Introduction

In legal terms, indentured labour describes “a contract committing one party to make a series of payments to or on behalf of the other – settlement of transport debt, subsistence over the (negotiable) contract term, and final payment in kind or, less usually, cash at the conclusion of the term. In exchange the payee agrees to be completely at the disposal of the payor, or the payor’s assigns, for performance of work, for the term agreed.” The system of indenture curtailed the freedom and mobility of the workers, who could not easily disengage from the contract when criminal laws reinforced it. Refusal or inability to work, misbehaviour, or other transgressions of disciplinary codes were punishable breaches of contract. In those cases the indentured workers were subject to fines, hard labour, or incarceration.

Indentured labour was widespread in (pre)colonial Asia. Indentured labour also existed as ‘White Servitude’ in seventeenth and eighteenth-century British and French America, where debt servants, political and religious dissenters, petty criminals etc. were put to work. With the expansion of the sugar plantations, enslaved Africans became the preferred labour force. In the nineteenth century the expanding global sugar market and a shortage of cheap, servile labour revived the system. The abolition of the slave trade and slavery and the subsequent actions by the imperial powers, particularly Great Britain, had enormous worldwide consequences. The “new” indentured system relocated millions of Asians to work under contract on sugar plantations in the Caribbean, Peru, Hawai’i, Réunion, and Mauritius. Asian indentured labourers were also often used in the exploitation of natural resources or in other jobs demanding hard physical labour in new economic activities. Examples of such activities were the exploitation of guano in Peru and rubber production in Southeast Asia, underlining the point that Asian indentured labour was also used in Asia itself. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Asian indentured migrants did not travel outside South and Southeast Asia. Increasing colonial intervention and expansion transformed regional economies, pushing people out, but also creating new Western enclaves of labour intensive production.


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Indenture is one of many forms of bound labour, including debt bondage, convict labour, or corvée labour. These forms of labour mobilization merit separate coverage. Here I will only use the term indentured labour and not contract labour as this term may be confused with other forms of labour contracts. The indentured labourers were often called “coolies.” The origin of the word “cooie” is unclear; it might be from the Hindi and Telugu कूली meaning “day labourer”, and is probably associated with the Urdu word کولی or “slave.” In the nineteenth century it became a common European term to characterize an unskilled physical labourer of Asian origin. In some areas, such as South Africa, it even could mean anyone of Asian descent. In this chapter the word will not be used, except in official terminology, because of its association with negative and racist stereotypes.

The British were the pioneers in organizing the nineteenth-century intercontinental system of indenture. After pressurizing other European nations to follow their lead in banning the slave trade, in 1806 the British were the first to ship 200 indentured Chinese to Trinidad for a five-year period of what they euphemistically called “industrial residence”. The system really took off in the 1830s, when slavery and apprenticeship came to an end in the British Empire, and the British transported thousands of Indian indentured workers to their colonies in Asia and the Caribbean. Planters argued that only massive, regular imports of malleable labour could save their enterprises. Indian indentured migration thus was closely tied to the expansion of the tropical regions and the abolition of slavery in the Empire.

However, it is misleading to regard indentured servitude as an intermediate stage in a linear process from slavery to free labour. Although indenture often came on the heels of abolition and apprenticeship, and thus at various times throughout the world, it did not always follow slavery. Cuba is an example of a mixed labour system where Chinese indentured labourers were imported before the abolition of slavery, while Hawai‘i used contracted indentured labourers without ever resorting to slave labour. Nor did indentured labour preclude the hiring of free labour. Thus free, indentured, and slave labour could exist side by side in the same economic setting.

As was the case with slavery, abolition of indenture took place at different times. The Chinese indentured trade was banned as early as 1874. In India indenture was abolished in 1917, while in Indonesia or the Netherlands East Indies the penal sanction was repealed in 1931, thereby also affecting labour relations with Javanese indentured migrants in the Dutch Caribbean colony of Suriname. That last mentioned indentured labour influx from Indonesia is frequently forgotten, encouraging the mistaken assumption that Indian abolition entailed the end of Asian indentured migration to the Americas.

Despite the fact that both slavery and indentured labour are forms of unfree labour and are often associated with back-breaking work on plantations, it is questionable whether the equation between the two is correct. The main differences are that indentured labourers did not become the legal property of their employers (who were often their own in the case of slavery) and that there was a time limit to the contracts, which also prescribed the rights and duties of labourers and employers, albeit
in Western terms. Indenture was a compulsory labour system, which was safeguarded by so-called penal sanctions, which made neglect of duty or refusal to work a criminal offense. Importantly, the enforcement of contracts, their supervision by authorities, the quality of indentured life in general, and labour conditions in particular, varied across time and space.

Origins, destinations, and recruitment

The nineteenth century saw a global movement of commodities and people, and of the capital required to accomplish this. The growing demand for labour in mineral, industrial, infrastructural, and urban projects and on plantations could only be met since an increasing number of individuals were pushed to migrate because of hardship in their home land and were pulled by the lure of opportunities in places of which they had previously probably never heard. The new indentured labour migration was a product of changing socioeconomic and political realities in the countries of origin, the extant patterns of (bound) labour migration, and the imperial nexus providing the legal and logistical basis (including recruitment and transport) for this type of migration. In short, old and new factors fused in this process, and the mix varied in the different areas of the migrants’ origin.

The largest supplier was India, where Great Britain oversaw the recruitment, transport, and overseas labour conditions of more than 1.3 million indentured migrants, 900,000 of whom were transported to British colonies in Asia and the Caribbean. Imperial regulation and control checked the number of abuses, without being able totally to eliminate foul play. Indian indentured migration was directly tied to expansion of capitalist enclaves in the British orbit in the nineteenth century. Indian indentured migration was not a new phenomenon in the nineteenth century as traders and labourers had previously traveled to other parts of Asia or East Africa. The new migrants, however, no longer came from coastal areas but from inland communities.

Recruiting efforts took off when planters from the island of Mauritius (which was British from 1810) turned to Indian labour after the abolition of slavery in 1834. Within five years, more than 25,000 Indians had been transported to Mauritius. Local planters were confident that their business would boom with these migrant labourers who were considered cheaper, more productive, and easier to control than the former slaves. But compulsion of labour trumped all other factors in the choice of workers. The optimism of the Mascarene planters inspired Caribbean planters to recruit Indian labour too.

The first group of Indian workers leaving for the Caribbean was not made to sign a contract before departure, or even on arrival, but soon contracts signed in advance were legalized in all colonies. The terms of indenture also changed: in 1849 Mauritius made the minimum length of the labour contract three years; the Caribbean followed this policy. When some colonies provided a free return passage after completing a
minimum of five years under contract, the five-year contract became standard in the
Caribbean in 1862. As soon as the system was firmly in place, the number of desti-
nations, including non-British colonies, expanded. Indentured Indian immigration
was legalized for Natal and Réunion (1860), the French Caribbean (1865), Suriname
(1873), Fiji (1879), and East Africa (1895).

The number of intercontinental indentured migrants was less than 10 percent of
the total number of indentured and non-indentured departures from Indian shores.
Major Asian destinations such as Ceylon, Burma, and Malaysia attracted millions;
annual departures climbed to over 425,000 in the last decades of the century. The
seemingly endless supply of Indian migrants was the result of demography and over-
population, political unrest, economic changes, famine and other natural disasters
which set millions on the move looking for work and shelter in the cities, where
many would be lost and thus a potential prey for recruiters. Infrastructural changes,
including the building of railroads, made easier the movement of people to the cities
and also to the depots in the ports. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact rea-
sons for migration, emigration data suggest that the Indian Rebellion of 1857 caused
a peak in overseas departures.

It is hard to gauge individual motives for signing a contract of indenture, but the
army of recruiters played a crucial role in this decision. The actual recruiting was
done by the so-called arkatia or unlicensed recruiter, who looked for candidates in
busy places like markets, railways stations, and temples. The arkatia, who received
a fee for every recruit, often painted a deceptive picture, promising riches and con-
cealing the long voyage across the kala pani (the black water, the crossing of which
was a taboo in Indian culture) or the penal system. When successful he handed the
candidate over to the licensed recruiter, also an Indian, who took care of the admin-
istrative process and forwarded the recruit to the ports of Madras or Calcutta.⁴

Like India, China had a long tradition of labour migration, which took on new
dimensions in the nineteenth century. And as in India demographic, socioeconomic,
political, and ecological pressures explained the growing willingness to leave. Final-
ly, similarly to India, a majority of the migrants originated from specific sending
areas. Historically the southern coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian were
the areas of recruitment. In the nineteenth century, migrants to Southeast Asia
came from Fujian, while Guangdonese dominated the labour trade to the Western
hemisphere.

⁴ Principal destinations of Indian labour in the period 1838–1924 were in rounded figures: Ceylon
2,321,000; Malaya 1,754,000; Burma 1,164,000; Mauritius 455,000; British Guiana 239,000; Natal
153,000; Trinidad 150,000 (144,000 indentured); French Caribbean 79,000; Réunion 75,000; Fiji
61,000; East Africa 39,500 (32,000 indentured); Jamaica 38,600 (36,500 indentured); Suriname
34,400; other British Caribbean 11,200. Source: David Northrup, _Indentured Labor in the Age of Impe-
rialism, 1834–1922_ (Cambridge, 1995). map 6, p. 53. Note that these are figures for labour migration,
not indentured migration. The figures for regional migration to Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya are likely
to be inflated by the inclusion of re-migrants (Northrup, _Indentured Labor_, p. 64).
Immediately after the banning of the slave trade in 1807 the British showed interest in Chinese workers with their reputation for stamina and endurance. Yet, after the failed experiment in Trinidad in the early nineteenth century, the next transport of indentured Chinese to overseas European colonies took place only in 1843 when the planters’ demand for labour was stronger than racial and legal objections as recruitment was technically illegal under Chinese law. In total, some 2 million Chinese traveled beyond Asian shores, but even this estimate represented only a modest part of total Chinese migration. In contrast to the Indian labour trade, which was largely directed to other parts of the British Empire, Chinese migrants left for a larger number of countries and colonies with different historical, political, legal, and socioeconomic backgrounds, as far apart as the Caribbean and Australia.

In 1847, the first Chinese indentured labourers arrived in Havana, and soon after Peruvian entrepreneurs followed the Cuban example. As elsewhere, coercion, abuse, fraud, and deception about the final destination and the contract were oftentimes used to lure men to sign up. Spanish and local officials contended that in the late 1850s, 90 percent of the indentured migrants boarded ship against their will. Scandals about corruption, kidnapping, and other abuses prompted investigations uncovering even more irregularities in la trata amarilla or the yellow trade. The subagents, locally despised as “pig brokers”, were seen as the major culprits. Chinese contract migration was depicted as a new slave trade.

Indentured migration from Java started later than in India or China and continued longer. There existed various overlapping systems of recruitment in Java: by informal indigenous networks, commercial agencies, and by employers. As in India and China, overpopulation served as a push factor in Java. And as in the other sending territories Java had a long tradition of labour migration though informal networks. Brokers, who organized pilgrimages to Mecca, also employed professional recruiters to arrange for Javanese temporary labour migration to plantations in Malaya and British North Borneo, and later New Caledonia and French Cochin China. After 1900, two commercial firms were additional players on the recruitment market. Recruitment for Suriname too was in these commercial hands. In total almost 32,000 Javanese indentured migrants left for the West in the period 1890–1932. The flow of migrants to Suriname was exceedingly small compared to the tobacco and rubber plantations in East Sumatra (Deli): Deli in its economically most prosperous years imported annually as many Javanese indentured immigrants as Suriname did in a forty-year period. Around 1910 a third system in the recruitment of Javanese labourers came into operation, when employers started organizing their own recruitment system in Java. This so-called laukeh (old hand) system, legalized in 1915, focused its activities on the social network of experienced labour migrants with a good track record.

Japan and the Pacific Islands were places of origin of smaller numbers of indentured migrants. In Japan, the Meiji government’s opening of the country from 1868 led to an unprecedented international migration of indentured labourers and free migrants. The main destination was Hawai‘i, which saw the arrival between 1868 and
1900 of approximately 65,000 indentured Japanese. Although the United States had banned indentured contracts in 1885, Japanese immigrants were still in bondage as they were in debt, often for brokerage and transport services, to the contracting agencies. When in 1908 the United States restricted Japanese immigration, the flow turned to Peru, which received 18,000 Japanese indentured migrants in total.

Recruitment in the Pacific Islands was known as “blackbirding”, indicating the use of force and fraud by private agents. From the 1880s the migration process was monitored by the British administration, which cut out major abuses. The majority of the indentured islanders came from Melanesia. More than 80 percent of the migrants were transported to plantations in Queensland (which alone received more than 60,000), to Fiji, and to the nickel mines in New Caledonia. In Fiji, more than 60,000 Indian indentured migrants, *Girmittyas*, were imported when competition for Melanesians created a labour shortage and drove up recruitment costs. In the end, indentured Indian labourers vastly outnumbered the imported Pacific Islanders in Fiji.

The emergence of plantations in the western Pacific was fueled by the crumbling of the cotton production in the U.S. South during the Civil War and the abolition of slavery there. Cotton turned out to be a transitional crop, and was overtaken by sugar and copra. The indentured labour trade was closely linked to existing trading networks and maritime labour practices. In contrast to other processes of indenture, the Melanesians did not sign a written contract; their recruitment was based on oral agreement. Another difference was that the labour trade in the western Pacific lacked the infrastructure of other source areas and depended on beach-based exchanges between recruiters and potential candidates.

Despite the large number of migrants to destinations far outside their region of origin the overwhelming majority of the skilled and unskilled Chinese, Indian, and Javanese migrants remained in South and Southeast Asia.\(^5\) Their migration was relatively short distance, often preceded by internal migration to urban areas, caused by the transformation of local and regional economies. Transportation improvements facilitated both types of migration flows.

### The contract

The contract of indenture, which minimally listed the name of the labourer, regulated the legal relationship between worker and employer, stipulating a number of obligations for both parties. Its content varied over time, area, and economic branch, but

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the main clauses concerned the length of the contract, working days and hours, and wages. The length of contract varied over time and in different areas and corresponded to the costs of recruitment and transportation. Employers recouped their initial expenses by the work of the indentured. The higher the costs, the longer the contract would run. Chinese labour for Cuba and Peru was the most expensive and eight-year contracts were the standard. Intra-Asian recruitment and transportation costs were the lowest, resulting in contracts of three years or less.

Additional stipulations prescribed that the employer had to provide housing and medical care at his own expense. The worker could not leave the premises of the enterprise without consent. The core of the indenture contract was the penal clause, which subjected the worker to criminal jurisdiction in case of a breach of contract by refusing work or other infractions threatening labour discipline.

Actual surveillance of contracts was in the hands of civil servants who were the backbone of the (colonial) state in both the source and receiving areas. They could play an important role in supervising and checking the system, but they were not always united in their philosophy and operations. Required to keep the economic motors behind the systems in mind, some officials had greater cultural affinity with the Western employers, while others also tried to maintain a certain degree of autonomy in relation to the enterprises. Thus besides official rules and regulations, the size and quality of the controlling bureaucracy and the personal efficacy of civil servants determined the level of inspection and the enforcement of the rules. The policy of these monitoring agencies could also shift over time.

Indian immigrants in non-British territories had the right to claim the assistance of the British consul. Communication with this official should have been free and without restrictions. Indentured labourers could request his help to appeal against the decisions of the highest local authorities. The consul could also report on shortcomings in the living and working conditions of Indians under indenture. In Surname, planters and colonial officials identified the role of the British consul and the right of appeal as one of the major reasons for the perceived lack of submissiveness of the Indian labour force and a reason for promoting immigration from Java. Indonesian scholars later claimed that some Indians felt superior to Javanese because of the protection they enjoyed of the British consulate.

Although the contract stipulated a fixed wage, the wages actually paid out could lead to conflict as “official” and real wages often differed. According to many arrangements the indentured labourers could be paid on the basis of days or hours worked or the number of tasks completed. Generally, employers preferred to pay for each finished task in order to increase labour productivity. Employers thus defined a task as the work an average labourer could perform in one day. The management argued that they were acting according to the contract. Indentured workers, however, frequently complained that the tasks assigned were too heavy to finish in one day, particularly when weather conditions such as heavy rain made their work even harder. Thus employers and indentured labourers, sometimes supported by colonial officials, differed on what a worker could do in one day. The
arbitrary definitions of an “average worker” and “average performance” were the main elements in wage conflicts. In practice wages and thus the capacity of indentured workers to accumulate savings varied enormously, depending on their health and stamina, their experience, the type of work they undertook (with overseers, for example, earning more), or opportunities to gain extra income from other activities. Moreover, to obtain a clear measure of any earnings, income needed to be compared to the local cost of living. In many instances, the price of rice was an important indicator of the actual standard of living of the labourers.

After expiration of their contracts labourers had several options: to sign a new contract, to return home, or to find employment elsewhere. The last option could be restricted as former indentured migrants were explicitly prohibited from working in certain industries to protect the non-immigrant population. Gold mining in Suriname is but one example. Many contracts included free return passage to convince those signing up of the, at least in theory, finality of the agreement. Many factors influenced decisions about whether to return or to stay. They included the formation of family and other relations in the host country, the power of the caste system in the case of Indian migrants, a failure of meeting savings goals, or the irregular sailing of return ships which caused time-expired migrants to incur debts. Distance from the homeland could also play a role in the decision to return. In Cuba and Peru, free return was not part of the contract and the high cost of the voyage made it difficult to return. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of Indian migrants in the Mascarene Islands repatriated. In the late nineteenth century, many Caribbean governments offered former indentured workers plots of land to populate the colony and to further develop smallholding agriculture. Repatriation rates varied through time among ethnic groups and destinations, and according to economic opportunities in places of destination and of origin.

Reception in host societies

Governments and employers determined the conditions of the labour contracts, but the migrants themselves also shaped conditions in their new, possibly temporary, homes. Their places of work were often spatial and social enclaves. Upon arrival most newcomers were allocated to their employers, but in some cases, including Cuba and Peru, slavery-style auctions were common. The arrivals had to adjust to a new environment including different diseases, diet, work rhythm, culture, and social stratification.

Needless to say, circumstances varied by territory, time period, and product. In Peru, for example, the mortality rate among Chinese migrants was exceedingly high, but it is unclear whether this was caused by ill treatment and malnutrition or the encounter with a different disease environment. The organization of production and the profitability of the enterprise had a great impact on labour conditions and levels of wellbeing. A common denominator was a clearly defined hierarchical
organization demanding unconditional discipline and obedience. Moreover, language differences increased the sense of alienation of contract workers from their employers. Yet management cultures could vary by economic sectors or even among employers. Another important factor was the macro-economic climate. Rapid economic expansion might lead to increased workloads and mounting tensions, lower health standards, and more crowded housing. It is a matter of debate whether material conditions such as housing, medical care, drinking water and food provisions improved over time. Finally, factors such as age, experience, social relations, and the physical state of migrants influenced how well and how quickly they might adjust.

Specific case studies, whether for particular places, ethnic groups, or economic sectors, reveal little about individual experiences, through there are some indirect indicators. Frustration about the circumstances in which indentured labourers found themselves may have prompted a variety of reactions, ranging from gambling and drug taking to suicide or even to rebellion. Heavy workloads and poor wages were often the main reasons for discontent. Desertion, that is leaving the enterprise without consent, was a clear act of dissatisfaction with prevailing conditions relative to opportunities elsewhere.

Other obvious forms of protest, certainly to the outside world, were personal attacks on supervising staff or mass strikes and rioting. In case of open defiance, the army or police might be used to suppress unrest. Particularly in the late colonial period employers used allegations of anti-colonial agitation as an argument to call in the support of the state to curb unrest on their enterprises, sometimes with perverse consequences for their workers. In Indonesia in the 1920s, the fear of agitation by alleged “outsiders”, such as nationalists and communists, led to ever more regressive policies, which did not lead to better treatment of the workers. Where resistance was more covert, involving, for example, feigning sickness or not following orders, the penal sanction gave the employers the right to take recalcitrants to court as such breaches of contract were deemed criminal offences. Open confrontations may have been more eye-catching, but the rates of convictions may have been a clearer indication of resentment. Finally, contemporaries had little awareness of cultural strategies of survival, such as escapism, to accommodate to the new life in an unfamiliar setting.

Though often from different cultural backgrounds, indentured workers moving overseas tried to form communities within the new and often alien world in which they found themselves. Adaptation and sociocultural identity formation often went hand in hand, but uneven sex ratios, and in particular a low ratio of females, sometimes made it more difficult to (re)build communities and to generate a sense of wellbeing and stability. This was especially so among Chinese and Pacific Islanders, making it even harder for them to settle in the host society. The British government ordered that specified quotas of women needed to be recruited, while Caribbean planters stated that they wanted women not for their labour power but to tie the men to the plantations. The status of women within the indenture systems remains,
however, debatable. Some have argued that women were at the bottom of a race-
class-gender hierarchy, subject to double exploitation by employers and by men
from their own group, while others have pointed to the opportunities for women
in a society with a shortage of females.

The arrival and settlement of different ethnic groups sometimes caused outbreaks
of open racism. The migrants were often seen as intruders taking jobs, weakening the
bargaining position of local workers, mainly, in the Caribbean, African freedmen, and
thus lowering wages. In particular, Chinese were frequently targeted, both during and
after the indenture period, not only because of their ethnic distinctiveness, culture,
and language, but also because of their perceived economic success. Not surprisingly,
in times of economic crisis migrants were often scapegoats accused of taking jobs at
cutthroat wages and undercutting local entrepreneurs. Ethnic tensions may even
have harmed development in postcolonial countries such as Guyana or Fiji, where ri-
valry between descendants of indentured labourers and other population groups con-
tinues to provoke discussion about social exclusion, which, in turn, is seen deeply to
affect the socioeconomic, cultural, and political functioning of the country. Outcomes
vary, however, for whereas twenty-first century Mauritius and Suriname provide exam-
ples of non-Asian countries where people of Asian descent form today the majority of
the population, in other countries, such as Jamaica or the French Caribbean islands,
the presence of indentured migrants has basically “vanished.”

The end of indenture

Like the abolition of slavery, the end of indenture did not occur simultaneously in all
receiving countries. Moreover, as with slavery, the debate surrounding the end of in-
denture focused on freedom in general and the concept of free labour in particular.
Temporal and geographical factors influenced debates over the meaning of free la-
bour. What was lauded as free labour in one place at a particular time was often la-
beled as slavery by any other name at other places at the same or different times. The
system’s abuses fueled the debate. This controversy is still visible in current publica-
tions. Proponents stressed and continue to stress that indentured migrants signed a
contract out of their own free will, while opponents pointed to deceptive recruitment
methods, the penal sanction, and the labour and living conditions in new host soci-
eties. Sometimes governments acted on critical reports regarding labour conditions
and the legal rights of the indentured workers, but calls for reform were often ignored
on account of the socially marginal position or the ethnic background of the inden-
tured migrants. Ultimately, politics with a capital P and new socioeconomic realities
made the difference. Hawai‘i was the first major receiving country where indentured
labour was banned when the U.S. anti-Peonage Act (1867) prohibiting the “voluntary
or involuntary servitude” was extended to the newly annexed islands (1898). Howev-
er, it was in the sending countries where the rising nationalist tides signaled the end
of the system. China was the first to act when in the 1870s the country adopted a
more assertive policy and first regulated and then suspended the system, even though debt and other forms of involuntary migration to Hawai‘i, Natal, and Europe continued to exist.

In 1916 the Indian Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, abolished the indentured trade. Indenture was seen, in Hardinge’s words, as “a system of forced labour entailing much misery and degradation and differing but little from a form of slavery.” Consequently, he urged “the total abolition of the system of indentured labour” in Fiji, Jamaica, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Suriname. This volte face by the British authorities was prompted by increasing nationalist pressure in India. Following Mohandas Gandhi’s protests in southern Africa over the precarious legal position of Indians there, indentured labour became a vehicle for highlighting wider forms of discrimination against Indians by the British. During the Great War indentured migration was thus abolished by London in order to save the British Raj.

Other developments leading to the international abolition of indentured labour were socioeconomic in nature. The nineteenth century had witnessed two major, distinct streams of migration: from Europe to temperate settlements and from Asia to (sub)tropical lands. At certain places these streams converged, as for example in Australia and southern Africa. Where at first the European settlers regarded indentured labour as an asset, soon they considered the growing number of non-Europeans as a threat to European rule and jobs. Consequently, by the turn of the twentieth century governments in these settler areas restricted entry of non-Europeans by adopting discriminatory legislation and thereby promoting the interests of people of European descent at the expense of the Asian populations.

In the plantation zones, changing economic circumstances sometimes made bound labour unattractive, either because economic downturns and unemployment militated against continuing recruitment or because in some cases offered wages were high enough to attract non-indentured workers. In Java, both political and economic factors prompted abolition of the “contract coolie” system in Indonesia and Suriname in 1931.

### Conclusion

The indentured labour system exhibited temporal, regional, and industrial variations depending, among other things, on the prevailing colonial authority that managed it, production regimes in new host societies, the local labour history, laws and customs

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in both source and host areas, the strength of the entrepreneurial class, the state of demand for workers in host areas, and supervisory structures. Many kinds of arrangements were simultaneously at work in both sending and receiving areas. Studies of the different systems in operation reveal a complex picture with different shades of coercion and freedom and that borders between forms of labour were fluid.

In whatever regime one considers, it was evident that the level of coercion involved was determined from the outset by whether an individual was forced to leave or made his or her own decision to leave. In either case, the role of recruiters was crucial. Those recruiters “fished in two pools.” First, they pursued mobile labourers in search of work and who were willing to consider the opportunities of new life elsewhere. Second, recruiters targeted more sedentary people living in villages. Chicanery could be a part of the process encouraging people to leave, and might include providing misleading information about work and contract conditions as well as final destinations, especially if they involved traveling long overseas distances. The costs of recruitment and transport were ultimately reflected in the length of initial contract that migrants signed.

Indentured migrants faced onerous conditions on sugar plantations, a major destination for such migrants and one where employers had often previously been slave owners and working conditions had historically taken a heavy toll on the enslaved. But decades after slavery had ended, working conditions for indentured labourers in new and expanding economic enclaves were arduous too. After an initial period of trial and error in the first half of the nineteenth century, the indentured labour system reached both its historic peak numerically and its greatest diversity in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Thereafter, the number of indentured migrants slowly declined, notably in the wake of the formal abolition of the system in China and India, but it still survived well into the twentieth century. Its final collapse came in the 1930s with repeal of the penal clause in the Dutch East Indies in 1931, and its subsequent ending in Suriname, the last refuge of indentured labour in the Americas.

The categorization of the revived system of indenture has been debated since its early-nineteenth-century beginnings. It was hailed as free labour based on voluntarily signed contracts, but the fact that in many places it was a direct successor to slavery, with the mental legacy of that system as well as the material remnants such as slave barracks, made it suspect then and now. As with slavery, racism was a cornerstone of the indentured migration system, even though its depth varied across colonial settings and depended on global and local economic conditions influencing how employers, civil servants and other population groups treated “foreign” labourers.

Despite these continuums indentured labour was not an intermediate phase in a teleological development from slavery to free labour. Indentured labour existed in places without a history of slavery and in other settings where enslaved, free, and indentured labourers worked side by side. The way the system was implemented showed clear variations in time and locality, calling for a nuanced approach to indentured migration and labour.
Suggested reading


Marks, Shula and Peter Richardson (eds). *International Labour Migration, Historical Perspectives* (Hounslow, Middlesex: M. Temple Smith, 1984).


Prasad, Shiu. *Indian Indentured Workers in Fiji* (Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1974).


