

Subaltern Success Stories: Socio-Economic Mobility in the Indian Labour Diaspora – Some Mauritian Case Studies

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Indentured labourers, migrating to tropical colonies in the wake of slavery, and subjected to working and living conditions of semi-servitude, prolonged the inequalities of labour relations in plantation economies into the 20th century. The overseas 'coolies', as they were described, became symbols of degradation and discrimination to Indian politicians as they struggled to free their country from the Raj. The stigma of the 'coolie', and stereotypes and misconceptions about the nature and position of the descendants of the Indian labour diaspora persist to this day. Yet, in two or three generations, many of these plantation workers prospered, becoming landowners, and sending their children to Europe to acquire expensive professional qualifications which have helped them to achieve positions of political influence and economic power in several instances. The dynamics of the socio-economic mobility of coolies and their offspring is discussed in this paper, with particular reference to case-studies taken from Mauritius, where the descendants of Indian indentured labourers today form a majority of the population, and have held key positions in government since that country's independence in 1968.

I. Migration and Characterisations of Indentured Indian Labour

Abolishing colonial slavery, in the early 19th century, the British drew upon themselves an imminent economic and political crisis as well as an ideological dilemma. Without slaves to work the plantations - the bedrock on which tropical producers based their prosperity and prospects - financial ruin and social dislocation were widely predicted. Who, however, could be imported to continue plantation labour, without the yoke of slavery clinging to them, and the stigma of hypocrisy correspondingly attaching to the British? An answer was found in the importation of so-called free British subjects of India. Justified as an escape from dire economic hardships in their homeland, the 'free' status of the migrants was diluted by the imposition of

indenture contracts which effectively tied them to a low, fixed wage for a period of several years. In addition onerous financial penalties could be levied for unauthorised absences from work, including periods of sickness, hospitalisation or imprisonment, and penal sanctions could condemn deserters to terms of hard labour in colonial jails.¹

Indentured labourers from India began arriving in Mauritius even before the last slaves had been freed, in the 1830s. Placed under government control from 1842, and reaching its apogee in the 1850s and 1860s when tens of thousands of labourers arrived annually, the system petered out in the early 20th century, and was virtually moribund by the time Indian nationalists discovered the plight of their overseas compatriots and clamoured for its abolition. By this time the status and very appellation of 'coolie', as the overseas Indian plantation workers were labelled, was seen as abhorrent. C.F. Andrews, a well known sympathiser of the nationalist cause, articulated the sentiments of Indian politicians when he described the conditions of labourers in Natal and Fiji around 1920 as "degrading the very name of 'Indian' and making it synonymous with the worst kind of sweated labour and hopeless illiteracy ... No further emigration and no further repatriation!"²

Some educated Indians did venture out to the colonies to do more than report aghast on their conditions. Gandhi took the opportunity to tour Mauritius and meet some of the Indians settled on the island, when his ship docked in Port Louis for a fortnight in 1901. While still in the early stages of his illustrious political life at the time of his visit, Gandhi's activism in South Africa had not gone unnoticed by the Mauritian press, who had already featured some accounts of his intervention in the struggles of the Indians there. Gandhi's activities on the island were largely confined to visiting with some of the wealthy Muslim merchants and attending a function at the Governor's residence. However, after his return to India, Gandhi encouraged one of his followers, another lawyer, Manillal Doctor to spend some months in Mauritius, to work for the political upliftment of the large Indian population of the island. Doctor championed the cause of the Indians in several celebrated court cases, and helped to launch an Indian language newspaper on the island, before leaving for Fiji where he achieved notoriety of a different kind thanks to a liaison with a European woman.³

Despite these isolated instances, the Indian elite concentrated on distancing themselves from 'coolies' if they resided overseas or advocating

¹ See M. Carter, *Sirdars and Settlers*, Oxford, 1995, chs 3–5.

² C.F. Andrews, *Indian Review*, July 1922.

³ P. Ramsurrun, *Mahatma Gandhi and his Impact on Mauritius*, New Delhi, 1995.

abolishing the system rather than seeking to uplift the migrants. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, protesting against the continuation of indenture in 1912, articulated a view commonly held by educated Indians towards the overseas Indian labourers – the characterisation of the coolie as a victim, a dupe, and a person of the lowest class: “The victims of the system are generally simple, ignorant, illiterate, resourceless people belonging to the poorest classes of this country and ... they are induced to enter ... into these agreements by the unscrupulous representations of wily recruiters.” Gokhale concluded that the system was “degrading to the people of India from a national point of view ... Wherever the system exists, there the Indians are only known as coolies, no matter what their position might be.”⁴

Officials, even those of Indian origin, who actually visited the colonies to which the Indian indentured labourers had migrated, invariably painted a more balanced picture of the conditions and prospects of overseas ‘coolies’. In the 1920s, Kunwar Maharaj Singh, sent to report on his compatriots in Mauritius, concluded: “As a whole the Indians, most of whom or their forefathers came to this colony as indentured labourers, have prospered. In not a few cases they have amassed considerable wealth and in general, considering the classes from which they have come, they are more prosperous here than they would have been had they remained in India.”⁵

II. Avenues of Socio-Economic Mobility

How did an indentured worker, contracted on a fixed wage for five years, at well below the market rate for his (unskilled) labour, amass, in a few years, the capital with which to buy himself into a better position? There were various opportunities for enrichment which were quickly exploited by the overseas Indians. The appointment of sirdars – or labour supervisors – was one such avenue of socio-economic mobility. The sirdar held a position of authority over his band; he earned higher wages than the ordinary labourers and supplemented this income by shop-keeping and money-lending activities. As an intermediary between European planters and the Indian workforce, other profitable side-lines soon emerged – the sirdar was instrumental in recruiting new arrivals and time-expired labourers to the estate, in overseeing re-engagements, and in brokering labour disputes and agreements.

⁴ See M. Carter & K. Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, Anthem Press, London, 2002, especially Chapter Two for a detailed discussion of these issues.

⁵ *Ibid.*

A great deal of money also began to be made by sirdars and other Indians who acquired the confidence of planters in returnee recruiting activities. The existing method of obtaining labour in India, through the medium of local *arkatis*, *maistries* and contractors was expensive and wasteful. Hundreds of diseased, elderly and non-manual workers were rejected and repatriated annually, as unfit for the arduous work of cane-cutting. Within a few years of the commencement of indentured immigration, however, return visits to India began to be made by overseas migrants, either on their own initiative, to collect family members, or instigated by planters. In the latter case, they were well compensated per head for the recruitment of their co-villagers, while state bonuses rewarded men who brought their wives and female family members. In this manner, a significant proportion of indentured arrivals in Mauritius became effectively chain migrants shipped alongside the agency-recruited workers.

As the indenture system matured, and time-expired Indians moved off the estates, their continuing availability for plantation labour was ensured and regulated by job contractors. Increasingly such men became the employers of the Indians, rather than the plantation owners. It was the job contractors who received a lump sum for the labour and who distributed wages to the workers. Their own remuneration could be significant, as they were able to avoid many of the overheads previously borne by the estate-owners.

This sirdari and contractor elite which emerged from the ranks of the indentured labourers was to be further enriched from the major land transactions which took place in the last quarter of the 19th century in Mauritius. Known as the *grand morcellement*, or parcelling out of lands, the acquisition of major tracts of scrub and cane-fields by Indian immigrants was facilitated by a world-wide depression of sugar prices in this period, which encouraged the large estate owners to sell off and subdivide their property. With the assistance of wealthy Indian merchants settled in Mauritius, enterprising sirdars and contractors, with some capital of their own to invest, joined forces to make collective land purchases which were then divided into smaller strips and sold on to the ex-indentured labourers.⁶

Among individuals who were prominent in the sale and resale of lands were Seewoodharry Bhuguth and Gorachand Lallah. They had arrived from Calcutta in the mid 19th century as young men and risen from the ranks of indentured labourers to become proprietors of extensive forests by 1873. In that year they were described as jointly employing "some hundreds of Indians as wood cutters and charcoal burners". Initially, the local government

⁶ This process is dealt with in detail by Richard Allen, *Creoles, Indian Immigrants and the Restructuring of Society and Economy in Mauritius, 1797-1985*, PhD thesis, Illinois, 1983.

was suspicious of the validity of contracts signed between these Indian entrepreneurs and their workers, fearful that such activities would lead to a decline in the available pool of estate labour. In the event, the judicial authorities decided that their activities were legitimate, and licensed the employees of Lallah and Bhuguth, paving the way for further entrepreneurial activities of this first generation of Indian immigrants.⁷

Some Indian immigrants acquired so much money from their property deals and labour management activities that they were able to become estate owners in their own right. Ramtohul, who purchased the plantation of Mon Choix for \$49,000 in June 1870, with a \$10,000 cash down-payment, was one of the first ex-indentured Indians to reach this elevated position. Unfortunately, his death, only a year later, left a large sum outstanding on the property, and his daughter was not able to wrest the estate from the control of the Europeans who had brokered the original deal.⁸ Men like Ramtohul were not always able to pass on these prestigious properties intact to their children, but the very fact of their acquisition is a testimony to the entrepreneurship and ambition of the humble 'coolie'.

The formation of a propertied elite from among the ex-indentured immigrants soon led to marriage alliances between wealthy Indian families. Ramkaleea Beeharry, the wife of Gorachand Lallah, was herself a powerful player in the land deals of the late 19th century. Songor Itty, a Tamil immigrant who had arrived in Mauritius in 1843 and subsequently became a *sirdar* on the Clemencia estate, also took a bride who had property in her own right. In Mauritius, he married Doya Kishto, the widow of another immigrant from Calcutta. Both were owners of plots of land near the estate when they married in April 1859. Among the witnesses at their wedding was its owner – himself the descendant of 18th century South Indian immigrants, Pierre Amourdon Arlanda. The couple channelled their wealth into a donation to their Hindu co-religionists, building a temple on their land. In 1867, Songor now a shopkeeper in Riviere Seche and his wife, donated the temple to the Hindu community.⁹

The acquisition of wealth and land brought prestige and social status, which carried with it, a sense of responsibility that was increasingly translated into acts of religious and cultural philanthropy. Dookhee Gunga, born in Mauritius in 1867, the son of a man who arrived as an indentured labourer from Calcutta in 1854, and who had purchased a plot of land at New Grove, successfully extended the family property to become a millionaire by 1920.

⁷ Mauritius Archives, PA 14, Petition of Lallah and Bhuguth, 20 Aug. 1873.

⁸ Mauritius Archives, PA 22, Petition of Corbane, 1874.

⁹ R. Sooriamorthy, *Les Tamouls à l'Île Maurice*, Port Louis, 1977, pp. 130–4.

In 1936 this company owned seven sugar cane plantations. Gunga donated large sums of money for the construction of temples and cremation grounds throughout the island. He also founded the Gita Mandal in association with other wealthy Indians, including the Ramtohol family, which was set up to administer a number of Hindi schools in Mauritius. Gunga financed the first Hindi publications to be printed on the island and after his death, in 1944, a government school was named in his honour. Dookhee Gunga's philanthropy even extended to his ancestral village of Runwanee in Bihar, where he funded the building of a well for the local people. In so doing, Gunga and others like him prefigure the actions of modern-day South Asian communities overseas whose remittances and charitable acts continue to constitute valuable seed funding for their impoverished homelands.¹⁰

III. From Agriculture to Politics and the Professions

While the first generation of Indian immigrants established themselves in positions of authority on the plantations, and as wealthy land-owners and religious and cultural patrons in the Indian villages which grew out of the *grand morcellement* of the late 19th century, their children had different aspirations. As the 20th century progressed, the descendants of indentured labourers aspired to become professionals, with their elevation to the status of doctors, lawyers and educators often acting as a spring-board into politics.

Ramkelawon Boodhun was the son of an immigrant railway worker, and became the first Hindu Indo-Mauritian to sit on the Council of Government. Educated in Britain, where he became a barrister in 1914, he was among the early Indo-Mauritians to engage in politics, standing in the general elections of 1921. He failed to win a seat, but was nominated by the British Governor to represent the Indo-Mauritians, along with a Muslim, Dr Hassen Sakir, between 1921 and 1926. Another Indo-Mauritian attorney-at-law, Bodhun Lallah, born in 1873, was the son of Gorachand Lallah and Ramkaleea Beeharry, in a further example of the rapid progression of the children of wealthy landed immigrants to professional status. Boodhun Lallah also dabbled in politics – standing and losing to a white candidate in the general election of 1911.¹¹

Dabeedin Reetoo, the grandson of indentured immigrants from Lucknow and Bihar, born in Flacq, Mauritius in 1888, and acknowledged by the

¹⁰ *Dictionary of Mauritian Biography (DBM)* July 1994, pp. 1519–20.

¹¹ *DBM*, July 1996, pp. 1596–7, and July 1994, pp. 1524–5.

1920s to be one of the wealthiest of Indo-Mauritians, had an unhappier brush with politics. His support of a conservative white candidate in the 1926 general election, against Rajcoomar Gujadhur, of Bihari descent, made him unpopular among Indo-Mauritians, while his inability to bring the white candidate to victory, led to a cold-shouldering by that influential class of estate-owners and oligarchs. His resulting financial distress was a salutary lesson for other wealthy Indians with a taste for politics. His successful adversary in the 1926 election, Rajcoomar Gujadhur, was another descendant of a Bihari immigrant, who had made a name for himself as a dairy farmer and cattle breeder by the turn of the 20th century. Canny business dealings made him a prosperous man and the owner of several sugar estates as well as a successful politician. His most enduring contribution to the family's name in Mauritius, and a continuing activity of the Gujadhurs on the island, was the establishment of a stable of race horses.¹²

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of rapid socio-economic mobility among overseas Indians in Mauritius is that of the Ramgoolam family. The teenage Moheeth Ramgoolam left the Saran district of Bihar to migrate to Mauritius in 1896. He was following in the footsteps of his elder brother. He worked for a number of years on the Queen Victoria sugar estate in Flacq, Mauritius before becoming a sirdar. Two years later, Moheeth married a young widow, who already had a son. Kewal, later to be known as Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, was born of this union on 18 September 1900. Kewal's half brother had also achieved a position of responsibility in the plantation system: Ramlall became a *marqueur*, or record-keeper of the attendance and earnings of estate labourers, and later a prosperous small planter at Belle Rose, Clemencia. The younger brother, Seewoosagur, despite the early death of his father, was supported by his elder brother and his uncle – a member of the prosperous Bhuguth family – through his education. After attending one of the best secondary schools in Mauritius he left for training as a medical doctor in England.¹³ Returning after an absence of more than a decade, imbued with Fabian socialist principles, Ramgoolam became an important member of the nascent Labour Party of Mauritius, and after the island was acceded independence in 1968, this son of Bihari 'coolies' was elected that nation's first Prime Minister. Holding this position for a number of years, and overseeing the country's emergence as a successful democratic post-colonial and welfare state, Ramgoolam is widely revered as 'chacha', the father of the nation. His son, Navin Ramgoolam, has also

¹² DBM, Dec. 1997, pp. 1657–9, and July 1943, pp. 301–2.

¹³ A. Mulloo, *Our Struggle, 20th Century Mauritius*, Vision Books, Delhi, 1982, pp. 13–18. See also S. Selvon, *Ramgoolam*, EOI, Mauritius, 1986, pp. 3–9.

served as Prime Minister for one term of office, and is currently the leader of the opposition.¹⁴

The story of the Rama family is illustrative of the socio-economic mobility of Indian immigrants and their descendants in Mauritius over several generations. In 1850 Kadum Rama and his wife arrived on the island from the coastal district of Ratnagiri in the Bombay Presidency. Despite being an indentured immigrant, Mr Rama was already a person of some learning, who had been a tax collector back home. He was accordingly given the job of sirdar on the Highlands sugar estate in Phoenix. The couple had four sons, all of whom grew up on and worked for the estate. The estate manager, Mr Carosin, offered the family ten acres of land to cultivate vegetables from which they derived substantial profits. They accompanied Carosin to his next posting at the Chamouny estate and when an annex of the plantation was put up for sale, the Rama family were able to acquire 300 acres of land. Through their partnerships with Franco-Mauritian estate owners they were able to consolidate and expand their position. They eventually purchased the Chamouny estate itself and a number of other large properties. The Rama brothers were all now independently wealthy and able to send their children to France for higher studies. Two of the sons became doctors and the third, a chemist. The depression of the 1930s and the division of the family property among the brothers marked the end of the large landholdings of the Rama family as individual members sold their shares, but the Ramas were now established members of the educated Indo-Mauritian middle classes. A grand-daughter of the family, Sheilabai, became a Government Minister in post-independent Mauritius.¹⁵

Whilst Mauritius, because of its relative proximity to India, and the facilities given to immigrants to settle with their families, and to acquire land and property, may be seen as exceptional in the annals of indentured labour history, even in colonies such as Fiji and South Africa where greater restrictions applied to the settlement and ownership rights of Indians, it was not unknown for individual immigrants to acquire wealth and status in a relatively short space of time, as the story of Kandhai demonstrates. He left Bihar towards the end of the 19th century under an indenture contract in Natal, together with his wife Dulari. After their indentures were completed

¹⁴ It has since become an unspoken political tradition on the island that only those individuals who belong to the same sub-stratum of the population as did Ramgoolam (of Bihari origin and of the Vaish caste) can accede to the Prime Ministership. To date, all the leaders of Mauritius since independence have conformed to this rule.

¹⁵ B. Mahadoo, *The Eternal Legacy*, Mauritius, 1996, pp.42–46. See also archival documents such as Mauritius Archives, PL 25, Lutchman Rama, Eau Bleu, to Protector, 6 Jan. 1908.

the couple saved enough money to purchase a piece of land in Durban. After Kandhai's death, his son Sewram continued to cultivate their land, becoming a market gardener.¹⁶

This survey of the success stories of a few members of a subaltern group for long stigmatised as coolies demonstrates the fragility of historical constructs which have sought to differentiate migration streams of the colonial poor as settlers versus labourers, and opportunists versus victims, codified by colour. Increasingly, revisionist histories of Indian migration are reassessing the definition of indenture, once termed a "new system of slavery" as "a distinct historical phenomenon." As Madhavi Kale's recent book on Indians in the Caribbean notes, "implicit in the 'new system of slavery' narratives is the assumption that traditionally people in the recruiting regions were largely stationary, and that indentured emigration was just another facet of the ongoing displacement and immiseration precipitated by colonialism."¹⁷ As Northrup points out, whilst distinct from European migration in composition, circumstances and destinations, Indian indentured migrants' "motives in emigrating, the voyages that carried them and their struggles to establish a new life once their contract was over do resemble those of 'free' migrants and deserve to be included in that larger story."¹⁸

IV. Concluding Remarks

Fittingly for the territory which received the largest number of indentured Indian labourers (almost half a million of them), Mauritius also has the most extensive labour archive in the Indian diaspora. The voluminous registers detailing age, caste, region of origin, subsequent marriages, engagements and deaths or departures are currently being computerised at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute under the auspices of Mrs Saloni Deerpalsingh, and when complete the data will provide researchers with an unparalleled source of information about Indian villagers who happened to migrate under the 19th century indenture system. The thousands of photographs, dating from the 1861 to the early 20th century, also constitute a unique pictorial record of 19th century village India – the dress, hair styles, jewellery and

¹⁶ S. Bhana & B. Pachai, *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans*, Hoover Press, 1984, pp. 218–220.

¹⁷ M. Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery & Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean*, Philadelphia, 1998.

¹⁸ D. Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 154.

even medical data which can be gleaned from the photographs are invaluable for the social historian. To date, this superb archive has been but little used, and it is hoped that the computerisation of the records will lead to a more widespread use of this material. Researchers at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute have also embarked on a comprehensive programme to record folk songs of Indo-Mauritians, many of which originate in Bihar, and have built up a sizeable collection. Tattoos and other disappearing aspects of the Indian legacy are also being recorded.

A Non Governmental Organisation, CRIOS, or the Centre for Research on Indian Ocean Societies, set up in Mauritius in 1996, has embarked on a publication programme designed to make the archives of the island and the history of its people better known to the global community of scholars and more accessible to students on the island itself. *Colouring the Rainbow: Mauritian Society in the Making*, and *Forging the Rainbow: Labour Immigrants in British Mauritius* detailed the evolution of this island society in the 18th and 19th centuries, while a third volume dealt with the thirty years since independence in 1968. Other recent CRIOS publications include *Stepping Stone of Immigrants*, an evocation in words and pictures of the Aapravasi Ghat site or former immigrant depot, where new arrivals were housed until allotted to the plantations. With the assistance of the Government of India, the site, which has been declared a national monument and currently houses a small museum, is to be surveyed by an archaeologist. The latest CRIOS series will look at the histories of each of the various components which make up modern Mauritian society. A first volume, *Across the Kala Pani: the Bihari Presence in Mauritius*, was published in Spring 2000.¹⁹ It is hoped that this fascinating island, often termed a microcosm of the world's populations, unpeopled until European intervention in the 17th century and consequently with an entirely recorded history of settlement, and one in which the Indian presence has been visible throughout – as slaves, convicts, labourers and latterly as merchants, citizens, bureaucrats and governments – will increasingly benefit from the attention and insights of Asianists from around the world.

¹⁹ The author is a founder member and publications editor of CRIOS and the works mentioned can be obtained from her.