

LEEDS BI-CENTENARY TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

FROM ABOLITION TO COMMONWEALTH

WEST YORKSHIRE REMEMBERS INDENTURED LABOUR
IN AFRICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



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LEEDS BI-CENTENARY TRANSFORMATION PROJECT/2008

Published by:

GBAKHANDA PUBLISHING

In association with the

AFRIKAN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

Printed by:

CREATIVE PRINT – Tel: 0113 242 6085

ISBN: 1 874555 14 1

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Front cover illustration:

East Indian Indentured Workers on Cacao Estate in Trinidad

Image courtesy: Project Gutenberg, USA/Brandon Head

Back cover illustration:

Indian indentured workers landing in Mauritius

Illustrated London News, 6th August 1842

Image courtesy: National Archives

Information about the *From Abolition to Commonwealth* exhibition and further copies of this pamphlet can be obtained by contacting Leeds Bi-Centenary Transformation Project, Leeds West Indian Centre, 10 Laycock Place, Leeds, LS7 3JA



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Foreword

It is always a pleasure to read beautifully written, meticulously researched text, particularly when the subject is important, fascinating and timely. All this is true of *From Abolition to Commonwealth: West Yorkshire remembers indentured labour in Africa and the Caribbean*.

This publication skilfully pieces together fragmented information of an aspect of our history that is in danger of being, if not forgotten, certainly sidelined. It is timely, because we have been commemorating the Bicentenary of the Parliamentary Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807 through various events across the country. This publication firmly demonstrates how indentured labour, sometimes described as a 'new form of slavery', was a direct result of legislation on the abolition of the slave trade and subsequently of slavery. Britain desperately sought to replace one source of cheap labour with another, (drawn primarily from the agricultural communities of the Indian sub-continent) which on the face of it was more acceptable than slavery. However, what this booklet does so powerfully and poignantly, is to record the human cost of this system and the manner in which it contributed to the 'interlocking' of the histories of, for instance, the Indian sub-continent with Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius and Malaysia. This 'interlocking' came with its inevitable tensions, the reverberations of which are still felt today, as well as the creation of dynamic, new, culturally diverse communities.

Indentured labour of course has a longer history than the period covered in this publication. There were, for instance, many categories of indentured servants in colonial North and South America, involving mainly adult White persons bound to labour for a period of years. However, it is the sheer scale of the indentureship programme undertaken by Britain in the 19th century that sets it apart. It was only possible because Britain had absolute power over its various colonies and was thus able to undertake the largely forcible mobilisation of people across countries and continents.

The case studies of individuals whose families have direct experiences of indentureship loops this back to West Yorkshire in a particularly interesting manner. The exhibition and the publication complement one another in ways that will make this a truly memorable experience for the visitor.

Dr Nima Poovaya-Smith
Director, Alchemy

FROM ABOLITION TO COMMONWEALTH

WEST YORKSHIRE REMEMBERS INDENTURED LABOUR IN AFRICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Acknowledgements

This pamphlet and the photographic exhibition is an important aspect of the theme of inclusion and transformative history. It demonstrates the interlocking nature of British Commonwealth histories linking the Indian Sub-Continent with Africa, the Caribbean and the United Kingdom (UK). Our research draws out the cycle of exploitation, dependency, resistance and independence, to relate how they interlock to present-day social, political and cultural issues.

The Leeds Bi-Centenary Transformation Project (LBCTP) staff and management committee take this opportunity to give due thanks and praise to the following people who assisted with the exhibition and this pamphlet.

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Introduction

The Leeds Bi-Centenary Transformation Project is a collaborative community initiative to highlight African achievements, liberation and aspirations in commemoration of the British Parliamentary Abolition Act of 1807. This Act helped to end the capture and transportation of African people from the continent of Africa to be enslaved in the Caribbean and the Americas. During a two-year period LBCTP staff and management committee have delivered a range of education, spiritual, arts and cultural programmes to local Leeds communities and some regional audiences.

As part of the Project, here we explore the experiences, impacts and legacies of indentured labour; one of the many post-abolition developments, which affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of men and women from South Asia and Africans in the Caribbean and Africa. The term *indentured labour* refers to the practice of binding workers to an employment contract for a fixed term in exchange for payment of travel, housing and food and/or low wages, working for any employer who would buy his or her contract of indenture.

Following the abolition of the British-sponsored transportation of enslaved people in 1807 and the end of slavery in 1833, indentured labourers were taken from India to the Caribbean to replace enslaved African men and women on the plantations; and the system soon spread throughout the British Empire. Few of these labourers returned to South Asia on completion of their indentureship and many became imbedded in the local African and Caribbean communities. As the Commonwealth developed out of the declining 'British Empire' thousands of the descendents of the labourers migrated to the UK and many have settled in Yorkshire.

Whilst the movement and migration of people to escape war, famine or persecution, or to seek better resources, is as old as humankind itself, both the Trans-Atlantic African Slave Trade and the Indentured Labour System were unique in their scale and scope. The Atlantic Slave Trade saw the forcible movement of more than ten million people during a period of three hundred years; and the Indentured Labour System saw the migration of almost two million South Asians in less than a century.

Reconstructing the experiences of these indentured workers is not an easy task. Only a few Indian migrants left written records behind. Most were too busy working to write about their lives. Traditionally, it has been the rich and powerful who have dominated historical records: only they have had the opportunity to pass laws, make speeches and write important books. But migrants also left a record. Letters, photographs and memories handed down by word-of-mouth have all contributed to our shared memories of Britain's imperial past. Sometimes, their voices can be found in unexpected places. Examining parliamentary debates, legislative archives and commissions of enquiry, historians have found the voices of indentured migrants, barely audible at times but undoubtedly there.



Indian woman labourer, India 1910
Image courtesy: Images of Empire

Abolition of trans-Atlantic African enslavement

Whilst the year 2007 saw the commemoration of two-hundred years since the end of British slave ships, which meant the end of the British-sponsored transportation of enslaved African people across the Atlantic, it did not mean the end of slavery itself.

Between 1450 and 1900 more than ten million Africans were enslaved, sold and transported from the West coast of Africa across the Atlantic to North and South America and the islands in the Caribbean. A triangular trade developed, using enslaved African labour to grow and produce cotton, sugar, tobacco and rum in what was known by Europeans as 'The New World' and is now the Southern States of North America, the Caribbean and Brazil. These lucrative items were then shipped to Europe where they financed western industrial revolutions and trade goods such as textiles, beads and guns; which in turn were used to barter for more enslaved Africans.

In 1807, two years after the battle of Trafalgar, the British Parliament passed a bill to end the capture and transportation of African people across the Atlantic. Historians disagree over whether this decision was the result of economic or humanitarian reasons. Most likely, it was both. Humanitarians in Britain gave voice to a growing feeling that the slave trade was morally wrong but at the same time the British government was shifting its imperial ambitions westwards, from the Caribbean to India. It also decided to change how imperial business would be done, abandoning protectionist customs duties on its African trading ventures in favour of an economic policy known as *laissez faire*. From now on, British and foreign traders would be charged the same rates of tax. As long as the British navy continued to dominate the seas, there was simply no need for a more formal and a more expensive type of control. Added to the need to end African enslavement was the actions of free and enslaved Africans. Pressure from abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano, Sarah Parker Remond, Frederick Douglass, Ignatius Sancho and Quoba Ottobah Cugoano; and the ever-present fear of enslaved African uprisings as occurred in 1760 in Jamaica led by Tacky and in 1831, led by Samuel Sharpe, was a poignant reminder of the cost of African enslavement.



Samuel Sharpe

It was in 1833, twenty-six years later, that a law was passed to begin the final emancipation of enslaved Africans in British Colonies. However, this did not suddenly make all the enslaved on British soil free. Instead, the British Government's first priority was to protect the plantation economies of the

'British West Indies' and other British colonies from the shock of the abolition of slavery. The first measure was the direct financial compensation of twenty million pounds to the British owners of freed persons in the Caribbean over the age of six and a half years old. Secondly, there was the forced apprenticeship of four to six years for freed persons over the age of six and a half.

Neither of these measures worked as the British Government had hoped. Instead, the twenty million pounds compensation failed to attract new investment because many investors doubted that the British sugar plantations could make a profit without slavery. The second provision was exploited by plantation owners, as they used the apprenticeship laws to extract as much labour as possible, whilst at the same time reducing the basic distribution of food and clothing to plantation workers. All of this meant that enslaved Africans in the Caribbean were not free in 1833 or 1834. Instead, complete emancipation in the British controlled Caribbean occurred on 1 August 1838 and nine months later in Mauritius, off the coast of Africa.

It is important to again stress that the 1833 Act, did not end slavery in the British Empire. Nor was slavery in the British colonies over by 1838. Such legislation was always intended to only 'gradually' end slavery and the law was initially only applied in the Caribbean. The enslavement of Africans by Europeans was abolished in the Gold Coast in 1874 and in southern Nigeria in 1916. As late as 1924, Britain was profiting from slavery in Sierra Leone, northern Nigeria, Gambia, Aden, Burma and Hong Kong. Slavery was finally abolished in Sierra Leone on 1st January 1928. After emancipation, many freed people in the Caribbean did not want to continue working on the plantations for their old 'masters', even if they now got paid! For those freed persons who did stay and work on the plantations, the plantation owners kept wages low. The old 'masters' were scared that the freed workers would save their wages, leave the plantations and buy a plot of their own land. The planters still desired a cheap, compliant workforce who would live on the plantations.

Few planters had expected that their supply of permanent plantation labour would be reduced so dramatically. The British West Indies sugar estates were also now in competition with the sugar plantations of Cuba, Brazil and the United States of America (USA), who continued to use enslaved African labour and showed no interest in emancipation. The British controlled Caribbean would have to look elsewhere for workers. Their solution was to create another workforce, which limited economic opportunities for and bargaining power of the former enslaved of the Caribbean.

Empire, imperialism and the introduction of indentured labour

The British in the Caribbean

Britain's presence in the Caribbean dates back to 1604, when it attempted but failed to establish a settlement to find gold in what is now Guyana. Twenty years later, the British had colonies in St Kitts, Barbados and Nevis and quickly developed sugar plantations that were dependant on enslaved African labour. After the abolition of slavery, Britain wanted to keep control of its territories in the Caribbean; the economic and political benefits were too good for it to consider surrendering. However, as long as the freed people were unwilling to remain on the plantations after emancipation, British Caribbean planters believed they would have to import labour from outside the region to keep their plantations going and their profits high. By importing labour and not paying higher wages to local freed people, the plantation owners limited their labour costs and in doing so, limited the economic opportunities and choices of the freed people, whilst ensuring their own economic advancement.

The British in Africa

Until the final quarter of the nineteenth century, Britain's interest in Africa was mainly confined to its coastal areas. Until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, ships sailing to India and beyond travelled south along the West African seaboard to Cape Town, which was built by the Dutch to refresh their sailors who were also bound for the East. From there, ships passed into the warmer waters of the Indian Ocean, laden with soldiers, sailors, guns and gold. The British, however, were not alone. Fleets from Portugal, Spain, Holland and France had, for centuries, been working these waters, brokering relations with African chiefs in order to gain access to ivory, rubber, gold, cocoa and enslaved Africans.

The importance of the trans-Atlantic African slave trade in explaining British imperial power cannot be understated. By 1800, the British economy was expanding faster than any other European power and in dramatically new ways. The mechanisation of the textile industry revolutionised industrial production but it was the triangular trade involving African enslavement that provided the network linking primary products to markets overseas. Economic growth also helps to explain Britain's military might: after the Battle of Trafalgar, in 1805, 'Britannia ruled the waves'. The Royal Navy was unmatched and London was the hub of a global commercial web.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the discovery of quinine made possible a form of prophylactic treatment for malaria, which was the scourge of European explorers. Meanwhile, the rapid development of steam technology enabled for the first time river transport into the interior for Europeans. At the same time, British attitudes to Africa were changing. Out of the campaign to abolish trans-Atlantic African enslavement, a powerful movement emerged to abolish slavery altogether, wherever and whenever it was found. In its place, 'legitimate commerce' would foster trade and with it, 'civilisation'. Christian missionaries, meanwhile, travelled to Africa in increasing numbers. Also, explorers seeking fame and fortune, pioneered epic journeys across the continent, capturing the imagination of the British public 'back home' as they went. By the last years of the nineteenth century, the concept of 'Civilising Africa' had become a popular European concern.



British Empire in 1897

Introduction of indentured labour

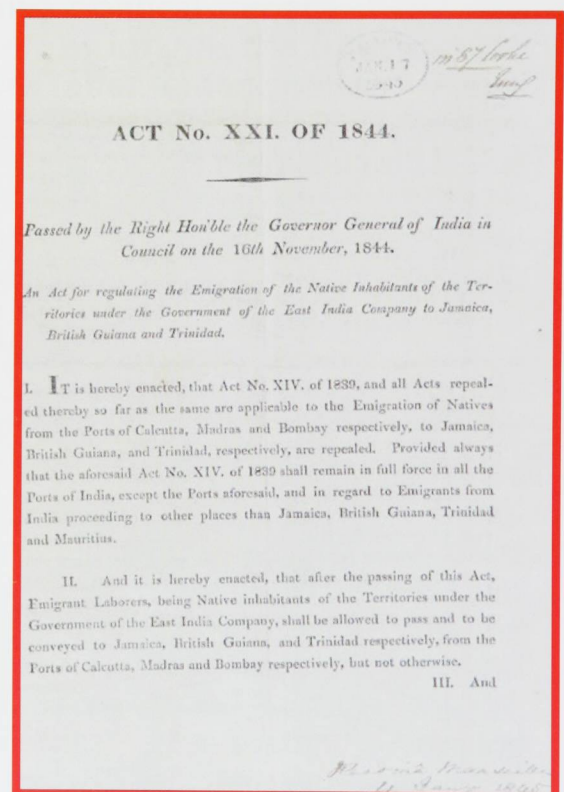
Caribbean

In the British colonies in the Caribbean, plantation owners believed the solution to their severe labour shortage was to attract workers from abroad to work on plantations. Under a system implemented by the British government, labourers would be contracted to work for whoever would buy their contract to work for given periods; known as the *indentured labour system*. Employers were obliged to provide their workers with housing and food and in some cases, a very small wage.

In the early years of the indentured labour system, many Caribbean planters' first preference was for European labourers, because they thought they were better workers and their presence would 'whiten' the mostly African plantation colonies. In the late 1830s and early 1840s, with the exception of the migration of 30,000 Portuguese workers from Madeira to Guyana, only a limited number of European labourers went to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations. Some French and German workers went to Trinidad and 4,500 other Europeans migrated to Jamaica between 1834 and 1835.

But the attempts at creating a system of indenture using European workers ended in failure, as they either fell victim to tropical illnesses or abandoned their contracts to take up service in less physically-demanding jobs. European migrants continued to be more attracted to migration to Northern America than to the British West Indies.

However, experiments as early as 1829 in Mauritius had shown plantation owners that a system of indentured labour using Indian workers could effectively alleviate labour shortages; and thus the British West Indies turned to India, which was almost completely controlled directly or indirectly by the British Government.



1844 Act regulating the migration of Indians to Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad
Image courtesy: National Archives

India

There had been a British presence in India since the early 1600s, initially as a trading post for the British East India Company, escalating into military dominance over south India in the 1700s and expanding northwards. After the suppression of the 1857 Indian uprising, the British colonial government took full control of India.

To the British government of the 1830s, India was the ideal place to secure a consistent flow of compliant, hard-working labourers whose financial desperation would see them travel to the other side of the world in search of better lives.

India's economic and political turmoil during the nineteenth century, together with periodic droughts and famines and an exploding population that grew from 185 million in 1800 to 285 million in 1900, meant increasing numbers of Indians were willing to accept the harsh terms of indenture contracts and long voyages to alleviate their poverty, which was exacerbated by British rule.

The recruitment of labourers from India was a complicated process that varied over time and place. Workers were hired by British-government-licensed recruiters who in turn employed *arkatias*. With their local knowledge, the *arkatias* were able to search villages, targeting the poor and vulnerable, persuading labourers to travel overseas for work. After persuading the labourers to leave their villages, the *arkatias* took them to ports, where the labourers were subject to health checks, signed their contracts and then shipped off to British territories to work.

As soon as the indentured labour system was implemented, there were voices of protest against it. The restrictive and often misleading nature of contracts, transportation conditions, allegations of kidnapping, low wages, substandard housing and food provisions and harsh punishments pressured the British Government to review the system of indentured labour. Worried that they had created a new system of enslavement, as well as the economic impact and damage to its international moral standing, Britain suspended the transportation of labourers from India in 1840.

During the suspension of Indian labour, the British government experimented with alternative ways of supplying the Caribbean planters with cheap labour, using Chinese people from British Malacca and Africans from Sierra Leone. The experiments were largely unsuccessful, resulting in limited numbers of willing migrant workers, therefore indentured labour from India was soon reintroduced. The system would continue well into the twentieth century, with India being the main provider of workers, through which Indian indentured labourers would build infrastructures and cultivate crops in other British territories abroad, but mainly in the Caribbean and Africa.

Africa

In Africa, British-sponsored indentured labour was mainly confined to two settler colonies: Natal and British East Africa, or BEA, which was renamed Kenya in 1920. In both cases, the British believed that African labour was either unwilling or unable to work. Indentured Indian migration offered a solution to the 'labour problem'. Between 1860 and 1911, 150,000 migrants went to Natal and a further 32,000 to British East Africa.

It was at a Durban meeting in October 1851, that the introduction of indentured labour to Natal was first proposed; but it was not until 1859 that the government of India acquiesced to the planters' demands. Laws stipulated a nine-hour working day, a minimum wage of ten shillings a month, plus the provision of food, clothing, medical treatment and lodging. Terms of indenture were for five years, after which indentured workers could choose to re-indenture or seek employment elsewhere in Natal. After ten years, workers would be entitled to free passage 'home' to India.

Compared to indentured labour elsewhere in the British Empire, the number of workers transported to East Africa was comparatively small. Of the 1.3 million indentured Indians a mere 32,000 went to East Africa. Their historical significance however could not be greater. In 1896, when the first indentured workers disembarked at Mombasa, the future of British East Africa was still in doubt, for while Britain envisaged an African empire stretching from Cairo to the Cape, the French foresaw their own empire, stretching west to east and joining the Niger to the Nile. In order to head off French ambitions, it was vital that Britain secured the headwaters of the Nile, located at the northern shore of Lake Victoria, in what is Uganda today.

To head off the French, in 1888 the British granted a royal charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) and placed Uganda under Company control. The problem was how to make Uganda pay. The arduous caravan journey from the coast took forty-five days. A railway, while incurring great expense, promised to open up the interior for the British, rebutting the French advance and paving the way for 'Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation'.

Without Indian workers, however, the railway would remain a dream. Africans had no incentive to labour for the White man and the colonists lacked the means to force them to work. In 1890 the IBEAC approached the Indian government, seeking permission to import Indian labourers to East Africa. At first, the Indian government refused. Abuses of workers elsewhere warned them against yet further schemes. But, after repeated requests and increasing political pressures from London, the government of India reluctantly agreed. The building of the Uganda Railway was a vital moment in the history of East Africa yet the significant contribution of Indian indentured workers continues to be overlooked.

Indentured labour in Africa, however, was anything but a British preserve. Across the continent, European powers such as the Portuguese and the French in particular - used various forms of indentured labour to maintain coercive labour systems not dissimilar to the slavery that had gone before. The Portuguese were pressed to abolish African enslavement in Angola in 1858, recreated another form of slavery by using former enslaved Africans as indentured labourers: or shipped them to their island colonies of Sao Tome and Principe under five year terms. Almost 100,000 were transported and though these migrants were officially entitled to a passage 'home', by 1908 only thirteen had returned. In Senegal, the French purchased the freedom of enslaved Africans before binding them to terms of fourteen years as the cost of their liberation. Later, many of these 'freed slaves' were transported to the French Caribbean, while across the Continent, as many as 60,000 former enslaved Africans from East Africa, Madagascar and the Comoro Islands were shipped to the island of Reunion and other French Indian Ocean colonies.



Detail of shawl made by Joali Kalsi in the Punjab during the 1870s.
All women members of the Kalsi family wore the shawl to their weddings
Courtesy: Dr Sewa Singh Kalsi

African indentured labour experiences

East Africa

For many indentured migrants, their first experience of Africa was the sight of Kilindini Harbour from the gangplank of a ship. Compared to indentured journeys elsewhere in the empire, the passage from Karachi was mercifully short, but the journey had begun long before they had embarked on a ship. From their original place of recruitment, indentured labourers were taken first to a holding station at Lahore, before being transported in special trains to a segregation camp at Budapur. From there, they were taken on to Karachi, where they boarded specially chartered steamers for Mombasa.

In 1897, a sudden plague epidemic broke out, forcing the closure of both Karachi and Bombay. Recruits had to be held in quarantine camps for weeks and sometimes months. In chaotic conditions, as recruiting agents tried to disinfect both people and their various belongings, hostilities broke out between angry inmates and guards who were struggling to maintain control.



Indian indentured workers on the Uganda Railway

Arriving in Mombasa, Indian indentured labourers found a colony in the making. Their task, though not simple, was relatively straightforward: to build a railway from Mombasa at the coast to Lake Victoria, nine-hundred miles inland. Recruits had been attracted by the prospect of earning higher wages than they could expect 'back home', yet the price they paid for their ambition was a commitment to a working life that was strange, dangerous and unstintingly hard. Employed by the British Government, it seems likely that workers received somewhat better treatment than those employed on

plantations elsewhere. Yet the nature of the work meant a gruelling encounter with the African land. From Mombasa, the line of the rails crossed the Taru Plain, a dry, waterless expanse described by one contemporary traveller as 'a dull uniform grey of endless bush and cactus'. Water was carried from the coast and distributed as sparingly as possible. Illness and disease was rife. Of the 32,000 Indians who worked on the line, almost 3,000 died as a result of dysentery, malaria and black-water fever. A further 6,454 were invalided home to India.



One of the Tsavo lions

There were other dangers beside illnesses and diseases. In March 1898 the railway reached the Tsavo River. During the nine months that it took to build the necessary bridge, workers were terrorised by a pair of man-eating lions, now immortalised in a Chicago Museum in the USA. Hundreds of workers fled back to Mombasa – those that remained built camp fires to scare away the lions and constructed barricades made from thorn trees for protection. Finally, in December, the lions were shot but not before twenty-eight of the workers had been killed.

Natal

The experiences of indentured labourers in Natal were different from that of the railway workers of British East Africa in several important respects. In Natal, Indians were employed to work on sugar plantations. Eager to maximise their profits, the English planters perceived their workers less as human beings and more as an economic resource. Relations between individual employers and their workers varied, yet all planters had their eyes fixed on optimum production. Though laws stipulated how workers should be treated, in Natal the story of indentured labour is one of exploitation, coercion, resistance and protest.

The first Indian labourers arrived in Natal in November 1860 on two ships, the *Belvedere* from Calcutta and the *Truro* from Madras. On board, cholera had claimed the lives of forty of the four hundred passengers. A further one hundred and sixty perished on board in the following six years. On arrival, migrant workers were incarcerated at a depot outside Durban, while they waited to be assigned. Barracks were unfinished and sanitary conditions were appalling. Some migrants were forced to wait for months before they were taken to their place of work.

According to the legislation of 1859, labourers were to work for nine hours a day and no more. In reality, indentured labourers worked from sunrise to sunset, planting, weeding and harvesting the cane. Labourers usually worked seven days a week with very little spare time in-between. Under-nourished and over-worked, it was common for labourers to fall ill but they seldom received medical treatment, either from their employers or from the migration authorities in Durban. According to the English settlers, feigning illness was the labourers' way of dodging work.



Indian women indentured workers in 19th century South Africa

Settlers punished their workers for alleged infractions by docking their pay. Corporal punishment was another recourse and flogging was widespread. So too was the withholding of rations. Often, planters appointed 'headmen' to supervise the workers. Known as *sirdars*, headmen took up an intermediary role between 'master' and 'servant'. Charged with maintaining order while maximising production, *sirdars* had a difficult task. Frequently, they beat and bullied the workers, while the employer took up a supposedly benevolent paternalist role.

Kenyan and Ugandan recollections



Sarojni and Rasik Patel Leeds, 2008

Rasik and Sarojni Patel are both Hindus. Rasik was born in Kampala, Uganda, in the 1940s, his parents were from Gujarat, India; they migrated to Uganda in the late 1920s. Sarojni arrived in Kenya from India when she was one month old, only visiting India twenty-nine years later. They both left Africa for the UK during the period of 'Africanisation' during the 1960s and were married in 1971. They now live in Leeds.

Rasik:

I was born in Kampala. My parents were from Gujarat, when India was British Raj. Then; all Gujarats were mostly farmers – 'Patel' means 'farmer' - there was land and cattle and they used to live completely on farming.

In Uganda for Indians:

Yes, it was a close community – like we maintained our culture, life style, customs and traditions. ... There were European towns and the White people settled there – there were Indian towns for the Indians and African towns for Africans. Indian people could not go to African towns after seven pm in the evening; and Indians could not go to European towns after seven pm either – curfew times were from seven am to seven pm and that's when you could go to other towns.

Sarojni:

I can't remember when exactly but I think my father was only like in his twenties and because he was quite educated he went to Kenya to work in an English company. He was earning quite a lot of money but he took an evening job as well as he had to support a large family – I have eleven brothers and sisters.

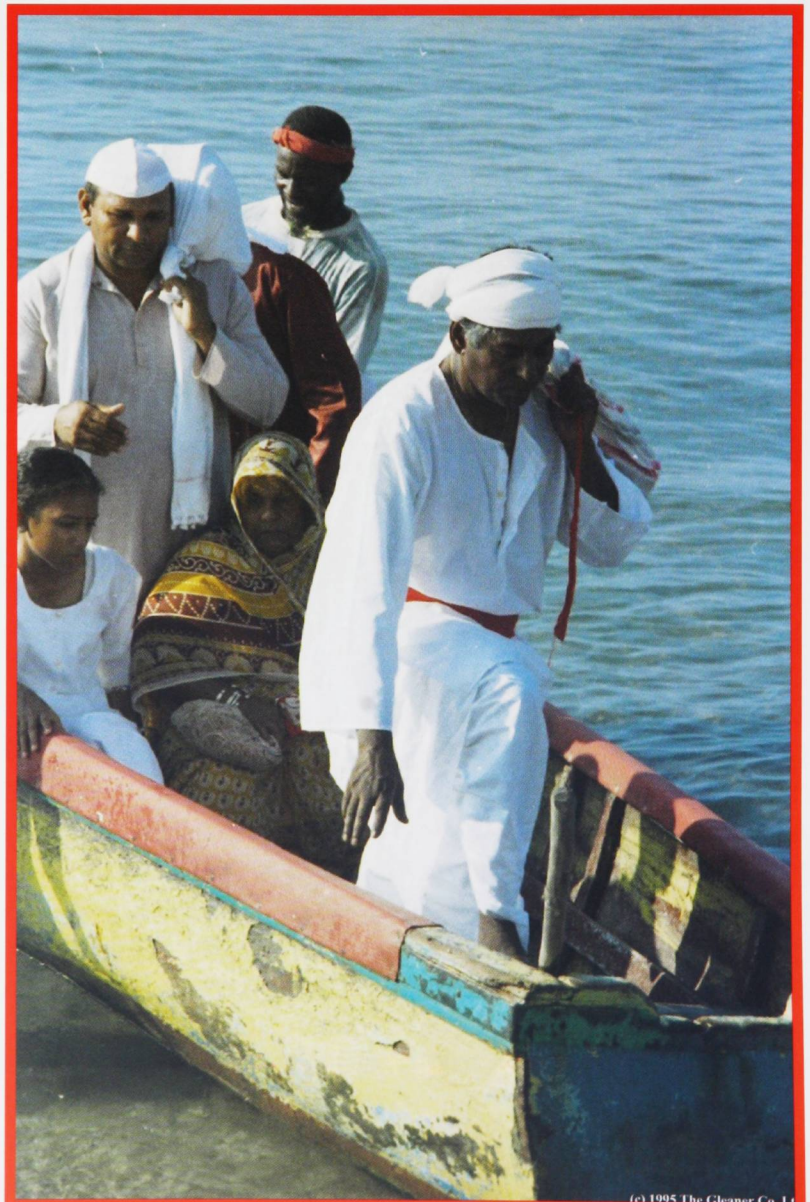
Caribbean indentured labour experiences

On 5 May 1838, 396 Indians arrived in the Caribbean, docking in British Guiana, now Guyana, the first indentured labourers of a system that was to last almost eighty years. They were the first of almost a quarter of a million Indians to migrate to the country on indentured labour contracts, with another 145,000 Indians posted to Trinidad and more than 30,000 to Jamaica. All these migrations were made possible by the British Government.

The voyage from Calcutta in India to the Caribbean lasted between three and six months. The majority of the Indian labourers exported to the Caribbean were aged between ten and thirty years old and in the early years of the system, there were two men for every one woman.

In May 2005 Jamaican Indians re-enact the arrival of Indian indentured workers in Jamaica at Old Harbour Bay in May 1845. The event commemorated the 160th anniversary of the arrival of South Asians in Jamaica

Image courtesy: the Jamaica Gleaner



(c) 1995 The Gleaner Co. Ltd

On arriving at the ports, the labourers were transported to their designated plantations to begin work immediately and often occupied the old ex-enslaved African quarters. Work was organised on a 'task' system, which allocated a task per day and a work day could start as early as 4.30am. Labourers often struggled to complete their allocated tasks, which was punishable by fines or imprisonment and their freedom of movement outside the plantations restricted by a pass system.

Indian labourers recruited to work on British Caribbean plantations in the nineteenth century were generally recruited to work on sugar plantations, which had been previously cultivated by enslaved African labour. Sugar-cane was the principal crop of the Caribbean plantations and people back in Britain had an insatiable appetite for it for use in cakes, pastries, tea, coffee and chocolate. The increase in the consumption of sugar, growing five-fold during the nineteenth century, was accompanied by falling prices that dropped by more than 75 per cent in the same period. It is no coincidence that Guyana imported the most Indian labour of all the British Caribbean and was the largest exporter of sugar. In the second-half of the nineteenth century, its sugar production grew by 270 per cent, thanks to indentured workers.

As the indentured labour system continued and the export of Indian labour to the Caribbean developed, migrant Indian workers and their families increasingly became an integral part of the communities and landscape of Caribbean countries. Part of the indenture agreement gave labourers the right of return passage to India at the end of their contracts, but this could also be exchanged into a land-grant. Contracts in the early years of the indentured labour system ranged from one to five years in duration, but from the 1860s, a minimum five year contract became the standard in all British sugar colonies. However, less than one in four Indians returned to India. Indian cultivation of land led to the growing of rice as well as the introduction of other Indian foods such as mangoes and curries.



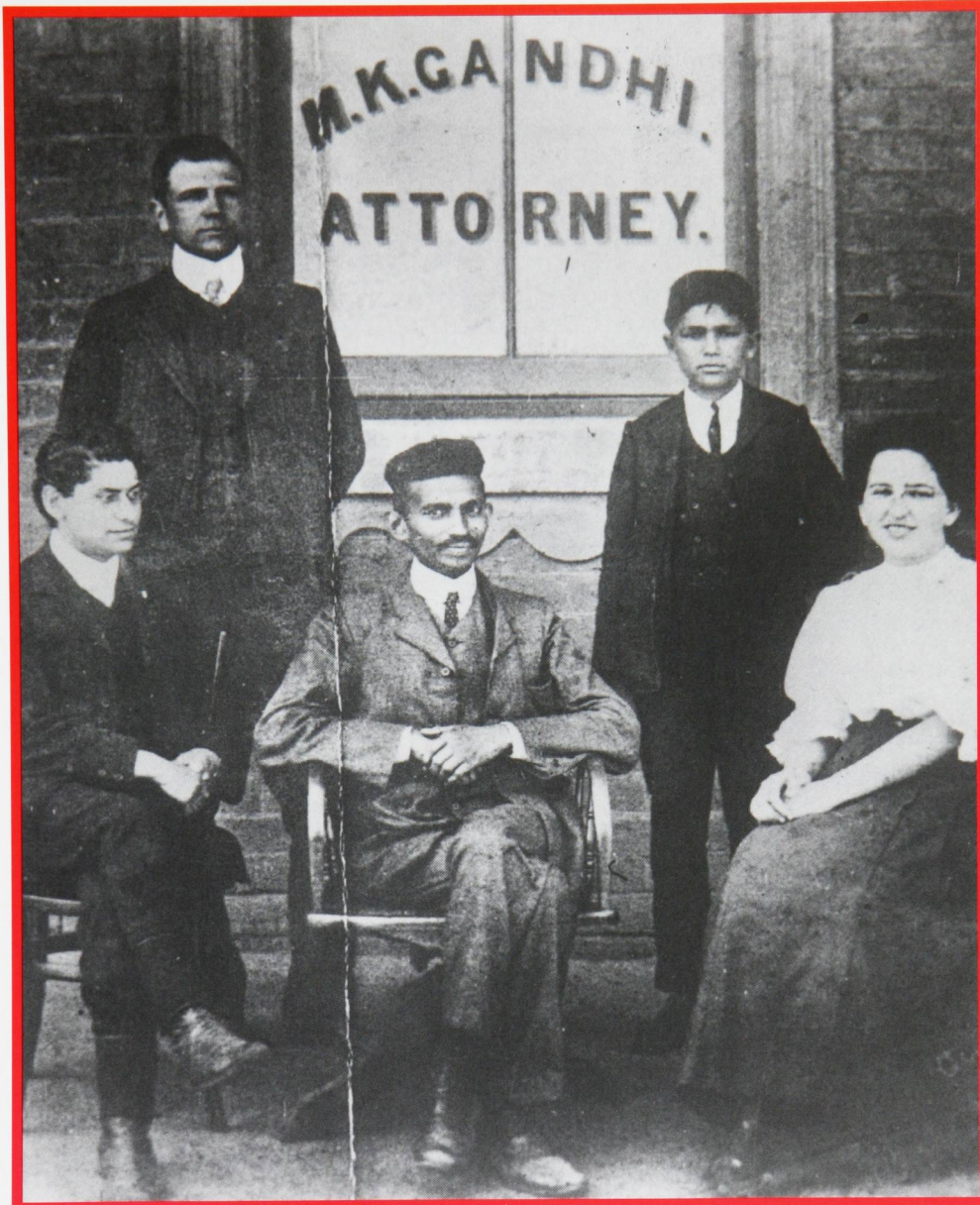
Resistance and the end of the indentured labour system

Migrants who left India as indentured workers had gambled on a better life. Yet the experiences of life in Africa and the Caribbean did not meet their expectations. Not only were working conditions extremely hard but life itself was devoid of all the reassuring sights and sounds of home.

From the very beginnings of the introduction of the indentured labour system, there had been protest directed against it and efforts to regulate it. This resistance came from anti-slavery organisations and churches, as well as the labourers themselves. For indentured workers, the first act of resistance was to assert their own humanity. In order to keep their Indian heritage intact and keep their memories of home alive, indentured workers bonded together. Cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences marked them apart but it was the shared experience of living in a foreign land that brought them together. By building their homes, cooking and cultivating vegetables on the small scraps of land around their huts, indentured workers enacted traditions and relived the customs of 'back home'. Festivals, stories, songs and dances were also important means to keep memories of India alive.

The most extreme form of resistance was to commit suicide. Others ran away. Sometimes workers went on strike. Others presented petitions of complaint to the colonial authorities. Yet opportunities to resist varied considerably. In East Africa there existed a diverse and dynamic Indian community, thanks largely to voluntary migration that accompanied the railway. If workers could escape, there were significant opportunities to find succour and support from an already settled Indian community. Plantation workers were less fortunate. Farms were isolated and the 'masters' control was tight. Uprisings by indentured labourers against their employers and the conditions they were forced to endure tended to be ineffective, small-scale and short-lived, with the exception of the 1913 uprising of Indian labourers at the Rose Hall plantation in Jamaica, which demonstrated strong Indian solidarity. The protest that started as an attempt to make the employer honour a promise of four days holiday period – was eventually ended after fifteen indentured workers were killed and forty were wounded.

After the first indentured labourers returned to India, migration authorities were notified of the abuses endured by workers in both Africa and the Caribbean. Worried about the damage to Britain's international moral standing, the British Government felt compelled to launch commissions of enquiries to investigate conditions, firstly in 1840 and again in 1871. This led to temporary suspensions of indentured transportation and once resumed, new legislation prohibited corporal punishment and guaranteed medical care provision. Whether conditions actually improved however is uncertain. Ultimately, as long as settlers and the colonial government shared a common goal of maximising agricultural output, thousands of indentured workers continued to be mistreated.



Mahatma Gandhi (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 1869 - 1948)
when he was practising as an attorney in South Africa, 1903.
He is seated in front of a window bearing his name
Image courtesy: Keystone/Getty Images

Indentured labour in East Africa ended in 1901 with the completion of the railway. In Natal, the practice of indenturing labour was not abolished until 1911, following a campaign led by M.K. Gandhi. Indentured labour itself, however, did not end until 1934 when the last indentured workers were freed. Indentured labour in the British Caribbean was formally abolished in 1917. However, many workers continued to be bound to plantations according to the legally-binding terms of their pre-1917 contracts.

Caribbean

The consequences of Indian indentured labour migration to the Caribbean varied across the region. During the era of indentured labour, two major divides between Indian and African communities on plantations in the Caribbean arose; firstly, the wage disparities between African and Indian workers, with Indians paid less; and secondly, the different freedoms and legal rights of Indians and Africans. For example, Indian migration continued into Guyana even in times of economic depression, which led to the lowering of wages for both Indians and Africans and this created an important factor in the later racial antagonism in the country between these two groups.

For many years, indentured Indians in the Caribbean voluntarily segregated themselves away from European and African communities and instead concentrated on building their own communities in which to try to recall and retain their cultures, religions, heritage, customs and languages of their homelands.

Indian labourers and their descendants gradually diversified into industries away from plantation work. Whilst the British in the Caribbean welcomed Indians as manual labourers in the fields during this period, they objected to Indian traders and businesses, which often undercut their European counterparts; and consequently Indians were subject to discriminatory treatment with regards to land ownership, electoral representation and trading licences. In spite of such disadvantages, Indians became involved in trade and transport and later the civil service, education and healthcare.

The India Office and the Government of India continued to monitor the welfare of Indian labourers and their descendants until Indian independence in 1947 when Indians overseas were regarded as foreign nationals and lost the support of the Indian Government. At the same time, the Indian labourers in the Caribbean and their descendants were also battling with the newly-emerging national identities of the Caribbean region. Despite, or perhaps because of, the discrimination of the British and tensions with the African Caribbean communities in some Caribbean islands, Indians played an active role in the movements for independence in Guyana, Trinidad and Mauritius, partly in the hope that they would share political power after independence.

East Africa

Of the 32,000 indentured labourers who worked on the Uganda Railway, just over half returned to India on completion of their contracts. A total of 6,724 remained in Africa. The remainder had either died, been dispersed or had been invalided back to India.

Besides the obvious legacy of the railway itself, the consequences of indentured Indian migration to East Africa can be seen in the considerable numbers of voluntary migrants who followed their indentured compatriots to Mombasa. Indian traders had been operating along the East African coast for many years, for example, in 1870, there were 4,000 Indians in the environs of Mombasa, but the railway encouraged migration from parts of India that had no previous contact with Africa. With the indentured workers came thousands of others, predominantly from the Punjab and central Gujarat. Amongst these new migrants were traders, artisans and fortune-seekers of every kind. Indian soldiers were employed to police the workers such as mechanics, engineers, administrators and clerks who came to work on the railway. With them, came 'mechanics of rule' that were distinctly Indian. Laws, administrative procedures, postal and currency systems all served to justify one official's observation that the railway had meant 'the driving of a wedge of India two miles broad right across East Africa'.

Indian settlement was at first received with enthusiasm, but with the onset of European migration in 1902, Indians were increasingly portrayed as an obstacle to the colony's development. Racial discourses developed to deprecate the role that Indians might play in a 'civilising' mission, whilst outnumbered British settlers agitated vociferously against Indians gaining either land in the highlands or political voice in Nairobi. Despite these developments the Indian population continued to grow and occupy an important place in the colonial economy.

Natal

Unlike East Africa, the vast majority of today's Indian population are direct descendants of indentured workers. Sadly, what both groups share is persecution. In East Africa, Indians faced discrimination, first at the hands of the Whites and consequently at the hands of a new generation of African political leaders. In South Africa, after the formation of a single nation state in 1910, political power was concentrated in the hands of a White minority. Under the apartheid regime (1948-1994) Indian South Africans played a prominent role in the struggle against apartheid. Durban, twinned with the city of Leeds, has the largest Asian population in sub-Saharan Africa today.

The British Commonwealth and migration to the UK

The decline of the British Empire in the early twentieth century and particularly after World War Two, gave rise to the development of the *Commonwealth*, which is an association of independent nations, most being former British colonies.

After the end of World War Two there were severe labour shortages in the UK – Poles and Italians were recruited. Later the British Government turned to current and former Caribbean colonies for labour by actively recruiting workers from the Caribbean region. This recruitment began to be limited during the 1960s when racially-discriminatory legislation limiting immigration was introduced. Prior to this period people from the British Empire and Commonwealth had possessed the right to enter the UK because they held British passports.

Amongst the people who migrated from the British West Indies to the UK were those descended from Indian indentured labourers, Indian Caribbean people, who remain proud of a distinct heritage and culture. There are more than 30,000 Indian Caribbean people in the UK today. Similar to the African Caribbean migrants in the 1950s and 1960s, Indian Caribbean people were attracted to UK job opportunities in the National Health Service, London Transport, Royal Mail, Inland Revenue and Civil Service, as well as being doctors, lawyers, teachers and dentists.

Indentured labourers and their descendants in East Africa also journeyed to the UK in the second half of the twentieth century. After independence from Britain, however, some African leaders in the 1960s and 1970s discriminated against the Indian population of East Africa, under policies known as 'Africanisation', Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda all had such policies. Consequently, many East Asian Africans decided to leave and migrate to the UK. In 1972, the president of Uganda, Idi Amin, attempted to expel the country's entire Asian population. Almost 27,000 Ugandan Asians consequently settled in the UK.



Case studies

In this section are two case studies about the legacy of indentured labour in Guyana and Mauritius, based on interviews in Bradford with Maureen Grant and Leeds based Raj Kannayya.

Guyanaian story

The Co-operative Republic of Guyana is the only English-speaking country in South America. Whilst it shares borders with Venezuela, Suriname and Brazil, it shares more culturally and socially with the Caribbean islands.

In 1838, African enslavement in Guyana, then British Guiana, was abolished and this had severe consequences for the British colony. Many freed persons moved to the developing urban areas and other freed people pooled their resources to create African Guyanese communities by purchasing land such as from abandoned plantation estates.

Experiments with both Portuguese and Chinese laborers did not work as the planters hoped, with these workers succumbing to tropical illnesses and diseases and others migrating to towns to participate in the retail business.

It was the East Indians, as they would become referred to, that became the most significant supply of imported labour to Guyana. They were originally contracted as indentured labour to work on the sugar plantations. In 1838, the first Indian labourers drawn from rural south India arrived in Guyana under five-year contracts. Between 1838 and 1917 nearly a quarter of a million migrants landed in Guyana and approximately 75,000 returned to India after their contracts, while the rest chose to remain in Guyana.

In using the Indian labourers in Guyana to work on the sugar plantations and treating them differently in conditions, status and law to the African Guyanese people, the colonial rulers and plantation owners of Guyana were creating an ethnic divide that would continue into the twentieth century as the two groups competed for land and job opportunities. Guyana became independent from Britain in 1966 although Guyanese economic and political instability of the 1970s and 1980s saw massive outward migration of its population, which remains as a continuing problem.

Maureen Grant



Maureen Grant was born and educated in Guyana where she trained as a teacher. She moved to the UK in 1980 with her husband, who was born in Barbados but spent his formative years in the UK. She has lived in Bradford since 1982. Here Maureen talks about growing up in Linden in Guyana, her community; and how she found herself living in West Yorkshire.

I grew up in Linden, It wasn't called that at the time; it was Mackenzie. I was born on the West Coast; Demerara. My grandparents on my father's side lived on the West Coast so that's where I was born; me and my older sister. My three other siblings were born in Linden. ... We didn't have any relatives in Mackenzie; my parents went there to work.

Guyana had a large influx of indentured labour from India and the population was about 51 per cent Indian. And then you had, about 48 per cent, was African. And then there was a small amount of the original Amerindians who were the first people, there are still some of them there. And then you had a small amount of Chinese people and Portuguese. So that was the mix of people. There were also some other Europeans, people who had remained to run and own industry.

In Linden, everyone sort of knew everyone, because it was a fairly small place. The main industry was bauxite, so people who worked there knew each other. The town was centred around that. As you might expect, the White people lived somewhere on the hills; they had their own schools and shops, so they didn't mix with the local people. The Portuguese tended to be more with the Whites too. The Chinese tended to be the shop-owners so they lived in the community but tended to be located around a business, but in any situation you might find a few families there. And then you had the Indians and the Africans. Mackenzie, where I grew up, was very much African.

But historically, it wasn't like that because the agriculture tended to be done by the Indians, so they lived in the rural areas. Mackenzie was mixed, because I do remember, in 1964, there was racial tensions and there was ... like civil war basically ... and all the Indians moved out of Linden at that time, it became completely Black with a few White people dotted here and there. So after this, you didn't really find Indian people in Mackenzie at all.

Obviously there would have been political tensions going on between the two [between Indian Guyanese and African Guyanese] but I would have been seven at the time so I suppose I wasn't fully aware of it. The way I look at it now, all I can see is that there is two sets of people who were living in a country and they ought to have equal rights. The economy has got a big part to play in it, because at the end of the day, I think, this is the roots ... the roots of indentured labour.

In Guyana the Indians do have a culture of their own but there's much more integration than you would probably imagine, compared to here, a lot more! I think probably food is a good example. Roti and curry, it doesn't taste the same as here, but roti and curry is definitely a national dish. You would never find a curry house over there, but any restaurant would be serving curry and roti. There's no need to have a separate place. Also, we all celebrated all the major holidays; like Ede was a national holiday and Diwali was a national holiday and you had the Christian holidays - Christmas, Easter, so all national holidays are celebrated by everyone.

I came here to the UK from Guyana in 1980. The reason I came was because I got married to my husband, ... he's from Barbados but his family came over here when he was in his early teens. So he grew up here. After university, he went to Guyana to teach. I was teaching at the same school, that's where we met. We got married and then we came back here. Actually, we only came back to pass through, but we're still here!

Mauritian story

Mauritius is an island in the Indian Ocean, with a population of 1.25 million and gained independence from Britain in 1968. The island was the first country to experience the experiment that became the indentured labour system and would become the largest receiver of Indian labour of all the British colonies.

In 1829, 1,110 Indian labourers arrived in Mauritius to work on sugar plantations. Though the trial failed and the workers returned home within months, large-scale Indian migration to Mauritius had begun by the end of the 1830s, with 25,000 Indian labourers having arrived by 1838. Between 1834 and 1910, almost half a million Indian labourers were brought to Mauritius to work on sugar-cane plantations, of which 157,639 returned to India at the end of their contracts some stayed in Mauritius while others migrated to other British colonies such as Natal, Fiji, Guyana and Trinidad.

After their labour contract had been completed, many indentured Indians chose to settle in Mauritius, buying small plots of land with the little money they had saved during their indentureship. Indian communities began to develop, growing crops and keeping animals, as well as turning to retail businesses. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Indian landowners became increasingly significant, as plantation owners divided-up their estates and sold the land.

Though the 1920s saw friction between the Indian community and French-descent Mauritians, the country has remained generally stable and peaceful. Hindu Indian Mauritians and Muslim Indian Mauritians together make-up 68 per cent of the total island population.



Raj Kannayya

Raj Kannayya moved to the UK from Mauritius in 2000 although he had visited many times before. He moved to London initially and then to Leeds. He returns frequently to Mauritius and plans to return there permanently one day. Here Raj talks about growing up in Mauritius and his Hindu Indian Mauritian family background.

Our generation is the fourth generations that have been in Mauritius. They come from a state in India called Andhra Pradesh. They came to work in the fields, the sugar cane fields. I believe my Grandparents, they've not come from a rich family, otherwise they would not move from India to another place. Maybe the recruitment company at that time said to them 'alright you come with me, you will get such and such money', but when they arrived, they do not have any choice, they have to be staying there, they have to work.

A good example which we take from Mauritius is ... all the nations together, all the community together because you have the Chinese, you have the Indians, you have the Whites, you have the French, you have the African people. Everyone is under one roof; everyone's got a share of it if you want it. Like in the government ... they are fairly represented. I find that it is an equal society.

Most of the commonwealth countries, where the British have been ruling, they have left the country with nothing - like Mauritius, when they have left Mauritius, there was nothing there - no highway, no big airport. All of the country where they were, Britain ... have left the country without improving it, without doing anything. Sometimes it has had a bad impact, like doctors - most of them if they are getting well paid in Europe they will come to Europe and in Mauritius they have to import doctors.

We have a strong England family since 1965 in the UK ... some distant uncle. So we keep on going and coming back and I've been here for seven years. We come over here for say maybe for six months, a year; and it's extended and extended but not forever. I like Leeds, it's very nice; people in Yorkshire are very friendly.



HILL COOLIES LANDING AT THE MAURITIUS.

The subject of the article which precedes this engraving, makes it not inappropriate that we should here introduce an illustration of another of those forms of human grievance, which closely, in our humble opinion, approximate to the crimes that are perpetrated by the slave-trade itself. Here are groups of that particular class of labourers which, in the East Indies, are termed hill coolies—inveigled from their native clime and home, and imported for the pur-

pose of working out in a species of slave labour the ends of gain of the planters and merchants of the Mauritius. There is every reason to believe, moreover, that when reduced into the strange land they are not treated with even ordinary humanity; and owing to the state, or rather suspension, of the laws having reference to their condition in the colony, they have open to them no means of redress. They are in fact the objects of a traffic, which is in its spirit as iniquitous

A pamphlet to enhance the *From Abolition to Commonwealth* indentured labour photographic exhibition held at SEVEN Arts Centre, Leeds, during 24-31 July/08

ISBN: 1 874555 14 1