ABSTRACT

PERSAD, RAJESH SURENDRA. A Passage From India: The East Indian Indenture Experience in Trinidad 1845-1885. (Under the direction of David Gilmartin).

The purpose of this research has been to analyze the social relationships that developed during the formative years of East Indian indenture system in the Trinidad. This work is an attempt to explore how the East Indian indentured immigrants in Trinidad individually and collectively navigated through the experience of servitude to form a collective identity and become established in a foreign land as they evolved from transient laborers to permanent settlers. Without the Indian laborers the sugar industry and the island’s prosperity faced ruin while the perceived prosperity of the Indians inspired resentment. Caught between the worlds of freedom and unfreedom, the Indians sought to establish themselves within Trinidad’s society.
A Passage from India: The East India Indenture Experience in Trinidad 1845-1885

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

History
Raleigh, NC
2008

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For David Gilmartin.
BIOGRAPHY

Rajesh Surendra Persad is originally from small town of San Juan just outside of the capital city of Port of Spain the twin island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. The eldest child of three, Rajesh is the only member of his family to venture outside his home country. At the age of 19, Rajesh left Trinidad and moved to Florida, and shortly after enlisted in the U.S. Army where he was stationed at Ft Bragg N.C. with the 82nd Airborne Division. After completing his military service, Rajesh settled in Raleigh, N.C. where he studied both Electrical Engineering and History at North Carolina State University.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most of the research material gathered for this work came from the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago and Main Library of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad. I would like to thank the staff of these institutions for the assistance they offered.
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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the studies on East Indian indentured labor in the British West Indies that relied on colonial sources tended to treat the system as being either voluntary or a form of servitude that closely resembled the system of slavery that it replaced. Many of these studies concentrated their focus on the “freedom” and unfreedom of the Indian indentured laborers through comparisons and inferred parallels with the indentured system with the system of slavery that it replaced. Indeed, the system of Indian indentured labor came in the immediate aftermath of slavery and colonial administrators approached this new scheme with caution as they attempted to balance the planters’ need for labor with the general well-being of the Indian indentured laborers. The colonial authorities implemented measures that they hoped would bring the economically desirable results that the colonies needed at the lowest possible social cost. However, the colonial authorities soon realized that no amount of government regulations could guarantee the welfare of the laborers in all circumstances despite their best efforts to address many of the shortcomings of the Indian indentured labor system.¹ The voices of concern by the colonial administrators entrusted with managing the Indian

indentured system that ended up in the official literature revealed many of the problems they faced. Thus, many studies on the Indian indentured labor system echoed the concerns of the nineteenth century colonial administrators of the “freedom” or “unfreedom” of the system by either focusing on the abuses or the juridical approach of the colonial authorities in addressing these conditions. The debate on the “freedom” and “unfreedom” of the Indian indentured labor system has inspired studies such as Judith-Ann Weller’s *East Indian Indenture in Trinidad* and Hugh Tinker’s influential work, *A New System of Slavery*, examined the system from opposite ends of the spectrum. Weller argued that the colonial administrators’ juridical approach and legislative intervention legally differentiated the Indian indentured labor from the previous system of slavery while Tinker depicted the system of indenture as a highly organized colonial institution of exploitation that amounted to a system of neo-slavery.

The social and political atmosphere of the West Indies in the modern era have also played a role in influencing the interpretation of the unfreedom of Indian indentured labor and Tinker’s work has had a profound influence on this area of study. Since its publication, Tinker’s work has spawned a discourse on Indian indentured labor as a form of neo-slavery and has also influenced many of the reinterpretations of the Indian indentured system in a number of country-specific works such as Rosemariijn Hoefte’s *In the Place of Slavery: A Social History of British Indian and Javanese Laborers in*
Tinker argued that the Indian indentured system followed in the legacy of unfreedom that determined labor relation particularly in the West Indies. The parallel of the Indian indentured laborers’ experiences to that of slavery that Tinker emphasized played an influential role in scholarship that re-examined the motivations of the actions of the colonial administrators. In *A New System of Slavery*, Tinker explained that despite the harsh conditions in India, “unequal and degrading to many, tiresome and tedious to most,” the system of indenture deceived the Indians who sought to improve their conditions of life. Instead, Tinker argued, by the time the laborers realized that they had exchanged “one form of poverty and servitude for another,” they were already in bonded in servitude. Tinker called the system of indentured labor a “lifeless system” where “human values” meant little in “the drive for production” and exploitation.² In Tinker’s opinion, the plantation system created a social order and a structure of relationships that “produced both a system and an attitude of mind in which the products determined

everything, not the people.” As such, Tinker argued that after the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, the Indian immigrants became an essential commodity for the survival of the plantation system with its insatiable appetite for labor. Tinker believed that the indentured laborers inherited many of the evils of plantation slavery and the actions of the colonial authorities made this system of labor different but not entirely distinct from the system of slavery it replaced.

In contrast, Judith-Ann Weller’s *East Indian Indenture in Trinidad*, examined the processes involved in the system of indentured labor and attempted to show the necessity of Indian indentured labor to the survival of the agricultural industry in Trinidad. Weller believed that the legal institutions addressed the inequities of the system and argued that the legislation sought to protect the laborers and consequently the economic well being of the colony. Weller’s main argument is that the colonial authorities adopted a paternalistic approach in dealing with the Indian indentured laborers as evident through the legislation and the presence of various institutions to protect the Indian indentured laborers designed to prevent the system from replicating the previous system of slavery. Weller maintained that the absence of such measures by the colonial authorities during African slavery demonstrated the “broad parallel” that existed between slavery and

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3 Ibid., 19.
indenture, and, “[at] no time did the indenture system quite deserve the senseless charge of Colonial Imperialism.”

As the debate to assign the Indian indentured labor system into the absolute categories of either “freedom” or “unfreedom” continue to overshadow the scholarship on this form of nineteenth labor, Gyan Prakash’s assessment of bonded labor becomes especially useful in making sense of this colonial system. Prakash pointed out that, “so long as people were legally recognized as unequal to begin with, insofar as unequal ranks were considered ‘natural,’ bondage could only be a particular condition that applied to certain judicially ranked groups: it could not result in unfreedom since people were differentiated by inequality rather than brought together as free.” While the issues that revolve around the ideas of “freedom” and unfreedom of the laborers offers a method of interpretation, it often ignores many other complex issues that contributed to the operations and the resulting social consequences of the system. Therefore, although this work examines some of the arguments linked to the “freedom” and unfreedom debate, it attempts to examine some of the other factors that contributed to the formation of class


that played an important role the determining the Indian immigrants’ identity during the first forty years of the Indian indentured system in Trinidad.

E.P. Thompson described the class experience as one that evolved from “the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily,” an appropriate description for the contractually bonded East Indian indentured laborers who entered the highly hierarchical society of Trinidad. Therefore, time rather than the abstract questions that focus on “freedom” and unfreedom provides the best framework for understanding the experience of the Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad in the nineteenth century. In keeping with Thompson’s argument that “class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs,” a method in examining the social development of the Indian immigrants in Trinidad that goes beyond the theoretical notions of “freedom” and unfreedom emerges.6 In this way, the story of the Indian indentured labor system can by told by the laborers themselves when one takes into account the way in which they carved out a space for themselves in Trinidad’s society. In examining the manner in which the laborers negotiated the obstacles they faced in their new home in Trinidad while being burdened with the complications that they

brought with them from India that had to be dismantled, one begins to appreciate the role of culture and traditions defining the Indo-Trinidadian identity. The culture and traditions that the laborers brought with them from India that prevented them from assimilating fully into Trinidad’s society and polluted the homogeneity of the Indians became an important marker for the “freedom” of the laborers since the African slaves were not officially allowed to practice their culture. For the Indian indentured laborers, culture and traditions became a double edge sword in that it provided them with the façade of “freedom,” yet it perpetuated long-standing conflicts imported from India, and prevented them from being accepted by Trinidad’s Christian society. Not only were the laborers engaged in a struggled with the social forces they encountered upon arrival but also with the contestation among themselves rooted in their traditional past. However, regardless of the differences that existed among the laborers recruited from India, the Indian immigrants in Trinidad evolved into a distinct class not only because of their common experiences on plantations or their ethnicity, but also a consequence of the myriad of social relationships that existed among them and the rest of Trinidad’s society.

The Indians that came to Trinidad brought with them their own traditionally structured societies governed by caste and a social order instilled into them from birth. However, the caste organization and structure that governed the social relations in India proved difficult to maintain in
Trinidad. The way that the indenture system operated contributed to the dissolution of the caste system in Trinidad although a memory of caste continued to exist. The conditions of the voyage to Trinidad from India as well as the living situation on the estates thrust individuals together with minimal regard to the customs and traditions of the hierarchical caste system. In addition, the presence of relatively few women—most of whom came from low caste and questionable background—in relation to the ratio of male Indian laborers that came to Trinidad, resulted in the erosion of the traditional system of authority.\(^7\)

Yet ideas of caste and notions of traditions that made them *Indian* in their own imagination never really disappeared. It is easy to forget through categorizations and group titles such as “laborers” or “Indians” that the Indian indentured laborers represented a collection of individuals. In many instances, the discussion of “freedom” and unfreedom failed to probe the underlying substance of class formation and the responses of individual to the social currents that surrounded them. At work with this collection of individuals in the formation of a group identity was that of their imagination and group dynamics. However, it is not enough to say that the Indians simply imagined an India in Trinidad. In the process of community development,

\(^7\) George A. Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency* (Calcutta, 25 February, 1883), 30-1. In Grierson’s report he claimed that normally four classes of women who emigrated to the colonies, namely, wives of emigrants, “widows without friends, who are starving,” married women who have absconded from their husbands and prostitutes.
individuals began to create and imagine themselves as part of a group through self-identification and from their relationship to an imagined group identity that they derived from their past. Therefore, the East Indian indenture system as practiced in Trinidad created a system of new social relationships that challenged the structure of the already established social traditions that defined both Indianness of the laborers and the Trinidadianness of the host society. The creation of the laborers' “little-India” in Trinidad did not mean that the laborers erased the traditional tensions that existed in India or imported all of complexities that existed in India. Instead, the Indian immigrants brought forward a modified version of those tensions of caste and class that existed in India and continued to struggle with each other along with the various social forces they encountered upon arrival in Trinidad.

However, the Indians did not represent the first and only group of indentured laborers to come to Trinidad. The Indians and the Chinese became the latest solution to the labor problem that had always plagued Trinidad. Although some Europeans came in during the period from 1841 and 1850, about 661 from ports in Britain, they melted into Trinidad’s society. In a society where color and class went hand in hand, the European immigrants that came to Trinidad found positions in the public service and commercial

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and relatively comfortable jobs on the estates. The closeness of culture of the European immigrants to the whites meant that they assimilated easily in the social order in Trinidad. The same can also be said of the African immigrants who blended in with the emancipated slaves. The Chinese and Indians stood apart from the accepted cultural traditions of the island. However, the social relationships that developed internally among Indians and externally with the rest of Trinidad’s society forever changed the social landscape of the island because of the vast number of Indian laborers that came and the many who remained to carve out a space for themselves in Trinidad.

The system of Indian indentured labor sent approximately two million Indian laborers into the tropical colonies of the British, French, Dutch, and the Danish colonial powers. Between 1838 and 1917, the British West Indies alone received more than 500,000 laborers to satisfy the demand for labor and prevent the collapse of the sugar industry. Trinidad received roughly one hundred and fifty thousand Indians who came mainly from Bengal, the United Provinces, and Madras. The appearance of Indian indentured laborers into

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9 Donald Wood, *Trinidad in Transition: The Years After Slavery* (San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago: Caribbean Educational Publishers Ltd., 1998), 81. During slavery, the lowest position that a held was that of an overseer. In the 1840s, at the prompting of Lord Harris to improve the methods of cultivation, the planters began to recruit some ploughman and stock-keepers that brought about some resentment from those who had been working on the estates and felt jilted by the newcomers who received the best jobs on the plantations.

10 Weller, 2.
the post-emancipation societies of the British West Indian colony of Trinidad, with its already pre-defined structure of social hierarchy, radically altered social relationships and forever changed the social structure. In the nineteenth century, the relationships that existed in Trinidad evolved directly from the sugar plantation system. The relationships to the planter’s capital defined the role of each member in society and determined the general anatomy of the sugar plantation society of the British West Indies. Historian Hugh Tinker described the organization that developed within the sugar plantation societies of the Caribbean as an “authoritarian system” that dictated almost every aspect of the economic, political and social configuration.

According to Tinker, the sugar plantation system incorporated all of the members of society into a coordinated effort designed to “extract sugar from the cane” for export.11 Sugar therefore justified the existence of colonies and all those in it. Under the system of British imperialism, sugar gave life to the colony and the colony gave birth to a hierarchical social order relative to the function of groups that facilitated in the creation of wealth for the metropolis. In this echelon of relationships, the social classes that developed achieved their position in colonial society by their contribution to the wealth of and close association to the metropolis.

11 Tinker, 3.
Thus, the slaves derived their social position by being the laboring capital of the planters and by their distance from the metropolitan culture just as the planters derived their elite position from their ability to produce wealth from the capital they owned for the metropolis and from their resemblance to metropolitan culture. The abolition of slavery altered these relationships to capital and threatened the dominant position of the planters who developed a cultural dissimilarity of the metropolis with each successive generation in the colony. In an effort to regain their declining social status, the planters used what was left of their influence to emphasize “racial class solidarity” to determine occupational assignments within society and consequently status.12

The arrival of the Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad in the immediate aftermath of slavery coincided with the social upheavals taking place in society. On one level, the Indian indentured laborers entered a society—where the memory of slavery still influenced social relations—as bonded laborers to fill the role of the former slaves. The Indian indentured laborers became the latest version of the “spinning jenny” in Marx’s analogy of objects and its relation to capital.13 The Indian indentured immigrants

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13 Karl Marx, “Wage-Labour and Capital,” in *Selected Writings*. 2nd ed. Edited by David McLellan (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 281. In an analogy to show an object’s relation to capital, Marx explained that a spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton and becomes capital only in
became the abstract entity "labor" where the value of the indentured laborers to the planters amounted to no more than the capital derived from their ability to perform labor on the estates. In essence, people in the form of Indian indentured laborers became a component in the technology of sugar production where the planters determined their value in terms of the laborers’ ability to generate capital.

Upon entering the plantations, indentured laborers found themselves caught between the obscurity of a legal contract that signified their supposed free choice versus their bondedness to the estates and the social relations that defined their status for a specified period. Their bondedness resulted from the very instrument that bestowed them the luxurious façade of freedom—the indenture contract. This condition of social confusion played an instrumental role in developing the collective class identity of the Indian indentured laborers who came to Trinidad from different regions in India in varying regional concentrations with distinctive traditions, customs, and even linguistic dialects within the hierarchical social structure of Trinidad’s post-emancipation society. Thus, the Indian indentured immigrants in Trinidad managed to discover the means to develop a collective identity that embodied elements of a class-consciousness. They developed an identity from their past and fused elements from their present circumstance in order to adapt and certain relations. Without these relations, Marx argued, the spinning jenny represents capital in the same way that “gold in itself is money or sugar the price of sugar.”
carve out a space for themselves in Trinidad’s society. Thus, the story of the formation of that collective identity among the Indians in Trinidad encapsulates the social and cultural history of the East Indian indentured labor system. Thompson described class-consciousness as “the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms,” and in many ways, the focal point in the story of East Indian indenture system in Trinidad converges on the social consequences of introducing people who came from different regions in India with different traditions, customs, and languages into an already highly stratified post-emancipation society of the British West Indies and the manner in which they responded to their new environment.14

Yet it appears almost contradictory that a system sometimes described as a form of neo-slavery flourished with the willing participation of so many Indians who voluntarily agreed to come to the Caribbean and more importantly chose to remain in the highly structured authoritarian plantation societies of the West Indies. It therefore seems probable that the explanation for this paradox lies in the immigrants’ ability to find a common ground that transcended traditional boundaries through extracting elements from their past while simultaneously developing a culture that enabled them to navigate in the unfamiliar. Thus, the formation of that collective class identity encapsulates the social and cultural history of the Indians in Trinidad. The

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14 Thompson, 10.
Indian indentured laborers who came to the West Indies retained a significant portion of their culture and traditions that eventually formed the nucleus of that collective identity. Undoubtedly, the Indian immigrants lost some aspects of their cultural traditions during the process of migration and altered many to adapt to the new environment. Nevertheless those who came from India retained many aspects of their cultural traits, despite the effects of the erosion from class struggle, which allowed them to develop into a social entity and challenge the existing social hierarchy.

**The constant rivalry**

The evolution of the social hierarchy and the nature of group interaction in Trinidad that the Indians encountered in the nineteenth century began to assume its distinct character almost immediately when the first Europeans arrived on the island. In 1498, Christopher Columbus happened upon the land he named Trinidad and claimed the territory for Spain. Shortly after, the Spaniards decimated the indigenous population in their search for quick wealth and to satisfy their bloodlust.\(^{15}\) Spain neglected Trinidad and occupied herself with the more lucrative colonies and recent

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conquests in Mexico and Peru. Even the Spanish colonial reforms of 1765 under Charles III that removed barriers to inter-colonial trade failed to benefit the impoverished island that appeared to possess no productive capabilities. Spain recognized that transforming Trinidad into a viable colony meant the development of agriculture through foreign immigration and the creation of a slave colony. In 1776, Spain instructed the Governor of Trinidad, Don Manuel Fálquez, to attract French planters, especially from Grenada, with incentives of land grants and protection.

Although the British captured the island in 1797, immigration to Trinidad first encouraged by Spain continued uninterrupted and even gained momentum with the tumultuous conditions in Europe. The chaos in the French colonies of the West Indies created by the Revolution in France brought an influx of French-speaking refugees of all classes and colors to

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16 Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783-1962* (Kingston, Jamaica; Exeter, N.H: Heinemann, 1981), 1. Almost a century passed before Spain established a permanent settlement and it was not until 1592 that Domingo de Vera, formally founded the capital city, San Josef de Oruña. Trinidad’s location outside of the main shipping routes and its small population unsuitable for plantation labor proved burdensome for Spain.

17 A. Meredith John, *Plantation Slaves of Trinidad, 1783-1816: A Mathemetical and Demographic Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12. The Cédula de Población (3 September 1776), sought to remedy Trinidad’s sparse population problem by offering generous incentives to French Catholics to settle in Trinidad. Many French settlers received land grants of 1000 quarrees (approximately 3,200 acres) and granted exemption on import duties of any good brought to the island to include slaves.

18 Brereton, 12. The French Catholic settlers Britain allowed into Grenada after the Seven Years’ War now faced increasingly severe political and social discrimination from the Protestants.
Trinidad. In the early nineteenth century, the population of Trinidad also increased when the English planters with dreams of sugar fortunes came with their managers and overseers. Many of the planters settled while some returned to England to become absentee planters and pursue other interests. However, their presence attracted commercial firms and businesses that brought with them hosts of employees to support the rapidly developing sugar industry. The immigrants that flooded into the island had a profound effect on the development of a social structure that functioned on a racial hierarchy. In this context, class represented more than an economic status but incorporated race as the most important factor in determining those who occupied the upper echelon in Trinidad’s society. Beneath the whites in the race-based social ladder came the large colored community that contained members of varying social positions and from a wide number of professions. No other group had as much diversity as the colored community in Trinidad. Within this group, its members spanned the social spectrum that ranged from those who possessed great wealth and achieved notable social

19 Wood, 32. Reports show that in 1792 close to four thousand slaves had been transported from Martinique alone.

20 Eric Eustace Williams, The History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), 58. Many absentee planters return to England to follow political ambitions and enjoy the profits of plantation at home in English society. To show a general pattern, Williams explained that in 1768, the majority of landowners in Tobago were absentee, 20/77 stayed in Tobago. In other British West Indian colonies, a smaller the number of planters chose to remain in the islands: Grenada, 28; St Vincent, 5; Dominica, 3; Barbados, 9; Antigua, 2; St Kitts, 3; Great Britain, 6; and Surinam, 1.
status, to others of humble means that squatted in remote parts of the island.21 Even among the African slaves that occupied the lowest position in this social order—like the whites and the people of color—occupation and origin determined the position of the individual in the social hierarchy within the group.22

In this social structure, race determined the grouping that each member of society belonged to, and to further complicate matters, each of those groups subdivided according to the various socially valuable traits that individuals possessed. One of the dynamic features of this social structure was the constant rivalry of those peoples of different social standing as they sought to advance their own position within their own group and collectively against competing groups. The constant social tensions demanded that those with power employ oppressive measures against those beneath them in order to guard against rival threats. Therefore, with emancipation came efforts to keep the former slaves in a state of unfreedom by restricting their options for social mobility.

Into this precariously balanced social order came the Indians who had to create a place within that order in order to exist as a social entity and

21 Wood, 41.

22 William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment 1830-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22. The slaves born in the West Indies considered themselves superior to those of African birth just as those who worked in the house considered themselves above the field laborers.
legitimize their position by demanding status recognition in the already fragile social structure of Trinidad. This work is an attempt to explore how the East Indian indentured immigrants in Trinidad individually and collectively navigated through the experience of servitude to form a collective identity and become established in a foreign land as they evolved from transient laborers to permanent settlers.

E.M. Forster once wrote that both the historian and the novelist share a fascination with the “characters of men,” but unlike the novelist, the historian “can only know of its existence when it shows on the surface.”23 The truth to Forster’s observation becomes especially relevant when dealing with issues that involve cultural and identity issues. As a work that examined the social progress from the Indians indentured laborers who came from India into the extremely hierarchical and socially sensitive post-emancipation society of the Trinidad, the title of this work is meant to evoke the central theme from Forster’s novel, A Passage to India, which focused on the issues of boundaries, identity, individuality, and cultural traditions. Forster toys with the theme of crossing boundaries and uses several metaphors to show the volatile nature and consequences involved as alien entities challenge the accepted traditional norms. The connection to Forster is somewhat abstract but in may ways shows that the Indian indentured labor system involved the crossing of

boundaries beyond the physical sense and the creation of a new space with its own boundaries in a new land.

The general chronological era of this work begins with the arrival of the Indian indentured laborers in 1845 and ends with the 1885 report on the Hosay Riot of 1884. The first forty years of the Indian indentured experience in Trinidad provided an opportunity to examine the system from its inception to its zenith. Although the system continued to 1917, the social relations that the Indian immigrants developed into during the first forty years as they carved out an Indo-Trinidadian space remains a permanent feature of the social landscape of Trinidad. In this way, although this work leads up to the Hosay Riot of 1884, it is not the main focus. Instead, it is an attempt to place that violent affair into context. The reports from the newspapers criticizing the Indians and their “heathen” festivals, the insubordination on the estates, and the social tensions that evolved from the very presence of Indians in society converged in 1884 to produce violent consequences. The violence against the participants was not simply a random act but the consequence of tensions that began building as cultures collided.

When immigration schemes were first set on foot in the 1830s the Colonial Office was intensely suspicious of the planters’ motives, fearing that they sought merely to perpetuate slavery in some form of disguise, and perhaps even more that other nations might say so, and thus sully Great Britain’s recently acquired humanitarian reputation. The immigration system
of Trinidad and British Guiana was therefore put together slowly, and experimentally, as the facts of declining production helped the planters to extract concessions first in the matter of public subsidies for importing labor, secondly, over the variety of sources from which labor might be imported. In the aftermath of slavery, the policy of using Indian indentured laborers to supply labor to the planters possessed many parallels to the former system of slavery and many of the works written on the conditions that the Indian indentured laborers faced. Indian indentured labor certainly represented a marked improvement from African slavery, despite the number of abuses reported. The chapter “Slavery and Indenture” explores some of the arguments that have focused on the idea of the Indian indentured labor system replicated African slavery. This provides a foundation in analyzing formation of an identity that developed from the experience of indenture. This section shows the early stages of Indian indentured labor and some of the various circumstances that gave rise to the arguments that attempted to present the indenture experience as neo-slavery.

The comparisons of indenture to slavery directly relates to the chapter “Passage from India,” which surveys the nature of the social relationships that the Indian indenture laborers encountered upon entering Trinidad’s society. K.O. Laurence in A Question of Labor, argued that the design of the

policies and institutions though ostensibly focused on distinguishing the Indian indenture system from slavery, did not focus primarily on the protection of the indentured laborers but served the interest of the planters. Laurence argued that through the “planters’ ability to maintain a general dominance over the colonial officials,” enabled the planters to manipulate the legal system in Trinidad to force the indentured laborers into a subservient state.25 While it is certainly true that the legislation evolved out of a need to address conditions as they arose, many laws also served to address specific social conditions and the response of the immigrants to such laws ultimately contributed to the formation of their collective class identity.

The chapter “Class Happens,” examines working of the indenture system in Trinidad and the conditions of life that determined the Indians’ place on the plantation and in society. The chapter “From Transient Laborers to Permanent Settlers,” deals with activities of time-expired indentured laborers and the issue of repatriations—one of the most contentious, and least understood aspects of East Indian indenture labor system in Trinidad. The issue of repatriations has not only played an integral role in defining the identity of the Indian immigrants in Trinidad it also evolved into an issue that affected social relationships. Contrary to popular opinion, not all of the Indian indentured laborers who went to Trinidad received the repatriations that they expected when they initially signed the indenture contract in India because of

25 Ibid., 503.
the laws in Trinidad that required that the laborers stayed for a period of “industrial residence” and evolving social conditions.

This work ends with the chapter “Hosay Riot of 1884,” by which the objective is to put into context the Government of Trinidad’s demonstration of force against the participants of the Muharram festival. The Hosay Riot of 1884, resulted in the 107 casualties and 16 deaths at the hands of the police and military troops. The Government of Trinidad claimed that the “mob of excited and wildly noisy and quarrelsome rowdies” warranted the violent as the celebrants disregarded an ordinance that restricted the participants from entering the town of San Fernando.\footnote{D.W.D. Comins, \textit{Note on Emigration: India to Trinidad, including Diary} (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1893), 42.} In his work, \textit{Hosay Trinidad}, anthropologist Frank Korom claimed that regulations sought to discourage the participation of “Afro-Creoles” from joining the participation in order to “keep the subaltern masses divided along ethnic lines.”\footnote{Frank J. Korom, \textit{Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 116.} While some evidence may support Korom’s theory, there exists equally compelling evidence that demonstrates the bias against the festival stemmed from a prejudice against those who brought the festival to the island. The extent of the violence against the participants by those acting under the authority of the state highlights...
extreme conditions and social attitudes that the Indian indentured immigrants faced.

Mariana Carter and Khal Torabully’s *Coolitude*, focused on the concept of an *Indian Diaspora* as a result of the Indian indentured labor system. Carter and Torabully adopt the definition of the *Diaspora* from Stuart Hall who explained that the *experience* occurs “not by essence and purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ that lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.”\(^{28}\) The concluding chapter discusses some of the concepts of *Indian Diaspora* in Trinidad and the extent to which the collective class identity assumed a political nature as a response to the social conditions.

The primary sources used in this works were gathered from the Parliamentary Papers, the Colonial Record Offices, official reports, and various official correspondences and material present at the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. However, during the Water Riots of 23 March 1903, fire destroyed the government buildings that housed the many of the records on East Indian indenture labor. The records lost included the indentured laborer’s contracts, the early records of the Protector of Indian

Immigrants, Parliamentary Papers, official reports, most of the records of the Colonial Secretary’s department before 1903, as well as critical dispatches of the Secretaries of the Colonial Governors for the period 1884-1903—the occasion when most of the policy changes that affected East Indian indentured labor took place. In addition, the fire destroyed numerous legislative enactments and ordinances that were repealed after serving its purpose and omitted in subsequent editions of the collected Laws of the Colony. As such, the material at the Trinidad National Archives offered only a limited number of sources, though very valuable. However, the secondary sources complimented the material gathered from the Trinidad National Archives by providing a guide through their different interpretations of the actions of the colonial authorities and depictions of the life of the immigrants themselves.

Although this work is an attempt to relate the response of the Indian immigrants to the circumstances that they experienced, it is difficult to appreciate the thoughts and sentiments of individuals whose actions often appear contradictory. However, it is best to reserve judgment on their actions since as E.P. Thompson reminds us: “Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.”

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29 Thompson, 13.
SLAVERY AND INDENTURE

The system of Indian indentured labor, despite its many shortcomings, differed vastly from the institution of slavery as practiced in the British West Indies. Although the comparison of Indian indentured labor to slavery compels attention to the plight of the Indian indentured laborers, in many ways, it undermines the brutality of African slavery and ignores many basic differences between the two systems. This chapter seeks to examine some of the conditions that allowed the Indian indentured labor system to be viewed as a parallel to the system of slavery it replaced and the legislative interventions that sought to prevent the system from degenerating into a system as abusive as that of African slavery. Perhaps the most important element in analyzing the indenture as neo-slavery argument revolves around the definition of slavery. Hugh Tinker argued that the indenture system emulated and replicated many actual features and characteristics of slavery. Tinker pointed out that the plantation system created a social order and a structure of relationships that “produced both a system and an attitude of mind in which the products determined everything, not the people.”¹ However, to simply assign “the plantation system” as the major agent of social order requires some explanation. To fully understand the Indians and the

¹ Tinker, 19.
class structure that developed in Trinidad’s society, it becomes necessary to examine the expectations that the planters placed on the laborers and how the planters eventually became dependent upon them. This section also attempts to show how the notions of “freedom” and unfreedom worked in conjunction with other forces—social, political, and economic—to shape the nature of West Indian society before the arrival of the Indian indentured laborers.

**Alienable property**

In the British West Indies, both African slavery and the Indian indentured system represented strategies to secure plantation labor. Both systems involved the unfreedom of the laborers in an effort to fulfill the tasks on the plantation although the degree of coercion and bondedness remained vastly different. However, the comparison of Indian indentured labor to slavery is not completely without merit since there were many abuses of the system that closely reflected and mimicked the conditions of slavery. The Indian indentured labor system represents a major component in the legacy of “freedom” and unfreedom that defined labor relations in the British West Indies. The Indians who came to Trinidad as bonded laborers under indenture, for the most part, exhibited a degree of personal freedom in that “choice.” The “choice” that led many of the laborers to cross the *Kala Pani* varied from the choice of escaping famine and oppressive conditions to making a quick
fortune. This “choice” made the Indians the determinants of their own destiny and represents a vast disconnect from the captured African victims that came before them. However, the social relations that governed labor and its relation to capital created an experience for the Indian indentured laborers that paralleled slavery. The ideologies of forced labor that governed the relations on the plantations during slavery became applicable to the indentured laborers—a dilemma that the authorities recognized, attempted to address, and at times, even promoted.

In Servitude in Modern Times, M. L. Bush believed that the use of terms and expressions that directly associate indentured labor with slavery falsely subscribe to the notion that both slaves and indentured laborers represented forms of “alienable property” but serve to capture the “essence” of the experience. Bush believed that depicting indentured labor as a form of slavery advocates an inaccurate representation of the slave and the indentured laborer as permanent and temporary chattels. Instead, Bush argued that the real difference between the two systems was that unlike slavery, the indenture system depended upon a contractual agreement that gave the planters proprietary rights only to the indentured person’s labor for a specified period and such rights excluded ownership of the indentured laborer’s person. In addition, Bush added that the colonial governing bodies

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treated the indentured laborer as a person and not an object and provided the legal means and avenues to protect those serving their time in indenture. The colonial authorities found themselves caught in the middle of the Indian indentured laborers’ struggle. On one hand they sought to create legislation that promoted the “freedom” and prevent a degeneration of the system into another form of slavery and on the other they sought to protect the interest of the planters and created legislation that contributed to the unfreedom of the laborers.

Despite the glaring differences between the slavery and Indian indentured labor, the early abuses of the laborers and the noticeable unfreedom of the laborers on the plantation that developed from the relationship to labor in that environment caused the Indian indentured labor system to earn the reputation as a form of pseudo-slavery. People became commodities and lost their humanness on the plantations and the social relations and the conditions of unfreedom came to define the status of the Indian indentured laborer. Much of the abuses of the laborers that paralleled the horrors of African slavery occurred at the inception of the scheme to use the Indian laborers as a replacement for slaves and overshadowed the system. The colonial authorities recognized the value of using Indian laborers as well as the abuses and potential degeneration of the system and intervened. However, the idea of the Indian indentured labor system as a form of pseudo-slavery persisted. The “freedom” versus unfreedom debate became an
instrumental tool in highlighting some of the flaws of the system while ignoring the social development of the Indians who sought to carve out a space for themselves in their new environment.

**The island was ill prepared for emancipation**

I.M. Cumpston suggested that the introduction of Indians to British colonies after 1834 saved the sugar industry from ruin because of the shortage of labor and Great Britain from the “moral disgrace” of buying slave-produced sugar.³ Even before the abolition of slavery, the price of West Indian sugar in Great Britain cost 7½d. per lb, while the higher quality Cuban and Brazilian sugar sold for 4½d. per lb.⁴ Between 1815 and 1831, sugar from countries such as Brazil, Puerto Rico and Cuba undersold British West Indian sugar in the European markets which resulted in a price drop of 60 per cent in London for muscovado sugar.⁵ The abolition of slavery along with the high cost labor further inflated the price of British West Indian sugar. The prospects looked dismal for the West Indian planters as one 19th century British observer explained:


Colonial sugar still possessed a virtual monopoly in the British markets, only slightly relaxed in favour of the sugar produce of countries in which slavery did not exist. To destroy this monopoly was in any case a serious measure, but there were special circumstances which rendered the change peculiarly obnoxious. The West Indian planting interest had deeply resented the emancipation of their slaves, and had by no means content with the compensation given. The modified slavery, termed apprenticeship, had broken down, under the pressure of English public opinion, which exacted such checks upon the power of the masters to enforce compulsory labour, as to make it of little use.⁶

The flimsy monopoly from protectionism cushioned the planters in the aftermath of slavery, but this could not go on forever. Yet, despite Sir Robert Peel’s zealous aspirations to abolish the preferential system of discriminating duties and tariffs in an effort to lower the cost of commodities for the British consumers, Peel never gave exceptions to slave-produced sugar fearing that would have justified the demand for slaves or provided a renewed interest in the slave trade. The comfort that Peel provided to the planters soon dissipated in 1846 when Lord John Russell succeeded Peel and announced a plan for the readjustment of the sugar duties within a month of his accession to power. The leader of the House of Commons, Lord George Bentinick, protested and vowed to stand by the sugar planters and “to support British capital” invested in the West Indies and elsewhere.⁷ However, not even Bentinick’s passionate speeches could prevent the inevitable.

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By August of 1846, the protectionists lost by a vote of 265 to 135 and the British Parliament passed the Sugar Duties Act that established a schedule to systematically end the preferential tariff for colonial muscovado by 1851. However, although the free traders celebrated the demise of protectionism as a system of commerce, they recognized the need for changes since the abolition of protective duties attacked the very foundations of the colonial system. The old colonial system that the free traders sought to dismantle had established its roots as early as the mid-seventeenth century when the “British sweet tooth” or rather the British consumer’s demand for luxury goods provided the impetus for colonial expansion. The mercantile system had satisfied the British government’s insatiable appetite for power while simultaneously satisfying British public’s insatiable appetite for luxuries like tea, coffee, tobacco, and sugar. As the wealth of the planters increased, the character of the plantation societies of the British West Indies matured. In return, the British public enjoyed the affordable luxury of slave-grown sugar. From the 1750s to the 1820s, West Indian sugar became the major import into Britain.8

The mercantile system not only afforded British West Indian raw sugar enough protection for the planters to establish a monopoly in the home market, it also stifled the implementation of labor-saving technological

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advances in sugar production and solidified the social relations that enabled the plantations to exist. The evaporation of protections almost immediately following the abolition of slavery placed many of the planters with their extravagant lifestyles precariously close to financial ruin and threatened to weaken the stability of the colonies. The planters however, had no one to blame but themselves—they wasted the years of apprenticeship and never attempted to implement innovative technology into the production of sugar.9 Even as late as 1862 when Edward Bean Underhill visited Trinidad, the planters squandered opportunity to prepare for the transition from slave labor to wage labor remained visibly apparent as Underhill explained:

The island was ill prepared for emancipation. The term of apprenticeship had been wasted by the planters, in exacting the utmost amount of work from the prospective free labourer. It was in vain that Lord Glenelg, in 1836, laid open the inevitable consequences of that event, and entreated the local Legislature to prepare for its coming. It was foreseen by him, that in the transition, the value of property would be affected, and the more permanent interests of society might be endangered, if precautionary measures were not taken. The planters were told that, whereas during slavery they had the command of labour, in a state of freedom labour would be obtained only as the real or apparent interests of the labourer were consulted. It was held to be probable that the abundance and cheapness of land would attract the labourer to its cultivation for his own advantage, and would lead him to avoid the steady toilsome work of the sugar estate; that not until an increased population pressed on the means of easy subsistence from the

9 Phillip D. Curtin, “The British Sugar Duties and West Indian Prosperity,” *The Journal of Economic History* 14, (1954): 158. Improved techniques and new machinery such as vacuum and centrifugal processes in refining, steam power and tramways gradually appeared in the West Indian sugar industry throughout the nineteenth century in an effort to reduce costs and compete on the world market.
provision grounds, the fertility of which yields to a small amount of toil an ample supply of food, would the Creole resort to the planters for employment, and the staple of the island be again largely produced.\textsuperscript{10}

The plantation system had developed a character after centuries of continuity and development that could not be easily replaced. The deeply entrenched ideologies of labor relations on the sugar estates crippled the planters’ ability to implement changes since they could not imagine any other means that would allow the operation of the sugar industry to continue without a subordinate class of laborers. At one time, the enormous riches derived from the production and trade of sugar, particularly in the 18th century, allowed the planters and other parties involved in the sugar industry to achieve an influential presence in Parliament that helped maintain the legal sugar monopoly in the home market, define the social relations on the plantations, as well as suppress the voices of discontent against slavery.\textsuperscript{11}

However, as the 19th century dawned on the British Empire the nature of imperialism changed and weakened the barriers erected by the British West Indian sugar interests. The shrinking markets in the British West Indies and the uncompetitive prices of sugar signaled the impending demise of the

\textsuperscript{10} Edward Bean Underhill, \textit{The West Indies: Their Social and Religious Condition} (London: Jackson, Walford, and Hodder, 1862), 66-67.

\textsuperscript{11} Eric Eustace Williams, \textit{Capitalism & Slavery} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 76-92. The union of the planters and merchants who profited under this system bought their way into Parliament by buying votes and rotten boroughs.
mercantile system that served the planters in the 18th century.\textsuperscript{12} Even so, the British West Indian planters failed to accept that the influence they once commanded declined with their profits. Groups that once stood with the West Indian planters, such as the Liverpool shipping interest, distanced themselves with the changing times.\textsuperscript{13} In the Victorian era, the British, who once shaped the world to satisfy their needs, now underwent a “moral transformation” and felt obliged to right the wrongs of their predecessors.\textsuperscript{14} This “moral transformation” in England had a profound effect on the social structure and the future stability of the West Indian colonies that policy makers in England could not ignore. Three years after emancipation, William Hardin Burnley captured the essence of the tensions between the planters of Trinidad and the British Government when he explained:


\textsuperscript{13} Dale H. Porter, \textit{The Abolition of the Slave Trade in England, 1784-1807} (North Haven: Archon Books, 1970), 1. The history of the slave trade began with British merchant ships began transporting African slaves to the West Indies since the beginning of the 16th century and what began as a modest venture, eventually became an extensive and highly competitive market. In the periods between the American and French Revolutions saw determined efforts by France, Spain, and the United States to free themselves from the dependence on Liverpool. The organization or the British slave trade centered in Liverpool and by the late eighteenth century occupied a prominent place in that city’s economy.

\textsuperscript{14} Wilson, 20. Wilson claimed that many of the morally conscious Victorians “who cheered Lord Palmerston for the bombardment of Brazilian slave-ports, and who asserted their belief in freeing the negro, would have the most bloodthirsty and vengeful views of how to put down the Indian Mutiny of 1857.”
Unfortunately, although slavery has ceased, the angry feelings occasioned by the struggle to effect it have not yet subsided. The same parties are still arrayed against each other, and new causes of contention have arisen: first, with respect to the system by which the labour of the emancipated negroes should be regulated, and subsequently, as to the necessity of increasing the labouring population; which the planters insist upon as absolutely requisite to uphold cultivation in our sugar colonies, whilst the anti-slavery party deny it, and impute the claim solely to a perverse desire to introduce a new system of coercion, as unjust as the one recently abolished.15

The sugar plantations of Trinidad, like the other colonies of the British West Indies, formed the very social and economic units that maintained the order while providing the bulk of the colony’s revenue through the export of sugar. Thus, to dismantle that system, first with the abolition of slavery and then to end Protectionism and expose the island’s expensive wage-labor produced sugar to open competition in the absence of a viable solution meant the impending ruin of the colonies. When John N. Dalton visited Trinidad as late as 1880 with Queen Victoria’s grandsons, Prince Albert and Prince George, the effects of colonial policies remained evident. In the travel journal they recorded:

The fact is that the West Indies are, at present, a glaring example of the terrible penalties following on reckless acts of inconsiderate sentiment which have been the curse of English statesmanship in the nineteenth century. Englishmen enfranchised the West Indian slaves, and paid a not considerable sum as compensation. They took absolutely no account of the fact that the whole social and economic systems of the islands had been built up on the pillars of slavery and commercial protective

duties, and that when these were, no doubt very properly, cut away, it must topple down unless something else was provided. Acting thus in avowed deference to the rules of morality it was impossible for Englishmen to escape a further moral responsibility. Of no other part of the Queen’s dominions can it be said so emphatically as it can of the West Indies that the ruling country is under a distinct obligation to it.\(^{16}\)

In Trinidad the end of Protectionism meant a more pronounced and absolutely necessary symbiotic relationship between the Colonial Government and the planters. The colony’s stability and Colonial Government main source of revenue depended on the planter’s ability to produce and compete in the open market. The Colonial Government understood its obligation to provide the necessary legislative actions to allow the planter to adjust to the drastic changes that took place in a relatively short period of time.

**Immoral heathens**

Historian Donald Wood argued that the planters of Trinidad acted in a “lukewarm” manner regarding the Indian indentured laborers preferring instead imported African laborers. Wood also pointed out the lack of support by the Trinidadian planters in the campaign in the early 1840s to persuade the British Government to allow Indian indentured laborers into Mauritius.

and the West Indies. The planters recognized that the survival of the sugar industry relied on the “necessity of immediately replacing the loss of labourers” in the years following emancipation. However, when the imported African immigrant laborers arrived on the plantations, the planters and managers reverted to treating the laborers like slaves and immediately dismissed those laborers who complained about ill treatment or the want of medical aid. The Colonial Government eventually abandoned the plan of continuing to import African laborers. The scheme failed because of the unrealistic demands of the planters on the Government of Trinidad to immediately solve that the labor crisis and unwillingness of African laborers migrating to Trinidad. The very treatment of the imported African immigrant laborers emphasized the void in the social relations on the plantations that the planters expected any of the new arrivals to fill. Dalton explained:

The Parliamentary Committee of 1842, having expressed itself favourable to the introduction of immigrants from the west coast of Africa, Lord Stanley (now Earl of Derby) sanctioned arrangements for the transport of liberated slaves from Sierra Leone and the Gambia, and the colony set apart a sum of £15,000 per annum, from the Colonial Treasury, to meet the cost. The number introduced under this

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17 Wood, 107. In 1841, the Agricultural and Immigration Society sought the importation of laborers “from all over the world” but Wood claimed that this was merely “a gesture in the grand manner” since they specifically wanted African laborers.

18 Ibid., 80. By 1861 all plans to import African laborers came to an end. The small number of African immigrant labor failed to impact the labor market in the way the planters had hoped.
arrangement, in 1842 and 1843, was only 858. The scheme was a failure, owing chiefly to the disallowance of an ordinance, hastily passed, to meet the case of some 233 liberated Africans, brought from St. Helena: they were to be placed under compulsory contracts, without the slightest freedom of choice as to employment, employer, or locality.\textsuperscript{19}

Marianne Ramesar claimed that there had been minor opposition to the introduction of Indian indentured laborers. In the two months after the arrival of the first Indian indentured laborers in 1845, the former town councilor of Port of Spain, Thomas Hinde petitioned Governor MacLeod with one hundred and forty signatories opposing the Colonial Government of Trinidad’s decision to aid in the importation of “immoral heathens.”\textsuperscript{20} Although the petition went ignored, the cultural distinction of the Indian indentured laborers to the rest of Trinidad’s population remained the most significant difference among the other laborers who came to the island.

In 1850, the \textit{Trinidadian} newspaper criticized the Colonial Government for promoting the interest of the planters while treating the rest of the population as “serfs of the soil” since they were “in no way consulted” on the issue of importing Indian indentured labor:

\begin{quote}
A costly immigration scheme was set on foot and carried to a ruinous extent, ruinous alike to the colonial treasury and to the pockets and prospects of the people. In addition an expensive and ecclesiastical establishment was created in defiance of the loud and remonstrances of
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{19} Prince Albert Victor, et al., 75.

\textsuperscript{20} Marianne Ramesar, \textit{Survivors of Another Crossing: A History of East Indians in Trinidad, 1880-1946} (St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies, School of Continuing Studies, 1994), 119.
the people, and other oppressive measures, which we need no here name, were at least attempted to be imposed. The secret of such a policy consisted in the wish to bolster up the interests of the former slave holders, to enrich them or secure them against supposed loss at the expense of the people and at the expense of justice to the bargain. The government manifestly legislated solely for the few nominal possessors of the land in the colony. The interests of the people at large were hardly in a single instance consulted. The dogged retention of the crown lands unequivocally declared that it was the wish of the government to pen up the laborers on estates, and by crowding in immigrants, the result was the dimmest vision—that is, a planter would dictate his own terms of labour.21

The issue of financing of the system of Indian indentured labor in many ways reveals the structure of the social order and the class conflicts that emerged. This issue allowed the colored and black middle class to flex its muscle and criticize the Colonial Government for its preferential treatment of the white elite planter class. Hinde’s petition sought to focus on the widely felt sentiment that the Colonial Government intended to alleviate the problems of the planters by burdening the colored and black middle class with increased taxation.22

In 1860, the Duke of Newcastle, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies, devised a formula for financing the Indian indentured labor scheme in Trinidad. Under the Duke’s formula that lasted until 1911, the planters paid two-thirds of the total cost of immigration while the remaining one-third of the cost that supported the Government’s staff in both Trinidad and India

21 *The Trinidadian*, 16 January 1850.
22 Ramesar, 119.
came from the General Revenue, that is, by the ordinary taxpayers. The planters paid their share partly through the Indenture Fees, the £5 paid per immigrant employed, and partly from an Export Duty on sugar, rum and cocoa. The remaining one-third was to be paid from the general revenues, that is, by the ordinary taxpayers. During the 1860s General Revenue spent 25-30 percent of the revenues each year on immigration expenses while the planters generally usually paid less than their fair share.

The debate on financing the importation of the East Indian indentured laborers brings into focus the existing tensions in Trinidad’s highly stratified society where race, color, and class deeply affected relationships. Racial and denominational conflicts in Trinidad’s society manifested themselves repeatedly especially over issues regarding law reform, education, and religion. This complex stratification of the social structure resulted from the patterns of European settlement and conquest of the island.

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23 Ibid. The Secretary of State for the Colonies justified the contribution made by the taxpayers for social reasons, namely the importation of women and children to the colonies.

24 Brereton, 102.
The Negroes would find it difficult to understand how they could be free.

In 1836, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Glenelg advised the Governors of the respective colonies with large unoccupied areas of Crown lands to “fix such a price on all Crown lands as may place them out of the reach of persons without capital.” Lord Glenelg explained that with emancipation, labor could not be “compelled” but required “sufficient inducements” to maintain the necessary production level required. Lord Glenelg suggested the implementation of measures that would “prevent the occupation of Crown lands by persons not possessing a proprietary title to them.” In *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, historian Eric Williams explained that the former slaves did not abandon agriculture but deserted the plantation agriculture where planters in alliance with the Government sought to impose a new method of unfreedom upon them. The authorities attempted to implement a condition of bondedness on the emancipated slaves by making them dependent on the plantation by denying

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25 Williams, *The History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, 88. The policy of apprenticeship, meant to provide a period of adjustment to the planters, confused the slaves who believed that they had been granted freedom. In the Dutch Virgin Islands the system of apprenticeship came to an early end in 1878 after a series of violent demonstrations. The Schoelcher Commission sent to inquire on the failure of apprenticeship reported: “The Negroes would find it difficult to understand how they could be free and constrained at one and the same time. The Republic would not wish to take away from them with one hand what it has given with the other; in the colonies as in the metropolis, the day of fictions is over.”

them the legal ability to leave the plantation. In keeping with Lord Glenelg’s suggestion, the Government of Trinidad enacted legislation that stipulated the acreage of Crown land that an individual could purchase and established price above the purchasing means of the freed slaves. In 1841, the planters objected to the proposal by the Secretary of State to allow individuals to purchase a minimum of 40 acres and insisted to the Government that it was in the best interest of the colony not to sell areas of Crown lands smaller than 320 acres. In compliance, the Trinidad Council of Government determined that the optimum size of a plantation was 640 acres. In another desperate measure to keep the emancipated slaves on the plantation, on the 6 October 1838, the government issued an Order in Council to prevent squatting on Crown lands and on private property. Later that year the Government also passed the Vagrancy Act in a frantic effort to restrict the movement of the freed slaves and prevent them from wandering off the estates. However, these measures proved ineffective since the planters were reluctant to report squatters to the authorities because the cultivation of their estates depended heavily upon that source of intermittent labor. The failure to control the movement of the ex-slaves and guarantee an effective labor supply impressed upon the colonial administrators the need for immigration. Comins explained:

Immediately after emancipation, so pressing had become the demand for agricultural labourers, in consequence of our scanty population and

27 Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, 87.
the preposterously high wages demanded for field labor—so palpable, so imminent had become the danger of ruin—that is was at once and almost instinctively resolved to call in immigrants by the prospect of higher wages, began to immigrate to the island at their own cost. It was soon discovered that a regular current of immigrants would set in if sufficient encouragement were afforded. The planters at once manifested their readiness to advance the passage-money. Provided the immigrants would engage their services as a compensation.28

In Trinidad, following the abolition of slavery, the sugar industry experienced a loss of 20 per cent in the labor force. In July of 1838, the planters commanded a labor force of 20,000, by 1851 the number of ex-slaves working on the sugar plantation fell to 3,116.29 K.O. Laurence claimed that the movement of labor out of the sugar plantations “was of course greatly exaggerated” by the planters who anticipated declining production. Instead, Laurence maintained that the newfound freedom of the emancipated slaves allowed them to seek non-agricultural employment outside the estates. Laurence claimed that the planters exaggerated the shortage of labor and the imminent failure of their estates, however acknowledged that sugar production declined as laborers left the estates.30 However, the ex-slaves understood that to fully appreciate the meaning of freedom they had to achieve both economic and social independence from the plantation—the most

28 Comins, 3.


30 Laurence, 1.
vivid reminder of their unfreedom. When Underhill visited Trinidad on behalf of the Baptist Missionary Society, he noticed that:

Three years after emancipation, in 1841, the condition of the island was most deplorable: the labourers had for the most part abandoned the estates, and taken possession of plots of vacant land, especially in the vicinity of the towns, without purchase or lawful right. Vagrancy had become an alarming habit of great numbers; every attempt to take a census of the population was baffled by the frequent migrations which took place. Criminals easily evaded justice by absconding to places where they were unknown, or by hiding themselves in the dense forests which in all parts edged so closely on the cleared lands. Drunkenness increased to an enormous degree, assisted by planters who freely supplied rum to the labourers, to induce them to remain as cultivators on their estates. High wages were obtained, only to be squandered in amusement, revelry, and dissipation; at the same time, these high wages induced a diminished cultivation of food, and a corresponding increase in price and in the importation of provisions from the neighbouring islands and continent. The labourers steadily refused to enter into any contracts which would oblige them to remain in the service of a master: this would too much have resembled the state of slavery from which they had but just emerged.31

To address the concerns of the planters, the colonial authorities implemented a plan to attract laborers from the smaller islands and Africa. However, this program proved unsuccessful in alleviating the labor shortage in Trinidad.32

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31 Underhill, 68-9.
32 Laurence, 2.
So imminent had become the danger of ruin

On 30 May 1845, the first two hundred and twenty-five East Indian laborers arrived in Trinidad on the *Futtle Rozack* to supplement the island’s labor supply.\(^\text{33}\) By the time the system of indentured labor ended in 1917, Trinidad’s population included the addition of roughly one hundred and fifty thousand Indians who came mainly from Bengal, the United Provinces, and Madras which forever changed almost every aspect of the social, political, cultural, and economic landscape of the island.\(^\text{34}\)

In the campaign waged in Britain in the early 1840s to persuade the Imperial Government to re-admit Indian into Mauritius and the West Indies, after Gladstone’s experiments ended in disaster, there seems to have been no support from Trinidad. However, the colonial government allowed Indian indentured labor to Trinidad and an initial quota was set at 2,500. The first ship arrived on May 10, 1845 with 225 immigrants aboard.\(^\text{35}\) Commenting on

\(^{33}\) *General Register: A* (1845). National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. The *General Register* records the first ship that brought Indian indentured laborers to Trinidad as the *Futtle Rozack*, however other sources records the name of the ship as the *Fatel Razack* or *Fath Al Razack* (Victory of Allah the Provider). All immigrants arriving on the island received a General Register Number at the time of arrival in sequential order. The East Indian laborers arriving on the *Futtle Rozack* obtained the General Register numbers 1-225.

\(^{34}\) Weller, 2.

\(^{35}\) Moore, 41.
the history of immigration in Trinidad, in his 1893 *Note on Emigration from Indian to Trinidad*, Surgeon-Major D.W.D. Comins wrote:

Immediately after emancipation, so pressing had become the demand for agricultural labourers, in consequence of our scanty population and the preposterously high wages demanded for field labour—so palpable, so imminent had become the danger of ruin—that it was at once and almost instinctively resolved to call in immigrants by every mode of inducement.\(^{36}\)

The British Government initially feared the establishment of a modified system of slavery hidden behind labor contracts. As such, on 30 July 1838, on the eve of emancipation, the British Government issued an Order-in-Council that prohibited the contracting of labor outside the colonies. The Government of Trinidad dispatched immigrant agents to board vessels and inform newly arrived immigrants that any labor contracts made before entering the island had no legally validity. A second Order-in-Council followed in September of that same year limiting contracts to a maximum of one year. However, in Trinidad, the effect of these pieces of legislature sent wages skyrocketing and threatened the survival of the sugar industry. The scarcity of labor forced the planters to negotiate on the laborers’ terms. Migrant laborers refused to enter time-based contracts, preferring instead to engage in task jobs and take advantage of the intense competition among the various plantations for their services. As the labor crisis in Trinidad worsened, Governor McLeod appealed to the Secretary of State, Lord Stanley, in 1844 to allow the legal recognition

\(^{36}\) Comins, 3.
of contracts made outside the colony. Lord Stanley’s compliance allowed the commencement of the importation of Indian indentured laborers to Trinidad in 1845.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite a brief interruption to Trinidad from 1848 to 1851, the supply of East Indian indenture laborers continued until 1917 when the Government of India finally abolished the system. Edgar Erickson argued that the importation of East Indian coolies was the direct result of the abolition of slavery by the more “farsighted planters” who looked towards India to meet the labor demands as they anticipated the exodus of labor following the end of the apprenticeship period.\textsuperscript{38} Surgeon-Major Comins observed that the arrival of Indians in Trinidad amounted to a “mere experiment” that would expectedly face many challenges, but claimed that having a “well-regulated system of immigration” would produce satisfactory results. Comins had good reason to urge caution in pursuing the policy of Indian labor since the first experiment with Indian indentured labor in the British West Indies proved disastrous.

The first “experiment” with Indian indentured labor occurred in British Guiana. Inspired by the Mauritian planters use of Indian indentured laborers, John Gladstone, father of William Ewart Gladstone, wrote a letter on 4

\textsuperscript{37} Moore, 73.

January 1836 to the Calcutta shipping agency of Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co.,
to inquire on his own behalf about the feasibility of sending one hundred
“Bengalese” to work in Demerara, British Guiana.39 Gladstone, a proprietor of
an estate in Demerara, wrote in his letter to the Calcutta shipping agency
that:

“You will probably be aware that we are very particularly situated with
our Negro apprentices in the West Indies, and that it is a matter of
doubt and uncertainty how they may be induced to continue their
services on the plantations after their apprentice expires in 1840. This
is a subject of great moment and deep interest in the colonies of
Demerara and Jamaica.40

The approaching end of the period of apprenticeship heightened the
concern of the planters about the labor on the estates. Erickson claimed that
the planters believed that the cost of labor would increase because the
“missionaries would encourage the emancipated blacks to demand wages
befitting a free man.”41 Gladstone argued for an alternative source of labor as
a means to address the labor shortage and destroy the ex-slaves monopoly on
labor and felt the Indians would be an excellent “as far as it is possible,

39 Erickson, 128.
40 “Letter from John Gladstone, Esq. to Messrs. Gillanders, Arbuthnot &
Co., 4 January 1836.” Parliamentary Papers, LII No. 180, 1837-38. (MF 41),
413-14.
41 Erickson, 128.
independent of our Negro population.”42 Finally, Gladstone asked for information and outlined the requirements of the laborers in his proposal:

I am now desirous to obtain all the information you can possibly give me. The number I should think of taking and sending by one vessel direct from Calcutta to Demerara would be about 100; they ought to be young, active, able-bodied people. It would be desirable that a portion of them, at least one-half, should be married, and their wives disposed to work in the field as well as they themselves. We should require to bind them for a period not less than five years or more than seven years. They would be provided with comfortable dwellings, food, and medical assistance; they would also, if required, be provided with clothing, or wages to provide themselves, which, for the able-bodied, would not exceed four dollars per month, and in that proportion for females and their children as they grow up; a free passage would be given to them to Demerara, where they would be divided, and 20 to 30 placed on one plantation.43

Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. responded favorably to Gladstone request and conceded that they engaged in negotiating in indentured labor even boasting, “Within the last two years upwards of 2,000 natives have been sent from this [company] to the Mauritius, by several parties here, under contracts of engagement for five years.”44 Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. eagerly received the proposal and explained that they saw no procedural obstacles or difference in sending Indian indentured laborers to the British West Indies.

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43 Ibid.
44 “Letter from Messrs. Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. to John Gladstone, Esq. 6 June 1836.” Parliamentary Papers, LII No. 232, 1837-38. (MF 41), 413-14
than to Mauritius. To serve Gladstone’s needs, Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co.
recommended the use of “hill coolies,” because:

The contracts, we believe, are all of a similar nature; and we enclose copy of one, under which we have sent 700 or 800 men to the Mauritius; and we are not aware that any greater difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies, the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they agree to go to, or the length of the voyage they are undertaking. The tribe that is found to suit best in the Mauritius is from the hills to the north of Calcutta, and the men of which are all well-limbed and active, without prejudices of any kind, and hardly any ideas beyond those of supplying the wants of nature, arising it would appear, however, more from want of opportunity than from any natural deficiency, of which there is no indication in their countenance, which is often one of intelligence. They are also very docile and easily managed, and appear to have no local ties, nor any objection to leave their country.45

Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. also offered suggestions on proven methods of managing the Indian laborers and counseled Gladstone to “give [his] managers sufficient power to insist upon [the laborers] performing any reasonable task they may be set to. Such has been the case in the Mauritius, and in one or two instances where the men have been idle or lazy, they have been punished by the competent authority.”46

After securing the necessary permits, 437 laborers set sail in January 1838 aboard the *Whitby* and Gladstone’s *Hesperus* and on 6 May 1838, the first Indian indentured laborers arrived in British Guiana.47 At the end of

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 John Scoble, *Hill Coolies: Exposure of the Deplorable Conditions of the Hill Coolies in British Guiana and Mauritius, ands the Nefarious Means by*
August, Sir Henry Light, the governor of British Guiana, toured the colony and inspected the conditions of the laborers. Light found that although some laborers wanted to return to India because the initial problems of insect attacks that caused the laborers discomfort, Light reported:

I have Reason to believe they abandoned the Idea of Return. From the Reports I have received, and from my personal Observation, the Coolies appear satisfied with their Position, and have not disappointed their Employers.48

John Scoble of the British Anti-Slavery Society visited British Guiana shortly after the importation of the laborers and published an article in the British Emancipator heavily criticizing Governor Light’s report to the Colonial Office that “the Coolies appear satisfied with their Position.”49

which they were Induced to Resort to the Colonies (London: Harvey and Darnton, 1840), 8. According to Scoble, the official account revealed that the indentured laborers sailed from Calcutta, 170 persons aboard the Hesperus (155 men, five women, and ten children), and 267 on the Whitby (250 men, seven women, and ten children).


49 Ibid., 22.
Table I  Distribution of Indentured Laborers in British Guiana, 1838

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estate</th>
<th>Proprietor</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vreed-en-Hoop</td>
<td>John Gladstone, Esq.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vriedestein</td>
<td>John Gladstone, Esq.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Regina</td>
<td>Messrs. Moss</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellevue</td>
<td>A. Colville, Esq.</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterloo</td>
<td>James Blair, Esq.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highbury</td>
<td>Messrs. Davidsons &amp; Co.</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>385</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the article, Scoble declared that the British “public has been deceived with the idea that the Coolies are doing “well;” such is not the fact.” Instead, Scoble claimed the ability to “speak confidently” about the Bellvue plantation and alleged that “the poor friendless creatures are miserably treated” and the laborers made two attempts to escape and when recaptured claimed they wanted to return to Calcutta. Scoble further explained:

I inquired of Mr. Berkeley, who is a teacher on the place, respecting food; he said they had enough of rice, and I think “fat” or lard. Deaths, he said, more than ten have died on this place, Bellevue, and the manager (Russell) refuses to give a rag of clothes to bury them in. I had one of these Coolies in my own place, who is capable of saying a few words in English; he told me, “Russell no good; Coolie sick salt, salt no more.” He was all but naked; and a friend present gave him a few old raiments, which seemed highly to please him. They are paid here with the Company’s rupees, five rupees a month. Is not this scandalous? They have been offered by the merchants two bits a piece for them. I do

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50 Scoble, 9. The data from the table used came from the House of Commons, 21 February 1840, No. 77, 51-2. Scoble mentioned that the table showed a “difference in the numbers landed and located upon the estates, of twelve Coolies, the cause of which cannot be gathered from the papers. It is of importance, that this point should be cleared up.”
not believe they can get its value in the colony. Ought not the planters to be compelled to give their value in Demerara silver currency? I have also heard that two from Gladstone’s estate escaped through the bush, and were captured by Captain Falant, at Fort Island, in the Essequibo River, and brought back to the plantation. Surely these things are far from being “well;” the one alluded to above told me, “Calcutta better.”51

In April 1839, Governor Light reported to the Colonial Secretary cases of abuse on Gladstone’s Vreen-en-Hoop estate, where the interpreter, Henry Jacobs, used a cat-o’-nine on laborers for leaving the plantation without permission and “had their backs washed with Salt and Water.”52 Concerned by the reports coming out of British Guiana, in 1839 the Colonial Office sent James Spedding to investigate the high mortality rates and conditions of the Indian laborers. Spedding found that 53 out of the 412 laborers died “that is to say, rather more than one in eight!”

Spedding blamed the high mortality rates on the laborers’ poor hygienic habits, and exonerated the government, estate proprietors, and agents of any abuses. Instead, Spedding criticized Scoble for exaggerating the accounts of abuses and in regards to the Henry Jacobs episode, maintained that floggings, though illegal, “were in no respect cruel; indeed they were no more than the Coolies had been use [to] in their own country to submit to from the superintendents.”53 On 6 March 1838, Lord Brougham repealed the order allowing indentured labor to the West Indies despite protests, but in any

51 Parliamentary Papers, XXXIX No. 463, 1839. (MF 42), 266-67.
52 Kale, 25.
53 Ibid., 28.
event, the Government of India suspended indentured emigration on 28 November 1838 and commissioned the governments of the presidencies of Madras, Bombay, and Bengal to investigate the system of indenture and conditions of the laborers.54

Despite the abuses in the system of indentured labor that legitimized comparisons to the previous system of slavery, the contractual agreement rendered the indenture system different from slavery by introducing the element of “free choice.” The conditions that would have caused an individual to make such a choice proved of little value to those who traded in Indian indentured laborers. The contract and “free choice” that made the system different from slavery also rendered the Indian indentured labor system vastly different from free labor since the contract bonded the laborers into a period of “slave-like” conditions. The very contract and laws that determined the relation of the indentured laborer to social structure also determined the limits of the indentured laborer’s “free choice.” Certainly, the contract gave the indentured laborer an estimation of their entitled rights but the laws and ordinances that helped define the limits of the indentured laborers’ actions also presented avenues for the planters to exploit. In 1897, Ordinance 24 of Trinidad and Tobago established that immigrants absent from work without a “lawful excuse,” who neglected or failed to attend “any particular work,” or refused “to begin or finish any particular work” as directed by “some duly

54 Erickson, 133.
authorized person,” such immigrant, “shall be deemed to be unlawfully absent from work and shall be liable to have the period of his indenture extended by as many days as he may be judged to have been unlawfully absent.”\footnote{Ordinance 24 (1897).} Thus, between these worlds of “freedom” and “unfreedom” the Indian indentured immigrants had to negotiate the social relations of those around them in order to create a space for themselves.

In 1909, George Fitzpatrick explained to the Sanderson Committee that the planters abused the immigration regulations on laborers who attempted to visit friends or relations on other estates and had to face “the ordeal of getting a written pass from his employer.”\footnote{Ramesar, 34.} Clearly, the actions of the planters made the indentured laborer keenly aware of their \textit{bondedness} and forced those under indenture to realize their position in society as they undoubtedly compared themselves to other members of society to include the time-expired indentured laborers. Apart from the ideology of “racial class solidarity” that the planters sought to inculcate among the island’s population as a method of control derived from the memory of slavery, the planters continually sought to develop the social relations with the indentured laborer as a capital enterprise and the indentured laborer continually resisted the structure of social relations that the planters attempted to force upon them. Thus, although the Indian indentured labor system differed from slavery, the social

\footnote{Ordinance 24 (1897).}
\footnote{Ramesar, 34.}
structure that governed relations accentuated the parallels between the two systems.

**Like sardines in a tin**

The government of India and the British authorities took precautions to prevent the indenture system from degeneration into another evil institution of slavery. The first formal steps in defining the rights of the indentured laborers by the government of India came after a series of escalating abuses that began in 1834 when G. C. Arbuthnot privately recruited 36 “Hill Coolies” to work on the plantations in Mauritius. On 9 September 1834, in the presence of the Chief Magistrate and the Superintendent of the Calcutta Police, Arbuthnot secured the thumb impression from these literate “Hill Coolies” for a five-year contract that included free return passage with wages of 5 Rs. per month. With slavery abolished, the increased demand for labor resulted in fourteen ships with privately recruited indentured laborers leaving Calcutta for Port Louis, Mauritius between 1 August 1834 and the end of 1835. The poor quality of the laborers and the concerns about fraud in the recruiting process forced the Governor of Mauritius, Major-General Sir. W.

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Nicolay, to act and demand a rudimentary set of standards for immigrants arriving in Mauritius.

Nicolay had good reason for concern, apart from the unscrupulous and dubious methods of recruiting, agents for the planters packed indentured laborers “like sardines in a tin” with no medical assistance aboard sub-standard sailing vessels carrying rice and other cargo to Mauritius. Ill treated and underfed, diseases spread rapidly among the laborers in the congested and poorly maintained vessels that resulted in high mortality rates among the indentured laborers. Unable to understand the contract and the location of where they would perform their term of service, many laborers jumped overboard to their deaths when the ships entered the open ocean. The indentured laborers’ plight followed them to the Mauritian plantations whose owners were infamous for their brutal treatment of slaves. Although

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58 Sudhansu Bimal Mookherji, *The Indenture System in Mauritius, 1837-1915* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962), 16-19. In responding to the Government of Bengal’s request regarding the conditions of the Indians indentured laborers in Mauritius, Nicolay suggestions included compulsory medical inspections and vaccinations for the indentured laborers leaving India as well as the inclusion of a clause in the contract binding the employer to provide free return passage for time-expired indentured laborers.

59 Sarup, 87. Some of the possible reasons that may have caused the laborers to commit suicide by jumping overboard, apart from those who experienced second thoughts about their decisions, included victims of ill treatment, and cases of forcible abductees seeking to escape, some preferred suicide rather than cross the seven seas that would result in the loss of caste and subsequent ostracism from Indian society. In addition, some laborers committed suicide believing that their destination was the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, a prison for those serving life sentences and political prisoners.
intending-indentured laborers received assurances that labor on Sundays, unlimited hours of work, and corporal punishment were illegal, the planters in Mauritius failed to recognize the distinction between slave labor and indentured labor and demanded 14-16 hour working days without holidays, inflicted corporal punishment, and restricted the laborer’s movement even after working hours. Ordinances 16 and 17 which approved of these working conditions by the Mauritius Council had to be vetoed by His Majesty’s Colonial Office who found it concerning that “such Acts could be agreed to either by the Governor of the Council (and was of the opinion that) freedom must be ill-understood at Mauritius.”

The evils in the system of indentured labor in Mauritius came to the attention of the Calcutta press who publicized the matter in March through April of 1837 after investigating reports of the high incidents of disease and deaths on ships transporting laborers bound for Mauritius. When Asiatic cholera forced the quarantine of three overcrowded vessels, the William Wilson, the Adelaide, and the Indian Oak, all of which lacked the presence of any medical officers and transported cargoes of rice, it forced the government of India to examine the system of indentured labor in Mauritius. In addition, J.P. Woodstock and T.C. Scott of the Bengal Civil Service visited Mauritius and reported to Lord Auckland that the deplorable conditions of the voyage

60 Mookherji, 17.
demanded improvement.\textsuperscript{61} Consequently, the Government of India passed Act V that came into effect on 1 June 1837 to regulate the recruitment of Indian indentured laborers followed by Act XXXII on 20 November 1837 that, among the many stipulations, required Agents to ascertain that the intending laborer “fully understands the terms of the contract” and the laborer “is desirous to fulfill the same.”\textsuperscript{62} At the very least, the passing of Act V and Act XXXII showed that the Government of India attempted to prevent fraudulent recruiting and confirmed that the indentured laborers willingly consented to the conditions of service. The presence of laws and legislation aimed at securing the rights of indentured persons added yet another dimension to the social relation virtually absent in relations with slaves, however such legislation showed the “unfreedom” of the laborer in relation to those who recruited them.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{62} Sarup, 257-59.
Figure I

East Indian Indentured Laborers Arriving in Trinidad (1845-1886)\(^{63}\)

\(^{63}\) *General Registers (1854-86)*. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. The data collected from the *General Registers* shows that a relatively small number of indentured laborers died on the voyage to Trinidad as a result of the intervention by the colonial authorities in improving the system of transportation from India to the colonies.
The social relation between the indentured laborers and the colonial authorities allowed the indentured laborers with the ability to use the legal institution to address violations of their established legal rights. The indentured laborer system afforded the protection to the laborers and the legal means to rectify injustices to the laborers—an entitlement denied to slaves. Yet, laws and the system of justice did not always guarantee the “freedom” of the laborers. The McNeil and Lal’s Report commissioned to investigate the conditions of the Indian indentured labor in the colonies as a consequence of the growing concerns in India found problems in the operations of the legal system that proved disadvantageous to the indentured laborers. The report found that the laborers complaining against their employers were “handicapped by poverty.” Not only did they lack the means to obtain legal advice, frequently witnesses declined to testify against their employers. Aggrieved laborers faced prejudiced magistrates who gave “undue weight to the statements of the estate officers,” the courts lacked competent interpreters, and in many cases “certain sections of the Ordinance provided unduly severe penalties, others were too restrictive, and that Magistrates sometimes awarded excessive punishments.”

64 Chimman Lal and James McNeil, *East India (Indentured Labour) Report to the Government of India on the Conditions of Indian Immigrants in*
Report revealed that the system of justice for the indentured laborers proved biased, inefficient, and unimaginative in making accommodations for even the most basic of problems in dealing with impoverished, uneducated, bonded laborers with their rudimentary, if any, knowledge of the English language. The failure of the colonial authorities to consider the practical implementation of the legislative measures regarding the Indian indentured labor showed that such symbolic gestures merely served to satisfy the imagination of the officials mind into believing that the legislative actions signified a considerable improvement from slavery when they knew that the system lacked the basic elements to function such as translators.

In the story of immigration, the problems that evolved always seem to appear when the authorities failed to save the laborers from themselves. In 1845, after petitions from the West Indian planters, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Stanley reversed the policies of his predecessors and allowed indentured labor from India to the West Indies. The report from the Bengal committee that found the absence of regulations as the main problem renewed interest in

_Four British Colonies and Surinam_ (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1915), 23. In 1913, Mr. James McNeil and Mr. Chimman Lal visited the British West Indies to report on the system of Indian indentured immigration as practiced in British Guiana, Jamaica and Trinidad, Fiji and Surinam. Although the McNeil and Lal report appeared generally favorable, criticisms of the system in India led Lord Hardinge, the then Viceroy of India, to announce in the Indian Legislative Council in April 1916 the determination of the Government to abolish the system.
the scheme. In a letter to Gladstone in July 1846, Lord Harris acknowledge the need for government regulation in saving the indentured laborer from himself:

My desire has been impartially to study the interest of both parties, at the same time never to lose sight of the fact that the coolies were 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 idly 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.

Despite the preconceived notions and prejudices of the Indians in general by many officials, the colonial authorities tried to intervene when possible to prevent abuses. In one of the many contradictions of the system of indenture, the intent of the colonial authorities in securing the wellbeing of the Indian indentured laborers often conflicted with the individuals responsible for executing the system. Recruiting of the laborers in India and preventing abuses by the planters in the colonies remained a major concern for the colonial authorities throughout the lifetime of the system. This does not mean that abuses did not occur, fraudulent recruiting practices plagued the system and attempts by the planters to revive slave like relationships

65 Ibid., 134.
66 Comins, 4. George Francis Robert Harris (Third Baron Harris) served as the Governor of Trinidad from 1846-1854.
continuously occurred. However, the colonial authorities decision to take an active role in preventing such abuses demonstrated a marked difference in the relationship with the laborer to the government—a feature absent during slavery.

The Colonial Emigration Act XXIV of 1852, passed by the Government of India attempted to address the problem of “Crimping” or fraudulently recruiting persons by establishing severe penalties such as fines of up to 500 Rs., with a possible six-month prison term. The measures by the authorities appeared to have an impact on the recruiting practices where reports deception or misrepresentation than coercion and entrapment became a more common complaint although cases of kidnapping surfaced from time to time.

A letter of inquiry from the Protector of Immigrants in Trinidad to the

67 Colonial Emigration Act XXIV of 1852, (14 May 1852). Passed by the Governor General of India in Council, Act XXIV explicitly defined “crimping” as:

Any person who by force of fraud, unlawfully detains in any place or decoys to any place any Native of India, with intent to force or prevail upon him to enter into any service, or contract for service to be performed out of the Territories under the Government of the East India Company into which he was not minded to enter without such force or fraud, or who by means of false imprisonment, intoxication, intimidation, force or fraud, causes any Native of India to enter into any such service or contract for service, or who attempts, by force or fraud or by any false promise, pretence or representation, to cause any Native of India to depart either by land or water from the Territories under the Government of the East India Company, is a crimp, and guilty of crimping, within the means of this Act.
Protector of Emigrants in Madras showed that even as late as 1914 the issue of kidnapping remained a concern:

With reference to a male emigrant name Bajee Sahib alias Shamsher Ali, who is now in Trinidad, “Picton” Estate, Naparima, No. 134703, ex S.S. “MUTLAH” 7th Oct. 1910, I humbly wish to know the following:

1. A letter from the boy received here in February said that he was purchased by a man there and that he will be sent to Africa—A translation of the letter herewith sent.

   Is it possible that the boy was sold?
   Is it possible to send him off to another Country?

2. It is now four years since he emigrated, once before on a request from me to the commutation amount was mentioned as Rs. 465 (Via your D. Dis. 423 of 1911 dated 16 August 1911). The father tried his best but was unable to get even a fourth of the amount. The poor old man desires to know what the amount will be, if the boy leaves by the end of the year. He further wishes to know if he will be brought back to Madras free of cost.

   The circumstances under which the boy was kidnapped by another was stated in my letter to your office to which your office replied on 30.3.1911 (D. Dis. 164/1911). The poor old man is very anxious to see the boy before he dies—He is now over 70 years.68

While this letter appears to show a case involving an abuse of the system, it also shows the colonial authorities attempts to address this matter and highlights the role of the Protectors. The position of Protector of Immigrants in Trinidad evolved from the various ordinances of the Legislative Council that sought to administer the Indian immigration in Trinidad. The Protector of Immigrants sought to look after the general welfare of the

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68 “Letter to The Protector of Emigrants, Madras (27 March 1914),” National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago.
indentured laborers and had the right to inspect all estates to verify that the planters lived up to their agreement by provided adequate living conditions and fair treatment for the Indian laborers. McNeil and Lal found that although the Protector of Immigrants had the authority of the ordinances to “secure the welfare” of the indentured laborers as well as an inspecting staff, many of the smaller villages remained neglected from oversight. Although McNeil and Lal found a number of flaws in the actual method of safeguarding the Indians, casual observers of the time found that the system functioned reasonably effectively. One observer recorded:

The main features of the present immigration ordinance are the following:—A superintendent of immigrants is appointed, with powers to transact all business connected with the immigrants, their indentures, registration, condition on the estates, and their return to their own country. He acts as their protector, and exercises a strict surveillance on behalf of the Government. On any complaint from a Coolie, he has power to visit the estate, and at once, if the complaint be well founded, to cancel the indenture, and remove the complainant. No contract is valid without the approval of the superintendent, nor can it be of longer duration than three years. The same officer is bound to keep an accurate register of the immigrants, to provide them with food if not immediately employed on their arrival, to assign the services of immigrants to any employer whom he may think fit, provided that husbands are not separated from their wives, nor children under the age of fifteen from their parents, or natural protectors. He may inspect the condition of the assigned immigrants at any time, muster them to hear what they have to say, and is directed twice a year to visit every plantation where they are employed. Employers have to make quarterly returns of all immigrants in their service, date and causes of

69 Ramesar, 49.

70 McNeil and Lal, 39. The island of Trinidad was divided into three sections, northern, central, and southern which defined the area of operations for the inspecting staff.
death (if any), number of births, etc. For illusage, or neglect of duty, or
breach of contract, on either side, the superintendent can immediately
cancel the indentures. If this officer reports that the huts, or
accommodations provided for the immigrants, are bad or insufficient,
or if, for any other cause, he should think the removal of an immigrant
requisite, the Governor can at once interfere and remove them, one or
all, from the estate.\footnote{Underhill, 79-80.}

As a member of the Baptist Missionary sent to the West Indies to
observe the “religious conditions” of the ex-slaves, Edward Bean Underhill
examined the Indian indentured labor institution with particular attention to
the governmental oversight as he contrasted the laborers freedom with that
of the slaves. It appeared that Underhill examined the theoretical aspects of
the system of protection when he concluded that, “these regulations are
wholly in favour of the Coolie.”\footnote{Ibid., 81.} By his own accounts it appeared that
Underhill viewed the institutionalized system of protection for the Indian
indentured laborers as paternalistic. The very title “Protector of Immigrants,”
suggests both that the laborers needed protection and the colonial
government assumed a protective role. Yet the system of protection faced
criticisms. Tinker argued that under a similar system in Mauritius the
Protector attempted to secure the interests of the planters and Indian
indentured laborers with complaints “could only accept whatever came to
him,” since there existed no real means for redress.\footnote{Tinker, 225. This condition of bias

\footnote{Underhill, 79-80.}
\footnote{Ibid., 81.}
\footnote{Tinker, 225.}
also extended to Trinidad. Ramesar characterized the Protectors into two major categories: those who sought to “stand up” to the planters to secure the interests of the Indian indentured laborers and those who sympathized with the planters.\textsuperscript{74}

By 1848, the Governor of Trinidad, Lord Harris, believed that the Indian indentured system to be a failure. In a dispatch to Earl Grey, Lord Harris outlined some of the reasons why he considered the system of Indian indentured labor to amount to a failure:

\begin{itemize}
\item[(1)] it had been resolved, adopted and executed in too hasty a manner;
\item[(2)] a large proportion of unfit men were collected,
\item[(3)] the proper officers were not set at the same time,
\item[(4)] sufficiently strict government supervision was not adopted from the first nor permitted afterwards,
\item[(5)] the planters were ignorant of the habits, customs and language of the immigrants;
\item[(6)] unsuccessful efforts of the Indians to show that they were not well-treated and their complaints of not having enough to eat resulted in their being easily seduced away by some sidar in the neighborhood;
\item[(7)] when the immigrants moved around at will on the pretense of seeking work, they often dropped to the ground and died unless discovered by the police;
\item[(8)] lack of regular inspection made it impossible for the government to insist on necessary care for the immigrants.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{itemize}

In 1848 the Government of India stopped all emigration until further notice. The Home Office agreed with Lord Harris, and recognized that even the

\textsuperscript{74} Ramesar, 49. Some Protectors in Trinidad such as Charles Mitchell earned a stellar reputation in his efforts to secure the well being of the Indian indentured laborers. In 1895, Governor Broome described Mitchell as, “an independent and fearless officer, well-versed in the business of his department,” who performed his duty well without seeking the “good opinion of the planting interest.”

\textsuperscript{75} “Dispatch from Lord Harris to Earl Grey (1 July 1848),” Parliamentary Papers 1847-1848 (749), XLVI, No. 25, 327-328.
scant immigration laws required a large staff of officials to enforce. Lord Harris believed that some regulations would prove beneficial both to employers and employees. The Indian indentured labor scheme resumed in 1851 with the colonial authorities playing a greater role in the operations of the system. In this way, the colonial authorities attempted to secure the interests of the Indian indentured laborers and prevent a degeneration of the system into a form of slavery. However, while the colonial authorities implemented a bureaucratic system and various laws and ordinances to ensure that the system of Indian indentured labor remained distinct from slavery, they could not dictate the nature of the social relations by the rest of society towards the laborers. The Indians entered into a society where the social relations to plantation laborers had been influenced and shaped by slavery. The forces that acted in response to the unfreedom of the laborers forced the Indians to consolidate themselves into a distinct community who responded by holding on to what they believed gave them a sense of freedom, namely their culture. Despite the different social climates in each of the respective colonies that saw the arrival of indentured laborers, the system of indenture forced many core elements that reflected the disposition of those who left India to present themselves in different colonial territories that did not exist with official approval under slavery. In a twist of irony, the laws that often proved difficult for the Indian indentured laborers to seek redress also afforded those who crossed the Kala Pani the legal rights to practice their
cultural traditions that often came into conflict with the social customs of the society they entered.
Thompson’s suggestion about examining the “total life-experience,” raises questions about the ability of the Indian indentured laborers to absorb and respond to the conditions of bonded servitude in Trinidad.¹ The decisions of the many to venture into the unfamiliar and the colonial regulations that facilitated the large-scale migration of laborers offer an insight into the nature of the British empire and the imperial strategies that created, sustained, and attempted to save the sugar industry in the years following the abolition of slavery. The indenture system was part of a colonial policy that sought to address the consequences of another colonial policy—the abolition of slavery. The very existence of the British West Indian colonies depended upon the fluctuating demands, interests, and whims of the metropolis and the dictates of the metropolis had enormous impact on the social realities in those dependent states.²

The status of Trinidad as a Crown Colony meant that the island remained the responsibility of Great Britain, where “the inhabitants possess neither charter, legislature, nor municipal authority, by which to oppose any

¹ Thompson, 444.
regulations established.” Therefore the policies implemented on the island reflected on the British Government’s ability to address the economic crisis that threatened the stability of the colony in the aftermath of slavery. The abolition of slavery inevitably changed the nature of social relationships and labor relations in Trinidad. The Indian indentured laborers who came to alleviate the labor crisis also came from a particular society with a system of social relations that proved advantageous to the planters. The planters depended on the absolute control of labor during slavery—the labor intensive methods of sugar production in the British West Indian plantations demanded a dedicated workforce. In the malleable Indian laborers the planters saw an opportunity that would enable the continuation of the plantation system and the necessary relations of labor to capital that facilitated production in the technologically deficient plantations of the West Indies. Messrs. Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. anticipated the requirements of the West Indian planters when they recommended the “very docile and easily managed” Hill Coolies to

3 William Hardin Burnley, *Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad, and the Actual State of the Experiment of Negro Emancipation* (London: 1842), 5. Three years after the apprenticeship, Burnley attempted to examine Trinidad to determine the success of “negro emancipation.”

4 Philip D. Curtin, “The British Sugar Duties and West Indian Prosperity,” *The Journal of Economic History* 14, (Spring, 1954): 158. Curtin claimed that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the West Indian sugar industry operated on the small-scale “estate” model that relied technologically backward means of production such as animals for transportation and power and boiling the cane juice in open “coppers.”
John Gladstone. The new arrivals entered into a society shaped by centuries of clearly defined class relations that were highly responsive to any variation in the social structure. In Trinidad the Indian indentured laborers soon discovered that once valid notions of self-categorization paled in comparison to the myriad of social relationships that now surrounded them. At the very least, the Indian indentured laborers negotiated through the social relationships that existed between the laborer and planter, immigrant and established society, subject and the colonial authorities, and among themselves—even to the extent where the individual’s present circumstances conflicted with past traditions.

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5 “Letter from Messrs. Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. to John Gladstone, Esq. 6 June 1836.”
Figure II  The Great Estates of Trinidad

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The Indian coolie’s aspirations

In 1882, when G.A. Grierson conducted an investigation on behalf of the Government of India into the recruiting practices of Indian indentured laborers in the Bengal Presidency, Grierson summarized the popularity of the Indian laborers with the planters in the following way:

A Chinaman’s idea is to serve till he has saved sufficient to start himself as an independent rival to the planter. The Indian coolie’s aspirations, on the other hand, seldom rise beyond his being a well-paid coolie servant, and nothing more. For this reason the Indian coolie is popular, while the Chinese coolie is unpopular in the colonies.7

The popularity of the “Indian coolie” implied the planters desired that the Indian indentured laborers remain in a condition of unfreedom—bound to the plantation under a self-imposed glass ceiling that restricted their social mobility to a “well-paid coolie servant” at best. From Grierson’s account it appeared that the planter equated ambition with rivalry, though Grierson’s use of the word “rival” invites speculation. While Grierson’s statement may have been a generalization about the Indian and Chinese in a number of colonies, in the West Indian context, it appears questionable. The chances that the planters would be distressed over an indentured immigrant’s attempt to acquire the means to become a “rival” given the nature of the economic and social conditions of West Indian society seems unlikely. It is more probable that the planters’ concern would be the indentured laborers leaving the

7 Grierson, 6.
plantation at their earliest convenience—a point that Grierson would not have
easily overlooked given the thoroughness of his investigation. Another
possible interpretation of “rival” would be attempts of the indentured laborers
to cross class lines after their period of servitude ended, this may have been a
concern of the planters given the nature of the social relations they
developed. “Rival” in this sense would mean that the planters would have lost
control of the members of a class that they attempted to dominate in order to
continue the operations of their plantations in the only way that they
understood. Grierson’s observation brings into focus questions about the
behavior that the planters expected of the Indian indentured laborers upon
arrival in Trinidad.
Table II  Number of Immigrants introduced into the Colonies during the year 1845 to 1891

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Year</th>
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The nature of the labor conditions and labor relations in India, particularly with reference to agricultural labor and sugar production came up in the public forum in England when some proposed to boycott slave-produced sugar. In 1829, George Saintsbury wrote a pamphlet, *East India*

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8 Comins, 24.
Slavery, which explored the slave-like conditions that existed in India, as Saintsbury explained:

There are at the present moment many persons to be met with who, actuated no doubt by and honest zeal in what they believe to be the cause of humanity, are exerting themselves throughout the sphere of their influence to discourage the use of West Indian sugar, because it is made by Slaves—and recommending as a substitute the sugar of the East Indies, “Because that,” as they allege, “is the produce of free labour.”

Saintsbury attempted to demonstrate that Indian society functioned under a clearly defined system of unfreedom through its complex social ordering arrangement. In his account, Saintsbury cited reports that established “from time immemorial” the legal recognition of “hereditary slavery” and used the example from the Gentoo Code to show that the system of unfreedom extended beyond the actual “owning” of a person as property:

If a Brahmin has purchased a Sudra, or even if he has not purchased him, he may cause him to perform service.”—Gentoo Code (Halhed’s Translation), Sect. iii.

And this is the land whose sugar must be “free sugar,” its labourers being “free labourers!”

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10 Ibid., 7-8. Saintsbury account included reports from the Orders of the Court of Nizamut Adawlut, 12th June 1816, cited in a government report, Slavery in India, 346. Saintsbury also included a citation from the Minutes from the Bengal Consultations to show the brutality in the Indian system of unfreedom: “The practice of stealing children from their parents, and selling them for slaves, has long prevailed in this country, and has greatly increased since the establishment of the English government in it.”
This particular impression of the system of social relationships as it existed in India reappeared in Grierson’s report where he developed the idea that indentured service offered an escape from the oppressive system that existed in India. Grierson explained:

Different classes also have different opinions. The highly educated everywhere are in favour of it, with more or less reservation. This class includes the average native gentleman. The next step in the social scale—the zamindar, together with his servants—is everywhere (with rare exceptions) opposed to it. It is they who are able to make themselves heard, and who have most means of forming the ideas of the people under them. To a zamindar every coolie who emigrates is looked upon as so much property lost. An example of this feeling may be found in Patna, where I noted that “many men of the lower castes, such as Doms, Dusádhs, and Chamárs, are paid very low wages for their work, and eke out a livelihood by theft. This is not, however, due to the labour market being overstocked, but to the custom which has descended from generations, of a kind of Prœdial servitude, under which men of these castes, who are frequently drunkards, lazy, and improvident, are kept bound to their landlord by liabilities which they can never hope to pay off.” If such a man emigrates, his zamindar looks upon him much as a South American slaveholder is said to have looked upon a fugitive slave. The man was practically his property and the recruiter was a thief.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Grierson, 17-8.
Table III  Castes of Immigrants introduced during season 1879-1880

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Number of Immigrants</th>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Number of Immigrants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chamar</td>
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<td>Bahalea</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ahir and Satope</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>Bind</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahman</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>Mahurutta</td>
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<td>Ghar or Gour</td>
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12 Comins, 37.
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**Total** 3072

Grierson’s deliberately portrayed indentured servitude as a more favorable substitute to the actual living conditions in India that the lower caste faced that not only occurred on the daily basis but also continued through generations. It is therefore not coincidental that Grierson claimed that the *zamindars* viewed the emigration of the laborer to that of a “fugitive slave,” it is a deliberate attempt to emphasize the conditions of unfreedom that he believed defined the social relations of the laborer to the *zamindars*. In no way does Grierson attempt to disguise his bias when he claimed:

> Finally, I have often heard it said that the recruiters exaggerate a coolie’s happiness in the colonies, and hence recruit under false pretences. I agree with Major Pitcher in thinking that the exaggeration itself is exaggerated. In the British colonies, at least, it is manifest that a coolie is far better off than he is in Hindústán.13

However, many reports on fraudulent recruiting practices surfaced and the Government of India responded by including in the Emigration Act of

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13 Ibid.
1852 the punishment for fraudulent recruiting.\textsuperscript{14} Although the law required the Colonial Emigration Agent to inform the Protector of Emigrants of any misconduct by the recruiters no later than the day following the arrival of any batch of emigrants at the Emigration Depot, problems persisted.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Colonial Emigration Act No. XXIV (14 May 1852). The legal penalties for the fraudulent recruiting of any “Native of India” included fines of up to 500 Rs., with possible prison terms.

\textsuperscript{15} Grierson, 10. Recruiters divided into two main categories, licensed and unlicensed. Gender played a role in determining the function of the recruiter, for instance, licensed recruiters were always men while the gender of the unlicensed recruiters varied. In the recruiter hierarchy, licensed recruiters were sub-divided into head recruiters, commonly called sub-agents, and ordinary recruiters. The Ordinary recruiters were either subordinate to a head recruiter or independent.
Figure III  Newly Arrived Indian Immigrants at the Nelson Island Depot\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Courtesy the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago.
Still living a worthless life

In 1873, John Geoghegan, in his *Note on Emigration from India* reported, “grave abuses” in India where the recruiting of immigrants still included methods that relied on “force and fraud.”\(^\text{17}\) However, Grierson’s account bears some truth since many persons who decided to emigrate did so secretly. Emigration provided many with the belief that they could improve their condition of unfreedom to one that offered new possibilities. The decision to emigrate may have been the result of numerous circumstances that the individual sought to evade such as indebtedness or burdensome obligations. In addition, the spontaneous decision to leave and pursue promises of fortune would have aroused criticism from family and the community regarding the individual’s decision to emigrate, many would leave their native village and travel some distance before entering a depot. In such cases, individuals may have promoted the idea had been kidnapped themselves or fallen victim to unscrupulous recruiters that may have encouraged the general suspicion of recruiters. Given the scale of the indentured system, it is expected that just as many recruits went willingly, there were some emigrants who fell victims to the recruiter’s dishonesty.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{17}\) John Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India* (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1873), 2.

\(^{18}\) Ramesar, 12-3. Some migrated under false impressions, expecting to become teachers or clerks in the colonies, some were kidnapped, while others
Grierson sought to convey that the conditions that the laborers experienced under the system of indenture represented a marked improvement from the circumstances that the nature of existence that the members of the lower caste had grown accustomed to in India. The nature of the unfreedom that determined the relationship between the lower caste and the zamindars would be easily transferred to the planters when the laborers assumed their position on the plantation. The planters learned of the importance of having laborers that easily adjusted to the unfreedom that defined the plantation system after the experience with imported African laborers, Underhill explained:

The liberated Africans, who were brought from Western Africa, refused to work, absconded from their employers, and took to the woods, subsisting partly by plunder of the neighbouring estates, partly by cultivating the land on which they squatted. A settlement which I visited near Port of Spain, consists almost entirely of this class of immigrants, still living a worthless life, addicted to revelry and drunkenness. A few actually supposed that, by travelling eastwards, they should reach their native land. They had not been made to understand the conditions on which they were engaged at Sierra Leone.19

The system of recruiting persons in India focused on the planter’s need for agricultural laborers and sought the enlistment of lower caste persons from the agricultural classes where the emphasis centered on individuals rather than families for recruitment. The Trinidad planters had no intention used the indenture program as a means to escape capture from the police for crimes they committed in India.

19 Underhill, 76.
to develop a society with families from the immigrant laborers. The planters had no use for non-working immigrants such as infants and the elderly. They simply needed males capable of plantation labor at the lowest possible cost and demanded that the recruiters investigate the abilities of the recruits to determine their propensity to do manual work.20

He was just a Brahmin in Trinidad as he was in India

The disintegration of caste values remains one of the most important factors in the formation of the Indian as a homogenous social group. The very nature of the operations of recruiting, transporting, and working conditions on the estates forces at the very least, the partial dissolution of caste barriers to social interactions. The process of caste dissolution began with the journey from the sub-depot to Calcutta and continued while waiting for the ship. The limited and confining spaces allotted to the recruits made contact with members of other castes unavoidable. Even on the voyage to Trinidad, the living quarters of the laborers, an area of 12 square feet of space to each adult below decks, erased the traditions of caste boundaries. The higher castes had

20 Ramesar, 19-20. To verify the ability to perform manual tasks the recruiters often tested the new recruits. In one early report, after having the recruits chop wood, the Emigration Agent grew suspicious of their smooth skins. Further enquiries revealed that the recruits were from the following professions: “one Sipahi (soldier), one Parawallah (policeman), one Tailwallah (oil seller), one Jolah (weaver), and one Baniah (shop-keeper).” The Emigration Agent rejected them despite protests from the sub-agents.
no choice but to have their meals with members of other castes. On the estates the distinctions of caste became increasingly blurred since ideas of the self as dictated by traditions meant little to the planters and the overseers. In India, an individual’s caste often dictated occupation and social status that meant little to the operations of the plantations. To complicate matters, the names that represented a caste rank in one area often held distinctive meaning in different areas in India. This uncertainty of caste among the Indian indentured laborers contributed in watering down caste as a means of social ordering. On the estates many of the overseers were either of low caste or former slaves who viewed all new indentured laborers as a homogeneous group—new laborers who had to be trained to perform their respective tasks. However, the memory of a caste system continued to exist particularly with the reverence given to Brahmins:

My father came out [to Trinidad] at the age of 17 from school and the moment the Indian people in the barracks realised that he was a Pundit and a Brahmin they didn’t let him move a stroke—the women cooked his food, they washed his feet, they did his job in the daylight, in the nights he had to do their pujas, read the Ramayan, christen their children, marry them and he was just a Brahmin in Trinidad as he was in India...22

21 Laurence, 110.

22 Seesaran, 51. In an interview with Seukeran (Shiva Karan) related to Seesaran anecdotal recollections passed on from his father who came to Trinidad in the late 19th century. Seukeran claimed that his father acquired the name “Seukeran” on the boat so that “he could be disguised and not known as a Brahmin.”
K.O. Laurence claimed in 1875, British Guiana objected to the recruitment of Brahmins based on reports from the plantations in the 1860s of Brahman priests refusing to work.\textsuperscript{23} Although British Guiana questioned the productive capabilities of the Brahmins on the plantations, the role of the Brahmins cannot easily be dismissed. The memory of tradition, however unpractical in the new environment, remained an important part in the lives of the Indians who sought to maintain their identity by holding on to elements of their Indian culture.

The desire to hold on to their \textit{Indianness} became increasingly important as Trinidad society rejected their presence. The Indians the lowest position when they entered Trinidad’s society who viewed the religious practices of both Hindus and Muslims as heathen and idolatrous. In 1859, the \textit{Port of Spain Gazette} wrote:

\begin{quote}
It would probably be a far more edifying sight to see their worship made a show and exhibition of—doubly grievous to see in a Christian country a \textit{false} and \textit{foolish} worship, paraded openly and unchecked, and it is a fair dream to look forward with hope to the accomplishment (when these and all similar outrages on decency and common-sense shall be swept away) to give place to that sincere heart worship of the only true God, which, quietly in spirit and in secret shall some say be paid alone.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23} Laurence, 115. Recruiting agent protested the objections to Brahmins from British Guiana claiming that some Brahmin “clans” engaged in manual labor, such as the \textit{Buinhars}. The also claimed that since Brahmin often attracted people of lower caste to follow them, any prohibition would pose serious difficulties for the recruiters.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Port of Spain Gazette}, 13 July 1859.
While the issue of religious leadership plays an important role in the organization of the community, it belongs to the larger subject of religion and identity. The reverence paid to Brahmins polluted by the voyage to Trinidad by members of other castes, many of whom abandoned their own caste affiliation, demonstrated not only that some traditions die hard but desire of the laborers to hold on to elements of their Indianness. Instead of abandoning their religious identity to conform with the rest of Trinidad’s society, the Indians engaged in religious festival and the performance of rites as a form of legitimizing their cultural traditions while holding on to what they believed made them Indian. This was especially true of the Muharram celebration that became a festival of importance of both Muslims and Hindus—especially in the early years when the Hindus lacked the presence of the Brahmin religious leadership. The Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad became increasing aware of their minority status in a society that frowned upon their religious practices. Consequently, they employed congregational participation in festivals like Muharram as a response to the hostility they faced. Despite the religious differences of the laborers many participated in large-scale festivals that served as a reminder of village life back in India, it became an important element in the building of the Indian community in Trinidad.\footnote{Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec, "Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion," \textit{Ethnology} 30, (Apr., 1991): 154. Van der Veer and Vertovec argued that congregational worship, such as large festivals, \textit{puja}, recitations of the \textit{Ramayana} forged communal bonds in the}
While the indenture experience provided an opportunity for many to break free from the bonds of tradition that determined their social status in India and in coming to the West Indies, it also provided a foundation based on traditions and culture that Indian laborers used to define their identity in a foreign land. Thus, although caste lost its social organizing function even though the memory remained alive among the Indian immigrants who made the necessary modification to keep a version of the tradition alive.\(^{26}\) The recruiting process that had considerable impact on social relations was the focus on individual members for emigration that rather than established groups, such as clan entire sections or factions of caste members from the same locality.

Although the recruitment of laborers occurred in various geographic locations making it difficult for members to have a natural affiliation since having indentured laborers with little or no connection to each other provided advantages to the planter in maintaining control. The collective identity that evolved in Trinidad did not only have its origins because of preexisting bonds in India. It developed as a result of the social forces that acted on the immigrants when they came to the New World and compelled them to find the settlements that the Indians established after leaving the estates at the end of their indentured service.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 233. While purification process could be undertaken once the laborer returned to Indian, upon arrival in Trinidad, almost all laborers experienced some degree of pollution and even the loss of caste.
necessary means to enable them to carve out a space for themselves within Trinidad’s society from their past.
CLASS HAPPENS

Thompson suggested, “class happens” when the consequence of shared experiences, traditions, and values eventually causes the members to develop similar interests and political attitudes. Thompson believed that all of a particular group's experiences, traditions, social experiences, and values contribute to solidarities in class terms. In his work that dealt with the making of the English working class Thompson argued that the group’s experiences represented a “fact” of the political, cultural and economic history. In Thompson’s opinion, any assessment of the “quality of life” of any particular group must take into account the “total life-experience” of the people in question.\(^1\) Thus, when examining the emergence of an Indian class from the indentured laborers the experience of indenture becomes especially important in understanding how the Indians carved out a space for themselves despite the opposing forces that they encountered. This chapter examines some of the major social relations and experiences that played an influential role in determining the formation of the class-consciousness among the Indian immigrants. The areas examined in this section deals with labor relations, between the employer and the Indian indentured laborers, the colonial authorities’ efforts to protect both the Indians and the employers and

\(^1\) Thompson, 444.
some of the consequences of the legislation introduced, and the attitude of Trinidad’s society towards the demonstration of Indian cultural traditions and the issue of land grants and repatriations.

The creation and evolution of that Indo-Trinidadian economic class did not come about as a “spontaneous generation” when the Indians laborers boarded the vessels in India bound for the West Indies, nor did the Indian immigrants experience an “external force” that immediately transformed them into a new social entity upon arrival.² “Class happened” because the collective experiences that the Indian indentured laborers encountered in Trinidad created the essential elements within the social structure of Trinidad’s society. The social boundaries based on color, class, and ethnicity shifted with the ever-changing social attitudes towards the Indians while the new immigrants attempted to negotiate within the confines of the ever-changing space that society allowed them. The uncertainty of the flexible boundaries that defined the system of Indian indentured labor in Trinidad demonstrated that circumstances often cause individuals to continuously replace and modify the very ideas that once defined their identity and re-invent themselves to adjust to the new experiences.

Protests on the plantation often took the form of strikes and the refusal to work. The challenge to the government was to find a way to balance legitimate complaints of abuse by the Indian laborers against legitimate complaints.

² Ibid., 194.
concerns by the planters’ claim of desertion by the laborers. Protests against the conditions often took the form of cultural expression, notably through the *Muharram* celebration. In addition, the issue of land grants and repatriations became a source of tension between the Indians and the rest of Trinidad’s society who felt slighted by the government’s course of action. Collectively, the consequences of interaction derived from these circumstances had a profound effect on the Indian’s view of themselves and their relations to the rest of Trinidad’s society.

The initiation of those circumstances that brought the Indians to Trinidad began long before Gladstone’s experiments with Indian labor in British Guiana but with the imperialistic designs of the various colonial powers to extract the wealth of the West Indies that began when Columbus entered the New World.\(^3\) Gladstone’s experiment represented just one version of bonded labor in the legacy of unfreedom that characterized the method of plundering wealth from the West Indies. Despite the failure of Gladstone’s experiment, necessity brought Indian indentured laborers to the West Indies and they came with a culture that differed vastly from the they encountered upon arrival. The indentured laborers’ could not ignore their past as they sought to establish for themselves a future in Trinidad. The Indian indentured laborers’ past contained the core elements of the laborers’ culture and

\(^3\) In *From Columbus to Castro*, Eric Williams quipped that, “It has been said of the Spanish conquistadors that they first fell on their knees, and then they fell on the aborigines.”
traditions that conflicted with the new society that they entered and elements of their common past became the foundation of a collective “Indian” identity.

In many ways, Trinidad’s society demanded that the laborers undergo the process of creolization—the transformation and modification of certain pre-existing cultural traditions to adapt to the social demands in the new land. The idea that the Indians should adapt to the customs of Trinidad came from the middle class—the professional whites, wealthy coloreds and educated blacks—found its way in the various newspapers that represented their respective interests. Kelvin Singh’s, Bloodstained Tombs, focused on the Hosay Riots of 1884 cited many of the biased accounts of the Indians in the years leading up to the incident. Singh claimed that the middle class “campaign” that manifested itself in the San Fernando Gazette and the New Era intensified with increases in the Indian population in Trinidad.4

Migrants upon entering a new society often attempt to develop their own group identity to compete with the rival social groups of their new environment. In the same way, the existing groups often see the new arrivals as threats and respond accordingly. In the case of the Indian indentured laborers who came from varying backgrounds, the process of forming a group identity began when the individual’s affiliation to common cultural traditions they found with other Indian indentured laborers that evolved into a

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collection of individuals with a common view of themselves. To an extent, the formation of the collective identity of the Indian in Trinidad developed naturally from self-categorization and social comparison that became highlighted under the stress of the social tensions. Society and social relations played a crucial role and perhaps, the most important factor that shaped the immigrants’ identity and position in the social structure of Trinidad came from the contractual agreements and the period of indentured servitude. Accustomed to the habit of extracting resources to satisfy their ambitions, the years of labor relations dictated that the planters generally viewed laborers as an economic unit designated for exploitation. The social relations that the planters developed ignored the humanness of the Indian immigrants and reduced people to their economic value to the planters’ capital. To fully appreciate the experience of the Indian indentured labor it becomes necessary to have the laborer re-enter history and articulate the social forces that forced a class uniting relationship with other Indian indentured laborers. The forces within Trinidad’s society that resisted the intrusion of the Indians, which came primarily from the middle class—the doctors, lawyers, public servants, and commercial classes—also had the effect of forcing the Indians to develop a collective identity.

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This unpleasant affair is not yet settled

The ex-slaves recognized immediately after emancipation that their *bondedness* to the plantation was contrary to their “free” status and sought to leave. In addition, they also recognized that the social relations to labor that allowed the plantations to continue did not significantly alter with emancipation. When emancipation came to Trinidad, it did not bring with it the radicalizing effect of transforming deeply embedded attitudes that determined social interactions. The social hierarchical structure in Trinidad remained virtually unchanged—slaves were now called ex-slaves and could leave the plantations and officially own land if they were able to overcome the legal barriers designed to restrict their movement. The granting of freedom to the slaves merely served to subdue the overt acts of domination but failed to alter to the social structure. The ex-slaves understood the motivations of the planters because they had been part of the plantation and no longer wanted to continue living in that mode of existence. The planters remained the most powerful class in the island and sought to transfer the social relations to labor that existed under slavery to the Indian immigrants.

Their first encounter with the social environment that they entered occurred on the plantations. In the plantations, the owners and managers were used to dealing with the laborers by the practices that they learned from slavery. The old habits of treating laborers that characterized the horrors of
slavery lingered on the plantations. The colonial authorities had no desire in allowing the Indian indentured labor system to become another scar on the evolved Victorians. Therefore, in order to protect the Indian laborers and the planters’ ability to create profits, the colonial government created a framework for the protection of the Indians and devised laws and ordinances that allowed the planters to obtain the maximum value from the laborers. The incident at the Clydesdale Cottage Estate that resulted in acts of violence by Indian laborers against the owner illustrated the potentially volatile foundational attitudes on the plantation that the Indian indentured labor scheme rested on. In 1846, only a few months after the inauguration of the Indian indentured system, the owner of the Clydesdale Cottage Estate, Mr. Walkinshaw faced accusations of abusing the Indian laborers under his charge that came about after the laborers retaliated. The matter of indentured laborers resorting to violence against the owner of an estate was enough to prompt the colonial government into action. Eager to uphold the integrity of the Indian indentured labor system and its distinction from slavery, the colonial authorities sent the Coolie Magistrate, Major Fagan to investigate the situation at the Clydesdale Cottage Estate. It became apparently clear to Major Fagan that “great neglect had been displayed both as to conforming to the regulations and also to the general care of the Coolies and moreover that
Mr. Walkinshaw had been in the habit of hitting and kicking them in a most unjustifiable manner.”

Major Fagan ordered the removal of the indentured laborers from the estate much to the dismay of Mr. Walkinshaw who refused to accept Major Fagan’s authority and took the matter up with the Colonial Secretary. Mr. Walkinshaw defended his action by placing “much stress” on his never receiving an original copy of the regulation regarding the treatment of Indian indentured laborers. However, each estate that received indentured laborers received a copy of the regulation, which was also published in the *Royal Gazette* and copied into all of the island’s newspapers. Mr. Walkinshaw also informed the Colonial Secretary that it was Major Fagan’s personal bias against him that accounted for the negative reports.

For the most part the Colonial Office remained insulated from the influence of the planters and sought to address and avoid abuses of the Indian immigrants. This however, was not the case for the Government of Trinidad

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7 Ibid., In response to Mr. Walkinshaw’s complaint of unfairness to against Major Fagan, the Colonial Secretary sent Justices of the Peace and others present during the proceedings to investigate the allegations of Mr. Walkinshaw. Contrary to Mr. Walkinshaw’s assertion, the investigators found that Major Fagan had treated Mr. Walkinshaw respectfully despite the estate owners’ hostility.
who often accommodated the wishes of the planters.⁸ Even in the case of the Clydesdale Cottage Estate where the Colonial Secretary agreed with Major Fagan’s decision, Mr. Walkinshaw sought retribution by bringing up charges against the laborers for assault:

Since the removal of the Coolies from the Clydesdale Cottage Estate the charge of assault brought by Mr. Walkinshaw against the Coolies has been decided by the Stipendiary Magistrate, three of them were discharged nothing being proved against them, the other found guilty of assault but discharged as being justified on account of having been previously assaulted by Mr. Walkinshaw.

This unpleasant affair is not yet settled as complaints have been made by three Coolies to the Coolie Magistrate of ill treatment by Mr. Walkinshaw one of whom who complained of neglect during severe illness is since dead.⁹

The Clydesdale Cottage Estate incident presented the colonial authorities with a significant concern that required special attention to prevent the system from degenerating into a disguised form of slavery. In the infancy of the Indian indentured labor system in Trinidad the island had no official organization or governmental body designed to protect the legal rights of the immigrant Indians on the plantations. Even after the Clydesdale Cottage Estate affair, it was not until the 1850s that the Immigration Department began conducting inspections on estates to inquire about the working conditions and allocation of immigrants. However, with the arrival of the first indentured laborers in the 1840s, the system for monitoring the

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⁸ Laurence, 167.

⁹ C.O. 295/153.
welfare of the Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad developed from the haphazard collection of reports and records of the laborers on the various plantations. The actions of Mr. Walkinshaw at the Clydesdale Cottage Estate demonstrated the precariousness of placing “free” individuals into an environment of unfreedom. The Clydesdale Cottage Estate affair indicated to the colonial authorities the vigilance required to prevent the degeneration of the system of bonded labor to slavery. The different notions of freedom and unfreedom by the planters who needed labor, the laborers who bonded themselves with a contract, and the government who had a duty to its subjects shifted continuously. The “freedom” of the Indian immigrants in Trinidad, both during the time the laborer spent under contractual obligation and after in the eyes of the colonial authorities stemmed from the notion that “freedom” meant an escape from the oppressive social traditions in India. These shifts in the definition of “freedom” made it extremely for the Indians to fully understand their position in Trinidad society as they unknowingly infringed on the flexible boundaries.

The Clydesdale Cottage Estate affair and other strikes and actions against the mistreatment that the Indians felt they suffered from reveals the way in which they viewed themselves. Clearly, strikes as a form of protest revealed that the Indians believed that they had an awareness of certain

10 Laurence, 167.
rights they possessed or believed their contract afforded them.\textsuperscript{11} Such actions against their employers represent a criticism against the unfreedom argument since it shows that the Indians did not resign themselves to being victims of their contracts.\textsuperscript{12} Initially, the newly arrived indentured laborers from India posed no real disciplinary problem upon arrival at the estates. However, after a short residence, they gained a clearer understanding of their rights from other more experienced laborers. Most of the legislation pertaining to the Indian indentured labor in Trinidad focused on the rules regarding work. These laws also aimed at protecting the Indian laborers from being overworked or mistreated by their employers and also sought to protect the employers by providing redress from the laborers who refused to work and went on strikes.\textsuperscript{13} However, the issue of strikes itself posed a unique problem for the colonial authorities. The \textit{1917 Report of the Northern}  

\textsuperscript{11} Comins, 42. During the years 1882, 1883, and 1884, violent strikes requiring police intervention occurred on the estates of the Colonial Company in Naparima, at El Socorro, just outside Port of Spain, and at Laurel Hill in Tacarigua. The first of these major strikes was the violent disturbance at the Cedar Hill Estate in 1882 when a gang of workers assaulted an overseer. However, Comins noted that when the proprietor or the attorney lived on and managed the estate, such as at Brechin Castle and Orange Grove, strikes rarely occurred.  

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Trinidad Royal Gazette}, 22 April 1885. Although many breaches of contract were prosecuted, the chief problem was to prevent immigrants from evading work. A rather unique effort for such evasion was a form of wholesale labor resistance involving large numbers of Indians who refused to work. Officials termed this form of labor resistance “strikes.” These strikes usually occurred between July and October—during the wet season or immediately after.  

\textsuperscript{13} Weller, 49.
Division, found that strike resolution proved a challenge to the authorities because of the deviations in the accounts given by different individuals.¹⁴

**Concealed under the veil of hypocrisy**

Despite the oppressive conditions that the Indian laborers faced under the system of indentured labor violent outbreaks rarely occurred. Most historical literature point to the *Hosay Riots* of 1884 as the major incident involving the Indians and seldom mentions the other disturbances. Yet these few minor acts of aggression by the Indians played an important role in shaping the views that the newspapers of the time developed as they portrayed the laborers as unpredictable and capable of erupting into violence at the slightest provocation. Even as late as the 1880s when the Indians began to establish themselves in Trinidad as a permanent feature of Trinidad’s society questions about the nature of the Indians surfaced continuously. It is possible that the views of the newspapers reflected an awareness of the conditions the laborers faced by the rest of Trinidad’s society who anticipated a reaction from the laborers inspired these accounts. Undoubtedly, many accounts from the various newspapers reveal resentment against the Indian immigrants, but in the years leading up to the *Hosay Riots* of 1884—particularly after the Cedar Hill Disturbances—the editorials from

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the *New Era* and the *San Fernando Gazette* warned of the future violence if the colonial authorities failed to hold the Indians accountable for breaking the law. The editorial from the *New Era* warned:

> As a climax to the petting and pampering of the Coolie Immigrants, which, at the most extravagant cost, has been the policy of the last forty years, it may perhaps do very well; but we question whether, to the cunning eye of the Oriental, it does not appear to be weakness, which invites his contempt, and suggests a repetition (when his numbers will be more equal to his chances of success) of rioting and disorder, which possibly can only be quenched with blood, or satisfied with carnage and murder, which find easy victims in a community too divided in itself to cope with the unity of purpose for which the East Indian is so noted.\(^\text{15}\)

The *New Era*’s editorial touched on the issues concerning the presence of Indians that affected the middle class of Trinidad’s society. The *New Era* described the Indians as a unified homogeneous society waiting for the opportune moment to wreck havoc on the rest of Trinidad’s unsuspecting, segmented society. The editorial went on to question the cost of the Indenture scheme and criticized the government for its impotence in enforcing the laws, particularly Ordinance 9 of 1882 directed towards the celebration of the *Muharram* festival. Issues about violence and the celebration of the *Muharram* festival had been raised in 1882 when the violence resulted in the death of a participant. Inspector Commandant of Police, Captain Arthur Baker explained:

> Each year there has been trouble during the Hosea, street fighting and so on; and about three years ago a man called Harracksingh, a leading

\(^{15}\) “Editorial,” *New Era*, (13 November 1882).
Hindoo, was killed. The Hindoos are a great majority, but both they and the Mahometans join in the sacred procession, the Hindoos chiefly for fun and for paying off old scores, etc., as feuds often exist between the different estates on the score of precedence in the Hosea, etc.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the \textit{New Era} observed “the unity of purpose” as one of the notable features of the East Indians for the purposes of contrasting them with the rest of Trinidad’s society despite vast differences of religious beliefs shared by the Indians in Trinidad. The religious difference became the cornerstone for Captain Baker’s argument to justify the need for the colonial authorities to intervene and to protect the sanctity and integrity of the Muslim minority’s \textit{Muharram} festival from the “Hindoo” majority’s disrespect. Just as Grierson reported on the docility of the Indians to justify the actions of the colonial authorities’ indenture scheme, Captain Baker justified the colonial authorities’ decision to intervene on behalf of protecting Muslims in Trinidad during the \textit{Hosay} celebrations despite their awareness of \textit{Muharram} being a communal event in India.

The rather insignificant rebellion of the Cedar Hill Disturbances that paled in comparison to other acts of revolts that occurred in the history of the West Indies, assumed an important role in measuring the volatility of the Indian indentured laborer in Trinidad. As a precursor to the \textit{Hosay Riots} of 1884 and the interest the disturbances aroused from the \textit{San Fernando}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{16} Singh, 114. In the testimony of the Inspector Commandant of Police, Captain Arthur Wybrow Baker, to Sir Henry Norman following the \textit{Hosay Riots} of 1884, Baker recounted the origins of Ordinance 9 of 1882.}
Gazette made this minor act of resistance an important element in shaping the future relations of the colonial authorities and the Indian immigrants. The San Fernando Gazette reported that on 28 September 1882, the two policemen who responded to the disturbance on the Cedar Hill Estate that came about over a “misunderstanding” about the criticisms of an incomplete task the Indian indentured laborers performed. The newspaper reported that the Indian laborers refused requests to complete the task and became hostile. When the two policemen arrived on horseback to “appease the dissatisfaction” they met a “warm reception from the coolies” that resulted in the injury of one officer.\(^{17}\) The following day, the Inspector of Police along with a larger contingency arrived to restore order but became involved in a confrontation that injured several officers to include the Inspector. In an effort appease the laborers, a representative from Colonial Company Estates, Mr. Fenwick who was known to have a “favorable effect on the coolies,” came to offer mediation but “narrowly escaped the fury of the people.” The absence of many of the police officers raised concerns but the only real casualty was that of P.C. Harding that resulted from “the effects of heart disease.” The standoff was only resolved when the Inspector Commandant, Captain Baker arrived from Port of Spain with a detachment of “upwards of forty policemen.” The San Fernando Gazette reported that the matter came to an abrupt end with the

\(^{17}\) San Fernando Gazette, 30 September 1882. One of the police officers escaped injury because his horse kicked away the attackers.
arrival of the armed contingency from Port of Spain. The “coolies laid down their arms” without any resistance and even gave up the “ring-leaders” who were arrested and transported back to Port of Spain.¹⁸

Despite the lack of a formal investigation to determine the cause of the tension that incited the revolt for a seemingly inconsequential request to complete a task, it appeared that most understood the tensions continued to exist and would probably erupt again. In the immediate aftermath of the Cedar Hill Disturbances, Trinidad’s society—through the lens of the various newspapers, particularly the San Fernando Gazette—predicted future uprisings as repercussions as a consequence from the response of the colonial authorities’ actions in dealing with the mini-revolt. The Muharram celebration took on a special significance and many in the island used the celebration as a gauge to measure the Indians resistance to the legal and social laws of Trinidad. The San Fernando Gazette warned:

Among the characteristics peculiar to coolies, they are reckless and dangerous to society and should, therefore, be made subservient to strict and unflinching discipline and surveillance.¹⁹

The sentiment was enough to cause the colonial government to pay special attention to the Muharram celebration of 1882. The San Fernando Gazette did not distinguish between Hindus and Muslims but classified the “reckless and dangerous” behavior to being “peculiar to coolies” or rather all

¹⁸ Ibid.
Indians. The colonial government supported that view and sent an auxiliary force to protect the town of San Fernando from “supposed aggression of the coolies,” and had the HMS Flamingo anchor outside the town in for added security. To everyone’s surprise, the Muharram celebrations passed peacefully forcing the San Fernando Gazette grudgingly admit:

> It may be safely said that, as a whole, the Hosein passed off unusually quiet, and with all possible marks of good behavior on the part of the coolies. So far, therefore, as that day is concerned, the conduct of the coolies was both exemplary and reassuring. Either they have overcome the unpleasant feelings manifested but a very short time ago, or, with their characteristic dissemblance, those feelings have been concealed under the veil of hypocrisy.20

However, despite the peaceful celebrations of the Muharram festival of 1882, the tensions that the presence of the Indians aroused within Trinidad’s society had had been wound to a breaking point. That breaking point came two years later and the unpleasantness that erupted and the cover-up that followed in the official investigation came from the “veil of hypocrisy” of the colonial authorities.

**They cannot afford to pay for legal advice**

In 1846 Lord Harris and Major Fagan, the Coolie Magistrate, worked together in preparing a Code of Regulations. In a letter to Earl Grey in 1848, Lord Harris explained:

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20 Ibid., (25 November 1882).
After having given my best consideration to the subject, it appears to me that, in the first place, the immigrants must pass through an initiatory process; they are not, neither Africans nor coolies, for to be placed in a position which the labourers of civilized countries may at once occupy. They must be treated like children—and wayward one, too—the former, from the utterly savage state in which they arrive; the latter, from their habits and religion.21

Lord Grey who rejected the Code because he felt it was too “stringent” and lacked the any legal validity. Instead in 1847, Lord Grey made into law an ordinance designed to encourage immigration. Lord Harris felt was a disservice to the planters in rejecting the code since:

On the withdrawal of those rules, they [the coolies] returned to the habits which are natural to them: the left the estates, and were to be seen wandering about in the country in bands, and by the time that the Immigration Ordinance came into force, but few were remaining on the properties on which they had been generally located.22

On the ordinance itself, Lord Harris commented, “I cannot say that the Ordinance No.9 of 1847, for the encouragement of immigration, has succeeded to my satisfaction.” Lord Harris believed that Ordinance No.9 proved ineffectual in keeping the laborers on the plantations. Lord Harris maintained:

On entering into contract, the coolies were liable, on breaking their engagements, to certain penalties. In order to enforce these it was necessary, first, that the delinquents should be caught, then brought before a justice of the peace. Now, the great difficult is, in this country, to get such penalties at all to bear upon the delinquents.23

21 Comins, 5.
22 Ibid., 4-5.
23 Ibid.
Lord Harris believed that it was necessary for the Government to implement measures not only to keep the indentured laborers on the estates but it was the responsibility of the government to their ingrained delinquency possibly derived from their customs and religion. Earl Grey eventually agreed and in a letter to Lord Harris on 15 April 1848 acknowledged that the Immigration Ordinance “has been ineffectual, and has not succeeded in preventing the coolies from falling into fatal and dissolute ways of life.”24

When Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon examined the colonial contract legislations in 1871 found that in Trinidad:

the contracts provide for the monthly payments of wages, but an enactment of the Colonial Legislature prohibits any immigrant from suing for the cancellation of his contract, on the ground of non-payment of wages, until after the expiration of three months beyond the time at which such wages become due.25

The letters of Lord Harris and Earl Grey’s agreement reveals a particular bias by the colonial authorities regarding the Indian indentured laborers. The prejudice against the indentured laborers was also confirmed in the 1915 McNeil and Lal’s report found:

It was represented to us that indentured Indians accused of offenses by their employers labor under the following disadvantages. They cannot afford to pay for legal advice and assistance and do not know how to defend themselves. Usually the only witnesses they can call are their fellow workers who are unwilling to appear against their employer. Magistrates attach undue weight to the statements of the estate officers and if inexperienced in the ways of immigrants are unduly prejudiced

24 Ibid.
25 Carter, 48.
by irrelevant volubility. Interpreters are occasionally incompetent. Officers of the Immigration Department do not attend Courts sufficiently often to watch over the interest of the immigrants or actively to defend them. Immigrants complaining against employers are handicapped by poverty and the difficulty of getting witnesses to come forward. It was also pointed out to us that certain sections of the Ordinance provided unduly severe penalties, others were too restrictive, and that Magistrates sometimes awarded excessive punishments.26

In 1915, the McNeil and Lal report compiled a list of offenses that the Indian indentured laborers allegedly committed from the years 1909 to 1912. The Trinidad immigrant labor code now provided comprehensive laws for penalizing those who failed to work regularly and controlling the movements of indentured laborers, though in practice absenteeism still persisted. The interests of the immigrants however were less well safeguarded. The care of the sick was governed by a fairly comprehensive law of 1865 which required all estates to provide their own hospitals if they employed immigrants under indenture, and to arrange for medical attention therein—as British Guiana had required since 1848—but both the restrictions on leave of absence and the method of registering time lost while under indenture with reference only to the employers’ records, left room for abuse.

26 McNeil and Lal.
### Table IV

Offenses for which Indentured Labourers were Prosecuted and number of cases: 1909-12 (available data)\(^{27}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offences</th>
<th>1909-1910</th>
<th>1910-1911</th>
<th>1911-1912</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desertion</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>1668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence from work without lawful excuse</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>1466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal to obey lawful order</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect to obey lawful order</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagrancy and refusing to give particulars</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breach of hospital regulations</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malingering</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading immigrants to desist from work</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using threatening words, etc., to those in authority</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual idler</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to register marriages</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harbouning immigrant's wife</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enticing away immigrant's wife</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunk when at work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damaging employer's property</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molesting Inspector while making enquiries</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employing indentured immigrants</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting with wife of immigrant</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using false certificates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangering property of employer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to begin of finish work</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>1125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening to murder</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2800</strong></td>
<td><strong>2726</strong></td>
<td><strong>2373</strong></td>
<td><strong>7899</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{27}\) Ramesar, 44. Taken from the McNeil and Lal Report.
Table V  Action taken in cases in which Indentured Labourers were Prosecuted: 1909-12 (available data)\(^{28}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results</th>
<th>1909-1910</th>
<th>1910-1911</th>
<th>1911-1912</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number discharged for want of prosecution, or want of evidence</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>1441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases dismissed on the merits</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number fined</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number imprisoned</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>1532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number sent to hospital</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number sent back to estates</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2457</strong></td>
<td><strong>2289</strong></td>
<td><strong>2031</strong></td>
<td><strong>6777</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The McNeil and Lal report showed that the majority of offenses occurred in relation to the unfreedom of the state of the laborer. However, having undermined the Government of Trinidad, the newspapers that forwarded the interests of the middle class made a deliberate attempt to taint the impression of the Indians as unlawful heathens. At the McNeil and Lal Report in 1913, many of the Indians began who decided to remain in Trinidad established themselves as a powerful economic force and encroached on the social boundaries that the middle class built to define their position. Their increasing attacks on the government and growing resentment of the Indians in society prompted the government to reexamine it paternalistic role it assumed with the Indians.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.
In *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation 1838-1920*, Lomarsh Roopnarine portrayed the incidences of crime as acts of resistance against the oppressive conditions on the estates by adopting a *subaltern* approach of interpretation from. Roopnarine attempted to parallel Guha’s interpretation of peasant insurgency in colonial India to show that crime in the West Indies among the Indian laborers in some instances could be interpreted as acts of resistance. Roopnarine argued that the transformation of acts of social defiance into a criminal act represented a critical insight into understanding the entities that struggled within the Indian indentured labor experience. In Roopnarine’s opinion, the classification of the Indian laborers methods of protest against the oppressive conditions through strikes and refusal to work as crime represents a deliberate attempt to deny those laborers’ their voice by reducing their actions to merely insubordination. Roopnarine argued that minor infractions such as “Desertion” that were classified as “criminal” served to silence the

— Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism.” *The American Historical Review* 99, (1994): 1477-8. First introduced by Ranajit Guha in his work, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Guha adopts the concept of *subaltern* from Antonio Gramsci’s, *Prison Notebooks*, and *elementary* from Emile Durkheim’s, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* gave rise to a “new road map” to oriental studies through an interpretation of “history from below.” Prakash explained that the *subaltern* of Gramsci referred to the “subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant,” and the *Subaltern Studies School* led by Guha attempted to “restore history to the subordinated.”
laborers’ voices of discontent by reducing their actions to simple description as “crime.”

**Could we only get free labour from Africa**

In 1845, many of the planters and members of the middle class still believed that the continued survival of the sugar industry remained in the importation of African laborers. The colonial government abandoned the plan of importing African laborers in 1861 after wrestling with the difficulties of recruiting African laborers and whose introduction failed to impact labor market in comparison to Indian indentured labor. The Trinidad Chronicle even went so far as to put forward the argument that the Indians offered no major contribution to the sugar industry because of their inferior abilities:

> We have, in fact, scarcely any skilled labour in the island. To know how to drive coolies through their daily tasks, as the mules are driven through theirs, is all that is required of managers and overseers. If the finest machinery in the world were placed at their disposal, they would

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30 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 82. Guha alleged that the 1875 riots of Poona and Ahmadnagar was preceded by violence against the moneylenders in the previous year. To help clarify the obscurity, Guha draws attention to the victims of the crimes—the moneylenders and landlords. Guha pointed out that the elites in society, the moneylenders, landlords, and officials “lump all forms of defiance of the law as crime” while the peasants saw such acts as social protests. In Trinidad, the parallel presented itself as the Indians resisted the middle class continued attacks on their cultural practices, particularly with regard to the Muharram celebration that served the Indian indentured laborers as a reminder of their Indianness.

31 Wood, 80.
not know how to use it; and as long as the coolie is imported for the planter chiefly at other people’s expense, while machinery must be provided at his own, we shall see no substantial improvement.32

However, although the colonial government officially terminated the program to bring in African labor, as the Indians presence became increasingly intrusive to members within Trinidad’s society, the demand to revive the African program increased. As late as 1871, the Trinidad Chronicle challenged the government’s claim that the system was costly and unproductive. Instead, the Trinidad Chronicle argued:

Could we only get free labour from Africa, how many difficulties would it not remove? But to get really free labour thence seems to be the greatest difficulty of all. It would cost so little to bring them across; passage 20 days instead of 90; they are so docile, so teachable; they would amalgamate immediately with the settled population; they would make this their home at once and never think of returning; the indentures might be charged lightly and the terms in their case need not be longer than was needed thoroughly to teach them the work of the estates and repay the smaller coast of their introduction.33

Perhaps one of the major sources of contention between the middle class and the Indians immigrants was the significant cultural difference of the new arrivals in a society that associated class with its resemblance to metropolitan culture. The Indians for the most part resisted westernization and remained culturally loyal to their Indian way of life. The Indian immigrants continued to display overtly their distinction in Trinidad’s society from the way they dress to the language they spoke, and the festivals they

32 Editorial, San Fernando Gazette, 4 February 1871.
33 The Trinidad Chronicle, 17 February 1871.
celebrated, notably *Muharram*. The resentment of the Indians adherence to their cultural traditions appeared in the *San Fernando Gazette* and reflected the views of the middle class:

But almost immediately after the introduction of a people differing so materially in manners, customs and religious principles from those among whom they were to spend at least and industrial residence, it became manifest that great as were the benefits derived from their advent here, society and morals would be materially the sufferers.35

Despite the criticisms, the Indian indentured laborers maintained their sense of identity in their new environment by holding on to that which allowed them to maintain a sense of connection to India. In this way, the bonds that developed among the laborers developed into an ethnic community that transcended the differences of the laborers that defined their respective identities in India. Many of the Indians became enthusiastic supporters of the festivals that they associated with India. Festivals in India often provided an arena to demonstrate the discontent members of a particular group felt against another.36 However, in Trinidad, the *Muharram* festival represented something beyond the Hindu-Muslim conflict that bothered the colonial

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35 *San Fernando Gazette*, 16 June 1883.

administrators in India. *Muharram* in Trinidad grew in popularity as the Indians used the festival not only as a means to show their growing sense of power derived from their economic prosperity but also their *Indianness*. The *Muharram* festival demonstrated both the laborer’s affinity to their homeland and a deliberate attempt to distinguish them as a separate entity or “community” within Trinidad’s society. The religious nature of the festivals meant little to the participants whose main concern was the memory of India that the celebration evoked. In the *Hosay Massacre* of 1884, Hindus accounted for the majority of persons killed and wounded in violation of the colonial government restriction on the Muslim festival of *Muharram*.

Perhaps the major contributing factors of the resentment of the Indian by the middle class came from the wealth that the Indians earned during their service of indentured labor and the land grants some received after their completion of indentured service. This of course represented a stark contrast with the African slaves who received nothing and in many instances had to resort to squatting. An editorial in the *Trinidad Chronicle* commented:

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38 The *Hosay* festival in Trinidad is derived from the Shi’ite festival of *Muharram* that marks the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, at Karbala.
Any old East Indian coming to Trinidad and being informed that they 675 coolies, men, women and children who sailed for Calcutta last week in the S.S. Peshwa, took with them over $91,000 in bank drafts, coins and jewelry would imagine and with reason that the people had discovered a very El Dorado in this gem of the western seas; and at the same time he would be astonished at the deep and widespread discontent at present existing among a class which one would be inclined to believe possessed all the elements of happiness and prosperity. 39

When the Indian indentured laborers first came to the West Indies, the prospect that they would eventually become permanent settlers never received serious consideration from the Government of Trinidad. 40 Ordinance 19 entitled the Indian indentured laborers of Trinidad “free passage back from this Colony to the port of place from which he had embarked” after five years or within two years after the completion of the their indentured service. 41 The arrangement to offer free return passage had a positive effect in both inducing emigrants from India to leave for the colonies and alleviating the concerns of the Government of India especially after the Gladstone fiasco. 42 The guarantee

39 The Trinidad Chronicle, 8 October 1884.
40 Laurence, 384.
41 “An Ordinance to make provision for the payment of Expenses of Bringing into this Colony Immigrants from the Coast of Her Majesty’s Government. (1844).” Ordinance 19 (1884). The ordinance also stipulated that the laborers who wished to return to Indian provide the Agent General of Immigrants “at least six calendar months” notice before the anticipated voyage home.
42 Comins, 4. The Government of India suspended indentured emigration to the on 28 November 1838 and commissioned the governments of the presidencies of Madras, Bombay, and Bengal to investigate the system of indenture and conditions of the laborers after Lord Brougham repealed the order allowing indentured labor to the West Indies on 6 March 1838.
that the laborers could exercise the option of returning to their native land at the end of five years reduced the fears of many recruits and appeased the Indian authorities.43 Lal and McNeil described the arrangements for repatriation as “satisfactory,” noted an added benefit of repatriation with returning laborers. Lal and McNeil believed that repatriation demonstrated an implied freedom when laborers returned to India especially if they decided to re-emigrate. In their report, Lal and McNeil noted that repatriation helped alleviate Trinidad’s need and provided “a good advertisement” when individuals decided to re-emigrate since it helped “dispel suspicion regarding deceit practiced on those emigrating for the first time.”44 Although the conditions of eligibility changed over the years, indentured laborers who arrived before 1854 were entitled to free passage after five years of service, while those arriving between 1854 and 1895 had to remain in the island for an additional 5 years of “Industrial Residence” in addition to fulfilling their contractual agreement.45 The authorities in Trinidad enacted legislation to

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43 “Lord Stanley, Secretary of State, to Lt. Governor Macleod, assenting to immigration from India (31 July 1844).” Great Britain Public Records Office (London), C.O. 296/16. Lord Stanley informed Lt. Governor Macleod to make amendments in the Immigration Ordinance to guarantee return passage in order to allow Indian immigration program to proceed.

44 Lal and McNeil, 39.

45 Ordinance 9 (1847). The ordinance established that registered immigrants who wanted to leave Trinidad and have completed an industrial residence of five years with this Colony would be eligible to receive a license or passport from the Agent-General of Immigrants. However, if the immigrant failed to complete the five-year industrial residence requirement, they could
regulate repatriation by granting licenses and passports issued by Agent-General of Immigrants only to eligible registered immigrants who completed their “Industrial Residence.” Legislation also allowed indentured laborers who failed to complete their “Industrial Residence” requirement the option of paying the sum of £3 for each year they wanted to make up before they could receive their passport. However, despite the government regulations, the only problem mentioned in the Lal and McNeil’s report came from the immigrants’ complaint that applications for passages along with the deposit of passage money when payable, had to be made “months in advance.”

A piece or parcel of land equal in value

The story of repatriation assumed a different character when the prospect of losing laborers dawned on the planters. In 1845, the first batch of largely unskilled Indian indentured laborers arrived in Trinidad, five years later the planters and the Government of Trinidad faced the unpleasant and inevitable prospect of losing the now skilled laborers. The planters resisted the idea of parting with their proficient and reliable workers who had adjusted to life on the estates and pressured the Government of Trinidad to action. In

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46 Lal and McNeil, 38. Indentured laborers arriving after August 1898 had to pay for part of their return passage, males paid half, and females paid one-third, while children were granted free passage.
1847, the Government of Trinidad responded to the planters’ request and enacted an ordinance that allowed eligible indentured laborers the option to commute the free return passage for “a piece or parcel of land equal in value.” With the foundation set in place with Ordinance 9 of 1847, in 1869, twenty-five indentured laborers who had applied for return passages offered to take the Government of Trinidad up in its offer and decided to give up return passage for lands of equivalent value. Governor Sir Arthur Gordon saw this as an opportunity to secure a base of permanent laborers by using land to make the Indian immigrants into formally permanent settlers, acted immediately. Governor Gordon granted the request without official permission from Great Britain. Although Governor Gordon had no authority to make grants of land but was required to auction them at an upset price of £1 per acre. Governor Gordon’s initiative prompted an additional forty-five time-expired indentured laborers desiring to land grants with they promise that they would continue to do part time work on neighboring estates.

The Government of Trinidad’s decision had a profound effect on the future social relations between the Indians and the rest of Trinidad’s society. In the entire of the corpus of legislative policies enacted by the Government of

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47 “For Encouraging Immigration into the Colony of Trinidad, and the Industry of Immigrants.” Ordinance 9 (1847).

48 Laurence, 386. Governor Gordon received approval for his initiative in 1859 and set the precedence in Trinidad by subsequent authorities to offer 10 acres of Crown land in lieu of return passage.
Trinidad in the post emancipation period it would be difficult to find another governmental article more insulting to the slavery experience in Trinidad than Ordinance 9 of 1847. The ordinance titled, “For Encouraging Immigration into the Colony of Trinidad, and the Industry of Immigrants” amounted to a slap in the face of the freed slaves who attempted to legally leave the plantation—the horrific reminder of slavery. The legislation created conflicts and resentment while providing the establishment of the Indian immigrant class of landowners that elevated the status of the former bonded laborers who occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder to one with the economic resources to qualify as middle class. There was however another side to the picture. The granting of land to the Indian immigrants involved the complicated process of surveying that often resulted in delays and even misunderstandings. In addition, some of the land granted had squatters of mostly emancipated slaves that had to be removed. This led to major disagreements that frequently ended in violence.49

In the years following the abolition of slavery the authorities attempted to “condense and keep the population” of the emancipated slaves on the plantation by making the purchase of Crown land difficult. In adherence to Lord Glenelg’s plan, the Government of Trinidad enacted legislation made the

49 Ibid.
legal acquisition of land near impossible for the freed slaves. The authorities in Trinidad in conjunction with the planters established that the £1 was the lowest price that Crown lands would be sold at public auction and only in 640-acre parcels. The manipulation of the legislature failed to assuage the determination of many of the freed salves to leave the plantation, who in defiance of the 1838 Imperial Order-in-Council, squatted on Crown lands. In the years before Indian indentured immigration, the government attempted to assist the planters’ labor crisis by ejecting squatters from Crown land in an effort to drive the landless ex-slaves back to the estates. Realizing the futility of eradicating the problem of squatters, in gesture of compromise or an attempt at appease the squatters to work on the estates, Governor Harris offered those occupying Crown lands the opportunity to purchase the property. The conditions Governor’s compromise appeared in the Port-of-Spain Gazette, (27 June 1847) and stipulated the following conditions:

1. Persons whose occupations of Crown lands commenced before the 12th day of December, 1838 were to receive free grants of the land so occupied on payment of 6s. per acre, in lieu of redemption of quit-rents, of the costs of survey, and of the expenses of the grant.

2. Persons whose occupation commenced after that date were to receive grants on paying for them at the rate of £1 per acre, and defraying the expense of the survey and the grant.

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50 Brunley, Observations on the Present Condition of the Island of Trinidad, 140.
3. All applications for grants on the above terms were to be sent in before the 31st December 1847.\(^{51}\)

After a series of ineffectual ordinances that failed to adequately discourage squatting on Crown lands, Governor Gordon adopted a land reform policy 1867 that proved mildly successful and allowed squatters to purchase land. However, this form of appeasement failed to satisfy the population, particularly the middle class when evidence about the amount of money the Indians amassed and took back with them to India surfaced. Trinidad’s society resented not only because they left Trinidad with large sums of money but also because they remained with it and becoming a direct threat to the middle class who sought to defend their status. The *New Era* wrote:

> It may be interesting to others, besides the coolies who are now receiving £5 sterling in lieu of a ‘return passage’ to know whether this measure supersedes or suppresses the former one of granting a ten-acre allotment of land in lieu of a return passage (valued) at £10 sterling, to each immigrant willing to waive his claim to be sent back to India at the expense of the colony. There are many who saw in this grant of a ten-acre lot of fertile land, to the object of an expensive and elaborately fed immigrant, a lavish distinction between free and inexpensive immigration to the colony; and the pampered system of temporary colonization inaugurated under the auspices of the planter-governing class, and heavily subsized by the Executive at the expense of the general revenue of the colony.\(^{52}\)

The land grant policy in Trinidad did play an instrumental role in creating an Indian immigrant land owning peasantry and kept roughly two-

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\(^{51}\) Moore, 66. Despite the large squatter population, the government received a meager 1,090 petitions. By 1866, the authorities only granted 295 titles.

\(^{52}\) *New Era, Editorial*, 16 February 1880.
thirds of time-expired Indians in Trinidad. The Government of Trinidad benefitted from this scheme since it greatly reduced the costs of repatriation, kept an available supply of experienced labor for use by the estates especially in the crop season, and prevented a drain in economic resources from Indians who returned with their earnings. However, the system did have its flaws, in some instances the government granted land unsuitable for agriculture, many Indians preferred the land they bought themselves and when they were offered five acres and £5, many took the money and abandoned the land. Governor Havelock acknowledged that some of the land granted had been “exceptionally bad” and without access roads. However, this did not prevent critics of the land grant scheme to claim that the government’s measure only attracted a worthless type of immigrant. In the years following 1873, the government adjusted the to five acres and £5 and eventually later land grants were given at the Protector’s discretion, to immigrants of “good character.”

Directly related to the issue of land grants was that of time-expired Indians returning to India with considerable sums of money. The remittances of money back to India developed into a special concern to the colony. Many felt that this represented an economic drain in the already struggling colony. Rumors about and exaggerations about the amount of money that the Indian

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53 Ramesar, 81. Many considered the land granted in the areas of Malabar and Mausica, just three miles from Arima, one of the major towns in Trinidad, worthless since “no intelligent man would have it at any price.”
took back added to the concerns and added to the resentment of the Indians.

When Dalton visited Trinidad with the Queen's grandsons, he observed:

One gentleman assured me, that a year or two ago ten Coolies returned to India with £600, their savings while in his employ. It is no wonder that they are beginning to exhibit considerable reluctance to leave a country where they are so prosperous. The Agent reports, in 1859:

"Barely two hundred have enrolled their names on the register for return Coolies for back passage to India since the sailing of the Morayshire, in December last. Of these only fourteen are old immigrants, introduced prior to 1848; the remainder are principally those whose industrial residence expired in 1853, and of these so many have since entered into fresh engagements, that experience induces me to believe that not even one hundred would really present themselves, at any given period for embarkation. The number of free Coolies being somewhat over four thousand, a sufficient number to freight a ship may eventually come forward."54

Table VI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Tonnage</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Money Deposited with Agents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>2245</td>
<td>34854</td>
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54 Dalton, 88-9.

55 Ibid. About one-fifth of the total were women and children.
Dalton was not the only person who took notice of the amount of money that the Indians took back to India. The colonial authorities and the middle class became concerned with the flight of capital and sought to address the situation. The concern for the perceived economic drain on the island played an influential role in the Government of Trinidad’s decision to offer incentives for the Indians to stay. However the increasing economic prosperity of the Indians shifted the attitude of the middle class who felt threatened and began a campaign against the Indians that had a profound effect on the social relationships between the Indians and the rest of Trinidad’s society. Since the state began a concerted effort to keep the Indians in Trinidad the middle class began to highlight some of the problems that came with Indian immigration, namely to focus on the crimes instead of the economic prosperity of the Indians.
THE HOSAY RIOT OF 1844

During a special meeting in 1844, the Trinidad’s Executive Council decided to supplement the police forces in the town of San Fernando with military troops in preparation of the Muharram festival. On 27 October 1884, Major Bowles, Commander of the Forces in the British colony of Trinidad, arrived in San Fernando by a “special train” from the capital city of Port of Spain with a detachment of twenty soldiers. Inspector Commandant, Capt. A.W. Barker, along with seventy-four police constables also made the roughly twenty-six mile trip from the capital city to the town of San Fernando. On that very evening the H.M.S. Dido, a twelve-gun wooden screw-propelled corvette dropped anchor off San Fernando harbor to serve as an additional contingent to the forces already on the ground.\(^1\) Although the presence of this unusually large gathering of colonial forces may have appeared excessive to the community of San Fernando, it would not have aroused too much suspicion since it was not the first time that a military presence accompanied the Muharram festival—called Hosay or Hosein in Trinidad.

The Muharram festival has a special significance in Islam since it focuses on the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson. However, in Trinidad it occupied a central role in the immigrant’s identity and their Indianness. It

\(^1\) San Fernando Gazette, 1 November 1884.
reminded of their common Indian past, served as an instrument to express their imported culture from India, and because of the very nature of the festival—a means to voice their discontent. This chapter explores the colonial government’s reaction towards the perceived insubordination of the Indians in their defiance of an ordinance. The killings that came as a result of the actions of the troops and the inquiry that followed demonstrated that the Trinidad’s society refusal in allowing the Indians to

In 1882, the *San Fernando Gazette* criticized the colonial authorities for sending the H.M.S. *Flamingo* to San Fernando as an auxiliary force to protect the town against “supposed aggression of the coolies on Hosein Day” and reported that the peaceful manner of the festival rendered “the services of Her Majesty’s naval force quite unnecessary.” The newspaper went on to commend the behavior of the immigrants noting that, “the conduct of the coolies was both exemplary and reassuring,” even though the newspaper suspected that the immigrants’ unpleasantness “may have been concealed under the veil of hypocrisy.”

The atmosphere in 1884 however, differed vastly from the previous years. Governor Keates decided to confine the *Muharram* processions to the plantations and enforce Ordinance 9, which explicitly prohibited the processions from entering the town of San Fernando. The ordinance also excluded all others except the “immigrant or the descendents of immigrants”

2 Ibid., 25 November 1882.
from taking part or “in any way interfere with such procession.” The Protector of Immigrants claimed that the Governor felt that the Muharram festival, “an orderly meeting of Muhammadans for a religious purpose,” degenerated into a “mob of excited and wildly noisy and quarrelsome rowdies” because of the “Hindus” and “Creoles” who joined the procession and engaged in opium and ganja smoking as well as drinking. Neil Sookdeo in Freedom, Festivals and Caste in Trinidad After Slavery argued that “the elites” turned their attention to Hosay after Canboulay Riots in 1883. Sookdeo explained that in the post-emancipation years, the Carnival festival—once reserved only for the elites in society—entered the domain of public space. The masks that were once reserved for whites could be worn by all and allowed the freed slaves to express through art and performance criticisms of society. Accounts from the newspapers suggested that from as early as 1848 a deliberate campaign to portray the new Carnival, or as it was called by the masses, Canboulay, as a vulgar anti-social affair. As the Canboulay evolved into a two day street procession, efforts to categorize the festival as a violent procession gained a public voice as the Port of Spain Gazette published a series of aimed

3 Ordinance 9 (1882). Originally issued in July 1882, the full text of the ordinance was published in both the Port of Spain Gazette and the San Fernando Gazette on 23 August 1884. Section 3 restricted the procession from entering the towns of Port of Spain and San Fernando and Section 6 restricted the festival to immigrants and their descendents.

4 Comins, 42.

5 The word, Canboulay, may have been a corruption from the French Cannes Brulées.
at inciting the government to action. However, it was only until the
governorship of R.W. Keate in 1857 that a serious effort was made to suppress the Canboulay festival. Governor Keate waged a war against the both the Canboulay and Hosay festivals, employing police power against the Canboulay festivals of 1859-59 and again in 1883 and finally the Hosay festival of 1884.6

The San Fernando Gazette reported that soldiers and police constables came “to guard against the possible insubordination of the Coolies” and although “preparations were made” by gentlemen “well known” in the community urging obedience to the regulations, the sound of drums indicated the intention to carry out the festival in the “usual way.”7 The San Fernando Gazette reported that these emissaries repeatedly urged “day and night during Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday” for compliance to the law, but this seems questionable. In any event, it seems unlikely that any of these so-called “well known” members of the community would have had any influence in deterring participation from a festival of such significant cultural importance.

Edward Bean Underhill, who once served as a Baptist Missionary in India, visited Trinidad in 1862 to investigate the “religious conditions” of the Baptist Churches post-emancipation and observed that he “did not find that

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7 San Fernando Gazette, 1 November 1884.
any of the pure Hindu holidays, such as the durgah poojah.” Underhill spoke of one estate having a “rude temple” and believed that the “new life into which the Hindus come, have greatly modified many of their national habits and usages.” However, Underhill explained with limited knowledge that “the Mohammedans celebrate the Mohurram on a day in the month of August, claiming that during that time the tazzias of India reappear on the hills of Trinidad, and are thrown, at the close of the festival, into the rivers or the sea.” At a glance, Underhill’s observations appear contradictory since he attempted to classify the festival as one solely practiced by Muslims. More importantly, Underhill never considered the practice of the festival in India where it assumed a significant communal event that incorporated both Shi’ites than Sunnis as well as Hindus. However, Underhill’s observations offer an insight into the cultural practices of the early indentured laborers since the construction of temple structures, unlike Muharram tadjahs, would have indicated a degree of permanence that transient laborers would not consider practical. The McNeil and Lal report of 1915 indicated that employers granted “all facilities” to the immigrants for religious purposes and mentioned no instances of employers denying the immigrants the means to follow their religious traditions. It appeared that although both Hindus and Muslims were free to practice their religious traditions, Hosay developed into

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8 Underhill, 51-2.

9 McNeil and Lal, 32.
significant festival for the Indian indentured laborers not entirely because of its religious significance, though as a yearly festival perhaps provided a means to count the years of servitude, but because of its Indianness.

Both Kelvin Singh’s, *Bloodstained Tombs* and K. Haraksingh’s article, “Control and Resistance Among Overseas Indian Workers” point to the *Hosay* festival as being means to voice discontent to demonstrate against the established order. Indeed the religious significance of the festival—the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson Husayn as he fought tyranny and oppression—may have held a special meaning to those under servitude. However, it appears more likely that as Korom argued, *Hosay* as a ritual, became the means to express the universal yearning for India that both Hindus and Muslims shared during the indenture experience. The widespread popularity of the *Hosay* festival in Trinidad may have stemmed from its ability to “infuse” many of the “indigenous cultural practices” from those who participate in the building of the *tadjahs*. However, *Hosay* gave the immigrants an avenue to foster a sense of community, even among the Hindus and Sunnis who participated in the festival, by incorporating a tangential cultural tradition to the vast majority of the Indian immigrants by transforming it into an expression of cultural identity in Trinidad.

On the night of 29 October, *Hosay* processions from the Phillipine and Union Hall Estates violated the ordinance by leaving their respective estates and

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10 Korom, 107.
went down the Cipero Royal Road. The authorities made no attempt to interfere with their proceedings, however, Captain Baker and Captain Johnstone, of the Fire Brigade, advised the procession to use an alternative route. This may have caused the participants to believe that despite the troop presence they had no reason to fear any meddling from the authorities. They may have felt that the deployment of troops was simply a precautionary and unnecessary measure as it had been in 1882. In any event, the San Fernando Gazette reported that most places of business were closed in anticipation of the Thursday procession despite the fact that the government forces blocked the three entrances into the town of San Fernando, to prevent the entrance of any Hosay processions. At the Les Efforts entrance, at the junction with the Naparima Royal Road, Stipendiary Magistrate, Arthur Child, stood with Major Bowles and his force of twenty soldiers. A.W. Baker, Inspector Commandant of Police, positioned himself at the North Naparima Royal Road junction at Mon Repos with forty police constables, and Superintendent Sergeant Giblan along with ten police constables was posted at the Vista Bella Road entrance of the Town from the North Royal Road.

The San Fernando Gazette reported that “early in the afternoon” news that at the Les Efforts entrance with the South Naparima Royal Road. Accounts claim that Stipendiary Magistrate Arthur Child issued the order to fire as the Hosay procession came to within twenty yards of the troops. This resulted in the immediately killing of several members of the procession and
widespread pandemonium among the celebrants. As the news about the incident at the Les Efforts entrance spread through the San Fernando, as word got to the other Hosay processions en route to the town, panic followed. At the Mon Repos junction, Captain Johnstone of the Fire Brigade, and another citizen Mr. James Deennan, attempted to calm the immigrants. Reports claimed that the authorities “found it necessary that the Riot Act be read,” followed by Captain Baker’s command to fire, which resulted in deaths of five persons and forty-one wounded. Only Sergeant Superintendent Gislan and his party at the Vista Bella entrance “were spared the trouble as well as the regret of dabbling in human blood.” Superintendent Sergeant Giblan successfully avoided bloodshed by calming a group of “uproarious Coolies making for San Fernando” and persuading them to follow another route.11

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<th>North Naparima</th>
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11 *San Fernando Gazette*, 1 November 1884.
TABLE VII  

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However, the manner in which the colonial authorities responded to the incident and the conclusion of the official reports that allows this incident to become a prism through which the social relationships between the colonial authorities and the Indian indentured laborers can be observed. Stipendiary Magistrate Arthur Child maintained that the procession violated the prohibition against carrying lighted torches as they attempted to enter the town of San Fernando. This violation prompted Magistrate Child to order the troops to fire on the procession. Witnesses examined in the course of the official investigation could not definitively say if the members of the procession were made aware of the ordinances or sought a confrontation with the authorities.\textsuperscript{12} One of the witnesses, J.E. Andre, brought the incident to the

\textsuperscript{12} Madhavi Kale, “Indian Labor in Trinidad and British Guiana,” from Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora (South Asian Seminar Series). Peter Van Der Veer Ed., (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.), 82-3
attention of Charles Allen, the President of the British Anti-Slavery Society who publicized the incident in Britain and India.\textsuperscript{13}

The Colonial Office selected Sir Henry W. Norman, Governor of Jamaica, and a former officer in the Indian Army during the Indian Mutiny of 1857 to lead the investigation.\textsuperscript{14} Norman’s ability to communicate in Hindi and his previous experience in India may have been one of the probable reasons for his selection by the Colonial Office. However, judging from his reports on the incident it becomes apparent that a more appropriate reason for Norman’s selection was to exonerate the government of Trinidad based on his prejudice of Indians. Norman believed that the “Coolies” in Trinidad had been too “indulged,” and pointed to instances where “bodies of Coolies” went to the Immigration Office to express their concerns “carrying their cutlasses and other agricultural implements.” Norman believed that allowing the Indians to act in this manner lead them to think that they were “powerful.”\textsuperscript{15}

It therefore comes as no surprise that Norman’s report absolved the Trinidad authorities from any wrongdoings. Norman even went a step further


\textsuperscript{15} Norman, 46-8.
by arguing that the Hosay festival—which he insisted in calling Muharram—had lost all of its religious qualities and evolved into “a sort of national Indian demonstration of a rather turbulent character.” Norman argued, the Trinidad authorities had a right to intervene and in no way did they violate the terms of their labor agreements with the Indian government.

The British Anti-Slavery Society’s publication of the incident raised serious concerns about the treatment of Indian indentured laborers in the colony since it appeared that Trinidad police killed Indians celebrating a religious festival. In the economically lean years of the 1880s, Trinidad’s depended upon the system of indentured labor and any actions that would temporarily suspend the flow of laborers meant that some plantations would fail. The attitude of the planters towards the Hosay and the authorities seemed at odds despite the dependency of both parties on the indentured labor system. An editorial in the New Era newspaper raised the question of repatriation and the increasing influence of the Indian immigrants that provided “the means of acquiring social influence in the lap of a pagan people,” where the government failed to provide the “special means of education” that would indoctrinate them into “Christian civilization.”

In other words, Norman’s claim that the “Coolies” in Trinidad had been too “indulged,” appeared in the New Era four years before the Hosay incident and blamed the colonial authorities for allowing the immigrants the “means of

16 New Era, 16 February 1880.
acquiring social influence.” Norman understood the relationship and the dilemma facing Trinidad’s society. Norman’s claimed that, “There can be no doubt that the Coolies feel their power, or rather, I should say, have an exaggerated idea of that power,” after living in Trinidad, where “the Coolie not only becomes a man of a more independent spirit than he was when in India,” to the extent of becoming “somewhat overbearing” mirrored the concerns of the Trinidad government.17 Thus, it was Norman’s duty to disprove any suggestion that the Trinidad authorities had interfered with Indians’ religious practice. Norman concluded:

Care had been taken in framing the rules that no part of them should interfere in any respect with the religious obligations of the Mahomedans, but I may remark that of the Indian immigrants in Trinidad, barely a fifty are Mahomedans, some of the most respectable Mahomedans in the Island hold aloof from the procession, either because they consider it unsanctioned by their faith, or because of the boisterous nature of the procession; in fact, the ceremony, although it is purely appertaining to the Mahomedans, is one in which most of the persons engaged are Hindoos.18

In the years before the Hosay incident, the Protector of Immigrants commented on an increase in strikes on the estates that declined rapidly after 1884. Norman equated the celebration of Hosay with the Indian’s increasing power. However, the actions of the Indians in the years leading up to 1884 signaled to the colonial authorities the need for measures to restrict the “freedom” that they Indians came to accept as a right. The attack of the Hosay

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17 Norman, 42.
18 Ibid.
was a deliberate attack on the “freedom” of the laborers. The presence of high-ranking officials such as the Stipendiary Magistrate for San Fernando and the Inspector Commandant of Police was as symbolic of the authority of the colonial government as was Hosay to the “freedom” of the immigrants. Kale argued that in developing Hosay, Indian workers had become “overbearing,” unpredictable, and unmanageable. Thus, the order for the police to open fire was also aimed at the Indian immigrants’ aspirations to self-definition.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) Kale, 85.
CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Indian indenture labor scheme in Trinidad attempted to inflate the supply of labor thereby reducing wages in order to save the sugar industry from the fierce competition it faced. Following the exodus of slaves from the plantation in the post emancipation period that virtually crippled the sugar industry, the planters hoped for a new labor force, legally bonded to the plantation, unable to freely move away from the estates without notice. Planter’s believed that in order for the sugar industry to survive the laborers condition or ‘freedom’ of unfreedom depended on the concerns and needs of the estates. The contract that bonded the Indian indentured laborers to the plantation imposed on them the obligations that the planters required of the laborers without explicitly violating the newly acquired British morality. At the same time, the contractual agreement that the laborers freely entered forced upon them a period of servitude where their unfreedom came to be regarded as an exception to the British ideologies of labor relations and the individual free will. Even the Grierson report talked about the Indians escaping their oppressive conditions in India for a better life in the West Indies. Any questions about why the people left and what choices were available to them never became a central issue to the planters who urgently needed labor nor the administrators in charge of saving the colonies.
What did “free choice” really mean when the options were limited?

The Indian indentured laborers brought the colonial administrators into the debate about ‘freedom’ and unfreedom that ultimately had a significant impact on the official relations with the bonded laborers and later on with the Indian immigrants who decided to settle in Trinidad. Different assessments regarding the conditions of life that the Indian indentured laborers faced have incorporated the ‘freedom’ vs. unfreedom debate into the changing consensus about what legitimately constituted free labor and in other contexts. As David Northrup pointed out in his work, *Indentured labor in the age of imperialism, 1834-1922*, conditions once regarded as ‘free labor’ in one time and place often faced criticisms about its forced and slave-like conditions in another time and place.²

Although the debate over “freedom” and unfreedom is as old as the system of Indian indenture itself, it ignores the pressures that the laborers faced outside the realm of legislative control. The narrowness of the “freedom” and unfreedom could not account or explain the inter-Indian indentured labor relations to include the modification of caste, the indentured laborer and the time-expired laborer relations, the Indian immigrants and the planter

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¹ Laurence, 6.

relations, or even the new laborer with the ex-slave relations. Yet and Indian sub class with economic strength developed within Trinidad’s society and evolved out of the many relations that exerted social pressures on the Indians.

**The ‘helpless coolie as victim’**

By the time that indenture system officially ended in Trinidad 1917, most workers who were supposed remain bound to the estates and settled near them in small, dispersed village communities. The planters never really understood the social system of relations that they created in their quest for profits. After the laborers completed their period of servitude the planters mistakenly believed that immigrants would continue to work on estates for wages and never considered that the immigrants who acquired land would leave to the estates to labor on their own lands for an independent subsistence. Even as the laborers left the estates and began to establish settlements, the planters’ skewed view of the social relations to the laborers led them to believe that the Indian immigrants continued to remain in a state of unfreedom. Instead, the planters congratulated themselves and boasted about their influence with the colonial government in determining the location of the settlements and their proximity to the plantations in anticipation that the residents of the settlements would continue working on
estates. Some social anthropologists claim that the difficulty of integrating the Indians into Trinidad’s creole community stems partly from a historic antagonism between the Indian who came as an indentured immigrant, and the ex-slave, whom he supplanted on the plantations of the sugar colonies. However, the historical evidence does not seem to fully support this theory.

Even at the Hosay Riot of 1884, the reports indicated that part of the reason for suppressing the riots stemmed from the close association of the Indians to the ex-slaves. In addition, the very concept of importing labor undermines this assertion since the Indian indentured laborers came after a series of labor schemes to address the exodus of the freed slaves from the plantations. However, the idea that the Indian was a “lackey of capitalism” whose presence inhibited the growth of an independent peasantry found its way into contemporary accounts of the Afro-Indo relations in Trinidad and in other West Indian territories. It is indeed intriguing to determine the origins of this particular school of thought since it appears contradictory to the entire ideology of importing labor into Trinidad. One possible explanation would be the colonial authorities deliberate attempt to alleviate themselves from blame by drawing attention away from the policies that attempted to restrict the movement of the ex-slaves and keep them on the estates.

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3 Laurence, 391.
4 Carter and Torabully, 12.
Many of the colonial sources treated the Indian indentured system as a modified form of the system of slavery and contained self-congratulatory accounts of the colonial administrators and their role in preventing the abuse of the Indians by the planters despite their limited efforts. While it is certainly true that the colonial administrators did try at times and established some legislative measures, the failures of the system remained ignored as the colonial administrators contented themselves with the idea that they saved the Indian indentured laborers from occupying the status of slaves on the plantations that the Africans once held. In *Coolitude*, Carter and Torabully focused on this particular notion when they claim:

As the indenture system expanded and flourished over the nineteenth century, stereotypes of the ‘helpless coolie as victim’ gained a wide circulation. Transmuted to the sugar estates of the British Empire, the ‘docility’ of the Indian coolie, and his relative lack of ambition, became the official explanations for the seemingly smooth running of what was deemed an essentially coercive institution. How else could officials square the myth of ‘kidnap’ with the evidence of re-indenture and remigration? Writing in 1883, George Grierson contrasted the Indian with the Chinese character in this respect: ‘A Chinaman’s idea is to serve till he has saved sufficient to start himself as an independent rival to the planter. The Indian coolie’s aspirations . . . seldom rise beyond his being a well-paid coolie servant, and nothing more.’

In this instance, Carter and Torabully incorporated the colonial report by Grierson to add credibility to the theory of the “helpless coolie as victim.” In doing so, they inadvertently supported the colonial authorities that as administrators they saved the Indians from an oppressive state of unfreedom.

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5 Ibid., 51.
in India by bringing laborers to the West Indies where they could achieve a degree of “freedom” unavailable in India. Additionally, the colonial government saved the Indian laborers from the state of unfreedom on the plantation because of his “helpless” nature by intervening with laws and legislation. This view takes the laborer out of being in charge of his destiny and placing him at the mercy of the colonial authorities and allows the argument for Indian indentured labor system as a form of pseudo-slavery.

However, to allow the laborer to provide an account of his own history requires at the bare minimum an examination of the main difference of the Indian indentured laborer from the African slaves. Although many aspects of African culture survived, the imported slaved faced the deliberate attempt to erase the memory of “freedom” through the suppression of culture upon entering the New World—a challenge the Indians did not have to deal with. In this sense, class determined the status of the Indians in Trinidad and as the Indian immigrants’ economic prosperity changed their social status also evolved that came into conflict as they sought to cross the social boundaries society initially established for them.

‘Like the fly trapped in honey, we became slaves’

The Indians that came to Trinidad brought with them a culture that evolved from a patchwork of customs that allowed them to form sub-communities that served as a mechanism to maintain their identity in the
dominant society. Interpretations of the East Indians in the Caribbean have challenged scholars who have attempted to analyze the extent of the preservation of traditional cultural traits in connection with acculturation, creolization, and assimilation within “hybrid” societies of the West Indies. The main approach to the study of Indians in the Trinidad relied on the assumption of a cultural past and to contrast the experience of the Indian indentured laborers on the estates with that of the African slaves. Such approaches have encouraged a skewed interpretation of the Indian indentured laborer experience by limiting the discourse to the system as a form of pseudo-slavery. In addition, such interpretations have allowed the introduction of the concept of an Indian Diaspora in Caribbean studies that paralleled studies on African slavery. Carter and Torabully’s recent work Coolitude is an example of one such attempts to parallel the Indian indenture experience with that of the system of African slavery it replaced to develop a common theme of unfreedom with the imported people that labored on the plantations. Carter and Torabully sought to parallel the East Indian indenture experience with that of the franophone’s negritude movement of the 1930s that developed themes of black consciousness by demonstrating that the distinctiveness of African personality and culture extended into all spheres of life to its perceived equivalent—coolitude.

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However, as Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec pointed out religion played a very important role in the construction of an Indian community in the colonies that saw the introduction of Indian indentured laborers. Although van der Veer and Vertovec focused on the more prevalent Hindu sub-community, it is impossible to ignore that Muslims as well as Hindus used the Indianness of religion and cultural traditions as building blocks of the Indian community. There remained a deliberate attempt to maintain the traditional values placed on names, language, kinship, and social status in the Indian context in Trinidad. To place this in the “freedom” and unfreedom argument confines the laborers as instruments of British imperialism and ignores the humanness of the laborers as they sought to recreate a new home from a memory of the old. How else can one explain the Hindu passion for a Muslim festival among the laborers?

From the description of the Hosay celebrations before and at the time of the massacre in 1884, Muharram became a cultural tool that the Indian immigrants used to develop a sense of community based not so much on religion as it was on the Indianness of the festival. The concept of holding on to a common homeland served as a means for the Indian immigrants to distinguish themselves in Trinidad’s society. This may have been a consequence of the social tensions in Trinidad against the Indian presence that originated with the middle class but it is difficult to determine. The

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Peter van der Veer; Steven Vertovec, 149.
reports from the newspapers of that time clearly revealed a bias that reached a climax in 1884 with vehement outcries against the Hosay celebration. However, the newspaper reports may have been an attempt to either sway public opinion to pressure the colonial authorities to action or it may have reflected public opinion. In any event, the idea of “little Indias” springing up on the different estates in Trinidad brought resentment from the other segments of society that undoubtedly contributed to the brutality of the outcome of the Hosay Riot of 1884.

Under the slave-like conditions that existed under indenture, the laborers responded to the oppression and ill treatment in ways in ways similar to those who lived in conditions of unfreedom. In extreme cases, the laborers sometimes reacted violently against their abusers as in the Clydesdale Estate affair. Apart from the overt acts of rioting and rebellion, which sometimes occurred, loitering and sabotage of machinery provided the means to seek redress. Arson appeared to be the weapon of choice, but those found guilty of committing such acts faced deportation order back to India. In other cases, the laborers sometimes deserted the estates so much so that the colonial authorities implemented legislation that could result in the offender serving time in jail, and an extended contract.8

Despite the inadequacies of the system, the colonial authorities consoled themselves into believing that the ‘freedom’ of the ex-indentured

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immigrant in the colonies surpassed that of the Indians had they remained in India. Many Indians too also subscribed to this belief despite being subjected to special restrictions that required them to carry passes, that criminalized those without employment, and that restricted their mobility post-indenture. Once in Trinidad, the Indians used their common past and culture to provide the foundation for the establishment an Indo-community but at the same time making a home in Trinidad provided the Indian immigrants with the ‘freedom’ from the social oppression of native customs. In this way, both the planters and the Indians understood and accepted the nature of the relationships and the benefits to be derived from manipulating ideas of ‘freedom’ and *un*freedom.

In 1910, a member of the Trinidad Legislative Council observed that *bondedness* of the Indian indentured laborer completely satisfied the desires of the planter:

> What he wants is an indentured labourer—not so much a labourer as an indentured labourer...somebody who is bound to him for five years, and liable to be committed to prison for disobeying orders.⁹

However, the same time the Indian indentured laborers understood and accepted that temporary state of *un*freedom that Indians frequently equated their conditions with slavery which sometimes appeared in song:

> ‘Like the fly trapped in honey, we became slaves. We toiled in the fields day and night, without sleep.’¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 55.
Yet the many Indians fulfilled their obligations and eventually settled in Trinidad where they capitalized not the savings they amassed, but from the money they gained in lieu of repatriations, land grants, and land purchases that elevated the social status of even the members of the lowest caste.

In *The Middle Passage*, V.S. Naipaul assessed the Indo-Trinidadians in the following manner:

Everything which made the Indian alien in the society gave him strength. His alienness insulated him from the black-white struggle. He was taboo-ridden as no other person in the island; he had complicated rules about food and about what was unclean. His religion gave him values which were not the white values of the rest of the community, and preserved him from self-contempt; he never lost pride in his origins. More importantly than religion was his family organization, and enclosing self-sufficient world absorbed with its quarrels and jealousies, as difficult for the outside to penetrate as for one of its members to escape. It protected and imprisoned, a static world, awaiting decay.11

While there are many arguments from Naipaul’s depiction that require exploration, the separation of the Indo-community from the rest of the population appeared as the dominant attribute of this group even as late as 1962 when Naipaul published his work and Trinidad gained independence from Britain.12 Naipaul seems to be implying that the Indian brought with them the cultural tool that prevented them from losing their identity through

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10 Ibid., 91. Indians frequently equated their conditions with slavery as illustrated by this Surinami folksong.


12 Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain on 31 August 1962.
the maintenance of tradition. In Naipaul’s assessment it appeared that the Indians experienced a self-imposed isolation because of their cultural tradition while ignoring the society that allowed the Indians to stay “Indian.” This portrayal of the Indian community ignored the social forces that acted on the Indians that rejected their presence because of the cultural differences. This initial dismissal of the Indians as a permanent feature in Trinidad’s society eventually forced the Indians to develop into a homogeneous entity despite the culturally rooted dissimilarities that existed among them such as caste and religion.

**Subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power**

Just as in Mauritius and other colonies that experienced Indian immigration, in Trinidad access to and control of land played a critical role in the establishing socio-economic position in the island’s social order. The colonial authorities used land as an incentive to address their immediate concerns, namely the retention of laborers in the island. In a 1902 report by the Protector of Immigrants, W.H. Coombs, recorded the planters’ concern with the granting of lands in lieu of return passage:

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The Planters urge that granting land to free immigrants would deprive the Estates of much a labour, but I do not think this should be taken into consideration having regard to the benefit the Colony would gain by having settlers on the Crown Lands opening up the Country and paying taxes. But as I before said it is a question that requires careful consideration, the work of allotting the lands should be placed under an official residing near the spot who would look after the settlers, give them advice as to clearing, cultivation, etc., and who would see that the lands were worked by those to whom they were allotted and not bartered or sold by them.14

However, many Indian immigrants of “good character” obtained land grants at the Protector of Immigrant’s discretion. Despite the perceived unsuitability of the land for agriculture by the colonial authorities, many Indians managed to engage in agricultural enterprises after leaving the estates.15 Seesaran pointed out that in many instances the Indians opted to purchase lands with the money they received for forgoing their return passage instead of accepting the land grants from the authorities. Many pooled their resources together sometimes even renting land from the state, which enabled them to enter into the large-scale agricultural production of sugar cane, rice, coconut, cocoa, cattle rearing.16

However, the initial land grants and eventual initiative to acquire land served as an important stimulus to encourage the laborers to permanently settle in Trinidad. The value of land ownership to the immigrants became

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15 Ramesar, 81. Governor Havelock considered the land granted “exceptionally bad” and without access roads.

16 Seeseran, 35-55.
apparent when it transformed the lowest group in the social hierarchy of Trinidad into a formidable economic class with in a relatively short time.\textsuperscript{17}

Yet, in the years following the end of the indenture system, particularly in the years approaching Independence, tensions arose between the Indians and the Africans. In 1962, V.S. Naipaul wrote:

But Trinidad in fact teeters on the brink of racial war. Politics must be blamed; but there must have been an original antipathy for the politicians to work on. Matters are not helped by the fierce rivalry between Indians and Negroes as to who despises the other more.\textsuperscript{18}

Historian Donald Wood as well as contemporary sources that observed the interaction of the Indians and Africans observed no real sources of conflict. In 1862, for instance, Edward Bean Underhill who went to Trinidad at the request of the Treasurer and Committee of the Baptist Missionary Society to investigate the “religious conditions” of the Baptist Churches post-emancipation observed:

The demand for provisions to supply the wants of the Coolies has increased, and the cattle employed on the estates must be fed. There has, therefore, sprung up a great demand for skilled labour, for labour of a better paid sort than that of mere field hands. The Inspector of Public Works informed me, that he employs none but Creoles on the roads and bridges now in course of erection; that, in fact, they monopolize all the better kinds of manual labour. Wherever skill is required, they are the parties to undertake the work. Garden produce

\textsuperscript{17} Aisha Khan, \textit{Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad} (Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 63. The social mobility of the Indians immigrants in successive generations resulted from successful entrepreneurship and education.

\textsuperscript{18} Naipaul, 77.
also finds a better market. All these occupations and duties are being rapidly taken up by the Creole. He is removed from the condition of a mere servitor, and receives a higher remuneration for the exertions he puts forth. The Coolie is therefore no competitor with the Creole in the labour market, and no ill-feeling exists because of the displacement of one by the other. Coolie labour opens a wider field of exertion to the Negro, and he is becoming the artisan and the skilled labourer of the Trinidad community. He has a fair share of the increasing fund distributed as wages in the island.\(^{19}\)

Wood explained that although both groups viewed the other with suspicion and sometimes contempt no real avenues for confrontation existed. In Wood’s opinion neither the Indians nor the Africans concentrated on politics nor competed with each other for jobs, housing, or even women—factors that normally cause strife between ethnic groups or between immigrant workers and the lower ranks of a host community. These conditions did not exist in Trinidad since the Indians filled the positions that the ex-slaves willingly vacated. In addition, the laws governing the indenture system held the planters accountable for the care of the Indians which they attempted to comply with in order to retain the indentured laborers.\(^{20}\)

Therefore, when one considers Naipaul’s assessment in 1962 and the arguments of racism today in Trinidad it is difficult to determine exactly the source of such intense rivalries. Political agendas play a role and have highlighted the issue of repatriations and land grants to capitalize on racial divisions. However, Naipaul argument of “original antipathy” cannot be

\(^{19}\) Underhill, 85-8.

\(^{20}\) Wood, 303-4.
ignored and the colonial authorities planted the seeds of misunderstanding from the ease in which they distributed lands to the Indians while throwing obstacles in the way of the ex-slaves.

The Coolie is therefore no competitor with the Creole in the labour market, and no ill-feeling exists because of the displacement of one by the other. Coolie labour opens a wider field of exertion to the Negro, and he is becoming the artisan and the skilled labourer of the Trinidad community. He has a fair share of the increasing fund distributed as wages in the island. His position is improved, and there is required of him -higher forms of labour than can be executed by the cutlass or the hoe. Many years must elapse before the population of Trinidad will overtake the means of easy subsistence. Not one-seventh of the soil is under cultivation. Noble forests clothe the mountain sides, where coffee and cacao would grow; and tens of thousands of acres, adapted for sugar, are overrun with brushwood, or form extensive savannahs of grass.21

The concept of the Indian Diaspora represents another of the political constructs that came about from the Indian indentured labor as a form of slavery. The difficulty in defining the word “diaspora” comes from an ever-shifting political landscape that relates to questions about identity and self-categorization. Originally used to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people, the “diaspora” entered into Caribbean studies as a means describe the system of African slavery and the forceful extraction of people from the African continent to the West Indies. It is a term loaded with the imagery of subjugation, bondedness, and unfreedom as people became scattered to various location away from their homeland by conquest. The “diaspora”

21 Underhill, 86.
concept implies a deliberate attempt to show that there exists an idealized homeland for the dispersed to return and ongoing relationship with that homeland.\textsuperscript{22}

To render a slavery-indentured labor comparison, Carter and Torabully deliberately employed the rather ambiguous definition of the renowned West Indian sociologist, Stuart Hall, who likened the concept of the diaspora to an 

experience. For diaspora experience as one characterized:

not by essence and purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” that lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference’. Identity in diaspora is not seen, therefore, as static or fixed but rather as ‘subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.’\textsuperscript{23}

Yet the concept of “Diaspora” cannot easily be dismissed because for many who subscribe to this concept regard the establishment of a community in a foreign land while maintaining the memory of a tradition and a homeland as testament to that “brotherhood of the boat.”

When the Indians first came to Trinidad, they occupied the lowest position in the social order and fulfilled the occupationally homogeneous role of laborers on the plantations. In the years following the end of the Indian indentured labor system, the Indians in Trinidad ventured into other


\textsuperscript{23} Carter and Torabully, 11.
professions and businesses and in many ways used the concept of “Diaspora” to validate the community they developed. For many, subscribing to the notion of an “Indian Diaspora” represents a means to demonstrate the “freedom” of their place in society in the present that developed from the unfreedom of the Indian indentured labor experience by holding on to memories of culture and traditions. Looking back at the formative years of class struggle that the Indians faced when they first entered Trinidad society maybe Naipaul is right and the Indians in Trinidad remains, “protected and imprisoned, a static world, awaiting decay.”

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