Imagining the Other: British Perceptions of Indentured Labor in Colonial Trinidad, 1838-1920

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ABSTRACT

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A thesis presented to the Department of History

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After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in the nineteenth century, a new indentured labor regime arose in which tens of thousands of East Indians were ultimately transported to the British Caribbean colonies to serve as agricultural laborers. Many scholars in recent decades have analyzed this indentured labor system, which lasted from approximately 1838 to 1920, primarily in terms of its social and economic characteristics and the agency of its participants. This thesis adopts a fresh methodological approach by investigating British perceptions of these individuals in the island of Trinidad, as expressed in newspapers, travel narratives, speeches, and government correspondence, in order to better understand how East Indians figured in colonial Trinidadian society. In so doing it argues that while British perceptions maintained a certain degree of continuity throughout these decades, their emphases and governing anxieties also evolved in conjunction with socioeconomic, political, and ideological developments not only in the colony and the metropole, but indeed throughout the empire. As such this work strongly argues for the relevance of global contextual factors and the fruitful possibilities of discourse analysis in the field of imperial history.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Upon the emancipation of slaves throughout the British Empire in the 1830s, colonial planters—as propertied individuals whose social status and economic well-being relied upon the manual labor of others—were understandably perplexed and worried. They owned vast tracts of agricultural land throughout the British Caribbean, and the sugar, cocoa, and other tropical crops their plantations produced with the labor of unfree Africans served as the economic lifeblood of the colonies. With the legislated abolition of the governmental apparatus of coercion that kept these persons working the land, it was understood as inevitable that former slaves would at once abandon the plantations, leaving the planters in the midst of a dire labor shortage.

Planters in Trinidad were by no means exempt from this labor problem. The Sanderson Report, produced in 1898 by the West India Royal Commission, estimated that in this island alone some 21,700 acres (8,781 hectares) had been planted in sugar cane by 1840\(^1\)—an expanse that demanded sizable amounts of manual labor. Unable and unwilling to tend these plantations themselves, planters experimented for several years with schemes to import free agricultural laborers from Africa, Madeira, the United States, and Europe. The results of these transitory attempts, which scholars note were characterized by “excessive optimism,” were not encouraging, and led planters to search farther afield for the much-needed labor source. In 1838 the first private initiative was made to bring East Indian laborers to Trinidad; however, due to the extensive criticism it received both for the prevalence of illness among the immigrants and the

scheme’s suspicious resemblance to slavery, the British government banned the importation of laborers from India for five years. Only in 1844 did the first government-sanctioned importations begin, and even then a system of indenture contracts would only be firmly established well into the 1850s.2

Thus it was that a system of indenture, which would eventually transport some 430,000 individuals from India, was established in Trinidad and other British colonies in the Caribbean. It did not spring forth Athena-like, fully formed and armed, but slowly, hesitantly, and in conversation with the social, political, and economic vagaries of the moment such as sugar market fluctuations and anti-slavery criticism. The latter was a particularly potent opposing force in the system’s formative period in that it sought to discredit the scheme on the grounds that indenture was far too coercive and prone to abuse to qualify as anything other than slavery in a new, more politically correct guise. Similar opposition to Indian indenture arose from other domains as well, such as late nineteenth-century socialist thought. However, of all the varied criticisms of the system, only emergent Indian nationalism—coupled with simultaneous socioeconomic and political developments—would ultimately succeed in abolishing it in 1917.

Because of the wide variety of British and colonial views on the issue of indentured East Indian labor throughout its periods of development, heyday, and decline, an equally far-ranging assortment of British opinions regarding the nature of the laborers themselves appeared, particularly because of the system’s perceived relationship to the recently abolished system of slavery. This thesis will examine a variety of sources that span the period of Trinidadian indentureship from 1838 to 1920—and by parsing the language of newspapers, colonial correspondence, and travel narratives, will elucidate both the diversity among these portrayals as

2 Ibid., 2-3.
well as common tropes, assumptions, and concerns that underlie them. Such an examination will demonstrate that certain anxieties existed in British thought in each period, and that these anxieties shifted according to developments in the socioeconomic context, continuity and episodic shifts in ideology. It will also examine some of the fundamental assumptions about both East Indians and Britons that were shared by those who held otherwise contradictory, even antagonistic opinions on the validity of the indenture system. On a more theoretical level, this thesis also will argue that these British perceptions of East Indian laborers illustrate the complex interaction between ideas and socioeconomic circumstances, and that conceptual frameworks for taking stock of the supposed “other” in society are malleable and susceptible to change.

Trends in the Historiography of Indenture

Numerous British and imperial historians have devoted their attention to reconstructing the development and nature of this system of indentured labor, and in doing so have focused both on broad socioeconomic processes and more recently upon the experiences and constructed identity of individuals participating in this system. Several general trends in the historiography can be deciphered, such as a shift from pro-imperialist accounts written during the 1950s to a much darker, negative view of the system as representing a new form of slavery. Subsequent work shaped by the “cultural turn,” which reacted against this opinion and took a much more optimistic view emphasizing the agency of these Indian laborers, is to some extent still prevalent today. Most recently, the latest trends in the scholarship have dealt with many new aspects of the topic, and probe issues such as race, gender, perception, identity, and questions of how the British colonial experience was informed by developments in a larger global context. In order to properly orient the ensuing discussion in its broader historiographical context, it is fitting to engage in a synthetic overview of these developments in scholarly literature on the topic of
Indian indenture. Such an overview can provide only a cursory summary of this diverse literature, and must inevitably omit several relevant works in this rich field. Nevertheless, by summarizing key trends and noting connections between contributions to the field, this overview will demonstrate the need for a new approach analyzing representations.

By the 1950s, scholars had already begun to deal with the topic of Indian indentured laborers in the British Caribbean, and their analysis was clearly influenced by the political and social norms of the time. In works such as *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834-1854* and "A Survey of Indian Immigration to British Tropical Colonies to 1910," I. M. Cumpston adopted a generically imperialist view derived from Whig historiography; she accepted the statements of government officials at face value and implicitly shared their beliefs in the civilizing benefits of indentured labor, the “benevolent neutrality” of the Indian colonial government in facilitating emigration, and the “docility” of Indian laborers. By emphasizing that such laborers were able to progress from plantation work to smallholding, retail trading, domestic service, clerical work, and other professions, she generally portrayed indentured labor as bestowing very real social and economic goods upon these individuals, arguing that “the usually successful gamble of emigration brought an increase in opportunities, incentives to industry, security, and release from the bondage of traditional custom, caste prejudice and social disapproval.” This relatively uncritical portrait of indentured labor as a way to civilize, elevate, and lend ambition to an otherwise docile and unambitious race had obvious ties with earlier, racially-charged ideas of “The White Man’s Burden,” and may have been formulated as part of a

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4 Ibid., 162.
reactionary defense of empire in an era of rapid decolonization. As such, it acted as a perfect foil for the new historiographical trends that began to take form in the early 1970s.

With the decline of British colonial rule in the region during the 1960s, not to mention other significant shifts in historical studies such as the rise of social history, it was inevitable that distinctly new interpretations of Indian indentured labor would appear in the decades after Cumpston. In 1974, the London-based Institute of Race Relations sponsored the publication of Hugh Tinker’s paradigm-shifting and still very relevant text *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*. As the title itself makes plain, Tinker took a profoundly pessimistic view of Indian indentured labor and drew support for his arguments from a larger historical debate between abolitionists and industrialists that stretched back to the system’s inception. During its formation in the nineteenth century the indenture system had been criticized by members of the Anti-Slavery Society as nothing more than a revitalized form of slavery, and while this criticism lost currency for some decades, it revived to some extent in the years leading up to the system’s dismantling.\(^5\) Tinker actively engaged with this preexisting debate, seeing the new labor system as inextricably bound to the need of self-interested planters for labor after the abolition of slavery.\(^6\) Further, he saw this system as only part of the larger exploitation of the tropics by the West, and argued forcefully that the British engaged in this system of slavery in full knowledge of what they were accomplishing.\(^7\) Even in the destruction of the system the moral culpability of the British was still evident; for Tinker argued that the system

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\(^7\) Ibid., xii-xv.
was only destroyed due to an “outburst of public opinion” in India, thus implying that the British could not even redeem themselves by belatedly developing their own moral principles.

The vocabulary and paradigm of seeing indentured labor as exploitative neo-slavery resonated within the subsequent work of others including the Jamaican scholar Marianne Ramesar. Published in 1984, her essay “Indentured Labor in Trinidad 1880-1917” gave an overview of the demographic and economic conditions of indentured labor in the island, mainly interpreting these individuals through the lens of laborers as economic creatures. Observing that the system was instrumental to the economic needs of the empire, she argued that through indentureship planters on this particular island were exploiting a “servile, controllable labour force”; further, she argued that indenture had “negative and far-reaching effects in cheapening agricultural labor, and degrading its status in Trinidad.”8 In Ramesar’s account the indentureship system and its legacy was thus profoundly negative in that it exploited the laborers and deepened the ethnic divisions within colonial and post-colonial society.9

Subsequent to the development and predominance of this negative view of indentured labor in the 1970s and 1980s, a scholarly reaction took place that contested the bleak picture painted by Tinker, et al. and emphasized that the Indian individuals who participated in the labor system must have exercised a degree of autonomy. One of the first works in this vein came from P.C. Emmer in 1986, whose essay "The Meek Hindu; the Recruitment of Indian Indentured Labourers for Service Overseas, 1870–1916” used recruitment procedures in India to argue that while slavery and indentured labor were considered to be similar, individual choice and recruitment patterns made them distinctly different economic systems. He argued that with little


9 Ibid.
extant evidence for kidnapping and other forms of coercion, and with the documented precautions that government officials took to prevent fraud and abuse, Indian indentured labor actually had more in common with free labor than with slavery. Further, and in a move typical of many works influenced by the “cultural turn” that began during the 1980s, Emmer argued that these Indian men and women demonstrated their agency by making the deliberate choice to go overseas as indentured laborers.

Other scholars quickly followed Emmer’s lead, and themes of agency, individual experience, motives, and cultural continuity began to dominate the scholarship. For instance, the Trinidadian historian and churchman Anthony de Verteuil in 1989 wrote a microhistorical account of the lives of eight first-generation East Indian immigrants to Trinidad, emphasizing their agency as social actors and highlighting the extraordinarily diverse means by which they each successfully forged their new social identities. De Verteuil also exemplified this new, wider interpretation of indentured laborers as more than oppressed economic beings in other ways, such as in his account of the Hosay riots of 1884 during which negotiations between laborers and colonial officials demonstrated the latter’s willingness and ability to make their voice heard.

Walton Look Lai, who made a significant contribution to the field in 1993 with his book *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, extended this trend by comparatively examining synchronic differences within the entire structure of British Caribbean indentured labor. Look Lai attempted to reconcile the disparate interpretations of Tinker and scholars like Emmer by describing

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11 Ibid., 189.

indentured labor as existing somewhere between slavery and free labor, defining it as a “hybrid” labor scheme that made use of semifree labor in the main sector and nominally free labor in the peripheral areas of economic activity. Importantly, he too emphasized the agency of Asian migrants (both Indian and Chinese), and described how they responded to the opportunities and limitations offered by the indenture experience. In so doing he created an account that was a marked departure from earlier narratives in that it was as much about their social evolution and cultural continuity as it was about the socioeconomic system of indenture.

A year later, K.O. Laurence’s substantial examination of indentured labor in Trinidad and British Guiana from 1875 to 1914 finally appeared. In this impressive work, which had been in development since 1975, the author demonstrated his thorough engagement with archival evidence and his sensitivity to the shifting tides of scholarship from the seventies to the nineties. Regarding the debate over neo-slavery, Laurence clearly was aware of the extremes of opinion on the issue and took a conciliatory stance. For instance, he described indenture in Tinker-esque fashion as “an oppressive system which imposed restrictions and onerous conditions on the indentured” and pointed out the ways in which that system was open to abuses, while also noting that “many managers and overseers took good care of their indentured immigrants.” One of Laurence’s important contributions to the debate was to point out that the standards by which critics judged the relative social, material, and moral parameters of the indenture system were themselves subject to diachronic change. It was just such a shift in standards that for Laurence

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15 Ibid., 485.
helped to bring about the gradual modification and abolition of the indenture system—a view that was to be contested by others who devoted more attention to Indian nationalism as a causative agent.

In 1995 David Northrup built upon the agency trend from the “cultural turn” with his *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, which used a broad focus and a synthetic, comparative approach to trace the worldwide development of semi-free labor throughout this period, both within and without the British Empire. His work responded directly to Tinker’s bleak portrayal of indenture, arguing instead with Emmer that indentured labor had more in common with free labor of the time than with slavery.¹⁷ He attempted to solve the neo-slavery debate by reiterating Laurence’s argument about the shifting standards against which indentured labor was measured, remarking that “conditions conceived as ‘free labor’ in one time and place were denounced as ‘slavery’ at a later time or another place.”¹⁸ Throughout, Northrup foregrounded the motives and agency of the Indian laborers, noting that they were propelled by both “the push of undesirable circumstances at home” and “the pull of opportunities overseas” [emphasis in original].¹⁹

In the years since the publication of these texts, several scholars have continued to employ one particular aspect of cultural turn methodology by emphasizing Indian agency. In the late 1990s, for instance, the Indo-Fijian historian Brij V. Lal argued that the experiential dimension of these Indian laborers had not received adequate attention. In seeking to reconstruct

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¹⁶ Ibid., 512-513.


¹⁸ Ibid., 142.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43.
the lived aspect of their history, he adopted a pan-imperial focus and argued that although indentureship throughout the British Empire was a dark experience, these individuals did exercise agency and maintain cultural continuity through tradition and religion.\textsuperscript{20} He also hinted at a newly emerging trend in historiography—the question of identity—by observing that the experience had resulted in tensions within the identity of the Indian diaspora.\textsuperscript{21}

Radica Mahase in 2008 gave even more emphasis to the agency of these laborers in her article “‘Plenty a Dem Run Away’ - Resistance by Indian Indentured Labourers in Trinidad, 1870-1920.” In this essay Mahase placed continued emphasis on individual experience and action by analyzing how indentured laborers in Trinidad resisted authority through means as diverse as “indolence, absence from work, desertion and threats made to planters and managers as well as the destruction of the plantation equipment.”\textsuperscript{22} Further, she engaged bottom-up cultural history by emphasizing that such resistance “was represented and propagated in everyday activities and articulated through popular culture.”\textsuperscript{23} Mahase used colonial sources such as government reports and newspapers from the period, and explicitly acknowledged their limitations. Yet by skillfully reading these sources against the grain, she was able to reconstruct Indian agency and motive, thereby showing that these laborers were not the “docile” workers constructed by historians like Cumpston and arguing that such resistance resulted in a “general amelioration” of their working conditions.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 236.


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 477.
Final examples of this cultural approach to Indian indentured labor come from Lomarsh Roopnarine, who during the past decade has devoted a significant amount of time and effort to the subject. Although he has addressed indentureship throughout the Caribbean region, Roopnarine’s work generally focuses on the key sugar regions of Trinidad and British Guiana and counters the tradition of Tinker, et al. by arguing that phenomena such as return migration to India and internal migration in these regions demonstrate that Indian laborers actually used this labor system that was not all that oppressive to migrate and to benefit themselves.\(^\text{25}\) Even more importantly, Roopnarine has also observed several shortcomings in the field at present, questioning the value of the traditional neo-slavery analytical framework and arguing for the development of new initiatives, such as comparative analyses or examinations of topics like unclaimed remittances and the loss of Indian citizenship.\(^\text{26}\)

However rich the legacy of cultural history might be for the topic of Indian indentured labor in the Caribbean, it is not the only method currently in use. As will now be shown, many other approaches have emerged during the past decades thanks to interdisciplinary infusions from fields such as gender and cultural studies. While the analytic clarity accorded by decades of hindsight is not yet available, it is nevertheless possible to classify works using these new approaches into at least two basic categories. The first set of works has placed the story of Indian indentured labor within the broad fields of Atlantic and global histories, observing the material

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and ideological connections to be found within global networks of production, exchange, and power. The second category has taken a narrower approach and explores discrete aspects of personal experience and identity such as perception, representation, race, and gender. Importantly, it is this latter trend which this thesis proposes to augment by examining British representations of the Indian indentured laborer.

The topic of indentured labor in the Caribbean has been a prime candidate for integration into new temporally and geographically expansive approaches such as Atlantic and global history. Occurring as indenture did within the colonial territory of a truly global empire, in a society composed of individuals from Europe, Africa, India, and China, and in an economy that relied heavily on global imperial markets, it is impossible to properly understand the history of Indian laborers, Trinidad, or the Caribbean as a whole without analyzing these complex demographic and socioeconomic linkages. By approaching the topic with a new global perspective, scholars have developed new interpretations of indentureship that destabilize older analytical frameworks and ask new analytical questions.

One of the first scholars to make extensive use of wider imperial linkages to inform her work was Madhavi Kale, whose doctoral dissertation in the early 1990s discussed indentured labor’s early development within the British Empire from 1837 to 1845. Within it she showed that existing prejudices worked to limit the arguments made by British abolitionists against indentureship, and that the colonial planters’ superior access to political power (both in the periphery and in the metropole) enabled them to undermine the position of free blacks and to acquire new laborers from India. This work was later incorporated into her 1998 book

*Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean*,

the wider focus of which dealt with capitalism’s function in the region and reinterpreted indentured labor “not as a process or experience[…] but rather as a site where hierarchies of empire were enunciated, contended and inscribed.”

In 2000 Karen Dhanda supplemented this interest in wider global linkages through politics and ideology in her work, which focused on economics and sought to determine how Trinidadian indentured labor was involved in integrating Trinidad into the world economy. Although interested in sugar as an economic commodity, Dhanda also analyzed the nature of the indentured labor regime that produced it, and using this dual focus noted connections between settlement patterns, sugar production, and East Indian indentureship. She embedded her analysis in a wider economic context that discussed both the “entire process of British indentured labor in the Americas” and the ways in which “outsiders” proposed economic development schemes that showed no knowledge of the material realities of the Trinidadian environment. Dhanda also underscored the importance of a wider context when it came to labor, arguing that “the web of networks that created a demand for indentured East Indians, recruited them and influenced the demise of this indentureship flowed across space. It was a truly global web of networks.” In short, Dhanda successfully used global social and economic linkages to make sense of the development and decline of indentured labor in the island.

One of Dhanda’s observations resonated strongly with the traditional debate over indentureship as neo-slavery and demonstrated that some scholars at this time were growing increasingly skeptical of the debate’s ongoing relevance. Underscoring the importance of local


29 Karen S. Dhanda, "Indentured Labor and the Integration of Trinidad into the World Economy" (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 2000), 5,14, [http://search.proquest.com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/304652008/](http://search.proquest.com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/304652008/).

30 Ibid., 4.
variability, she argued that “in Trinidad, neither slavery nor East Indian indentureship fit the stereotypes about slavery and indentureship. Indentureship was not one monolithic structure that replaced another because slavery in Trinidad was not a closed monolithic structure either.”\textsuperscript{31} This readiness to move beyond the traditional analytical framework received further impetus from Clare Anderson, who in 2009 published “Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century,” and thus made the case for shifting the frame of analysis on this subject. Noting the apparent distinction scholars had made between “free” and “unfree” labor, she instead argued, based on her examination of recruitment and shipment patterns as well as colonial changes throughout the British Empire, that the process had more in common with wider colonial practices associated with incarceration and confinement.\textsuperscript{32} It was this different interpretation of indentureship’s practice and perception, derived in part by embracing a global perspective, that Anderson suggested might offer a fruitful means to escape the confines of the traditional debate over whether indentured labor was a second form of slavery.\textsuperscript{33}

One final work demonstrating the novel possibilities of viewing Indian indentured labor through a global lens comes from Nalini Mohabir, who in 2014 examined the imagined and real links between India and the Caribbean that played a part in the return voyages of some of these laborers. Making use of “history, memory, portscape, literature, and imagination,” operationalized through oral history, archives, and walks through relevant sites in Calcutta, she attempted to discover how return migration for these individuals might function in the absence of memorials. By combining a global historical focus with attention to memory, perception, and

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 7.


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 104-105.
imagination, she challenged existing cultural narratives of one-way migration and nuanced understandings of the ways in which these individuals conceived of their movement through this global context.\(^{34}\)

As discussed earlier, the second theme in scholarship since the year 2000 has involved a more intensive examination of components of personal identity and experience, including but certainly not limited to topics such as gender, race, perception, and representation. It must be noted that such themes are not self-contained, and their traces might be found even in works dealing with global history; Mohabir’s work is an excellent case in point. Further, it is impossible to document here all the ways in which historians have approached these topics in relation to Indian indentured laborers. However, a brief synopsis of four examples from the past fifteen years may demonstrate some of the practical ways in which scholars have constructed new perspectives that together provide a more nuanced understanding of indentured labor in Trinidad and the wider Caribbean.

In 2003, the postcolonial scholar Anne-Marie Lee-Loy published an essay that, although it dealt only tangentially with Indian indentured laborers, demonstrated that a new emphasis on representations—i.e., how some individuals chose to define and characterize other individuals—was beginning to form. She chose to focus on popular representations in newspapers, travel narratives, and official correspondence of the Chinese laborers who, like their Indian colleagues, worked in British sugar colonies during this period. Upon finding these representations frequently to be far less negative than was usual for the time, Lee-Loy argued that this was due to the integral economic role these individuals played as both producers and consumers, and that

such positive depictions were used to maintain colonial order. Indian laborers entered the discussion mainly as the backdrop against which Chinese immigrants were portrayed, and Lee-Loy argued that in such a role they were frequently depicted as being inferior—socially withdrawn or miserly, for instance—in comparison to the Chinese. Although other evidence exists that may undermine this particular argument, the point stands that representation and perception were novel and useful additions to the field that demonstrated how economic roles and political necessity influenced public rhetoric.

Representations received additional treatment from Amar Wahab in 2007, whose background in sexuality and gender studies informed his excellent assessment of what he termed “West Indian Orientalism.” He was perhaps the first scholar to devote an entire essay to examining literary and visual representations of “coolies” in the British West Indies, and operationalized this analysis with a theoretical reliance on Said’s concept of Orientalism and a focus on evidence in travel narratives and paintings of the time. Wahab highlighted the role of race, gender, and preexisting orientalist stereotypes in structuring such representations, and argued that Europeans generally portrayed Indian laborers as either picturesque coolies who were disciplined and encouraged to work by the colonial plantation system, or “culturally-saturated orientals” that remained outsiders to New World society. In employing this novel approach, Wahab demonstrated that an analysis of representations by colonizers could usefully illuminate

36 Ibid., 218.
the construction of social space, ideological justifications for racial segregation, and the ways in which race and “other”-ness functioned in British colonial society.

Patricia Mohammad recently took up the theme of the Asian “other” in 2009 by dealing with how this Asian identity functions in Caribbean society up to the present day. She argued forcefully that the legacy of colonialism imposed certain markers of identity upon colonized groups, and that these have persisted in modern times with a variety of negative consequences.\(^{38}\) While her focus was oriented toward modern concerns, in the process of answering questions regarding how Asian identity was formed Mohammad necessarily dealt with the ways in which British individuals documented their perceptions of these Indian and Chinese laborers through literary sources and government correspondence—and in so doing again demonstrated that investigating historical perceptions can yield valuable insights into social formations and developments.

One final example of the new interdisciplinary focus on historical identity and its various components comes from Alison Klein, a professor of English whose 2015 doctoral dissertation dealt primarily with the themes of race, gender, and empire in Caribbean indenture narratives. Within it, Klein analyzed the fictional as much as the factual, discussing literary representations and gender stereotypes in the region through a comparative examination of novels, autobiographies, and oral histories from Trinidad, Guyana, Britain, and the United States. Klein’s work shows that despite fiction’s existence outside the realm of history proper, investigations therein can have relevance for historians, since depictions in works such as Edward Jenkins’ *Lutchmee and Dilloo* (1877) and A.R.F. Webber’s *Those that Be in Bondage*...

(1917) were used to justify and communicate ideas about the nature and validity of empire to the reading public, as well as to express notions of racial hierarchy.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{A New Direction: Representations}

In light of these developments, not to mention other recent works that examine topics like religion and caste during and after the indenture experience,\textsuperscript{40} it is clear that historical understandings of Indian indentured labor in Trinidad and the Caribbean at large have become far more nuanced and complete than they were in the mid-twentieth century. However, it is similarly clear that several gaps still persist in the literature. Besides the shortcomings mentioned earlier by Roopnarine, one particular gap lies in the relative lack of attention scholars have paid to British colonial representations, both written and visual, of Indian migrants. As demonstrated by the above historiographical overview, such representations have mostly functioned as illustrative or incidental facets of historical evidence, and only a few scholars like Wahab and Kale have devoted sustained attention to discussing the nature and role of these representations in history.

One may postulate several reasons for this relative neglect of British representations. Firstly, discourse analysis in historical studies is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it may simply be that scholars have not yet had time to fully explore the entire range of representations in imperial, colonial, and post-colonial history. A more substantial reason for this neglect, however, may lie in the particular focus of many colonial historians in the decades since the cultural turn. With the rise of “bottom-up” history and its emphasis, however laudable, upon


\textsuperscript{40} For example, see N. Jayaram, "The Metamorphosis of Caste among Trinidad Hindus," Contributions to Indian Sociology 40, no. 2 (June 1, 2006), 143-73, doi:10.1177/006996670604000201.
reconstructing the experiences, agency, motives, and perceptions of marginalized and subaltern groups, scholars have often in turn marginalized the perceptions of the traditional villains in colonial narratives: planters, colonial administrators, etc. Without attempting to morally rehabilitate or justify the injustices such individuals frequently perpetrated, it is nevertheless the case that their perceptions and experiences—even their racist representations of those they exploited and saw as intrinsically inferior—present an equally valid means through which to analyze and gain a deeper understanding of past colonial societies in places like nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Trinidad.

An examination of these representations need not reinvent the source base, for evidence showing how these laborers were perceived by British and colonial actors is certainly plentiful in newspapers, travel narratives, and governmental correspondence of the time. Even in the existing secondary literature hints abound. Just to cite a very few examples, Emmer’s work refers to colonizers’ terms like “the meek Hindu” and “stout sturdy men and women”;41 Ramesar notes that planters saw Indian laborers as “unreliable”;42 Laurence cites British references to the “excitable, suspicious, revengeful and…impulsive temperament” of Indian laborers in Guiana,43 as well as a Trinidadian newspaper referring in 1872 to “the riotous tendency of coolies when banded together”;44 and Lal refers to unflattering descriptions like the “flotsam and jetsam of humanity” and “bad, lazy, and inferior as a class” that were used to describe these individuals.45

43 Laurence, A Question of Labour, 517.
44 Ibid., 490.
In short, whatever other factors might account for the lack of attention to these representations as a deserving subject of historical research, it is most certainly not due to a paucity of evidence.

There are several reasons for engaging in this sort of discourse analysis. Perhaps most obviously, the vocabulary and imagery through which colonial British society described Indian indentured laborers inevitably shaped public discourse over their privileges, responsibilities, and socioeconomic position in colonial society. Understanding these representations thus may lead to a better understanding of later developments in the region such as colonial economic development and eventual political independence. A second reason emerges from the mutually beneficial relationship that can form between discourse analysis and conceptual and intellectual history. For studying representations can augment what are frequently theoretical, elitist understandings of large-scale concepts like “imperialism,” “race,” and “labor” by illustrating how they were formed and expressed in everyday colonial life—not by philosophers or theorists, but by ordinary government officials, planters, and laborers. Finally, and most importantly for those scholars who may be interested in the lived experience of subalternity, discourse analysis focused on British representations can inform current understandings of the experience of Indian laborers by revealing the attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices with which they had to contend.

**Methodological Parameters: Argument, Scope, Key Terms, and Periodization**

To operationalize this new focus on characterizations scholars can use a variety of different methodologies: for example, a visual history approach that investigates paintings, lithographs, and other visual representations of Indian laborers, or alternatively an approach that focuses on the written evidence within British sources. This thesis adopts the latter methodology, and thus will collect evidence for British perceptions from written accounts such as government correspondence, travel narratives, newspapers, diaries, and so forth. Such a deliberate choice to
foreground written evidence is not meant to imply that such material is somehow more relevant than imagery, but rather arises from several methodological considerations, not least of which is a desire to thoroughly analyze all primary sources rather than to embrace too large a source base and to thereby risk shortchanging some of the rich material these sources contain. The evidence thus gathered will then be carefully evaluated and embedded in its historical context, not only to understand how these perceptions and representations mesh with contemporary circumstances and customs, but also to forestall the possibility of anachronistic evaluation that might perceive only the negative or racist elements of such documents. By then comparatively analyzing these sources, this thesis will uncover common themes or sharp divergences and then draw wider conclusions regarding the practical necessities, dialectical causes, and ideological currents that might explain these responses.

In the course of examining British representations of Indo-Trinidadian indentured laborers through the lens of written evidence, ensuing chapters will mount several interrelated arguments about the nature and occurrence of these representations. The first argument is that during each phase in the development of the indentured labor system there existed what might be labeled unique governing anxieties, a term used here to describe ideas that were repeatedly mentioned, promoted, or attacked and that thus demonstrate a common, mutually understood preoccupation among a plurality of individuals. For example, during the system’s early years one finds a strong tendency for both pro- and anti-indenture Britons to be preoccupied with disputing the system’s morality, and hence its legitimacy. This anxiety would later subside and, due to demographic and socioeconomic developments in the island, would be replaced by a new anxiety over the place of East Indians in colonial society. In the system’s final years, two new anxieties
would arise over the growing wealth and social prominence of some Indo-Trinidadian elites, as well as over the disputed linkages between Indian nationalism and the Indian colonial diaspora.

Yet these periodic shifts in British perceptions were not their sole characteristic. Despite these transient anxieties, underneath them all one finds a complex of deeply-embedded assumptions about East Indian persons and their relationship to Europeans—a complex that saw them as primarily economic and racially-defined beings who needed to be paternally civilized into a more elevated, acceptable mode of being. This complex of beliefs persisted from the 1840s well into the twentieth century for several reasons—primarily because of their firm grounding in a traditional European and Christian worldview, but also because of the creative agency of those who held such views to adapt them to new socioeconomic realities.

A third argument that will arise from the evidence presented here is that there were clear but ideologically problematic linkages between pro-indenture arguments and those voiced by anti-indenture critics such as the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) and the Indian National Congress. As will be seen in ensuing chapters, both bodies protested indenture on the grounds of its injustice, exploitative nature, or its harmful effects on society; yet in so doing, their members relied on the same foundational assumptions about the passivity and helplessness of the Indian laborers themselves, thereby perpetuating the same sort of paternalizing control that they ostensibly opposed. The narrative of Indians in need of rescue remained firmly in place, with the only difference being the identity of their purported rescuers.

Taken together, this examination of representations and the arguments resulting from it make several distinct contributions to current scholarship. Firstly, of course, this material augments theoretical understandings of the “other” in British colonial society by examining one case study in how it practically functioned and evolved in Trinidad. More importantly, it also
problematizes assumptions regarding the nature of abolitionist and anti-indenture sentiment in the British Empire, particularly in reference to the Anti-Slavery Society. For far from supporting the notion that the abolitionist tradition was cleanly removed from the pro-slavery and pro-indenture ideas of their supposed opponents, the evidence provided here in fact demonstrates that there was never such a neat ideological separation as might be supposed; rather, they functioned within and in key ways affirmed the same discriminatory biases that pervaded nineteenth-century British society. Finally, and on a deeper level, this examination also eloquently testifies to the malleability and diachronic resilience of perceptions. Since the socioeconomic and political contexts in which British ideas of the “other” occurred varied over time, the persistence of the basic assumptions noted above throughout the period of indenture can only be explained as the result of deep ideological foundations and the ability and willingness of Britons to adjust their perceptions according to the evolving realities of their specific time.

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While the geographic and temporal boundaries of this examination may seem intuitively self-evident, in a time of increasingly global scholarship it is nevertheless fitting to briefly sketch them at the project’s outset. The geopolitical region forming the overwhelming focus for this thesis is the British colony of Trinidad, which for many years remained one of the British Empire’s most important sugar-producing colonies alongside Jamaica and British Guiana. Such a focus is not at all intended to minimize the significance of indenture and its development in other British colonies during this time. Indentureship was not unique to this island, clearly; nor was Trinidad the largest or most popular destination for indentured laborers during this time.

Yet there are several related reasons for this self-imposed limitation to one particular island. First and foremost is simply the issue of the project’s logistics; it would be ambitious at
best to attempt any thorough-going diachronic dissection of British perceptions of indentured laborers throughout the empire within the bounds of anything less than a substantial monograph. A second and more important reason arises more from historical circumstances and the extant source base. Trinidad was one of the few British colonies that participated in the post-slavery indenture system almost from its founding, and consequently it is possible to trace diachronic change in British perceptions for a longer period than those in Fiji or other late arrivals into the indenture system. Furthermore, Trinidad was positioned quite favorably in geographic terms, with its relatively close proximity to the metropole and its participation in the wider Atlantic world facilitating relatively easy travel to and from the colony. This ease of travel allowed for the creation of multiple travel narratives, so crucial for the purposes of this thesis, in which racial stereotypes and other evidence of British perceptions abound.

Despite this work’s explicit focus on British Trinidad, it must be emphasized that due to the very nature of the historical context it would be clearly impossible to limit all sources to the island itself. The colony existed as a small but integral part of a massive imperial network, and as a result the evidence written by Britons in Calcutta or London remains just as vital to the narrative as the regulations of the Trinidadian governor Lord Harris. An additional motivation for this expanded source base is the simple fact, so frustrating to historians, that individuals frequently elided important differentiations between colonies and ethnic groups, in some cases grouping Chinese and Indian laborers together under the homogenous term “coolies,” or in others simply referring to “the West Indies” with little attention to the very real differences between the British colonies in that region. As a result, this examination seeks to make careful use of more than purely Trinidad-focused sources, always endeavoring to highlight instances in which the author’s ambiguities both allow for and advise caution in the source’s use.
Having lamented the careless use of ambiguous terms in the historical record, it is only proper to note and attempt to clarify some of the potentially ambiguous terms used herein. This work will employ terms such as “indentured Indian laborer,” signifying thereby any of the tens of thousands of individuals who migrated under contract from India to other British territories with the practical assistance and oversight of British actors. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India was itself a microcosm filled with ethnic and religious diversity, and it is unfortunate that this diversity has been largely erased from the colonial sources that form the bulk of the present source base. The term “Indian” will therefore be used with the implicit understanding that a huge range of cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic, and caste-based diversity underlay this capacious term, and that it is only because of the peculiar perspective of the sources being discussed that this diversity is comparatively invisible. Similarly, the terms “Briton,” “British,” or “colonial” will be employed with the full understanding that these individuals also differed significantly in ethnic and social terms. Some were steeped in the elite society of London, while others were colonial-born and far removed from the traditional metropole; likewise, some may have maintained regional identities as Irish, Welsh, or Scottish, while others perhaps preferred to identify as English or British.

Importantly, the rationale for using these terms despite their limitations is based on the historical structure in which individuals participated; for each term, British and Indian, overwhelmingly described not a person’s intrinsic characteristics but their behavior and fundamental relationship with others in an imperial framework.46 To be an Indian or a so-called

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“cooler”\textsuperscript{47} was not merely a result of one’s ethnic heritage or geographic provenance—it was to a great extent about acting in accordance with the wishes and expectations of the colonial power, and about not being ethnically British in the white Caucasian sense of the word. Similarly, to be British was to be set apart by act and ethnicity from the Indian “other”. One perceives that to be British in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant to enact that identity in specific ways vis-à-vis a non-British subject population—in this specific instance, vis-à-vis East Indian indentured laborers.

The periodization within this work also deserves a brief mention. Previous scholars have adopted a plethora of competing timespans for examining the phenomenon of Indian indenture in the British Empire, each for a variety of more or less valid reasons. However, this examination limits itself to discussing events occurring in and evidence from approximately 1838 to 1920, thus encompassing the formal existence of British indentureship from 1845 to 1917. Individual chapters focus on further subdivisions of this timespan into three periods of unequal length: the formative period of indenture, stretching from 1838 to 1860, in which the need for labor eventually resulted in an established, government-sanctioned system of indentured migration; the heyday of migration, from 1861 to 1900, during which the system peaked and a new post-indenture Indian population took firm root in the island; and the system’s decline and abolition from 1901 to 1917, in which economic circumstances, Indian nationalism, and the First World War would together spell the end of indenture in the British colonies. Such a periodization is not sharply delineated, however, and it will become evident that in many ways these divisions are blurred and overwritten by strong ideological continuities.

\textsuperscript{47} The term “cooler”, used widely during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to these laborers, carries with it even today a pejorative and offensive meaning. Within the bounds of this discussion, therefore, the term will only be used in the context of actual quotations from the sources, and in its place will refer to these individuals as Indians, East Indians, indentured laborers, etc.
In chapter two, the discussion will commence with an analysis of both pro- and anti-indenture British representations as they occurred during the afore-mentioned formative period from 1838 to 1860. During this time the debate over the system’s morality will become evident, as well as four important characteristics of British perceptions that would form the persisting basis upon which similar perceptions would be constructed in subsequent decades. Here too the discussion will reveal the problematic commonalities between pro- and anti-indenture British thought, and will demonstrate the shared foundational assumptions that complicate the notion that anti-indenture advocates embraced a comparatively more egalitarian—or at least less discriminatory—view of Indians than their pro-indenture counterparts.

Chapter three progresses to deal with the heyday of indenture, a term here used to refer to the period from about 1861 to 1900 when the majority of Indian immigrants entered the colony. It will note the demographic growth of the Indian population in Trinidad as a result of continued migration and reproduction—growth which had obvious social implications and that stimulated the rise of a new anxiety in British and colonial thought over the proper place of Indians in island society. While the discussion will note that the tradition of foundational assumptions seen in chapter two continued, it will also observe that a number of individuals began to nuance this with new attention to Indians as social beings and even—particularly in relation to the Hosay Massacre of 1884—as a source of potential social unrest.

The waning of the system and its relatively sudden abolition during the course of the First World War form the setting for the fourth chapter. The discussion will observe that even in this time the traditional complex of racial, economic, paternalizing, and civilizing ideas continued to resonate in British thought. However, new anxieties also formed over their potential to form a prosperous social elite and to form destabilizing connections with emergent Indian nationalism.
The chapter will close with a brief discussion of the system’s abolition, noting that there was no serious rethinking of the foundational assumptions that had for so many decades characterized these British perceptions, and hinting at how this would continue in ensuing years.

It is fitting to close with a final note on this work’s limitations and intent. It does not pretend to offer an exhaustive quantitative analysis of British perceptions of indentured East Indians, but rather to examine those accounts which form some of the most visible and influential evidence on the subject. Further, while it does not venture into the promising realm of stereotypes as conveyed through imagery such as lithographs, paintings, and photographs, it acknowledges their informative potential and establishes a potential interpretive framework for how they might subsequently be successfully addressed. In sum, this thesis represents a comparatively new direction in the literature on Indo-Trinidadian indenture, and by offering this new perspective aims not only to demonstrate its usefulness to the field, but also to stimulate the production of other analyses that in turn will build upon and expand this work.
CHAPTER TWO: ESTABLISHING A PARADIGM, 1838-1860

In the September 1846 issue of the Anti-Slavery Society’s official newspaper the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, an unnamed correspondent had much to say regarding recent experiments with Indian indentured laborers in the British colonies—and none of it was positive. The author’s almost palpable indignation pervaded his description of the recent arrival in Trinidad of two immigrant ships and what had befallen their occupants: “These were divided into lots of twenty-five each, without regard to their feelings, or even to their relationships, as if, to use the language of a correspondent of high character, ‘they had been so many pigs or oxen.’” “The Coolies have been wheedled from home: they have been deceived and injured, and amongst us they are helpless,” the reporter exclaimed. Drawing upon similar sentiments expressed in the *Trinidad Spectator*, he lamented that these Indian laborers were “poor”, “wretched Coolies” who were being torn away from their family members by this new labor regime. Such compulsion was clearly illogical and unjust, since it violated their innately free status: “the Coolies leave India as freemen; they arrive in Trinidad as freemen; they cannot be compelled…”¹

This vision of oppression, so clearly calculated to excite the anti-slavery sympathies of its readership, in many ways represents the multiple tensions and paradoxes at work in British and colonial society during the first years of the indenture “experiment” in Trinidad and the wider West Indies, a formative period defined here as stretching from approximately 1838 to 1860. The morality of an emerging system of Indian indenture was obviously the key issue here, for those

opposed to it were almost universal in voicing suspicion that it was simply slavery in a new, more politically correct guise. Accordingly, their understandings of Indian laborers as lacking agency because of being caught up in a system of deception and exploitation clearly resonated with and can be seen as a natural derivation of existing understandings of slavery. Unfortunately, by emphasizing Indian laborers’ powerlessness in order to make the broader argument that they stood in dire need of rescue, such well-intentioned opinions actually perpetuated harmful stereotypes that denied these persons agency and placed their fate in the hands of ostensibly benevolent British reformers. The effect was that, almost universally in British society of this time, Indian indentured laborers were seen as subjects to be acted upon, not agents in charge of their own lives. Such views would be perpetuated in subsequent decades, entrenching ideas of Indian passivity and forming a significant ideological barrier to equality in colonial society.

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This sort of anti-indenture, anti-slavery sentiment constituted only one side of the indenture debate, and a minority at that. Far more persuasive in government circles were the voices of planters and elites with vested interests in the continued economic prosperity of the West Indian colonies. This more prevalent strand of thought saw emancipation and the subsequent shrinkage of the sugar industry’s labor force as the potential death knell of the colonial economies. Indenture thus represented a rational, morally acceptable solution to the problem that would safeguard the rights and property of British colonial subjects. True, this meant that the practice of Asian indentureship became inextricably linked to that of slavery; even observers at the time recognized that the two phenomena could not be considered in isolation since the extinction of the former labor regime gave rise to the latter. But in pro-indenture
thought indenture was generally seen as a rational, humane system that was not only infinitely better than slavery in moral terms, but also the means to ensure the region’s economic salvation.

This chapter will examine a variety of sources from this formative period in Trinidadian indentureship during which the system was gaining form and credibility, and by parsing the language of those who wrote about Indian laborers, will elucidate both the diversity among these portrayals as well as common tropes, assumptions, and concerns that these actors all shared. In so doing, it will become evident that while a plurality of opinion certainly exists in these sources, even in the opposing arguments of pro-indenture planters and anti-slavery critics four unifying themes of paternalism, a sense of obligation, and predominantly economic and racial characterizations resonate and recur. And while it is only with great caution that one may generalize about such a broad scope of sources, these commonalities demonstrate that much of the ideological groundwork for what would later be termed “The White Man’s Burden” was in fact already operational in British-Indian colonial relations decades before its most strident formulation at the end of the nineteenth century.

Importantly, on a more general level these sources also betray a common anxiety over the system’s debatable morality, a phenomenon that derived not only from a desire on the part of many Britons for moral justification, but also from the setting of morality as the dialogue’s central controversy by anti-slavery advocates. Despite its prominence in these early years, this anxiety would eventually be defeated by socioeconomic forces in favor of the system, and furthermore would be eclipsed in subsequent decades by other more pertinent preoccupations such as the place of Indians in colonial society. Moreover, and as already hinted in the opening, these sources show that both pro- and anti-indenture advocates saw themselves as being engaged in a civilizing project to improve and better the lives of Indian laborers, differing only in
precisely how this project should be accomplished. This clearly impacts modern understandings of the British anti-slavery movement and demonstrates that despite their morally praiseworthy efforts, even anti-slavery advocates were both limited by the prejudices and thought modalities of the time, and committed to the same goals as their erstwhile pro-indenture opponents.

The Pro-Indenture Narrative

Before delving into the particulars that inform anti-indenture attitudes such as those expressed by the Anti-Slavery Reporter, it is necessary to first understand the perceptions against which they were reacting. Perhaps none epitomizes the pro-indenture stance better than the novelist Anthony Trollope, who in 1859 published The West Indies and the Spanish Main, an extensive survey of that region's societies and the politics of assorted colonies based upon his recently completed travels there. While Trinidad occupies only one out of the volume’s twenty-three chapters—short shrift indeed in comparison to the eight chapters accorded to Jamaica—the chapter nonetheless contains informative passages regarding Trollope’s attitudes toward and perceptions of the Indian immigrants who by this time were becoming widespread in the island. Further, these remarks can and will be combined with his assessment of Indian laborers in the wider region to construct a fuller, more nuanced account of his thoughts on the matter.

Trollope’s narrative of Indian laborers in Trinidad begins with a discussion of the propriety of indentured immigration, in which the author responds critically to what he claimed was the excessive softness of the Anti-Slavery Society and its zealous campaign against the system, which he alleged was being waged on the grounds that Indian labor was harmful to the economic position of free negro laborers. After deriding these objections and making light of

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2 It must be noted that such an argument is misleading at best, since the Society typically deplored the system for its exploitation of Indians as much as for its effect on laborers of African descent. See James Heartfield, The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1838-1956: A History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 336.
the reported mortality rates aboard immigrant ships, he proceeds to recite the sort of economic arguments that were typical of pro-indenture sources. Citing the testimony of the politician and fellow novelist Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, he argues that the British are actually giving the Indians a valuable economic opportunity: “these Coolies, after having lived for a few years on plenty in these colonies, return to their own country with that which is for them great wealth.”

Economics are indeed paramount in his consideration, for the Indian laborers are vital to maintaining the West Indian colonies and represent in some sense the region’s economic salvation: not only by industriously competing with free African laborers, but by acting as a fresh genetic and demographic infusion to the region’s labor force: “when these different people [Africans and East Indians] have learned to mix their blood—which in time will also come—then mankind will hear no more of a lack of labour, and the fertility of these islands will cease to be their greatest curse.”

The racially defined nature of Trollope’s worldview is manifest throughout his discussion of immigrant laborers, particularly in a passage concerning the West Indies at large. Participating fully in the then-current belief that ethnic groups could be subjected to sweeping ethnographic generalizations about their physical and behavioral traits, he proceeds to sketch a racial overview of the region and its laborers:

My theory—for I acknowledge to a theory—is this: that Providence has sent white men and black men to these regions in order that from them may spring a race fitted by intellect for civilization; and fitted also by physical organization for tropical labour. The negro in his primitive state is not, I think, fitted for the former; and the European white Creole is certainly not fitted for the latter. […]It is probable also that the future race who shall inhabit these islands may have other elements than the two already named. There will soon be here—in the teeth of our friends of the Anti-Slavery Society—thousands from China and Hindostan. The Chinese and the Coolies—immigrants from India are always called


4 Ibid.
Coolies—greatly excel the negro in intelligence, and partake, though in a limited degree, of the negro's physical abilities in a hot climate. And thus the blood of Asia will be mixed with that of Africa; and the necessary compound will, by God's infinite wisdom and power, be formed for these latitudes, as it has been formed for the colder regions in which the Anglo-Saxon preserves his energy, and works.\(^5\)

To this neat categorization of individuals into racially defined stereotypes he adds the admission that unfortunately there were no signs of miscegenation at present between free African and Indian laborers. Drawing upon history he nevertheless argues that the two groups will eventually mingle just as others such as “the Anglo-Saxon and the negro” had done, eventually resulting in a racial mixture that he believes will be properly adapted to the grueling demands of tropical labor.

Trollope’s assumptions regarding the inherently racial nature of humankind being fully expressed in the above passage, it is nevertheless useful to parse out the specifics of such views. In this worldview, races are divinely established subgroups of humans, neither immutable nor exclusive, which nevertheless participate in several distinct behavioral and physical traits. Race is assumed not only to fundamentally define the limits of individual intelligence, but to dictate the physical endurance of one’s body. Miscegenation is assumed to occur naturally, and yet the European, by virtue of his economic and political power, is in a position to enforce the will of God by instituting a system of immigration that will ensure such racial mixing and by extension the proper productivity of the region. In such a cosmology the Indian laborer becomes objectified and commodified into an economic and racial entity, useful only inasmuch as he or she cooperates in the larger, divinely sanctioned (and therefore morally legitimate) apparatus of British industry and the march of divinely overseen progress.

\(^5\) Ibid., 74-5.
The extent to which Trollope’s readers might have agreed with him on such issues is not known. However, the lack of any discernable controversy over the book’s publication, as well as the existence of other similarly structured accounts of race, support the notion that his racially-predicated worldview was one shared by at least a significant portion of the British populace, both in Great Britain itself and in the West Indian colonies. More importantly, the apparent widespread acceptance of this pro-indenture view can be seen as a result of its embedding within other religious, scientific, and pseudo-scientific ideas of the time. Such ideological linkages made the questioning of indenture not just a matter of economics, but a questioning of the validity of foundational European ideas about the world and the proper moral order for society.

More evidence for pro-indenture British colonial perceptions of East Indians comes from Louis Antoine Aimé Gaston De Verteuil, a French-Trinidadian Catholic, doctor, and public servant who during his long life served as, among other things, the first mayor of Port-of-Spain. In 1858, he published an extensive natural history of his home island entitled *Trinidad: Its Geography, Natural Resources, Administration, Present Condition, and Prospects*, in which he emphasized the economic importance of the West Indies and Trinidad in particular. While the bulk of his volume is dedicated to the island’s geography, geology, botany, topography, climate, and industry, he does dedicate three chapters to the island’s population and ethnic composition, its political administration, and its “present condition,” a topic in which the system of Indian indenture figures prominently along with the author’s suggestions on how the island should be administered in the future.

As a public servant and member of the island’s elite, his perceptions and portrayal of the Indian laborers are strongly shaped by his ties with the British colonial government. Indeed, after

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tracing the development of indenture back to the island’s dire labor shortage after emancipation, he reports favorably on recent political developments in the island such as the appointment of Major James Fagan as Coolie Magistrate, and draws extensively on the accounts of Governor Harris for his information. Due to this influence it is hardly surprising that his portrayals of Indian indentured laborers chime remarkably well, as will be discussed later, with those voiced by government officials.

After briefly referring to the dire need for labor in the island and the initial failure of laborers obtained from the United States, France and Madeira, De Verteuil describes the first shipments of laborers from “Hindostan” and notes that they fell short of expectations due to a poor selection process and their place as “perfect strangers” in the island. This, he says, has now been ameliorated due to proper governmental regulation as well as the established presence of Indo-Trinidadians, who initiate them in the local customs and thus encourage them to lose “their own peculiar ideas and habits.” He notes that controversy surrounded regulations proposed by Harris and Fagan in 1846, and explicitly calls out the Anti-Slavery Society for protesting them; siding with the government and anxious to defend its moral standing, De Verteuil argues that the ordinances were necessary and would have prevented the desertion in 1847 of Indian laborers who were later found “destitute, sick, and starving in the roads.” He approvingly quotes Lord Harris’s words on the matter in 1846:

My desire has been impartially to study the interests of both parties, at the same time never to lose sight of the fact, that the coolies are placed here under peculiar circumstances, as utter strangers in a foreign land, and therefore requiring the zealous and increasing care of Government: that they are, also, far from being the best class of the Indian labouring population; are naturally dissolute and depraved in their habits, if left to themselves, and

much inclined to fall into habits of drinking and of wandering idle about the country, and therefore require the close supervision of Government, in order to correct, if possible, but at all events to prevent, any evident cases of vagabondage and licentiousness.⁸

In short, De Verteuil explicitly affirms the belief of the government that these laborers were in need of benevolent paternal discipline, not liberty. Quoting Lord Harris again, he reminds readers that “they are not, neither coolies nor Africans, fit to be placed in a position which the labourers of civilised countries may at once occupy. They must be treated like children, and wayward ones too; the former, from their habits and religion; the latter, from the utterly savage state in which they arrive.” Governmental protection was needed to save the ignorant coolie from himself, and thanks to the meddling of the Anti-Slavery Society that prevented such protection, the suffering that certain Indians faced in 1847 was the natural result of the “unrestrained liberty granted to savage or half civilised races.”⁹

Further, in this account it was the moral responsibility of the British not only to protect these individuals but to set about altering and “improving” their character and habits in a process generally described as “civilisation”. This civilizing and improving mission was clearly expressed by Lord Harris in what De Verteuil describes as “impartial, noble, and independent language”:

The immigrant has been looked upon too much as a mere animal whose labour is valuable; whereas I would endeavour to make him eventually a useful colonist, an industrious and worthy citizen. To attain this, he must be subjected to a discipline, and to education. The provisions of that discipline must be directed, superintended, and enforced by the government in a colony like this [emphasis in original].¹⁰

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⁸ De Verteuil, Trinidad, 373.
⁹ Ibid., 375.
¹⁰ Ibid., 377.
As might be expected, there are racial and religious elements to these arguments as well. Construing European conceptions of industriousness as a duty and a moral virtue as the product of racially inherited habits and Christianity, De Verteuil and Harris together assert that such motives “are unknown to the fatalist worshippers of Mahomet and Brahma”; thus it is important to inculcate industriousness in these individuals and to thereby refashion them in the image of civilized mankind (read: the British). Importantly, the manifestly self-serving nature of such a mission seems to be ignored by De Verteuil, as are the logical problems presented by the fact that any sort of behavior by Indian immigrants in the island could be made to support this framework. After all, if they were industrious, it could be construed as a sign that British civilizing efforts were working, while any “indolence” could be simply seen as evidence for the inherent racial and religious inferiority of the Indian laborer.

As these intellectual issues do not disturb De Verteuil, he closes his assessment of the state of Indian indentured labor in the island on an optimistic tone that highlights continuing immigration and governmental regulation. Describing the current laborers as “healthy, well clothed, and contented, improving in habits of industry” he bases this opinion upon the sizable financial remittances they sent back as well as the fact that many chose to remain in the island rather than brave the voyage back to India. In a passage highlighting some of the key racializing, civilizing, and paternalizing aspects of British attitudes toward these immigrants, he writes:

Coolie immigration, properly conducted, may yet aid in saving such of the islands as have fertile lands; nay, may be the foundation, in this archipelago, of industrial, peaceful, and happy communities, whose prosperous example may become a useful lesson to other classes of immigrants, and a powerful stimulus to the influx of foreign labour; for not only are the coolies a very intelligent race, but they are saving, industrious, well adapted to the climate, and highly susceptible of improvement.12

11 Ibid., 376.
12 Ibid., 378.
As hinted earlier, such views as those expressed by Trollope and Verteuil were not limited to occasional visitors from Britain; they also found expression in the everyday policies and correspondence of government officials in the Colonial Office. In June and July of 1847, for instance, some of the Office’s correspondence made reference to occasional complaints from Trinidad that emphasized the importance of properly selecting immigrants in India. Some of the laborers seemed to be physically unfit for the demanding work on sugar plantations, while others had objectionable characters, being “by profession strollers and vagabonds”; this upset planters who had invested in their transportation to the colony, and led to calls for the instalment of properly qualified agents in India to weed out undesirable applicants.\(^\text{13}\) Such accounts even in passing illustrate the ways in which these laborers were seen primarily as tools: agricultural assets whose proper role was to be used for the good of the colony, and who were to be rejected if their actions did not conform to expectations.

Some years later in 1849, in a letter to Sir Henry Barkly (then the Governor of British Guiana), the Secretary of State for the Colonies Earl Grey made several revealing comments regarding the indentured labor regime not only in that colony but throughout the West Indies. Amalgamating both “liberated Africans” and “Coolies” in his assessment, the Earl speaks of them as “men so rude and ignorant of the state of society in which they were placed” who, when for a time they had been imported without being bound to indenture contracts, were “totally unfit to be thus thrown upon their own conduct and discretion.” In his estimation, past experience throughout the Crown’s sugar-producing colonies has demonstrated that only “unhappy results” follow from abandoning multi-year indenture contracts, a phenomenon which he describes as “leaving either Coolies or liberated Africans under no management and no restraint.” While the

precise nature of such “unhappy consequences” is not specified, and while he does express some
trepidation at the similarities between indentureship and “compulsory labour,”\textsuperscript{14} the general
implications of the Earl Grey’s arguments are clear enough: that agricultural laborers, whether
African or Indian, demand control and supervision because they are incapable of functioning
within colonial society and because in the absence of such a regulated labor system they will be
vulnerable to exploitation.\textsuperscript{15}

By the 1850s, the beneficial effects of such a strong infusion of labor into the Trinidadian
economy were clearly apparent; average sugar exports were up by nearly 30%, and planting was
expanding at great speed, with more than 12,000 acres (4,856 hectares) coming into sugar
cultivation between 1840 and 1857.\textsuperscript{16} In 1852, Lord Harris used this economic growth to support
petitions for funding to import even more immigrants, apparently claiming “that the average
exports of the last 5 years in Trinidad are greater than those of any 5 years of which the exports
are recorded, that the crop of the present year is the largest ever shipped, and that there is every
probability of a considerable increase next year.” This he attributed entirely to “the effect of
immigration,” something to which he was originally unfavorable but which he now considered as
“of paramount necessity for maintaining the cultivation of the Colony.”\textsuperscript{17} Again, the
characterization of these individuals as economic tools to be judiciously used comes to the fore;


\textsuperscript{15} It is worth noting here that there appear to be striking parallels between the Earl Grey’s attitude toward Indian
laborers and those of domestic labor reformers towards the working class in Britain. The topic merits further
investigation although it lies outside the scope of this discussion.

\textsuperscript{16} K. O. Laurence, \textit{A Question of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana, 1875-1917}.

\textsuperscript{17} C.O. 318/197: Wood and Hogan to Merivale, 1 October 1852.
further, it hints that economic benefits could be instrumental in overturning initial moral
trepidation over the elements of force inherent in the indenture system.

One final pro-indenture account in this formative period comes from Captain C. Biden,
Protector of Emigrants to the West Indies, who in 1855 reported on the arrival of the ship
“Scindian” in Madras after a voyage of nearly four months. According to Captain Biden, the
laborers on his ship, who were making use of their right to return passage to India, arrived in
remarkably good health; this to him demonstrated that their treatment had been “most humane
and considerate.” “The whole party expressed their entire satisfaction of the kind protection they
had experienced both from the Commander and Surgeon…” After making these reassurances
that the system was not perpetrating abuses, Biden remarks extensively on the accumulated
wealth that these “poor people” had in their possession, to such an extent that he offered to
protect them from robbers by sending their money on ahead of them; however, “they preferred
keeping it themselves, and during their stay here, for mutual protection they hired a room and
lived together.” Additionally, he makes in passing some intriguing remarks about the relative
unhealthiness and “marked want of energy” of Bengal Coolies in comparison to those from
Madras, “who exerted themselves and never yielded to the effects of a variable climate, or the
inclemency of the weather.” But perhaps the most revealing evidence for Biden’s views of Indo-
Trinidadian laborers is in his portrayal of the returnees’ ready endorsement of the system: “The
Coolies declared their perfect satisfaction with the treatment they experienced at Trinidad, where
all their wants and comforts were uniformly attended to, and a fair remuneration could be
obtained for their services.”\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\) C.O. 318/213: C. Biden to T. Pycroft, 2 November 1855, enc. in Melirll to India Board Secretary, 13 June 1856.
Needless to say, this account raises obvious questions about the authenticity of such statements and whether they testify more to the ventriloquism of Biden than to the actual sentiments of returnees. After all, one would not logically expect such glowing endorsements of Trinidadian indenture from individuals who had been willing to spend four months at sea to quit that environment and return to India. Nevertheless, the actual portrayal of Indian laborers in this account complements that seen in earlier evidence; they are “poor people” who benefit from and need the protection of the (ostensibly benevolent) British colonial government, and whose need thus justifies and ensures the morality of the indentureship system. An additional factor worth noting is Biden’s willingness to generalize about the relative health, constitution, and habits of these individuals based on their origin; it is revealing, though by no means conclusive, that the supposedly hardier individuals are said to originate from southern India, a region traditionally associated with darker skin coloration. This possible racializing element is not overt in the sources discussed here, and it would clearly be hazardous to assert that Biden was embracing precisely the same racially-defined worldview of Trollope. Nevertheless, this ideological tendency clearly resonates with other racializing ideas, and at the very least demonstrates that such views were emphatically not individual idiosyncrasies.

In sum, the pro-indenture account as presented in these sources included an assortment of interlinked ideas, not only about the laborers themselves, but also about the society and world in which they lived. Most authors who were in favor of indenture justified the system because they saw East Indians as inferiors in a divinely-ordered, racially-defined world, as uncivilized beings who lagged behind Europeans on an assumed trajectory toward an ideal civilization, and as a potent economic tool that, like any other natural resource, could be usefully harnessed by rational governance for the benefit of European society. Such a complex of ideas was clearly embedded
in deep-running beliefs about the objective reality of the world, the role of divine Providence, and the fundamental purpose of human society. As such, pro-indenture arguments rested on a durable intellectual foundation that would in turn make the questioning of indenture that much more difficult to credibly achieve.

*Anti-Slavery Thought in Theory and Practice*

Yet against the condescending, racializing narrative of Indian laborers as rude and ignorant agricultural tools one must place the arguments of those opposed to the system on moral grounds. This examination thus turns to provide a brief survey of British abolitionist sentiment as expressed in newspapers and travel narratives of the time, which show that in seeking to make sense of this new development in the economy of West Indian colonies, abolitionists resorted to seeing indentured labor according to their preexisting framework: as another form of slavery that had to be eliminated, or at the very least reformed and properly governed, to prevent morally wrong abuses of the vulnerable laborers. As the quotations from the chapter's outset demonstrates, and as subsequent evidence will show, anti-indenture advocates were preoccupied with demonstrating the system's immorality and attempting to "rescue" those whom it saw as being exploited. By analyzing these sources further, it becomes clear that these individuals—ostensibly sympathetic observers believing in the common humanity of Africans and any other oppressed individuals—were nevertheless constrained by ideas prevalent in their historical context such as that Indian persons were ignorant, vulnerable to exploitation, and objectively dependent on British good will.

Perhaps the most prominent expressions of such anti-slavery opinion came from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (hereinafter referred to as BFASS), an organization founded in 1839 by a trio of British abolitionists. Although its members were mainly
preoccupied with the welfare of former British slaves or with abolishing the still-entrenched system of American slavery, the BFASS’s focus even from its early years was more global, and sought to promote both human rights and the eradication of slavery and slavery-like systems throughout the world.\textsuperscript{19} The society’s official organ, the \textit{British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter} quoted earlier,\textsuperscript{20} was published on a monthly basis and included opinion pieces, news reports from around the empire, and even poetry that generally supported their stated goals. As such, the paper not only indicates the society’s current concerns and struggles as it sought to come to terms with the rise of indentureship, but also demonstrates some of the ways in which the editors aimed to present the Society to the rest of the British public.

Given that slavery had now been outlawed by the British government and was now recognized by many Britons as a morally outrageous, exploitative system, one of the main tactics of the BFASS was to simply argue that a system like Indian indenture either had the same characteristics of slavery, or that it was open to the same abuses as slavery had been. For example, in an article printed in the June 1845 issue of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter, an anonymous reporter criticizes a Trinidad-based author who, despite proven abuses of indentured laborers in Mauritius, optimistically maintained that labor abuses would not necessarily occur in the West Indies. The anti-slavery reporter responds by arguing that since the system of indenture will be the same in both locales, similar hazards and suffering will result from the voyages, and the end result will be “social mischief and pollution” in colonial societies. Taking the stance that the importation of laborers to the island is not even necessary, the reporter impugns the nascent system as being driven solely by the planters’ “unmixed cupididy,” and

\textsuperscript{19} Heartfield, \textit{The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society}, 1-2.

\textsuperscript{20} This title was often abbreviated to simply “The Anti-Slavery Reporter.”
argues that such forced immigration resembles slavery far too much—even when it makes use of persons “suited to tropical labour.” Perhaps most revealing is his closing cynical comment that demonstrates a belief in the virtual absence of Indian agency and the irresistible exploitative capacities of the British. “…In the case of the Coolies, practical freedom will be almost impossible. Their ignorance will render a kind of pupillage necessary; and pupillage may soon degenerate into practical bondage.”

A month later, the periodical took on the pro-indenture attitude of the government with a reprinting of the Coolie regulations recently promulgated in the colony by Major James Fagan; for while they made no explicit commentary upon the issue, the editors’ sentiments were eloquently expressed in the article’s bold heading: “The Coolies Enslaved in Trinidad.” Within these regulations, one receives the usual pro-indenture image of these Indian laborers that (understandably, given the author Major Fagan’s role in maintaining the system) contains no hint of coercion or exploitation. Rather, the regulations emphasize the perceived need to govern these at-times wayward individuals, and are framed as fair-minded, benevolent but just rules that if followed will ensure the laborers’ own well-being. On a deeper level, they may also be read as implicitly conveying the exasperation of a bureaucrat at the practical failure of previous governmental regulations.

For instance, Fagan repeats a charge made by Lord Harris that “Coolies are frequently met on the public roads, and in the neighbourhood of estates, in almost a state of nudity, notwithstanding the ample covering provided for them…” Fagan also remarks on the


22 The precise composition of attire that seemed to a British lord in 1846 “as offensive to decency as it is disgusting in a civilized community,” is left to the imaginative interpretation of the reader.
frustratingly intractable nature of some of the laborers and in so doing demonstrates that cultural stereotypes of these laborers as lazy already existed. “No one requires a stricter surveillance of conduct while at work than the Indian labourer, whose propensity to lie down and smoke while at work, and to seize every available opening for evading it, is proverbial.” Near the close of his missive Fagan also notes the rise of rum drinking among Coolie laborers, and calls on managers to discourage this practice since it will tend to inhibit “religious and social improvement” (the need for which is simply assumed) among “a people who have such strong claims on the philanthropy as well as on the self-interest of their employers.” It is difficult to know precisely how the editors and readership of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* would have interpreted Fagan’s words since they are not commented upon; however, from the opinions noted earlier as well as subsequent evidence, it is plausible to suggest that they would have affirmed the need to extend philanthropy to the Indian laborers while also decrying the system that apparently reduced them to servants in need of such extensive regulation.

Two months later in December 1846, the editors of the paper announced to their readership that their protests against these very regulations—regulations which would have reduced the Indians to “a state of practical slavery”—had been successful; the head of the Colonial Office had disallowed them. It ruefully noted, however, that Major Fagan was still in office despite the “low estimate in which he held these strangers” and his “overbearing character.” As evidence of these undesirable characteristics, the paper reprinted what it claimed was a letter from Fagan to the Naparima stipendiary magistrate Mr. Knox; within it he orders

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24 The author knows of no legitimate reason to believe that said letter from Fagan to Knox is not genuine, but given the demonstrated prejudice of the source, the factual existence of the cited letter must not be unquestioningly assumed.
protesting Coolies back to their estates and in so doing voices a number of the revealing stereotypes noted previously in other government correspondence and travel narratives. For instance, he refers to the laborers as “Asiatics, whose character, habits, and feelings are so different from those of every other section of the human family,” and recommends a strict policy of discipline for unruly behavior, since the laborers will soon detect any administrative leniency and might quickly place his employer at his mercy. Upon citing this evidently damning letter, the editors swiftly attack Fagan, again citing supporting remarks from the like-minded Trinidad Spectator. According to Fagan’s views, they charge, “the Coolies may be oppressed and famished […] with impunity[…] Theirs is a state of absolute slavery.” “Tell it not in India,” they sarcastically declare, “lest the Coolies refuse to emigrate to this Western Canaan!”

As with the previously discussed publication of the regulations proposed by Fagan and Lord Harris, it is difficult to know precisely which elements were distasteful to the main body of the periodical’s anti-slavery readership, and which they may have passed over without comment. For while much of the editorial criticism focuses on the legal means by which laborers were to seek redress for grievances, it is not possible to conclusively determine whether the editors or readership would have objected to other elements, such as Fagan’s characterizations of Indian laborers as being fundamentally different from all other members of the human family. Given their ideological focus on elevating the condition of enslaved Africans by making appeals to common humanity, however, it is entirely likely that they did find Fagan’s words problematic or at least indicative of a person who might treat non-British persons inhumanely. Despite various uncertainties on this score, it must be emphasized that this account and others like it successfully

demonstrate some of the ethnic stereotypes that were already current in British vocabulary, and further that abolitionists were identifying them with pro-indenture sentiment.

Another revealing anti-indenture account comes from the combined efforts of Captain E. Swinton and his widow Jane, the latter of whom in 1859 published a short narrative entitled *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad*. As master of the ship “Salsette,” Captain Swinton was ostensibly in a position to objectively judge, based upon his own experience and perceptions, the actual condition of Indian laborers on their way to the West Indies. However, the authors’ sympathies seem to lie in the direction of the Anti-Slavery Society and other such organizations, as is evident not only from the content but also from the book’s dedication to the Society of Friends. Unsurprisingly, other evidence shows that the book’s editor, the Rev. James Carlile, appeared as a committee member and delegate in the General Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in June 1840.26

Within this short account, which consists of excerpts from the diary of the captain (who unfortunately went down with his ship on a return voyage from New York to London) as well as concluding remarks from his widow, the authors purport to provide an explanation for the high rate of mortality—120 deaths out of 324 passengers, or 37%!—that occurred during the voyage. According to this account the causes for the death toll, shocking even by standards of the time, lay in the prevalence of infectious diseases such as dysentery and cholera aboard the “Salsette,” as well as inadequate food and medical provisions for which even the charitable ministrations of the Captain and Mrs. Swinton could not compensate. The account’s general effect is to raise serious questions about the efficacy of governmental regulation, to excite the pity and

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indignation of the reader at the suffering and death, and to urge reformation (rather than abolition!) of the indenture system to eliminate any morally wrong abuses.

Along the way the authors describe the Indian passengers in vocabulary that demonstrates a range of sentiments from benevolent compassion and sympathy to disgust. The authors’ observations contain a mixture of generalizations and specificity; for example, although the passengers include both “the scum of the villages as well as some desirable emigrants,” they are universally characterized as having “dirty habits” and a simple character. In the generalizing vein again, Mrs. Swinton declares that “the female Coolies” do not have the same sort of sympathy for one another that British women do, and opines further that “they have no morality whatever: if they fancy each other, they become man and wife for the time being, and change again when they please. The parents of girls will sell their children for a few rupees…” Despite the evident disgust latent in this narrative, the Captain’s wife nevertheless had hope for their eventual civilization through religion, staking her hopes on their perceived docility: “These people being very subservient and tractable, I believe there would be less difficulty in bringing them to embrace Christianity than any other race of people I have met.” Positioning herself as a benevolent bringer of aid to “this unfortunate race of people”, her expressed ambitions are to interest other “kind and philanthropic persons” in ameliorating the situation of these Indian immigrants—not by campaigning against the evils of the system (part of which she even admitted “looked very much like slavery”), but by advocating better provisions and medical care during the deadly passage from India.

28 Ibid., 14.
29 Ibid., 15-16.
Based on the above evidence, it appears that the portrayals of Indian laborers by the BFASS and other like-minded British abolitionists included a number of basic assumptions: that these individuals primarily represented human capital; that they were biologically and racially predisposed to tropical climates; that they were by their very nature vulnerable to exploitation; that they were further handicapped by their ignorance; and that the benevolent efforts of Europeans would not only be necessary to save them from oppression, but that they would naturally and unquestioningly accept such assistance. Importantly, and with an irony that perhaps was not visible to individuals at the time, it is clear as well that these beliefs about East Indians were in fact very similar to those made by pro-indenture advocates like Major Fagan. For while they might have disagreed over the proper extent of Indian laborers’ reliance on British colonial benevolence, or the actual difference between these individuals and Europeans, the difference was ultimately one of degree rather than of kind. Anti-indenture advocates might criticize the abuses of the system, but on a fundamental level they like their pro-indenture opponents shared common discriminatory ideas that denied the agency of Indian laborers and imagined them as tools to be used at the discretion of Europeans.

*The Walkinshaw Affair: Governmental “Protection” at Work*

It was perhaps all too easy for pro- and anti-indenture advocates to view their respective opinions as mutually irreconcilable. Yet a glance into the historical record complicates this notion by indicating not only that they both shared the afore-mentioned key assumptions about Indian laborers, but that pro-indenture advocates could also be engaged in the same sort of benevolent protection and “rescuing” that anti-indenture individuals like the Swintons were. For at the precise moment that the BFASS was pillorying Lord Harris and Major Fagan for their attempted policies toward unruly “Asiatics,” the two personages in question were rather
occupied in an internal affair which, had the BFASS known about it, might have persuaded them to adopt rather more lenient views. In a packet of letters sent from Lord Harris to the Earl Grey—the recently-appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies—a series of events and opinions comes to light in what might be termed the Walkinshaw affair. Despite its foregrounding here, the whole debacle was only one minor incident in the wider history of the Colonial Office’s dealings with Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad. However, the case holds wider significance because, according to Harris, it clearly demonstrated the need for British policymakers to protect coolies from abuse at the hands of planters; after all, they were “poor half educated strangers, alone in a strange country, ignorant of its language, customs and laws,” and some planters clearly did not feel obligated to treat them fairly. As for the details of the entire sequence of events, the letters attached to Harris’s missive begin to make them clear.

On 12 August 1846, a planter named Edward Walkinshaw, “proprietor of the Clydesdale Cottage Estate in the district of South Naparima,” wrote a long and slightly incoherent letter to one Mr. White—apparently a minor government official in the island—claiming that “his” coolies had suddenly become insubordinate despite his benevolent treatment of them. This he attributed to a number of “black sheep in the flock,” who had been stirred up to insubordination by troublesome ringleaders from other plantations. Other of his laborers he charged with various crimes and/or moral shortcomings: “Bitchie” was “much addicted to rum drinking” and assaulted two of his fellow laborers, while “Girdarry” absented himself from work without permission, stole sugar, and was detected “exposing his private parts to the Creole females and children on the Estate.” Upon the refusal of the stipendiary magistrate (the afore-mentioned Mr. Knox) to impose any punishment upon these individuals, presumably due to lack of evidence, they were

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30 C.O. 295/153: Harris to Earl Grey, 5 October 1846.
set at liberty; Walkinshaw thus chose to characterize all subsequent insubordination among his laborers as the natural result of not imposing penalties for the original offenses:

To day only 6 are at work, the rest are wandering about without papers. Now what am I to do. Neither the Police or Magistrates will afford any protection. My life and property I consider both at stake. Mr. Lacroise of Fullarton Estate was pelted with stones and mud lately by his gang; and I much fear unless a very severe example is made and that immediately that you will ere long hear of Murder being committed by them. They are incorrigible thieves. My Creoles have had all their Poultry stolen and have themselves left in consequence. I have £27,000 at stake on this Estate but if the Coolies are to be allowed to practice such fearful acts of insubordination with impunity, I fear I shall have no alternative but to abandon the cultivation.³¹

The letter concludes in a hysterical tone, with Walkinshaw adding in a lengthy postscript that he himself had been “nearly killed by the Calcutta Coolies” after he had scolded a laborer named Tarren for idling in the field. He writes:

I am literally covered with bruises, and but for the praiseworthy exertions of the Madras Coolies and the Calcutta Sirdar aided by a few Creoles, who came to my assistance I must have been killed. The most active were Busing Lal Sing and Sonner who with sticks as thick as my Arm laid on me with all their might. I can breath [sic] with great difficulty, and from the increasing pain know not if I shall be able to reach San Fernando. But until the ringleaders are in custody, and some disposition shown by the authorities to afford me protection, I cannot consider my life or Prop’y safe. It is all the consequence of having been allowed to perpetrate their former atrocities with impunity[…]. One of the men named Ginnow who speaks a little English avowed it was their intention to kill me and cut me to pieces, but Heaven only knows whether I shall even now obtain protection…³²

Having apparently been rebuffed or at least ignored to a greater degree than he desired, Walkinshaw evidently decided after two weeks’ time to move matters up the chain of command to the Governor, writing a more composed and obsequious letter to Lord Harris on 28 August. In it he gave his side of the story, complaining that even though he had “determined neither to use or permit anyone to use them harshly” and sought “to win their best affections,” the Indian

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³¹ C.O. 295/153: Walkinshaw to White, 12 August 1846, enc. in Harris to Grey, 5 October 1846, No.1.

³² Ibid., 21-22.
laborers on his estate had been emboldened by a lack of punishment to become insubordinate and dissolute. Perceiving a need to emphasize his role as a benevolent Christian gentleman, he asserts that “as a reference to our able and zealous minister the Rev. Mr. Watson it will be found I have not been unmindful of their spiritual and moral Welfare, but I do not think I have spoiled them, or done more than any humane person would have done.”  

A day later, Major Fagan provided his own very different assessment of the problem in a letter likewise addressed to Governor Harris. In it he notes that the charges made by Walkinshaw were unsubstantiated and indeed stood opposed to the testimony of two Indian laborers—the “Calcutta Sirdar Hurry Sing of the Rajpoot Castle, one of the highest tribes in India; and Bookan Sing of the Brahminical or Sacerdotal tribe”—who asserted that any violent acts made by these laborers were made to defend one of their fellows whom Walkinshaw was beating. He ultimately argues that any violence that might have been committed by these Indians was natural given the neglect and cruel usage (both established by previous but unspecified evidence) to which their employer had subjected them. In light of this, he opines, “some such refractory conduct as that with which they have been charged could not have failed to have taken place especially with a race only kept in subjection and obedience by an uniform and consistent adherence to a strict, but just and considerate course of treatment in regard to them…”

Subsequent investigation of the dispute only served to turn the tide of government opinion ever more against Walkinshaw. Perhaps the most damning testimony came again from Major Fagan on 7 September, when in a long letter to Lord Harris he outlined the evidence arrayed against Walkinshaw and formally recommended that any indentured Indian laborers on

33 C.O. 295/153: Walkinshaw to Harris, 28 August 1846, enc. in Harris to Grey, 5 October 1846.

34 C.O. 295/153: Fagan to Harris, 29 August 1846, enc. in Harris to Grey, 5 October 1846.
the man’s estate be removed. As previous evidence has shown, a close reading of such
documents frequently reveals explicit characterizations of, and implicit assumptions about,
Indian laborers that are invaluable to reconstructing the ways in which British colonists
perceived them. In this respect Major Fagan’s letter of 7 September is particularly useful, for
while arguing to defend these laborers from planter exploitation he also inevitably employs a
number of these stereotypes and assumptions.

Predictably for a case of prosecution, the main accusations revolved around physically
demonstrable privations that Walkinshaw had evidently inflicted on these laborers. They had
been forced to work essentially on half rations; the labor demanded of them was approximately
double that set by neighboring planters; the legally mandated hospital for ill laborers was leaky
and drafty; and one of the sick laborers named Jhandoo had apparently died from lack of proper
medical care. This was inexcusable conduct for Fagan because, as he sympathetically put it, it
represented “a positive withholding of that care and attention to their comfort health and rights as
men, on the guarantee of which they were induced to withdraw from their homes, to aid by their
sweat and toil in the rescue of this distant Colony which the want of labor was gradually but
surely entailing…” As for practically imposing half rations on these persons, Fagan condemned
the practice with a curious mixture of national, moral, and religious factors—as “a system of
strictness and injustice quite alien to the character and feelings of Britons, and which no
Christian man should practice towards his dependent who has no other person to look up to for
subsistence but the employer to whom he is under engagement for a definite time;” more
perceptively, he went on to remark that the Indian laborer “in this respect is unlike the
independent creole labour who can command a market for his labour when and wherever he chooses to seek it.”

Toward the close of his letter Fagan provides an elaborate but telling observation on the vital moral, political, and economic importance of halting such abuses by dealing firmly with the case at hand—and in so doing clearly demonstrates a sharp anxiety over the morality of the system itself. For if men like Walkinshaw are allowed to perpetrate such injustice, Fagan argues, the successful working of the great Question of Indian Immigration now in course of trial in this Colony, must be endangered, if not wholly defeated, through that alarm and distrust in our faith, honesty and honour, which, in such a case, could not fail to be engendered in the susceptible minds of the Coolies, to say nothing of those moral consequences affecting our character as the leading portion of the great human family which any tolerance shewn to such a system of Coolie ill usage as has been discovered and exposed on the Clydesdale Cottage Estate, could not fail to realise.

Whatever Edward Walkinshaw might have thought of such arguments, they were apparently convincing to Lord Harris, who took Fagan’s suggestion to remove the laborers from Walkinshaw’s Clydesdale Cottage Estate and sent notice of his actions, along with the entire correspondence, to the Earl Grey. Admitting that this was already the second case in which he had been obliged to remove indentured laborers due to ill treatment—a notable aside, since he had only been appointed Governor of Trinidad earlier that year—he cast himself as the moral, conscientious governor defending helpless persons from exploitation. After all, he comments, “with poor half educated strangers, alone in a strange country, ignorant of its language, customs and laws it would be highly blameable in the Government to neglect any means in its power to

35 C.O. 295/153: Fagan to Harris, 7 September 1846, enc. in Harris to Grey, 5 October 1846.
36 Ibid.
see justice done to them…”\(^{38}\) Whether the demeaning implications of such a paternalizing tone were evident to Harris, Fagan, or even their anti-indenture critics in 1846 is not clear. However, these words convey much about attitudes and stereotypes of Indian laborers then in use that, although discriminatory, were also attended by a measure of practical governmental protection.

**Conclusions**

The period from 1838 to 1860 saw the inauguration of a new system of indentured labor in Trinidad and other sugar-producing colonies of the British Empire, the ultimate economic, demographic, cultural, and social implications of which would only become clear in ensuing decades. During this formative period in the history of Indian indenture, it is clear from the evidence cited above that British and colonial individuals—government officials and nobility both in London and Trinidad, sea captains, social reformers, and writers—harbored a wide assortment of perceptions of the Asian laborers whose labor the colonial economies needed so dearly. While generalizations on such subjects are perilous and particularly prone to overstatement, it is nevertheless useful to observe four key features that generally resonate among these diverse sources.

The first element is that of what one might call benevolent paternalism. Whether in Lord Harris’s pro-indenture descriptions of laborers as “poor half educated strangers, alone in a strange country, ignorant of its language, customs and laws” or the Anti-Slavery Society’s anti-indenture interpretation of them as “deceived and injured” and “helpless” persons to be defended through humanitarian efforts, the Indian laborer was generally seen by all as a passive creature who could be variously aided, pitied, regulated, or civilized. Unlike their perceptions of Chinese or African laborers, British actors—with the notable exception of Mr. Walkinshaw of Clydesdale

\(^{38}\) C.O. 295/153: Harris to Earl Grey, 5 October 1846.
Cottage—generally seem to have seen these individuals as nonthreatening, or at least nonthreatening unless provoked. Their physical (though not psychological) welfare was to be ensured, particularly as this had a strong material impact upon their effectiveness in the colony’s agricultural economy.

A second aspect of these portrayals, closely linked to the first, is that they all generally convey a sense of obligation to inferiors: that since the Indian immigrant was somehow socially, morally, and economically deficient, s/he therefore required governmental regulation to function properly in colonial society. As might be expected, and has been amply demonstrated here, this strand of thought was most pronounced in governmental correspondence. According to Major Fagan and Lord Harris, immigrants had to be protected by contracts and regulations not only from exploitation by unscrupulous planters, but also from themselves. Most of this sense of obligation or trusteeship seems to have concerned only their material and physical well-being, but traces of a sense of moral obligation can be found as well, as demonstrated by both Major Fagan and his erstwhile opponent, Edward Walkinshaw.

A third element of these collected British perceptions, and one which more directly concerned the immigrants themselves, was the overwhelming predilection to cast them as predominantly economic beings. Perhaps this was inevitable given that the very purpose of their arrival in the colony was to ameliorate a faltering colonial sugar economy; yet it remains striking that even after their introduction to the island their motives and well-being were time and again judged according to labor and economic measures. From Major Fagan’s description of them as people who “aid by their sweat and toil in the rescue of this distant Colony” to Captain Biden’s and Trollope’s remarks on the return immigrants’ extensive assets, the East Indian immigrant was perceived by pro- and anti-indenture authors alike as a creature whose proper purpose was to
work, and whose happiness could be guaranteed by providing them with proper material and financial incentives.

In augmentation of this economic view it must not be forgotten that a fourth element of race figured prominently in characterizations of the Indian laborers. Trollope was perhaps the most outspoken of these particular authors in this period, yet his racial definitions of East Indians as intellectually superior to Africans and more suited than Anglo-Saxons to tropical climates is not wholly unique; De Vertueil and Lord Harris also conceived of them in racial terms, as did Major Fagan. Clearly the use of race to delineate ethnic distinctions during this period was not ipso facto disparaging. Yet even when not attended by negative or degrading language the inclusion of race within the rhetoric about these laborers constituted a very real assertion of fundamental difference between them and the British author.

Further, the paternalism, sense of moral obligation, and economic and racial conceptions of the Indian laborer seen in British sources from this early period of Trinidadian indenture have a great deal in common with what in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century would be summed up in the concept of “The White Man’s Burden.” It is customary to associate this particular formation with Kipling, American involvement in the Philippines and Cuba, the “scramble” for Africa, and the high tide of Victorian imperialism in the late nineteenth century. Yet as the evidence contained within this chapter has made clear, the intellectual foundations for and traditional expression of constitutive concepts of “The White Man’s Burden” may be found in British colonial sources from decades earlier. As will be shown in ensuing chapters, these concepts of racial difference, paternalism, and civilization existed in dialogue with socioeconomic changes, and as a result would develop new features in subsequent decades.
Importantly, most of these individuals were structuring their accounts in ways that reveal an overarching anxiety over the morality of the system; pro-indenture advocates felt compelled to demonstrate its beneficial effects and moral legitimacy, while its opponents derided it for being akin to slavery and therefore equally morally reprehensible. This phenomenon appears to have developed not only as a result of many Britons’ desire to avoid the moral opprobrium now connected with outright chattel slavery, but also because of the way in which anti-slavery critics successfully framed the debate in the vocabulary of morality. Further, on an intellectual level this focus on morality is perhaps to be expected. As has been seen, pro-indenture arguments were firmly embedded in deep-running European beliefs in a divinely-ordered, racially defined, objectively knowable world—beliefs which even anti-indenture opponents also shared by and large. Rather than challenge the very structure of this shared worldview, it was more ideologically convenient to debate indenture’s morality and practical implementation, neither of which questioned such fundamental beliefs. Regardless of its prominence at the time, however, this anxiety over the system’s morality would be subsumed by socioeconomic forces that overwhelmingly favored the system due to its beneficent effects on colonial sugar economies. Such anxiety would not occur in such widespread fashion until its reappearance in modified form during the early twentieth century.

As shown above, it is furthermore clear from these sources that both pro- and anti-indenture advocates believed they were engaged in a civilizing project to elevate and materially improve the lives of Indian laborers—they differed only in how this project should be practically accomplished. Such findings impact current understandings of the British anti-slavery movement, for they not only reiterate that anti-slavery advocates were limited by the prejudices and thought modalities of the time, but also demonstrate that in many ways they were committed
to the very same goals as their pro-indenture opponents. This common cause, coupled with indenture’s economic appeal, may ultimately explain the ease with which anti-indenture advocacy declined as this formative period drew to an end.

For in closing, the reader may draw his attention back to the BFASS and their clear opposition, so forcefully expressed in the 1840s, to the Indian indenture system on the grounds that it was akin to slavery and that it would be detrimental to the welfare of the African laborers. That the times had changed is clearly shown by the travel report of one Rev. Underhill, printed in the April 2, 1860 issue of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*:

Singularly enough, contrary to the usual expectation, it [Indian immigration] has improved the condition of the negroes.[…] Coolies labour opens a wider field of exertion to the negro, and he is rapidly becoming the artisan and skilled labourer of the Trinidad community. […] But it must be a cause of gratulation to the friends of the African race, that in this instance a system which at first sight seemed calculated to lower the rate of wages, and to deprive the negro of the market for his labour, to which he had a right to look for employment, has resulted in his advantage…”

As this account aptly demonstrates, by the end of the 1850s the Anti-Slavery Society’s moral campaign against the formation of an Indian immigration system had failed, overwhelmed by economic forces in the form of desperate sugar planters and a British government eager to assure their continued revenues. And indeed, indentureship would grow significantly in coming decades not only in the British but also the French and Dutch colonies, with more than a hundred thousand laborers leaving Calcutta during the 1860s alone. In the face of such opposition, critics of indentureship might deplore its excesses or abuses, but the system itself would not be budged. The only thing they could do was rationalize the system’s existence, shift the debate to

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40 Heartfield, *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society*, 337.
what indenture’s civilizing benefits and outcome ought to be, and persuade themselves that all was not lost. Perhaps some good could come from the system after all.
CHAPTER THREE: THE HEYDAY OF IMMIGRATION, 1861-1900

In January of 1874, an intriguing bit of correspondence was forwarded from Governor Longden to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Earl of Kimberley. Unusually for an exchange between relatively distinguished members of the British imperial government, the subject at hand was an Indian immigrant named Barathsing, who had come to these gentlemen’s attention due to his 1873 purchase of the sugar-producing Corial Estate and subsequent request for twenty-five indentured laborers. His story, as narrated by the immigration agent Robert W.S. Mitchell, constituted what Governor Longden termed “an interesting record of the possibilities open to an intelligent Coolie,” and due to its implications seems to have been of great interest not only to the Governor but also to officials in India, who had specifically requested information on this individual.

Mitchell’s lengthy narrative provides a comparatively detailed account of Barathsing’s origins, indenture experience, and various experiments in shop-keeping and finally sugar production. It seems that the most surprising—and reassuring—feature for Mitchell and his audience was Barathsing’s determined capitalistic acumen. Mitchell writes:

Eventually Barathsing dissolved partnership with his brothers […] and purchased the Corial Estate (240 acres) for which he agreed to pay $18,400 (£3833.6.8) in annual instalments of $2400 (£500) each. He has already paid £1000 and spent $20,000 (£4166.13.4) more in erecting a new boiling house, machinery and dwelling houses for his laborers. The crop of the Estate was 100 tons, and that of 1875 at about 350 tons. Besides the Corial Estate Barathsing has a mortgage on an adjoining property of $12,000 (£2500) for which he received interest at 20 per cent, and in the town of San Fernando he owns house property worth $4000 (£833.6.8) besides several other small properties.
which he says "are not worth mentioning". On the Corial Estate from 100 to 120 labourers are employed…¹

The apparent popularity of this account within government circles was far from being a mere aberration, as demonstrated by its subsequent reprinting in popular news media. The story of Barathsing appeared some months later in the 7 October 1874 issue of the Times as part of a much lengthier feature dealing with a number of pertinent issues of the time, including “coolie dépôts” and the state of Indian persons in Trinidad and British Guiana. In it, the author cites several of the racial and economic stereotypes common to pro-indenture narratives (“the coolie has an eye on the accumulation of property, and is infinitely more docile [than Africans]”) and opining that the current condition of these laborers was superior to their previous experience in India. Ironically, the story of Barathsing’s material success was used to support this latter idea, and the author closed with a plea for such uplifting action as Barathsing’s account demonstrated be undertaken in India: “Why cannot something of the above kind be done for India? These Coolies are Hindoos, not civilized, not even pleasant to be near, for their habits are not nice. Here [in Trinidad and Demerara], with responsibilities, they rise into manhood.”²

The appearance of Barathsing’s story in both popular and governmental sources from Trinidad to India and London clearly demonstrates its widespread appeal, perhaps because it responded to preexisting anxieties in society about the moral propriety of the indenture system and its place in the empire. It must be remembered that, although less vocal than it had previously been, the Anti-Slavery Society and its critical assessment of indenture were still very much alive. For many pro-indenture advocates, the story of Barathsing’s success must have

¹ C.O. 384/102: Mitchell to Colonial Secretary, 6 January 1874, enc. in Longden to the Earl of Kimberley, 9 January 1874.

represented precisely the sort of account to silence anti-slavery’s lingering protests regarding the exploitative nature of indenture. Indeed, such accounts apparently demonstrated what defendants of the indenture system had claimed for decades: that indenture benefitted and ennobled those whom it affected. Here was an Indian—a morally weak and racially inferior person, according to ideas of the time—who was accepting the benevolent, civilizing overtures of British colonists and audaciously recreating himself in their own image. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, it is said, and with Barathsing’s modesty, agricultural interests, and capitalistic drive being apparently akin to those of British planters themselves, his story could be interpreted as a clear endorsement of the system from its greatest potential critic: the indentured laborer himself.

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The story of Barathsing also suggests that new developments were now in play in the British Caribbean colonies. For by the 1860s and 1870s, it was clear to perceptive observers that the system of Indian indenture in the British West Indies was there to stay. The successful integration of Asian labor into the region’s labor force in preceding years, not to mention the presence of a credible, established, and government-sanctioned immigration system, encouraged planters to make use of the resources the system made available; they expanded their production accordingly, and the resulting growth in the sugar industry was seen by government and public alike as an unqualified good. The moral qualms over indenture’s exploitative capacity, openness to abuse, and similarity to slavery originally expressed by humanitarians and anti-slavery advocates seemed to have subsided, at least for the moment. Not even political troubles such as the Indian Rebellion of 1857 had seriously disturbed the flow of indentured immigrants into the region’s now-thriving agricultural economy. By all accounts, the economic disaster emancipation
had posed decades before had finally been laid to rest. Planters had the upper hand over a cheap and readily procurable labor source, and prosperous times were ahead.

Although Trinidad’s island sugar economy was no match for those of larger colonies such as British Guiana, it too benefited significantly from these wider economic trends of cheap labor and a ready market. According to the 1899 Sanderson Report’s estimation, in the period from 1860 to 1869 Trinidadian sugar cane production had grown by 80% from the rates of the 1840s, while the acreage of cane cultivation there had nearly doubled from that of 1840. This continued economic growth naturally fueled a more or less comparable rise in the island’s demand for Asian, predominantly Indian, agricultural labor.3 The colony experimented briefly—as did British Guiana—with Chinese laborers into the first half of the 1860s, but as K.O. Laurence and others have noted, their labor proved to be both expensive and unreliable in comparison to that of their Indian counterparts, and the practice was soon abandoned. It thus seems that by the mid 1860s, the Indian laborer had no real competition in the Trinidadian agricultural labor market.4

The previous chapter argued that throughout the formative period of Indo-Trinidadian indenture, British sources both for and against indenture demonstrated an overriding anxiety over the morality of the system, and in so doing voiced opinions regarding Indian indentured laborers that were united by four common elements. As the analysis progresses in this chapter into what might be termed the heyday of indenture, a period defined here as stretching from approximately 1861 to 1900, the language of travel narratives, newspapers, governmental correspondence, and even fiction will demonstrate that these four elements continued to find expression in British

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4 Ibid., 4.
perceptions of their Indian laborers. However, new understandings of Indians as social beings, potential sources of unrest, and aesthetic objects also began to take shape during this period, and taken together reflect the growth of a new anxiety over how to assess the place of Indians in Trinidadian society. Such a shift is not merely coincidental; rather, it can and should be seen as the direct result of the establishment and growth of a post-indenture Indo-Trinidadian population who could no longer be relegated solely to the realm of economics. On a more general level, such a shift also eloquently demonstrates the sensitivity and adaptability of perceptions to new social and economic developments in the environment.

*Tradition and New Directions in Governmental Correspondence*

By the early 1870s, the Colonial Office was becoming increasingly preoccupied with Indian affairs in Trinidad; for not only was it still necessary to govern the steady stream of Indian immigration into the island, but it was also vital to deal with the new subset of demands, social dynamics, and problems that arose from the presence of a now-substantial number of Indians already living in Trinidad. This population of what were termed “time-expired coolies” was finding its own place in the island’s economy and society, with some individuals becoming moneylenders, shopkeepers, or agriculturalists in their own right. The complications this added meant that colonial officials frequently addressed issues relating to them, and in so doing furnished historians with numerous source documents testifying, among other things, to their own perceptions and implicit biases. Several illustrative sources from the records of the British Colonial Office during this period therefore have been selected to demonstrate that both traditional perceptions and new ideas were beginning to make their way into government discourse.
As under-secretary of state for colonies,\(^5\) Robert G.W. Herbert received a great deal of correspondence regarding the colonies under his supervision. Two of his correspondents and fellow London-based bureaucrats were Stephen Walcott, the colonial land and emigration commissioner, and Sir Thomas William Clinton Murdoch, chairman of the colonial land and emigration commission. Between them these bureaucrats dealt with a wide assortment of topics, and the subject of laborers in Trinidad was only one of many issues in need of their attention. Yet within several of their missives it is possible to enunciating the views they express, and to thereby develop a better understanding of their perceptions of Indo-Trinidadian indentured laborers.

Many of these views chime well with the traditional economic preoccupations noted in government correspondence in earlier decades. For example, an 1872 letter addressed from Walcott to Herbert documents some of the government’s struggles to maintain control over the system, as manifest in internal tensions being played out in Madras between rival labor recruiters. The issue at hand had to do with the propriety of giving cash advances as recruitment incentives to prospective laborers in Madras. “Advances to Emigrants to be repaid out of their wages has always been a fruitful source of discontent and ill feeling on the part of the Emigrant, and the attempt to recover the advances has generally proved a failure,” Walcott notes ruefully. Yet the demands of a competitive labor market made them impossible to deny. “It seems however that the competition of the French and Mauritius recruiters in the Madras Presidency, who offer the Coolies, amongst other inducements, a money advance, renders it necessary that the recruiters for the West Indies should make the same offer if they hope to obtain a supply of

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labourers. If this be so [...] the advances should be on as moderate a scale as possible...”

Ironically, the British government was being put in the awkward position of competing with itself for laborers, as different regions of the empire attempted to outdo one another with inducements meant to obtain the willing service of Indian laborers. Quite apart from the ways in which this indicates the advantageous bargaining position of prospective laborers, it also chimes with traditional approaches in which their financial desires are foregrounded and in which money is seen as the primary means by which their relationship with the colonial power is mediated.

In another letter to Herbert in June 1872, Murdoch dealt with another economic issue related to immigrants in Trinidad—namely, the question of how much land was to be granted in lieu of back passage to India to those immigrants who chose to remain in the island. As a London-based bureaucrat who apparently spent little to no time in the Caribbean, in this instance Murdoch was forced to rely on the contradictory information given to him by local officials such as the governor of the island, the agent-general of immigrants Henry Stuart Mitchell, the immigration agent Robert W.S. Mitchell, and even a Mr. St. Luce d'Abadie, warden of Monserrat. In negotiating these claims Murdoch frequently repeats them, thus documenting some of the many opinions then extant in Trinidad on the behavior of Indian laborers.

“Dr. Mitchell says that the immigrant will work neither for himself nor his neighbors if the planter offers him higher wages, and that the Coolies during crop time have worked fairly on neighboring Estates,” he reports, in so doing conveying the Doctor’s perception that their behavior was typically driven by financial concerns. Ironically, the Doctor himself comes across

6 C.O. 318/267: S. Walcott to Robert G.W. Herbert, 2 October 1872.


as primarily concerned with economic matters also, as his main worry is that the East Indian
might compete with planters in the labor market if given more land than he can cultivate himself;
to that end he proposes to alter the current ten-acre land allotments to five acres plus £5 in cash.
Mr. d’Abadie and Murdoch himself oppose firm enforcement of this position, however, arguing
that such a change should be left for the laborer to decide. While this attention to the agency of
the Indian individual seems commendable, it may not have been entirely altruistic. For Murdoch
also displays a keen sensitivity to the politics of the issue, perhaps betraying an awareness of the
possible bad press that might arise from critics like the Anti-Slavery Society:

There should clearly be no compulsory change, especially not one which might be
represented as in the interest of the Planter as against the immigrant. Probably it would be
best, till the working of the plan is better ascertained, to leave the matter alone. The
Cooly is apt to be suspicious, and any change at the present moment might prejudice the
whole scheme. Nor even in the interest of the planter does there seem any object in
making an alteration at present…

Murdoch’s views on Indian indenture here are intriguingly mixed, and stimulate more
questions than they answer. For example, his own perception that Indian laborers tended to be
suspicious is itself noncommittal; did he believe that this was due to some genetic predisposition,
or was he subtly hinting that they were suspicious of colonial intentions toward them, perhaps as
a consequence of past perceived injustice? One similarly is led to wonder what sort of experience
Murdoch had with public criticisms of the indenture system that made him particularly interested
in avoiding any appearance of exploitation at the hands of planters.

This continued emphasis on economic matters is also evident in governmental discussion
over how to govern Indians’ personal financial affairs. In February J.R. Longden, the Governor
of Trinidad, wrote to the Earl of Kimberley (Secretary of State for the Colonies) proposing a new
way for Indian laborers to remit money to recipients in India. Interestingly, he mentions in

9 Ibid.
passing that Indian immigrants were avoiding the established banking channels due not only to the expense, but also out of a desire to conceal the amounts;\(^\text{10}\) this chimes well with other accounts that tend to dwell on the perceived frugality or even miserliness of these persons.

However, other governmental correspondence hints that new understandings of Indian laborers were beginning to emerge alongside preexisting economic and racist stereotypes. For example, in a letter dated 6 June 1872, Sir Murdoch wrote to Herbert on the subject of the so-called “Topazes” then employed on ships carrying Indian migrants to the West Indian colonies. While scholars understand that the term Topaz or Topas was typically used to denote persons of mixed Asian and Portuguese ancestry, it is difficult to ascertain exactly who these individuals were or what their role in relation to the indentured labor system was, partly because of the uncertainty of colonial officials themselves over whether the term signified ethnicity, nationality, or occupation. From the context, it appears that many of the Topazes in question in 1872 were employed as sailors aboard these vessels, and in the absence of contracts binding them to return passage, some had the option to remain in the colonies. Regarding British Guiana, Murdoch writes that “a peak number of Topazes have in the last seven years been sent to that Colony[…]

A large proportion, however, have not been natives of India but persons of different origins picked up by a native Baboo in Calcutta.”\(^\text{11}\) According to Murdoch’s information, some of these persons accepted indenture, some returned to India, and others simply remained in the colony.

In the case of Trinidad, and despite uncertainty over the Topazes’ origins or intentions, Murdoch and the officials supplying him with information exhibit a desire to put these individuals to good use—preferably through indenture—and traced them accordingly. “As

\(^{10}\) C.O. 384/102: Longden to the Earl of Kimberley, 25 February 1874.

\(^{11}\) C.O. 318/267: T.W.C. Murdoch to Robert G.W. Herbert, 6 June 1872.
regards Trinidad the whole number of Topazes whom it has been possible to trace is 38 of whom 8 were not Indians. Of the remaining 30 there had left the Island (7); were working on Estates or otherwise (14); run away or knocking about (6); sick (1); dead (1); cannot be traced (1).” In this account it appears that social stability and economic interest lay at the heart of such efforts; for as Murdoch expressed it, “the employment of emigrants as Topazes is obviously the simplest and most convenient course wherever practicable. At all events arrangements must be made to prevent the landing in the Colonies of a class of people who are unable to support themselves there or to obtain the means of returning to their own Country.”\textsuperscript{12} Implicit in such a statement is a dislike of the possible ill effects of unemployment in colonial society, not to mention the conviction that indentureship represented a safe means of preventing vagrancy and ensuring the quiet integration and subordination of these ostensibly Indian immigrants.

Some months later, Walcott wrote to Herbert on the same matter, noting a promising means of forestalling this unwanted immigration to the colonies outside the formal bonds of the indenture system. Officials in India had begun to stipulate that “in future the agreements with the Topazes shall provide for their free back passage to India in all cases.” Interestingly, Walcott sees this as a positive development and chooses to portray it not as an assertion of the official labor system’s authority and validity, but rather as a result of humanitarian and politics concerns: “This will prevent these men from falling into distress and becoming a public burden either in the Colonies or in this Country.”\textsuperscript{13} It is entirely possible to construe Walcott’s letter as expressing only the relief of a colonial administrator at a measure that promised to reduce the number of problems with which he might have to deal. However, it is also possible to conclude

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} C.O. 318/267: S. Walcott to Robert G.W. Herbert, 3 September 1872.
that Walcott was pessimistically assuming, in keeping with the logic that underpinned the indenture system itself, that Asian individuals outside the strictures of indenture would naturally tend toward unemployment and dependency, if not outright vagrancy.

Other governmental correspondence from the 1870s further elaborates on this novel understanding of Indians as a social force and demonstrates a growing anxiety over their proper place in society. For instance, during the course of 1874 a minor controversy arose over the proposal of officials in India to modify the existing colonial requirements for personal identification. Since non-British colonial subjects were required to bear pass cards in this period, the scheme proposed that so-called “time-expired immigrants” should be required to wear bronze medals for outward identification; this would ostensibly eliminate the time-consuming process of checking the bearer’s card in the event of arrest. Responses from colonial administrators were decidedly and unanimously negative, and the matter was ultimately dropped. However, what is most of interest is not the proposal itself but the social concerns with which colonial administrators rejected it, as well as the fact that administrators in Trinidad gave the Indian population itself a voice by including their written opposition to the measure.

Perceptions and generalizations, many of them informed by statistical evidence, abound within these responses. The Inspector of Immigrants O.W. Warner voiced his opinion that the proposed medals made no sense since time-expired immigrants were rarely liable to arrest in the first place. This opinion was seconded and elaborated by Robert Mitchell, who noted that an immigrant’s knowledge of English acted as a guarantee against being arrested at all.14 Most tellingly, he foresaw such a requirement as a threat to the island’s social tranquility:

…time-expired Immigrants, particularly those whose position enables them to ride or drive about the country, would be slow to recognize the benefit to be derived from

14 C.O. 384/102: Mitchell to Colonial Secretary, 28 January 1874, enc. in Longden to the Earl of Kimberley, 4 February 1874.
travelling about "ticketed," laying themselves open to the derision of the creole population. Between the creole population and the Indian race class prejudices are fast dying out, and it seems clear that any attempt to define their position as aliens more distinctly would undo the good that time and customs have effected.\footnote{Ibid.}

Several conclusions can be made from these responses. Quite obviously, the fact that colonial officials produced a written opinion ostensibly from the people the measure proposed to affect indicates a desire to at least retain the appearance of benevolent governance. As for Mitchell’s assessment of social tension and difference between creole (Afro-Trinidadian) laborers and the Indian population, it demonstrates a faith in the ability of good governance to ensure social tranquility and to facilitate the reconciliation of ostensibly separate ethnic groups. Most importantly, he clearly understands the social dimension of Indian individuals whose status in society is a desired good to them. This departure from a purely economic and racial understanding is remarkable, and stands as a testament both to the growing acceptance of Indian individuals as a part of the island’s social fabric, and to a readiness of administrators to make use of them to ensure social stability.

The trend to incorporate social concerns clearly continues in still more correspondence from the period: for instance, in assessments of the condition of the laborers such those made by Robert Mitchell and Governor Longden in 1874. The report documents a few socioeconomic issues in the island such as drunkenness and a tendency of time-expired laborers to engage in predatory lending practices; however, it expresses great optimism regarding their condition: after all, Mitchell reports, “guaranteed a minimum wage, ensured protection and care in health and in sickness, enjoying unusual facilities for acquiring property, their condition may, I think, compare
favourably with that of any other peasantry in the world.”\footnote{C.O. 384/102: Minutes of Report of Acting Agent-General of Immigrants for 1873, enc. in Longden to the Earl of Kimberley, 17 March 1874.} As for Longden’s own comments, they naturally tended to match this favorable assessment and foreground all the benefits that the system bestowed on its Indian constituents. Longden observed that “they are guaranteed by Law a minimum wage of a shilling and a halfpenny a day; many of them earn much more than this; they receive in addition free lodging, medical attendance, hospital treatment when sick, and on many estates garden grounds. They can save from their wages, and many of them after leaving the estates make money by shopkeeping…”\footnote{C.O. 384/102: Longden to the Earl of Kimberley, 17 March 1874.}

An amplified version of Mitchell’s assessment was presented in a 15-page printed report, which owing to its length offers rich evidence arguing that despite the addition of new social concerns, many British government officials still tended to view Indian laborers in Trinidad within a thoroughly traditional framework. Within this report Mitchell freely engages in ethnographic speculation, using what must have been common conceptions of Indian culture, ethnicity, and religion to spin a narrative in which the British play their usual role as benevolent colonial overlords of idiosyncratic and morally weak subjects:

…It must be borne in mind, however, that the newly arrived Indian brings within him a constitution physically and morally weak; he comes from a country where famines are by no means uncommon, and where what we call a substantial meal is probably not an everyday occurrence; his religion and the customs of his country teach him to look upon death as a desirable consummation rather than an object of dread, and it is not until the Indian has spent a few years in the Colony that he realises the fact that his industry will be amply remunerated, in short, that he may look forward to owning at no distant date, like many of his countrymen, his own land, and that his sons may receive an education at the expense of the colony, and aspire not only to affluence here, but to a College education in England, and employment in the Indian Civil Service which has of late been placed within the reach of the children of the humblest peasant in the Colony. After his first year of indenture has expired, and before his body has overcome its inherited weakness, the love of money takes possession of his soul, and the coolie stints
himself so far, for the sake of his darling dollars, that when he falls into ill health recovery becomes more difficult than it would otherwise be…\(^{18}\)

Other noteworthy elements are also found in this text, such as Mitchell’s tendency to conflate all Indians as “Hindoos” and his firm belief in the liberating and elevating effect of indenture: “On his arrival in this Colony, and for twelve months at most after, the Indian peasant cringes before his employer and crouches to everyone he meets on horse-back or decently dressed, but soon throws off this submissive air…” In short, the report functions as a microcosm of many of the traditional economic and racial concepts noted in previous decades, and reinforces the conclusion that British colonial officials frequently persisted in seeing indentured laborers as creatures to be governed by and used within economic affairs, as individuals defined primarily by race, and as inferiors in need of moral deliverance and benevolent protection.

Nevertheless, when taken together with other governmental sources, they together show that some British officials did move beyond traditional modalities of understanding to incorporate other aspects of Indian individuals such as their social status or religion. This shift is positively correlated with the concomitant demographic growth of the Indian population in Trinidad, and may be seen as a natural response to their growing presence within colonial society.

*The Social Dimension in Other Sources*

This pairing of traditional stereotypes with a new attention to the social implications of Indians in colonial society was clearly not limited to government discourse; rather, it appears in other accounts from the time such as travel narratives and newspapers, and was frequently accompanied by other novel features such as an appreciation of Indians as aesthetic objects. One prime example of this comes from the 1871 travel account of the Christian Socialist, clergyman,

and writer Charles Kingsley. Entitled *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies*, its general structure is that of a round-trip travel narrative, beginning with the author’s departure from England, continuing through his visits to the Virgin Islands, the Lesser Antilles, and Trinidad, and concluding with his return home. Kingsley devotes a great deal of attention to the natural beauties of the region—unsurprisingly, given that from his early years he had expressed a deep interest in nature and geology—as well as to the individuals and societies he encountered along the way. Throughout the account, he displays a moderate political and religious stance that neither endorsed complete reform nor defended what he saw as the worst aspects of colonial society of the time.

Some of the most revealing descriptions arise in connection with his arrival in Trinidad, and as he sketches for his readers the “strange variety of races” in Port-of-Spain the author conveys a primarily aesthetic interpretation of the populace. For instance, he describes an elderly Indian as a scantily-dressed, “delicate-featured old gentleman, with probably some caste-mark of red paint on his forehead,” and pointedly remarks on his physical contrast with the “brawny negroes” nearby. In the same vein, a young Indian mother is described as a brightly dressed and ornamented, “clever, smiling, delicate little woman”—words that convey the author’s keen sense of the subject’s “other-ness” as well as his clear approval of these persons as properly picturesque, nontthreatening characters to people his narrative.

Regarding the indenture system itself, however, Kingsley is most appreciative, sketching it as an “admirable system” and arguing that the immigrants are well-treated, as demonstrated by

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20 Charles Kingsley, *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1871), 111, [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.5b270340](http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.5b270340).
the government’s ability to keep the death-rate on board immigrant ships during 1870 to only(!) twenty-seven percent despite cholera epidemics onboard. He rephrases “indenture” as “apprenticeship”, perhaps in an effort establish more optimistic connotations among his readership, and goes on to detail features of the system that undermine charges of abuse or exploitation.21 “Husbands and wives are not allowed to be separated,” he declares; they are paid well, are taken care of in case of sickness, and the regulations protect the laborers from their own “willful idleness,” “covetous and short-sighted” employers, and even their own countrymen and their predatory lending practices. The economic focus continues in his observation that Indians frequently hoarded their wages as a result of “that fondness for mere hard money which marks a half-educated Oriental.” 22 Nevertheless, the system as a whole is sound in this view, and Kingsley is skeptical of any charges that the participants are being wronged, particularly since he heartily approves of the conduct and regulating efforts of the aforementioned Dr. Mitchell, a man whom he (unsurprisingly, given their similar views) was proud to call his friend.23

As for the cultural and racial aspects of these individuals, Kingsley voices many traditional beliefs. The “Hindoos in the West Indies” are “the surplus of one of the oldest civilizations of the Old World come hither to replenish the new”; he believes that “only a very few of those who come West are Mussulmans” and that the majority are of the lower castes. Here the traditional narrative of a civilizing mission comes to the fore:

One must therefore regard this emigration of the Coolies, like any thing else which tends to break down caste, as a probable step forward in their civilization; for it must tend to undermine in them, and still more in their children, the petty superstitions of old tribal

21 Ibid., 140.
22 Ibid., 141.
23 Ibid., 143.
distinctions; and must force them to take their stand on wider and sounder ground, and see that "a man's a man for a' that."  

In the midst of this traditional rhetoric, however, one finds another intriguing hint of new attention to their role in society. Kingsley opines: “There seems to be good hope that a race of Hindoo peasant-proprietors will spring up in the colony whose voluntary labor will be available at crop-time, and who will teach the negro thrift and industry not only by their example, but by competing against him…” Of course the economic aspect of their conduct here is unsurprisingly highlighted. What is new—and reminiscent of the previously discussed account of Barathsing—is this acknowledgment of a permanent place for Indian individuals in the island’s society. As might be expected, this development is constrained by racial and economic concerns, subordinated to British civilizing interests, and compromised by an interest in them as aesthetic objects. Yet the hint is there, and shows that even pro-indenture individuals like Kingsley were beginning to see that their Indian labor force could not be defined in purely economic terms, nor could their role in society be entirely circumscribed by British regulation.

Similar developments can be seen in newspapers from the period: for example, in a report published in the *Times of India* in 1894. Entitled “Asiatic Immigration to British Colonies,” the piece adopts the tone of an informative essay demonstrating to its readers how and why Indian immigration had transformed its far-flung colonies. It traces the history of immigration to its post-emancipation roots, describing the Indian laborers in the now-customary economic terms of “a reliable supply of cheap labour” and describing the benefits that enable them to take back to India “a considerable amount of savings” if they remain healthy and industrious. Familiar racial and racist descriptions abound: “the coolie is fairly amenable to authority,” the author claims,

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24 Ibid., 146.

25 Ibid., 145.
before proceeding to optimistically describe the ways in which these people were displaying their amenability to the British civilizing mission. “The Indian immigrant, notwithstanding the conservative instincts of the Asiatic, has already shown, not only in his sustained industry, but in many other ways, that he comes of a higher race, and that he possesses a far greater aptitude for all the essentials of Western civilisation.”

Yet closer analysis hints that even this racist portrayal was adopting an additional element by tacitly acknowledging the social dimension of Indian immigrants, much as Robert Mitchell had done twenty years before in his report on Barathsing. The author continues, “the advantages of having the coolies as a labourer on the estates are palpable to all, and most people admit the desirability of his subsequent residence as a free cultivator, thus forming a middle-class between the white estate owner or his representative and the bulk of the negro populace.”

In this view, East Indian immigrants could no longer be defined simply as creatures to be governed and mollified by judicious use of financial goods; they were integrating themselves into society as a separate class that could nevertheless be useful to the colonizers. Such a development must be seen as resulting from the establishment and continued growth of the Indian population on the island rather than any fundamental shift in intellectual constructions. Perhaps many British observers in 1894 still preferred to think of these people in terms of economics, labor, and race, but clearly their demographic growth into a sizable minority on the island forced these observers to also acknowledge the very real role of Indo-Trinidadians in island society.

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27 Ibid.
As has been noted earlier, the intellectual force and immediacy of the Anti-Slavery Society’s campaign against indenture had largely abated by the latter decades of the nineteenth century for a variety of reasons, including the system’s now-established credibility and its clear economic usefulness. However, criticisms of indenture itself were by no means limited to this particular organization, and as will be demonstrated below, they also arose from like-minded authors, liberal politicians, colonial subjects, or even radical political movements. Though such critical views formed a minority in contrast to the more prevalent pro-indenture narratives, they pose a refreshing counterpoint and show that even in indenture’s heyday some individuals continued to oppose the system using a variety of intellectual means.

Some of the loudest criticism arose in late 1884 and early 1885 in response to a series of unfortunate events in Trinidad variously called the Hosay Riots, Hosay Massacre, or Jahaji Massacre. The Hosay festival itself was the Indo-Trinidadian variant of the Shi’a Muslim festival Muharram, and even by 1884 had a decades-long history in the island; Bridget Brereton finds observances of the festival first recorded in 1846, a year after the first Indians arrived in the island. Over the years its participants creatively adapted the religious festival into a sort of pan-Indian celebration that included Hindus and Africans as well as Muslims.28 Indeed, the festival’s growing inclusion of carnival-esque drinking and ceremonial stick-fighting alarmed some Muslims who protested against what they saw as the festival’s degeneration.29 The festival’s social disorder had similarly excited worries among the planter class of the island for years.30

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30 Brereton, "Trinidad and Morant Bay," 55.
comes as no great surprise, then, that the ingredients of an increasingly rowdy festival of ethnically distinct participants plus a particularly aggressive colonial police force explod on 30 October 1884 into violence that claimed the lives of sixteen Indians and injured many more.

As expected, a number of British newspapers gave their own varying accounts of these events in Trinidad, and among those expressing criticism of the government’s actions were the Anti-Slavery Society’s “Anti-Slavery Reporter” as well as “Justice,” the official paper of Britain’s first socialist political party. As might be expected, the former periodical remained faithful to its tradition of politely criticizing governmental action in light of humanitarian concerns, initially praising the government’s pending inquiry into the “recent lamentable occurrence, when a number of Coolies lost their lives by being fired upon by Her Majesty’s troops.” Some months later, the paper genteelly objected to the completed investigation, which reported that “no blame for the deplorable occurrence on the 30th October attached to the Colonial Government” and recommended that the regulations that fostered the massacre remain in place. “A more unsatisfactory paper we have seldom read, and venture to think that further trouble may be expected,” the Anti-Slavery Reporter’s correspondent opined, demonstrating the Society’s clear but thoroughly polite and traditional questioning of governmental action.

In contrast, a significantly more radical view arose from the young Social Democratic Foundation. In its 8 November 1884 issue, its official organ the Justice made a point of

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interpreting the violence as another manifestation of “revolutionary agitation,” printing its account under this heading along with other global news of governmental oppression and anti-governmental protests ranging from Manitoba to France to Egypt. Such a view placed blame not on unruly Indians, but on exploitative capitalists:

In Trinidad, in the West Indies, the planters have brought about a rising among the coolies. These indentured free laborers as they are called, have, in order to increase the profits of their task-masters, had harder tasks imposed on them than they are equal to perform. They revolted against this brutality, and as a result numbers have been shot down by the police.35

Curiously, it appears that the newspaper’s reporter was either ignorant of—or deliberately chose to omit—the fact that the massacre occurred during a festival, and instead interpreted it as a sort of slave revolt rather than as the clearly unplanned and uncoordinated unrest evidence suggests it was. To maintain clarity on this point, it is instructive to compare the Justice’s account of events with the details as reconstructed by later historians. For example, Brereton describes the events of 30 October 1884 thus:

…two Hosay processions disobeyed new regulations which prohibited their traditional entry into San Fernando to dump their tadjahs [“tombs”] in the sea. The police fired on these unarmed men, most of them Hindus not Muslims, resulting in at least 16 deaths and about 100 injured. This tragic incident was a “Hosay massacre” rather than a “Hosay riot”, as all modern historians have recognized, and nothing like a major rebellion by the Indian immigrants took place during the indenture period.36

Additional coverage of the massacre as a revolutionary insurrection continued in the Justice’s issue of 6 December, which sarcastically claimed that it was “one of the periodical massacres of natives” and that “those concerned acted with wanton and panic-stricken violence,


36 Brereton, "Trinidad and Morant Bay,” 65.
and it is quite clear that a labour difficulty was at the bottom of it. The condition of the indentured coolie differs in little from that of chattel slavery…“37

This misrepresentation and deliberate construction of the tragedy as a labor revolt against “profit-mongering Society” obviously demonstrates that the art of “spin” in reporting is far from a new innovation. More importantly and to the point, however, it also demonstrates that socialism was able to infuse new life into the traditional internal criticisms of indenture that had been traditionally mounted by the Anti-Slavery Society. The argument that indenture was an unjust, profit-oriented system that relied on the exploitation of hapless victims remained constant, of course, but it had acquired fresh intellectual foundations in the form of socialism. For in such an account, anti-indenture opposition was no longer the result of reformist benevolence or Christian compassion as in the case of the Anti-Slavery Society. Rather, socialism’s intellectual critique was founded on a markedly different, Marxist understanding of society as divided between oppressors and oppressed, and was driven by a desire to eliminate injustice by founding a new and more egalitarian society through revolution.

Another compelling example of anti-slavery thought and its limitations in this period comes from a work of fiction by J. Edward Jenkins, a Liberal politician and Member of Parliament.38 Perhaps best known for his satirical works, he nevertheless wrote treatises and novels as well, as demonstrated by his publication in 1877 of Lutchmee and Diloo: A Story of West Indian Life. In this work, he explains, he hopes to defend coolies against the wrongs inflicted on them, and to illustrate the “difficulties and perils of the system of indentureship”; the


story is therefore a newly formulated version of many of the arguments originally made in his 1871 treatise *The Coolie, His Rights and Wrongs*. Although the author sets the fictional narrative in British Guiana, he argues that what he presents is in fact common to indentureship in all the other colonies, thus making this narrative a relevant source for the present case study focused on Trinidad. Perhaps most importantly, the work makes it clear that as a Liberal politician Jenkins indeed criticizes the abuses of the system and advocates reform, but limits his agenda to reform only. As he puts it in the preface, “a Coolie system, under proper supervision and restraint, could be made a system of incalculable benefit to Asiatics.” Given such a view, the book ultimately combines social criticism with an underlying validation of indenture, and thus demonstrates the limits of anti-slavery and liberal political thought on the issue at this time.

Perhaps surprisingly, many of the tropes that make their way into Jenkins’ narrative are of a kind with those of more conservative commentators such as Kingsley. Here too the Indian is seen as a picturesque creature, albeit in a more relatable form; the titular protagonists are shown to be happily married, affectionate, and thoroughly conforming to the then-current Western stereotypes of proper marital relationships. A condescending tone is virtually inevitable, however, as Jenkins describes them as displaying “childish exhibitions of joy and curiosity” and consistently speaks of Lutchmee as “little,” “pretty,” and “simple and ignorant.” The typical economic tropes about Indian laborers reappear, with references to thrifty, clever coolies who are

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40 Ibid., viii.

41 Ibid., 34-35.

42 Ibid., 54-55, 271.
able to make a considerable sum of money, as well as to predatory Indian money-lenders. The same racial and cultural assumptions also arise, with Jenkins speaking of the “repugnance of race” that separates an Indian from a Briton, his apparent belief that all Indians were Hindus, and references to ostensibly racially defined traits such as an “Asiatic touch of self-assertion”.

In light of these limitations, it is clear that although Jenkins’ expressed intentions at times chimed with those of anti-slavery advocates and other critics of indenture, ultimately his usage of the very assumptions and tropes of the time demonstrate a similarly close connection to those insisting on maintaining the system. The time for questioning the validity of the system itself had passed and would not return for some decades to come. Rather, the furthest extent of mainstream liberal thought was to reform rather than abolition, and reform, moreover, which was still predicated on the same foundational assumptions about race and economics that gave strength to the indenture system itself.

One final example of how some persons opposed traditional narratives comes from the controversy over The English in the West Indies, a book published in 1888 by the English historian and novelist James Froude. This travel narrative, like that of Kingsley some seventeen years before and Trollope before that, in conventional fashion contains Froude’s own observations and opinions on West Indian geography and society. The geographic breadth of his travels exceeded those of Kingsley (whom he openly acknowledged and commends), and as a result comparatively less space is devoted explicitly to Trinidad and its affairs. Nevertheless, there is still ample evidence to suggest that Froude’s views aligned closely with Trollope,

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43 Ibid., 185.
44 Ibid., 195-200.
Kingsley and conservative, pro-indenture opinion, although even here there is a clear preoccupation with defining the proper place for Indians in colonial society.

Froude wastes no time debating whether the laborers there are pleased with their lot. “These Asiatic importations are very happy in Trinidad,” he claims. “They save money, and many of them do not return home when their time is out, but stay where they are, buy land, or go into trade. They are proud, however, and will not intermarry with the Africans. Few bring their families with them; and women being scanty among them, there arise inconveniences and sometimes serious crimes.”

In light of the growth of the Indian population in the island by this time—which was upwards of 60,000 persons, according to Laurence—it may be concluded that Froude’s estimate of the Indian population (later explicitly stated as 10,000) may have been based more in opinion than fact. Similarly, the claim of an overwhelmingly male immigrant population appears exaggerated, as governmental records indicate that during the 1880s the ratio of women to men among new immigrants was generally over forty to one hundred.

In other passages Froude’s parallels with Trollope are even more clear—particularly in his emphasis on race and miscegenation. However, he seems to abandon any hopes for “racial mixing” in the belief that events and nature have proven it impossible:

It were to be wished that there was more prospect of the Coolie race becoming permanent than I fear there is. They work excellently. They are picturesque additions to the landscape, as they keep to the bright colours and graceful drapery of India. The grave dignity of their faces contrasts remarkably with the broad, good-humoured, but common features of the African. The black women look with envy at the straight hair of Asia, and twist their unhappy wool into knots and ropes in the vain hope of being mistaken for the


47 Laurence, A Question of Labour, 525.

48 Ibid., 536.
purer race; but this is all. The African and the Asiatic will not mix, and the African being the stronger will and must prevail in Trinidad as elsewhere in the West Indies.\textsuperscript{49}

Subsequent passages reiterate this pattern of racial stereotyping, with references to Indians having “the fiercer passions of their Eastern blood” and the crimes that result from their women’s occasional infidelities. Yet frequently the intention in using race as an analytical framework is to contrast them with Afro-Trinidadians and to emphasize their supposed complete social and sexual separation.\textsuperscript{50}

As for the economic facet of Froude’s analysis, it is by now well anticipated. “The Coolies are useful creatures,” he comments in passing. “Without them sugar cultivation in Trinidad and Demerara would cease altogether.” More striking is his foregrounding of the Indian as picturesque, a move only seen in the two previous literary sources by Kingsley and Jenkins. “Singularly ornamental” is the way in which Froude chooses to characterize a population of 60,000 human beings; as “picturesque additions to the landscape,” this perspective objectifies these individuals and denies them basic agency, individuality, and human dignity while also implying their assumed proper role as naturally-occurring resources to be mastered and used by civilized society.

Importantly, some individuals refused to let this account and its traditional biases pass unchallenged. One year later, the Afro-Trinidadian intellectual J.J. Thomas attacked Froude’s condescending narrative in a polemic he entitled \textit{Froudacity: West Indian Fables by James Anthony Froude}. In it he voices strong opposition not only to Froude and his biased portrayal of Trinidad, but also to voting injustice and the colonial administration itself—for instance, he writes off Governor Longden as “a gentleman without initiative, without courage, and, above all,

\textsuperscript{49} Froude, \textit{English}, 65.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 67.
with a slavish adherence to red-tape and a clerk-like dread of compromising his berth.”51 Most of Thomas’ arguments have to do with Froude’s portrayal of Africans in the island, and consequently relatively space is devoted to the concerns of the Indian portion of Trinidadian society. One notable exception to this is a passage in which Thomas decries the violence of the Hosay Massacre and provides a fuller account of the social and political environment in which it occurred, protesting strongly against the injustice experienced by coolies who met “a violent death” or received “a life-long mutilation.”52 In sum, Thomas’ account demonstrates that the condescending vision of Froude and his ilk was not entirely secure. Colonial opposition, though still in its infancy, would increasingly start to question assumptions and tropes that pervaded British colonial society.

Conclusions

Throughout the discussion of the numerous sources above, a number of key themes have emerged, and may now be generalized to some extent. In the first place, and as repeatedly noted above, there were many continuities in modes of thought between this period and the formative years of indentureship discussed in the previous chapter. As sources from Walcott to Kingsley show, in the latter half of the nineteenth century Indian laborers in the colonies continued to be seen primarily as economic creatures and tools to be used at the discretion of the British planter class, and as racially-defined beings about whom objectively true generalizations could be made. They continued to be seen as suitable recipients of and participants in an unequal relationship of benevolent paternalism, even in the eyes of liberal, pro-reform authors like Edward Jenkins. And many British colonial individuals, from Governor Longden to the anonymous correspondent for


52 Ibid., 102-106.
the *Times of India*, still believed that they as a higher society were morally obligated to govern and civilize those at a presumably lower stage of development.

Yet there are also several new aspects evident in these sources—aspects that represent new directions in British ways of interpreting the “other” during this period. The first of these is the growing awareness of the Indian individual as a social being. As has been noted previously, this appears to have been a result of the demographic growth and established nature of the Indian population in the island. No longer could they be interpreted as hired laborers whose default state was to return to a rightful home in India. They were thriving and becoming an integral piece in the island’s social fabric, and as such, they naturally developed social relations with other groups (e.g., planters, Afro-Trinidadians) that were themselves governed by a complex web of economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious factors.

A second comparatively new element in characterizations during this time is an occasional tendency to see the Indian populace as a potential source of domestic unrest or even violence. This does not seem to have been widespread, but is nevertheless present; and as the circumstances surrounding the Hosay Massacre amply demonstrate, this tendency could at times lead to violent and tragic consequences. As for the causes for this development, they are impossible to conclusively trace. However, they may well be seen as another logical result of the demographic expansion of the Indian population, which may have begun to figure more prominently in colonial imaginations as more numerous and threatening “other” than it had previously been.

One third element arising from these sources is the idea of the Indian laborer as an aesthetic object, a picturesque part of the natural landscape to be appreciated by the (implicitly white male) viewer. The scholar Amar Wahab has similarly noted the role of the “picturesque” in
perpetuating what he terms West Indian orientalism. Basing his argument in part on these same travel narratives by Froude and Kingsley, he maintains that “the plantation picturesque was the primary aesthetic mode of disciplining laboring subjects in the West Indies.[…] …At the same time that the plantation picturesque constituted an aesthetic apparatus of constructing beauty, embedded in this notion of beauty were ideas about the rightful place of land, labor, and capital.”

Indeed, as noted earlier, this perspective turns the individual being observed into an object to be visually exploited according to the whim of the observer; it denies them agency and dignity; and it recasts them as natural resources to be objectively understood and mastered by white civilized society. Arising as it does from authors who had little experience in Trinidadian society, such a shift appears to have had much more to do with developments in British, Victorian-era aesthetic sensibilities than with any change in Trinidad. Further investigation is warranted to decipher the ways in which this tendency in travel narratives figures into the broader evidence within British literature and art of the time.

Taken together, these three new developments in British perceptions reflect the growth of a new anxiety that clearly took precedence over the previous period’s worries regarding the debated moral legitimacy of indentureship. Rather, this new anxiety centered on how to assess the proper place of Indians in Trinidadian society. Were they to remain forever “post-indenture” subjects whose status as an economic tool remained despite their new existence outside the formal constraints of indenture? Or were they to become a significant new demographic in Trinidadian society, complete with their own social interests and identity? As noted earlier, this shift in anxiety was clearly not coincidental, but must be seen as the direct result of the

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establishment and growth of a post-indenture Indo-Trinidadian population who could no longer be relegated solely to the realm of economics. On a more general level, however, this shift also clearly demonstrates the agency and flexibility of British individuals in navigating socio-economic changes in their society. For rather than discarding their former perceptions of these Indian laborers, they successfully adapted their preexisting understandings by grafting on new social and aesthetic elements that corresponded more closely to contemporary developments.

Further change occurred in the realm of anti-indenture sentiment and politics. As the previous chapter has made clear, the anti-slavery movement originally opposed indenture on the grounds that it represented a system of exploitation serving only to gratify the avarice of its wealthy participants. However, by the 1850s such opposition had failed, and the Anti-Slavery Society had to content itself with subdued criticisms of its abuses and occasional calls for reform. It is in this light that their repudiation of the violence of the 1884 Hosay Massacre must be seen—as the protests of an organization whose influence and effectiveness had clearly declined from their previously held position. The new developments that occurred during this time did not involve a reinvigoration of the Society, but rather the introduction by the Social Democratic Foundation of a fresh intellectual basis upon which similar criticism could be founded. As later events would show, socialism’s power to curtail what it saw as the abuses of avaricious capitalism was never great, and in any event had little impact upon indentureship in the British Empire. Nor would it forge any substantial alliance with the Anti-Slavery Society. Nevertheless, this infusion of new intellectual material into the body of anti-indenture criticism represents an intriguing episode in the development of the tradition, and demonstrates that some in Britain were still willing and able to mount criticisms of an unscrupulous and exploitative capitalism from the new perspective afforded by Marxism.
In retrospect, the structure of indentureship in Trinidad and the West Indies showed few signs of waning as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Many of the racist and discriminatory patterns of colonial thinking continued to hold sway, while new elements such as the “picturesque” and trepidation over their perceived potential for violence governed the ways in which British and white Trinidadian individuals saw the Indo-Trinidadian population. A few challenges arose from both British and subaltern voices like J.J. Thomas, but neither could dislodge the system that by now was thoroughly entrenched in the region’s economic and demographic makeup. Only after the turn of the century would indenture begin to face its greatest and most successful opposition—not from Britain, nor from Trinidad or the West Indies—but from India itself. These events, the emerging Indian nationalism that drove them, and the new anxieties that would arise in relation to indentured laborers will form the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: TRADITION AND ABOLITION, 1901-1920

“At a meeting of the East India Association, held at Caxton Hall, Westminster, on Monday, January 28, 1907, at four p.m., a paper was read by Nasarvanji M. Cooper, Esq., on ‘Prospects of Indian Labour in British and Foreign Fields’.” Thus begins the dry report of the East Indian Association on what was only one of the many more or less interesting presentations it entertained on topics as diverse as “Indian Pottery,” “Imperial Preference, Cobdenism, or Swadeshi—which is best for India?,” and “Indo-British Trade with Persia.” The chairman introduced Mr. Cooper as the editor of the Parsi Chronicle and an educated gentleman from India who had “enlarged his mind and his experience by touring over a great part of the world, and had made observations which formed the basis of his paper.” Tellingly, the purpose of Cooper’s paper was not only to inform, but to “furnish ground for comparison with the unhappy conditions to which the natives of India were subjected in some other portions of the British dominions.” In other words, Cooper promised to alleviate the consciences of his upper-class British and Indian audience by describing the many ways in which Britain had bestowed social and economic blessings on its colonial Indian subjects.

Nor did he disappoint. In this paper, Cooper used his firsthand experiences throughout the West Indies to paint a rosy picture of Indian indenture, in so doing reiterating many of the

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1 Founded in 1866 by the Indian Dadabhai Naoroji, this society acted as a forum for Indian elites and retired British officials to discuss matters related to India and its government. See [http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/east-india-association](http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/east-india-association) for further details.

traditional tropes about indenture such as its economic benefits and the racial and picturesque nature of its Indian participants. In so doing, however, he repeatedly emphasized the supposed moral weakness of these individuals and lampooned some of them for their apparent efforts in recent years to ascend to the circles of European elites through property and conspicuous spending. “I have seen them in their new homes, smoking Virginia cigarettes and Havana cigars, driving in cabs, drink Dewar’s whiskey and Mazawattee tea, wear cashmere trousers and Russian leather shoes, and even drink Moet et Chandon’s champagne…” he reported with a hint of pique, and less than a hint of hypocrisy.³ Who were these Indian laborers, after all, to thus affect the manners of a class to which their position, race, and moral inferiority inevitably barred them?

A mere five years later, another Indian gentleman delivered a rather different speech before a similar audience of British elites: the Imperial Legislative Council. The speaker, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, was a history professor turned Indian social reformer and nationalist who had been elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1905. As such Gokhale was firmly opposed to the indenture system, and framed his argument against it on the grounds that it was inherently faulty, inevitably exploitative, and a source of “national degradation” and ethnic prejudice. Completely absent here was Cooper’s happy immigrant who after a few years of indenture in the colony could aspire to luxury consumption of champagne and Havana cigars. Rather, “the victims of the system were generally simple, ignorant, illiterate, resourceless people belonging to the poorest classes” who faced great material, emotional, and psychological suffering as a direct result of their exploitation by British planters.⁴

³ Ibid., 320-321.

These two reports, each of which will be discussed later in greater depth, represent some of the strongly contrasting perspectives on indenture in the British Empire during the first part of the twentieth century. As will be seen, both Cooper’s traditional pro-indenture narrative and Gokhale’s new, Indian nationalist critique were participants in a larger debate over colonial government and the place of non-Europeans in the imperial structure. More importantly, both presentations demonstrated the existence of new anxieties that now figured prominently in British relations with the Indian indenture system: an anxiety over the apparent prosperity and social prestige of Indian elites, and a related concern over ethnically-defined, proto-nationalist linkages between India and the Indian colonial diaspora. How these two anxieties played out, and how British perceptions of Indo-Trinidadians shifted in the years leading up to indenture’s abolition, form the main narrative of this chapter.

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At the start of the twentieth century, the system of indentured labor in the British West Indies found itself in a significantly different sociopolitical and economic context than that in which it originally had been founded some sixty years earlier. On a global scale, many of the structures of European empires remained in place, but the traditional imperial rivalries between them were taking new and virulent form in competitions such as the infamous “scramble” for Africa. Colonialism was nearing its zenith around the world, even as newly developing nationalisms were beginning to undermine them. The proliferation of the railroad, telegraph, and steam power were connecting empires and individuals in unprecedented fashion, while the intercontinental flows of resources and persons were on the rise.

As for Trinidad itself, to a certain extent it was benefitting from its economic and demographic integration into the British imperial system. Indentured labor continued to appear
integral to continued economic well-being; for although the sugar industry’s growth had virtually ceased, particularly after a sugar depression in 1884-5 and the more general depression of 1894-98, other areas of the island’s agriculture such as cocoa and rice took off as the overall economy diversified. Average cocoa production in the first decade of the twentieth century, for example, was more than four times its rate during 1870s, and nearly double that of the previous decade. Demographically the Indo-Trinidadian population was flourishing, totaling somewhere between 85,000 and 100,000 persons by 1900; importantly, only 10,821 had arrived in the five years previous to this, indicating that the overwhelming majority of these people were well-established in the island. Although most of these individuals were still engaged in the traditional field of agriculture, increasing numbers of Indians chose to enter alternative occupations from the 1890s onward—as general laborers, domestic servants, railroad workers, proprietors, shopkeepers, milk sellers, and even priests and teachers. Clearly, the tendencies toward permanent settlement first evinced some thirty years earlier by the likes of Barathsing were becoming widespread. This was a settled population, a permanent social and cultural element of island society that the original proponents of indenture six decades ago might scarcely have imagined.

Concomitant with their demographic growth and establishment in the island was the development of Indo-Trinidadian political awareness and a growing opposition to being


6 Ibid., 413, 415.


8 Laurence, *A Question of Labour*, 530-531.

9 Ibid., 525, 520.

10 Ibid., 418.
represented by the customary Agent-General of Immigrants. Already in the 1880s and 1890s stirrings of Indian political participation in the colony’s government could be felt in forms as diverse as their letters to newspapers, agitation for an elected legislature, and the formation of the East Indian National Association in 1897. To some extent these efforts were rewarded; by 1903, the first Indian was elected Mayor of San Fernando.11 It is tempting to view the development of an Indo-Trinidadian political voice as being a direct cause for the decline of the indenture system and its abolition in 1917. However, as James Heartfield, K.O. Laurence, and Hugh Tinker have pointed out, this is not a completely accurate interpretation; rather, other more powerful factors were at work, including the simultaneous decline of sugar planters’ economic and political power, continued suspicion if not outright opposition from the Anti-Slavery Society, and perhaps most importantly, the emergence of nationalism in India itself.

This chapter extends the previous two chapters’ analyses of British characterizations of Indo-Trinidadians into the system’s final years—a period defined here as stretching from approximately 1901 to 1920. In so doing it will observe that two new anxieties began to rise to the fore of British perceptions as indenture entered its final two decades. Pro-indenture advocates like Cooper voiced an anxiety that in many ways can be seen as a logical progression from previous concerns over Indians in society; that is, they worried over the apparent prosperity of some post-indenture Indians who seemed to aspire to social parity with European elites, and frequently responded by asserting Indian inferiority in another, typically moral sense. Concurrent with this, the emergence of Indian nationalism led some anti-indenture observers in both Britain and India to express concern over the system’s detrimental impact on the larger Indian “nation”—a term, importantly, that typically connoted ethnicity over political affiliation or

11 Ibid., 424.
geographic location. Thinkers like Gokhale, for example, chose to see the system not only in terms of its alleged immorality and injustice but also as a smear upon their racially-defined, and thus global, Indian nation.

This second anxiety was a particularly ironic development, since its racial definition of an Indian identity that transcended geographical boundaries was itself driven by the racialist tendency of Europeans to define individuals and their behavior according to their ethnic heritage. In essence, anti-indenture Indian nationalism defined the nation on the template of the discriminatory racial boundaries imposed by Britons, and then leveraged such a definition to pose an effective threat to the indenture system. However, this co-opting of rhetoric was not entirely unproblematic. For as will be shown, there were other linkages between the anti-indenture logic of Indian nationalists and their opponents’ pro-indenture arguments; both parties claimed they were benevolently seeking to ameliorate the laborers’ condition, but in so doing both felt compelled to rhetorically degrade them and deny their agency.

Cooper and Ritch: Tradition and Protest

Cooper’s presentation before the East India Association in 1907 is illuminating in that it eloquently encapsulates key aspects of the traditional pro-indenture narrative as it now entered the twentieth century. As noted previously, Cooper uses many of the traditional stereotypes and assumptions in an attempt to persuade his audience of indenture beneficent effect on British subjects. Adopting the role of astute ethnographer, he recounts that he had “devoted considerable time to the study of the natives of these countries, their habits and customs” after being struck by the “remarkable” prosperity of these immigrants. The traditional economic focus and propensity for using money as the infallible yardstick against which to measure the extent of human
happiness comes to the fore and is seen as a particularly effective means of contrasting the situation of Indians in the West Indies with their previous condition in India itself:

…they are remarkably happy.
The Indian labourers in their native villages, over-burdened with debt, their small dwellings seized by usurious Marwarees in payment of originally small loans, but swollen by compound interest to twenty times their original value, and their household goods threatened with dispersal, afford indeed a miserable spectacle. Disheartened and hopeless, they hear, as they smoke their hukkas under the village trees, of a land in the far West, where labourers are scarce…

In the West Indies, in contrast, indenture provides the wherewithal to escape the misery of poverty. According to Cooper, prosperity is easily attainable thanks to the benevolent terms of the system, and any failure to acquire wealth is simply the result of moral weakness:

A family, for instance, consisting of husband, wife, and two children, can earn 165. a week; out of this sum 65. a week can easily be saved […] This is, however, not the case in all instances, but that is not the fault of the system, but of the men themselves. Rum is cheap, and the Hindus and Mohammedans, who are usually sober in India, become in too many cases infected with the love of strong drink. It has often made me sad to see drunkenness amongst some of the coolies. It is, I believe, a proof of an excess of money beyond their actual wants. […] I am absolutely convinced that, if immigrants be strong, sober, and industrious, there is no limit to the prosperity which they may attain. By honest labour they can amass a considerable amount of money.

Yet for Cooper even this acquisition of wealth is no foolproof way to demonstrate one’s strength of character. Rather, and in a move that unwittingly betrays an underlying anxiety over the growing wealth of some of these persons, he construes conspicuous spending by Indians on everything from gold ornaments to European-style luxuries like Havana cigars, cashmere, and champagne as evidence of foolishness and moral weakness. This attitude is more than an interesting addition to the traditional economic focus so clear in other previous sources. Rather, it

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12 East India Association, *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review*, 318.
13 Ibid., 319.
14 Ibid., 319-321.
shows that these supposedly “poor coolies” were now beginning to compete for social status with colonial elites—and that the latter were not entirely comfortable with this threat to their dominance.

One of the natural (though by no means justifiable) ways to discredit a growing Indian elite was apparently to cast them as inferior in some other way. Thus the theme of moral weakness continues throughout the report, and according to Cooper repeatedly showed itself in matrimony, domestic violence, and murder among the Indian populace. Much of this he attributes to a demographic imbalance of sexes among the indentured laborers, citing questionable statistics that claim an average proportion of fewer than 35 women to 100 men. (In the case of Trinidad and British Guiana, this claim is undermined by other statistics cited by Laurence that show significantly higher proportions during this time that range from 40 to 60 women per hundred men.) This imbalance, Cooper argues, inevitably leads to competition for female attention, which in turn gives rise to seduction, adultery, and murder. Indian males, both Hindu and Muslim, respond by mutilating and murdering their faithless wives—and even in cases unrelated to marital infidelity are known for being homicidally revengeful.\(^\text{15}\)

In keeping with other tropes and traditional expressions of the time, Cooper imagines Indians in the West Indies as not only these morally flawed, economically “useful” creatures, but also as racially defined and picturesque beings. It seems that Cooper had read Froude and agreed with his assessment of Indian laborers as “ornamental”;\(^\text{16}\) unsurprisingly, he also borrowed Froude’s outlook on the unbridgeable gulf between the Indo- and Afro-Trinidadians. “The immigrants come to work; the negroes do not want to work. The two races are more absolutely

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 321-322.

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 325.
apart than the white and the black. The immigrants insist on their superiority of birth, and pride themselves on the ancient civilization of Hindustan…"17 This assessment of complex inter-ethnic miscegenation having been neatly disposed of, he returns to the trope of the picturesque and in a particularly revealing passage focuses on Indian females:

Their [the immigrants’] offspring born in the Colonies are always better-looking than themselves. These creoles are a fair race, both men and women. Some of them are very handsome, and particularly the women. Not often in India have I seen such stately and beautiful Hindu and Mohammedan women, with their bewitching eyes and tiny lips, as I have seen among these creole women. With what delight and a kind of pride—for are they not the offsprings of the immigrants from India?—have I watched some of these handsome creole girls[...] looking at the shop windows in Water Street in George Town, and often making purchases in these shops, where white men attend to their wants. Your readers may laugh, but really the eyes of some of these creole boys and girls are bewitching. I have heard many English planters and other business men in these Colonies say that the features of these East Indian creole girls are far superior to those of some of their own women.18

These telling remarks are especially illustrative of a particular European relationship with the Orient, detailed by Edward Said and subsequent scholars and variously described as Orientalism or the “postcolonial gaze.” In such a context, the author unilaterally objectifies and distances himself from the “other,” as demonstrated here by Cooper’s quasi-voyeuristic scrutiny of the bodies of Indian females.19 Importantly, these are no longer rational, self-possessed individuals going about their everyday lives, but aesthetically pleasing creatures whose actions, status, and very existence are interpreted as being inextricably linked to, judged, and even possessed by Europeans. Underlying this element is an additional hint of titillation at the implied reversal of racial and gender norms and the loss of control that this may entail, as white men are “bewitched” or obediently “attend to [the] wants” of these Indian creole women.

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 325-326.
Beyond forming an excellent summary of the prevailing pro-indenture narrative and its stereotypes, Cooper’s report is important in that the subsequent discussion it stimulated among the Association’s members demonstrates that this narrative was not entirely secure. Most of Cooper’s audience responded favorably to this report, according to the Association’s minutes. As chairman, the aging Irish judge and veteran of the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion Sir Raymond West voiced several concerns: that marriage among these Hindus be properly official and designed to prevent polygyny; that the proportion of women to men among immigrants be regulated to at least a 7:10 ratio; and that Muslims among them should be allowed to propagate their own faith (“which is infinitely better than no religion at all”) in the interest of maintaining their morals. He ruefully conceded that “it would be much better if these people were all Christians, and good Christians, but we have no right to force Christianity upon them, and things being as they are, it would certainly be a benefit to them if, within the limits of their own tenets and their own religion, they were instructed and encouraged to live moral and beneficial lives.”

Despite a brief tense exchange over the welfare of Indians in Ceylon, many of the other comments from the Association’s members were similarly supportive and generally tended to reinforce the traditional ideas already documented in the report and elsewhere: the benevolent intention and effects of the British indenture system, the stereotype of the Indian as mild and docile, and so on. Only one substantial rebuttal was forthcoming, and was presented by Mr. L.W. Ritch, an intriguing character who was at once a Jewish Theosohist, a Londoner then living in Johannesburg, and a pro-Indian acquaintance of Mohandas Gandhi. In his remarks he voiced an

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21 East India Association, Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review, 346.

unequivocal opposition to the entire “coolie system” and took issue with the way in which the British estimation of Indian satisfaction “was based almost exclusively upon considerations of their material welfare.” Drawing upon his experience in South Africa, he even charged the indenture system with originating and perpetuating racial prejudice throughout the colonies, and concluded that “the whole business was unsavoury, was un-British.” It seems that few of Mr. Ritch’s fellow members found his arguments convincing, however; the discussion moved on with a few compromising (and one guesses, rather awkward) comments, and soon concluded.

Two weeks after the presentation of Cooper’s paper in Caxton Hall, some of the author’s remarks found their way into a larger piece in the *Times of India* entitled “West and East: Anglicised Indian Women.” As the title suggests, the author of the article chose to focus on Indian women both on the subcontinent and in the colonies, reporting some of the controversies over how best to instill Western education in Indian women while still guarding against “excessive imitation of the West.” While much of the article expresses optimism over the supposed improvements to the lots of women in India, many of Cooper’s remarks chosen by the author are construed in a significantly more pessimistic manner. For instance, after citing Cooper’s comment on the “bewitchingly pretty” Indian women in the region, such beauty is immediately presented as a moral danger and connected to the supposed moral degradation prosperity was breeding. “But some of these girls aspire to nothing higher than to be the mistress of a white man. In other respects also the material prosperity of the immigrants is accompanied by moral deterioration. Drunkenness is rife…” Agreeing with Cooper, the author suggests that

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such moral inferiority could be remedied through religion and education, both (obviously) to be bestowed by British governance.

With the later inclusion of comments on the “very backward state” of education in the colonies, uxoricide, and lack of religious observance, the account ultimately paints a relatively dark picture of Indians in the West Indies. Nevertheless, it is vital to note that despite this fact, the author is still, like Cooper, hewing very close to the traditional lines of argument featuring an objectifying “picturesque” gaze, morally inferior and racially defined subjects, and the dire need for benevolent, elevating British governance. But what of the substantial objections raised by Mr. Ritch regarding the injustice, prejudice, and un-British nature of the system itself? They are neatly omitted, the only remaining trace apparent in the closing remark that “Sir L. Griffin, Mr. L.W. Ritch, Mr. A.G. Wise, Mr. Tarapore and others took part in the discussion.”

Clearly, objections to indenture and discrimination could be raised, but there was no guarantee that they would be heard or rebroadcast to others.

In sum, Mr. Cooper’s account and the ensuing discussion both within the Association and in the press have much to say about the current state of British opinion on Indians in Trinidad and the West Indies as a whole. The traditional narrative featuring economic benefit, benevolent British protection, and the civilization of ignorant and morally inferior races was very much intact, even—and this is particularly illuminating—even among members of the Indian elite. These common tropes had pervaded British and colonial perceptions virtually from the system’s inauguration, and still held sway in much of society into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, a few challenges to traditional stereotypes were beginning to arise in the metropole itself. As Ritch’s protests demonstrate, these challenges could arise from new and unusual speakers—

25 Ibid.
neither from the Anti-Slavery Society nor the Social Democrats as in previous years, nor even from Indian elites—but from the occasional British observer who was willing to question the master narrative of indenture.

Reaffirming Tradition: “A Race of Peasant Proprietors”

With the advantage of historical hindsight, and in light of the abolition of indenture within a few short years, it is tempting to expect primary source evidence from the first decade of the twentieth century to contain a growing number of publicly expressed objections to indenture. However, this is only to impose modern expectations upon the evidence; for in fact, it is difficult to find many expressed objections at all during this period. Even the Anti-Slavery Society itself, which as previously noted had moderated its stance substantially by the latter years of the nineteenth century, was unwilling to mount opposition to the system. As James Heartfield notes, in early 1907—the same time that Cooper was presenting his views noted above—the Anti-Slavery Society was expressing their “considerable confidence” in indenture schemes due to the government’s “very stringent conditions and safeguards on all labour emigration.”26 As will now be shown, similarly approving and traditional attitudes toward indenture and the laborers themselves are also to be found in newspapers and travel narratives of the time.

For example, the Times of India’s 23 February 1903 edition contained a piece from a correspondent in Trinidad that purported to demonstrate the wonderful ways in which Indian laborers had brought about the economic “salvation of the island” through sugar and now especially cocoa cultivation.27 Subtitled “A Race of Peasant Proprietors,” the account describes


the laborers in glowing terms that nevertheless perpetuate the traditional view of them as racially-defined, primarily economically-oriented persons whose industrious nature works for the benefit of colonial society and sets him apart from the supposedly lazy, post-emancipation African. “The coolie is of a frugal mind. He works his six days a week and saves up the balance of his wage that remains after careful expenditure on the necessaries of life.” (Apparently this author would not have agreed with Mr. Cooper’s perception that Indian laborers in the West Indies were prone to indulge in conspicuous spending.) As for the role of the British colonial government in all this, here too the traditional narrative plays out, with the author describing it as a “watchful and wise Government” that furthers the welfare of these immigrants in the face of planter interests.²⁸

In early 1907, a month before its coverage of Mr. Cooper’s presentation, the Times of India contained a report on issues with specifically Indo-Trinidadian laborers as part of a larger piece on India-related matters being discussed in the House of Commons. The discussion appears to have begun with a question from Mr. Thomas Summerbell, a radical socialist MP from Sunderland in the north of England,²⁹ regarding the reported protests of the Trinidad Working Men’s Association (the early predecessor of the Trinidad Labour Party³⁰). According to Summerbell, this unrest stemmed from the “suffering of the middle and lower classes of this island”; this suffering was allegedly caused by the competition they faced from Indian immigrants, who themselves represented a drain on the colony’s finances and “a standing

²⁸ Ibid.


menace to public peace and property.”

While previous questions in this piece were reportedly answered by the Secretary of State for India himself—at the time the journalist and scholar turned Liberal politician John Morley—this question was answered by a “Mr. Churchill,” who in light of his position as Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State for the Colonies from 1905 to 1908, must have been Winston Churchill.

In his response Churchill forcefully argues on behalf of Morley (and the Colonial Secretary, Lord Elgin) against this claim and Summerbell’s request for an investigation, in great part by reiterating the typical arguments for the benefits Indian laborers had brought to the island. As he notes, they and their descendants “form a large and valuable element in the population of Trinidad: they contribute most materially to the revenue of the colony, and are in no way a menace to public peace and property.” Since, he reasoned, the Governor of Trinidad reported that the alleged distress was not occurring among agricultural laborers, clearly the East Indian population could not be to blame for it—his unstated and incorrect assumption of course being that Indo-Trinidadians were laboring purely in agriculture.

The Times of India does not indicate whether Churchill’s arguments were seen as convincing. However, the inconsistency of his view with the fact that the Indo-Trinidadians population had decades before diversified away from reliance on agriculture demonstrates that it was at the very least politically convenient to continue to cast them as peasants only, rather than


as “peasant proprietors” or wage laborers. Further, the dispute over whether or not they represented a threat to public property is an interesting but inconclusive one since it could be seen as evidence for any number of attitudes. For while Summerbell’s opinion clearly conveys his belief that the immigrant population represented an undesirable, socially troublesome source of potential unrest or even violence, Churchill’s counterargument could be evidence for anything from an unwillingness to intervene in colonial affairs, reliance on the governing structure of indenture to prevent social unrest, or the thoroughly traditional belief in the inherently “tranquil” or “docile” nature of Indian laborers.

Two additional articles in the *Times of India*, from 1909 and 1910 respectively, demonstrate the further continuation of traditional themes in both popular and governmental thought. The first piece, entitled “The Labour Supply,” again frames indentured labor throughout the colonies purely in an economic perspective, regarding the indenture system as a necessary structure and stimulant for Indian migration to the West Indies. These laborers’ role identity is that of economically useful tools, although the author seems to disregard the recent decline of sugar in favor of cocoa: “They have been invaluable in supplying labour for the sugar industry, on which the prosperity of each colony so largely depends.”35 The second article presents the conclusions of the government’s Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates carried out in 1909, which were in favor of continued indenture. Within them the Committee concludes that “the system of indentured immigration as actually worked is not open to serious objection in the interests of the immigrant labourer,” that Indian immigration was invaluable to developing Britain’s tropical colonies, and that the current system was “the only

practicable form of emigration to distant colonies on any considerable scale.”  

In short, they once again emphasized their belief in the economic nature of the Indian labor, the beneficial economic effects of indenture, and the continued need of governmental oversight and regulation to ensure the system’s continued operation. None of these items is remarkably different from the typical interpretation of indenture and its participants, and indeed it would appear that the Committee could scarcely have imagined that the system they favored so much might disappear before the next decade was out.

This thoroughly conservative position on indenture was not limited to government officials or the occasional colonial reporter. Rather, as a book published in 1912 by Algernon Edward Aspinall demonstrates, traditional approbation of the system was alive and well as late as five years before its abolition. At the time of its publication, the 41-year-old Oxford-educated lawyer had been secretary of the West India Committee for fourteen years, had just several years earlier wedded the charming young actress and dancer Kitty Mason, and was beginning an alternate career as a writer specializing in the agriculture of the West Indies. Importantly for this discussion, he was also concerned with the history, society, laws, and infrastructure of the region, and he included all these subjects and more in his sizeable work of 1912 entitled “The British West Indies: Their History, Resources and Progress.” Within it Aspinall inevitably brushes up against the issue of indentured laborers, and it is thus instructive to see how this civil servant-turned-writer chose to interpret the phenomenon.


Aspinall’s optimistic outlook on the current state of affairs in the British West Indian colonies comes through right from the start, and exhibits a curiously incoherent conception of whose efforts are actually behind the colonies’ prosperity. For instance, he praises the patience and fortitude of the region’s planters despite the adverse circumstances they have faced, such as the abolition of slavery nearly a century before. By arguing that it is these planters who have borne “the burden and heat of the day” — not the Indian laborers who actually accomplished the grueling task of cultivation, and without whose labor the planters would not have been able to remain solvent — Aspinall is seemingly willing to write them out of the picture entirely. Yet later on in the same book Aspinall does refer to the “important part East Indian coolies play in the economy of these colonies,” in effect acknowledging at least in passing their role in the region’s economy. One may reconcile these contrasting remarks by realizing that while Aspinall was only willing to publicly extend credit to the planters, he was very much willing to perpetuate the usual method by which many before him had interpreted Indian laborers: as mere economic resources or tools to be used at the planter’s discretion, and whose efforts would redound as much or more to their employers as to themselves.

It should not be surprising, then, that Aspinall’s subsequent remarks also align closely with this traditional pattern. One of the most prominent themes he expresses has to do with the issue of the beneficent, civilizing effects of indenture:

The voyage does wonders for the immigrant, and on his arrival at his destination he is sleek and fat, though at first a somewhat irresponsible and useless individual. After his five years of indenture he is a different man. He has learnt discipline and acquired a knowledge of systematic agriculture. His muscles have hardened by continuous work, and his views expanded by the varied life of a sugar estate and its complex machinery; he has acquired the habit of work and a self-dependent spirit. He has, in fact, become a


40 Ibid., 269.
valuable member of the community. His term of indenture having expired, he either settles down on the estate as a free labourer or acquires sufficient land to carry on his favourite industry. With his neat wattle homestead, his cows—the East Indian is an expert where cattle are concerned—and with his family all engaged in some useful occupation, he presents an admirable specimen of the well-to-do, contented colonist, an ever-present example of the benefit which has accrued to him, as well as to the colony, from the system of immigration under which he exchanged the East for the West.41

One must wonder exactly what Aspinall’s sources were telling him regarding the grueling passage from India to persuade him that arrivals in Trinidad could conceivably appear “sleek and fat”, but that is perhaps beside the point. His larger argument, so very much in keeping with what government officials and pro-indenture advocates had been saying for years, was that indenture was a mechanism through which the British could bestow civilizational benefits and exert a moralizing influence over innately uncivilized, “irresponsible and useless” individuals. It is all to the benefit for these Indians, Aspinall believes, because they are being elevated and ennobled in a new colonial environment in which they “are free from the traditions which keep them back in their mother country.”

On the subject of governmental sponsorship and protection, Aspinall goes to great lengths to discuss and defend the past and current action of the government in defending the indenture system. He cites the conclusions of governmental inquiries made both in 1870 and 1891 as evidence for the system’s benignity and legitimacy, stating that the former investigation in British Guiana “found that the most serious allegations were not substantiated.” As for the more recent 1891 inquiry into multiple colonies, he approvingly notes that the report “was in every way favorable” and quotes the report’s findings that in Trinidad “Indian coolies have already very exceptional advantages, and a still brighter future before them.” To this he adds a detailed account of the system from recruitment to the completion of the indenture period, noting

41 Ibid., 268-269.
throughout the abundant precautions taken to prevent abuse and ensure the Indians’ material well-being, and characterizing the British administration as exerting a “kindly but firmly parental authority.” He concludes by citing the most recent inquiry of 1909, the findings of which were cited above by the Times of India; and despite noting that the Committee did not even visit the colonies in question, argues that their findings validate the system as being strongly beneficial both to the colonies and to the immigrants themselves.\(^{42}\)

Interestingly enough, in his assessment of East Indians in the islands Aspinall seems to focus purely on the system of indentured labor rather than upon the very significant population of Indians and Chinese who now existed outside this labor structure. True, he does note their demographic increase in the islands as a result of the system—yet not once does he mention Indians in his discussion of the region’s politics or religions. Clearly it is dangerous to place too much interpretive weight upon this absence of evidence. Nevertheless, this omission by Aspinall may be seen as an indication of how British thinkers were accustomed by tradition to see the Indo-Trinidadians and other Indian persons in the region mainly within the confines of a system dictated by their own economic needs. Such a view was driven by tradition and could not easily accommodate itself to understanding this sizable demographic minority in ways other than that of agricultural service to a needy colonial economy.

\textit{Gokhale, Debate, and Abolition}

Rooted as his arguments are in a traditional interpretation of the empire-wide indenture system, Aspinall’s defense of it nevertheless betrays the fact that some thinkers during the first decades of the twentieth century were beginning ever more loudly to question indentureship’s moral standing and economic benefit. This was less the effect of British misgivings about the

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 271-277.
system’s moral standing and more directly the result of agitation originating in pro-Indian thought. For instance, and as Hugh Tinker noted in A New System of Slavery, questioning of the system by those generally in favor of increased Indian autonomy went back to the turn of the century, with Gandhi and Lord Curzon being among the foremost in calling for the abolition of the system.43 Others such as Lord Hardinge (Viceroy of India), the missionary C.F. Andrews, and Gokhale were also instrumental in bringing the system to its eventual end in 1917. By further examining Gokhale’s speech before the Indian Legislative Council mentioned previously, it will become evident that his anti-indenture arguments and assessments of indentured laborers were strongly influenced by the traditional pro-indenture tenets that still largely held sway in British opinion. Further, although these arguments nuance perceptions of Indian laborers substantially, they contain numerous parallels with those mounted decades before by the Anti-Indenture Society, and in fact work to perpetuate a similar legacy that degrades these individuals’ condition and denies their agency.

As an Indian social reformer and nationalist, Gopal Krishna Gokhale’s advocacy and deep concern for the underprivileged went hand in hand with his respectable political career. He had been elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1905, and the same year founded the Servants of India Society, an organization dedicated to extending emergency relief, literacy, and other social goods to less fortunate members of Indian society.44 It was perhaps inevitable that he would be among the most vocal critics of the British indenture system, for as his arguments against it demonstrate, he saw it as militating both against the poor subset of the


Indian people with whose welfare he was most concerned and also against the honor of a racially defined—and therefore non-British—Indian nation.

As noted earlier, and as reported by the *Times of India*, in early 1912 Gokhale proposed to outlaw the system before the Imperial Legislative Council, basing his arguments on three main tenets. He claimed first of all that the system was inherently faulty, with illusory safeguards, discriminatory and repressive laws, and disproportionately severe punishments for breaches of contract; in such an account this was “a monstrous system, iniquitous in itself, based on fraud and maintained by force,” “wholly opposed to modern sentiments of justice and humanity,” and “a grave blot on the civilization of any country that tolerated it.” The system was made even more repugnant by his second tenet, that it was especially morally reprehensible because it exploited the Indian laborers who were helpless, ignorant victims of unscrupulous agents. These problems thus informed Gokhale’s third argument, which also represented a key anxiety of Indian nationalists like him—namely, that the indenture system was a source of “national degradation” that perpetuated racial discrimination against Indians by fostering the image of them as “mere coolies.”

Gokhale’s second tenet is of most interest to this discussion, not only due to its apparent contrast with the pro-indenture ideas so widespread in earlier sources, but also because of how it conveyed new and broader understandings of these individuals while simultaneously degrading their status. After completing his portrait of them as “simple, ignorant, illiterate, resourceless people,” Gokhale added a tragic rendition of the material, emotional, and psychological suffering these immigrants faced, including:

…the imprisonments with hard labour for trivial causes, the physical violence endured by many without any chance of redress, the bitterness of finding themselves entrapped, the home sickness destroying all interest in life, the heavy preventible mortality on the estates, the large number of suicides and the unutterable tragedy and pathos of men and women knowing that the vast sea rolled between them and their native place starting actually to walk back to their country, imagining in their simplicity and ignorance that some land route could be found, and either seized and forcibly taken back, or else devoured by wild beasts or perishing of hunger and cold.46

Before objecting to perceived exaggerations of Gokhale’s account, it must be remembered that he was objecting to the global British indenture system rather than simply its occurrence in Trinidad or the West Indies. As such he may well have been speaking of events in Natal, Fiji, Mauritius, or any of the other colonies into which indentured labor had been introduced, and perhaps in these there were indeed instances of recalcitrant laborers being “devoured by wild beasts.” Of more importance to this discussion, however, is the strong contrast between Gokhale’s compassionate, overtly sentimental account of indentured laborers and traditional narratives mounted by Aspinall et al. Here they are seen as far more than useful economic tools or racially defined beings. Rather, and in a welcome expansion of perception, they are thinking and feeling individuals who can experience psychological trauma, longing, disappointment, and determination. At the same time, however, Gokhale’s attempt to ameliorate their condition ironically does so by degrading their perceived qualities and sketching them as purely ignorant (and therefore presumably innocent) victims. Quite apart from his own attempt to sketch indenture as Tinker’s “new system of slavery,” his image of Indian laborers as passive victims bears striking resemblances to that painted by the Anti-Slavery Society so many years before, and even in a measure to pro-indenture views. For all accounts saw themselves as benevolently working to deliver these individuals from poverty and exploitation, and yet in so doing rhetorically degraded their condition and necessarily denied their individual agency.

46 Ibid.
Naturally pro-indenture rebuttals were forthcoming from other members of the Council, and they ultimately succeeded in defeating Gokhale’s proposal. For instance, one Mr. Clark responded by reiterating many of the traditional arguments for the system such as its role in elevating and civilizing its participants; indeed, he maintained that “indentured labour opened out to the more adventurous spirits, a new life in a new land, where they might hope to obtain a state which they could never hope to obtain in their own country.”\textsuperscript{47} Gokhale’s defeat in 1912 must not be seen as inevitable, however. As the approving comments of Messrs. Thackersey, Haque, Mudholkar, Majid, Malaviya, and Khan demonstrate, Gokhale’s sentiments did resonate strongly with many of his fellow members. And while his death only three years later would preclude him from seeing his goal achieved, the arguments he mounted against indentureship would play a key role in abolishing the system in 1917.

As demonstrated in a variety of sources from the time, the last few years leading up to the system’s abolition saw a sharp rise in Indian and British criticism of indenture, mainly on the grounds of the system’s alleged deleterious social and moral consequences (in contrast to the Anti-Slavery Society’s early objections to the system’s \textit{intrinsic} immorality). The chapter will thus conclude with a brief glance at a few examples of such subsequent opinions on the matter, and in so doing will demonstrate that while anti-indenture thought indeed ultimately prevailed, many of the decades-old tropes and traditional ideas about the laborers within the system would remain in circulation in subsequent years. Indenture could be abolished when economic and ideological forces conspired in its destruction—but it would not be so easy to dismantle traditional racialized beliefs about those in whose favor the system’s abolition had purportedly been dismantled.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
In November of 1916 the *Times of India* published a despatch from the Government of India that spoke out in favor of abolition and refuted charges made by Lord Crewe several years before that indenture was valid because of the benefits it conferred on the laborers. Rather, this despatch argues, these supposed benefits are much less than previously supposed; moreover, the system itself represents a “racial stigma,” and Indian politicians are outspoken in characterizing it as slavery that “brands their whole race in the eyes of the British colonial empire with the stigma of helotry.” In addition, the system is blamed for encouraging prostitution among its participants: “the women emigrants are too often living a life of immorality in which their persons are, by reason of pecuniary temptation or official pressure, at the free disposal of their fellow recruits, and even of the subordinate managing staff.” From this account it appears that opinion in India, while obviously pushing back against the traditional narrative of the timid and docile coolie, were still withholding the possibility of agency from the now sizeable Indian populations in the colonies. They were still racially defined members of an Indian nation who were being victimized by imperial exploitation, and whose assumed need for deliverance was now being met not by the British government, but by its Indian counterpart.48

It is impossible to discuss indentureship’s abolition in 1917 without considering the wider context of the First World War and the circumstances it occasioned that helped to persuade British authorities to acquiesce to the Indian Government’s demands. For example, in a speech published in early 1917, the Viceroy (Lord Chelmsford) calls openly for the continued cooperation of India in the war effort, and attempts to quell what he delicately terms “domestic differences”—differences that seem to have mainly centered on the issue of indenture. The

Conservative Lord Chelmsford had the difficult task of acknowledging the fact that his predecessor Lord Hardinge had promised abolition less than a year before, while also refraining from taking any action that might jeopardize the still-vital agricultural economies of the colonies. In executing this balancing act Chelmsford importantly acknowledges the “moral evils” of the system—particularly regarding the alleged incidence of immorality and prostitution—and thus concedes an important stretch of ideological ground on the matter. It therefore seems clear that the abolition of indenture in the midst of World War I was no coincidence.\textsuperscript{49} Rather, the simultaneous growth of Indian nationalist sentiment alongside Britain’s need to compromise with their colonies in order to avoid discontent and retain their full economic support conspired to bring about the system’s end. Importantly, such perspectives inevitably cast indentured Indian laborers throughout the empire as tools once again—not only as economic tools to support the imperial economy, but as political bargaining chips to be liberated or regulated according to the needs and whims of the government.

Meanwhile, other sources add nuance to the complex relationship between anti-indenture Indian objections and pro-indenture thought. Pandit Malaviya was one of the key figures in the Indian Government advocating abolition, and as his unsuccessful 1916 bill for this purpose demonstrates, he built upon the legacy of Gokhale and grounded his objections in a variety of similar moral and political reasons. Fundamental to several of these was a set of unspoken assumptions about these laborers—that as emigrant laborers they are very much in need of “proper protection and safeguards,” that they are the victims of a system that has produced “so

\textsuperscript{49} “Proceedings in Detail,” \textit{The Times of India} (1861-Current), Feb 08, 1917, \url{http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/500176051?accountid=9703}. 
much unhappiness and wickedness,” and that they are sometimes forced to live in strange lands\textsuperscript{50} under “galling” and “humiliating” conditions.\textsuperscript{51} Ascertaining the veracity of these statements is not the goal of this examination. However, it is vital to note the continued emphasis by even pro-Indian, anti-indenture advocates on the victimhood and exploitation of these individuals. On an even more intriguing note, through some complex calculus of logic these “victims” are also frequently seen as perpetrators of moral crimes—a seeming paradox that while not fully enunciated in these sources, exhibits parallels with similar arguments posed by anti-slavery advocates a century earlier that the moral failings of the victims were due to the structure in which they had been caught.

One final source from the \textit{Times of India} demonstrates that the traditional narrative favored by pro-indenture advocates was far from dead, and also that the issue of female sexuality noted in previous accounts was becoming a hot topic. In a letter to the editor printed in March of 1917, a Trinidadian writer from a former sugar-planting family protests against what s/he termed “the method by which my home island has been pilloried as the partaker in sundry high crimes and misdemeanors against indentured Indian emigrants and the honour of the womenkind.” Claiming that they had witnessed no such dishonoring, the writer goes on to reiterate many of the usual arguments for the beatific condition of immigrants in the island: “…the women are happiest with their own men and have every means of contentment in a perfectly honourable manner: if at any time they wish to marry, their ability to marry well is guaranteed by the fact that being in a decided minority they can pick and choose in a way undreamt of in their own

\textsuperscript{50} While it may be no more than a matter of word choice, this telling reference to other British colonies as “strange lands” also may be interpreted as a subtle contestation of empire and an unspoken assertion that Indians properly belonged within the geographic bounds of the subcontinent, perhaps due to their ethnic or religious heritage.

land.” Similar arguments comparing their alleged economic, political, and educational opportunities follow, with the author asserting that their incomes, hospital facilities, houses, governmental protection, and guarantees of justice all far exceed those in India, and in fact together provide them with a happier lot than himself.\textsuperscript{52} In short, the letter represents the continued life of the traditional indenture narrative even in 1917—a sign that despite the system’s abolition the traditional perceptions of Indo-Trinidadian individuals persisted and would not be so easily abolished.

\textit{Conclusions}

By the end of 1917 social circumstances for Indian laborers in Trinidad and throughout the British West Indies were significantly different from those experienced at the turn of the century. They were part of a society at war, for one thing—involved in a global conflict among imperial powers the likes of which none had ever seen. The indenture system was dead, having fallen victim to the Government of India’s political agitation which the wartime British Empire could not afford to disregard. And as a matter of fact, the influx of new indentured laborers to the island had declined in recent years anyway; by 1918 fewer than 3,500 adults had arrived in Trinidad during the previous five years, a number similar to the total arrivals for only one year during indenture’s heyday in the 1870s and 1880s.\textsuperscript{53} The steadily growing Indo-Trinidadian demographic was nearing a total of 130,000 and thus represented approximately a third of the island’s entire population.\textsuperscript{54} In many ways, the foundations for subsequent social and political developments on the island was already in place.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{52} "A WORD FROM TRINIDAD," \textit{The Times of India} (1861-Current), Mar 23, 1917, \url{http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/500514672?accountid=9703}.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Laurence, \textit{A Question of Labour}, 520, 525.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 525.
\end{itemize}
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As the previous two chapters have demonstrated, British and colonial representations of these Indo-Trinidadian individuals and their fellows throughout the empire were governed by a cluster of mutually-reinforcing, traditional tropes that found varying degrees of expression in newspapers, natural histories, and governmental discussions. As always, to generalize runs the risk of eliding important differences among these accounts or making more out of passing differences than is actually warranted. Nevertheless, it appears that the four general themes noted during the time of indenture’s founding from 1838 to 1860—the Indian as a helpless creature in need of benevolent paternal protection, as an inferior being whose state imposed a moral duty on British observers to civilize them, as racially defined persons, and as economic tools—persisted throughout British opinion well into these early years of the twentieth century.

For example, the traditional portrait of the Indian as a useful, economically-motivated tool for salvaging the economies of British colonies is very much present throughout the period, from Nasarvanji Cooper’s presentation to Churchill’s speech against Summerbell to Aspinall’s natural history of the region. Their continued racial definition is likewise clearly evident not only in Cooper’s arguments, but even in the later protests of Gokhale and Ritch against indenture as promoting racial discrimination. Writers in the *Times of India*, Mr. Clark in his response to Gokhale, and Aspinall all clearly assumed the existence and validity of Britain’s traditional, obligatory civilizing mission toward those who could only be conceived as their moral inferiors. As for the tradition of benevolent paternalism toward a presumably helpless Indian victim, one need only call to mind Cooper’s opinions that found extensive approval not only among his East India Association audience, but also with the editor and readers of the *Times of India*.
In similar fashion the three additional ideological developments discussed in Chapter Three—ideas of the Indian as a potential source of unrest, as a social being, and as a picturesque addition to the landscape—may also be traced, although none of them seems to have persisted in any large degree. Only in the words of the Socialist Mr. Summerbell does the idea of an Indian population as a threat to social tranquility seem to find expression during this time, and this is constructed primarily as a logically necessary opposition to the laborers in whose welfare Summerbell was most interested. However, ideas about Indo-Trinidadians as social beings do find rather more expression, appearing not only in Gokhale’s spirited defense but also in Cooper’s far more cynical account of luxury-loving, morally deficient fellows who grotesquely attempt to imitate the habits of conspicuous consumption displayed by European elites. The picturesque trope also recurs, appearing most prominently in Cooper’s borderline erotic narrative of Indian females and the subsequent report on his presentation in the *Times of India*.

It is not enough, however, to observe continuities of theme and prejudice between these sources and those from earlier periods. Opposition to the traditional narrative and the system of indenture itself was also expressed during this time, and such questioning might have represented an opportunity to create new ways of understanding these individuals. As has been discussed, some thinkers like Ritch and Gokhale even attempted to do so with the addition of emotional and psychological factors. However, these attempts to diversify British perceptions met with only limited success, and their speakers were ultimately drowned out by the more numerous traditionalists who had little use for such nuanced ideas.

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55 It is worth noting in passing that Summerbell’s opinion hardly meshes with the Social Democratic Foundation’s previous defense of the 1884 Hosay Rebellion as indentured revolt against exploitation. Evidently one socialist’s justified revolt was another’s socialist’s “standing menace to public peace and property”.
On a more general level, it becomes clear throughout many of these sources that at least two new anxieties began to dominate British perceptions as the indenture system entered its final decades. In continuity with an earlier anxiety over the place of Indians in colonial society, pro-indenture advocates like Cooper worried over the apparent prosperity of some post-indenture Indians who seemed to aspire to social parity with European elites. They frequently responded to this perceived threat and the diminishing of apparent difference between themselves by fabricating another source of difference in moral terms. By unilaterally asserting Indian moral inferiority, such individuals were in essence arguing that while the post-indenture Indian might become a materially successful nabob engaged in exactly the same pastimes as Europeans—namely, property acquisition and conspicuous consumption of European luxuries—there was still an even more fundamental level of difference that would necessarily bar them from equality.

Concurrent with this first anxiety, the emergence of Indian nationalism led some anti-indenture observers in Britain and India to express concern over the system’s detrimental impact on the larger Indian “nation”. Disturbingly, it appears that many of the same pro-indenture tropes and techniques seem to have persisted in this second anxiety, having been merely reformulated to fit the needs of the speaker in that moment. Thinkers like Gokhale, for example, interpreted the system not only in terms of its alleged immorality and injustice, but also as a stain upon the honor of their racially-defined Indian nation. Interestingly, this nation was assumed to be racially defined according to the very same categories that had been imposed by its British founders, thus demonstrating that these Indian nationalists were both bound within the definitional constraints of their context and also fully capable of coopting this rhetorical inheritance for use in new and subversive ways. Further, there were strong parallels between anti-slavery arguments and those used nearly a century later by the likes of Gokhale and Malaviya. For both arguments attempted
to abolish a system they found morally and/or politically objectionable by framing their effort as a benevolent rescue of purportedly innocent victims, thereby degrading the very persons they aimed to save and denying them an active role in their future.

During the closing years of indenture, then, British perceptions of Indo-Trinidadian individuals exhibited a wide range of ideas; they were characterized as everything from morally weak West Indian nabobs, to helpless victims of an exploitative labor regime, to “sleek and fat” colonists upon whom the future of Britain’s West Indian territories relied. Yet among these substantial variations, traditional tropes and prevailing anxieties can be found that speak eloquently of the interaction of perceptions with changing socioeconomic conditions. Indentureship indeed ended in 1917, at least formally. But the economic, racialized, prejudicial ideas that had dominated much of British-Indian interactions for the past decades could not be so quickly abolished. They continued to resonate throughout British imperial society right up to the formal end of the system, and would in fact persist for many more years into the future in the form of racialized social and political tensions in the island.
CHAPTER FIVE: RECAPITULATION

In the course of examining British perceptions of the Indian indentured laborers and their descendants in Trinidad, this thesis has attempted to cover a broad expanse of time and space, drawing evidence across eight decades from anti-slavery sea captains to Indian nationalist politicians to upper-class English novelists. It has observed how perceptions were shaped during the indenture system’s formative years, in which economic need competed with and eventually displaced anti-slavery moral trepidation. The examination then progressed to discuss some of the developments in British perceptions in what was termed the heyday of indenture, during which time indentured immigration to the island peaked and a post-indenture Indian minority gained a solid footing in Trinidadian society. It finally turned to examine how these perceptions shifted in the early years of the twentieth century, partially in response to emerging Indian nationalism and the ultimately successful challenge it would pose to the indenture system.

It is fitting therefore to conclude the discussion with a retrospective analysis of what this kaleidoscopic variety of perceptions has to say not only about the prejudices and stereotypes functional in the British Empire during this period, but also about ideological currents and the ways in which such perceptions form and subsequently reflect upon new developments in their environment. From the previously-discussed evidence at least three overarching conclusions emerge; these conclusions positively impact current understandings of how British and other colonial societies took stock of their variously-defined “others”, and show that a study of their perceptions and representations can provide a new perspective on the deeper levels of ideology at work in past societies.
The first conclusion, hinted at in previous chapters, is that each of these three periods may be said to have been governed by their own unique anxieties over Indian indenture. In the formative period of the 1840s up to about 1860, for instance, British authors repeatedly expressed anxiety and doubt over the system’s intrinsic *morality*. This preoccupation was primarily driven by the Anti-Slavery Society and its well-intentioned attempts to discredit the system by likening it to the discredited, morally repugnant system of slavery. Importantly, and despite the ultimate failure of their arguments to forestall the establishment of indenture throughout the British Empire, their efforts did ensure that the indentureship issue would dominate the conversation. For once the framework of conversations over indenture had been anchored in its morality, even pro-indenture authors like Trollope and De Verteuil were forced to respond according to those terms by attempting to assert indenture’s difference from slavery and its supposedly beneficial effects.

In the second period from 1861-1900, there was a clear shift away from preoccupation with the system’s morality; indenture had already been established, and although criticism would continue throughout the system’s existence, the morality debate no longer held such a prominent place in public discourse. Rather, one finds a new anxiety taking shape over the place of Indians in Trinidadian society after their time of indenture had ended—a natural development in light of the growth of this population in the colony. This anxiety found prominent expression in a variety of ways—for example, in discussion over individuals like Barathsing who defied British expectations, and in controversy surrounding the British suppression of the so-called Hosay Riot. Across these sources, however, one finds that at their heart is a questioning of just how far Indians could and should be incorporated into colonial society, and whether this represented a possible threat to British sociopolitical control.
As indenture entered its final two decades, two final anxieties began to rise to the fore. With the emergence of Indian nationalism, and given the then-current tendency to define individuals and their behavior according to their ethnic heritage, some observers in Britain and India began to express concern over the system’s detrimental impact on the larger Indian “nation”. Thinkers like Gokhale, for example, chose to see the system not only in terms of its immorality and injustice—very similar to those of anti-slavery advocates decades before—but also as a smear upon their racially-defined Indian nation. Concurrent with this, pro-indenture advocates like Cooper voiced a rather different anxiety that in many ways can be seen as a logical progression from previous concerns over Indians in society, and as a manifestation of a degree of social tension between Britons and their colonial subjects: that is, they worried over the apparent prosperity of some post-indenture Indians who seemed to aspire to social parity with European elites.

Evolving anxieties aside, these sources also support a second main conclusion: that the story of British perceptions of Indo-Trinidadian laborers and their descendants is a story not only of episodic change, but of surprising continuity. Despite some eighty years of extensive social, geopolitical, and economic change, an assortment of ideological components clearly remained constant throughout many British assessments of their Indo-Trinidadian fellow subjects. For as has been emphasized in previous chapters, four key ideas—that the Indians were racially defined, that they were primarily economic beings, that they required governmental regulation, and that they were passive creatures to be variously aided, pitied, regulated, or civilized—continued to resonate from the system’s disputed founding well into the twentieth century.

Importantly, it is clear that these concepts endured not only because of their firm embedding in a traditional European and Christian worldview, but also at least in part due to the
creativity and adaptive agency of their advocates in response to changing circumstances. For what is most evident throughout the entire lifecycle of indenture is that these durable British perceptions were very much in dialogue with economic and sociopolitical shifts in the system's environment. Thus in the 1870s we witness a shift from perspectives that focus solely on East Indians’ economic identity and existence within the indenture system, to a more broad view that also acknowledged a certain (and disputed) place for them in island society. This process of supplementing or adapting traditional understandings of an “other” in colonial society to new circumstances seems to have successfully maintained its relevance, and on a broader level demonstrates the tenacity and creative adaptability of perceptual frameworks.

One final conclusion arises out of a consideration of the multiple ideas presented in opposition to this durable pro-indenture British narrative. That is, there were clear but ideologically problematic linkages between these pro-indenture arguments and the characterizations voiced by anti-indenture critics, from the Anti-Slavery Society to the Indian National Congress. For as hinted at in chapter two, well-meaning anti-indenture advocates seeking to redress what they saw as the grievances perpetuated by the system were themselves modeled on the ideological framework of indenture itself. In their view the Indian laborer was not a rational creature in possession of agency and a will to work for his or her own betterment; rather, they more often than not saw the indentured Indian as an ignorant creature who had to be rescued and defended by benevolent humanitarians from the exploitative grasp of the sugar planter. Only the character of the villain and hero had been changed; the storyline remained the same, and the Indian laborer continued to be cast in the same subordinate role.

Likewise, well-intentioned indenture critics in the first decades of the twentieth century took the same approach as the Anti-Slavery Society. Not even the establishment of a sizeable
post-indenture minority in many of the colonies led these Indian nationalists like Gokhale to see them as a possible avenue through which to abolish the system. Rather, Indian nationalists were now the latest actor to adopt the role of the indentured laborer’s savior—a role in which they would ultimately be successful, it is true, but one which nevertheless still denied participants in the system a voice in the matter. Reasons for such a limited reimagining of the indenture paradigm are difficult to conclusively define. However, it is reasonable to postulate the operation of a phenomenon similar to that noted above in the Anti-Slavery’s successful casting of the indenture debate in moral terms. That is to say, once the dominant pro-indenture camp had established a narrative of indenture as beneficial to coolies in need of governance, it was logical for similarly-positioned elites in the social structure—whether members of the Anti-Slavery Society or Indian nationalist politicians—to negate the narrative without questioning its premise by arguing that indenture was harmful and exploitative to laborers who, not coincidentally, also lacked agency.

In conclusion, it is now clear that engaging discourse analysis by investigating perceptions and representations within colonial societies is a fruitful line of inquiry that has much to say about the complex interaction between ideas and socioeconomic circumstances, the malleability of conceptual frameworks for taking stock of the “other” in society, and the fact that certain fundamental assumptions can at times underlie what appear to be starkly opposing ideologies. Discourse analysis also contributes greatly to an expanded and more nuanced understanding of macroscopic concepts like race and labor in that it demonstrates how these concepts were expressed and negotiated “on the ground,” rather than simply how they were defined by intellectuals. More work remains to be done in this area of research: in an expansion away from the concentration of this thesis on one particular colony in one particular imperial
regime, in a widening of the potential range of sources, and in a nuancing of the topic through attention to specific aspects of identity such as gender and religion. It will be necessary in future work to examine, for instance, the opposite side of the metaphorical equation by considering how Indian laborers understood and took stock of other groups in colonial society, both African and British. It may also be fruitful to examine the role of imagery such as lithographs, photographs, and engravings in reinforcing and perpetuating stereotypical understandings of ethnic groups within colonial societies. It is to be hoped, however, that this examination has represented a positive step forward in understanding the truly vital role of perceptions, not only in shaping the actions of subalterns in colonial and postcolonial societies, but in demonstrating some of the important social and ideological components within systems of imperial control and domination.
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