
“Coolies”, Containment, and Resistance

The Indentured System
in British Guiana

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Plantations played a pivotal role in the development and maintenance of the British Empire throughout the 19th century. Though crops varied, coffee, sugar, tea, and rubber, all served the same purpose: to fuel the British capitalist system. By extension then, those who labored: slaves; free laborers; and indentured laborers were instruments of the system. The success of plantations depended on a cheap labor source that planters could control and bind to the land. The Indentured System worked to control labor throughout the British Empire. This paper will examine the mechanisms within the indentured system that ensured the planters control and domination of Asian laborers or “coolie”¹ labor in the British colony of British Guiana.

Prior to 1838, the institution of slavery provided a labor source on plantations throughout the British West Indies. When slavery was abolished in 1834, the Guiana colonial government introduced an “apprenticeship” program that forced ‘ex-slaves’ to continue working on the plantations for a period of six years. After protest from the Creole population, this term was reduced to four years. With a new sense of power, workers organized and demanded a wage higher than Planters were willing to pay. In 1842 and again in 1848 sugar strikes occurred, the first of which lasted between twelve

and thirteen weeks.² After the introduction of the British Sugar Duties Act in 1846, sugar from the West Indies was no longer protected on British markets, and had to compete with foreign imports. Competition on a free market and the shortage of labor further “strengthened the determination of planters to secure immigrant laborers whose conditions of indentured service excluded the right to seek out new employers and whose wage rates were also statutorily restricted.”³

In 1838, 396 Indians known as the “Gladstone Coolies” were the first brought to British Guiana as workers by plantation owner John Gladstone.⁴ Among allegations of abuse and “neoslavery” were testimonies from former slaves who asserted that Indian workers were treated in the same way they had been treated under slavery.⁵ After reports of ill treatment, the Indian government put a stop to the unregulated system in 1839. As the economic situation deteriorated, planters demanded the ban on indentured labor be lifted. The Indian Government, under pressure to ensure the will being of its citizens, but economic pressure to maintain the prosperity of the plantation system, lifted the ban and emigration was once again resumed to the British West Indies between 1845 and 1848. Between 1851-1870, referred by Look Lai as the “period of multiracial immigration”, a steady shipment of Asian laborers arrived in British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica annually.⁶ It was during this period that heavy regulations were established

²Rodney, Walter, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881 – 1905* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 33.

³ Rodney, 32.

with the purpose of protecting the laborers from harsh conditions and abuses and to silence anti-slavery protest both in Britain, India,⁷ and China.

From 1838 until the indentured system ended in 1920, a total of 470,594 people immigrated from Asia.⁸ Approximately 91 percent of those that emigrated from Asia to the British Caribbean during this period came from India, while those from China made up only 9 percent; British Guiana received 238,909 people from India, and 13,533 people from China.⁹ People from India made up the largest population of migrants to the West

common with the Indian migration than to migrations to Latin American colonies.¹²

Unlike the indentured system in Cuba and Peru, the British system involved the state and its agencies at all levels of the of the migration process, from recruitment to arrival in the West Indies. The British colonial office attempted to make the British indenture system distinct from the Latin American system, which had a “myriad of abuses” that “had become something of a scandal... and colored much of the labor export business.”¹³ As one poster advertised by the British in Canton:

- There is no slavery wherever the British Flag flies.
- The Law is the same to rich and poor. All Religions are tolerated and protected, and the Queen of England has appointed Special Magistrates in her West Indian Colonies, to look after and protect the strangers, who go there to seek their fortunes
- Any laborer entering into a contract for five years, and desiring to cancel it at the end of the first year, and work where he

plantations, vagrancy and pass clauses of the Immigration Ordinance of 1864, and finally the use of quotas to increase the number of women in the colony. By focusing on these aspects of the British indentured system, this paper will explore the ways in which

can do so on repayment of four fifths of the passage money....”¹⁷; or they could terminate it at the end of a year if they paid a periodic tax. Commutation payments increased dramatically between 1859 and 1862¹⁸ indicating that many immigrants chose to buy out of their contracts. In response to the growing loss of labor, the Immigration Ordinance was amended in 1862 so that “[n]o such immigrant shall be entitled to change his employer, or to pay in commutation of service, during and portion of the said term of five years for which he shall have been so indentured. ...”¹⁹ Hence, whatever power immigrants had had was taken away and the planter class had complete control and power over the laborers for a period of five years.

In addition to the contracts, local immigration legislation in British Guiana had the purpose of restricting “coolie” labor to the plantations and of actually preventing integration into the larger society. Planters may have lost ownership of slaves in 1838, but they were still “firmly in control of the post-Emancipation legislature”²⁰, and had complete power in the making of laws. In the 1864 Immigration Ordinance a vagrancy clause was implemented in British Guiana that restricted “immigrants” to a two mile radius of plantations.²¹ Furthermore, any “immigrant” found beyond two miles of his or her plantation without written permission from the plantation owner or overseer would be

17 Lai, 11.

18 Adamson, 45.

19 An Ordinance to Extend the Term of Indentures of Immigrants Introduced from India and China, 1862 (No. 30); Papers re British Guiana, pp. 1863 (6830), XV. 139.

20 Rodney, 31.

21 An Ordinance to consolidate and Amend the Law Relating to Immigrants. p. 155, 1864 (No. 4); Papers re British Guiana, pp. 1865, XVI, 131.

liable for fines and criminal charges²². What is problematic about these laws, besides that fact that they removed the freedom of technically ‘free’ people and made breaking a civil contract criminally punishable, is that the vagrancy and pass laws also prevented Asian laborers from filing complaints against planters and overseers, and from socializing beyond those on their own plantations. In order to file a complaint, a person had to go to the Immigration Office which was located in Georgetown, the capital of British Guiana. For many laborers, the plantations were located several miles from Georgetown so that in order to actually file a complaint they would have to receive a “pass” from the overseer or planter, the very people they were often filing the complaint against. Under the immigration ordinance, immigrants could leave the plantation without a pass if they were going to the immigration authorities to file a "reasonable" complaint. If the complaint was deemed to be “frivolous” by the colonial authorities or if five or more immigrants went together, they could be prosecuted for breaking the pass law.²³ While some were successful in filing a complaint, in many cases, immigrants would be charged with breaking the vagrancy laws. In one case, an immigrant was subpoenaed to come to Georgetown to testify against his employer. He was then charged by his employer for missing work and thrown in to jail.²⁴ In addition to the vagrancy laws, immigrants could

22 Ibid.

23 Lai (1993), 64.

24 Kloosterboer, W., *Involuntary Labour Since the Abolition of Slavery: A Survey of Compulsory Labour Throughout the World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 13.

And Adamson, 46.

be charged for missing work.²⁵ Immigrants were subjected to criminal charges, fines, or jail time, in addition to losing wages. In 1887, there were 17,770 indentured laborers in British Guiana. Employers filed 2,848 complaints against indentured immigrants for various reasons; indentured immigrants filed only five complaints against employers.²⁶ While these dramatic differences can be interpreted in different ways, the figures suggests that planters held more power to use the law against immigrants, and the law was not a tool by which immigrants could protect themselves from their employers. Despite the pretext of protection from abuses, the laws actually worked against immigrants and were used by planters to discipline rebellious immigrants by charging them with minor or major offenses against labor laws of which there was “court partiality toward planters in the dispensation of justice.”²⁷

Though vagrancy and pass laws were intended for indentured workers, the laws were often applied to anyone of Indian or Chinese descent whether or not they were under indentured contracts. If they could not prove “to the satisfaction of the Stipendiary Justice” they were not under indentureship they were often arrested.²⁸ For example, in 1855 a free immigrant was arrested and jailed by the police in Georgetown, and then sent to Plantation La Jalousie.²⁹ According to the arresting police officer, “[n]o coolie could

25 An Ordinance to consolidate and Amend the Law Relating to Immigrants. p. 159, 1864 (No. 4); Papers re British Guiana, pp, 1865, XVI, 131.

26 Daily Chronicle (Georgetown, British Guiana). June 1, 1888.

27 La(108 -1.7il)v-2649.r6Ealousie.

remain in the city...all must go to the estates.”³⁰ A common belief was that “every immigrant ought to be either in the fields at work, in [the] hospital, or in jail.”³¹ The vagrancy and pass laws worked to maintain the isolation and immobility of Asian immigrants by tying them to the plantations and preventing integration into larger society. By doing this the state could control and contain Asians and keep them subjugated to white dominance in addition to maintaining a cheap, servile labor force.

Once workers completed their five year contracts, various measures were taken by the planters and Colonial Office in an effort to keep Asian laborers in the colonies and on the plantations. One such measure used was the

source of labor in the colonies".³⁴ Having families willing to remain within the colony, and on the plantation not only eliminated the cost for return passage that planters had to pay Indian workers, but also was thought to reduce the number of 'disturbances' on the plantations that disrupted the production of sugar. Such disturbances, namely fighting between men and the abuse of Indian women by Indian males, were blamed on the "insufficiency" of females, opposed to the violence of males.

Fear of abuse was a major factor that made many women reluctant to board vessels to go overseas. Stories of rape were common among women in the colony, as well as on the vessels that carried them there, described as spaces of "sexploitation".³⁵ One example is the case of Maharani. Maharani was an Indian woman who was raped aboard the *Allanshaw* in 1885 on route to British Guiana from Calcutta. She later died from injuries she sustained during rape. On arriving in British Guiana, a full investigation was launched in which several of the crew and passengers were interrogated. The man accused of the crime was a young black crew member name Ipson. Maharani's rape and death highlights the abuse so common to women on the ships. Incidences of rape were not uncommon aboard the passage, but, unlike Maharani's case, most were ignored. Shepherd speculates that in the case of Maharani, the fact that the accused rapist was a black man, may have made the authorities more inclined to investigate to show critics of

34 Reddock, Rhoda, "Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1985): 79-87. Found in Moses Seenarine, "Indian Women in Colonial Guyana: Recruitment, Migration, Labor, and Caste." 23 March 2007. <<http://saxakali.com/indocarib/sojourner3.htm>>

35 Shepherd, xix.

the indentured system their commitment to the protection of Asian women, although no charges were actually laid.³⁶

Similar to the period of slavery, resistance was a common occurrence on plantations.

In contradiction to the racialization of Asians as “docile”⁴³

planters breaking the labor code by their treatment of indentured laborers.⁴⁸ In his letter he stated:

My countrymen like myself have had the misfortune to come to Demerara, the political system of which colony has very appropriately have divined and defined by Mr. Trollope under a happy inspiration as “despotism tempered by sugar.” To these twin forces, the Immigration system is as sacred as the old system of slavery in former days, and for one in my humble position to have ventured to touch it with profane hands or to have dared to unveil it is considered on this side of the Atlantic to be a capital and inexpiable offence.⁴⁹

Such direct challenges were instrumental in raising sympathies from those unaware of the conditions on the plantations and within the colonies.

In British Guiana, collective resistances like riots were also common. Rodney suggests that riots were spontaneous events that had little threat to the planters and little chance of influencing riots on other plantations. Contrary to this opinion, in 1888, riots first broke out on Plantation Nonpareil on June 14 and within days other riots broke out on plantations across the East Coast, which suggest that one influenced the other. In one account, on the Plantation Enmore, five overseers were put in the hospital after receiving beatings from the workers, who were enraged their pay was being withheld. It took 30 police officers to eventually put down the riot.⁵⁰ Many of these riots actually started in the weeding gang, which was the women’s sphere. In one case following a riot at Plantation (Friendship) Berbice in 1903, a plantation driver testified that he heard an antation

Two

go fight... Salamea, I hear, urge the coolies who had assembled to fight.”⁵¹ Workers

intended to punish the Black population for having left the estates after Emancipation.”⁵⁷ Nonetheless, communities did resist. Individual and collective acts of resistance help put an end to the oppressive nature of the indentured system and racial oppression.

The Indentured system in British Guiana and other parts of the Caribbean were often used as a model for other white settler countries. In the U.S., the indentured system in the Caribbean was used by Southern plantation owners as a reason to maintain the institution of slavery. Many defenders of slavery denounced the use of “coolie” labor on American soil, which they viewed as a threat to domestic slavery. Furthermore, the U.S. pro-slavers criticized Britain for abolishing slavery throughout its empire, but then implementing a system that they viewed as worse than slavery.”⁵⁸ Jung notes that those “fighting the hardest to uphold slavery attempted to criminalize coolie importations [to the US] first.”⁵⁹ Anti-slavery advocates, who viewed the indentured system as a new form of slavery, ironically, were often on the same side of the debate as pro-slavers.

The Anti-“Coolie” Act, enacted in 1862, prohibited the carrying of “Chinese subjects also known as coolies”⁶⁰ aboard any American vessel to any foreign country. The purpose of this law was, supposedly, to pr

impregnated a Creole woman in Georgetown.⁶⁵ Orr, disgraced, was said to have left British Guiana in 1867. He turns up again two years later in Louisiana advocating the indentured system. At a convention in 1869, attended by planters from across the U.S., Orr delivered a speech using his experience in the Caribbean to encourage planters to import Chinese labor:

You want to know about the Chinaman labor. I will tell you all my candid opinion; but I left home six years ago--in 1863, and since then I have traveled a great deal in West Indies and South America ... Now we have heard of the emancipation and land going to waste, unless we get labor. In the West Indies I studied the character of the people. You know they had emancipation—that was in 1830 something. The Negroes, after emancipation, degenerated and would not work. To remedy that they imported Chinese. I can't say how many ... I don't know the statistics; but they all are getting along well...I know the Chinese are heathens, but you want cotton and cane—and if he makes them you will not object very much to him.⁶⁶

Several of the planters attending the conference sponsored a trip for Orr and the son of one of the planters to go to China to bring back workers to work on the sugar estates of the U.S. Gulf States.

British Guiana policies and legislations designed to control indentured workers influenced policies, legislations and attitudes in countries beyond the British Empire. The connections between the US and the Caribbean is not just one directional. According to Jung, planters in the British West Indies recruited free African-Americans between 1839 and 1847.⁶⁷ The total population of African-American immigrants made up about seven percent of the total migrant population to the British West Indies.⁶⁸ In addition, slave

65 Jung, 3 and Lai (1993), 197-199.

66 Jung, 102.

67 Jung, 47.

68 Lai, 7.

smuggling from Cuba to Louisiana occurred up until the 1860s.⁶⁹ With “ideas, peoples, and capital [moving] around the Greater Caribbean in myriad ways, across geopolitical boundaries”⁷⁰, the extension to the U.S. is of no surprise. As Guterl and Skwiot state, “common interest bound the planter class of the United States South and the Caribbean islands.”⁷¹ The indentured system, as it was used in the British Guiana, had effects on the ideas and actions of the Plantocracy in the United States. These transnational

The Indentured system within British Guiana or the Caribbean should not be seen as an isolated oppressive system of dominance but as apart of a wider system of racist

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