



GLOBAL SOUTH ASIANS

# Beyond Indenture

Agency and Resistance in the  
Colonial South Asian Diaspora

Edited by  
Crispin Bates



EAST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS



# Advance Praise

*Beyond Indenture* is a fitting tribute to the late Brij V. Lal, scholar and individual extraordinaire. It places the history of indentured labourers from India alongside a variety of overseas labour from India. The result is a volume with a good mix of both familiar and unusual topics. The shared theme across the essays is the resilience and grit of people even under exploitative conditions. It makes this a standout volume on the subject.

—**Mrinalini Sinha**, *University of Michigan*

The lives of millions of plantation and domestic workers, traders, moneylenders, teachers, civil servants, sailors and others who migrated from India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to all continents deserve a close and detailed study. This book, with its rigorous, wide-ranging and accomplished scholarship, is exciting to read. It is a monumental contribution to the history of indenture and post-indentureship studies.

—**David Dabydeen**, *University of Cambridge*

An insightful and impressive set of essays on many facets of the social lives of South Asian migrant labourers in the colonial and post-colonial eras. A worthy tribute to Brij Lal.

—**Sugata Bose**, *Harvard University*

*Beyond Indenture* brings together complex tales of agency and resistance by the globally migrant labour force since the days of colonial empires. Instead of focusing on the well-known labour exploitation by officials, planters, and other types of employers, this work explores the stories of workers. It covers a wide range of issues, from resistance to derogatory conditions of employment, including the cases of poisoning of employers by domestic servants. Once a subject of crime thrillers, this has become a domain of exploration by historians. It highlights issues of remigration, a fascinating effort of workers to improve their living conditions. The point of domestic intimacy, new forms of families in plantations, caste mobility and stories of Eurasian labourers add a new dimension to the complex historiography of indentured workers. Finally, the book covers the complex post-colonial political developments in societies with complex demographic mosaics due to indentured workers. As an editor, Crispin Bates weaves

a synthetic introduction that captures the huge complexities of indentured migration from its inception to its post-colonial legacies and that demonstrates his mastery over this subaltern narrative. The book is a must-read for all those engaged in studying labour history.

—**Subho Basu**, *McGill University*

*Beyond Indenture* represents an exciting new chapter in the scholarship on Indian indentured migration. Going far beyond earlier debates that saw indentured labourers either purely as victims of exploitation or as wholly free agents, the bracing collection of essays here highlights a range of voices and a diversity of experiences. The book is exemplary in featuring cutting-edge scholarship from scholars at different stages of their careers and from different locations. The collection is expertly edited and hugely compelling.

—**Sunil Amrith**, *Yale University*

# Beyond Indenture

*Beyond Indenture* brings together original essays by a mix of experienced and upcoming scholars. They reflect, as far as possible, the viewpoints and voices of indentured Indians who exercised agency, resisted and manipulated the colonial labour system to their advantage, and went on to build new lives for themselves overseas following the expiry of their contracts. Some remigrated to other colonies to earn a better wage and escape from debt and other burdens. Among those who chose to remain, women played a prominent role in the struggle for rights, freedom and opportunities, achieving them in ways which often defied or redefined South Asian customs and traditions. Alongside the migrant labourers, ‘passenger Indians’ made their way to the sugar, tea and rubber colonies, and became clerks, teachers and shopkeepers. After independence, the Indian communities overseas faced newer problems, not least of which were discrimination and marginalisation. Some were forced to return home. Others built upon the experience of struggles in the colonial era to collectively mobilise. Another theme explored is that of the broad alliances of diasporic Indians and Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants who have been recently enabled by the internet to connect with each other and to reconnect with the countries from which they originated.

**Crispin Bates** is Professor of Modern and Contemporary South Asian History at the University of Edinburgh and Honorary Visiting Professor in the Graduate School of African and Asian Studies, Kyoto University. He has authored, co-authored and edited a total of 15 books including a history of South Asia from 1600 to the present, entitled *Subalterns and Raj* (2007), and a series of seven volumes concerning the history of the Indian uprising of 1857, entitled ‘Mutiny at the Margins’ (2013–2017). In 2015–2018, he led ‘Becoming Coolies’, an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)–funded project on the origins of Indian overseas labour migration in the Indian Ocean, for which he conducted research in archives throughout the Indian Ocean region.

## GLOBAL SOUTH ASIANS

Throughout the modern era, South Asia and South Asians have been entangled with global flows of goods, people and ideas. In the context of these globalised conditions, migrants from the subcontinent of India created some of the world's most extensive and influential transnational networks. While operating within the constraints of imperial systems, they nevertheless made distinctive and important contributions to international trade, global cultures and transnational circuits of knowledge. This series seeks to explore these phenomena, placing labourers, traders, thinkers and activists at the centre of the analysis. Beginning with volumes that seek to radically reappraise indenture, the series will continue with books on the mobility of elite actors, including intellectuals, and their contributions to the global circulation of ideas and the evolution of political practice. It will highlight the creativity and agency of diasporic South Asians and illuminate the crucial role they played in the making of global histories. As such it sets out to challenge popular misconceptions and established scholarly narratives that too often cast South Asians as passive observers.

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*For Brij V. Lal (1952–2021)*



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## Acknowledgements

This volume grew out of several conferences, with accompanying exhibitions, held in 2016 that were funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Swindon, as part of the ‘Becoming Coolies’ project on the origins of South Asian overseas labour migration in the Indian Ocean region. The first conference was at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi; the second conference, ‘After Slavery’, and the ‘Coolitudes’ exhibition were hosted by the University of Leeds; and the final conference, entitled ‘Indentured Lives: Rethinking the Experience of Indian Overseas Labour Migration, 1800–1920’, was hosted by the School of History in the University of Edinburgh. The scope of the volume was subsequently expanded to include additional chapters that were commissioned in the Caribbean and Fiji. Enormous gratitude is due to the collaborators in the AHRC project – Andrea Major, Marina Carter and Ashutosh Kumar – and to Danny Amos Flynn for his artwork as well as to all those who participated in the Delhi, Leeds and Edinburgh conferences and who helped make them such a success. Further thanks are due to Jessica Robinson for her assistance in copyediting the initial drafts of the manuscript, and to Sohini Ghosh and Qudsiya Ahmed and latterly Anwesha Rana at Cambridge University Press who patiently shepherded this book through the production process until its publication.

The editor wishes to acknowledge the kind support of publishers who have permitted the reproduction of extracts from various publications in this volume: Enuga Reddy and Kalpana Hiralal’s *Pioneers of Satyagraha: Indian South Africans Defy Racist Laws, 1907–1914* (2017), the *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies*, *Women’s History Review* and the *Colombo Telegraph*.

This book is dedicated to the memory of the distinguished Indo-Fijian historian Brij V. Lal, who contributed to it what he described as his very last non-fiction essay before he retired from academic writing to focus solely on literary work. His decision was motivated by failing eyesight. Most were unaware of his other health problems until his sudden and shocking death on 25 December 2021 at the age of 69.

Brij rose to fame from humble origins in a poor farming family in Tabia, Vanua Levu, via a competitive scholarship to study at the newly founded University of the South Pacific, Suva. He went on to complete his MA at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, and PhD at the Australian National University, Canberra, where he was Professor of Pacific and Asian History at the School of Culture, History and Language. He is remembered for his pioneering research on the history of indentured migration to Fiji and Fijian history (his own paternal grandfather was a *girmitiya*) and his famous book *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (1983) which used statistical records to challenge assumptions about Indian migrants. He is also remembered for the warm advice and encouragement he gave to many younger scholars around the world who were struggling to follow in his wake. Brij was not just a well-known and hugely admired historian, but also a poet and novelist and an influential public intellectual who, amongst other things, played an important role as a member of the committee that devised Fiji's revised constitution of 1995, an achievement of which he was justly proud. Brij wore lightly the numerous honours heaped upon his shoulders, including Officer of the Order of Fiji (OF) in 1998, the Australian Centenary Medal in 2001 and the Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2015. Having been expelled from his beloved home country in 2009, he spent his remaining years residing in Brisbane, Queensland, as Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University. He was a hugely valued and much-loved presence at numerous conferences held over the years devoted to exploring the history of the South Asian diaspora. His work will continue to live on and inspire historians for many generations to come.

Crispin Bates

# Introduction

*Crispin Bates*

The historiography on South Asian overseas migration in the colonial era has focused extensively on the history of indentured labour. This was a system of recruitment of workers on a fixed contract of three to five years with a single employer, at the end of which they could re-indenture, find other employment or have their passage paid home. These contracts were prominently used by private employers to hire plantation labour in sugar, rubber, tea and coffee plantations following the abolition of slavery and by rural Indians to escape from poverty and/or discrimination. They were also used in government public works departments, in railway construction and in the military. Those who signed such an agreement (known as a *girmit* in north India) described themselves as *girmitiyas*. Although guaranteed food, shelter and employment, and subject to periodic inspections, those in the hands of private employers overseas could be exploited as they were often working in remote locations and were legally not free to leave until their contract had expired or they (or their family) had bought their way out of it. Although never allowed in Sri Lanka or Myanmar, and superseded by other forms of migration by the beginning of the twentieth century, more has been written about South Asian indentured labour than any other form of historical migration from India, partly because it was subject to government regulation and is therefore unusually well documented in colonial archives.

Within the literature on indentured labour, most of the writing has revolved around migration statistics and the debates between anti-slavery campaigners, planters, British imperial officials and, latterly, the complaints of Indian nationalist politicians, leading up to the effective abolition of indentured overseas labour contracts by 1920. The voices of the migrants themselves are not so often heard, nor those of the many other Indians who were not on contracts of indenture who migrated at the same time. A classic text, Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tinker (1974).

drew its inspiration from the early campaigns against indentured migration launched by the anti-slavery movement in Britain. However, in recent years, a new scholarship has been emerging, especially from within the diaspora – most prominently in South Africa – which sheds light on the highly varied social lives of migrants. Rather than depicting migrants as the silent victims of planters and colonial officials, these social histories reveal intimate details of their lives and the diverse and inventive ways in which they managed to survive and even prosper in their new homes. An early pioneer of revisionism was Brij V. Lal, followed by P. C. Emmer, Marina Carter, Ashwin Desai, Goolam Vahed and Ashutosh Kumar.<sup>2</sup> This newer literature has highlighted the pivotal role of Indian intermediaries (*sirdars* and *kanganis*) in the recruitment of overseas labour,<sup>3</sup> as in the Indian labour market as a whole.<sup>4</sup> It has also revealed the various ways in which migrants exercised agency, manipulating the otherwise often cruel colonial labour system to their advantage. One of these methods was to remigrate to other colonies, to earn a better wage and to escape from debt and other burdens – a phenomenon highlighted in this volume. Among those who chose to build new homes and lives for themselves in the colonies to which they had migrated, women played a prominent role in the struggle for rights, freedom and opportunities, achieving it in ways which often (controversially) defied or redefined South Asian customs and traditions.<sup>5</sup>

The important role of Indian migration in the global history of capitalism and the emergence of modern societies in the Global South in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been highlighted in the works of Adam McKeown, Sugata Bose, Thomas Metcalf, Sunil Amrith, Yoshina Hurgobin, Subho Basu, Crispin Bates, Lynn Hollen Lees, Radhika Mongia and Neilesh Bose.<sup>6</sup> These have shown Indians to be part of a global circulation of labour power, which included convicts<sup>7</sup> and was integral to the expansion of empire and imperial enterprises. It has been estimated that as many as 30 million Indians travelled abroad between 1830 and 1930, with some 24 million returning in what Sugata Bose has described as a ‘circular migration’ rather than ‘emigration’.<sup>8</sup> Sunil Amrith has proposed that as

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<sup>2</sup> Lal (1983); Emmer (1986); Carter (1995, 1996); Ashwin and Vahed (2008); Kumar (2017).

<sup>3</sup> Carter (1995); Peebles (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Bates and Carter (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Carter (1994); Gupta (2015); Bahadur (2014); Pande (2018); Datta (2020).

<sup>6</sup> McKeown (2004); S. Bose (2006); Metcalf (2007); Amrith (2013); Hurgobin and Basu (2015); Bates (2017); Lees (2017); Mongia (2018); N. Bose (2021).

<sup>7</sup> Anderson (2018, 2022); Yang (2021).

<sup>8</sup> S. Bose (2006), p. 73.

many as 28 million may have crossed the Bay of Bengal, in both directions, between 1840 and 1940.<sup>9</sup> They contributed not only through their work on the plantations but also through working as civil servants, schoolteachers, moneylenders, traders, shopkeepers, dockworkers and policemen (especially Sikhs), through serving in the Indian army,<sup>10</sup> by working in the construction industry, road and rail building,<sup>11</sup> mining, shipping and – not least of all – as *ayahs* (nursemaids) and domestic servants.

Indian domestic workers, like Indian *lascars* (sailors), were to be found in every continent. Like many categories of only semi-bonded labour, they have been little studied until recently.<sup>12</sup> Domestic workers were not often indentured but were commonly indebted for their passage and bonded to their employers in the same way as plantation labourers. They laboured under intense supervision and travelled as far as Britain, where even Victoria, the empress of India, paraded her favourite servant, the handsome 24-year-old Abdul Karim.<sup>13</sup> The further they were from home, the more vulnerable they could be. However, there were many ways in which migrants resisted and fought against oppressive working conditions, which could even cause them to be feared, as Prinisha Badassy shows in her contribution to this volume. Both in domestic servitude and in plantations, the workers were far more assertive than is commonly assumed in the infamous trope of the ‘meek Hindu’. By the early twentieth century, indentured migrants overseas were joined by many more free migrants, or ‘passenger Indians’<sup>14</sup> and old migrants who had served out their contracts and moved on to new occupations. They embraced the concept of civil rights and began to demand equality before the law and political and workplace representation. Many in South Africa, in the early 1900s, were willing to undergo harsh conditions of imprisonment in defence of those rights in one of the earliest anti-colonial struggles. Sikhs who migrated to North America networked internationally at the same time, connecting with comrades in Calcutta and Punjab in order to rebel against colonial rule, as shown by Chhanda Chatterjee later in this book.

Uniquely armed amongst Asian workers with their contract – the *girmīt* – an inspectorate, access to courts (however unequal) and a complaints procedure (however flawed), the concepts of their individual, legal and civil rights gradually

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<sup>9</sup> Amrith (2013), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Singha (2019).

<sup>11</sup> Kerr (1995).

<sup>12</sup> See Sen (2009); Datta (2021); Fischer (2004, 2006); Ahuja (2006); and Balachandran (2012).

<sup>13</sup> Basu (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2009); Vahed (2016).

grew amongst migrant workers over many decades, as they contested and struggled against their employers and the local colonial governments. New and improved rights were enshrined in a succession of labour ordinances in the 1890s. Thousands, at the end of their contracts of indenture, stayed on and found themselves new employment, sometimes working alongside and even in competition with Europeans with whom – notably in South Africa – they demanded equality. The ideas of equality and civil rights were further reinforced in the politics of early Indian nationalists, egalitarian Hindu reform movements such as the Arya Samaj and pan-Islamism. They were formally internationalised in the work of the League of Nations after 1919<sup>15</sup> and affirmed again at the end of the Second World War in the freedom struggles of multiple nations, beginning with India. However, the equality of South Asian migrants as citizens in their new homes continued to be contested following the collapse of the European empires. Burmese Indian refugees struggled to gain rehabilitation in India, whilst Indians in independent South Africa were thrown into a long and protracted war against the oppressive policies of the apartheid regime. Struggles to achieve democracy and equal rights of citizenship were repeated in nations all over the Global South, with varying outcomes. There was success in countries such as Mauritius, Guyana and Trinidad, where migrants were a large minority or a majority of the population. Elsewhere, such as in Malaysia, complex constitutional arrangements achieved a remarkable sharing of power and a level of social harmony. However, in some places, migrants suffered a dramatic reversal in their conditions, including expulsion (in Uganda) or exclusion from political influence. Perhaps the saddest example of this is Fiji, where Indian migrants played a substantial role in building one of the most prosperous Pacific island economies but have been progressively marginalised in the last half-century. These and other themes are addressed in the essays in this volume, by a mixture of experienced and upcoming scholars – the majority from within the diaspora – who attempt to reflect, as far as possible, the viewpoint and voices of the migrants themselves.

## **Agency and Resistance**

This book is divided into four sections. To begin, we have a section that looks at various forms of agency and resistance amongst those who migrated overseas for work. This section is eloquently introduced in Chapter 1, by Goolam Vahed, who surveys the historical literature concerning the various forms in which resistance may be encountered. Citing Sherry Ortner, Vahed points out that the aim of

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<sup>15</sup> Sturman (2014).

individuals in resisting power is not always clear, nor are the workings of power itself, which creates difficulties in characterising it. It may be expressed in the form of a violent liberation movement, as in the Haiti of Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1804, or in the everyday forms of resistance, described by James C. Scott, which do not necessarily aim to overthrow an established order at all but merely to exert greater control over daily life. Vahed then goes on to examine the ways in which indentured migrants negotiated structures of power, specifically in colonial Natal in South Africa. Indenture was a complex system, he argues, and the indentured cannot be painted as simply passive victims. Most of them worked on the colony's sugar plantations, where the strange environment, rigid work schedule, overbearing *sirdars* (overseers), draconian laws and strenuous work made life difficult. Yet there were few open rebellions. Instead, the indentured subverted the system indirectly to lessen the impact of an alienated existence and to rebuild their lives. This approach may not have overthrown authority in the workplace or state power, but it allowed the labourers to mitigate the worst effects of indenture. Many had come to Natal to make a new life for themselves and focused on doing so once they completed their contracts. This was not a case of 'false consciousness'. Indenture was not a permanent state, he argues, and most migrants simply wanted to survive and move on to free lives, often showing great initiative and enterprise in the process.

Chapter 2, by Prinisha Badassy, explores the highly contested and often emotionally charged relationships between colonial settlers and their bonded labourers. Both masters and mistresses on the one hand and servants on the other fought to own, shape and define the power relations between them. The experiences and emotional strain associated with being a domestic servant frequently gave rise to a culture of anger, resistance and violence within the ranks of Indian servants and the domestic space in colonial Natal. This chapter posits that poisoning, as a criminal act, reveals a great deal about the feelings and circumstances of those who were accused of it and tried by the colonial courts, unveiling the ubiquitous feelings of inequity and ill-treatment experienced by Indian domestic workers. Poisoning occupies a special place in the history of crime, requiring premeditation, planning and knowledge for its successful execution. The delegation of responsibility for the preparation and cooking of food to these servants frequently caused masters and mistresses to distrust their servants and aroused feelings of suspicion and fear. Between the years 1880 and 1920, there were several high-profile cases that reached the courts. However, because of the calculated and clandestine nature of poisoning, as well as the difficulty of detection, as it produced very little incriminating evidence, the cases that came through the Natal courts probably represent only

a small proportion of the actual number of attempted poisonings. These crimes were situated, Badassy argues, at varying points on a continuum of distressed interactions between masters, mistresses and servants, and each possessed its own intimate performative terrain.

In Chapter 3, veteran historian Rana Behal explores labour resistance on indentured plantations in the Assam valley in India. The tea industry was the earliest British commercial enterprise in the Assam valley. From the mid-1860s, it was powered almost entirely by indentured labour. By the end of colonial rule, half a million labourers were employed on over 300,000 acres of cultivated land. The lives of these labourers under the authority of the planters left much to be desired. Annual reports between 1868 and 1906 revealed recruitment abuses and poor living and working conditions. The indentured employees also had to cope with their individual identities being subsumed into the ‘coolie’ whole. In this chapter, Behal seeks to explore the resistance offered by the labouring community to this treatment. It examines the use of desertions, so-called riots, assaults and unlawful assemblies by both individual and collective workers in opposition to economic and physical coercion and particularly the sexual exploitation of coolie women. The enacting of cultural traditions, including music, as a means of resistance is described. In considering the impact of labour resistance, the chapter concludes with the eventual development of trade unions and their relationship with the Indian Tea Association in the 1940s.

In Chapter 4, Kalpana Hiralal presents a forgotten narrative of the Gandhian-inspired Satyagraha campaign in South Africa in a study of the treatment of Indian political prisoners between 1907 and 1914. The Satyagraha struggle in South Africa was a pioneering political protest movement, spearheaded by the Indian community, against the pervasive injustices and racial discrimination characteristic of colonial rule. Well over 20,000 men, women and children joined the struggle and defied civic laws. Thousands were detained, imprisoned and subjected to harsh treatment and living conditions. Yet in the vast corpus of literature on this struggle, the treatment and impact of prison conditions have not been analysed or documented. This chapter examines the prison conditions experienced by Indian Satyagraha prisoners between 1907–1914. It highlights their diet, physical assaults, living and labouring conditions, and argues that even though some *satyagrahis* (peaceful protestors) were treated less than humanely in prison, this did little to quash their spirit of resistance. On the contrary, they became more defiant amidst the plethora of discriminatory laws. The chapter explores the intersections of migration and political resistance in the diaspora, adding to current debates on the complexity of indentureship and its legacy.

In Chapter 5, Chhanda Chatterjee explores the global networks of resistance that connected Sikhs in the Punjab, Canada and Calcutta in the colonial era. Punjabi Sikhs travelled the world both as migrant workers and as part of the British army within the empire. As they did so, they passed on news of the often better-paid labour to be found in different locations overseas. One promising destination was Canada, which in 1903–1907 had a booming economy and a need for workers in the railways and other industries. However, the growth in immigrant labour caused resentment among white labourers, and tensions between (mainly white) workers' unions, the federal government and Indian immigrants grew. The Sikh workers organised themselves in defence of their interests, forming the Khalsa Diwan Society in 1907 as the first step in their proactive stance towards their position in Canada. This chapter examines the evolving conflict between British authorities and the proponents of 'white Canada' on one side and the Sikh community on the other. Central to its exploration is the significance of the Sikh network that connected Punjab, Calcutta (the point of embarkation for Punjabi immigrants) and Canada in the dissemination of revolutionary Sikh ideas and political opposition to their colonial oppressors.

## Remigration

The second part of this volume concerns the theme of remigration of indentured migrants, an important example of workers' agency that took various forms and has attracted renewed attention of late, most notably with Reshaad Durgahee's introduction of the concept of 'subaltern careering'.<sup>16</sup> In Chapter 6, Chan E. S. Choenni describes the return migration of 'Hindustanis' from Surinam to India between 1878 and 1921. The Dutch colony of Surinam was one of the last colonies to introduce indentured labour from India. The first ship to arrive from Calcutta docked in 1873, and between 1873 and 1916, 34,304 immigrants came to work in Surinam. The Coolie Treaty (*Koelietractaat*) that dictated the practices of indenture in Surinam stated that the labourers had a right to a free return passage after five years of service. More than a third of the Indian immigrants returned to India at the expense of the Dutch government; the rest chose to remain. This chapter analyses the remigration of this group to India, comparing it with the number of returnees from other colonies, exploring the motivations for making the journey back to their country of origin and examining the categories of returnees under the Coolie Treaty. It includes a detailed statistical study of the surprising amounts of jewellery and savings that those remigrating carried with

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<sup>16</sup> See Bates and Carter (2021); Hurgobin and Basu (2015); and Durgahee (2021).

them and goes on to explore the different receptions they experienced upon their return to India. The tale of Indian indentured labour in Surinam concludes with the last splutterings of the arrangement between 1917 and 1922.

Chapter 7, by Lomarsh Rooparine, analyses the remigration of Indians in the Caribbean during the indenture and the modern period, essentially from the middle of the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Specifically, the chapter examines the period when Indians were under contractual indentured obligations and the period after the abolition of indenture in 1920. Rooparine demonstrates that the remigration of Indians within the Caribbean has received less attention when compared to other migrations. Unfortunately, we are left with a poor understanding of how these once cyclical migrants turned settlers navigated the contours of the Caribbean landscape to achieve better livelihood opportunities. The remigration of Indians was based on illegal and legal motivations and aspirations brought about by their desire to make the best of their transplanted life from India to the tropical sugarcane plantation zones of the Caribbean. The contention is that although a majority of Indians either returned to India or remained in their specific islands, a minority of them remigrated within the Caribbean. These migratory dynamics reveal another side of the Indian experience in the Caribbean, notably that Indians have not been stationary since their arrival to the region. They have instead shown a remarkable degree of determination to participate in the larger migratory flows in the Caribbean. In so doing, their remigration patterns have shown a strong relationship between thought and action as well as negation and affirmation amid bouts of marginalisation and discrimination in sending and receiving destinations. Rooparine predicts that Indian remigration in the Caribbean will continue with greater intensity because of the uneven level of development between nations. The remigration of Indians has also become a way of life. To develop, he says, one must remigrate.

Chapter 8, by Yoshina Hurgobin, uses passenger logs and colonial reports to examine Indian labour remigration within various nodes of the Indian Ocean between 1847 and 1906. Remigration, here, means the process whereby labour migrants moved across colonies (and their dependencies) without returning to India or making the three main ports of embarkation (Calcutta, Madras and Bombay) the main points of departure. The first part of the chapter explores how indentured Indian workers remigrated and engaged in numerous back-and-forth mobilities between Mauritius and nearby islands (Agaléga, Diego Garcia, Réunion, Seychelles and St Brandon) because of their oceanic proximity. In one case, Mauritius became the departure point towards Mombasa. The chapter thereby brings into discussion the historiographies of both indentured Indian labour and the Indian Ocean.

Existing scholarship on indentured labour in Mauritius has revealed how returnee migrants actively journeyed to India to recruit new migrants and thereby increased their information networks allowing them to migrate to places near (Natal, Madagascar and Réunion) and far (Brazil and China).<sup>17</sup> Hurgobin takes this scholarship in additional directions, highlighting how complex circumstances engendered remigration to diverse destinations and marginal spaces such as the small-island dependencies of Mauritius, which rarely feature even in the larger historiographical Indian Ocean-wide canvases.<sup>18</sup> Hurgobin teases out original material incorporating rarely seen nodes such as Lombok and Penang, revealing ever greater complexity and unanticipated levels of agency in the global movements of South Asian labour.

## Gender and Family

The third part of this book explores issues of agency and resistance relating to gender and family and begins with a chapter by Arunima Datta on the lives of ‘coolie’ women in Malayan plantations. ‘Coolie’ was an Indian term for a day labourer, often used by the British to describe migrant workers, but which became increasingly seen as pejorative amongst Indians overseas. By the 1890s, colonial rubber planters in Malaya had become convinced of the benefits of locally settled pools of labour and began encouraging the immigration of Indian ‘coolie’ women and families. As Malaya entered the 1930s, women constituted 39 per cent of the migrant Indian population, but an entrenched gender imbalance remained and permeated everyday life. Against this backdrop, Chapter 9 examines the complex interactions and intimacies between Indian coolie men and women in Malaya, presenting new insights into Indian–Malaysian history and offering a better understanding of the textured realities of plantation life. A selection of reported trials concerning intimate or conjugal problems amongst Indian coolies in Malaya, such as elopement and adultery, are interrogated to reveal the misrepresentation that pervades colonial discourses and uncover evidence of female agency.

Women were indisputably sometimes victims of male violence and kidnapping. However, Datta argues that colonial gender stereotypes, which painted women as perpetual victims and men as perpetual perpetrators, downplayed the active engagement of women in sexual and conjugal relationships. The colonial documentation of these cases systematically ignores the agency of women and the socio-economic realities behind their behaviour. The scarcity of women and

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<sup>17</sup> Carter (1994, 1996); Bates and Carter (2021).

<sup>18</sup> S. Bose (2006); Metcalf (2007).

loopholes in colonial administrative policy, in fact, created new possibilities for intimate relationships between Indian ‘coolie’ men and women that significantly differed from those back in India. The reportage also overlooks the complex potential motivations behind male conduct, including concerns regarding emasculation, control and status tied to their economic subjugation.

Beyond establishing the realities of ‘coolie’ life, the chapter probes colonial preoccupations, demonstrating how both judicial administrators and newspapers reporting trials focused on coolie ‘moral failings’, ranging from lack of modesty, trustworthiness or honesty to a propensity for violence. The re-examination of these cases therefore raises questions about the basis for such stereotyped views, their utilisation in maintaining ‘order’ among colonial subjects and the integrity of the colonial courts that relied upon them. Ultimately, Datta seeks to re-endow coolie women with power and agency and to expose the dependence of the plantation economic system on the exploitation of gendered workers.<sup>19</sup>

In Chapter 10, Nafisa Essop Sheikh similarly grapples with the agency of indentured Indian women in South Africa and endeavours to reinvest them with a complexity stripped away by previous studies that have described their oppression as totalising and irresistible. The social reproductive role of indentured women, in particular, meant that they were uniquely and advantageously placed in comparison to Indian women who remained on the subcontinent. Sheikh considers the dichotomy between women’s productive (waged) and reproductive (unpaid, often household-related) labour in relation to life in Natal and how female indentured workers used existing patriarchal discourses to create spaces of autonomy and opportunities for themselves.

In Chapter 11, Sheetal Bhoola discusses the family enterprises of Gujarati ‘passenger Indians’ in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, from the early 1900s till the present, exploring the connections between financial mobility, business, caste and community. Bhoola’s subjects are the second- and third-generation Gujarati Hindu ‘passenger migrants’ who travelled to South Africa at their own expense and who chose to relocate to Port Elizabeth (present-day Gqeberha) and Uitenhage (present-day Kariega) instead of colonial Natal from the 1900s onwards. The study is based on narratives that illuminate the way in which their caste-based occupation of shoemaking served them as a migrant populous. Descendants of these migrants also established caste-based businesses and engaged in other entrepreneurial activities to achieve financial mobility. A tight-knit community based around shoemaking developed in Port Elizabeth, and formal caste-based organisations

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<sup>19</sup> The story continues in her book in this same series (Datta 2020).

sprang up in response, with the aim of engaging in social and financial upliftment. Bhoola identifies and attempts to fill a lacuna in the literature available on the families of this little-known community of Hindu Gujaratis in the Eastern Cape.

Chapter 12, by Rochelle Almeida, studies the domestic Anglo-Indian female workforce in imperial Britain. Almeida seeks to corroborate the existence of women of mixed racial descent as part of the early South Asian workforce in Britain. These women are often invisible to us as today they have European surnames, anglicised first names, westernised dress and lifestyles and speak English. By using pictorial and epistolary evidence, however, they can be identified and their lives explored. Many travelled to Britain with the families that had employed them as *ayahs* in India. Being far from home, they were uniquely vulnerable, and if dismissed upon arrival, they were forced to find new work in a strange and alien environment. The travails involved in this, British attitudes towards these women and the experiences of specific mixed-race individuals are vividly reconstructed within this chapter.

## Legacies

The dispersal of Indian workers across the globe left a long shadow, and their precarious situation was dramatically exposed with the collapse of British rule. In this final part of the book, Chapter 13, by Emma C. Meyer, describes the profound effect of the Japanese military's takeover of British Burma in late 1941 and 1942 on the communities of Indian descent who were living and working there. Many fled across the Bay of Bengal by steamship or aircraft or on foot, and approximately 500,000 reached the borders of British India and settled there for the duration of the war. Scholars of South Asian history have produced a small but growing literature on the evacuation of Burma and the experiences of those who fled during the war. However, there has been very little research conducted on the fates of the Indian refugees who spent the war in India and later made attempts to return to Burma. Using archival evidence from Visakhapatnam district in south-eastern India, which received more wartime evacuees than any other district in British India, Meyer explores the resettlement of Indian evacuees during the war and the failed attempts to 'repatriate' them after the war's conclusion. Meyer provides an analysis of the impact that the Second World War had on the many migratory South Asian populations in the Bay of Bengal and their frustrated attempts in the late 1940s to return to the state of 'normalcy' they had previously enjoyed.

A far longer and pernicious struggle faced the South Asian community in South Africa, who were confronted after the Second World War with a barrage of

legislation aimed at entrenching white minority rule. Amongst these, the Group Areas Act (GAA) was one of the key instruments used to reinforce the ideology of apartheid in South Africa by emphasising separate residential areas, educational services and other amenities for the different supposed racial groups. The GAA was a culmination of anti-Indian measures, restricting access to land and trade for almost a century. In Chapter 14, Brij Maharaj focuses on Indian opposition to the GAA and resistance to the forced displacement that resulted from it. In a manner reminiscent of their pioneering struggle for civil rights in the early 1900s, Indian political organisations were vociferous in their condemnation of and opposition to the GAA and racial residential segregation, which was intended to ruin the community economically and force them into ghettos. However, while the Natal Indian Congress and the Natal Indian Organisation claimed to represent the whole Indian community, there was very little evidence of mobilisation of the working class and the poor, whose interests were neglected by elite political leaders. Segregation represented a double-edged sword for the underclasses – with increasing rents and slum clearance, some would become homeless, while others could possibly be housed in municipal housing schemes. Political action against the GAA consisted mainly of petitions, letters and delegations to the South African government authorities and the occasional mass meeting. However, their numbers were too few, and the coercive apparatus of the apartheid state, as represented by the army and the security branch of the police force was too formidable. Indians struggling to eke out a living were unlikely to court arrest and imprisonment in sufficient numbers to have much impact. Whilst sincere in their efforts, their successes, as in 1907–1914, were severely limited until joined in later years by the power of international boycotts of the apartheid regime.

The penultimate chapter in this volume, Chapter 15, by Brij V. Lal, describes the decline of the Indo-Fijian from a time of pre-eminent agency and achievement to one of abjection. By the time the indenture system was abolished in Fiji on 1 January 1920, 60,000 Indian indentured immigrants had arrived in Fiji. Abolition raised the question of the rights of those Indians who had decided to stay back in the British colony. Would they enjoy rights ‘no whit’ inferior to those enjoyed by other British subjects as they had been promised? Indians wanted equal and non-racial franchise on the basis of a common roll. However, this demand was resisted by Europeans, who saw in this a threat to their own privileged position, and by Fijian chiefs, who wanted to preserve their traditional hierarchical way of life. The colonial government settled on racial franchise in an arrangement which would preserve the status quo. The call for non-racial franchise fell on deaf ears. Fiji’s 1970 independence entrenched a racially elected parliament. Unfortunately, the

assumptions that underpinned the political culture were flawed. Among them was the assumption that Fijians would always vote as one to keep power. That was found wanting. When a multiracial coalition won power in 1987, a Fijian-dominated military overthrew the government at the behest of the Fijian establishment. This coup proved to be a pyrrhic victory for Fijian nationalism as Fijians fragmented into competing factions. Nonetheless, in 2000, when a coalition headed by an Indo-Fijian won power, it was overthrown in a putsch by a part-Fijian, ostensibly at the behest of the Fijian nationalists. In 2006, Fiji's fourth military coup started a new era, jettisoning the protocols and parameters of Fiji's twentieth-century past. Racial franchise was abolished, and equal citizenship for all was entrenched by a constitution decreed into existence without any public consultation. Indo-Fijians supported the coup leader, Frank Bainimarama, and his party overwhelmingly, placing their faith in a military leader to protect them from the Fijian nationalists but thinking little of what would happen when Bainimarama would finally go. The 2013 decreed constitution gives the overwhelmingly Fijian military the guardian role over the constitution, endowing it the power both to interpret the constitution as well as to enforce it, usurping power which rightfully belongs to an elected parliament. The majority of the members on the government benches are Indo-Fijians, but they lack political weight and moral authority and are used to rubber-stamp public policy rather than help make it. Indo-Fijians have been voting with their feet since the 1987 coup. Then about half the population, now they are about 30 per cent and declining due to low birth rate and continuing emigration. A true partnership in governance is beyond the reach of Indo-Fijians in Fiji. They will have to content themselves with some participation, living uncertainly on the sufferance of others. Once the movers of political change, they are now its passive recipients.

The final chapter in this volume, Chapter 16, by Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, compares the new and old diasporas of South Asians and how they are now linked through the internet. The chapter explores what Rajasingham-Senanayake calls the political economy of 'cyber-nationalism' and examines the roots of what has become a global Tamil 'ethnoscape'. It suggests that the 'Tamil national question' in Sri Lanka, during the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) search for independence, reconfigured and boosted the diasporic identities and the activism of groups of descendants of indentured South Indian migrant communities, some of whom have become part of a disadvantaged and discontented emergent global 'precariat'.<sup>20</sup> The chapter points to the development

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<sup>20</sup> Standing (2011).

of new spaces of political and economic agency among migrant and refugee communities that transcend national boundaries and outlines the way in which new migrants may create new languages of cultural and political agency, activism and empowerment for the descendants of old indentured migrant communities. Most interestingly of all, these new communities, as observed in previous research,<sup>21</sup> are often pan-South Asian. They pay little regard to former ethnic, caste and religious divisions amongst migrants, both old and new – a perhaps optimistic and positive development to anticipate in the future.

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<sup>21</sup> Bates (2001).

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## **Part I**

# **Agency and Resistance**



# 1

## Negotiating Power in Colonial Natal

Indentured Migrants in Natal, 1860–1911

*Goolam Vahed*

The Power of a Man is his present means to obtain some future apparent Good.

—Thomas Hobbes<sup>1</sup>

Where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.

—Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>

Men make history, but they do not make it just as they please.

—Karl Marx<sup>3</sup>

The British colony of Natal imported just over 152,000 indentured migrants between 1860 and 1911 to work on its railways, municipalities, coal mines and sugar plantations. The indigenous Zulu population had access to land at mission stations at reserves and through private companies, and resisted absorption into the racist capitalist economy for as long as they could.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, despite the large indigenous Zulu population, white settlers turned to Indian labour. The indentured migrated for a variety of reasons. These ran the gamut from demographic and economic dislocation resulting from British colonialism to being a widow or outcast or perhaps simply possessing a desire to travel. Notwithstanding claims of duping and false representation, the many examples of return migration, (re)migration to different colonies and chain migration suggest that at least some of the indentured were consciously undertaking the journey and had a reasonable idea of what they were getting into.

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<sup>1</sup> Hobbes (1660), ch. x.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault (1978), pp. 95–96.

<sup>3</sup> Marx quoted in Feuer (1969), p. 360.

<sup>4</sup> See Marks (1990).

Colonial societies and their plantations specifically were structured around power. Hobbes is cited in the epigraph because of his emphasis on the centrality of absolute power in human relations, while Marx's domination–repression conception of power sees power as residing in the bourgeoisie and a process of constant struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The concept of power is highly contested in the social sciences. Broadly speaking, however, there is a difference between those who see power as an 'exercise of power-over' and those who define it as a 'power-to-do'.<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, for example, defines power as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance'.<sup>6</sup> Foucault has a similar perspective: 'if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others'.<sup>7</sup> The power-to-do conception, as Hanna Pitkin explains, means that 'power is a something' – anything – which makes or renders somebody able to do, capable of doing something.<sup>8</sup> Power is capacity, potential, ability or wherewithal. In other words, power is a 'potentiality, not an actuality – indeed a potentiality that may never be actualized'.<sup>9</sup>

Foucault also made the crucial point that power is diffuse and operates within society rather than above it and asks that we examine micro-level techniques and tactics of power, which include such things as surveillance, control, encouragement, discouragement, suggestion, and so on. Employers, managers, overseers and *sirdars* (foremen) were able to keep workers in check through formal controls such as the battery of laws that were heavily weighted against workers.<sup>10</sup> It was at this micro level that power was most acute and sought to directly control and mould the indentured population. Workers had few protections even though a 'protector' of Indian immigrants was appointed on the recommendation of the 1872 Coolie Commission, to ensure that contracts were respected by employers. The secretary of state for the colonies appointed the Sanderson Committee which reported in April 1910 that protectors and magistrates were generally biased against workers as they usually belonged to the planter class. In Natal, J. A. Polkinghorn was a rare exception amongst protectors because of his willingness to challenge planters. He was frustrated at his inability to take action against a recalcitrant employer and wrote to the colonial secretary in 1906 that it was an

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<sup>5</sup> Allen (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Weber (1978), p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault (1983), p. 217; Allen (2016).

<sup>8</sup> Pitkin (1972), p. 276.

<sup>9</sup> Allen (2016).

<sup>10</sup> See Tayal (1977); Henning (1993); and Desai and Vahed (2007); amongst others.

‘injustice’ that he was required to assign workers to such employers.<sup>11</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, who spent the years between 1893 and 1914 in South Africa, appeared to have little confidence in the protector, writing in an editorial in the *Indian Opinion* that the ‘so-called “Protector” of indentured labourers’ had ‘assumed the role of “Exploiter”’. When we thus find that the sea has caught fire, where shall we get the water to quench it?<sup>12</sup>

Studies of Indian indentured migration have proliferated in recent decades due to the rise of India as a global power and the efforts of the Indian state to offer limited citizenship to Indians in the diaspora. This has increased interest among academics and many ordinary Indians in the diasporic Indian population. There are many studies on the mechanics of the Indian indenture system – how it was put into place, the processes of recruitment, the journey to the colonies, the arduous working conditions, and so on – but the role of those migrants who resisted power structures or took the opportunity to make new lives in the colonies has been relatively understudied. This is not to underplay the repressiveness of the system. Hugh Tinker, drawing on British politician John Russell’s 1840 description of the system of indenture, titled his study *A New System of Slavery*<sup>13</sup>; Gandhi wrote in 1907 that the system of indenture was an ‘evil thing’ because it essentially comprised unfree labour<sup>14</sup> while Amit Mishra concludes that ‘the indenture labour regime was a form of servitude, though not essentially a new system of slavery, as the labour was denied of its economic freedom and occupational and territorial mobility in the indenture system’.<sup>15</sup>

While acknowledging the brutal conditions of indenture, the perspective taken by this study is that the indentured did not passively oblige with the dictates of colonial authorities and/or accept the ubiquitous power of their employers. That they continued to migrate to the colonies in large numbers, and many even returned to the colonies for a second term of indenture or to settle permanently, calls for an understanding of the indentured experience that goes beyond the indenture-as-slavery thesis.

Workers registered their grievances in different ways. Resistance was mostly individualistic in Natal, including slowing down the work pace through feigning illness or breaking tools, deserting employers, occasionally engaging in violence against authority figures and suicide. There were group protests as well, with one

<sup>11</sup> Natal Archives Repository (NAB), CSO 2854/1906.

<sup>12</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 27 August 1910. See Vahed (2018) for a reappraisal of the role of protectors.

<sup>13</sup> Tinker (1974).

<sup>14</sup> *Indian Opinion*, 15 June 1907.

<sup>15</sup> Mishra (2010), p. 229.

major violent confrontation, the Gandhi-led strike of 1913, capturing international attention.<sup>16</sup> Resistance, as understood here, went beyond ‘working class heroism’ to include agency and invention. Beyond defying or confronting their masters and the conditions of employment, many of the indentured showed great initiative and enterprise, imagination and courage in rebuilding their lives in Natal in the face of adverse social, political and economic conditions.

This study draws heavily on the records of the protector, who made notes on his visits to plantations while his office recorded the various complaints made by indentured workers about their working and living conditions. There are 196 boxes of records in the Natal Archives Repository. It is acknowledged that the archives are biased in capturing the voices of those in power. This was compounded by the fact that the workers’ voices were captured through translators. Nevertheless, these records can be read ‘against the grain’ to give voice to the silenced.

## Resistance and Agency

As the Foucauldian injunction in the epigraph implies, power and resistance are not binaries but intertwined, rendering the concept of resistance ambiguous. Sherry Ortner argues that the aim of individuals in resisting power is not at all clear, nor are the workings of power itself – hence, the difficulty in characterising resistance.<sup>17</sup> In thinking of slaves or indentured workers’ resistance, images of workers engaging in violent protests against employers likely come to mind. The liberation of enslaved people in Haiti under Toussaint L’Overture in 1804 and the freeing of the Amistad Africans a few decades later through ‘lawfare’ have been captured in film by Hollywood and served as exemplars of resistance.<sup>18</sup> Yet while violence lurked on many plantations, there were few instances of open physical resistance. This could have been because employers and the state monopolised power, monitored the movements of the indentured through a series of laws and controlled their freedom of association, and there were few opportunities to work and live in the colony outside of the ambit of the employer.<sup>19</sup>

Resistance, James C. Scott argues, does not have to aim to overthrow an established order to count as ‘resistance’. Scott speaks of ways in which ordinary people attempt to exert control over their lives as ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’, which ‘stops well short of outright collective defiance’.

<sup>16</sup> See Swan (1985).

<sup>17</sup> Ortner (1995), p. 175.

<sup>18</sup> See the films *Toussaint L’Overture* (2012) and *Amistad* (1997).

<sup>19</sup> Desai and Vahed (2007), pp. 145–166.

Such actions require ‘little or no coordination or planning’ and ‘typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority’.<sup>20</sup> We know from the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, drawing on Antonio Gramsci, that culture is a dynamic process ‘produced, reproduced, and transformed through human agency’.<sup>21</sup> Culture can manufacture consent and exercise control without violence, as people may ‘consent to rule when they accept as given (or at least desirable relative to perceived alternatives) the values, norms, and versions of justice’ prevailing at a given time. The relations between ‘between and among consent, domination and resistance’ are thus tenuous at best.<sup>22</sup> However, Scott dismissed the notion that the absence of violent collective resistance on the part of subaltern groups was due to the ideological hegemony of the ruling class. While accepting Scott’s argument about everyday resistance, we need to be careful not to categorise every action as ‘resistance’ to the point that the concept becomes meaningless and also be aware that people may act in ways without being cognisant of the larger consequences of their actions.<sup>23</sup>

One of the ways in which the indentured sought to affirm their self-worth was by opposing the labels assigned to them. While the employers and authorities termed them ‘coolies’, the migrants themselves opposed the use of the term. In the Tamil language, *kuli* referred to payment for menial work for persons without customary rights. The 1872 Coolie Commission, which had been established to investigate the conditions on plantations, reported that the word ‘coolie’ was used in India to apply

to the lowest classes only, and it is regarded as a term of reproach in the nature of abuse. On many estates this term was mentioned to us, in our conversations with the coolies, as one of their objections to the colony.... There is no doubt that the term is galling, and a source of annoyance.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Scott (1985), p. xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Ringrose et al. (2009), p. 5. ‘Much of the current analyses continue to draw and build on theorizing that emerged out of the UK Gramscian tradition of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. In this view ... culture is understood through what people do, not, as more structural approaches would have it, through the symbolic or economic calculations assigned to them. The emphasis is on how the structure is produced, reproduced and transformed through human agency.’

<sup>22</sup> Ringrose et al. (2009), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Chandra (2015), p. 565.

<sup>24</sup> Coolie Commission (1872), p. 13.

While the proposed ‘Coolie Agent’ had his (it was always a he) title changed to that of protector of Indian immigrants, whites continued to refer to Indians, both free and indentured, pejoratively as ‘coolies’. However, this is an indication that the indentured asserted their selfhood from their formative days in the colony.

The indentured and their descendants lacked the political clout to influence legislators in South Africa. This is not to say that they were powerless. Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li speak of ‘rightful resisters’.<sup>25</sup> This, Uday Chandra points out, refers to individuals and groups ‘being aware of the structures of power pre-dominating in a particular society and within those structures to articulate their claims, exploiting crevices and cracks in social arrangements to push forward subaltern political agendas’.<sup>26</sup> In the context of indenture in Natal, for example, workers used the office of the protector of Indian immigrants and local magistrates, notwithstanding their limitations, to complain about the everyday conduct of employers in the hope that these authority figures would intervene on their behalf.<sup>27</sup>

Saba Mahmood’s writings on agency and resistance from a feminist perspective have been criticised in certain quarters, but I found them helpful for this chapter. Mahmood is critical of academics who hold that only actions that ‘impose a teleology of progressive politics’ qualify as resistance. She regards it as fallacious to assume that there is a universal desire on the part of people to be free from relations of subservience.<sup>28</sup> Thus, we should not take for granted that the indentured naturally wanted to destroy relations of capitalist domination in Natal. Mahmood accuses those who assign some preconceived agency to the subalterns as being analytically and politically prescriptive, for underlying this thinking is the notion that workers must act towards self-determined goals and interests. Mahmood insists that ‘the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance’.<sup>29</sup> What ‘progressive’ academics and critics may see in the actions of certain peoples as

a case of deplorable passivity and docility, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agential

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<sup>25</sup> O’Brien and Li (2006).

<sup>26</sup> Chandra (2015), p. 566.

<sup>27</sup> Vahed (2018).

<sup>28</sup> Mahmood (2005), pp. 9–10.

<sup>29</sup> Mahmood (2005), pp. 14–15.