, and Rs. 2000 in 1841 to establish an Alms House in Calcutta.[126] He was also a major donor to the Calcutta District Charitable Society, His involvement in reformist and charitable activities won him accolades from the British government, including the title of the 'Justice of the Peace' of Calcutta, charters of honour, a charter of citizenship of Edinburgh, a gold medal from the Company's Court of Directors, a medal from the Queen herself, and even an offer of knighthood (which he declined).[127] An active member of Calcutta society, Tagore was further involved in the establishment of the Hindoo College in 1817, and the movement for freedom of press following Adam's Press Ordinance of 1823 suppressing the freedom of English press in India.[128] He argued that for all Indian subjects to have reach to the government for changes, general assemblies and meetings

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[124] *Samachar Darpan*, dated July 23, 1831, reported: 'Commercial bank: Mr. Dwarkanath Tagore lets everyone know that he will fulfil all debts on behalf of the bank'. See also Kripalani, *Dwarkanath Tagore*, chapter 6; Bandyopadhyay, *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha*, p. 337.

[125] *Samachar Darpan*, June 1, 1833. FRCS refers to Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons.

[126] *Bengal Hurkaru*, February 4, 1847.

[127] 'A Charter of Honour presented to Dwarkanath Tagore at Town Hall in 1842 before his departure to Europe', 2000/8004/1, No. 1402; 'A Charter of Honour presented to Dwarkanath Tagore by the Edinburgh Emancipation and Aborigines Protection Society', 2000/8005/1, No. 1403; 'Charter of Citizenship of Edinburgh awarded to Dwarkanath Tagore', 2000/8007/1, No. 1405. In Rabindra Bharati Museum Collections, Kolkata. The last accolade was reported in *Asiatic Journal*, November 1842, pp. 339-41.

[128] For details on the movement against suppression of the press, see Prasun Sonwalkar, 'Indian Journalism in the Colonial Crucible: A Nineteenth-Century Story of Political Protest', *Journalism Studies*, 16:5 (2015), 624-636.

were not enough, freedom of press and printing presses were paramount.[129] Finally, under pressure from the likes of Dwarkanath Tagore, the Press Act was published in September 1835 providing more freedom of press.

An active supporter of 'native' press, Tagore was a shareholder in *Samachar Darpan* and *Bengal Hurkaru*, provided financial support to establish the *Englishman*, *Sambad Koumudi*, the *India Gazette*, and *Sambad Prabhakar*, and was involved in the maintenance of the Calcutta Public Library.[130] He maintained that the passing of the Press Act helped remove the perceived difference between Europeans and Indians in Calcutta.[131] Freedom of the press, Tagore argued, strengthened the government's control over the region, while also guaranteeing to the people 'that their rulers mean to govern with justice, since they are not afraid to let their subjects judge of their acts'.[132] When an act was passed in 1836 depriving non-official Britons of the right to appeal to the Supreme Court against judgements taken in the Company's provincial tribunals, Tagore joined the movement against it and spoke at the Town Hall about the importance of non-official Britons in bridging the gap between government servants and Indians.[133] Mehrotra highlights that although not the first instance of Indo-British collaboration in public agitation, this movement was 'far more systemic and extensive than the merely sporadic and local protests they had attempted hitherto', and ensured the support of the non-official British community in Indian undertakings 'almost as a quid pro quo'.[134]

Tagore's interest in the issue of labour migration was also not confined to indentured labourers. He maintained relations with the Committee of the Edinburgh Emigration and Aborigines Protection Society, which maintained a strong abolitionist and anti-indenture stance.[135] He was also close to prominent abolitionist George Thompson, whom he brought to Calcutta to spread his message to members of the SAGK. Tagore's testimony for the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40 was

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[129] 'Manuscript on Dwarkanath Tagore's Life', File 8, No. 3, Serial No. 320. Rabindra Bharati Museum Collections.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid, p. 317.
[132] Quoted in Bagal, *Unabingsha Shataker Bangla*, p. 36.
[133] Mehrotra, 'The Landholders' Society', p. 364.
[134] Ibid, p. 365.
[135] Kissory Chand Mittra, *Memoir of Dwarkanath Tagore* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1870), p. 96.

one of the few testimonies from Calcuttans who were not directly involved in the trade, but included as a trustworthy citizen-witness.[136] He was thus a prominent presence in the socio-political sphere, actively engaging with several issues of public interest. He was also close to the British ruling class—winning accolades, attending and throwing parties with Europeans, and even once inviting the British Queen to India to taste 'such a curry as has never been on [Her] Majesty's table'.[137] News articles in the *Friend of India*, *Bengal Herald* and *Bengal Hurkaru* were laudatory, and often praised his charitable activities and accolades he received.[138]

Although not as prominent a philanthropist as Tagore, Rustomjee Cowasjee (1792-1852) was a notable Parsi merchant and insurance and shipping magnate from Bombay, who was based in Calcutta. Among other commercial ventures, he held shares in the Laudable Society, Sun Life Co., New Oriental Life Insurance Co., Universal Life Assurance Co. and Union Insurance Co.[139] Ships built in his docks at Kidderpore and Salkia near Calcutta carried mail and passenger to and from Singapore and China. Partner in the shipping agency Rustomjee, Cowasjee and Co., he was also involved in shipping to Mauritius.[140] Rustomjee was also secretary to the Hooghly Docking

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[136] Testimony of Dwarkanath Tagore, November 9, 1838, in 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee', pp. 71-72.

[137] *Calcutta Monthly Journal*, dated December 1823 mentions parties he threw, attended by the likes of Emily Eden. William Prinsep, founding-partner of Carr, Tagore and Co. wrote of his visit to England: '[Tagore] launches into the full swing of London life.' Prinsep further wrote: 'when dining with the Queen which she and Prince Albert both enjoyed because [Tagore] never understood the usual etiquette of never speaking until addressed. On one of these occasions he turned to the Queen and said that it made him very jealous to find that her Majesty visited all her dominions but left out [her] richest and best [India], and where she would find more perfect loyalty than in any other not excepting England. She smiled and said it was worth consideration, but she added "… Mr. Zamindar what will you give me if I do go out and visit you"? The eyes of the Ladies in waiting sparkled at the expected description of jewels shawls elephants etc. "[…] Majesty, why we will give you such a curry as has never been on your Majesty's table"! The Queen laughed outright. Prince Albert threw himself back in his chair [convulsed]. The staff smiled [..] and looked disappointed while DT [Tagore] thoroughly enjoyed the effect of his impudent joke which no one but himself would have dared to utter.' 'Memoirs of William Prinsep', Vol. 3, 1838-42. MSS Eur D/1160/3, BL.

[138] News reports in Rabindra Bharati Museum Collections, Kolkata.

[139] P. Thankappan Nair, *A History of Calcutta's Streets* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1987).

[140] His involvement in the firm is mentioned in 'List of Merchants, Agents and Companies', *The Bengal and Agra Annual Guide and Gazetteer*, 1841, p. 209. Records that show that Rustomjee, Cowasjee and Co.'s shipped to Mauritius include 'Despatches to India and Bengal', Record Department, IOR/E/4/760, dated September 25, 1839, No. 13, p. 691. The following records

Company and Director of the Indian General Steam navigation Company.[141] Besides commercial enterprises, he built the Parsee Fire Temple on Ezra Street (Calcutta) in 1839, financially contributed to the establishment of the Metcalfe Hall and Asiatic Society of Bengal, and excavated four water tanks of his own expense.[142] He was also an annual subscriber to the District Charitable Society of Calcutta and involved in trading with China in close conjunction with Carr, Tagore and Co.[143]

As it turns out, Dwarkanath Tagore held considerable interest in trading, shipping and insurance, while Rustomjee Cowasjee was involved in emigration across the empire and shipping with Mauritius. They were both in positions to profit from a burgeoning trade in Indian indentured labourers, their anti-indenture stance seeming counter-intuitive. I argue that instead of finding the answer for this supposed discrepancy in their commercial activities, it can be found in imagining them not solely as merchants, but 'merchant-reformers'. The role of both Tagore and Cowasjee in contemporary Calcutta society was not confined to commercial interests, but involved considerable philanthropic activities. Thus, it was possible for someone like Tagore to discuss *zamindari* rights and rent-free tenures in areas of the public sphere earmarked for landholders' issues, and simultaneously weigh in on the rights of indentured labourers and problems of the indenture trade in other spaces. This divergence was born out of certain Calcuttans holding a non-singular role in society—appearing both as merchant/entrepreneur, and reformer/philanthropist.

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from 1843 refer to ships of his firm and ships belonging to his family involved in emigrating labourers to Mauritius: Letter from Messers Rustomjee, Cowasjee and Co., dated February 27, 1843, March 1, 1843, No. 6; Letter to the Colonial Secretary, dated February 28, 1843. March 1, No. 21; Letter from Messers Rustomjee, Cowasjee and Co., dated February 28, 1843. March 1, 1843. No. 7; Letter from the Emigration Agent, dated March 2, 1843. March 8 1843, No. 4; Letter from M/s Rustomjee, Cowasjee and Co. dated November 26, 1844. November 27, 1844, No. 9-11. In General (General) Department Proceedings, No. 6, WBSA. Records referring to Rustomjee, Cowasjee and Co. emigrating servants from India to England include Letter from Rustomjee Cowasjee and Co., dated January 22, 1840. February 5, 1840, No. 41, General (General) Department Proceedings, WBSA. For details of ships from his firm, see Anne Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships 1790-1833* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[141] Nair, *Calcutta's Streets*.

[142] Ibid. See also *The Englishman*, dated May 8, 1837.

[143] *Samachar Darpan*, June 1, 1833; 'Memoirs of William Prinsep', Vol. 2, 1822-38. MSS Eur D/1160/2, BL.

Irrespective of divergence in professions, many weighed in on the indenture question through meetings, petitions and committee testimonies. Besides merchant-reformers like Tagore and Cowasjee, this included prominent men from all walks of life—*zamindar*, educationist and reformer Prasanna Coomar Tagore, social reformer Rev. James Charles, educator, proselytiser and social reformer Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Supreme Court advocate Theodore Dickens (who headed the Calcutta investigative Committee of 1838-40), civil servant and educationist Russomoy Dutt, barrister Longueville Clarke, and Scottish watchmaker and philanthropist David Hare.[144] Many of those who participated in the indenture debates at Calcutta attended public meetings together, were involved in the same associations, sat on the same boards of committees of education and charitable societies, and frequented the same socio-cultural space in Calcutta. It was this intricate fabric of personal and professional networks that underlined the Calcutta public sphere. The resultant public sphere in Calcutta was defined by features that lent themselves to the emergence of the indenture debates—the coming together of a small but active community of Calcuttans to discuss

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[144] Prasanna Coomar Tagore (1803-68) was a zamindar and pleader at the Sadr Dewany Adalat (Supreme Court of Revenue) at Calcutta. At various times, he was governor of the Hindu College, member of the Council of Education, fellow of the University of Calcutta, founder of the British Indian Association and the National Association, and founder of the Hindu Theatrical Association of 1831. Besides petitioning against the indenture trade in 1837-38, he also moved for freedom of press in 1823. Nair, *Calcutta's Streets*; Bagal, *Unabingsha Shataker Bangla*, p. 33.

K.M. Banerjee (1813-85) was a part of the Young Bengal movement, professor at Bishop's College, and editor of several periodicals in Bengali and English. Anjali Bose, ed., *Samsad Bangla Charitabhidhan* [A Dictionary of Bengali Biographies] (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1998); Bagal, *Unabingsha Shataker Bangla.*

For Dickens, see Patrick Collinson and Thomas Cartwright, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); *Calcutta Monthly Journal* for August 1838, p. 93; *Calcutta Monthly Journal and General Register*, 1836; The *Calcutta Christian Observer* I, 1832, p. 128.

Russomoy Dutt (1779-1854) was on the board of the Council of education and the Sanskrit college, and involved in the establishment of the Hindu College. Besides the indenture question, he was involved in movements on stamp duty, European inheritance laws, freedom of press, and the use of jury in courts. Dutt was a member of the Calcutta investigative committee—the first Indian to serve on such a committee. Bose, *Samsad Bangla Charitabhidhan*, pp. 461-62.

Longueville Clarke was barrister of the Supreme Court in Calcutta and founder of the Ice House, the Bar Library, and the Metcalfe Hall at Calcutta.

David Hare contributed to the establishment of the Hindu School, Hindu College and the Hare School in Calcutta, and was a prominent member of societies for promoting English education in Bengal. See Peary Chand Mittra, *Biographical Sketch of David Hare* (Calcutta: W. Newman and Co., 1877).

issues of public interest, the emergence of public meetings and petitions as a means of bringing such issues to the attention of government, and the coalescing of Indian reformist ideals with ideas of humanitarianism in metropolitan Britain.[145]

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the Calcutta public sphere, and its discussion of the indenture question had a significant impact on how the indenture trade within the British Empire was perceived, operated and regulated. The use of both physical and non-physical spaces of discussion, and the conveyance of these discussions to the colonial rulers in both Calcutta and metropolitan Britain shaped the global debates on indenture. Within Calcutta, the nature of the public sphere affected the indenture debates, but at the same time, the debates saw one of the earliest uses of the Calcutta public sphere in the nineteenth century. Thus, as much as the public sphere helped formulate the indenture debates, a study of the debates has implications for understanding the early public sphere as interactive, collaborative and vocal. It allows us to analyse the public spaces, the nature of the public sphere, and the emergence of a vocal public in the colonial city. As the following chapters will demonstrate, arguments both in favour of and against indenture that brewed locally in Calcutta came to have a global impact in defining notions of servitude, race, citizenship and mobility in the British Empire at large. In fact, it was this process of metropolitan feedback and responsiveness that underlines the position of Calcutta within indenture networks and further within the ‘web’ of empire.

[145] The last feature is discussed in further detail in chapter 4.

# Chapter 3:
# Contracts, Servitude, and Post-Slavery Anxieties

The 'coolie question', as it came to be known, had become a point of discussion in Calcutta since the very beginning of the indenture trade. In its dual role as port-city and colonial capital, Calcutta was central to the physical indenture networks, as well as to the debates on labour servitude in the British Empire. With the Town Hall meeting and petition of 1838, the investigative committee of 1838-40, and articles in contemporary periodicals, Calcutta took centre-stage in debates around indentured migration and played a formative role in changing migration policies. This chapter does a close reading of the Town Hall meeting, petition, and the report of the Calcutta investigative committee to explore how questions of deception in recruitment, exploitation and mistreatment were discussed in Calcutta. In doing so, it highlights the contribution of anti-indenture voices from Calcutta to metropolitan labour regulations, and the global understanding of servitude. Moreover, an exploration of the anti-indenture voices in Calcutta and their constant comparison of indenture with slavery highlights the post-slavery nature of the indenture debates.

In the post-Abolition environment, the assessment of labour movements was based on a complete and immediate revocation of the slave trade. Naturally, the labour regime created to replace slave labour was evaluated along the rubric of the recently-condemned slave trade. Discussions around Abolition had created a new dichotomy of acceptable and unacceptable (exploitative) forms of labour regimes. Thus, provisions that had been discarded as unacceptable within the slave labour regime—such as the use of coercive and deceptive practices in the procurement of labour, mistreatment of labourers during passage and on plantations, or the employment and detention of labourers against their will—also had to be discarded in labour systems that followed. The debates at Calcutta not only referred to this dichotomy, but also used the same language of acceptable and unacceptable forms of labour-systems. Anti-indenture voices highlighted instances of mistreatment, exploitation, deceptive recruitment and breach of contract to argue against the indenture trade—constantly comparing it against the slave labour regime.

This chapter explores how the debates in Calcutta added to the rhetoric that defined the indenture trade as a 'new system of slavery'. In doing so, voices from

Calcutta weighed in on the post-Abolition endeavour to define acceptable forms of servitude, in an environment that had recently questioned the legal and moral implications of the slave labour regime. Before analysing how slavery framed discussions on the indenture trade in Calcutta, this chapter explains the timeline of the Calcutta debates and explores how anti-indenture arguments were reflected in petitions, committee minutes, news reports and oral interviews from Calcutta.

## Situating the 'Coolie Question'

The implementation of Act V of 1837 had facilitated the creation of a new emigration policy applicable exclusively to the indenture trade—defining in the process the indenture trade as separate from other migratory labour regimes.[1] This prompted debates around the indenture trade in Calcutta, which manifested in the Town Hall meeting of 1838, the resultant petition, the report of the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40, and local news articles. Such discussions not only debated specific provisions of the trade (such as provisions for recruitment, accommodation and passage of migrant labourers) but also questioned the validity of the indenture trade as a whole. Lack of knowledge about the indenture scheme, ill-treatment of labourers and similarity with slavery formed three core arguments against continued emigration. Before moving on to these core themes, this section offers a detailed chronology of how the 'coolie question' was discussed in Calcutta.

The interactive and vocal public sphere at Calcutta had created conditions conducive to the growth of spaces where the indenture question could be debated. The Town Hall itself was a product of this discursive space—created as a result of Calcuttans vocalising the need for public spaces of discussion and debate. It was here that the discussion on indentured servitude first manifested in 1838. On June 15, 1838, around 152 inhabitants of Calcutta petitioned the sheriff James Young to hold a public meeting to discuss indentured migration.[2] This led to the meeting being held at the

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[1] One of the provisions of the act stated that it did not apply for 'native seamen' (such as *lascars*) or domestic servants, thus implying a newly-emerged legal status for indentured plantation workers that separated them from other migrants or workers in the eyes of colonial regulations. Emigration Act V of 1837, passed by the Governor-General in Council on May 1, 1837, Home Department, Public Branch, Annex Building, NL.

[2] H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Bose, *Samsad Bangla Charitabhidhan* [translations mine].

Calcutta Town Hall on July 10, where criticisms against the indenture trade and its alleged resemblance with slavery were discussed. The Town Hall discussion presented arguments both in favour of and against continued emigration, and signalled the beginning of a sustained discourse in Calcutta that compared indentured servitude to the slave trade. At the same time, this meeting brought to light the importance of petitioning the colonial government to institute changes in emigration regulations. It was one of the earliest and most publicised records of the Calcutta public's opinion of the indenture trade.

The Town Hall meeting brought to public notice some of the primary concerns about indenture trade and became a platform where inhabitants of Calcutta—whether European or Indian—could vocalise their concerns. Although the meeting saw arguments both in favour of and against continued emigration, it ended with a unanimous decision that the indenture system was 'fraught with unmixed evils'. It was thus decided to petition the colonial government to enquire into the abuses alleged to exist in the trade, and move for its suspension. Those present adopted the following resolution:

> Resolved, that this meeting, having heard of the commencement, continuance, and extension of a system of exporting the natives of India to the British slave and other colonies, expresses its deepest regret that

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The complete list of attendees included J. Bennett, C.P. Harvey, J.R. Harvey, R. Jones, T. Bason, R. Dias, C.W. Pittar, George Martin, C. Gray, A.W. D'Cruze, W. Smyth, Manick Chunder Sein, Govindo Haldar, Prankishsoo Chuckerbutty, T. Kenderdine, T. Andrews, J. Campbell, R. Staunton, J. Boyce, Thomas Boyce, George Pearson, C. Kenderdine, T.W. Smyth, R. Beatson, C. Riley, J. Campbell, J. Penny, W. Morton, Charles Pitzance, Thomas L. Lessell, James Bradbury, J. Thomas, A.F. Lacroix, W. Robinson, G.C. Hay, W. Byrn, Robert J. Rose, T. James, J. Hughes, F.H. Browne, John Lamb, J. Spence, Llewelyn and Co., D. Wilson, Muddoosoodun Mullick, Sonaton Mullick and Co., Muddunmohun Chunder, Nundocoomar Dutt, Nundolol Dutt, H. Woollaston, W. Renfry, R.J. Dring, Jos. Hayes, W.H. Micklejohn, George Higginson, Thomas Desbrulais, Jadobchunder Bose, W. Turner, F.E. Elphinstone, H. Brown, H.C. Kemp, N. Grant, R. Lepage, Nilmadob Chund, N. Rees, George Grant, W.J. Twentyman, E. Gray, D. Edmonds, J. Holmes, R.W. Allan, R. Forbes, W.R. Wallis, R.B. Wallis, R. Parks, Thomas Dickens, T.M. Thomas, Woopendey Mohun Tagore, N.B.E. Baillie, C. Fagan, George F. Humfrey, W.J. Judge, Nathaniel Alexander, J. Simonin, Thomas Casper, P. Pereira, A.G. Miller, E.R. Coser, P. Pereira, C.W. Tyler, A. D'Silva, John Collie, J. Robertson, T.W. Jones, C.P. Sealy, J.M. Cantopher, J. Smith, S. Dessa, J. Henry, Demello, J. Gill, M. Pinto, D.W. Madge, G. Galloway, A. Cones, C. Grose, J.R. Hayes, T. Gregory, E. Gill, P. Martinelly, M. Payne, G.A. Peroux, J. Dessa, J.M. Maddocks, J.H. Stocqueler—alongside two unintelligible ones. *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLIV, 1838, p. 303.

> such a traffic should have originated on this port, believing the system to be fraught with unmixed evils to the so called 'free emigrants' […] it is expedient respectfully to petition the government to institute a full enquiry into the circumstances of the traffic; which enquiry in the opinion of this meeting will necessarily lead to its prompt and total suppression, and that in the meanwhile and pending such inquiry, the exportation of natives of India to any part of the world as labourers be suspended.[3]

This decision of the Town Hall attendees was presented in the form of a petition to the President-in-Council on July 26. This petition criticised the indenture trade as a system that defrauded unwilling labourers to migrate overseas, and left thousands of families without the protection of an earning member. It argued that indentured emigrants were 'neither aware of their destination [,] the real nature of their engagement or of the extent of their future labor and reward.'[4] It alleged that they were transferred from one master to another at Mauritius and reshipped to West Indian plantations.[5] Criticism of the indenture trade was based mainly on a detailed criticism of its provisions, and the conditions of work and living it offered to the migrant labourer. Ultimately, the petitioners demanded a full enquiry into the trade and measures for speedy and complete suppression of the traffic.

The petition refrained from mentioning any specific incidents of abuse or fraudulence even though such examples had been discussed in the meeting. It asserted instead that the cases of abuse and fraudulence they implicitly referred to were not isolated incidents, but part of a systemic problem. This strengthened the anti-indenture argument that abuses were inherent in the indenture system, and thus only drastic measures such as changed emigration policies or a complete suspension of the trade could remedy the situation. It further implied that the regulations already in place, and

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[3] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLIV, 1838, p. 311. See also *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 11, 1838.

[4] Letter to Alexander Ross (President of the Council of India and Deputy Governor of the President of Fort William) from James Young (Sheriff of Calcutta), [Petition] on behalf of those assembled at the Town Hall Meeting in Calcutta, dated July 10, 1838. August 1, 1838, No. 1, General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA. Henceforth 'Petition from James Young'.

[5] Ibid.

the vigilance of emigration officials, were not sufficient to suppress these abuses.[6] Such assertions would form the crux of the ensuing anti-indenture argument.[7]

In response to pressures from anti-indenture voices in the British parliament, from British public, and from colonial spaces like Calcutta, the decision was taken for investigative committees to be appointed in colonies and port-cities. The investigative committee created in Calcutta was the most significant of these, not least because reports from Bombay, Madras, Mauritius and Sydney, the other sites of investigative committees, were either considered inconclusive, inadequate, or never reached the parliament.[8] Moreover, instructions for the establishment of investigative committees explicitly stated that in order to make its reports satisfactory for 'those who agitate the question at Calcutta', the committees had to be convened not by local authorities and Company servants visiting the plantation colonies by chance, but by officials selected by the Government of India explicitly for this purpose and unconnected with the colony in order to avoid bias.[9] In his report of 1873, John Geoghegan highlighted the centrality of voices from Calcutta in the parliamentary debates by stating that in the Calcutta committee report, '[b]oth parties [in Parliament] now found an ample armoury of weapons', since 'combatants on both sides fought equally in the dark till they got the report of the Calcutta Committee'.[10] The Calcutta committee report was thus not only the most detailed record of the early indenture debates in Calcutta, but also a significant body of evidence that influenced metropolitan regulations. In fact, when the indenture

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[6] 'Petition from James Young'.

[7] The Town Hall petition was followed by a counter-petition from merchants of Calcutta favouring the indenture trade, which has been discussed in chapter 5.

[8] John Geoghegan's report of 1873 stated of the committees appointed at this stage to investigate into the indenture trade: 'The Bombay Committee had reported that no such abuses prevailed on that side of India. In fact, emigration from Bombay could hardly then have been said to exist. The Madras Committee had not contributed anything of value. The records of the Mauritius Committee, if it ever sat, are not forthcoming, and no communication whatever seems to have been received from Sydney.' John Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1873), p. 6. The two enquiries in British Guiana that had been solicited from England and India, were never conducted.

[9] Letter from G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, to the Chief Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated September 12, 1838, in Extract from the Proceedings of the Honourable the President of the Council of India in Council in the General Department, dated July 11, 1838. In *Mauritius: Copies of Correspondence addressed to the Secretary of State for the Colonial Department, relative to the Introduction of Indian Labourers into the Mauritius* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, May 28, 1840).

[10] Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India*, p. 10.

trade was re-opened in 1842 after its brief suspension, the changed regulations in the Act of 1842 were in keeping with the recommendations of the Calcutta Committee Report.

The decision to establish investigative committees in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Mauritius and the West Indies represents three things. Firstly, that metropolitan government found the case persuasive enough to institute local committees. Secondly, that it was responsive to criticism not only from within Britain, but from across the empire, especially as the petition from Calcutta pressed the need for investigation. Thirdly, that metropolitan interest in and responsiveness to allegations of mistreatment, exploitation, deception or similarities with the slave labour regime prompted the decision to parcel out responsibility of investigation and governance to local agencies. The decision for investigative committees was also followed by an order suspending further permits for labourers migrating from Calcutta, Madras and Bombay pending investigation.

Thus, in August 1838, a six-member committee was appointed in Calcutta to investigate the abuses alleged to exist in Bengal Presidency and to advise government on the best means of applying a remedy and preventing the recurrence of similar abuses.[11] The committee was composed of Theodore Dickens (Chairman), J.P. Grant, Major E. Archer, W. Dowson, Rev. James Charles, and Russomoy Dutt.[12] Of them, Theodore Dickens was a Supreme Court advocate and a popular speaker at public meetings. He also owned sugar plantations in India.[13] Grant was a civil servant and judge in the Bengal Presidency with first-hand knowledge of Mauritian emigration. Major Archer was a participant and observer in the indenture trade from Calcutta and a member of the military, Dowson was a member of the Calcutta-based merchant-firm

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[11] Letter from H.T. Prinsep, Secretary to the Government of India, to Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated July 11, 1838, Fort William, August 1, 1838, No. 4; Letter from H.T. Prinsep, Secretary to the Government, to T. Dickens, Rev James Charles, W. Dowson, Major Archer, Rosomoy Dutt and J.P. Grant, dated August 1, 1838, August 1, 1838, No. 6. In General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[12] Radhika Mongia suggests that members were deliberately sought from different social, ideological and moral positions in an attempt to allow the investigative committee to be impartial and objective. She terms this ‘an arithmetic approach to truth procurement.’ Radhika Mongia, ‘Impartial Regimes of Truth: Indentured Indian Labour and the Status of the Inquiry’, *Cultural Studies*, 18:5 (2004), 749-768.

[13] Ibid, p. 754.

Dowson, Bestel and Co. (which was involved in emigrating indentured migrants overseas), and Rev. Charles was a popular reformer.[14] Russomoy Dutt (1779-1854) was a judge of the Small Causes Court and later Commissioner in the Court of Requests. He was one of the founders of the Hindoo College (later Presidency College) and secretary to the Council of Education. Dutt was also one of the earliest Indians to be appointed to public commissions of enquiry in British India.[15]

The committee was under orders to enquire into 'the nature and extent of the abuses alleged to exist in this [Bengal] presidency', with a view to correct the problems and 'advise government as to the best means of applying a remedy and preventing the recurrence of similar abuses'.[16] The committee worked by taking detailed testimonies of indentured labourers (both current and returned), merchants, company officials and others involved in indenture trade, as well as basing their investigation on eyewitness accounts, records, and correspondences from the Superintendent of Police and Magistrates of Calcutta and the districts.[17]

Those interviewed for the committee report included ships' captains such as Alexander Mackenzie of the *Cavendish Bentinck*, Edwards of *Christopher Rawson*, James Smart and John Dyer; ship-owners and merchants such as James Rapson, Alexander Colvin, William Frederick Fergusson, John Mackay and William Frank Dowson; labour-procurers such as John Hughes and W.E. Browne; colonial officials such as F.W. Birch (Superintendent of Calcutta Police), J.J. McCann (Deputy Superintendent of Police), J.H. Patton (Magistrate of 24-Pergunnahs), D. McFarlan (Magistrate of 24-Pergunnahs), Arthur Onslow (civil servant in Madras Presidency), George Witchlow and William Cracroft; migrant labourers such as Bibee Zuhoorun, Sheik Manick, Boodoo Khan, Karoo, Suboo and Ramdeen; and citizen-witnesses such

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[14] *Calcutta Monthly Journal*, August 1838, p. 93; *Calcutta Monthly Journal and General Register*, 1836; *Calcutta Christian Observer* I, 1832, p. 128.

[15] He was the first Bengali judge of the Small Causes Court, secretary of the Sanskrit College and involved in several educational and political activities of the time. Historian Romesh Chandra Dutt and poetess Toru Dutt were his great-grandchildren. *Friend of India*, September 14, 1837, p. 289; Bose, *Samsad Bangla Charitabhidhan*, pp. 461-62; George Smith, "The First Twenty Years of the Calcutta Review", *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 59 (1874), pp. 230-31.

[16] Letter to the members of the Committee, from H.T. Prinsep (Secretary to the Government of Bengal), dated August 1, 1838. August 1, 1838, No. 6, General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[17] Ibid.

as David Hare, Longueville Clarke, Roger Dias, Dwarkanath Tagore, John Floyd, Reverend Thomas Boaz and Thomas William Smyth.

The committee accumulated evidence, held interviews and called witnesses throughout 1839, and finally submitted their report in October 1840. Although not signed and supported by all the original members of the committee, this was accepted as the definitive report by the colonial state.[18] The report stated:

> We conceive it to be distinctly proved beyond doubt that the coolies and other natives exported to Mauritius and elsewhere were (generally speaking) induced to come to Calcutta by misrepresentation and deceit, practised upon them by native crimps, styled duffadars and arkotties, employed by European and Anglo-Indian undertakers and shippers.[19]

The Calcutta committee report found most charges of abuse made against the indenture trade to be true and stated that the emigrants were 'incapable of understanding the nature of the contracts' and suppressed their voices for fear of penal consequences.[20] At the same time, the report recommended some regulations in case indentured migration was to continue, which included provisions about female migrants, contracts with foreign governments with interest in Indian indenture trade, and the limitation of the emigration scheme to certain Indian ports under strict regulations. The report considered the economic impact of indentured emigration as well—that it provided undue competitive pressure on the African free labourer, provided insufficient wages, and generally evaded the payment of full wages.[21] These recommendations of the Calcutta committee would later be incorporated into the changed emigration regulations instituted in 1842. For instance, questions around similarity to slavery, mistreatment of labourers on passage, deception in their recruitment and the problem of indentured migrants continuing in the same plantations that employed slave labour were addressed by increasing surveillance over the mode of recruitment, along with introducing the offices of the Protector of Emigrants and Protector of Immigrants in each participating port.

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[18] The opinions of original members who did not support this report is discussed in chapter 5.

[19] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee', p. 5.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

## Reading Voices from Calcutta: Petitions, Reports and Interviews

Before moving onto a discussion of how the twin questions of mistreatment and similarity to slavery became a central part of the discussions in Calcutta, this section explores how petitions, committee minutes, news reports and oral interviews from Calcutta reflected the anti-indenture voice. It also considers some of the issues with using such sources for writing the history of Indian indenture.

Petitions were one of the principal ways in which voices from Calcutta were articulated. It was the anti-indenture petition from Calcutta in 1838, followed by a counter-petition from Calcutta merchants, that first brought the voices from Calcutta to the metropole. Reading such petitions sheds light on how inhabitants of colonies interacted with the metropole, and offers an insight into the main demands of the petitioner. The act of petitioning not only implied that an inhabitant of Calcutta could comment on a migratory labour system sanctioned by the metropole, but also made the connection between the ruler and the ruled more direct. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the act of petitioning also had a bearing on the nature of subjecthood and citizenship, as it played a subtle but crucial role in legitimising both the migrant labourer and the Calcutta petitioner as citizens of the empire. At the same time, petitions offered only momentary snapshots into the anti-indenture arguments, a full view of which was more apparent in news reports and records of the Calcutta investigative committee.

Investigative committees in the British Empire had long served the purpose of creating and archiving knowledge systems. Such extra-legal committees not only gave the public an opportunity to contribute to the regulation of the labour regime by participating as committee members, but also served as government acknowledgment of questions around its legitimacy. The very establishment of the indenture committees solidified the issue of labour in the post-Abolition empire, and their reports on emigration and labour regulations came to affect a century-long trade in labourers. Scholarship on nineteenth-century investigative commissions has traditionally considered them as policy-making extensions of the government. Oz Frankel argues that those such as Royal Commissions in Britain mirrored parliamentary inquiry processes

in an effort to appropriate its legitimacy.[22] According to Frankel, commissions were installed to manage public debates, while also making the state visible to the public.[23] This was also true of the indenture committees, which were set up in response to local attitudes to indenture, and were often headed by prominent citizens rather than colonial officials. In fact, the committees were under strict instructions to appoint officials selected by the Government of India (either local to the port-city or unconnected with the plantation colony) to avoid bias and make its reports acceptable for critics of the trade at Calcutta.[24]

Adding to this scholarship, Adam Ashforth argues that commissions of enquiry are set up for one of four reasons: the need to go beyond politics, limited state resources, distrust between government bodies, or pressure from within the bureaucracy.[25] For indenture committees, there was a fifth, more practical reason—the sheer distance and communication factors for a multi-site empire such as the British Empire. In context of the indenture debates, which functioned with inputs from disparate parts of the British Empire, it was impossible to centralise the entire operations. Thus, alongside working as a tool to manage public debates, the indenture committees were also one of the earliest colonial committees to gather information on the indenture trade and its transgressions across the empire on such a vast scale. It was part of the same process of knowledge production that led to ethnographies, surveys and censuses in colonial India—collecting and fixing present knowledge on the subject. At a time when unfree labour-systems across the empire were under scrutiny and being criticised in parliament, having an investigative committee look into its problems gave

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[22] Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). See also Oz Frankel, 'Scenes of Commission: Royal Commissions of Inquiry and the Culture of Social Investigation in Early Victorian Britain', *The European Legacy,* 4:6 (1999), 20-41.

[23] Frankel, *States of Inquiry.*

[24] Letter from G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, to the Chief Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated September 12, 1838, in Extract from the Proceedings of the Honourable the President of the Council of India in Council in the General Department, dated July 11, 1838. In *Mauritius: Copies of Correspondence addressed to the Secretary of State for the Colonial Department, relative to the Introduction of Indian Labourers into the Mauritius* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, May 28, 1840).

[25] Adam Ashforth, 'Reckoning Schemes of Legitimation: On Commissions of Inquiry as Power/Knowledge Forms', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 3:1 (1990), 1-22.

legitimacy to public concerns on indenture, and even legitimised the position of the state as the body in charge of indenture.

Radhika Mongia argues that inquiry commissions such as the Calcutta and Mauritius investigative committees established to investigate the criticisms levied against the indenture trade, were simultaneously a 'mechanism for the evaluation and adjudication of truth', and 'a method of information collection and compilation'.[26] In fact, it was the image of the inquiry as 'an apparatus for the production of truth'—an objective and impartial truth—that enabled the indenture system to continue for almost a century.[27] The indenture committees thus acted as arbiters of truth, and the report of the Calcutta committee continued to live in official memory as the authoritative record of the indenture trade and local opinions on it in the mid-nineteenth century.[28] Thus, as much as the setting up of these investigative committees represented government acknowledgement of criticisms to the indenture system, the findings of the committees were considered authoritative, and the acceptance and incorporation of their reports in emigration laws were deemed adequate safeguarding against these criticisms. In fact, as Mongia argues, this reliance on the impartial inquiries led the colonial state to continually gather information on the indenture trade, and hold periodic investigations into transgressions like reports of abuse or suicide.[29]

The investigative committee was heavily reliant on oral testimonies. Between August 1838 and January 1839, the Calcutta investigative committee interviewed 36 people about the indenture trade. This included ships' captains, indenture officials, merchants, returned indentured labourers (6 labourers, including one woman), and

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[26] Mongia, 'Impartial Regimes', p. 749.

[27] Ibid.

[28] For instance, Geoghegan's report of 1873, which emerged as a definitive record of the official history of Indian indenture in its own right, often referred back to the findings of the Calcutta investigative committee. See Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India*. As Mongia points out, the conflicting positions of the members of the Calcutta committee were not seen as problematic, but rather a process that brought together divergent positions on the issue of indenture. Mongia, 'Impartial Regimes', p. 757.

[29] Mongia writes: 'Yearly and often quarterly 'returns' of the situation of the migrants, including information on the births and deaths, the money earned, the amount saved, the beatings endured, the contracts breached, the misconduct prosecuted, the diseases contracted, the letters received or dispatched, became a regular, indeed required, feature of the system.' Ibid, pp. 762-63.

citizens-witnesses.[30] Besides documentary sources such as official reports, contracts, records of emigration, and ships' records, oral testimonies were the main evidence-base that the committee's investigation drew upon. Testimonies were often paraphrased in the report to support the contentions of the investigative committee. This practice of gathering oral evidence remained a ubiquitous part of the indenture trade, and over the years, officials continued to periodically examine and interview indentured labourers either when they disembarked in destination colonies like Mauritius, or in Calcutta upon their return at the end of the indenture period.

Oral interviews are one of the very few first-hand accounts of the trade and are essential for studying how different participants and observers perceived the indenture trade. At the same time, interviews such as these balanced a fine line between testimony and oral history. Even though recorded for purposes of investigation and not historical reconstruction, the study of interviews involves considerations of factual credibility and verification.[31] Thus, an analysis of the interviews conducted by the Calcutta investigative committee needs to take into account factors such as reliability of memory and accuracy of recall. The question of reliability permeated the discussion around the committee report. Testimonials of different interviewees were given different weightage, generally along lines of race and social or occupational position. Further, as this thesis demonstrates, testimonies were shaped by the way questions were framed, by fears of coercion, and by remits of investigation determined by the interviewers.

Through the process of archivisation, archives privilege certain voices while marginalising others—resulting in a repository where voices are absent as subjects, as authors, or both.[32] Achille Mbembe argues that the archive is defined by processes of

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[30] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[31] For a discussion of reliability of oral evidence, see Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', and Trevor Lummis, 'Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence', in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alastair Thomson (London; New York: Routledge, 1998); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially chapter 7.

[32] In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot showed that there are four layers of silencing in the writing of history—silencing during the making or recording of sources, silencing during the creation of archives, silencing by the narrators through selection of sources and narratives, and silencing by the collective of historians and the public through their selection of particular narratives to become part of the historical corpus. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

discrimination and selection—processes that result in 'the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others'.[33] For instance, most historical sources on the early days of the indenture trade included the indentured migrant as a subject, but only very rarely as authors. The voices of women—whether involved in the debates or as an indentured emigrant—were even more difficult to find in the early period of indenture. In line with Spivak's argument in 'Can the Subaltern Speak', the female indentured migrant suffered 'double displacement' from a position where she could voice her opinion.[34] Thus, it is only through a process of reading against the grain that the labourer's testimony can be used to construct this thesis' arguments. Their contributions, voices, interpretations and comments on the indenture trade and their experience of it has to be extracted from records not written with the explicit intent of showcasing their voices.

Although the investigative committee offered some indentured migrants the opportunity to voice their opinion of the indenture trade, the labourers and their testimonies were removed from official discussions of the trade in three distinct ways. Firstly, the spaces of indenture debates were generally open only to a largely elite group of Calcuttans with access to economic and social capital, as well as English education. Indentured labourers were more *allowed* than *welcome* in this space, and the extent to which they could participate and influence the discourse on emigration policies was determined by their elite counterparts. In fact, the inclusion of labourers' voices, even if as witnesses to the trade, was regulated and limited according to the needs of the discourse. This was partly achieved by having elite Calcuttans speak on their behalf, often at the cost of not having indentured migrants testify to their own experience. For instance, Dwarkanath Tagore's testimony was used in the committee report to argue that indentured migrants were unlikely to agree to emigrate if they knew the exact terms and conditions, including how far they were going (instead of having migrant labourers in local factories or indigo plantations attest to their willingness to migrate). The testimonies of prominent citizen-witnesses David Hare and Longueville Clarke were

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[33] Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and Its Limits', in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. by Carolyn Hamilton and others (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002), p. 20.

[34] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-314.

used to attest to instances where indentured labourers were visibly unwilling to migrate overseas.

Secondly, the participation of indentured labourers in these spaces through testimonies or interviews were often guided by questions that intended to restrict their voice to very specific themes. For instance, the Calcutta investigative committee was focused on determining whether provisions of the indenture trade were exploitative, and reminiscent of slavery. Thus, instead of asking returned migrants open questions about their grievances, committee members asked questions that were very specifically concerned with instances of mistreatment, deception in recruitment, and the upholding of contract (or lack thereof). This was because proof of breach of contract strengthened the contention that indentureship was a continuation of slavery. It demonstrated that exploitation or mistreatment during recruitment, passage, and in plantations took place not only because the system was inherently exploitative, but also because regulations were easily breached and thus the mere presence of contracts did not preclude conditions of servitude. In this, the Calcutta investigative committee acted as an extension of the colonial state, using the oral testimonies to report specifically on the accusations levied against the trade, and reflecting the state's endeavour to determine whether the indentured labour regime represented an exercise in 'free' or 'unfree' labour. Continued focus on questions of fraudulent recruitment, breach of contract and mistreatment was aimed at investigating the allegations of abuse against the trade to an extent satisfactory to legislators, rather than identifying the migrant labourer's concerns with the trade. In the process, the questions came to frame not only the testimonies, but also the archives.

Thirdly, the labourer's testimony was considered less reliable than that of elite and European citizens. Ann Laura Stoler argues that there are hierarchies of credibility in colonial archives, some of which, such as rumour versus news, and hearsay versus visually-confirmed fact, are commonly accepted.[35] This understanding permeated the records of the Calcutta committee, where 'native evidence' or testimony was considered low on the scale of reliability. The committee report, for instance, stated that it had arrived at its conclusions 'after all due allowance [was] made for the habit of

[35] Stoler, 'In Cold Blood'.

exaggeration prevalent among Bengalees and Hindoostanees'.[36] Testimonies from Indians were thus considered fundamentally unreliable.[37] William Dowson had submitted a separate report that rejected the findings of the main report and argued that the problems of the indenture system were remediable through well-implemented regulations and did not warrant its complete prohibition. His report weighed 'native evidence' as even less reliable, arguing: 'My colleagues […] are weighing the value and credibility of evidence in a very different manner from that which is laid down as the proper method and principle by all writers on the subject [. They] well know no value can be put […] [on the section of the report that] rests on native evidence.'[38]

In her work on slavery in South Asia, Indrani Chatterjee argues that existing scholarship has considered parliamentary papers as repositories of facts, when they need to be considered as part of a triangulated conversation around slavery and abolition in the global context.[39] This consideration extends to the history of indenture, where we can read the official records of the Calcutta investigative committee and the parliamentary discussion around the possible suspension of the indenture trade in the mid-nineteenth century as a conversation between Britain, Calcutta and plantation colonies. We can also read into these official documents the hierarchisation of testimonies according to prevailing notions of race and reliability, and see it as evidence on the prevailing indenture trade guided by questions that the colonial state needed answered (as opposed to questions that the migrant labourer wanted to pose). In spite of such restrictions, however, the interviews represent one of the earliest instances where the voice of the labourer, and his encounter with state machinery is recorded. These interviews remain to this date one of the only official spaces of discussion where early Indian labourers found a voice, however restricted.

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[36] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'. Emphasis added.

[37] Mongia argues that this was related to the constant endeavour of colonial investigative committees to get to an impartial and objective truth, which Indians were considered not capable of. Mongia, 'Impartial Regimes'.

[38] William Frank Dowson, 'Minute on the Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Abuses alleged to exist Relative to the Export of Coolies', dated October 16, 1840, in *Letter from Secretary to Government of India, to Committee on Exportation of Hill Coolies: Report of Committee and Evidence* (East India House: Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, February 12, 1841), p. 13.

[39] Indrani Chatterjee, 'Renewed and Connected Histories: Slavery and the Historiography of South Asia', in *Slavery and South Asian History,* ed. by Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 31.

## ‘A New System of Slavery’: Arguing against Indentured Servitude

The discussions at the Town Hall meeting and the Calcutta committee were inordinately balanced against continued trade. Even in the face of opinions to the contrary, a majority of voices maintained that the indenture trade was oppressive and exploitative, and perpetuated conditions of the slave trade. This section explores how discussions at Calcutta compared the indenture trade to slavery, and analyses why the juxtaposition of slavery and indenture was an important concern of the post-slavery empire.

As pointed out in the introduction, the anti-slavery movement and its eventual culmination into the abolition of slavery had led to a distinct shift in both the legal definition and public opinion of the limits of servitude. Features that were discarded as immoral, illegal and unacceptable within the slave-labour regime, such as mistreatment on plantations and lack of choice in determining the provisions of labour, also had to be discarded in all following labour systems. Following from this, the phrase ‘new system of slavery’ became common within Calcutta debates, and direct comparison between slavery and indenture emerged as a common refrain. Thus, those petitioning against indenture pointed to provisions similar to slavery as their main criticism of the indenture trade, while merchants and planters in favour of the trade pointed to its contractual nature and its dissimilarity to slavery to argue for its continuance. This highlights the post-slavery nature of the indenture debates—where the indentured labour regime not only followed slave regime in plantation colonies, but constantly referred to the definitions and the dichotomy created by the regime. Consequently, the indenture trade came to be judged by its adherence or lack of adherence to contracts, and the perceived dichotomy between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour.

Scholars like Hugh Tinker have highlighted structural similarities between the two labour regimes to demonstrate that indentured servitude replicated actual conditions of slavery.[40] As pointed out in the introduction, this question of whether the indenture trade inherited some of the features of the slave regime has been part of a central historiographic debate in works on Indian indenture—with scholars who argue that there were continuities between the two, and others who point to fundamental differences between the two regimes. This thesis moves this debate forward by focusing

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[40] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*.

not on *whether* the indenture labour regime was a continuation of slavery, but *why* and how it was framed by the legacies of the slave labour regime and anti-slavery activism. I contend that as a labour regime that replaced slave labour in plantation colonies, slavery unquestionably influenced how the indenture trade operated, and framed how it was understood and debated. Moreover, as it followed a massive debate in Britain about the legal and moral legitimacy of slave labour, anti-slavery activism and discussion around Abolition framed how indenture was regulated, imagined and debated. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two labour regimes, and especially helps us understand why voices from Calcutta were obsessed with comparing the indenture system against slavery.

The focus on unfree labour practices within the indenture trade, and the positing of the similarity-to-slavery argument as the most trenchant criticism of the trade was a direct impact of the Abolition debates of the early-nineteenth century, and the post-Abolition shift in both legal and public opinion of acceptable forms of labour. This explicit and constant comparison to slavery, and the tendency to frame the indenture debate within the dichotomy of 'free' and 'unfree' labour is what I refer to as the 'similarity-to-slavery' argument. While scholars have studied how debates around slavery contributed to the understanding of 'free' and 'unfree' labour in the British Empire, this thesis extends this line of analysis to the indenture debates at Calcutta.[41] In doing so, it explores how this assumed connection between the two regimes, and the assessment of one against the other shaped how the public perceived the new trade, affected how the trade was investigated through committees and questionnaires, and ultimately impacted how the indenture system was regulated.

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[41] Key works that explore how slavery and anti-slavery framed ideas of free labour include Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Richard Huzzey, 'Concepts of Liberty: Freedom, Laissez-faire and the State after Britain's Abolition of Slavery', in *Emancipation and the Remaking of the British Imperial World*, ed. by Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper and Keith McClelland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Seymour Drescher, 'Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade', *Past & Present*, 143 (1994), 136-166; Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Seymour Drescher, *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999).

As this section will demonstrate, the anti-indenture voices at Calcutta used this connection between the two regimes as the crux of their argument against continued indenture trade. The indentured labour regime was seen as ‘a new system of slavery’ or a continuation of slavery because of several reasons—including the continuation of indentured labourers in the same estates and under the same conditions as during the slave-regime, allegations of deceptive recruitment practices, and the systemic nature of the alleged problems of the indenture trade. In fact, this line of argument worked so well as a criticism of the indenture regime precisely because of the power of the term ‘slavery’ to conjure an immediate feeling of criticism and condemnation.

The Town Hall meeting of 1838 had commenced with an absolute condemnation of the prevailing system of indenture, and the passing of a resolution based on the slavery argument:

> Resolved, that this meeting having heard of the commencement, continuance, and extension of a system of exporting the natives of India to the British slave and other colonies, expresses its deepest regret that such a traffic should exist, and, more especially, that it should have originated in this port, believing the system to be fraught with unmixed evils to the so called “free emigrants”.[42]

The outright condemnation of the trade as ‘fraught with unmixed evils’ was at least partially derived from the contention that conditions of slavery were pervasive. The reference to ‘British slave colonies’ highlighted the fact that indentured migrants were expected to work in plantations that used to employ slave labour for decades—under similar working and living conditions, penal sanctions, and regulating officials.

This line of argument was put forward in the Town Hall meeting by Bishop Daniel Wilson. The Bishop argued that the plantation colonies being old slave colonies, there was a possibility of the indentured labourers being treated the same as slave labourers preceding them, their freedom being similarly restricted.[43] He asked, ‘[w]here were the laws to protect them in an old slave colony and from the tyranny of task-masters who had spent a whole life in driving slaves?’[44] Theodore Dickens, who later headed the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40, argued that in these plantation

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[42] ‘Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies’, p. 311.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid, p. 311.

colonies, 'the only relation that has hitherto existed in service, has been that of master and slave; where labour […] has always been stigmatized as the portion of slavery; where the late masters of slaves are the lawgivers; where the prejudices of color are entertained and produce a degree of hatred, and scorn of fellow men'.[45] Rev. Charles took this argument forward to assert that the indenture trade was similar to the slave trade because both reduced man into 'an article of merchandize'.[46]

In general, most speeches admonishing the slave trade and arguing its similarity to the indenture trade were greeted with cheers from the audience, making it clear where the majority of the audience stood on the question of servitude. At the same time, the opinion of all attendees at the meeting were not unanimous. Some favoured continued migration. Major Archer, for instance, found the comparison to slavery tenuous, stating that labourers in Mauritius were well-treated and received better wages than in India.[47] He further argued that laws in Mauritius were 'leaning towards the coolies and against the planters', and that offences were rare and the pay punctual.[48] Ship's captain Mackenzie used his considerable experience in the indenture trade to argue that it was not as inhuman as made out to be, and stressed the need for a full and impartial enquiry before moving for its suspension.[49] He argued that petitions for abolition without a thorough enquiry would not only undermine present colonial policy, but also 'be an acknowledgement [that the British government] […] permitted a Slave Trade to grow and flourish under our eyes'.[50] Attendees such as Mr. Osborne argued that the comparison to slavery was not just, pointing specifically to the lack of evidence about the alleged atrocities perpetrated in the indenture system.[51] In fact, he thought an

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[45] Ibid, p. 313.

[46] Ibid, p. 311.

[47] Ibid, p. 316.

[48] Archer's testimony was questioned by Osborne, who pointed out that he did not reside in Mauritius long enough to formulate an informed opinion, to which Archer replied that he had been in Mauritius for 16 days, but had lived in the neighbouring island of Bourbon for years. However, his testimony still remains problematic because it failed to make explicit how Mauritian laws worked in favour of the labourer.

[49] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 312.

[50] *Calcutta Courier*, July 11, 1838.

[51] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 312. According to reports in the *Englishman*, Osborne said he had not heard a single well-authenticated case of abuse, and questioned the accuracy of the kidnapping reports that appeared in the papers. *Englishman*, July 11, 1838.

enquiry was imperative before petitioning the Legislative Council to interfere with an Order in Council. Although divergent in their views of indenture and the definition of servitude, all attendees agreed to the resolution of instituting an enquiry.

When the resolutions taken at the Town Hall meeting were presented to the government in July 1838, it pointed out that indentured emigrants were rarely aware of the conditions of engagement, or their destination.[52] This extended Bishop Wilson and Rev. Charles' argument in the Town Hall meeting that the right of British citizens to choose their employment worked only with the caveat that he was aware of his rights and the terms of employment he enters into. The petition argued that the cases brought up in the meeting were not isolated instances of oppression remediable by increased regulations and vigilance.[53] The problem of oppression and mistreatment was systemic and thus the indenture system was 'radically bad' and bore elements of a 'new species of slavery'.[54]

The petitioners further pointed out that professedly benevolent intentions of the indenture trade did not prevent it from becoming an oppressive system—much as it did not for the slave trade.[55] In fact, they pointed to the irony of designating indentured labourers as 'free labourers' since the same term had previously been 'employed by these engaged in the exportation of the unhappy sons of Africa to other countries'.[56] Continuing their juxtaposition of slavery and indenture, the Town Hall petition apprehended that if the indenture trade continued, 'the Coast Ports of India will soon resemble the slavemarts of Africa and the Mauritius become a slave emporium for the world [...] and that the evils so long inflicted on the Negro race will be transferred to the inhabitants of British India.'[57] Their apprehensions about the trade drew from three main contentions—that the merchants and planters involved in the indenture trade were

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[52] 'Petition from James Young', 1838.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] The petition stated: 'Those fears [about the indenture system being a 'new system of slavery'] have been strengthened by the statements made in the Lords House of parliament by Lord Brougham from which it would appear that the slave trade which it has cost the British people twenty millions to suppress—commence with as professedly benevolent intentions as this trade.' Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

previously involved in the slave trade, that the trade was expanding rapidly from port to port to previously enslaved colonies, and that the men who employed labourers entertained 'inhumanizing views' about them.[58]

This theme also emerged in local periodicals. The *Friend of India,* for instance, argued that '[t]he tendency of the system at the Mauritius is to abuse; because helpless men of a servile class and colour are often committed to the charge of unscrupulous Europeans at an impassable distance from their native home.'[59] *The Englishman* also pointed to the problem of emigrating British Indian labourers to foreign plantation colonies, where there was no assurance that the contract would be maintained, and the British government held no power of regulating or implementing its emigration policies.[60] Articles in the *Bengal Hurkaru* pointed out that a system that depended on 'shipment of coolies, delivered to order' was likely to be abusive.[61] It further alleged that labourers were often recruited by false propaganda—where participation in the trade was advertised as a government order ('kompanie-ka-hukum') rather than a voluntary act.[62] As the *Friend of India* reported in August 1838, this was not a temporary, but 'a systematic and perpetual arrangement', whereby 'the free labourer of India is to replace the slave; and the Cooly Trade to be substituted for the slave trade'.[63] In fact, it considered the indenture trade 'a wanton, unnecessary, immitigable evil' that could not be removed by regulations alone.[64] Similarly, the periodical was also a space where common inhabitants of Calcutta could raise their concerns. A letter to the *Bengal Hurkaru* complained, 'A detention against a man's will, without legal authority, or

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[58] Ibid. The question of race and ethnographic stereotyping of the migrant labourer is discussed in the next chapter.

[59] *Friend of India*, October 20, 1842. Key news reports that drew a linkage between slavery and indenture include *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 7; July 9; December 21, 1838; and *Friend of India*, June 7, 1838.

[60] *Englishman*, March 30, 1842. In an earlier report, the *Englishman* lamented that in any foreign colony, 'The Indian Government has no means, and can have no means, of enforcing West India contracts, and cannot depend upon the colonial office for so doing.' *Englishman*, July 10, 1838.

[61] *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 20, 1838

[62] Ibid.

[63] *Friend of India*, August 9, 1838.

[64] *Friend of India*, January 14, 1838.

lawful cause, is false imprisonment […] Obtaining possession of a man's person, and sending him out of the country is kidnapping. […] Is it not slave trading?'[65]

Arguments based on commonalities between the slave-trade and the indenture system continued into the discussions at the Calcutta Committee of 1838-40. Official correspondence from the Fort William (Bengal) government reveals that the establishment of the Calcutta committee was a direct reaction to the growing criticism of the trade and the aforementioned petition. It thus retained some of the arguments and sentiments expressed in the meeting.[66] The committee report argued that there was a deliberate use of kidnapping and false imprisonment in the process of recruitment, and strongly condemned the use of 'misrepresentation and deceit' by labour recruiters.[67] Many labourers had, according to the committee's report, been persuaded to come to Calcutta to work as peons, gardeners or porters under the aegis of the Company and did not understand the contracts they signed. Despite the regulations of 1837, labourers were reportedly under the impression that they would be liable to penal consequences if they did not comply.

In fact, the report implies that fraudulence was central to the recruitment process—enhanced by the migrants' ignorance of the trade, and the provision that recruiters received a cut of the advance on wages offers to labourers.[68] This relates to two major anti-indenture contentions in Calcutta. Firstly, that fraudulence and false recruitment practices were a systemic problem, and government-mandated regulations and contracts were not enough to counteract them since they could easily be circumvented. Secondly, that if labourers from eastern India were aware that they had to cross the seas and reside abroad for a minimum of five years, very few would have

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[65] Letter to the Editor, *Bengal Hurkaru*, August 11, 1838.

[66] Letters to those selected to run the committee included copies of the Town Hall petition to suspend the trade and the merchants' counter-petition to minimise government interference. Letter from H.T Prinsep, Secretary to the Government, to T Dickens, Rev James Charles, W Dowson, Major Archer, Rosomoy Dutt and J.P. Grant, dated August 1, 1838. August 1, 1838. No 6. General (General) Department Proceedings, WBSA.

[67] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[68] On the practice of advancing of six months' wages to the labourers, the report maintained: '[t]his system of nominal allowances to the Coolie was a source of fraudulent and dishonest gain to all the subordinate agents engaged in the export; and it is certain that if advances were forbidden, the prop and mainstay of the Coolie trade, as heretofore carried on, would be at once removed.' Ibid.

readily agreed to engage in the indenture trade.[69] This insistence on problems inherent within the indenture trade harken back to the similarity-to-slavery trope. Pointing to fraudulence in recruitment was an effective way of arguing that indentured migrants were not in control of their own movement and employment, rather victims of a system that was not so different from the recently-condemned slave trade. Drawing upon these, the committee report argued that renewal of the indenture trade will not only 'weaken the moral influence of the British government throughout the world', but also 'destroy the effect of all future remonstrances and negotiations respecting the slave trade'.[70]

Further, the report argued that the situation was complicated by the employment of indentured labourers in foreign colonies, where British laws did not apply.[71] There were particular apprehensions about labourers exported from French Pondicherry or to French colonies like Réunion, since slavery still prevailed in the French Empire. Continuing their insistence on the inefficacy of regulations, the report maintained: 'no system, we are firmly convinced, would ever suffice completely to counteract the tricks and falsehoods that would be resorted to in India by the Duffadars, Arkotties and other persons engaged in similar avocations.'[72]

The similarity-to-slavery rhetoric was also espoused in local periodicals. The *Bengal Hurkaru*, for instance, stated that the export of indentured labourers to British Guiana was 'a procedure both cruel and unjust'.[73] It showed concern that planters 'who have been accustomed to look upon their slaves in no better light than the beasts of the field' cannot be expected to treat the indentured labourer any better.[74] The *Friend of India* argued that the indenture system was one of 'fraud and injustice'—employing teenage boys to do the work of full-grown men in plantations, and falsely advertising the advance payment of six months' wages that many labourers never received.[75] Some

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[69] This was tied to the idea of crossing the 'kala pani' or the 'black seas', which was associated with loss of caste for most Indian labourers. This was further tied to apprehensions about foreign land and about the empire as a whole.

[70] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee', p. 9.

[71] This related to a wider issue of regulating indentured migration to plantation colonies outside the limits of the British Empire, which is discussed in a later section.

[72] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[73] *Bengal Hurkaru*, December 21, 1838.

[74] Ibid.

[75] *Friend of India*, June 7, 1838.

pointed out that precautions taken at the port of embarkation did not prevent abuses in the plantation colonies. The *Englishman* wrote in 1838 that the Indian government had no control over plantation colonies like Mauritius and West Indies, and thus had no authority to enforce regulations there.[76] Moreover, many indentured migrants moved from British India to non-British colonies. The *Englishman* maintained that 'the issue of emigration to foreign ports is most serious […] because there is no guarantee that once the coolies leave the ports, […] they would be sent to those same ports. There is no way of tracing or regulating it.'[77]

While some scholars argue that nineteenth-century debates were centred on themes of servitude because of structural similarities, this is also because the situation in the plantation colonies provided conditions conducive to a smooth transition from one labour regime to another. Elsa Goveia argues that slavery not only affected the mode of production on the plantations, but also shaped the entire West Indian life—influencing urban and rural patterns, and creating a hierarchy and a distinct lifestyle for both planters and the labourers.[78] The slave labour-system thus laid the foundation upon which the system of indentured labour was erected, and became the natural reference point for the understanding and discussion of indenture. On the one hand, anti-indenture arguments in Britain and India used the system's resemblance to slavery to reject indentureship, and the British parliament took this into consideration when formulating and renewing its policy on indenture. On the other, merchants and proponents of indentured migration used freedom of choice to argue in favour of continued emigration.

## Exploitation, Mistreatment, and Deception

The argument that the indenture trade was similar in many respects to slavery and hence should be severely curtailed or completely abolished, drew upon a body of evidence that dealt with individual instances of mistreatment, exploitation or deception. Such individual examples of abuse in the indenture trade proved particularly popular in the press, and in the interviews and report of the Calcutta committee. In fact, as the three

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[76] *Englishman*, July 10, 1838.

[77] *Englishman*, March 30, 1842.

[78] Elsa Goveia, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

main accusations against the indenture trade, the questions asked by the Calcutta committee were prominently centred around themes of mistreatment, exploitation/deception and the upholding of contractual obligations. This section explores how such examples were discussed in Calcutta and used as arguments to regulate or discontinue the indenture trade. These quotidian abuses have been discussed here in three phases—during recruitment, during confinement and passage, and in plantations. As a port-city that was involved in the emigration of labourers, discussions at Calcutta were inordinately balanced towards experience of recruitment and passage rather than experience in plantations.

It was these instances of abuse that when collated, proved essential to substantiating the similarity-to-slavery argument. Proof of mistreatment, deception and exploitation was in keeping with the dual contention that indentureship was a continuation of slavery, and that regulations were inefficient for solving these abuses. Concerns about recruitment, passage and plantation life explored here appeared time and again in discussions over indenture. Repeated publicising of exploitative techniques applied within the indenture trade, and their public denial by merchants characterised the debate as it manifested in Calcutta. Taken together, these added cogency and legitimacy to the arguments against continued indenture trade.

Anti-indenture debates focused on recruitment because of two reasons. Firstly, proving that labourers did not know where or how far they were going, or that labourers were deceived into signing up for the trade, made it possible to argue that the indenture trade was based on treachery and not the labourer's agency. Secondly, even if not deliberately deceived, many of the labourers signed a contract they could not read. In fact, the very idea of work-contracts was new to migrants who were till date only used to temporary employment in factories, road-works and indigo plantations. Thus, many of those who criticised the indenture trade and argued for its discontinuance highlighted misrepresentative recruitment practices, including the role of intermediary recruiters, who were seen as an extension of the merchant. This helped develop a narrative where deception and misrepresentation were systemic.

Most interviewed by the Calcutta investigative committee—whether labourers, officials or ships' captains—testified to deception, misdirection and illegal confinement. Speaking of the regular and well-authenticated instances of kidnapping before the 1837 regulations, Captain Birch stated that 'kidnapping prevailed in a very great degree in the

lower provinces of Bengal'.[79] According to the evidence of Abdoolah Khan, an Indian doctor aboard ships, labourers on board were unaware that they would be separated from their families for five years since middlemen stated to them they would only be gone for two months.[80] Similarly, colonial official George Witchlow stated that most migrants did not know they were going to Mauritius, or even where Mauritius was. He mentioned especially the case of a woman kidnapped on her pilgrimage to the Jagannath Temple in Orissa, who was sent in disguise in men's clothing to Calcutta to be emigrated as an indentured labourer.[81]

Merchant and committee-member William Dowson testified to an experiment to shed light on recruitment practices. He had asked an associate Mr. Carapiet to engage labourers from Chhotanagpur but only after explaining to them 'the nature of the employment, and that [the labourer] was to leave his country for a period of five years'.[82] According to Dowson, this proved a fruitless mission, since Mr. Carapiet did not succeed in procuring a single labourer, even though other middlemen were engaging labourers in the immediate vicinity. Dowson used this to demonstrate that labourers were very often not informed about their destination.[83] Even outside the committee report, there are several references to false recruitments—Djoram, an early recruit to Mauritius, only found out on board that he was going outside India, while Karoo was enticed to Calcutta with the promise of a road-repairing job but was taken to the emigrants' depot instead.[84] Similarly, at the Town Hall meeting, Theodore Dickens pointed out that there were sometimes circulars that led local court-officers, police agents, and emigrant labourers to believe that the middlemen were working under

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[79] Testimony of Captain F.W. Birch, August 30, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[80] Testimony of Abdoolah Khan, September 10, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[81] Testimony of George Witchlow, December 11, 1838. On a similar vein, John Dyer, a ships' captain, stated that labourers 'appeared to have no conception as to where they were going, or the length of the voyage'. Testimony of John Dyer, October 25, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[82] Testimony of W.F. Dowson, November 27, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[83] Ibid.

[84] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee', Appendix, p. 58; Cited in Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), p. 20.

government sanction.[85] This made many labourers think that signing up was compulsory rather than voluntary.

A court-pleader by profession, Roger Dias's testimony was based on his many conversations with labourers who had appeared in front of the police or the 24-pergunnahs court before embarkation.[86] Dias pointed out that labourers he spoke to denied the presence of any contract or agreement, and complained that recruiters often informed them that 'the magistrate would force them to go if they withheld consent, and that all non-compliance would be punished'.[87] Thus, they had no idea of the nature of service. According to Dias, many labourers expected it to be 'service near Calcutta, and of a short duration, to enable them to return to their homes, as I believed servants are in the habit of doing biennially and triennially, and that they would be able to make their usual remittance to their families.'[88] This especially meant they were not aware they could lose caste by crossing the *kala pani*—the black water of the seas.[89] This was corroborated by Dowson's statement that the main complaints of labourers he met were that they had been misinformed about the length of their journey, and also that by consenting to unknowingly cross the seas, they would lose caste.[90]

Many alleged that middlemen recruiters misstated facts about the voyage, the nature, and place of work. For instance, Karoo, an indentured migrant, testified that he

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[85] Dickens mentioned that an agent sent 'circulars addressed to judges, collectors and magistrates, which are countersigned and registered by the police, calling upon the authorities to aid his minor agents in the task of marching these coolies through the various districts from which they come to Calcutta.' This led officers of zillah courts, local police agents, as well as emigrant labourers to believe that the middlemen were working under government sanction. 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 314.

[86] The 24-pergunnahs is an administrative unit in southern Bengal. Notably, Dias testified that he was fluent in 'Bengalee and Hindoostanee' and remarked that 'I have been much among the natives […] and have never required an interpreter to communicate with them'. Testimony of Roger Dias, October 29, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Testimony of Roger Dias, October 25 and 29, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[89] Travelling overseas in the nineteenth-century was considered to breach caste. Those who crossed the seas, or the *kala pani,* could be ousted from their caste, and only be reintegrated after offering penance. Although this was a system that technically only affected Hindu travellers, the social position of Muslims and their relationship to family could also be affected.

[90] Testimony of W.F. Dowson, November 27, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

was told about a job in Calcutta repairing roads for four rupees per month and free food. But on arrival at Calcutta, Karoo was told there was no employment on the roads, offering Mauritius as an alternative where they would receive good wages, food and clothing.[91] This highlights the fact that deception was not always explicit. Recruiters often made use of legal loopholes and misinformation instead of force, to ensure that labourers went willingly. Moreover, Rev. Thomas Boaz argued that labourers who came from the interior, such as hill-dwellers, 'had no conception of a sea voyage, or of where they were going.'[92] They were also much less likely to understand the contract since they did not speak the common tongue of Hindustanee.[93] James Smart, captain of a ship, testified that many labourers did not know they were on a sea voyage—they lowered their vessels [*lotas*] for water and were surprised when the water was salty.[94]

The focus on deception in recruitment also permeated into the news, and especially became something that people wrote to periodicals about. A letter to the *Bengal Hurkaru* asked the indenture trade to be abolished on grounds that 'human beings were hood-winked, cajoled, and induced to leave their homes, under false pretences'.[95] Well into 1843, periodicals such as the *Friend of India* and the *Bengal Spectator* continued to report instances where migrant labourers had been deceived into joining the indenture trade with incorrect or incomplete information.[96]

Kidnapping and illegal confinement had also become a visible problem of the indenture trade, as prominent inhabitants of Calcutta testified to their experience with confined labourers. For instance, merchant-entrepreneur Dwarkanath Tagore testified to the committee that the *syce* (horse-groomer) of his partner, Mr. William Prinsep, once complained of his brother being held by recruiters, who wanted to send him to

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[91] Testimony of Karoo, November 16, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'. Similar statements came from other labourers interviewed, such as Suboo and Manick. Juhoorun Ayah stated that she had been deceived into thinking Mauritius was only five days' journey by boat. 'Examination of Juhoorun', Exhibit no. 10, Appendix to 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[92] Testimony of Rev. Thomas Boaz, December 14, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Testimony of James Smart, October 15, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[95] Letter to the Editor, *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 7, 1838.

[96] See, for instance, *Bengal Spectator*, 1843, Vol. 2, No. 10, p. 106.

Mauritius.[97] He also spoke of a friend's servant whom some recruiters had tried to forcibly emigrate to Mauritius. Based on his experience with labourers in his factories and indigo plantations in eastern India, Tagore argued that labourers were unlikely to agree to emigrate overseas for a long time if they knew the exact terms and conditions, but were nonetheless influenceable.[98] He pointed out that not only were labourers unable to provide for their families at such distances, but it was also absurd that they would agree to five-year overseas contracts when in Indian factories, labourers consented to a maximum of eight months away from their family.[99] David Hare and Longueville Clarke's encounter with indentured migrants confined in a central Calcutta house has already been discussed in a previous chapter. Such testimonies, however, were not without resistance from government officials. The Superintendent of Police Captain Birch stated that the labourers alleged to have been confined in the central Calcutta house were in fact 'perfectly willing to proceed'.[100] Recruiting agent W.E. Browne argued that rather than being confined, the labourers were merely accommodated with all facilities, including two cooks and two Indian doctors, 'under the strict regulations of government'.[101]

The situation in passage was similarly a cause of concern. Harsh treatment of labourers on board, and the high incidence of disease and death were frequently referred to in the discussions at Calcutta. The *Bengal Hurkaru* frequently reported on labourers who had tried to abandon ship, or were mistreated during passage. In one instance, it reported that a 'coolie ship' was travelling with seventy people 'confined in cells five feet by eight' in size.[102] In fact, Thomas Boaz's account of labourers being confined below deck on their journey overseas became well-known in British public circles when he wrote a letter on this issue, extracts from which were read at a public meeting in

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[97] Testimony of Dwarkanath Tagore, November 9, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[98] Ibid.
[99] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 316; Testimony of Dwarkanath Tagore, November 9, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[100] Testimony of Captain F.W. Birch, October 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[101] Testimony of W.E. Browne, October 11, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[102] *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 6, 1838.

Exeter-Hall, London, and subsequently appeared in journals in Calcutta.[103] In passage, labourers occasionally jumped overboard presumably to escape conditions on board, and especially under the assumption that they could reach land.[104] This not only highlighted the miseries of passage, but also drew attention to similarities with slave-suicide during the middle passage. Abdoolah Khan portrayed labourers on board as crying and in despair, especially due to inadequate provisions of food, clean water and space.[105] Bibee Zuhoorun, the only female labourer who testified for the committee, maintained that she had received injuries and lost her caste by travelling across the seas. She implored 'even my mother will not drink water from my hand'.[106]

At the same time, from the perspective of indenture officials and those involved in emigrating labourers, the evidence of mistreatment and exploitation was contentious.[107] In fact, according to the committee report, official witnesses like Mr. Onslow of the Madras Civil Service, Rev. Garstin, Dr. Wise, Captain Mackenzie and Captain Rayne—'all unexceptionable witnesses in point of good faith, character and veracity'—testified to the labourers' 'general healthy appearance and their apparent contentment.'[108] Rev. Garstin, for instance, stated that labourers were 'treated remarkably well, with great humanity, and even tenderness' during passage.[109] Captain F.W. Birch maintained that there was no incentive for captains and shippers to evade regulations around passage since it would procure unwilling labourers: 'It is [in] the

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[103] Testimony of Thomas Boaz, December 14, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[104] Testimony of Captain James Rapson, August 22, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[105] Testimony of Abdoolah Khan, September 10 and September 13, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[106] Testimony of Bibee Zuhoorun, September 20, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[107] Notably, the trope of fraudulent recruitment practices has been contested by scholars like Crispin Bates and Marina Carter. They have argued that many labourers expressed a choice, however limited, to be employed overseas. This allowed them to build their own space within the colonial labour market, take initiative, save money to support their relatives, and adapt to their circumstances. See Crispin Bates, 'Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience', *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, 13 (2000); Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels: A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora' in Sukanya Banerjee, Aims McGuinness, and Steven C. McKay ed. *New Routes for Diaspora Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

[108] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[109] Testimony of Rev. Garstin, October 29, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

interest of the captain that the provisions which are found by the shippers should be ample, as otherwise the Coolies might come down upon him.'[110]

Some of those interviewed therefore countered claims of deception and mistreatment. In fact, in spite of testifying to the presence of fraudulence in recruitment, Dowson maintained that labourers were contented on the Mauritian estates: 'during my experience, extending over a period of four years, I have never seen or heard of a single case of cruelty, injustice or oppression being practised towards a Coolie […] they are treated throughout the island with great tenderness and humanity by their employers.'[111] The Chief Commissary of Police in Calcutta also stated in a letter to Captain Birch that no labourer was sent away without their consent and he was always within his rights to refuse.[112] As other interviews of returned migrants demonstrate, while some migrants faced abuses such as mistreatment, deceptive recruitment practices and corporal punishment, others were content with their employment situation (some even eager to renew their contracts).[113] The contradiction in testimonies for the Calcutta committee not only reflects this duality, but also reflects the vested interest and personal beliefs of those who testified.

The question of contract and its upholding was another theme that emerged in the committee's interviews. The indenture trade, as the name suggests, was characterised by the contract signed between the labourer and the employer. A typical contract signed between the legal representative of the planter and the labourer at the port of origin was overseen by a government-appointed official, and stated unambiguously that the labourer was voluntarily engaging in contract to be employed in

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[110] Testimony of F.W. Birch, August 23, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'. This line of argument is remarkably similar to contentions found in the planter petition from Mauritius. See chapter 5.

[111] Testimony of Dowson, December 13, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[112] Letter from John Finniss, Chief Commissary of Police, to Captain Birch, Superintendent of Police, Port Louis, dated May 23, 1838. Appendix no 16, January 26, 1838. No 783. 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[113] See, for instance, Letter from Chief Magistrate of Calcutta with statements of five coolies returned from the Mauritius. Dated May 26, 1841, No. 47 and 48, Home Department, Public Branch Consultations, NAI; Statement from 23 returned Indian labourers in Attachment/Enclosure to Letter from M. Patton, Chief magistrate, to G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated March 23 1842, No. 18. Home Department, Public Branch Consultations, April 6, 1842, No. 18-19, NAI.

the plantation for five years.[114] It covered issues like wages, food and medical provisions (including a list of the amount of food a labourer was entitled to daily), and the respective duties of the labourer and planter. In early contracts, the labourer was variously mentioned as a *khidmutgar* or a 'free labourer'.[115] The Bengali translation of the contract mentioned the same terms in rudimentary Bengali legalese, and often translated labourer as 'worker' or 'chakor' (servant).[116] Since the early migrations, and more prominently since the emigration act of 1837, contracts became compulsory and written with meticulous detail. Besides making sure the migration was legal, contracts were supposed to make recruiters and planters accountable. The indentured contract thus not only represented the legal basis of the arrangement, but was also testament to its post-slavery nature.

Even as steps were taken to make the indenture system separate from the slave regime in legal terms, there were continuities between the two labour regimes. This included similarities in the process of labour procurement, the lack of transparency during passage, and the oft-used provision for punishment or non-payment of wages in case of the labourer's refusal or inability to work.[117] These caveats made contracts central to the indentured labour regime. A lot of the discourse around indenture was therefore centred on whether certain aspects had been written into contract or laws. Many of those in Calcutta arguing against indenture stated that the mere presence of contract did not ensure freedom if the migrants did not know what it said or how it

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[114] See, for instance, Exhibit 6: 'Copies of Old and New Contracts', in Appendix to *Letter from Secretary to Government of India, to Committee on Exportation of Hill Coolies: Report of Committee and Evidence* (East India House: Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, February 12, 1841).

[115] The term *khidmutgar* is used to refer to domestic workers who wait on their masters, but can be used more broadly as domestic workers. Literally, it means the provider of any kind of service (*khidmat*). Henry Yule, *Hobson-Jobson: A glossary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, and of kindred terms, etymological, historical, geographical and discursive*. New edition ed. by William Crooke [originally published in 1886] (London: J. Murray, 1903), p. 486.

[116] See copies of Bengali contracts in General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA. Notably, the Bengali version of a labourer's permit for Mauritius in 1837 states the object of emigration as 'chakri korite', i.e. to work in a professional capacity. See Exhibit 6: 'Copies of Old and New Contracts', in appendix to *Letter from Secretary to Government of India, to Committee on Exportation of Hill Coolies: Report of Committee and Evidence* (East India House: Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, February 12, 1841).

[117] These are some of the allegations made by returned indentured migrants in the mid-nineteenth century.

worked. They argued that the tenets of contract were often circumvented to suit the needs of the employer—whether by transferring labourers to plantation estates they did not sign up for, or retaining part of their wages. During the Town Hall meeting, for instance, Theodore Dickens raised the issue of wages. He demonstrated that out of the pay of 5 rupees per month, one rupee was retained by the employer as insurance against the labourer becoming a burden to the colony after end of contract. Thus, the labourer was at the mercy of the master, who could discharge him at the last minute to avoid paying for his return passage.[118]

The treatment of labourers on plantations and how their contractual obligations played out was also a central question for the investigative committee. It formed the crux of most interviews with labourers, mainly because first-hand accounts of plantation life were difficult to obtain in Calcutta. Interview questions relating to plantation life revolved around overwork, the use of punishment, and adherence to tenets of the contract. Labourers testified that middlemen often misrepresented to them the jobs they were expected to perform.[119] Further, they were rarely allowed to go beyond the plantation without written permission.[120] Overwork was also a common complaint from labourers such as Ramdeen and Sheik Manick.[121] Sheik Manick testified that eleven men died of various illnesses during his stint at Mauritius, but they were actually overworked to death.[122] He further complained of lack of provisions on the plantations, as well as the lack of wage-payment.[123] Corporal punishment was often observed on the plantations—especially flogging and beating. In fact, Abdoolah Khan maintained that although a doctor on board ship, he himself had been hit by the ships' captain.[124] There were other penal clauses such as punishing unauthorized absence with imprisonment,

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[118] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 314.

[119] Testimony of Abdoolah Khan, September 10 and 13, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[120] Testimony of Bibee Zuhoorun, September 20, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[121] Testimony of Ramdeen, November 27, 1838; Testimony of Sheik Manick, October 1, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[122] Testimony of Sheik Manick, October 1, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'. He complained that this was especially true of French planters.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Testimony of Abdoolah Khan, September 10, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

and imposing the notorious 'double cut' in wages for sickness.[125] Speaking of the mistreatment on plantations, a Mauritian labourer Karoo maintained: 'I would not advise my countrymen to go to the Mauritius.'[126]

One theme that was not given due attention in the committee report was the question of sexual harassment on plantations and ships. Sexual harassment, assault, and expectation of sexual favour was a common occurrence in plantations. Bibee Zuhoorun complained that she was asked by the plantation owner Dr. Boileau to be his mistress, which she refused. When she lodged a complaint, the police did not cooperate. Instead, she was beaten and harassed further.[127] She further stated that the planter wanted sexual favours and would often beat her for not complying. She exclaimed: 'I would not return to Mauritius on any account; it is a country of slaves; I would not go there again; I would rather beg my bread here.'[128] However, the issue of sexual harassment and assault was not explored in the committee report. Rather, the only time the report talked about women was when they discussed the problem of labourers leaving behind their families, especially since many were sole earners for their families. For instance, John Dyer stated that labourers being forcibly separated from their family was a problem since elders and children depended on them for subsistence.[129]

This is a significant omission, not least because discussions of sexual violence and mistreatment of women were common in anti-slavery debates, as well as in later debates over Indian indenture. Henrice Altink, for instance, argues that the horrors of slavery were often exposed by abolitionists and anti-slavery activists through the treatment of slave women.[130] She writes, 'Supporters of both gradual and immediate abolition focussed in their writings and speeches on the harm done to the enslaved female body […] This was a most effective means to arouse audiences because this

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[125] Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Sirdars as Intermediaries in Nineteenth-Century Indian Ocean Indentured Labour Migration', *Modern Asian Studies*, 51:2 (2017), p. 467.

[126] Testimony of Karoo, November 16, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[127] Testimony of Bibee Zuhoorun, September 20, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'. See also 'Examination of Juhoorun', Exhibit no. 10, Appendix to the 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Testimony of John Dyer, October 25, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[130] Henrice Altink, *Representations of Slave Women in Discourses on Slavery and Abolition, 1780–1838* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

treatment was diametrically opposed to the gender order of the metropolitan society, which assumed that women were the gentler sex in need of male protection.'[131]

The question of female chastity and aspersions to it also became central to criticism of the indenture trade later in the century—especially in the debates over indenture trade to Assam, and the twentieth-century discussions on indenture spearheaded by Indian nationalists. Women in plantations served the dual purpose of wife and labourer, and within the gendered framework of the indenture trade, exploitation of female migrants became a common instrument of exposing the evils of indenture, especially directed towards instigating response from the public. Casual reference to sexual abuse on ships, depots and plantations was used to highlight an image of decadence and lawlessness.[132] This worked in the wider historical context of social reforms focused on Indian women—the Age of Consent debates of the 1890s, the controversy around the Native Marriage Act (1872), and the passing of the Prohibition of Female Infanticide Act (1872).[133] The image of helpless female labourers was used in the Assam debates and later by nationalists to demonstrate how women were doubly exploited under the colonial/indenture system on the one hand, and male oppression on the other. This added to the wider portrayal of the trade as dangerous, exploitative and immoral.

Although a potent point of criticism against the indenture trade, the women's question was not included in the Calcutta committee report, or discussed in the mid-nineteenth century because the ideal indentured labourer was unequivocally imagined as

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[131] Ibid, p. 2.

[132] See, for instance, reports on Assam plantations in Kanailal Chattopadhyay, ed., *Dwarkanath Ganguli's Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta: Jijnasa, 1959) (originally published as separate articles in the English periodical *Bengalee* in 1886-87); *Justice Murdered in India: The Papers of the Webb Case* (Calcutta: Sa 1884). Reprinted in: Kanailal Chattopadhyay, ed., *Dwarakanath Ganguli's Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta: Jijnasa, 1959). See also novels and travel narratives written at the time that highlight the mistreatment of women in Assam plantations, such as *Coolie Kahini: Sketches from Cooly Life* (Calcutta: Victoria Press, 1888); Ramkumar Vidyaratna, *Udasin Satyasrabar Assam Bhraman* [The Indifferent Truth-Seeker's Travels in Assam] (Calcutta, 1879).

[133] Prominent works on these social reforms include Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, ed., *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

male. Although there was an increasing number of women participating in the trade, their presence was seen as secondary to the men and their particular problems, mainly sexual assault and violence in the hands of planters, were ignored in legislation.[134]

## Conclusion

Calcutta enjoyed a formidable position within the imperial schema. Protests at Calcutta were instrumental in the move for the suspension of the indenture trade in 1839 and the establishment of investigative committees across the indenture networks. The Calcutta investigative committee, on the one hand, offered an opportunity for non-official inhabitants of Calcutta to investigate the abuses alleged to exist in the indenture trade and offer suggestions to the metropolitan government. On the other, it created a baseline for understanding the indenture trade by formulating questions that targeted the main accusations against the trade. As accusations of abuse piled up against the indenture trade, and especially as the issue gained ground among the British and Indian public, interviews of returned migrants by indenture officials, police, magistrates and port-officials emerged as a common practice.[135] This centrality of Calcutta within global indenture networks is highlighted by the impact of its discourses on metropolitan law-making and print media, the responsiveness of the metropole to debates within the city spaces, and the contribution of these debates to trans-imperial notions of servitude. This was reflected especially in the interviews conducted by the Calcutta investigative committee, where shippers and Mauritius officials were asked for suggestions for

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[134] Early conversations between Gladstone, planters and parliamentarians demonstrate that in the 1830s-40s, female migrants were often recruited to do lighter work, or included to provide a sense to family to the male migrants. They were also paid lower wages at times.

[135] See, for instance, Letter from Chief Magistrate of Calcutta with statements of five coolies returned from the Mauritius. Dated May 26, 1841, No. 48, Home Department, Public Branch Consultations, NAI; Statement from 23 returned Indian labourers in Attachment/Enclosure to Letter from M. Patton, Chief magistrate, to G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated March 23 1842, No. 18. Home Department, Public Branch Consultations, April 6, 1842, No. 18-19, NAI; Letter from McFarlan, Chief Magistrate of Calcutta, to G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government of India. Dated May 4, 1841. Calcutta. May 26 ,1841, No. 47, Home Department, Public Branch, NAI; Letter from McFarlan, Chief Magistrate of Calcutta, to G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government of India, dated April 20, 1841, in *Examination of [Six] Coolies Returned from Mauritius per Gilbert Munro* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1841), IOR/V/27/820/23.

improving the trade.[136] These comments were incorporated into their suggestions to the metropolitan government for future law-making, demonstrating a more collaborative empire in operation.

The question of servitude had undergone a radical transformation through the Abolition and indenture debates. The post-slavery moment was determined by a new yardstick of morality that all subsequent labour regimes had to adhere to. Consequently, the anti-indenture debates in Calcutta thus came to highlight mistreatment and deception to argue against the indenture trade—constantly comparing it against the slave labour regime. This constant juxtaposition of the two labour regimes pervaded the discussion around indenture and was central to arguments for its discontinuance. As this chapter demonstrates, in this immediately post-slavery environment, the indenture trade came to be judged by its adherence or lack of adherence to contracts, and the perceived dichotomy between 'free' and 'unfree' labour practices. Ultimately, the debates at Calcutta and their adherence to the post-slavery understanding of migrant and plantation labour led to post-slavery anxieties being written into labour laws.

[136] James Smart, a Master Pilot for the East India Company, for instance, suggested that there should be native speakers on board ships, provisions for close survey of the ships before it left Indian ports, and a consistent system of mustering the labourers and cleaning and fumigating decks. John Dyer, another Master Pilot, made suggestions about provisions of water, medicine, appropriate ventilation and proper clothing on deck. Testimony of James Smart, Master HC Marine, October 17, 1838; Testimony of John Dyer, October 25, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

# Chapter 4:
# Race, Citizenship, and the Ideal Labourer

This chapter continues the analysis of the anti-indenture debates in Calcutta to explore how it engaged with themes like race, citizenship, labour rights and imperial responsibility. Besides affecting global sugar trade and the lives of thousands of migrants, the movement of indentured Indians created a racialised understanding of Indian labour. The very trope that considered Indian indentured migrants as primitive, ignorant and undifferentiated in terms of race and religion, also celebrated them as ideal labourers. Moreover, the debates at Calcutta contributed to the understanding of imperial citizenship. Petitioners from Calcutta not only defined migrant labourers as mobile citizens of the British Empire, but in the process of debating the indenture trade, themselves emerged as vocal citizens of the empire. Unlike the post-slavery understanding of servitude and the obsession with contracts that the previous chapter explores, these features of the indenture debates at Calcutta were unique to the Indian context. The consideration of Indian indentured labourers as primitive and ignorant, and the positing of both the labourers and the Indians who purported to speak for them as citizens of the empire, became important themes as voices from Calcutta became active in deciding the terms of the indenture trade. Thus, this chapter engages closely with how notions of race, citizenship and labour rights emerged in the indenture debates at Calcutta, particularly among arguments against indenture.

## 'More Allied to Monkeys than to Men': Race, Ethnography and the 'Coolie'

Racial, ethnographic and occupational assumptions about the migrant labourers were a persistent trope within the indenture debates at Calcutta. This section discusses these assumptions, and analyses the perceived connection between race, intelligence and labouring capabilities. In doing so, it discusses how the image of the ideal labourer was constructed through the debates at Calcutta, and how these constructions had a bearing on the understanding of servitude, mobility and labour rights.

South Asian equivalents of race have been an important focus of attention among historians, sociologists and anthropologists. Peter Robb's 1995 edited collection recognised the difficulty of using race as an unit of analysis in studies of South Asia, and developed the working definition of race as an 'essentialising of groups of people

which held them to display inherent, heritable, persistent or predictive characteristics, and which thus had biological or quasi-biological basis'.[1] In colonial India, this was variously related to prevailing notions of taxonomy, caste, ethnography, climate, regionalism and physical characteristics. Susan Bayly argues that the works of 'scholar-officials' with Indian careers alluded to ethnological, evolutionary and racial hierarchies in South Asia, and a hierarchical notion of 'civilisation'.[2] She wrote, 'The most significant approach to India as an ethnographic problem in the colonial period was the theme of race, with its accompanying […] notions of evolutionary historic race conquests, its belief that civilisation was the unique achievement of ethnologically 'advanced' races, and its insistence on eternal deep-seated antipathies between so-called higher peoples and those of inferior or debased and degenerate 'blood'.'[3]

The concept of race had changed dramatically in the late-eighteenth century from linguistically and environmentally defined, to mid-nineteenth century 'scientific' and evolutionary conceptions of race.[4] The emergence of scientific racism, and the defining of race according to evolutionary, pre-determined terms affected the conceptualisation of the migrant labourer. It impacted how colonial officials, merchants, and those arguing against indenture spoke about labourers. This manifested in three distinct ways. Firstly, the rhetoric that emerged from the indenture debates in Calcutta equated position in social hierarchy with intelligence, employability and labouring capacity. Indian 'coolies', it was argued, were the perfect post-slavery labourers because they were ignorant, docile, hard-working, and easily convinced to travel overseas. Secondly, it created a false equivalence between climate and racial characteristics. Finally, this discourse—in conjunction with official and planter attitudes to migrant

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[1] Peter Robb, 'Introduction: South Asia and the Concept of Race', in *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, ed. by Peter Robb (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 1.

[2] Susan Bayly, 'Caste and 'Race' in the Colonial Ethnography of India', in *The Concept of Race*, p. 167.

[3] Ibid, p. 168. As Bayly goes on to argue, this drew from Victorian understanding of race, which used 'rigorous 'scientific' methodology to define and rank all humankind […] according to criteria which equated civilisation with a physiologically-determined bent towards the creation of 'advanced', libertarian, morally-progressive political institutions.' Ibid, p. 172. At the same time, Victorian ethnographic studies that considered caste and other socio-religious distinctions in terms of race were based at least partially on fears of miscegenation. This did not apply to the conceptualisation of the 'coolie' in and of itself, but nevertheless coloured it.

[4] Ibid, p. 168.

labourers—flattened social and cultural identities of migrant labourers into terms that defined the person only in relation to their utility in the indenture trade.

Colonial understanding of race in South Asia was closely linked to ideas of primitivism, which in turn influenced how the migrant labourer was described in indenture debates. Uday Chandra argues that primitivism was 'an imperial ideology of rule that infantilized so-called savage or tribal peoples and subjected them to a protectionist yet developmentalist regime'.[5] He demonstrates that it arose from encounters with landscapes that clashed with the Company state's vision of a civilised and ordered agrarian society, especially at 'frontier zones' such as the Chhotanagpur region.[6] This reading of primitivism facilitated the official segregation of 'tribes' as primitive subjects of the Raj, commonly identified with hills and forests. The centrality of this ideology in administration of the Company state and delineation of the primitive migrants by colonial scholars added to the notion of protection and improvement of the migrant. As Kaushik Ghosh points out, the term *dhangar* 'embodied a language of primitivism', as aboriginality emerged as a new language classifying Indians as labour for plantation work'.[7] This manifested in the town hall meeting, the resultant petition and the committee report—generally in the form of racialised and essentialised idea of the labourer, assumption of characteristics such as physical fitness and ignorance, and the persistent trope of speaking on their behalf.[8]

Asserting the ignorance of the labourers who migrated, and an essentialised idea of all migrant labourers as 'hill coolies' from the fringes of caste society were in fact central tropes in the Town Hall meeting. For instance, Bishop Wilson urged that although he would not normally support petitions that limit freedom of action, that

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[5] Uday Chandra, 'Liberalism and Its Other: The Politics of Primitivism in Colonial and Postcolonial Indian Law', *Law & Society Review*, 47:1 (2013), 135-168.

[6] Ibid, p. 142.

[7] Kaushik Ghosh, 'A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India', in *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed by Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 32.

[8] Such notions of primitivism, ethnographic hierarchies and the relationship between physical attributes and behaviour as discussed here in relation to the indentured labourer also had parallels in the treatment and understanding of global convicts and incarcerated communities. For the latter, see Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2004).

principle did not apply here because the labourers were 'so ignorant as not to be aware where they were going or what [the indentured contracts] were about'.[9] Rev. Charles, who seconded the Bishop's motion, rested his entire argument on the contention that the labourers were neither capable of understanding the contract, nor of defending their rights in terms of that contract.[10] According to reports in the *Calcutta Courier*, he found it necessary to 'restrain the helpless and ignorant Coolies from entering into engagements which they could not understand, and from binding themselves down by contract, to the evils and privations which awaited them in the lands of their labour.'[11] In fact, he compared the situation to that of child-labourers in England and legislation around it—a comparison that characterised indentured labourers as child-like, 'unable to help themselves, and requiring the protection and interference of government'.[12]

In a statement that betrayed his belief about the inferiority of indentured migrants, Rev. Charles characterised indentured migrants as 'more allied to monkeys than to men; their only care consisted in eating and drinking; these wants being satisfied, they thought of nothing else, and would never reflect on the probable consequence of what might befall them hereafter'.[13] This racialised and paternalistic characterisation sat well with the audience, and was applauded and repeated at several intervals. Notably, barrister Longueville Clarke stated later in the meeting: 'The coolie was represented, as but little removed from the monkey, so wild, so deplorably ignorant, as to be utterly helpless; what then would become of him in a foreign and distant land, where his language was unknown, and his wants and habits were strange?'[14] This rhetoric was also visible in periodicals. The *Friend of India*, for instance, wrote that the 'coolies' were 'the most simple, ignorant and degraded of the population of Bengal', and that European planters took advantage of their 'ignorance and simplicity, to inveigle

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[9] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLIV, 1838, p. 313.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Quoted in *Calcutta Courier*, July 11, 1838.
[12] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 311.
[13] Ibid, p. 311.
[14] Ibid, p. 315.

him into a distant servitude'.[15] Other reports referred to the indentured migrant as simple, ignorant, 'half civilized' and 'too abject to vindicate their own rights'.[16]

The understanding of the indentured labourer as ignorant, helpless, unfit, and almost child-like provided space for the Calcutta elite to speak for and make decisions on their behalf. It further strengthened the contention that regulations were not sufficient to control abuses of the trade. Rev. Charles, for instance, argued that even though the police authorities who examined the labourers prior to embarkation were competent enough to explain the terms of contract, the labourers were incapable of understanding them.[17] Highlighting the clause that required the labourer to appear before a colonial official who explained the terms of contract to him in his mother tongue, Rev. Charles pointed out the impossibility of finding translators in Calcutta who spoke the language of the 'dhangurs', and also the impossibility of the superintendent having explained to around 6,000 coolies the terms of the contract to their perfect comprehension.[18] The second resolution of the Town Hall meeting highlighted this by stating that 'the hill coolies and other natives of India, who are induced to emigrate, do not understand, and are not capable of understanding the terms of the contract into which they are said to enter'.[19] This point was reiterated in the committee report, which stated that 'in the cases of the Hill Coolies especially […] the parties were *really incapable* of understanding the nature of the contracts they were said to have entered into, even when an opportunity of explanation had been afforded apparently sufficient for the purpose.'[20] This emphasis on the ignorance of the so-called 'hill coolies' was directly related to an essentialised view of the primitive and ignorant migrant from the hinterland. This was in line with the colonial state's understanding of primitivism, and its push for subjugation and improvement of those identified as primitive.

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[15] *Friend of India*, May 24, 1838; August 9, 1838.

[16] *Friend of India*, August 30, 1838; May 24, 1838.

[17] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 311.

[18] Ibid, p. 313. This point was contested, especially as Mr. Osborne pointed out that not all coolies were *dhangars*. Many were from Bengal and other provinces, whose language the police officers spoke and understood. Such voices were few and far between, as most contemporaneous discussion revolved around an essentialised and definite idea of the 'coolie' as hill-men outside caste society, incapable of understanding terms of the trade.

[19] Ibid, p. 314.

[20] Ibid. Emphasis added.

Assumptions of ignorance also manifested in the interviews conducted by the Calcutta investigative committee. Colonial officials and ship's captains held indentured labourers to be unintelligent and ignorant. J.J. McCann pointed out, for instance, that people engaged in Calcutta as domestic servants and mechanics were 'certainly much more intelligent than those called Coolies'.[21] Captain Mackenzie stated that from his limited interaction with the labourers, it seemed they held 'very vague notions of the nature of their engagement' and were at times 'totally ignorant of it'.[22] This seemed to be the consensus of most respondents. Ship's captain John Dyer also stated that the migrants had 'no conception as to where they were going, or the length of their voyage'.[23] Roger Dias stated that it was impossible for labourers to comprehend the terms of their engagement, since those he saw in court 'were generally illiterate and extremely ignorant'.[24] Magistrate Patton concurred that labourers did not understand the terms of the contract, saying, 'I doubt whether the majority even understood a word of what was said at the police […] neither I, nor any man in my court, could make them understand one word'.[25]

At the same time, the characterisation of labourers as ignorant prompted many to testify that indentured labourers were easily duped into migrating. Rev. Boaz asserted that their close family bond made it unlikely that labourers would leave for Mauritius had they perfectly understood the nature of the contract. He testified: 'It is contrary to the habits of the people of India to leave their own country; and this is more particularly the case with the Hill Coolies.'[26] Based on his experience with labourers employed in his indigo factories, Dwarkanath Tagore concurred that they were difficult to retain in factory employment at the end of the manufacturing season.[27] He testified that the 'lower class of natives' who formed the bulk of the labour pool, could easily be

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[21] Testimony of J.J. McCann, September 6, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[22] Testimony of Alexander Mackenzie, September 13, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[23] Testimony of John Dyer, October 25, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[24] Testimony of Roger Dias, October 25, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[25] Testimony of Magistrate Patton, October 15, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[26] Testimony of Rev. Thomas Boaz, December 14, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.
[27] Testimony of Dwarkanath Tagore, November 9, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

influenced to leave their homes and join the trade, 'but if they perfectly understood that they would be required to go [on] a voyage of a month or six weeks, it would be difficult to get their consent.'[28] They were more likely to comply if they believed they were to be employed in European households ['for whom they have a great respect'] and that they would soon return.[29] This implied that it was easy to recruit labourers through misrepresentation.

The view of the indentured migrant as ignorant, unintelligent and in need of spokesmen was closely tied to contemporary perceptions of migrant labouring population. The terms 'hill coolie' and 'dhangar' were used interchangeably by the interviewers and interviewees to denote hill communities from the Bengal Presidency, and the term 'coolie' was used to denote indentured migrants exclusively.[30] The absence of preliminary definitions of either term, or a delineation of their occupational or social characteristics, was tied to unsaid stereotypes of the labouring population that were well-known and acknowledged in public discourse. These assumptions pervaded the indenture debates at Calcutta, and can be traced to varying ideas about local labour. In an article on missionaries in Bengal, Sangeeta Dasgupta mentions German missionaries who wrote about 'Kols' and 'dhangurs' serving in Calcutta as menial workers.[31] They were employed to sweep streets, clean canals and perform similar public works.[32] They are described in these accounts as 'happy and light-hearted', but also dark-skinned, wild and semi-nude.[33] According to Dasgupta, both *Kol* and *dhangar* were terms used by

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] As mentioned in the introduction, the term 'coolie' has been used to denote various forms of physical labourers, but most writings on the indenture trade used the term to refer specifically to the indentured migrant. This practice continued throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, until a law was passed in 1950 to replace the term coolie with *mazdoor* to signify Indian labourers. 'Replacement of the term coolie by the word "mazdoor" in official correspondence', Ministry of Labour: Resolution. New Delhi, 27 May 1950. No. L.W.I.56(6)/50, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Home Department, Public Branch, NAI.

[31] Sangeeta Dasgupta, ''Heathen Aboriginals', 'Christian Tribes', and 'Animistic Races': Missionary Narratives on the Oraons of Chhotanagpur in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 50:2 (2016), pp. 446-47.

[32] The *Calcutta Courier*, for instance, stated that 'people who clean the drains in Calcutta, and remove all the filth of the town are called Danghurs, and that they are the very class of persons employed in these necessary labours'. *Calcutta Courier*, July 9, 1838.

[33] Dasgupta, 'Heathen Aboriginals'.

upper-caste Bengalis, whose vocabulary the missionaries had borrowed to characterise the men.[34] It is not unfair to assume that similar processes led to the use of these terms in official or individual correspondence, and later ethnographic accounts.

The terms 'Hill Coolie' and 'Dhangur' had been used to denote migrant labourers from the very beginning of the trade, including the early indenture trade of 1835.[35] Moreover, the use of such terms, the comparison of *dhangurs* to monkeys, and their characterisation as illiterate and ignorant communities can be traced back to the correspondence between John Gladstone and Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. in 1836-37.[36] In their reply to John Gladstone's search for labourers to replace slaves in his plantations, Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. suggested those from eastern India. They argued, 'the tribe that is found to suit best in the Mauritius is from the hills to the north of Calcutta, and the men of which are all well-limbed and active'.[37] Moreover, they were considered 'docile and easily manageable', with 'no local ties, nor any objection to leave their country'.[38] The letter stated: '[The men] have hardly any ideas beyond those to supply the wants of nature. [The] Dhangurs, are always spoken of as more akin to the monkey than the man. They have no religion, no education, and in their present state no

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Letters from the Chief Magistrate of Calcutta frequently referred to 'Dhangur labourers' or 'Coolies of the Danghur Caste', who have engaged to serve in Mauritian sugar plantations. See Letter from Chief Magistrate to Officiating Secretary to Government, General Department, dated May 13, 1835; Letter from D. McFarlan, Chief Magistrate, to G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government, General Department, dated July 23, 1835; Letter from G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government, to G.F. Dick, Chief Secretary to the Government of Mauritius, dated July 29, 1835. Fort William, July 29, 1835, No 453. General Department (General) Proceedings, WBSA.

[36] Letters between John Gladstone and Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co., in 'Correspondence on the taking of coolies to British Guiana, including letters from Andrew Colville, George C. Arbuthnot and Sir George Grey, and copy letters to the Duke of Wellington', 1838, GG/358, Glynne-Gladstone MSS Collections. Gladstone's Library, Hawarden (Wales). Henceforth, this collection at Hawarden is referred to as GG-MSS.

[37] Letter from Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. to Gladstone, dated June 6, 1836. Enclosure No.1 to Gladstone's letters to Lord Glenelg dated February 28, 1838. In *Copies of All Orders in Council, or Colonial Ordinances, for the better regulations and enforcement of the relative duties of Masters and Employers, and articled servants, tradesmen and labourers, in the colonies of British Guiana and Mauritius and of correspondence relating thereof*, House of Commons Papers 1838, No. 232 (Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 2. March 1838). Henceforth, '*Masters and Employers*'.

[38] Ibid.

wants beyond eating, drinking and sleeping; and to procure […] labour.'[39] This racial characterisation of migrant labourers from eastern Indian villages helped imagine them as ideal post-slavery labourers, who could be easily convinced to migrate because of their alleged ignorance.

The discussions in the meeting, petition and committee report were not exempt from similar essentialisation and racialisation. Although scholars today have used statistical analysis of ships' logs and official documentation from the nineteenth century to point to the fallacy of this contention, the majoritarian view at the time remained that those who were migrating were overwhelmingly 'hill coolies' and *dhangars*. Abdoolah Khan, designated as 'native doctor' on board ship, testified that the migrant labour pool was a mixture of 'dhangars' and others from Chhota Nagpur and the Bengal Presidency.[40] W.E. Browne, on the other hand, maintained that the majority of labourers on board his ship were 'hill coolies'.[41] Not only was the category of the 'hill coolie' or 'dhangar' essentialised and undefined, but the interviewers and interviewees seemed to also share an idea of the 'hill coolie'. Certain social, cultural and even racial/ethnographic characteristics of the 'hill coolie' were mutually agreeable to both parties without further explanation or clarification.[42] This was also true of more official spaces, where the indentured migrant was confidently identified as the primitive 'hill coolie', who subsisted 'upon the products of the chase, reptiles, and insects; in short […] all sorts of disgusting food'.[43]

The terms were generally accompanied by assumptions about their labouring capabilities and socio-economic position. This depended on drawing a causal link between racial/ethnographic characteristics and potential for labour.[44] This was often

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Testimony of Abdoolah Khan, September 13, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[41] Testimony of W.E. Browne, October 11, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[42] Notably, the term 'hill coolie' or *dhangar* was not explained in the proceedings of the Calcutta committee because of its Indian audience, but their ethnographic characteristics were explained by Arbuthnot in his letter to Gladstone.

[43] *Correspondence Relative to the Introduction of Indian Labourers into the Mauritius* (London, 1842), p. 9. Quoted in Tirthankar Roy, 'Sardars, Jobbers, Kanganies', p. 979.

[44] For other works on the relationship between physical attributes and labouring capacity in the colonial context, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of*

expressed through comparison with African labourers. For instance, Captain Rayne testified that an able-bodied male *dhangar* was equal to an enslaved labourer for field labour, but not for work on board ship or on the wharf since 'they have not the bodily strength of the African for labour, requiring a great exertion of muscle, but they have perhaps more endurance, and can work for a longer time without fatigue.'[45] Dwarkanath Tagore, in his capacity as proprietor of indigo factories employing migrant labourers, compared them to workers from Bengal. He complained, '[t]he natives of Bengal are naturally an idle set of people […]. Hence they are not good workmen, and the Dhangas or Hill Coolies, being much better workmen, are preferred by indigo planter, and others who employ many labourers.'[46]

At the same time, some officials were of the opinion that physical abilities aside, the 'mild temper [temperament] and cautious habits of the Hindoo, with the increased energy which the fine climate produces, renders him a much superior character to the African negro.'[47] Captain Rayne stated that the 'Calcutta Coolies were more docile and worked harder than any other labourers.'[48] The report of the Mauritius investigative committee stated as well, that the 'Hill Cooley [sic.]' was 'mild and inoffensive', which was considered a desirable trait.[49]

The terms 'hill coolie' and 'dhangur/dhangar' were attributed varying characteristics in later ethnographic works. The *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* saw one of the only discussions on the *dhangar* in the mid-nineteenth century. It stated, 'The Dhangur Kholes, who inhabit Chota Nagpur and its vicinity, are described by all who have spoken of them as a lazy, degraded, and mean-spirited race. They are utterly

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*the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

[45] Testimony of Captain Rayne, October 30, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[46] Testimony of Dwarkanath Tagore, November 9, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[47] Letter from Thomas Wise to Theodore Dickens, dated September 19, 1838. Appendix to 'Report of the Calcutta Committee', No. 8.

[48] Testimony of Captain Rayne, October 30, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[49] Letter from the Committee of Inquiry on Indian Labourers to Captain G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, Port Louis, dated March 16, 1839. In 'Indian Labourers: Indian Enquiry of Flacq, Mauritius'. *Papers regarding the employment of Indian indentured labourers overseas, Vol. 10: Report on the condition of the labourers on 22 estates in the Flacq District, Mauritius (includes answers to questionnaires, by both employers and labourers)*, dated February 1839-March 1839. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1847, No. 77650, IOR/F/4/1847/77650.

untinctured with Hinduism, and speak a peculiar dialect.'[50] The entry on coolies in *Hobson-Jobson*, a historical dictionary of Anglo-Indian terms, demonstrates its myriad connotations.[51] According to *Hobson-Jobson*, the term has been in use since the 1550s, and could refer to a hired labourer, burden-carrier or an indentured migrant. In northern India, it was applied to lower-class unskilled labourers from the hills, while in South India it denoted hired wage labourers (derived from the term *kuli*, meaning wages).[52] For Walter Hamilton, the term originated from *Koli*, a community in western India 'who have long performed such office [as menial labourers], and whose savagery, filth, and general degradation attracted much attention in former times'.[53] For instance, the term was used to refer to labourers who built the new Fort William in Calcutta in 1757-75.[54] Hugh Tinker argues that although derived from words such as Koli, 'by the end of the eighteenth century, the term had ceased to have any connection with any group and race [and] was used to describe those at the lowest level of the industrial labour market.'[55]

Some of these observations in ethnographic works referred to peculiar physical features. George Campbell mentioned *dhangar* labourers in Calcutta as distinguishable from 'the flat broad-nosed features of the Santals' by their 'peculiar little 'pique' 'retrousse' sort of nose'.[56] Other ethnographic works considered them in terms of occupational features and labouring potential. *Hobson-Jobson* states that *Dhangar* was 'the name by which members of various tribes of Chutia [sic.] Nagpur, but especially

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[50] *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, Vol. 8 (1832), pp. 264-65.

[51] Henry Yule, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive* (London: J. Murray, 1903 [1886]), pp. 249-51.

[52] Ibid. There have been some other theories about their origins. R.V. Russell argued that *dhangar* in the central provinces referred to shepherding communities. R.V. Russell, *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (London: Macmillam and Co. Limited, 1916), pp. 18, 41. William Crooke, on the other hand, considered *dhangars* 'a Dravidian tribe found in eastern district of the north-western provinces' such as Gorakhpur and Mirzapur, and Oraons as 'the typical Dhangar labourers of Chota Nagpur'. William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-western Provinces and Oudh* Vol. II (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1906), pp. 267-70.

[53] Walter Hamilton, *Description of Hindostan and the Adjacent Countries*, Vol. I (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1820), p. 609.

[54] Cited in Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, 'The New Fort William and the Dockyard: Constructing Company's Calcutta in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Studies in History*, 32:2 (2016), 231-256.

[55] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*, pp. 41-42.

[56] George Campbell, *The Ethnology of India* (Calcutta: C.B. Lewis, 1866), p. 29.

the Oraons, are generally known when they go out to distant provinces to seek employment as labourers'.[57] Edward Dalton considered *kols* and *dhangars* as aborigines distinct from population in the plains, and as 'industrious and energetic'.[58] Matthew Sherring described *dhangars* as 'an industrious and active people', 'able-bodied and well-conducted', 'chiefly employed in felling the jungle'.[59] In an account from the late-nineteenth century, H.H. Risley related the term to *dhan* or paddy. He stated, '[t]he *dhangar* system of payment is so general in Chota Nagpur that the term is virtually synonymous with labourer, and these nomadic labourers describe themselves, and are known throughout Bengal, as 'Dhangars'.[60]

This undifferentiated and imprecise articulation of the migrant labour is pertinent because it relates to ideas of colonial philanthropy and need for spokesmanship. Andrea Major explores how racial, imperial, and commercial discourses contributed to the portrayal of the 'hill coolie' as the quintessential migrant labourer in the Australian indenture scheme.[61] Major argues that the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society's (BFASS) rationale for excluding Indian migrants from the global market was based on an essentialist understanding of 'inherent racial characteristics of the Indian labourer, his lack of information about the world, and his supposed place within a static, timeless, and unchanging village India'.[62] It is reasonable to assume that this applied to early discourses at Calcutta as well. The labourers'

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[57] Yule, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 296.

[58] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872). See also Dalton, 'The Kols of Chota Nagpore', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XXXV:2, (1866), Supplementary Number, 153-200.

[59] Matthew Atmore Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1872), p. 403.

[60] H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, Vol. I (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1892), p. 219.

[61] Andrea Major, ''Hill Coolies': Indian Indentured Labour and the Colonial Imagination, 1836–38', *South Asian Studies*, 33:1 (2017), 23-36.

[62] Ibid. Abolitionist orator George Thompson is quoted as saying in an East India House Debate from 1842: 'Look at his ignorance; he was ignorant of the character of those by whom he was first engaged; he was ignorant of the geography, and knew not the position nor the relation of the country to which he would be sent; he was ignorant of the elements and considerations which constituted a fair and equitable bargain; he was ignorant still more of the character of those by whom he was to be employed; he knew nothing of their avarice, their subtlety, their love of power, their past treatment of their coloured slaves, and the means which they possessed […] of setting aside and rendering nugatory the most important clauses in the paper contract which had been mutually signed in India.' Quoted in ibid, p. 4.

ignorance and inability to understand contracts was seen as tied to racial characterisations that negated their ability to exercise autonomous agency. Major demonstrates that highlighting the labourers' helplessness and perceived lack of agency was the preliminary step to rendering them 'appropriate subjects of colonial philanthropy'.[63]

Discussions around the indenture trade in Calcutta operated within the rubrics of early colonial ethnography, which drew on a perceived link between the labourers' primitivism, ignorance and labouring potential. Purported to consist mainly of hill communities such as *dhangars*, they were considered as a primitive and readily available labour market—an untapped and abundant source of labour for the empire known for their propensity for hard labour and familiarity with temporary internal migration. This cycle of self-fulfilling stereotype heavily influenced the anti-indenture discourse, where the hill coolie emerged as an ideal plantation labourer precisely because all indentured migrants were perceived as hill coolies, and all hill coolies perceived as primitive. Uday Chandra states that the terms *Kol* and *Dhangar* were used interchangeably in colonial archival documents.[64] Straddling colonial notions of the tribal and the primitive, *Kols* 'were classified as 'tribes' by anthropologist-administrators in Chotanagpur, [but] became the labouring caste par excellence in modern Bengal'.[65]

Kaushik Ghosh argues that colonial obsession with the primitive led to their fetishisation as a solution for colonial demands of labour.[66] The *dhangar* was considered an appropriate, even lucrative labourer due to his perceived position outside caste society, and by implication, freedom from caste restrictions on food and mobility. For instance, J.R. Mayo commented in a deposition in 1837 that 'in several parts of India there are people to be found who have no caste, especially the Hill Coolies of Bengal, a fine athletic race of people, who eat fresh meat or any other kind of food

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[63] Ibid, p. 5.
[64] Uday Chandra, 'Kol, Coolie and Colonial Subject: A Hidden History of Caste and the Making of Modern Bengal', in *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, ed. by Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad, and Kenneth Bo Nielsen (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 19.
[65] Ibid, p. 20.
[66] Ghosh, 'A Market for Aboriginality', p. 18.

without scruple. They are free from the prejudices of the Hindoos and Mahometans.'[67] John Mackay stated: 'the Dangurs entertain no prejudices of caste [or] religion, and they are willing to turn their hands to any labour whatever. […] Their clothing is simple and scanty, and they eat only once, rarely twice, in 24 hours.'[68] The lack of caste, and by implication, civilisation, defined the utility of the 'hill coolies'. As Mayo asserted, 'I should prefer employing the Hill Coolies of Bengal, especially as they are […] free from caste.'[69] Being beyond caste, they could be relegated to the realm of the primitive and could easily be persuaded to cross the *kala pani* without losing caste. This not only implied for the colonial state a cheaper reserve of labour, but also one that was more controllable and mobile.

Besides implications of a docile and disciplinable reserve of labour whose position outside caste society made them an ideal candidate for the post-slavery labour regime, Indian labourers were desirable for several other reasons. Firstly, their viability as good labourers was tied to their migratory nature, familiarity with the seasonal labour market, and their experience in labour organisation and collective bargaining.[70] Secondly, the racialised idea of 'hill coolies' as strong and unintelligent helped planters imagine them as good physical labourers perfect for plantation work. In a letter from 1836, for instance, British merchants pointed out that 'though not physically nearly as strong as the natives of Africa, [Indian labourers] are able to bear long continued

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[67] J.R. Mayo, 'Remarks upon the Employment of Indian Labourers out of their own Country', dated Sydney, May 1, 1837. Enclosure 3 in No. 32, Appendix to *Report from the Select Committee on Transportation [Communicated by the Commons to the Lords]* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 16 August 1838), p. 175.

[68] John Mackay, 'Indian Immigration: On the Introduction of Indian Labourers: Memorandum for the Consideration of His Excellency the Governor of New South Wales and its Dependencies', Enclosure 3 in No. 32, Appendix to *Report from the Select Committee on Transportation [Communicated by the Commons to the Lords]* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 16 August 1838), p. 173. The contention about food habits is debatable but added to the argument for *dhangars* as cost-effective and thus a commercially viable labour pool.

[69] J.R. Mayo, 'Employment of Indian Labourers', p. 175.

[70] For instance, John Mackay stated, 'I never knew any of them able to read or write […] but they will travel a distance of five hundred miles in search of employment, and know the value of money, and carefully save the wages they earn in Calcutta and on the plains, and carry them back to their country to spend with their families. John Mackay, 'Indian Immigration', p. 173.

exertion as well as any people in the world.'[71] Gladstone parroted Gillanders and Arbuthnot's description of 'hill coolies' by calling them 'docile, quiet, orderly, and able-bodied People'.[72] Thirdly, Indian labourers were considered a cheap alternative. In a letter from 1836, Calcutta merchant George Arbuthnot stated that India was perfect for procuring labourers because the cost of employing Indian labourers was 'not one-half that of a slave'.[73] British merchant John Moss reiterated this sentiment, arguing that 'East Indians are the best conducted and the cheapest labourers in the world, with the fewest wants'.[74]

Finally, Indian labourers were considered a perfect fit for the climatic and agricultural needs of the plantation colonies. Climatic considerations were an important step in choosing the ideal labourer. As Gladstone pointed out in a letter to parliamentarian John Hobhouse, the 'influence of the [tropical] climate' produces a 'reluctance to labour, and increasing desire for spirituous liquors' for European plantation labourers.[75] Gladstone believed that 'the extreme heat and relaxing influence of the climate produce […] a disposition of indolence and an aversion to labour' for aboriginal inhabitants of tropical countries and the African slave population.[76] By contrast, Indian labourers were used to working in similar climatic conditions.

The 'hill coolie' trope not only fed into the colonial regime's imagination of plantation labourers, but also fit the planter's expectation of the ideal labourer. As Gladstone and other planters reiterated these themes to members of the British Parliament, this racialised understanding of Indian indentured migrants came to be perpetuated in committee reports and government regulations. The discourse at Calcutta

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[71] Letter from Livingston Syers and Co. to Messers Taylor, Potter and Co., dated February 4, 1836, GG/2768. GG-MSS.

[72] Letter from John Gladstone to John Hobhouse dated February 23, 1837, Enclosure in No. 5, in *Masters and Employers*.

[73] Letter from George Arbuthnot to Robert Gladstone dated July 18, 1835, quoted in Sydney Checkland, *The Gladstones: A Family Biography 1764-1851* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 315.

[74] Letter from John Moss to Gladstone, dated September 10, 1836, in 'Letters from John Moss (of Otterspool), Liverpool Merchant and Demerara Planter', GG/297, GG-MSS.

[75] Letter from John Gladstone to John Hobhouse dated February 23, 1837, Enclosure in No. 5, in *Masters and Employers*.

[76] John Gladstone, *A Statement of Facts on the Present State of Slavery in the British Sugar and Coffee Colonies, and in the United States of America* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1839). Manuscript contained in a letter from John Gladstone to Sir Robert Peel, GG/1171, GG-MSS.

further perpetuated this image. As the quotes from the Town Hall meeting above point out, those against continued indenture trade also resorted to using similar dehumanising tropes as those who supported forced labour. Thus, the same discourse that considered Indian indentured migrants as primitive, ignorant and undifferentiated in terms of race and religion, also celebrated them as ideal labourers. The default image of the indentured labourer remained that of a dark, strong man eager for labour—an image the discourse at Calcutta had a direct role in creating and perpetuating.

Analysing the role of race in the indenture debates at Calcutta allows an exploration of how the discourse at Calcutta defined for posterity the image of the ideal post-slavery labourer. Firstly, as the obsession with comparison to slavery highlights, indentured migrants had to be legally defined as free—free in their decision to migrate, and free from modes of exploitation that had come to define the slave regime. Secondly, they were almost always defined as men. Thirdly, the perfect labourer was imagined as primitive, docile and outside the restrictions of traditional caste society. All migrants, who in actual practice came from different regions and walks of life, were essentialised within the image of someone who was ignorant and easy to induce to travel. The diverse social identities of an entire group of migrants was flattened into a singular term that defined the person only in relation to their position within the indenture trade.[77] This fed into ideas of uncivilised and ignorant migrants, where such characteristics were not individual features but racial characters—common to the entire community, and determined by race. Moreover, this line of enquiry demonstrates that ethnographic and anthropological reports from the late-nineteenth century were not the first to draw linkages between physical characteristics and behavioural attributes, or to consider intelligence and labouring capacity as racially-determined. This was already a prominent feature of the early-nineteenth century.

## Citizens of the Empire

The very act of indentured migration not only created racialised understandings of Indian labourers, but also raised them to the status of rights-bearing citizens.

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[77] This has parallels with Kaushik Ghosh's assertion that the essentialised perception of the *dhangar* community negated all specificities of language, religion and local history, as 'an entire civilisation and various societies [was] flattened out within the confines of one term, the Dhangar'. Ghosh, 'A Market for Aboriginality', p. 18.

Discussions in Calcutta frequently referred to the need for spokesmen, and appealed to a sense of imperial benevolence. The labourer's position within the British Empire was coloured by the contention that their primitiveness precluded them from speaking for themselves. Thus, labourers needed protection from planters and others who could exploit them, more so because their migratory nature transformed them from regional subjects in British India to citizens of the empire. This section explores how by appealing to a sense of imperial responsibility towards its citizens, and acting as spokesmen for the Indian labourer's rights, both the indentured migrant and his spokesman in Calcutta emerged as citizens of the empire.

What makes an imperial citizen? Daniel Gorman argues that citizenship is 'a primary means through which societies assert, construct and consecrate their sense of identity'.[78] It is defined by 'a sense of civic belonging, comprising both social and legal-political identities.'[79] Nineteenth-century British India bore witness to emerging and changing notions of nationhood, subjecthood and citizenship that pervaded most discourses—including that on indentured labour. As Sukanya Banerjee points out, the ideal of the 'universal citizen-subject' assumed singularity through overlapping trajectories in the late-nineteenth century.[80] This universal citizenship came with the caveat of being necessarily dual: 'Indians, after all, were 'imperial' citizens, citizens only because of their position as localized 'Indian' subjects of the Crown.'[81]

Most works on imperial citizenship focus on its consolidation in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, especially in conjunction with emerging ideas of nationhood and anti-colonialism.[82] The mid-nineteenth century remains largely

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[78] Daniel Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship: Empire and the Question of Belonging* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 1.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Sukanya Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 9.

[81] Ibid, p. 15.

[82] For a fuller exploration of citizenship in a colonial and transnational context, see Gorman, *Imperial Citizenship*; Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*; Joya Chatterji, 'South Asian Histories of Citizenship, 1946-1970', *The Historical Journal* (2012), 1049-1071; Sandip Hazareesingh, 'The Quest for Urban Citizenship: Civic Rights, Public Opinion, and Colonial Resistance in Early Twentieth-Century Bombay', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34:4 (2000), 797-829; Taylor Sherman, William Gould and Sarah Ansari, *From Subjects to Citizens. Society and the Everyday State in India and Pakistan, 1947-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

under-represented in this scholarship. The category of the citizen, as Banerjee argues, was not formally codified in British law until well into the twentieth century.[83] By contrast, this thesis focuses on a time before the 'Queen's Proclamation' of 1858, which is considered a legal watershed for concepts of subjecthood and citizenship. Notions of citizenship and subjecthood in relation to the mid-nineteenth century indenture system are thus unique in their interplay of ideas of civilisation, spokesmanship and protectionism at a stage before the legal codification of the category. Unlike ideas of citizenship that emerged from the interplay between nationhood and the dichotomy of belonging to the 'Indian' nation and the British Empire, the notions of citizenship that the debaters at Calcutta appealed to was embedded in a socio-political scene before the emergence of a clearly-defined nationalism, or of mechanisms of statehood such as the census. The resultant rhetoric that identified Indians as citizens of the empire relied heavily on the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion, especially as the discursive space at Calcutta systematically excluded indentured migrants and their voices.

The discussions at Calcutta often referred to the importance of protecting indentured migrants from mistreatment, and the need to consider the geographical limits of British legal structures. In the Town Hall meeting, for instance, Rev. Charles pointed out that it would be difficult, perhaps even impossible to adequately protect the labourers in the destination colonies because of the limits of the regulatory function of the colonial Indian government.[84] He argued that labourers were more prone to ill-treatment in Demarara because its large European population constantly defied

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2014); Emma Hunter, ed., *Citizenship, Belonging, and Political Community in Africa: Dialogues Between Past and Present* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ; London: Princeton University Press, 2014); Rieko Karatani, *Defining British Citizenship: Empire, Commonwealth and Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003); Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); T.H. Marshall, 'Citizenship and Social Class, 1950', in *The Anthropology of Citizenship: A Reader*, ed. by Sian Lazar (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999); and Michael Mann, 'Ruling Class Strategies and Citizenship', *Sociology*, 21:3 (1987), 339-354. Global citizenship and cosmopolitanism have also been a focus of study for the twentieth century, prominently in Kris Manjapra and Sugata Bose, *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[83] Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*, p. 23.

[84] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 311.

parliamentary authority.[85] This concern became more acute with indentured migration to French and Dutch colonies, and incited discussions on the regulatory concerns for British citizens employed in non-British colonies where similar regulations might not apply. Sheik Manick, for instance, testified to the Calcutta investigative committee that '[t]hose who were employed by Englishmen said that they got sufficient to eat; but [not] those who were employed in the service of Frenchmen […] Those employed by English gentlemen got their pay monthly, but not those employed by French gentlemen.'[86]

Dowson testified before the Calcutta investigative committee that more labourers were being exported from French Pondicherry than from Calcutta and other Indo-British ports.[87] Since slavery still existed in the French Empire, some expressed doubt that changes in regulation within the British Empire could solve labourers' concerns outside its remits.[88] Dowson was thus of the opinion that 'precautionary and restrictive measures adopted merely in British ports' were not only ineffective in stopping abuses in the system, but would also push the indentured traffic from British to French ports.[89] In fact, he argued that only the suspension of trade with French colonies like Bourbon could stop an exacerbation of the situation. This consideration of the discrepancy in regulations between French and English colonies, and the legal ambiguity of labourers moving between English and other colonial regimes highlighted two things. Firstly, the fear of indentured migration reverting into slavery continued to be a strong point of criticism. Secondly, the comparison to the French Empire put pressure on the British Empire to ensure that its labourers were safe from mistreatment and exploitation, making them responsible for the well-being of the Indian labourer.

Mirroring this sentiment that the colonial state should be responsible for protecting its migrant labour forces from exploitation and slavery, Longueville Clarke

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[85] Ibid, p. 314.

[86] Testimony of Sheik Manick, October 1, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[87] Testimony of W.F. Dowson, November 27, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[88] Indentured migration between the two empires became a point of diplomatic debate in the later part of the century, especially building up to the Anglo-French Convention on emigration of labouring population in 1860. See Kate Marsh, '"Rights of the Individual", Indentured Labour and Indian Workers: The French Antilles and the Rhetoric of Slavery Post 1848', *Slavery & Abolition*, 33 (2012), 221–31.

[89] Testimony of W.F. Dowson, November 27, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

commented at the Town Hall meeting that British rule in India played a paternal role. For him, the colonial state was responsible for 'saving' migrant labourers from oppression.[90] The Town Hall petition stated that imperial responsibility towards the removal to slavery in British dominions was comparable to its responsibility in ensuring the protection of civil rights of the labourers in their capacity as British citizens.[91] Taken alongside the notion of ignorant migrants incapable of helping themselves, such statements pressed the need for imperial benevolence. Moreover, constant appeal to changes in metropolitan regulations emerged from a vision of global indenture networks that could only be regulated through a centrally-consolidated legal framework, as opposed to separate regulations in British India and destination colonies. It betrays a belief in the responsibility of the colonial regime in maintaining a centrally-regulated indenture scheme responsive to criticism and feedback from its disparate parts.

The insistence on colonial responsibility towards labourers as British citizens was a unique feature of the mid-nineteenth century debates. Distinct from the Assam debates and the nationalist movement for abolition of indenture at the turn of the century, the mid-nineteenth century discourse was non-subversive and did not question imperial governance. Rather, by appealing to the metropolitan government to make regulatory changes, it reaffirmed the political position of the British rule in India. The report of the Calcutta investigative committee stated, for instance:

> We have a full trust that the benevolent and commanding intellects employed in the consideration of the whole subject in England, both within Parliament and out of it, cannot fail to lead the legislature to right conclusions; and we rest humbly confident in the conclusion, that whatever may be the result, Parliament and the people of England will duly protect the emancipated African from all competition in the wages of labour and means of subsistence that is not free, fair and unaided by local power, and will not permit injustice to be done to the Indian subjects of the Crown […] from any motives of political advantage […] or of mercantile gain.'[92]

The Calcutta investigative committee, which acted in many ways as representative of the voices at Calcutta, thus asserted their 'full trust' in the benevolence of the

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[90] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', p. 315.
[91] 'Petition from James Young', 1838.
[92] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee'.

lawmakers in Britain. Further, they were fully confident that the British parliament will prevent any injustice from befalling the indentured migrant.

Instead of questioning the colonial regime for instituting the indenture trade, the voices from Calcutta criticised specifics tenets of the trade while expressing unwavering confidence in the decisions of the imperial regime, and in the benevolence of their regulations. In fact, instead of being a criticism of the state, this was an admittance that the legal structure and decisions of the colonial state were supreme. This further entrenched those at Calcutta into their position as allies of the colonial state. This was in keeping with the tone of public debates and petitions at the time, which often highlighted loyalty to the British colonial state. This non-subversive nature is especially significant because when a resistance movement against problems of the inland indentured migration to Assam (eastern India) emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, the issues raised were very similar to those raised in the mid-nineteenth century indenture debates, but the tone was firmer and more subversive. This demonstrates a shift in both public attitude towards colonial government, and towards the idea of citizenship, mainly with the emergence of nationalist ideals across India at the turn of the century.

These discussions not only lauded the paternal role of the colonial state, but also implicitly pointed to the role of the state in regulating the indenture trade. The second resolution passed in the Town Hall meeting of 1838 stated that the meeting did not intend to ‘interfere with the civil rights of any class of her Majesty’s subjects’ or stifle ‘free migration’. However, in this case, the question of freedom of movement and employment on the part of the indentured migrant was overshadowed by colonial responsibility of the British state towards protecting its citizens, since in their opinion, the indentured migrants ‘do not understand, and are not capable of understanding the terms of the contract into which they are said to enter’.[93] In essence, this contended that the argument that labourers should be allowed to choose their mode and place of employment and escape what planters often depicted as miserable economic conditions at home, applied only with the caveat that they were not entering unregulated, coercive labour systems. Turning the free labour argument on its head, this line of argument implied that the labourer’s right of mobility was nullified by his right to freedom from

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[93] ‘Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies’, p. 314.

mistreatment. This tied together imperial responsibility with labour rights by proposing a situation where the colonial government could maintain strict regulatory rights over the trade to ensure the labourers' safety from unfree and coercive labour regimes. By implication, the rights of labourers and their capacity to enjoy their right to freedom without exploitation was upheld by the colonial state, and any infringement of these rights could warrant government intervention. It further implied that labour rights were bestowed upon the indentured migrant by the colonial government, who held the authority to enforce it. This understanding of the role of the state in protecting the labourers' rights was also reflected in official discussions. In a letter from 1844, the Governor-General Henry Hardinge wrote, 'Our Coolies are not their own masters as regards emigration', and asserted that indenture regulations to protect the labourer's rights was necessary since 'they are hired by the [government] whom they are to look for protecting them in all their rights'.[94]

Appealing to the paternalistic role of the British state not only made a strong argument in favour of making laws protecting indentured migrants, but also emerged as the primary way in which the debaters at Calcutta asserted their position as citizens of the empire. On the one hand, those discussing the indenture issue at Calcutta highlighted the need for metropolitan laws to protect the indentured migrants, and expressed concern about migrants moving to colonies that were not bound by British laws. Thus, by appealing to a sense of imperial benevolence and responsibility, these peripatetic labourers came to be imagined as citizens of the British Empire whose rights had to be protected by British law. Bridging the gap between subjecthood and citizenship, this implied that the colonial state was expected to be responsible for the well-being and protection of indentured labourers.

On the other hand, through the very process of asserting the rights of their fellow men and writing petitions to the metropolitan government, these speakers themselves emerged as citizens. While the link between petitioning and citizenship has been studied extensively by historians of Britain and western Europe, colonial citizenship has rarely

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[94] 'Letter from Hardinge to Stanley: The Coolie Emigration Act', V/6, IOR Neg 11691/6, dated November 23, 1844. In 'Papers of Field Marshal 1st Viscount Hardinge, Governor-General of India 1844-48' (1830-1848), IOR Neg 11691-94, BL.

been seen in this light.[95] In the South Asian context, the use of petitions has been substantively explored in very few works—most notably in a special issue of *Modern Asian Studies*.[96] Through several articles that trace the use of petitions from the Mughal period to the late-colonial period, this special issue argues that the written petition has long been an important vehicle of 'political dissent and popular mobilization', while also embodying 'expressions of community and individual rights'.[97] Taken together, these articles argue that petitioning in South Asia has played three major roles. Firstly, it has been a mechanism of centralising and bureaucratising of state power, as well as a mode of standardising and routinising political relations. Secondly, petitioning emerged as a vehicle for creative forms of protest, dissent and popular public engagement. And thirdly, petitioning also played a powerful symbolic role, whereby written petitions retained traces of a patrimonial form of rule with a face-to-face relationship between the ruler and the petitioner.[98]

This thesis adds to this scholarship by arguing that through the very process of petitioning and voicing their opinions on matters of public interest, the colonial petitioner from Calcutta projected himself as a citizen of the empire. The act of petitioning not only implied that a citizen based in Calcutta could comment on a

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[95] For a fuller exploration of how mass petitions in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England emerged as the means of formation of a politically discursive public sphere, see David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Read Foster, 'Petitions and the Petition of Right', *Journal of British Studies*, 14:1 (1974), 21-45; David Zaret, 'Petitions and the "Invention" of Public Opinion in the English Revolution', *American Journal of Sociology*, 101:6 (May, 1996), 1497-1555; Peter Fraser, 'Public Petitioning and Parliament before 1832', *History*, 46:158 (1961), 195-211; Mark Knights, ''The Lowest Degree of Freedom': The Right to Petition Parliament, 1640–1800', *Parliamentary History*, 37 (2018), 18-34; Beat Kümin and Andreas Würgler, 'Petitions, Gravamina and the Early Modern State: Local Influence on Central Legislation in England and Germany (Hesse)', *Parliaments, Estates & Representation*, 17:1 (1997), 39-60; Philip Loft, 'Involving the Public: Parliament, Petitioning, and the Language of Interest, 1688–1720', *Journal of British Studies*, 55:1 (2016), 1-23; Derek Hirst, 'Making Contact: Petitions and the English Republic', *Journal of British Studies*, 45:1 (January, 2006), 26-50.
Merchants and planters speaking favourably of slavery or the indenture trade also used petitions as a means to vocalise their opinions in parliament. This has been discussed in chapter 5.

[96] Rohit De and Robert Travers, ed., 'Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 53, Special Issue 1 (January 2019).

[97] Rohit De and Robert Travers, 'Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia: Introduction', *Modern Asian Studies*, 53:1 (2019), p. 3.

[98] See De and Travers, ed., 'Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia'.

migratory labour system sanctioned by the metropole, but also made the connection between the ruler and the ruled more direct. Petitions from Calcutta frequently referred to 'imperial responsibility' towards the indentured migrants. This idea of the colonial state being duty bound to its members also points to petitioners positioning themselves as vocal, rights-bearing citizens rather than imperial subjects. The incipient ideas of citizenship apparent in petitions from Calcutta were, at the same time, limited by the authoritarian structures of the colonial state.

The expression of opinion, the petitioning of metropolitan government, and the underlying belief in imperial legal structures made the petitioners participants in the empire. Through this process, the petitioners at Calcutta were transformed from passive subjects of the British Empire to vocal citizens who actively participated in debating the rights of his fellow citizen and contributed to changing emigration regulations. Not only was their participation in public discussions based in their self-identification as citizens of this empire, through petitions, letters and committees, the vocal citizens at Calcutta also expected the colonial state to be responsive to their demands. In fact, this conversation rendered the vocal citizens of Calcutta part of a civil society broader than just the city. As Carey Watt argues, discussions in voluntary associations were tied to ideas of citizenship and nation-building in late-colonial India.[99] In the absence of well-formed ideas of nationhood in early and mid-nineteenth century Calcutta, these added to an understanding of citizenship as not being limited to the city, but as extended to the empire.

The only thing connecting citizens of Calcutta to metropolitan lawmakers, was that they were tied by the same idea of responsibility towards its citizens. Their invocation of notions of civic duty altered the perception and scope of political space. It suggested that the metropolitan parliamentarian had the same duty as a Calcutta citizen to make sure that migrant labourers of the empire were protected from mistreatment. At the same time, it suggested that the Calcuttan was now as much of a citizen as the British man—a citizenship that could only be reached by active performance of duties expected of a citizen. The figure of the 'imperial citizen'—whether manifest in migrant labourers moving between different colonies of the empire, or in the self-appointed

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[99] Carey Watt, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association, and Citizenship* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 7.

spokesmen appealing for legal changes to the indenture schema—emerged through debates that traversed between Calcutta, London and plantation colonies. The responsiveness of metropolitan Britain to the concerns of such 'imperial citizens' further complicated the 'binarized equation between colonizer and colonized'.[100]

## A Rhetoric of Rights and Responsibility

As pointed out in chapter 2, voices against the indenture trade in Calcutta were motivated by a combination of commercial, reformist, humanitarian and other interests. This section explores the reformist and humanitarian motivation behind arguing against the Indian indenture trade—one that was intricately linked with ideals of rights and responsibility. The participation of Indians and Britons of Calcutta in the indenture debates drew variously from post-slavery humanitarian ideals in Britain, the Indian reformist context where prominent Indians negotiated with colonial government for social betterment and welfare, the custom of philanthropy exemplified by *zaminders*, and the zeal to achieve the status of rights-bearing citizens of the British Empire through petitioning. This context heavily impacted how the rights of labourers was discussed, and was evident in the language used in the petitions appealing for change.

Rachel Sturman contends that indentured migration represents one of the earliest spaces where international labour rights were discussed and championed, leading to the emergence and establishment of several key concepts in transnational human rights, and the early conceptualisation of international labour regulations.[101] She argues that although the indenture system was exploitative and coercive, it 'occasioned new ideas […] about what constituted a legitimate and humane labor system'.[102] While Sturman's argument for a direct link between the treatment of indentured migrants and the emergence of a distinct rhetoric of 'human rights' and labour regulation in the twentieth century is based on a very loose definition of human rights, concepts of humanitarianism did underline the indenture debates.

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[100] Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*, p. 28.
[101] Rachel Sturman, 'Indian Indentured Labor and the History of International Rights Regimes', *The American Historical Review*, 119 (2014), 1439–65.
[102] Ibid, p. 1440.

The term 'rights' was rarely mentioned in the indenture debates, barring very few situations such as the following quote from the Town Hall petition: '[the emigrants] have been the subjects of transfer [from] one master to another at Mauritius and other places as well as reshipped […] [M]any of them had suffered as men and citizens in their persons [,] their purse and their *civil rights*.'[103] The limited usage of the term, however, did not preclude labour rights from emerging as a prime point of argument. Those in favour of indentured migration emphasised the right of the labourer to choose employment, and those against its continuation pointed to the labourer's right to better living and working conditions, and his right of security from deception and exploitation. As C.A. Bayly points out, some of the earliest Indian theories of modern polity and society were generated in relation to the rights of mobile peoples, such as seamen, traders, *lascars* and Indians soldiers. This was because both British officials and Indian liberals saw land rights as customary, but for mobile peoples, rights had to be created anew by the state.[104] In fact, as the previous section demonstrates, this very movement of indentured migrants to serve in plantation colonies raised them to the status of citizens of the empire—citizens whose rights had to be upheld by the colonial state. This had implications for how the emergence of indentured labour as an institution affected the question of rights accrued to labourers and citizens, and how imperial labour policies worked to ensure those rights.

As the previous chapter has argued, the post-slavery moral and political climate in Britain greatly affected how the Indian indenture trade was debated. In the aftermath of anti-slavery movements and the abolition debates, it was imperative for any migrant labour-system to comply with the economic and ethical principles of post-slavery Britain. For those who questioned the trade, strict regulations and contracts were the means to achieve this. At the same time, this involved the contentious issue of government interference in economic affairs. For merchants and planters, the *laissez-faire* economy that Britain purported to represent required that labourers be allowed to 'sell' their labour to the highest bidder. Hence, they discouraged any regulation that constricted indentured migration, or what was considered the migrant's right to choose his employment. Indentured contracts were especially used to show that labourers had a say in determining conditions of employment, or at least had prior knowledge of the

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[103] 'Petition from James Young', 1838. Emphasis added.

[104] Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*, p. 31.

conditions of work in plantations and were aware of their rights.[105] In both cases, the rights of the migrant labourer remained the focus of their respective arguments.

Humanitarianism has been closely linked with the anti-slavery question, especially with organisations such as the British India Society (BIS), Aborigines Protection Society (APS) and the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) employing a humanitarian rhetoric.[106] As Heartfield and Laidlaw argue, the APS and BIS were crucial in putting humanitarian concerns at the top of the colonial agenda, and placing India within a wide transnational context.[107] Most works on humanitarianism focus on the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[108] Michael Barnett, however, has

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[105] The merchant and planter argument has been further developed in the next chapter.

[106] The BFASS concentrated on the continuing slave trade and slavery outside the British Empire, while the APS mainly addressed problems caused by British imperialism. Key works on these organisations include James Heartfield, *The Aborigines Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1837-1909* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011); Zoë Laidlaw, '"Justice to India–Prosperity to England–Freedom to the Slave!" Humanitarian and Moral Reform Campaigns on India, Aborigines and American Slavery', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22:2 (2012), 299-324; Charles Swaisland, 'The Aborigines Protection Society, 1837–1909', *Slavery & Abolition*, 21:2 (2000), 265-280; Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), especially chapters 4 and 5; and Roderick Mitcham, 'The Geographies of Global Humanitarianism: The Anti-Slavery Society and Aborigines Protection Society, 1884–1933' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2002).

[107] Heartfield, *The Aborigines Protection Society*; Laidlaw, 'Justice to India'.

[108] See, for instance, Kevin Grant, 'The British Empire, International Government, and Human Rights', *History Compass*, 11:8 (2013), 573–583.
Humanitarianism in the nineteenth-century British imperial context has been studied in Andrew Porter, 'Trusteeship, Anti-Slavery, and Humanitarianism', in *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume 3, The Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 198-221; Catherine Hall, 'The Lords of Humankind Re-visited', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* (2003), 472-485; David Lambert and Alan Lester, 'Geographies of Colonial Philanthropy', *Progress in Human Geography*, 28:3 (2004), 320-341; Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Rob Skinner and Alan Lester, 'Humanitarianism and Empire: New Research Agendas', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40:5 (2012), 729-747; William Green, 'Emancipation to Indenture: A Question of Imperial Morality', *The Journal of British Studies*, 22:2 (1983); Andrea Major, 'British Humanitarian Political Economy and Famine in India, 1838–1842', *Journal of British Studies*, 59:2 (2020), 221-244; Zoë Laidlaw, 'Investigating Empire: Humanitarians, Reform and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40:5 (2012), 749-768; Ashby

pointed out that a distinct 'imperial humanitarianism' can be seen to emerge in the early-nineteenth century, before which acts of compassion were limited to the private realm.[109] The anti-slavery movement especially spearheaded this, having caused the British public to 'broaden its moral imagination and to recognize its special responsibilities to the colonized.'[110]

How did imperial humanitarianism manifest in the mid-nineteenth century? For Barnett, humanitarianism created new forms of community and instilled new kinds of commitments 'on the part of the fortunate to the welfare of the less fortunate', and brought together notions of imperial trusteeship, compassion, welfare, Christian ideals and morality.[111] At the same time, this humanitarianism was paternalistic and interventionist, existing 'alongside discourses of Christianity, colonialism and commerce that deemed the 'civilized' peoples superior to the backward populations.'[112] Scholars have also pointed to the paradox of settler colonialism—that just when campaigns to abolish slavery, to reform governance at home and campaigns on behalf of indigenous populations were emerging, and colonial officials were given instructions to govern humanely, thousands of Britons were 'encouraged to invade and occupy indigenous peoples' land on an unprecedented scale'.[113] With reference to India, Peter Marshall refers to the 'moral swing to the East', where the British imperial interests moved away from the Atlantic, towards making India the centrepiece of nineteenth-

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Wilson and D. Brown, ed., *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[109] Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*. He argues that although the history of humanitarianism has been traced to the 1860s, the term had come into everyday use in the early-nineteenth century. Ibid, p. 10.

[110] Ibid, p. 63.

Notably, although anti-slavery is seen as the beginning of humanitarianism in Europe in most historiographies, Richard Huzzey discards it, arguing that Victorian opposition to slavery defies any simple classification as universal humanitarianism or imperial reform. Richard Huzzey, 'Minding Civilisation and Humanity in 1867: A Case Study in British Imperial Culture and Victorian Anti-Slavery', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40:5 (2012), 807-825.

[111] Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 55.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 1.

century British Empire.[114] Marshall argues that this is because humanitarianism, especially in the late-eighteenth century Cornwallis era, was seen as compatible with Britain's national advantage, arguing that while West Indians continued to deny 'their blacks' the essentials of civil society and protection under law, the East India Company was extending such benefits to Indians.[115] William Green even goes so far as to argue that abolishing the slave trade but allowing the Indian indenture trade to flourish was not an example of British hypocrisy, or of derailed imperial trusteeship when confronted by powerful vested interests, but merely of a necessary compromise—'a vital, if disagreeable, bulwark in a basically humane Atlantic strategy, not the calloused or wilful adoption of a 'new system of slavery''.[116]

In spite of such inherent contradictions in both the conceptualisation and execution of humanitarian ideals across the empire, it remained a strong force that impacted the indenture debates at Calcutta. Post-slavery ideas of humanitarianism and imperial morality seeped into the associational culture in Calcutta through the cross-imperial transmission of ideas in newspapers and letters, and came to impact how indenture was perceived and debated. In fact, the argument for imperial responsibility discussed in the previous section was also steeped in a rhetoric of humanitarianism. Both the petitions for protecting the right of labourers to 'choose' overseas employment, and the counter-argument for protection against exploitation in indenture often used the rhetoric of rights to validate individual commercial interests. Many of the participants of the Town Hall meeting or the Calcutta petition referred to 'imperial benevolence' and demonstrated belief in the colonial state to take the right moral decision.[117] The rhetoric employed in these debates is often reminiscent of the 'civilising argument'—where it is the responsibility of the coloniser to institute good governance for moral and material progress of the colonised.

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[114] Peter Marshall, 'The Moral Swing to the East: British Humanitarianism, India and the West Indies', in *East India Company Studies: Papers Presented to Professor Cyril Phillips*, ed. by Kenneth Ballhatchett (Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1986).

[115] Ibid, p. 83.

[116] Green, 'Emancipation to Indenture', p. 99.

[117] For instance, a letter from Dwarkanath Tagore to the Company's Court of Directors referred to the 'just and liberal rule of the honourable court', and highlighted its 'pure and benevolent intentions, [and] noble solicitude for the welfare and improvement of the millions', which would best secure the happiness of Indians. Quoted in 'Baboo Dwarkanath Tagore', *Asiatic Journal*, November 1842, pp. 339-41.

Besides upholding post-slavery ideals of morality and humanitarianism that pervaded the British Empire, this discursive sphere at Calcutta was also influenced by ideals of nineteenth-century social reforms that defined the so-called Bengal Renaissance. Within Bengal, the early and mid-nineteenth century was a time of social reform movements against social 'evils' like *sati* and perpetual widowhood, and in favour of widow remarriage, freedom of the press, increased printing presses, and accessible legal framework of the state. The indenture debates were part of this wider reformist trend, demonstrated by the fact that the same personages participated in several such movements. Moreover, it also drew from Indian traditions of philanthropy, where *zaminders* and rich members of society were often responsible for philanthropic activities such as building wells, or donating to the destitute.

At the same time, this operated within several limitations. Firstly, as shown in chapter 2, some of the participants in the indenture debate held direct commercial stake in either the continuation or the abolition of the Indian indenture trade. Secondly, the voice of the labourers was conspicuously absent in these debates. This system expected passivity on the part of the labourers, in a situation where regulations and decision-making were the purview of colonial officials, with no involvement of the labourers themselves.[118] Interviews of returned emigrants by emigration officials and testimonies for the report of the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40 were the only spaces available to indentured migrants to voice their concerns in the early decades of the trade. Even when allowed, their testimonies were often considered less reliable than that of officials and elite citizens.[119] Thirdly, the participants, who generally came from elite backgrounds, argued for the rights of persons that they not only did not identify with socially or culturally, but also did not often afford rights to themselves, when employing them in households, agricultural works, plantations and public works. Finally, the reformist zeal went hand-in-hand with paternalism. Participants generally spoke of the labourers in derogatory terms and used their perceived lack of intelligence to render them subjects that they could speak on behalf of.

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[118] This approach greatly affected which abuses were regulated. As Sturman points out, because of such restrictions on the voice of the labourer, the regulatory regime did not address the major grievances of the labourer: 'the withholding, underpayment, and nonpayment of wages; extensions of their labor time; and in some places, restrictions on their free movement off the estates'. Sturman, 'Indian Indentured Labor', p. 1456.

[119] The report of the investigative committee stated that the report had to make 'allowances' for the exaggeration that 'native' witnesses were prone to. 'Report of the Calcutta Committee', p. 6.

Thus, a graded and nuanced understanding of reformism was at work here, working closely in conjunction with personal interests and social hierarchies operating in contemporary Calcutta, and the involvement of merchant-reformers in debating the indenture trade. The resultant mix of Indian reformism, traditional philanthropy and European post-slavery humanitarianism became central to the indenture debates and coloured the arguments of the Calcutta public sphere. It highlighted the need for regulations, motivated those in Calcutta to vocalise their concerns, and encouraged ideals of trusteeship and spokesmanship. As Sturman has pointed out, the indenture system exemplified how labour welfare worked in 'fundamentally non-democratic contexts', where the understanding of labour rights and welfare as a humanitarian concern was fully compatible with imperial subjecthood.[120] This operated in a space where criticism of bonded labour was intricately linked to ideas of humanitarianism and imperial responsibility towards its citizens.

## Conclusion

The discourses that emerged in mid-nineteenth century Calcutta around race, citizenship and rights help locate the political and intellectual position of Calcutta within global indenture networks, and by implication, wider imperial networks. This was reflected not only in how the debates contributed to discussions on servitude, labour rights and citizenship, but also in the extent to which metropolitan law-makers were responsive to voices from Calcutta. Nineteenth-century British Empire was thus characterised by this collaborative and trans-imperial nature of statehood, where regulations and state-building operated with inputs from disparate parts of the empire. The British Empire's relation with its migrating labouring population thus grew in conjunction with inputs from disparate parts of the empire, Calcutta being a major node.

The relationship between race, labouring capability and ignorance that was drawn in the indenture debates also permeated official and public discourse. In official documentation, the indentured migrant was seen through the same eyes, and the perceived relationship between the ignorant and primitive 'coolie' and his labouring capability was never questioned. In a memorandum from John Mackay in 1837, for instance, the ideal indentured migrant was identified as the 'Dangur', who 'entertain[ed]

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[120] Sturman, 'Indian Indentured Labor', p. 1457.

no prejudices of caste or religion, and […] are willing to turn their hands to any labour what[so]ever'.[121] His primitive nature was exemplified in his willingness to eat 'any kind of animal food' including 'snakes, lizards, rats, mice', his 'simple and scanty' clothing, and his 'equally simple and confined' habitations.[122] Similarly, in newspapers, the same rhetoric became popular, as the 'dhangur coolie' from eastern India came to be imagined as the solution to the post-Abolition labour deficit. The image of the strong but unintelligent 'coolie' was made popular in public discourse through newspapers. The *Friend of India*, for instance, argued that 'coolies' are 'the most simple, ignorant and degraded of the population of Bengal', 'but one remove[d] from the animals which graze upon their hills'.[123] Thus, the indenture debates, although they took place in closed meetings, came to impact wider official and public notion of the labourer. The image of the indentured migrant as conjured within these meetings and petitions permeated into both official and public spaces. This ideal of the Indian indentured labourers that was created as a nexus between the labour wants of the planter, the needs of the spokesmen at Calcutta, and the perception of primitive communities in colonial India, became the prevailing norm.

Moreover, these conversations helped consolidate the image of the ideal Indian indentured labourer, who was imagined as strong, male, docile and outside caste society. He was free to sell his labour overseas and free in his decision to migrate, but his ignorance required him to be represented by elite spokesmen. Finally, the indentured labourer had rights that the empire bestowed upon him, and was responsible for upholding. He was not only a citizen himself, but the means by which Indians and Europeans in Calcutta could achieve their own claims to citizenship. In this context, imperial citizenship applied to the labourer through his right to being protected under law, and to the petitioner from Calcutta through his participation in its formulation and execution. Through these debates, the relationship between Calcutta citizens and the imperial state was imagined, performed and consolidated.

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[121] John Mackay, 'Indian Immigration', p. 173.
[122] Ibid.
[123] *Friend of India*, May 24, 1838.

# Chapter 5:
# In Favour of Indenture: Merchant and Planter Voices

The British Empire was, in many ways, contingent on trade and commerce. Merchants helped expand the empire into newer territories, while planters consolidated imperial hold on these newly-acquired territories through settlement and commodity production. They had a particularly important role in procuring, employing and legalising indentured labour. In fact, the continuation of indentureship for around a century, and the resumption of indentured emigration in 1842 (after its brief suspension in 1838) was partially attributable to relentless pressure from merchants and planters, who were often in a position to influence emigration policies. Planter and merchant efforts to secure a continued system of labour emigration after Abolition, and their arguments in favour of the Indian indenture trade in particular, framed the post-slavery debates. Any understanding of the indenture debates is incomplete without an analysis of the merchant and planter argument in favour of indenture.

When slavery was abolished in 1833, merchant networks were extended across the empire (including in Calcutta). Planters held strong lobbying powers and negotiated with the government over the after-effects of Abolition. Abolition had created labour crises in plantocracies that ranged from permanent decline of sugar industry in Jamaica, to decline and slow recovery in British Guiana, and fast and successful recovery in Mauritius. This post-Abolition crisis had naturally led to arguments from planters and merchants about labour scarcity, recruitment and commercial loss. Although there has been substantive work on the West India lobby and planter arguments in context of slavery, planter/merchant voices and their role in empire have remained peripheral to historians of Indian indenture, and indeed to historians of the British Empire.[1] It seems

[1] Although initially neglected among historians of slavery and Abolition, proslavery arguments have been widely discussed in recent historiography. Some key works include Christer Petley, ‘‘Devoted Islands’ and ‘that Madman Wilberforce’: British Proslavery Patriotism during the Age of Abolition’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39:3 (2011), 393-415; Srividhya Swaminathan, ‘Developing the West Indian Proslavery Position after the Somerset Decision’, *Slavery & Abolition*, 24:3 (2003), 40-60; David Lambert, ‘The Counter-Revolutionary Atlantic: White West Indian Petitions and Proslavery Networks’, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6:3 (2005), 405-420; Michael Taylor, ‘British Proslavery Arguments and

only natural to extend this line of enquiry to the indenture debates in order to fully understand not only the pro-indenture strand of the debates, but also why the indenture trade continued for almost a century in spite of constant pressure from anti-indenture voices across the empire.

This chapter explores merchant and planter arguments in favour of continued indenture trade, by focusing on the political and commercial influence of such voices on post-slavery labour regulations. Most works on indentured migration focus on the theme of anti-indenture protest—a narrative that under-represents the voices of merchants and planters who decried prohibition and thus formed a significant part of the indenture debates. By exploring petitions from merchants in Calcutta and juxtaposing them against petitions and reports from merchants and planters across the empire, this chapter brings the merchant voice into the narrative. The resonance of merchant voices in Calcutta—whether in the form of articles in local periodicals, in public meetings, or through petitions to the colonial government—reflects the centrality of Calcutta within global debates on indenture, and puts into perspective how Calcutta served as a site of negotiation between pro- and anti-indenture voices.

Pro-indenture voices, as well as being affected by the merchant community at Calcutta, made use of cross-imperial linkages. Through epistolary linkages, merchants based in Calcutta, planters based in Britain, and plantation-owners based in the West Indies or Mauritius could work closely together to push the pro-indenture agenda forward. This was because on the one hand, members of merchant-houses in Calcutta (such as Gillanders, Arbuthnot, and Co.) were often related to plantation owners in destination colonies, and thus in a position to aid each other's commercial interests. On the other hand, planter and merchant interests complemented each other due to a common interest in the sugar trade and the procurement of plantation labourers—sugar planters were involved in the production of sugar and the employment of plantation labourers, while merchants were responsible for the distribution of sugar and the supply of plantation labourers. As a result, the pro-indenture argument was transnational in nature.

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the Bible, 1823–1833', *Slavery & Abolition*, 37:1 (2016), 139-158; Paula Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Thus, the merchant argument was not unique to the Calcutta experience, but generally moved in conjunction with merchant and planter arguments from Mauritius, West Indies and metropolitan Britain. The relationship between the pro-indenture argument originating in each of these spaces were complex and nuanced, but the voices from Calcutta nonetheless remained distinctive in the early years of indenture. It was especially distinctive in focusing on issues applicable to a procurer of labour, as opposed to a recipient (such as plantation-owners). Thus, while previous chapters have focused exclusively on Calcutta, this chapter considers the merchant arguments in Calcutta in relation to the global pro-indenture argument. In the process, it situates Calcutta within a transnational network of labour discussions, and solidifies its position within a global and collaborative network of merchants and planters. In doing so, this chapter points out that merchants and planters of the British Empire, including those based in Calcutta, made three main arguments in favour of the indenture trade—the legal, the economic, and the humanitarian. Before moving on to a detailed discussion of these arguments, the next section explores their position in the nineteenth-century British Empire.

## British Merchants and Planters

British merchants and planters were transnational individuals who held trading interests in India and the Caribbean, owned plantations across the empire, headed shipping agencies, constituted organisations aimed at the rights of merchants, and participated in parliamentary lobbies. Thus, they played a central role in the workings of the empire, and were a significant part of the global debate on indenture. This section briefly introduces the planters and merchants of the British Empire, and demonstrates how they had a stake in continuing indenture trade because their economic, political and social standing were tied up with the sugar trade and the indentured labour system.

In an imperial system that was economically dependent on commodity production in overseas colonies, planters acted as linkages between the metropole and plantation colonies. British planters have often been described as transatlantic, liminal and absentees.[2] While their business interests sprawled across the empire, many planters

[2] Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). See also Christer Petley, 'Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class', *Atlantic Studies*, 9:1 (2012), 1-17.

in the nineteenth century operated largely from the confines of the metropole. This absenteeism led to the establishment of a large West India planter community in Britain that possessed landed estates and formed a powerful colonial lobby at London.[3] This lobby operated through island agents, members of the Society of West India Merchants, absentee planters living in Britain, and Members of Parliament with West India connections and interests.[4] Lobbying was not confined to London either, since West India planters and merchants became increasingly prominent in leading regional and provincial merchant organisations.[5]

As the abolitionist movement gained momentum in the beginning of the nineteenth century, metropolitan attitudes towards planters changed from one of ambivalence to criticism. Christer Petley notes that planters, who had since the eighteenth century been considered liminal but harmless, were now being presented as subjects who fell outside the pale of acceptable British behaviour.[6] Petley relates this to the cultural and political fall of the planter class—'a fall that was part of a late eighteenth-century reformulation of British identity, as Britons sought to redefine nation and empire in the context of revolutionary changes at home and overseas'.[7] Planters and

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[3] O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, p. 15.
For details on West India planters, see M.D. North-Coombs, 'From Slavery to Indenture: Forced Labour in the Political Economy of Mauritius, 1834-1867', in *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920*, ed. by Kay Saunders (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 78-125; Richard Allen, 'Capital, Illegal Slaves, Indentured Labourers and the Creation of a Sugar Plantation Economy in Mauritius, 1810–60', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36:2 (2008), 151-170.
Prominent works on the British planter class include Lowell Joseph Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833: A Study in Social and Economic History* (New York: The Century Co.,1928); Nicholas Draper, 'The Rise of a New Planter Class? Some Countercurrents from British Guiana and Trinidad, 1807–33', *Atlantic Studies*, 9:1 (2012), 65-83; Christer Petley, 'Gluttony, Excess, and the Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean', *Atlantic Studies*, 9:1 (2012), 85-106; Christer Petley, 'Rethinking the Fall'; David Beck Ryden, 'Sugar, Spirits, and Fodder: The London West India Interest and the Glut of 1807–15', *Atlantic Studies*, 9:1 (2012), 41-64.
The case of the British planters involved in the overseas indenture trade, namely from India to overseas plantation colonies, was different from that of indigo and tea plantation owners in India. For the latter, see Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), especially chapters 4 and 5.
[4] O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, p. 15.
[5] Draper, 'New Planter Class', p. 76.
[6] Petley, 'Gluttony, Excess, and the Fall', p. 86.
[7] Ibid.

merchants adapted to this new legal rubric by organising and lobbying to protect their commercial and political interests. This was partly achieved by the activities of the London Society of West India Planters and Merchants, and the London West India Committee, which formed the focal point for planter political activity.[8] The former, for instance, petitioned for issues such as a tax regime favourable to planters, easy access to North American markets and military protection in the Caribbean, while the latter maintained a strong stand against Abolition, and negotiated compensation for planters for 'the loss of his slave'.[9]

Colonists and planters based in the plantation colonies also promoted their interests through provincial bodies, pressure groups, petitions and memoranda. M.D. North-Coombs argues that in 1832, colonists in Mauritius obtained an influential and permanent place in the administration with the constitution of the Legislative council.[10] Thus, even if physically removed from the metropole, planters based in colonies like Mauritius had a say in the implementation of imperial policies, and their landed interests were well-represented. Lobbying was complemented by cheap labour strategies such as hindering the formation of an independent black peasantry and drafting of laws to force the emancipated population to the plantation labour market. This perpetuated labour-intensive production techniques instead of necessitating an overhaul of a system dependent on cheap and tractable labour.[11] Taken together, lobbying and cheap labour strategies made the introduction of indentured labourers imperative for the continuation of sugar production.

By contrast, British merchants played a crucial role in straddling the disparate parts of the British Empire, and expanding its political and economic reaches. Established in 1600, the English East India Company spearheaded the empire's relations with the East and West Indies and brought newer territories under economic and political consolidation. At the same time, private agency-houses emerged, whose commercial activities ran parallel to that of the Company. These agency-houses or merchant-houses acted as agents for domestic manufacturers and merchants (working

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[8] For details, see Ryden, 'Sugar, Spirits, and Fodder'.

[9] Ibid, p. 42; 'Extract from a Despatch from Lord Bathurst to Major-General Sir B. D'Urban (Governor of British Guiana)', dated February 25, 1826, GG/2865, GG-MSS.

[10] North-Coombs, 'From Slavery to Indenture', p. 85.

[11] Ibid.

on commission), and heavily invested in enterprises in the locality of the overseas station, such as indigo plantations in eastern India.[12] Early pioneers of the agency-house in Calcutta included non-Company merchants already living in Calcutta by the 1820s, those who travelled to India as representatives of British merchants and shippers and stayed back to form their own partnerships, and merchants who went to India independently after the 1830s.[13] Most of these men were from wealthy farming, professional or mercantile families, and their conspicuous wealth, eligibility for borrowed capital, and control over local banking and insurance sectors facilitated their position as heavy fixed capital investors.

When Company servants were barred from private trade in 1788, private sector trading passed to the hands of agency-houses, and their hold over trade in India became more rooted with the removal of Company monopoly to Indian trade in 1813.[14] By the 1830s, the private sector opened up further due to end of the Company monopoly in China trade in 1833, and the granting of Europeans the right to own land in India. As pointed out in chapter 1, Calcutta became the site for several private agency-houses involved in shipping, insurance, commodity trade and labour migration—businesses that profited from a continued trade in Indian indentured labourers. Coordinating with merchants based in metropolitan port-cities such as Liverpool, Bristol and London, as also with West India planters, these agency-houses came to represent merchant voices against the prohibition of indenture.

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[12] S. D. Chapman, 'The Agency Houses: British Mercantile Enterprise in the Far East c. 1780–1920', *Textile History*, 19:2 (1988), p. 241.
Key works on agency-houses in Calcutta include Maria Misra, *Business, Race, and Politics in British India, c. 1850-1960* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Stephanie Jones, *Merchants of the Raj: British Managing Agency Houses in Calcutta Yesterday and Today* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992); S.B. Singh, *European Agency Houses in Bengal: 1783-1833* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1966); Chapman, 'The Agency Houses'; Tom Tomlinson, 'The Empire of Enterprise: Scottish Business Networks in Asian Trade, 1793-1810', *KIU Journal of Economics and Business Studies*, 8 (2001), 67-83; A.M. Misra, ''Business Culture' and Entrepreneurship in British India, 1860-1950', *Modern Asian Studies* (2000), 333-348.
Although some historians have claimed that agency-houses were unique to colonial Calcutta, Chapman argues that they were active in different parts of the world, such as Mathesons and Swires in China, Wallace Bros. and Steel Bros. in Burma, Hendersons in Borneo, Siam and Java, Mackinnon Mackenzie in East Africa, Finlay Muir in South Africa, Guthries, Bousteads, and Symes in Malaya, etc. Chapman, 'The Agency Houses', p. 239.

[13] Maria Misra, *Business, Race, and Politics*, pp. 30-31.

[14] B.R. Tomlinson, *The Economy of Modern India: From 1860 to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 97-98.

## Pro-Indenture Voices: Letters, Petitions and Committee Reports

At least in context of the indenture trade, merchant and planter interests were conflated, and they coordinated with each other through epistolary linkages and close personal and commercial relationship between West India planters and British merchants.[15] This section discusses the main ways in which this pro-indenture argument was vocalised—including through petitions, news articles, letters and reports.

Letters, periodicals and petitions emerged as the three main conduits that facilitated the formation, circulation and vocalisation of the pro-indenture argument. Merchant networks in the empire relied on interpersonal and epistolary linkages between merchants, planters and British lawmakers. Especially at the metropole, letters became the means for British planters and merchants to publicly argue in favour of indenture, as well as to convince lawmakers of the importance of continued indenture trade. As demonstrated in chapter 1, Liverpool planter John Gladstone's communication with the Calcutta-based Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co. was the initial impetus for a continued trade in Indian indentured labourers, his correspondence with parliamentarians like Lord Glenelg and Hobhouse was key to the legalisation of the indenture trade, and his letters with fellow merchants and members of the West India Merchant Association helped popularise indenture as an alternative to slave-labour in plantations. Letters were also useful to counter any claims supporting the prohibition of the indenture trade. For instance, in his letter to the Duke of Wellington in February 1838, Gladstone vehemently opposed public accusations of ill-treatment on his West Indian plantations, arguing that 'the most unjust and unfounded representations are now resorted to by those who are opposed to the West India interests, in order to inflame the public mind on this subject'.[16]

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[15] Although merchants and planters used separate petitions, often based in disparate locations, their arguments were similar, as was their position on the indenture trade. Moreover, merchant and planter communities held similar interests in the trade and the lines between them was often blurred since the same individual could act in both capacities. Therefore, this chapter often uses the umbrella term 'merchant voice' to refer to arguments of planters and merchants alike.

[16] Letter from John Gladstone, Andrew Colville and Henry Davidson to the Duke of Wellington, dated February 28, 1838, in 'Correspondence on the Taking of Coolies to British Guiana', GG/358, GG-MSS.

While letters worked at a more personal and individual level, petitions to the government emerged as a common way of expressing the pro-indenture argument publicly and *en masse*. The use of pro-indenture petitions drew from the longstanding English tradition of petitioning that dates back to the seventeenth century. Elizabeth Foster demonstrates that the stabilisation and consolidation of procedure by the seventeenth century, and belief in the security of written records necessitated petitioning as a formal means of communication with the Crown.[17] By the seventeenth century, the right to petition had become a salient right held by individuals and collectives.[18] Mass petitions, whether to the Crown, the parliament or local magistrates, also became the means of formation of a politically discursive public sphere in England. As David Zaret argues, petitions especially facilitated the flow of information and political messages from the public sphere in the periphery to the political centre.[19] Thus, the emergence of political petitions had attributed an unprecedented authority to public opinion in politics, and this was not just confined to metropolitan Britain.

By the eighteenth century, petitions had also emerged as a standard means of communication between colonies and the imperial centre—in the form of appeals for relief from natural disaster, reduction in imperial duties, as well as defence of the slave-labour system.[20] West India planters often petitioned the metropolitan government to defend planter interests and to prevent or delay Abolition and slavery reforms.[21] Similar to the anti-indenture and pro-indenture petitions of the mid-nineteenth century, these were quasi-constitutional means of seeking redress from the colonial administration. In the 'paper empire' of the English Atlantic, the very production and handling of such proslavery petitions became an exercise in the official registration of grievances. There are parallels between proslavery and pro-indenture petitions—especially because both

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[17] Elizabeth Read Foster, 'Petitions and the Petition of Right', *Journal of British Studies,* 14:1 (1974), 21-45.

[18] David Zaret, 'Petitions and the "Invention" of Public Opinion in the English Revolution', *American Journal of Sociology,* 101:6 (May, 1996), 1497-1555.

[19] Ibid, p. 1498.

[20] David Lambert, 'The Counter-Revolutionary Atlantic: White West Indian Petitions and Proslavery Networks', *Social & Cultural Geography,* 6:3 (2005), 409-20.

[21] Ibid. For parallels in use of petitions to oppose abolition and emancipation by African slaveholders, see K.O. Akurang-Parry, '"A Smattering of Education" and Petitions as Sources: A Study of African Slaveholders' Responses to Abolition in the Gold Coast Colony, 1874-1875', *History in Africa,* 27 (2000), 39-60.

appealed to planter interests, argued the sanctity of the planters' properties, and referred to the economic effects of change in sugar production. Moreover, in contrast to public petitions that emerged in the seventeenth century and constituted open appeals to the general public, many of these were 'private petitions', 'a traditional, privileged form of communication from periphery to political centre' conveying grievances about legislation.[22]

Petitioning was especially important in this context because of the transnational nature of the indenture debates. Pro-indenture petitions came in from Liverpool, London, Glasgow, Mauritius and the West Indies. In the absence of physical contact with the political nerve centre of the empire, petitions emerged as the very few ways in which individuals and groups from disparate parts of the British Empire could present grievances to the British parliament. Moreover, the discussion of these petitions in parliament showed that just as petitions from within the state, petitions from across the empire also held the authority to institute constitutional reforms. At the same time, the legitimacy of the petitions was affected by its ability to travel through proper channels, As Lambert argues in case of petitions related to slavery, 'the highly deferential style of writing demonstrates that petitioners sought to influence, and not challenge […] metropolitan authority'.[23]

Within Calcutta, merchant arguments in favour of continued trade were exemplified in a petition from merchant companies like M/s Henley, Dowson and Bestel in July 1838.[24] Closely following the Town Hall petition of 1838 that advocated an end to the indenture trade, this merchant petition argued that the agricultural prosperity of Mauritius depended on the supply of indentured labourers. Its prohibition would not only ruin those involved in the sugar trade, but also affect the agricultural

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[22] Lambert, 'The Counter-Revolutionary Atlantic', p. 408.

[23] Ibid, p. 411.

[24] 'Petition of Messers Henley, Dowson & Bestel and others, or the respectful representation of the merchants of Calcutta, who are connected with the trade of the Mauritius, in a memorial addressed to the President in Council of India in Council', dated July 23, 1838, Calcutta. General Department (General) Proceedings, August 1, 1838, No. 2, WBSA, Kolkata. Henceforth, 'Calcutta Merchant Petition, 1838'. Also appeared in 'Coolie Petition: The Representation of the Merchants of Calcutta, who are connected with the trade of the Mauritius, to the President of the Council of India in Council', *Calcutta Courier*, July 31, 1838.

prosperity of British plantation colonies.[25] Similar petitions also came out of the plantation colonies. A petition from planters, merchants, traders and other British inhabitants of Mauritius to the Court of Directors called the suspension of the indenture trade 'unconstitutional as restrictive of the personal liberty of all British subjects to take their persons and their industry from any part of the British Dominions to another'.[26] In British Guiana, planters, merchants and clergymen signed a petition in 1839 enumerating the problems of labour shortage since emancipation in the colony.[27] Colonial officials in such plantation colonies were often co-signers of such pro-indenture petitions, since a continuous and uninterrupted migration of Indian labourers was necessary to continue the mainstay of the island economy—its sugar plantations.

Periodicals also played an important role in expanding and popularising the pro-indenture argument. In contrast to petitions and committee reports, this was geared towards influencing public opinion rather than government regulations. In India, the *Calcutta Courier* and the *Courier de Pondicherry* were prominent pro-indenture periodicals that frequently updated the public on the indenture trade, reported on planter grievances and petitions, and publicly criticised periodicals with an anti-indenture stance.[28]

Pro-indenture voices were also evident in more official spaces, such as the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40. Appointed by the colonial government in response to public complaints against the indenture trade, this six-member committee produced a report in 1840 that pointed to ill-treatment of labourers in certain cases, and made suggestions for changes in emigration regulations. However, even as the report of the committee was overwhelmingly against continued indenture trade, two members of the committee William Dowson and J.P. Grant rejected its findings and submitted

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[25] 'Calcutta Merchant Petition', 1838.

[26] Quoted in *Bengal Hurkaru*, July 19, 1839.

[27] Letter from Governor Light to Lord Russell, dated December 22, 1839, in *British Guiana: Copies or extracts of any correspondence between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Governor of British Guiana, respecting the immigration of labourers into that colony* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 24 March 1840), p. 39. See also, enclosure to this letter, 'Petition Adopted at a Public Meeting of the Inhabitants of British Guiana', dated December 21, 1839.

[28] Their engagement with the pro-indenture argument is explored in the following sections.

separate minutes to voice their opinions.[29] Both argued that the problems of the indenture system were remediable through well-implemented regulations and did not warrant its complete prohibition. Dissensions within the committee report itself—a report that featured in the government's decision to regulate the indenture trade—is exemplary of how pervasive the merchant voice was within the Calcutta discursive space. This was further complicated by the fact that Dowson was a member of the merchant firm M/s Henley, Dowson and Bestel, which had countered the claims of the Town Hall meeting in a separate petition.

Pro-indenture voices were also present in spaces that were overwhelmingly anti-indenture, such as the Calcutta Town Hall meeting of 1838, and testimonies in front of the Calcutta investigative committee. Many who testified for the committee, for instance, maintained that indentured migrants in Mauritius were content and well-treated, and had no complaints.[30] Rev. Anthony Garstin testified that indentured labourers were treated with great humanity and tenderness during the voyage, and had access to abundant food.[31] He further stated that in talking to hundreds of labourers across several Mauritian plantations, he found no complaints of ill-treatment—labourers did less laborious work than in India while receiving higher wages.[32] Similarly, within the largely anti-indenture tenor of the Town Hall meeting, some pro-indenture arguments were forwarded. Mr. Osborne questioned the comparison drawn between slave trade and the indenture trade, saying that 'the likeness of the two trades was not so great as had been represented'.[33] He further argued that there were 'no proof of the alleged atrocities', and stated that if there were in fact atrocities, people in Mauritius would question it themselves. He urged, 'Why should the benevolence of the whole world be concentrated around this table?'[34]

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[29] The report of the committee was ultimately only signed by three of the six original members, since Major Archer left the investigations midway, and Grant and Dowson submitted separate reports that stood in contrast to the report of the committee.

[30] See, for instance, Testimony of Capt. J. Rapson, August 22, 1838; Testimony of Capt. R. Rayne, October 30, 1838; Testimony of A.P. Onslow, December 11, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[31] Testimony of Rev. A. Garstin, October 29, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[32] Ibid.

[33] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLIV, 1838.

[34] Ibid.

The records of the Mauritius committee, although they allegedly never reached parliament in time, also formed a crucial part of the pro-indenture argument. As part of the decision to appoint investigative committees in each participating colony and port-city, in October 1838, the Governor of Mauritius appointed an investigative committee to inspect Mauritian estates that employed Indian indentured labourers. It was led by Special Justice Campbell, Bury, Hugon, and Captain Villiers Forbes, and assisted by magistrates of each district. Alongside other commissions of enquiry, its aim was to investigate allegations of abuse in the indenture trade, and offer practical solutions. More specifically, it aimed to obtain accurate information on the treatment of Indian labourers in individual estates by visiting thirty-one estates and getting both plantation-owners and labourers to answer a set questionnaire. The interview questions were provided centrally by the Colonial Secretary of Mauritius, which the members of the committee were supposed to personally communicate to 'the Indians'.[35] The queries for Indian labourers included questions about their knowledge of the contract, payment, provisions supplied to them, hours of labour, medical attendance and their communication with their families in India, while that for plantation-owners focused on the number of employees and returnees, number of deaths, sickness and absence, and provisions for medical attendance.[36]

The committee offered separate reports for each district in Mauritius, but their underlying contentions remained the same. In contrast to the Calcutta investigative committee, it concluded that the employment situation in Mauritian estates was satisfactory and did not need many changes except for regulations around food and working hours. The report for Flacq, for instance, stated that every estate in the district included proper accommodation for labourers, with a hospital proportionate to the

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[35] Letter from G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary of Mauritius, to Special Justice Campbell [Leader of the Mauritius Investigative Committee], dated October 15, 1838, Colonial Secretary's Office, in 'Correspondence Respecting the Employment of Indian Labourers in the Mauritius', in *Mauritius: Copy of Despatches from Sir William Nicolay, on the Subject of Free Labour in the Mauritius* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, February 7, 1840), p. 15.

[36] 'Indian Labourers: Indian Inquiry of Savanne, Mauritius', in *Papers Regarding the Employment of Indian Indentured Labourers Overseas, Vol. 6: Report on the Condition of the labourers on 24 of the principal plantations in the Savanne District, Mauritius,* dated July 1839. Board's Collections, 1840-1841. Vol 1847, No. 77646, Legislative Department, IOR/F/4/1847/77646.

number of men employed.[37] Labourers were generally in good health, and mortality rates, although considerable, were not attributable to overwork or ill-treatment.[38] Although instituted to personally gather the grievances of Indian labourers in individual estates, there were several limitations to the working of the committee. The labourers were interviewed through interpreters and questioned in the presence of their employers. In fact, such limitations led Special magistrate Charles Anderson to refuse to sign the report of the Mauritius Committee, which he believed was misleading and based on evidence that was not credible.[39] He further pointed out that contrary to the contentions of the committee report, Indians were overworked and lived in dirty accommodations often without beds.[40] In spite of such opposition, the reports of the Mauritius committee and the correspondence around it played a central role in perpetuating the pro-indenture argument.

Mauritius was one of the earliest and most popular plantation colonies to use indentured labourers in the production of sugar, with Indian labourers migrating there since 1834. Most French proprietors in Mauritius, unlike their West Indian counterparts, resided in Mauritius, and many maintained an active presence in inspecting and supervising the work in their estates.[41] Being answerable to British creditors in the capital, the planters and plantation-owners faced immense pressure to increase economies of the estate, which resulted in rigorous controls over the distribution of rations and wage-calculation.[42] At the same time, planters and colonial residents in Mauritius had risen to an influential position in the administration by 1832.[43] The

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[37] Letter from the Committee of Inquiry on Indian Labourers to Captain G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, Port Louis, dated March 16, 1839. 'Indian Labourers: Indian Enquiry of Flacq, Mauritius'. *Papers regarding the employment of Indian indentured labourers overseas, Vol. 10: Report on the condition of the labourers on 22 estates in the Flacq District, Mauritius (includes answers to questionnaires, by both employers and labourers)*, dated February 1839-March 1839. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1847, No. 77650, IOR/F/4/1847/77650.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Letter from Charles Anderson to G.F. Dick, dated November 30, 1838, in 'Correspondence Respecting the Employment of Indian Labourers in the Mauritius', in *Mauritius: Copy of Despatches from Sir William Nicolay, on the Subject of Free Labour in the Mauritius,* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, February 7, 1840), pp. 36-37.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers,* p. 214.

[42] Ibid.

[43] North-Coombs, 'From Slavery to Indenture', p. 85.

strategic position of Mauritius, its commercial significance as a major sugar supplier to the British market, and the continued investment of British capitalists in Mauritian sugar estates created a close association between Mauritian and metropolitan capital.[44] The operation of the investigative committee in Mauritius, planters' reaction to it, and the consideration of planters' opinions by officials at Mauritius and metropolitan Britain betrayed the powerful position of planters within plantation colonies. By virtue of being settlers and controllers of the plantation economy in a small colony, planters were close to the power-structure and had a strong say in emigration regulations. Moreover, the administrative machinery in plantation colonies had as much stake in the move against prohibition as individual planters or merchants, since unlike larger colonies such as British India, they had an undue economic dependence on the plantation economy and its smooth functioning. Committee reports and planter-petitions from Mauritius are thus crucial for understanding the position of planters and plantation-owners based in Mauritius, and analysing how they affected the pro-indenture argument in the metropole.

The pro-indenture argument in Calcutta thus has to be studied in relation to voices from plantation colonies like Mauritius and British Guiana, because constant communication between merchants and planters of the empire resulted in a pro-indenture argument that was transnational. Moreover, this approach takes forward the 'web of empire' analysis to show that the empire worked on inputs from its disparate parts—be it Calcutta or plantation colonies. In fact, a juxtaposition of pro-indenture voices from Calcutta and Mauritius shows that the change of vantage-point between the recipient and the procurer of labour affected the regulations suggested. While the committee in Calcutta was more concerned with issues of recruitment, exploitation and the voyage, that in Mauritius focused more on the labourers' condition on plantations and economic effects of indentured immigration on the colony. It was the ideas floated in such letters, reports, periodicals and petitions that circulated in the empire and permeated the discourse on Indian indentured labour.

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[44] Ibid, pp. 88-89.

## A Three-Fold Argument: Legal, Economic and Humanitarian

The pro-indenture argument had emerged in the face of two interrelated pressures. On the one hand, the abolition of slavery had led to an immediate need to procure alternative labour forces and institute a change from slave-labour regime to a post-slave labour regime. On the other hand, those opposed to the indenture trade kept a strong pressure on British parliament to close down the newly-founded indenture trade. Thus, planters and merchants not only had to prove the need for an alternative source of labourers, but also demonstrate that Indian indentured labourers were the most well-suited for this post-slavery labour regime.

The main way in which anti-indenture arguments and legislation affected merchants and planters were by cutting into their profits, making them suffer losses from their massive investment into overseas plantations, or by turning the sugar trade into a loss-making business. However, this was not the main argument forwarded in most petitions and letters from planters. In contrast to an argument for personal mercantile profit, pro-indenture petitions resorted to broadly three nuanced lines of argument—legal, economic, and humanitarian. Each of these lines of argument were mutually supportive and served to assert the rights of merchants and planters while countering anti-indenture voices. The legal and humanitarian arguments countered two of the strongest claims of the anti-indenture argument—that the indenture trade was a continuation of slavery, and that it exploited labourers. The economic argument pushed for continued indentured emigration by linking the rights of merchants and planters to the prosperity of the British Empire.

These three arguments became the cornerstone of the pro-indenture lobby and pervaded most pro-indenture petitions, letters and reports—whether from Calcutta, British, or plantation colonies. Merchants in Calcutta remained a crucial part of this global network of merchants and planters, and actively represented their Calcutta-based interests while collaborating with other merchants of the empire to advance the pro-indenture argument. The following sections analyse each of these arguments in detail. They demonstrate that unlike the anti-indenture argument that was focused largely in Calcutta, pro-indenture rhetoric was created more collaboratively from across the globe, as British merchants and planters constantly communicated with each other across national boundaries.

**The Legal or Contractual Argument**

One of the foremost arguments made in favour of continued indenture trade was the legal argument, which emphasised that Indian indenture was a legitimate labour-system based on legally-binding contractual obligations, and that its prohibition was contrary to the tenets of the British justice system. This was a strong rebuttal of claims that the indenture trade was a continuation of slavery, arguing that the very presence of a contract and legal restrictions precluded the indenture trade from being similar to slavery or any unfree form of labour. British merchants and planters often contended that the indenture system was not inherently exploitative, and could be kept in check with government-mandated regulations. Alleged problems of the system, such as kidnapping, unlawful detention in depots, high rate of death and disease on voyages, or flogging were either rejected as exaggerated accusations, or considered within the acceptable spectrum of problems in a functioning labour system. Moreover, the legal argument also appealed to rule of law and notions of imperial responsibility. On the one hand, it emphasised that once legal contracts were instituted under well-defined and established laws, the system could not be uprooted. On the other hand, it implied that stopping the indenture trade without enquiry and evidence would be prejudicative, and would adversely impact British merchants and planters, whom the British government was duty-bound to protect.

As pointed out earlier, the contract or indenture was at the centre of the indenture debates. Merchants and planters used their very presence to argue for the legitimacy of the indenture trade, while those against the indenture trade pointed to fallacies within the contractual arrangement to argue for its prohibition. In the post-Abolition context, planter arguments took advantage of the denunciation of slavery and the caveat that any labour system following emancipation must by definition be free. The rubrics of defining ‘unfree’ and ‘free labour’ in the aftermath of Abolition were based on a complete and immediate revocation of the Atlantic slave trade—a juxtaposition that pro-indenture voices made use of to argue for continued indentured migration.

One of the earliest manifestations of the legal argument was in the Calcutta merchant petition of 1838. Closely following the Town Hall petition of 1838 that

advocated an end to the indenture trade, this merchant petition argued that the agricultural prosperity of Mauritius depended on the supply of indentured labourers.[45] Its prohibition would therefore not only be prejudicative and against 'the principle and practice of British justice', but also 'a sure means of entailing a ruinous degree of detriment on the Mauritian Sugar Trade […] [and] a Condemnation, without a hearing, of a most respectable body of merchants'.[46] The analogy drawn between slavery and indentured labour was rejected as 'forced and unjust', since indenture involved a voluntary contract.[47]

The legal argument also manifested in the minutes by Dowson and Grant, original members of the Calcutta investigative committee of 1838-40 who submitted separate minutes denouncing the committee report. In his evidence for the committee, Dowson agreed that the indenture system was far from perfect. He lamented that labourers were not informed properly that they will travel by sea, or that they will be away for five years, and provided anecdotal evidence of how middlemen recruiters often resorted to false claims about the indenture trade to procure labourers.[48] However, in spite of his reservations about the uncontrolled continuation of the indenture trade, Dowson was against its complete prohibition, arguing that the problems of the system were remediable through strict regulations. For Dowson, even if allegations against the indenture trade were true, they were 'insufficient ground for putting down the enlisting system'.[49] In fact, Dowson insinuated in his own report that the committee's report was partial, exaggerated and often false, acting rather like 'an advocate commenting upon evidence which he desires to make appear favourable to his own side of the question'.[50] He held that there were some specific failures of the indenture trade, but this problem was not systemic. Ultimately, Dowson argued that the indenture system actually

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[45] 'Calcutta Merchant Petition', 1838.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Testimony of W.F. Dowson, November 27, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'.

[49] William Frank Dowson, 'Minute on the Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Abuses alleged to exist Relative to the Export of Coolies', dated October 16, 1840, in *Letter from Secretary to Government of India, to Committee on Exportation of Hill Coolies: Report of Committee and Evidence* (East India House: Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, February 12, 1841), p. 13. Henceforth 'Dowson's Minute'.

[50] Ibid, pp. 13, 15.

presented ‘extremely little hardship to the Coolies’, and that every exception to that can be corrected through legislative interference.[51] Dowson’s argument is not surprising given that he had a direct stake in continued indenture trade—he was a member of the merchant firm M/s Henley, Dowson and Bestel, a signatory of the Calcutta merchant-petition.

Fellow-member of the Calcutta committee J.P. Grant also held that abuses of the indenture system could be countered by introducing more rigorous regulations. Grant considered that the indentured labour system, in spite of its abuses, was an exercise in free labour, and ultimately advantageous to the labourer, to India, to the colonies, and to the empire at large.[52] Through a re-reading of evidence collected by the committee, Grant argued that abolition should only act as a last resort, and that complete prohibition was detrimental to labourers since it ‘imposes special restrictions on the movements of free coloured native subjects.’[53] He not only argued that many of the allegations in the committee’s report (like abduction, deceitful recruitments and cheating labourers out of advances) were exaggerated, but also implored that existing abuses could easily be controlled through regulations. The fact that dissension occurred within the very committee tasked with locating abuses within the indenture system demonstrates how discussions around indenture in Calcutta were complicated and constantly negotiated between pro- and anti-indenture voices.

Periodicals in Calcutta also mirrored the legal argument in favour of continued trade. As pointed out in chapter 2, voices in periodicals were often more inflammatory and subversive. Pro-indenture news-reports and letters to editors often challenged government decision to discontinue the indenture trade in 1839, and openly questioned or mocked petitioners who were against the indenture trade.[54] In supporting the legal argument, they forwarded two main points—that the presence of contracts made the

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[51] Ibid, p. 17.

[52] Copy of Mr. J.P. Grant’s Minute on the Abuses Alleged to Exist in the Export of Coolies, dated March 1, 1841, in *Hill Coolies: Copy of Papers Respecting the Exportation of Hill Coolies* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, June 21, 1841), pp. 1-42. Henceforth, ‘Grant’s Minute’.

[53] Ibid, p. 4.

[54] For instance, the *Calcutta Courier* stated in 1838 that instances of ill-treatment of indentured migrants was exaggerated and ‘amount to a positive *swindle* of the public mind, and a gross abuse of that confidence which the public places in the statements of the papers.’ *Calcutta Courier*, July 4, 1838.

indenture trade an open and fair system, and that examples of ill-treatment or deception were exaggerated or outright false. A report in the *Courier de Pondicherry* argued, for instance, that 'there is no kidnapping, no confinement, no thrashing, no starvation. Coolies go voluntarily, joyfully, with music and dance.'[55] A letter to the editor of the *Englishman* stated that lax policing and inefficient magistracy was the core of the problems, rather than any issues inherent in the indenture system.[56] Another argued that prohibition of indenture not only accused *a priori* the colonial officials in plantations of being inefficient, but was equivalent to a declaration 'that British laws are deficient, magistrates unmindful, officers powerless, governments incapable or unwilling, to protect the Indian labourers.'[57]

In face of rigorous regulations, the instances of kidnapping and ill-treatment of indentured migrants were frequently posited in pro-indenture periodicals as exaggerations and lies. A report in the *Calcutta Courier* argued that 'it is quite a fallacy to assert that the coolies do not understand their contracts; and that they have not that strong repugnance to leave their homes for a consecutive series of five years'.[58] In fact, it was argued that 'No single Coolie gets a permit of embarkation without having a personal interview with the Superintendent of Police. The duffadars are kicked out, the doors of the hall of audience closed—and then from the very lips of the Superintendent himself are they told, where they are going, and upon what contract; that they are perfectly free agents, and with full liberty to go or remain'.[59] In another case, they argued that numbers for kidnapping and deaths on passage were exaggerated by rival newspapers ('extended by the rapid imagination [because] it thrills the blood, and fires the brain'), and there was no evidence of corporal punishment in plantations.[60]

Planters in Mauritius followed a similar line of argument. The formation of the Mauritian investigative committee to report on the condition of Indian labourers in plantation estates was immediately followed by a planter-petition from Flacq district that criticised the aim and mode of this investigation. This planter-petition emphasised

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[55] Quoted in *Friend of India*, July 26, 1838.
[56] Letter to the Editor, *Englishman*, July 20, 1838.
[57] Letter to the Editor, *Englishman*, July 14, 1838.
[58] *Calcutta Courier*, July 14, 1838.
[59] *Calcutta Courier*, July 4, 1838.
[60] *Calcutta Courier*, July 9, 1838.

the ‘gentleness and humanity’ with which Indian labourers were treated in plantations and contended that although it was important to enquire into plantation conditions, this particular investigation did not present an accurate account of the state of affairs.[61] It recorded very specific grievances of merchants and planters against investigative committees, and thus provides an insight into the planters’ perspective on contracts. Notably, it used terms such as master (*maître*) when speaking of plantation owners, reflecting a hierarchical relationship within plantations reminiscent of the erstwhile slave-master relations.

The planter-petition from Flacq reiterated the legal argument by questioning the methodology of enquiry—that of travelling to each plantation estate in each district to ask questions of planters and labourers about their experience of the indenture trade. The petition stated categorically that questioning the indentured Indians *en masse* would create inaccuracies in the enquiry since some of the labourers were undisciplined and could persuade others to lie.[62] Another logistical difficulty was the language barrier with labourers. The petition recommended that each request made to an Indian and its reply should be translated for the plantation owner in a language he understood, so that they could justify themselves against falsehood or slander and even seek counter-investigation if required.[63] Ultimately, the petition made clear that the main purpose of the inquiry ought to be to ensure that each article of contract was maintained on the plantations and that Indians labourers did not take advantage of the investigation to spread slander about planters. This re-focusing of the authorities’ attention from the labourers’ experience during recruitment, passage and plantation to the upholding of a legal contract was an important feature of the pro-indenture argument.

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[61] ‘Petition of Planters from Flacq, Mauritius’. Enclosure to Letter from C.M. Campbell, J. Villiers Forbes, Hugon and Bury to G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, dated February 18, 1839, Flacq. In *Papers regarding the employment of Indian indentured labourers overseas, Vol. 10: Report on the condition of the labourers on 22 estates in the Flacq District, Mauritius*. *Board’s Collections, 1840-41*. Vol. 1847, No. 77650. IOR/F/4/1847/77650, February-March 1839 [In French. Translations mine] Henceforth ‘Flacq Planter Petition, 1839’.

[62] As evidence, the petition stated that labourers had on several occasions left the plantation to complain on the most frivolous pretexts. But when separated from the group and questioned individually, they declared that they were well-treated and had no complaint, but had been influenced (often threatened) to complain by some of their fellow-labourers. ‘Flacq Planter Petition’, 1839.

[63] Ibid.

A separate petition from merchants and planters in Mauritius argued that there existed various stages of regulations and official procedures the labourer had to go through before reaching the destination plantation.[64] This included written bi-lingual contracts during their engagement in the service, explanation of the contract of hiring by appointed officials of the state, deposition of such contracts with police magistrates at the destination colony (i.e. Mauritius), inspection of labourers by a Government medical officer before transferring them to their respective plantation estates, regular payment of wages, and food provisions.[65] For the petitioners, these regulatory steps made the indenture trade legal and removed opportunities for mistreatment or deception.

Planters in Mauritius had an undeniable influence on colonial strategy in regards to the indenture trade. Members of the Mauritius investigative committee soon complained to the Colonial Secretary G.F. Dick that the planters who signed the petition had made it impossible to conduct the investigation 'in the mode proposed […] viz. that of examining each Indian separately and recording each deposition'.[66] The planters were so persuasive as to make the Colonial Secretary advise that the enquiries of the committee be ceased.[67] In fact, in keeping with the idea of enforcing the legal requirements of the contract, in January 1840, six planters from Mauritius submitted a plan for the establishment of an Emigration Committee to oversee the introduction of labourers, monitor their conditions in the colony, and uphold regulations to prevent their exploitation in the hands of planters and overseers.[68] This system shifted the

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[64] 'Petition of Planters, Merchants, Traders, and other Inhabitants of Mauritius'. Enclosure 1 to *Correspondence Respecting the Employment of Indian Labourers in the Mauritius*, No. 62 (Printed by the House of Commons, 7 February 1840).

[65] Ibid.

[66] Letter from C.M. Campbell, J. Villiers Forbes, Hugon and Bury to G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, dated February 18, 1839, Flacq. In *Papers regarding the employment of Indian indentured labourers overseas, Vol. 10: Report on the condition of the labourers on 22 estates in the Flacq District, Mauritius*, dated February 1839-March 1839. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1847, No. 77650, IOR/F/4/1847/77650.

[67] Letter from G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary to C.M. Campbell, President of the Committee of Inquiry on Indians [in Mauritius], dated February 28, 1839. 'Indian Labourers: Indian Enquiry of Flacq, Mauritius' in *Papers regarding the employment of Indian indentured labourers overseas, Vol. 10: Report on the condition of the labourers on 22 estates in the Flacq District, Mauritius*, dated February 1839-March 1839. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1847, No. 77650, IOR/F/4/1847/77650.

[68] Letter from James Edward Arbuthnot, C. Brownrigg, M.T. Rowlandson, Henry Barlow, Robert Bullen and Edward Chapman to Lieutenant-General Sir William Nicolay, dated

responsibility of ensuring the well-being of the indentured migrants from the colonial government to the employers. Instead of the metropolitan government, individual planters under this system would be responsible to the local government for the hospitable treatment of labourers, who could apply penalties for deviation from existing laws. A similar plan was proposed by the Mauritius Free Labor Association, which wanted planters to be at the forefront of recruitment and to maintain emigration regulations by appointing officials of its own.[69] The proactive role of planters in suggesting schemes for continued emigration was testament to their pervasive presence and influence in policies affecting the plantation colony. Further, suggestions for change highlighted the willingness of merchants and planters to accept increased regulations, and underlined how receptive they were to compromises in order to avoid absolute prohibition.

Ultimately, petitions and reports that forwarded the legal argument emphasised that the indenture trade was based on legally-binding contractual obligations. Its complete prohibition is not only in variance with the principles of the British legal system, but also an exaggerated response to allegations of ill-treatment. This moved the focus of the indenture debates from the binary of prohibition and continuation, to the compromise that problems within the trade should be corrected and regulated. Moreover, in official eyes, consent of the indentured labourer was important, but if this consent was obtained in the form of a contract, there remained no objections to the indenture trade. A letter between parliamentarians and planters from 1841 stated, for instance: 'the consent of coolies is indispensably necessary to the validity of the transfer of their services. Yet if that consent was fully and fairly given, we do not see anything illegal in the transaction Mr. Gladstone states […] coolies cannot complain of a breach of contract if with a full knowledge of the facts they agree to serve'.[70] This appeal to

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December 17, 1839, Port Louis, Mauritius. Home Department, Public Branch Consultations, May 13, 1840, No. 16. NAI.

[69] Letter from Edward Chapman, Halir Griffiths, H. Hunter and Henry Barlow to Lieutenant General Sir Lionel Smith (Governor), dated January 14, 1841, Port Louis. In *Papers Regarding the Emigration of Indian labourers to the British Colonies, Vol. 2: Hill Coolies: Report of the Committee, Minutes of Council*, dated April 22, 1841 to May 12, 1842. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1909, No. 81645. IOR/F/4/1909/81645.

[70] Letter from J. Campbell and Thomas Wild to Lord Russell, dated February 9, 1841, in 'Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1806-1849', GG/2768, GG-MSS.

rule of law and contractual obligation was the premise on which the legal argument was based.

**The Economic Argument, or the Position of Planters**

Such a re-focusing of the indenture debates to suit the needs of the post-Abolition environment was also evident in the economic argument. Instead of pointing to how the prohibition of indenture would mean commercial ruin for individual planters and merchants, the economic argument highlighted the plight of the plantation colonies as a whole and pointed to the unjust treatment of merchants and planters of the empire. Plantation colonies were considered special due to their undue dependence on commodity production. The economic argument thus emphasised the centrality of indentured migration to plantation economies, and the centrality of plantations in turn, to British economy. The economic argument was carefully constructed to focus more on the collective than the individual. It highlighted that the plantation economy, British economic health, and the personal and collective prosperity of merchants and planters were dependent on continued indenture trade and continuous commodity production.

The need-for-labour argument had been used since the turn of the century to argue that if alternative labour-forces were not recruited immediately after Abolition, it would lead to the financial ruin of all British plantation colonies. This argument was initially made to counter anti-slavery voices in parliament, to argue against Abolition and emancipation, and later to argue in favour of financial compensation for planters who lost their slave-labour due to Abolition. After Abolition, the need-for-labour argument became part of the pro-indenture argument, to point out that there existed an urgent and crucial need for alternative labour forces to be employed in overseas plantation colonies. For instance, in his letter to Liverpool merchant Andrew Colville, John Gladstone urged ‘if a supply of labourers for [Jamaica and Demerara], who can be bound to serve the Planters for a reasonable number of years cannot be procured from some quarter or other and in considerable numbers, the ruin of both colonies cannot be averted for many years’.[71]

[71] Letter from John Gladstone to Andrew Colville, dated November 11, 1839, in ‘Letters from Andrew Colville (from London), 1831-49’, GG/100, GG-MSS.

The petition of Calcutta merchants was one of the earliest that documented this argument. The Calcutta merchant petition of 1838 closely followed the Town Hall petition in favour of abolition of the indenture trade, and rejected the latter as 'unfounded with facts', hostile to merchants and ultimately detrimental to Mauritian sugar trade and economy.[72] The merchant-petition argued that measures for prohibition not only relegated merchant interests to the background and condemned them financially, but also questioned their motivations and respectability. It sought to draw a direct correlation between the suspension of indentured emigration, commercial prospects of planters in Mauritius, and the 'slur' on the body of merchants, which was taken as a personal affront. It further implied that the suspension would be 'discreditable to the British mercantile character, and opposed to the feelings of true philanthropy'.[73] Their argument for continued migration operated on three-levels—that the cases of maltreatment and deceptive recruiting practices were unproven, that even if they were provable, public opinion was pre-emptively biased against the planters, and that even if the alleged abuses existed, they were remediable and hence not sufficient grounds for suspension of the entire system.[74]

Talking more specifically about the economic considerations of the indenture trade, the merchant-petition asked to consider that those connected with the trade or Mauritius had made large purchases of land, invested in the trade and diverted capital into Mauritian agriculture, which would be detrimentally affected by 'a hasty and arbitrary suspension of the Coolie-labor trade'.[75] The petition went to the extent of calling the detriment to the Mauritian economy a 'national injury'—forwarding the idea that Mauritian economy and British economy were intricately linked.[76] Similar arguments emerged in a letter to the editor of the *Calcutta Courier* in July 1838.[77] Accusing journalists of slandering those involved in the indenture trade by accusing them of ill-treatment and forced labour, this letter considered it the duty of a good citizen to correct these assumptions. It maintained that the suspension of the indenture trade would not only deprive the labourers of their freedom by confining them to a state

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[72] 'Calcutta Merchant Petition', 1838.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] 'The Cooly Question', Letter to the Editor, *Calcutta Courier*, July 21, 1838.

of ‘almost serfdom’ with little opportunity of employment, but also ‘annihilate’ the colonies.[78]

Similar sentiments were mirrored in a petition of Mauritian planters, merchants and traders from 1839.[79] Submitted in May 1839, this protested against the Order-in-Council of September 1838, which had invalidated any future contracts made outside the island, and those made for a period longer than twelve months.[80] It emphasised that sugar cultivation was the mainstay of the Mauritian economy: ‘the staple produce of the colony, and the only article of commerce which is the growth of the soil, so that the fortune of every single individual depends entirely on the success and extent of its culture [cultivation].’[81] Using hyperbole about the centrality of sugar cultivation in Mauritius economy, it pointed out that Mauritius produces a considerable amount of sugar and that ‘an immense amount of British capital has been invested in the manufacture of sugar, which has increased the produce very materially’.[82] This included ‘considerable purchases of land, machinery, cattle, and agricultural implements’ and the erection of buildings and infrastructure.[83] Annual average production, it implored, increased from 16,000 tonnes before 1829 to 34,000 tonnes during the ten years following that, pointing to a direct correlation between agricultural profits and indentured immigration.[84]

Similar planter responses were seen in British Guiana. In December 1839, 773 ‘Clergy, Planters, Merchants, and other Inhabitants’ of British Guiana signed a petition to ask for loans to ‘recuperate from a debilitating labor shortage precipitated by

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[78] Ibid.

[79] ‘Petition of Planters, Merchants, Traders, and other Inhabitants of Mauritius’. Enclosure 1 to *Correspondence Respecting the Employment of Indian Labourers in the Mauritius*, No. 62 (Printed by the House of Commons, 7 February 1840), p. 7. Henceforth, ‘Mauritius Planter Petition’, 1839. Although the petition does not mention the names of the undersigned, except that there were 100 signatories, the letter from G.F. Dick accepting receipt of the petition is addressed to Messes. Hunter, Arbuthnot and Co., who was possibly the major merchant-house behind the petition.

[80] The Order-in-Council, titled ‘An Order for Regulating the Relative Rights and Duties of Masters and Servants’, effectively ensured that Mauritian planters could only employ labourers already on the island, that too for a maximum of twelve months.

[81] ‘Mauritius Planter Petition’, 1839.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid

[84] Ibid.

emancipation the previous year.'[85] It stated that to maintain economic security and prosperity, the British government ought to help West Indian sugar estate proprietors out of the difficulties caused by Abolition. Petitioners further argued that a loan was essential since the colony did not at the time have the resources needed for a sufficiently extensive immigration scheme to enable it to recover from the blows delivered by emancipation. This petition created a direct link between economic and 'moral' ruin by highlighting that prohibiting emigration would not only affect cropping, but also increase the propensity for crime.[86] It warned that if no loans were forwarded, the capital used in buildings and machinery would be lost and the labourers would 'speedily degenerate into a state of barbarism'.[87]

The sentiment espoused in such petitions were not unique. It echoed a popular opinion among government officials in destination plantation colonies, that a continuous and uninterrupted migration of Indian labourers was necessary to continue the mainstay of the island economy—its sugar plantations. For instance, Governor Nicolay of Mauritius expressed support for the petitioners when forwarding the petition to Lord Glenelg and asked for speedy removal of the prohibition.[88] Governor Nicolay did not deny there were 'nefarious practices' around the employment of labourer, but was confident that strong laws and regulations would be able to contain such practices.[89] He further pointed out that proximity of Mauritius to the Indian subcontinent and constant communication between the two countries were particularly conducive for Indian authorities to keep an eye on the true condition of emigrants into the colony.

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[85] Letter from Governor Light to Lord Russell, dated December 22, 1839, in *British Guiana: Copies or extracts of any correspondence between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Governor of British Guiana, respecting the immigration of labourers into that colony* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 24 March 1840), Vol. 34, p. 39. See also, enclosure to this letter, 'Petition Adopted at a Public Meeting of the Inhabitants of British Guiana', dated December 21, 1839.

[86] The petition held that idleness on the part of the labourers would increase crime-rates. Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Despatch from Sir William Nicolay to Lord Glenelg, dated May 4, 1839. *Correspondence Respecting the Employment of Indian Labourers in the Mauritius* (Printed by the House of Commons, 7 February 1840). See also Despatch from Sir William Nicolay to Lord Glenelg, dated May 21, 1839 in the same document.

[89] Ibid.

Further arguments against emigration were formulated in the correspondence between merchants and agency-houses on the one hand, and the metropolitan government, or its representatives in the colonies, on the other. In May 1841, two Calcutta-based agency-houses named Messrs Colville, Gilmore and Co. and Messrs Saunders, May, Sarkies and Co. petitioned for the emigration of labourers from Calcutta to Mauritius. What started off as a petition for a certain number of labourers seeking passage to Mauritius, became one emphasising the indispensability of indentured labourers in Mauritian economy.[90] Pointing to the losses that Mauritian plantations would suffer if indentured immigration were to discontinue, the letter stated: 'much of the crop that is now upon the ground must otherwise [perish] and serious loss to individuals and injury to the Island be the result, besides increasing the difficulties, which are at present felt in England from the high prices of sugar caused by the short crops from the West India Colonies.'[91] Given the urgency of labourers needed to cut the crops in June and July, they made a case for immediate arrangements for immigration, promising to 'give any security for the good treatment of the people, and the faithful payment of the wages that may be stipulated for'.[92] They also pointed to the large capital investments tied to the crop and its distribution (by metropolitan agencies such as the London-based Reid and Co., for instance), which would further be hampered by the prohibition of the indenture trade. Although their petition was ultimately rejected by the Governor-General in Council by citing the prohibitory Act XIV of 1839, the arguments forwarded by the agency-houses reflected common points of argument in favour of continued trade in indentured labourers, pointing especially to their own commercial stake in the indenture trade.[93]

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[90] Letter from Messers Saunders, May, Sarkies and Co. to I.R. Colvin, Private Secretary to Governor General, dated May 3, 1841, Calcutta. In *Papers Regarding the Emigration of Indian labourers to the British Colonies, Vol. 2: Correspondence of two Calcutta Houses of Agency, viz. Messrs Colville, Gilmore and Co. and Messrs Saunders, May, Sarkies*, dated March 1841-May 1841. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1909, No. 81646, IOR/F/4/1909/81646.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Letter from G.A. Bushby, Secretary to the Government of India to Messers Saunders, May, Sarkies and Co, dated May 5, 1841. In *Papers Regarding the Emigration of Indian labourers to the British Colonies, Vol. 2: Correspondence of two Calcutta Houses of Agency, viz. Messrs Colville, Gilmore and Co. and Messrs Saunders, May, Sarkies*, dated March 1841-May 1841. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1909, No. 81646, IOR/F/4/1909/81646.

Ultimately, the economic argument maintained that complete prohibition of the indenture trade would be ruinous to both the destination colonies and to British trading interests, emphasising that Indian indentured labourers could not be replaced without ruining the plantation economy and hampering the trade in sugar. It stood on three inter-related pillars of reasoning. Firstly, that indenture trade was linked to wider networks of sugar trade, colonial economy and plantation economy. Prohibition of the indenture trade would not only be disastrous for individual planters, but also have a ruinous knock-on effect on these. Secondly, prohibition or delegalising indenture was an *a priori* accusation of both planters and British authorities in plantation colonies. Thirdly, planters and merchants saw the use of slaves, and later apprentices and Indian labourers as their rights that should be protected by the empire and state. This was apparent in letters and petitions that highlighted the importance of trade and migrant labour, and also the right to employ such labour. While the focus on merchant profits and economic ruin is unsurprising, it is the way in which the collective was emphasised over the individual that betrays the post-slavery nature of such pro-indenture petitions.

**The Humanitarian or 'Free Labour' Argument**

In most petitions, however, these two arguments were overshadowed by the humanitarian argument that posed the indenture trade as a trade in 'free labour'. The post-Abolition atmosphere had necessitated a change in tactics, where petitions for policy changes required a shift of focus from individual to collective profits, and necessitated consideration of the labourers' benefits within the scheme. Thus, the legal and economic arguments often came to be conflated with, and often strategically superseded by a humanitarian one, where continuation of indentured emigration was supposed to benefit both the planter and the labourer.

This line of argument emphasised that migrant labourers under the British Empire had a right to sell their labour to the highest bidder and choose their employment. By this logic, the prohibition of indenture impinged on labourers' right of movement and choice of employment, and also kept them from better payment and working conditions. This argument was directed against the anti-indenture rhetoric brewing at the colonies and the metropole. This strategic preference for legal and humanitarian rather than economic arguments, points to the influence of the post-slavery moment. The post-slavery nature of the indenture debates made free labour

arguments the most persuasive, and merchant voices took advantage of this situation to vocalise their concerns accordingly.

In a letter relating to the advantage of employing Indian indentured labourers in Mauritian plantations, planters advocated the indenture scheme as beneficial to labourers as well as to British India:

> [B]y not only ridding [India] of her superabundant population, but by providing her with a future supply of workmen, who will have acquired here a competent skill and knowledge in cultivation] […]. [T]heir emigration here is unquestionably advantageous to themselves, by their procuring higher wages, in a climate more healthy than their own, and by their removal from a country where, under the Hindu and Mahommedan law, some degree of qualified slavery is still supposed to exist, to an island from whence its last vestige had for ever disappeared.[94]

Focused around how continued indentured emigration was creating a skilled agricultural workforce and guaranteeing employment, higher wages and freer working conditions to labourers, this statement echoed the humanitarian argument often made in planter and merchant petitions. More importantly, it turned the slavery argument on its head by stating that unlike British India, where slavery was still not legally abolished, the plantation colonies represented free spaces where the migrant labourer would not be subject to slave-like conditions. This was one of the most blatant examples of planters and merchants taking advantage of the post-abolition situation to argue that the indenture trade was by definition post-slavery and hence an exercise in 'free' labour. The irony of this statement from erstwhile slave-owners demonstrates how the planters deemed to speak on behalf of the labourers to justify their arguments, while distancing themselves from plantation slavery in their own estates. The passage of the parliamentary act to abolish slavery had led to a dangerous stance that obliterated the history of slavery and absolved the planter of all responsibility for atrocities under plantation slavery.

With the legal abolition of the institution of slavery in the British Empire by 1833, and especially in context of debates on servitude that immediately preceded it, the

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[94] Extract from the Proceedings of the Honourable the President of the Council of India in Council in the General Department, dated July 11, 1838. In *Correspondence Respecting the Employment of Indian Labourers in the Mauritius*, No. 62. (Printed by the House of Commons, 7 February 1840).

juxtaposition of ‘freedom’ and ‘unfreedom’ had become central to nineteenth-century discourses on labour. As Madhavi Kale points out, indentured labour was successful in ‘enabling that crucial dichotomization of slavery and freedom, even as substantially less than ‘free’ labor and social conditions not only persisted but indeed proliferated under the aegis of empire and its (coercive) civilizing mission.’[95] In the aftermath of anti-slavery movements and debates on servitude, it was important for any unfree labour-system, or any systematic movement of labourers to comply with the legal, economic and ethical principles of post-slavery society. This was complemented by the argument that indentured migration not only provided a viable and lucrative employment option, but actually saved migrants from the unfortunate socio-economic conditions in their respective villages.

Such arguments grew largely out of counter-arguments to the prohibition of indentured labour, and specifically its alleged resemblance to slavery. For instance, the argument that prohibition of the indenture trade bound labourers within the confines of their immediate surroundings was a direct response to the anti-indenture argument that accused the indenture trade of being inherently exploitative and curbing the labourer’s freedom. Freedom of labourers—whether to transcend their geographical (and by implication, socio-cultural) boundaries, or against exploitation—was a theme common to both those in favour of, and those against indentured migration. Alongside legal and economic arguments, improving the conditions of migrant workers formed a central pillar on which the arguments of planters and merchants were based. This line of argument was visible in petitions from Calcutta and Mauritius.

In addressing the analogy to the slave trade, the Calcutta merchant-petition of 1838 stated that far from being a continuation of slavery, the indenture trade represented a ‘free labour market’ characterised by voluntary emigration.[96] According to the petitioners, Mauritian estates provided not only superior wages and better conditions of work as compared to India, but also a wider market for labour.[97] It argued that the conditions of employment and migration—‘a most liberal rate of money payment, an abundant supply of wholesome food, a degree of daily labour far within the physical powers of any race of men, kind personal treatment, and a free passage back to their

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[95] Kale, *Fragments of Empire*, p. 175.
[96] ‘Calcutta Merchant Petition’, 1838.
[97] Ibid.

own country when their time of service has expired'—were superior to those enjoyed by other labourers across the world and satisfactory to the indentured labourers themselves.[98] At a more personal level, continued emigration was supposed to bring affluence to the labourers' homes and morally uplift them by 'expand[ing] their minds beyond the narrow circle of their various local prejudices'.[99]

In fact, economic and other arguments were strategically relegated to the background by arguing that ultimately, it was 'a question involving the rights of British subjects […] to carry their manual labour to the most productive market'.[100] The act of prohibition was feared to set a most dangerous precedence of curbing constitutional liberty. This turned the anti-indenture argument on its head by implying that rather than ensuring the freedom of labourers from exploitation, the abolitionary measure in fact *curbed* their rights of employment and movement. Such an interpretation of the indenture trade not only brought the freedom of labourers to the centre of the debate, but also asserted that continued indentured emigration was beneficial to the labourers.

In fact, to prove its confidence in the positive effects of continued indenture trade, the merchant-petition from Calcutta pointed out that if the allegation of trafficking was substantiated, the merchant community would support any revised regulations because contrary to popular belief, false recruitment affected commercial interests of merchants. Employing labourers by unscrupulous means, it maintained, would render them 'unwilling' and cause them to spread bad reports that would make it further difficult to procure labourers.[101] This is an important statement since it eliminated the premise for a significant point of criticism forwarded by the proponents of anti-indenture—that planters would allow the indenture trade to continue in spite of allegations of mistreatment and deception. Such assertions worked in favour of the planters and merchants since it not only assuaged them of the guilt of false recruitment and mistreatment, but also asserted that such practices were commercially unviable. This rhetoric fit in with the post-Abolition socio-political environment that required labour to be distinct from servitude and in its extreme implied that any form of labour-system post-Abolition was by definition 'free'. In concluding, the petitioners stated that 'on

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

general grounds of good policy, the trade in free labour is not only defensible but worthy of commendation'.[102]

Although largely a meeting of Calcutta citizens who wanted the indenture trade to stop, the Calcutta Town Hall meeting also saw some argument in favour of continued trade. Captain A.G. Mackenzie argued that in his experience, the indenture trade was not as 'inhuman' as it has been made out to be. In fact, he worried that such a grave and exaggerated narrative of the trade would be 'an acknowledgement, that [people of Bengal] had permitted a slave trade to grow up and flourish under [their] eyes, until exposed to the world by Lord Brougham'.[103] Even Longueville Clarke, who mostly advocated the end of indenture, stated that if the indenture trade was proved to be not injurious to the labourer, then 'the labourer had a right to seek employment abroad without reference to the interests of the cultivators at home'.[104]

The humanitarian argument was also apparent in the report of the Calcutta investigative committee. William Dowson's minute criticised the report of the committee to argue that the emigration of Indian indentured labourers was 'a voluntary act'.[105] In fact, he argued that the argument for prohibition of the trade was 'a principle destructive of the liberty of the subject […] a species of tyranny not for a moment to be endured, as it would destroy the political free agency of the subject'.[106] Dowson was convinced that prohibiting the indenture trade will prevent labourers from seeking the most profitable market and limit them to 'a country where their labour barely suffices [...] to subsist them in the most wretched manner, and where they are subject to almost annual visitations of famine and disease'.[107] Further, he pointed out that some degree of misrepresentation and deception existed in all recruitment—whether of military men, sailors, or workers. Thus, it was not fair to consider it as an exclusive and abhorrent feature of the indenture trade.[108]

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[102] Ibid.
[103] 'Meeting for Preventing the Exportation of Coolies', *Calcutta Review*, Vol. XLIV, 1838.
[104] Ibid.
[105] 'Dowson's Minute', 1840, p. 13.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.

J.P. Grant's report mirrored Dowson's sentiments. Speaking of the unjust effect it had on the labourers' agency, Grant stated in his report that the prohibitory act of May 1839 had been passed to counteract abuses in the indenture system, but ended up prohibiting *all* spontaneous emigration free of contracts where no such abuses have been alleged:

> [T]his law prohibits all the labouring population of this immense portion of the empire, including skilled labourers or artisans, as well as unskilled labourers, from going of their own accord, as free intelligent workmen, unfettered by any contract, from hence, where their labour may be unable to feed them, to other portions of the empire where their labour may be invaluable. [...] it is an impolitic and unjust law.[109]

In contrast to Dowson, Grant's main objection to the prohibitory regulations lay in its effect on labour migrations outside the limits of indenture, stating that it was unwarranted and objectionable. While prone to exaggeration, the underlying implication of this statement was that such as act of prohibition would set a legal precedence for all forms of migratory labour and would become an act that curtailed future labourers from exercising their rights.

For Grant, it was a question of 'whether the whole of the labouring population of the vast portion of Her Majesty's territories entrusted to the government of the East India Company ought, or ought not, to be as free as the rest of Her Majesty's subjects in respect to the disposal of their labour, and their right of going about.'[110] This not only equated prohibition to severe curtailment of rights, but also celebrated continued indenture trade as a triumph of humanitarian values, where the Indian labourer could enjoy the same legal rights as a British citizen to travel and sell his labour.

Pro-indenture periodicals also celebrated continued indentured migration as a philanthropic endeavour. A letter published in the *Calcutta Courier* summed up this pro-indenture argument: 'if the cooley is pleased with his conditions and the employer is content with his servant, and that each is shielded by the law from the power of being injured by the other, why should the eager desire of the labourer's friend seek to deprive

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[109] Grant's Minute, pp. 3-4.
[110] Ibid, p. 1.

him of benefitting by his voluntary exile'.[111] The *Courier de Pondicherry*, for instance, applauded indenture as 'the finishing stroke of the grand and philanthropic measure […] for the emancipation of the slaves'.[112] Its reports argued that labourers migrated voluntarily and on the plantations, enjoyed 'a degree of happiness which they have never tasted before', away from the 'state of degradation and slavery' they experience in India.[113] Similarly, according to the *Calcutta Courier*, indentured labourers fully understood their contracts and willingly renewed their arguments, because they were 'fat and contented' and free from 'that servility which characterizes them, here [in India]'.[114] In a later news-report, the *Calcutta Star* cited the wealth brought home by returning coolies as evidence of their well-being.[115] Drawing a direct connection between migration and personal improvement, this report argued that 'coolies returned from Demerara [are] morally improved […] they have been awakened to a sense of their rights as citizens; […] from mere listless hangers on upon society they have been elevated into men and citizens'.[116]

Another argument that stood out in pro-indenture newspapers was the reversal of the similarity-to-slavery argument, to urge that continued indenture trade was actually a deterrent to slavery. For instance, *Calcutta Courier* argued that the suspension of the indenture trade from Bengal would warrant increased emigration from French Pondicherry, possibly even of British citizens, where there would be less surveillance and regulations to secure the labourers' welfare.[117] Playing to the anti-slavery sentiments of British public, the underlying implication was that since slavery was not yet abolished in the French Empire, it would be irresponsible of the British government to let emigration happen from French-Indian ports instead of British-Indian territories. In a later report, the *Calcutta Star* accused that if the indenture trade from Bengal were to stop because of pressure from the anti-indenture lobby, Britain would have to depend

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[111] Letter to the Editor, *Calcutta Courier*, July 19, 1838.
[112] 'The Courier de Pondicherry and the Cooly Trade', *Friend of India*, July 26, 1838.
[113] Ibid.
[114] *Calcutta Courier*, December 11, 1840.
[115] *Calcutta Star*, October 9, 1843.
[116] Ibid.
[117] It asked, 'How much better would it be to strike at the root of the evil here; put the emigration on a proper footing, by exploding the Duffadar system, and leaving the Coolie a free agent.' *Calcutta Courier*, July 12, 1838. See also, Letter to the Editor, *Calcutta Courier*, July 19, 1838.

on import of sugar from territories outside its empire, such as Brazil and Cuba, 'where slavery is still present'.[118]

The beneficial-to-India argument was taken forward in other contemporary documents. In a letter to Colonial Secretary John Russell, for instance, the London West India Merchants' Association made the same case, linking together the economic and free labour arguments.[119] Signed by planters with estates in British Guiana that employed Indian migrants, this letter turned the question of labourers' rights and safety on its head, to argue that the *allowance* rather than *prohibition* of the indenture trade was beneficial to labourers. It stated: 'it would […] be an act of humanity, on the part of the British Government, to give the inhabitants of those regions [India] access to a country capable of affording profitable employment to industrious labourers for ages to some, and where such dreadful calamities as that just adverted to are utterly unknown; a country where they would also have the means of obtaining religious instruction.'[120] Using the argument for better living, working and even moral condition of labourers if indenture trade were to continue, the Merchants' Association pushed for government sanction and promotion of what it called the 'free migration' in indentured labourers. Continued migration was supposed to 'tend materially to the successful working of the free labour system' and in time, 'render Great Britain independent of foreign slave countries for all tropical productions, and ultimately be the means of putting down the slave trade and abolishing slavery throughout the world.'[121] Thus the indenture trade was hailed not only as the solution to the post-Abolition labour shortage, but also the means to achieve global abolition. Advocating the indenture trade as the means to abolish rather than perpetuate slavery was a clever strategic argument that utilised post-emancipation sentiment to strengthen merchant role in policy-making.

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[118] *Calcutta Star*, August 8, 1844.

[119] 'Condition of Hill Coolies', Letter from West India Association to Lord Russell dated December 17, 1839. Enclosure No. 1 to Letter from Lord Russell to Governor Light dated February 2, 1840. In John Scoble, *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: Johnston and Barrett, 1840).

[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid.

In 1837-38, the British Empire saw an empire-wide shift from bonded 'unfree' labour systems to nominally 'free labour' regimes.[122] The emergent concept of free labour that developed through negotiations across the empire could be moulded to suit the needs of planters and merchants. The notion of 'free labour' or 'free migration', terms used interchangeably in merchant and planter petitions, theoretically mirrored the free-trade argument in terms of being profit-driven and advocating opportunities of labourers to sell their labour to the most profitable market. Periodicals referred, for instance, to the 'fair and open hire of labourers', and 'good market[s] for coolee labor'.[123] However, unlike free-trade arguments, it advocated government intervention.

The strategic conflation of economic and humanitarian arguments by drawing more attention to labourers' freedom of movement and employment was conditioned by the specifically post-Abolition nature of the indenture debates. At least on paper, the rights of labourers—whether 'free' or 'unfree'—emerged as a central point of concern for metropolitan lawmakers. The Court of Directors in London, for instance, declared that in conversations about lifting the ban on emigration after 1839, the 'primary consideration [was] … to promote the advantage of certain classes of the people of India, by allowing them free command of their labour'.[124] Pro-indenture voices adhered to this line of argument to ensure their increased reception in emigration policies of post-Abolition empire.

## Conclusion

A detailed analysis of pro-indenture arguments has been missing in most works on Indian indenture. Madhavi Kale's work offers a rare but brief engagement with the pro-indenture argument, but it remains confined to arguments for labour-shortage. Kale argues that pro-indenture petitions were 'increasingly institutionalized as the idiom in which sugar entrepreneurs negotiated concessions […] from free trade reformers and imperialists.'[125] Moreover, merchant and planter arguments found their way into

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[122] For detailed discussion of this shift, see Kate Boehme, Peter Mitchell and Alan Lester, 'Reforming Everywhere and All at Once: Transitioning to Free Labor across the British Empire, 1837–1838', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60:3 (2018), 688-718.

[123] Letter to the Editor, *Englishman*, July 20, 1838.

[124] Letter to Lord Ellenborough (Governor General of India) from the Court of Directors of the East India Company, London, dated March 22, 1842. Quoted in 'Grant's Minute'.

[125] Kale, *Fragments of Empire*, p. 55.

Parliamentary Papers and came within close reach of lobbyists, policy-makers and legislators. This, Kale argues, contributed to the naturalising of labour-shortage as a situation threatening British Caribbean sugar industries, which by implication further naturalised the migration of indentured labourers to allegedly sustain the sugar industry.[126] Thus, the baseline information for emancipation and post-emancipation society, which informed metropolitan decision around institution of alternative labour systems such as indentureship, was created and moulded by planter visions.

While the shortage-of-labour argument remained an important part of the pro-indenture argument, this chapter has shown that it was not the only, or even the most forceful argument made in favour of indenture. Instead of a simple argument that equated post-Abolition labour shortage with loss of profits for merchants and planters, the nuanced and complex arguments discussed above brought together issues of wider interest. Taken together, the legal, economic and humanitarian arguments appealed to the need to uphold the British justice system, offered a wilful conflation of the commercial interests of the merchant/planter and of the British Empire, and presented the indenture trade as the means to financially and morally uplift the Indian labouring class. By taking focus away from mercantile profit onto the need to uphold rule of law, protect British economy and offer choice to migrant labourers, pro-indenture petitions appealed to the legal and moral requirements of post-slavery society. They also implied that continued indenture trade would not only favour merchants, but also positively affect people across the empire. This was a distinct shift from how proslavery arguments worked by upholding the merchant's right to his profits.

As a result, debates on indenture worked with pressure from anti-indenture voices that favoured prohibition, and that from merchants and planters whose commercial well-being depended on a regular trade in indentured labour and an assured influx of labourers into the plantation colonies of the British Empire. In fact, the positive reception of pro-indenture petitions in the metropolitan government, and the continuation of indentured migration for a century in face of constant scrutiny and calls for abolition attests to the impact of merchant and planter voices in its favour. Although merchants and planters from across the empire fed into the pro-indenture argument, voices from Calcutta remained distinctive. In a unique way, Calcutta saw the brewing of

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[126] Ibid.

both pro- and anti-indenture voices—voices that impacted trade, regulations, migration networks and lives globally.

# Conclusion

This thesis has taken a three-fold approach to the history of Indian indenture. Firstly, it has explored the role of Calcutta within global debates on indenture. This includes investigating who were involved in the Calcutta debates, how they contributed to the indenture debates, and how indenture debates were moulded by the nature of the city-spaces and the public sphere in Calcutta. Secondly, it has analysed the importance of the 'post-slavery' moment in defining ideas of servitude in the British Empire. Thirdly, it has used these debates to comment on the nature of the British Empire, and to explore how the understanding of labour and servitude were influenced by inputs from geographically-disparate parts of the empire. By inserting the contribution of the city of Calcutta and the post-slavery moment into studies of Indian indenture, this thesis has demonstrated that place and time are two pertinent rubrics in the study of the indenture trade, which have generally remained unaddressed in literature.

Calcutta's position as a premier port, its geographical congruity to a hinterland with a steady supply of labour, its position within trading networks, and the presence of shipping agencies and merchant-houses had made it central to the indenture trade. Some of the earliest ships carrying indentured labourers to plantation colonies had sailed from Calcutta, and some of the most important decisions about the future of the indenture trade was taken in Calcutta (such as in the Calcutta investigative committee or correspondence between colonial officials), or taken in consultation with Calcutta (such as in the correspondence between Gladstone and Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co.). As this thesis has demonstrated, Calcutta's role in the indenture trade was not limited to its position as port-city, but extended to the legal and discursive spheres. Voices from Calcutta contributed to the development of both pro- and anti-indenture arguments, and impacted how the indenture trade was conducted and regulated through the course of a century.

Ultimately, the indenture debates at Calcutta in the 1830s and 1840s had four major impacts. It contributed to changing emigration regulations, it showcased how the indenture debates were framed by its post-slavery nature, it defined for posterity the image of the ideal plantation labourer, and it made Calcutta an active and vocal part of the British Empire, consolidating its position within wider imperial networks.

Voices from Calcutta—whether in favour of or against continued emigration—were important in legal decisions around the trade. As the colonial capital of British India, decisions about indenture were often taken in consultation with local administrators, and legal provisions were changed according to opinions expressed in local meetings and news media. Moreover, early migration laws used Calcutta as the main reference point when setting out provisions for indentured emigration, followed by acts that extended these provisions to Bombay and Madras. On the one hand, petitions from those opposed to indenture added to a strong anti-indenture voice in Britain spearheaded by parliamentarians like Lord Brougham and John Scoble.[1] On the other hand, petitions from Calcutta merchants added strength to the planter-lobby in parliament and helped build a narrative where the indenture trade was not only hailed as the solution to the post-slavery labour shortage across the empire, but also celebrated as a system that benefitted both planters and labourers. As the pro-indenture argument was created collaboratively across the empire, voices from Calcutta were not only reflected in petitions coming out of Calcutta, but also influenced petitions and letters written by British planters in consultation with merchants from Calcutta.

The Calcutta committee report of 1840 held an especially prominent place in the indenture debates. It was cited heavily in parliamentary debates, and when the indenture trade was re-opened in 1842 under newer regulations, detailed policies about recruitment, passage and plantation work were included in keeping with the committee's recommendations. For instance, the posts of emigration agents and Protector of Emigrants were created in Indian and Mauritian ports to prevent false

[1] Brougham and Scoble were prominent abolitionists of the nineteenth century, who also lobbied for an end to indenture. Scoble was a member of the Anti-Slavery Society and later the BFASS, and prominently wrote on the condition of indentured Indians in John Scoble, *Hill Coolies. A Brief Exposition 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 & Darton, 1840). See Elwood H. Jones, 'Scoble, John' in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 9, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003, <http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/scoble_john_9E.html> [Accessed July 31, 2020]. For Lord Brougham, see Michael Lobban, 'Brougham, Henry Peter, first Baron Brougham and Vaux (1778–1868), lord chancellor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-3581> [Accessed July 31, 2020].

recruitment, and penalties were instituted for people flouting the rules.[2] These were two of the most important recommendations of the Calcutta committee to restrict abuses within the trade.[3] The report of the committee was actively sought by the metropolitan government, and also came to be cited in later emigration reports. In fact, the very establishment of investigative committees in Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Mauritius and the West Indies was related to the indenture debates at Calcutta. Instructions for the establishment of these committees explicitly stated that precautions needed to be taken in the appointment of the committees in order to make its reports satisfactory for 'those who agitate the question at Calcutta'.[4] Thus, the committees had to be convened not by local authorities and Company servants visiting the plantation colonies by chance, but by officials selected by the Government of India explicitly for this purpose and unconnected with the colony.[5] In his report of 1873, John Geoghegan highlighted the centrality of voices from Calcutta in the parliamentary debates by stating that in the Calcutta committee report, '[b]oth parties [in Parliament] now found an ample armoury of weapons', since 'combatants on both sides fought equally in the dark till they got the report of the Calcutta Committee'.[6] Similarly, a letter from the members of the Mauritius investigative committee asserted that 'The Cooly Trade in all its ramifications [has] been so fully and ably exposed by the Committee appointed in Calcutta'.[7]

The Calcutta debates also betrayed its post-slavery nature. Thus, the perception of the indenture trade was not only shaped by the structural vestiges of the slave labour

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[2] Act XV of 1842, Colonial Emigration Acts (Bombay Education Society Press, 1842), Home Department, Public Branch, Annex Building, NL.

[3] 'Report of the Calcutta Committee', 1840.

[4] Letter from G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, to the Chief Secretary to Government of Bengal, dated September 12, 1838, in Extract from the Proceedings of the Honourable the President of the Council of India in Council in the General Department, dated July 11, 1838. In *Mauritius: Copies of Correspondence addressed to the Secretary of State for the Colonial Department, relative to the Introduction of Indian Labourers into the Mauritius* (Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed, May 28, 1840).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India*, p. 10.

[7] 'Letter from the Committee of Inquiry on Indian Labourers, Flacq, Mauritius, to G.F. Dick, Colonial Secretary, Port Louis', dated March 16, 1839. In 'Indian Labourers: Indian Enquiry of Flacq, Mauritius', *Papers regarding the employment of Indian indentured labourers overseas, Vol. 10: Report on the condition of the labourers on 22 estates in the Flacq District, Mauritius (includes answers to questionnaires, by both employers and labourers)*, dated February 1839-March 1839. Board's Collections, 1840-41. Vol. 1847, No. 77650, IOR/F/4/1847/77650.

system (especially on ships and in plantations), but also a complete revocation of conditions reminiscent of slavery. A central premise of the anti-indenture debates was the contention that the indenture system perpetuated conditions of the slave trade. This became the most distinctive part of emigration regulations. Post-slavery anxieties not only manifested in increasingly rigorous regulation of the Indian indenture trade, but also more detailed contracts. A crucial point of criticism against the slave labour regime was that planters lacked accountability, and the labourers' agency were severely curtailed. Thus, in the aftermath of Abolition, contracts emerged as the main legal provision separating the slave labour regime and the indentured labour regime. Since the early migrations, and more prominently since the emigration act of 1837, contracts became compulsory and were written with meticulous details, including the identity of labourers engaging in the trade, the food, clothing and medical provisions he was entitled to, the provisions for a return journey, etc. After resumption of the indenture trade in 1842, contracts also had to be reaffirmed through continuous scrutiny by officials at both ports.

Merchants and planters used contracts to argue that the indenture system was legal and non-exploitative. The very presence of a contract was seen as security against slave-labour. At the same time, anti-indenture voices in Calcutta and Britain argued that the mere presence of contracts did not protect labourers from exploitation. Early contracts favoured planters—allowing them to re-appoint labourers in different estates or different jobs, increase unpaid hours of work during cropping season, and make absence punishable by deduction of wages. Thus, in the post-slavery environment, both pro- and anti-indenture arguments upheld the dichotomy of servitude and freedom. Contrast with slavery still remained the main way in which the indenture trade was judged. Using post-slavery as a theoretical framework thus allows us to understand why the debates revolved around questions of legality, consider how Calcutta was central to these decisions, and see why the debate was pervaded by the language of 'freedom' and 'unfreedom'.

The debates in Calcutta also framed future understanding of the ideal plantation labourer in post-slavery empire. Firstly, as the obsession with comparison to slavery reveals, the post-slavery moment required indentured migrants to be legally defined as free—free in their decision to migrate, and free from modes of exploitation that had come to define the slave regime. In fact, the importance of contracts in distinguishing between the slave and indentured labour regime also implies that in the eyes of the state,

labourers were considered in charge of their own productive labour and able to sign their own contracts. Secondly, the indentured labourer was almost always defined as men in the early days of the trade. Although there was an increasing number of women participating in the trade, their presence was seen as secondary to the men and their particular problems, mainly sexual assault and violence in the hands of planters, were ignored in early legislation. Finally, the ideal labourer was imagined as primitive, docile and outside the restrictions of traditional caste society. All migrants, who in actual practice came from different regions and walks of life, were essentialised within the image of someone who was ignorant and easy to induce to travel. Testimonies from Calcutta citizens described indentured migrants as a homogenous group of 'illiterate and extremely ignorant', or 'unintelligent and socially degraded people' who were 'not capable of understanding the contracts they entered into'.[8] The same discourse that considered Indian indentured migrants as primitive, ignorant and undifferentiated in terms of race and religion, also celebrated them as ideal labourers perfect for plantation work.[9] The default image of the indentured labourer remained that of a dark, strong man eager for labour—an image that the discourse at Calcutta had a direct role in creating and perpetuating.

In context of imperial networks, the debates further made Calcutta an active and vocal part of the British Empire. As Boehme, Mitchell and Lester argue, 1837-38 was a period when the empire was transitioning from a dependence on bonded labour to free labour.[10] This transition offered an opportunity for the rubrics of free labour to be determined with inputs from citizens across the empire. Not only was the imperial government itself 'an amalgam of geographically disparate governmental entities'[11] based in Britain and the colonies, the transition also made it possible for planters, merchants, and citizens opposed to the idea of a renewed system of slavery to weigh in on post-slavery labour regimes like the indenture trade. Thus, through letters, petitions, committee reports, and the movement of people like abolitionist George Thompson

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[8] Testimony of Roger Dias, October 25, 1838. In 'Proceedings of the Calcutta Committee'; 'Report of the Calcutta Committee', p. 5.

[9] For discussion of the 'typical' Indian labour migrant in terms of ignorance, helplessness and position in caste society in the context of New South Wales, see Andrea Major, ''Hill Coolies': Indian Indentured Labour and the Colonial Imagination, 1836–38', *South Asian Studies*, 33:1 (2017), 23-36.

[10] Boehme, Mitchell and Lester, 'Reforming Everywhere and All at Once'.

[11] Ibid, p. 688.

between Calcutta and Britain, Calcutta became an important site within global debates on indenture. This gave voice to common citizens from Calcutta, challenging the traditional image of empires consisting of a unilinear flow of ideas—decisions taken in the metropole (core) and dutifully followed in colonies (periphery) with no space for colonised voices.[12]

On the part of the state, the repeated use of commissions of inquiry and periodically-revised regulations suggest their overarching official commitment to the potential of colonial law to eradicate abuses and make indenture a legitimate post-slavery system of labour. The role of the Town Hall meeting, newspaper reports from Calcutta and the Calcutta Committee in affecting changes in colonial emigration policies, or even influencing new regulations, indicates the strategic position of Calcutta within the 'web of empire'. Analysing the continual negotiation with the colonial state helps create a more nuanced understanding of how the empire functioned not in isolation, but in conjunction with constant inputs from its various geographically-disparate units. It is this process of metropolitan feedback and responsiveness that underlines the position of Calcutta within indenture networks.

This thesis thus makes a serious contribution to the scholarship on Indian indenture. Firstly, it highlights the contribution of the city of Calcutta in the history of Indian indenture—a theme that has rarely been addressed in literature. Secondly, instead of commenting on *whether* the indenture trade represented a continuation of slavery or an exercise in voluntary migration, this thesis investigates *why* the question of similarity to slavery (or lack thereof) was central to the indenture debates. In doing so, it moves focus away from structural similarities between the slave and indentured labour regimes, to explore how legacies of slavery influenced how the indenture trade operated, and framed the debate around its continuation.

Thirdly, by focusing on the post-slavery moment, this thesis exposes the methodological limitations of works that make overarching arguments about who migrated as indentured labourers, whether they were inveigled into the trade or joined of their own accord, and whether the indenture trade was a highly-regulated system. The

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[12] For historiographic discussion of the core-periphery argument and its limitations, see Alan Lester, 'Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 4:1 (2006), 124-141.

Indian indenture trade continued for almost a century and involved the movement of labourers from different social contexts (across caste, gender and class boundaries) and geographical spaces (across Bengal, Bombay and Madras presidencies) to multiple plantation colonies in the British, French and Dutch empires. Naturally, its history needs to be broken down by place and time, particularly for a system as dynamic as the indenture trade. Such an approach helps illustrate the 1830s and 1840s as a watershed moment in the history of the indenture, and in the history of the colonial world. The post-slavery context did not merely provide the backdrop to the indenture debates but rather, as this thesis has shown, indelibly shaped it.

At the same time, this thesis not only contributes to histories of Indian indenture, but also adds to scholarship on empires, colonial cities and colonial ethnography. At a global level, as discussed above, this thesis adds to emergent scholarship on empires and the relationship between metropole and colony.[13] At a local level, it adds to the scholarship on Calcutta, and opens up space to rethink current understanding of shared public space in the colonial context. Most works on Calcutta society have either focused on social reforms and 'great men' of the early-nineteenth century without commenting on the interactive nature of the public sphere, or have focused on the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the clash between the Indian and the European became central to conceptualising both Indian or Bengali identity. In its consideration of debates from Calcutta, this thesis challenges ideas of the city space and public sphere that worked within normative spheres of the 'black town' and 'white town', or similar alleged antagonism of European and Indian communities. Challenging works that consider British and Indian societies as hermetically sealed, it explores spaces of Indo-British collaboration in the mid-nineteenth century, and examines their participation in matters of common interest. In doing so, it adds to our understanding of Calcutta, its social sphere, and its contribution to global events.

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[13] For a fuller discussion of the relationship between metropole and colony and the contribution of colonies in shaping the British Empire, see Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, ed., *Decentring Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World* (London: Orient BlackSwan, 2006); Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. by Stoler and Cooper (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 1-56; Alan Lester, 'Imperial Circuits and Networks'.

By analysing the interplay of race and labour, this thesis further challenges the periodisation of works on race and ethnography in colonial South Asia. It demonstrates that the categorisation of Indians into groups by their supposed racial characteristics, and the assumption of linkages between physical characteristics and temperament (such as intelligence or labouring capacity), were already a prominent feature of the early-nineteenth century. Further, as argued in chapter 4, petitioners from India not only showed awareness of their position within the imperial networks, but actively sought to elevate themselves to the rank of citizens by exercising their right to petitions, and participating in what was seen as the duty of the colonial state to uphold the rights of its migrant population. In forwarding this argument, this thesis adds to literature on the relationship between petitioning and citizenship, while also engaging with notions of citizenship and subjecthood in colonial South Asia.

This thesis sits at the intersection of imperial, labour, and urban history. Through its analysis of the indenture debates in Calcutta, it reflects on the British Empire, its migrant-labour schemes, and the impact of the indenture debates on the city of Calcutta, its citizens, and the migrants themselves.

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