

Connecting indenture across oceans: letter-writing between India and the Caribbean

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The aim of this project was to push back against the perception within the historiography of indenture studies in the Caribbean that the vast geographical space between the point of departure for Indian indenture migrants and their port of arrival encouraged a rift, a permanent displacement and dislocation, between homeland and adopted country. Through archival research at the National Archives of Guyana in early 2017, I was able to identify that services of letter-writing were offered by the Immigration Department to indentured immigrants, a service which was eventually replaced by the general postal office and the ease of acquiring Indian stamps and money-orders between the Caribbean and India. Threads, therefore, were maintained for at least some migrants between India and the Caribbean and across oceans through paper. The project, which required archival research in India, then had two aims: to reveal the bureaucratic structures that enabled these ties to be maintained, and, if they still existed, the finding of these letters. The generous grant I received from the History Project and the Institute of New Economic Thinking enabled me to research these two questions.

I set out in late August 2017 to New Delhi and to the National Archives of India to explore the higher echelons of the bureaucracy of indenture that was the colonial Government of India with the above aim in mind. With the help of the History Project and Institute of New Economic Thinking grant I was able to spend five weeks until early October 2017 in New Delhi. My original project proposal had sought to spend three weeks in New Delhi at the National Archives of India and then three weeks in Kolkata at the West Bengal Archives, bearing in mind some flexibility according to what I would find at either archive. Once I had reached the National Archives of India, however, I realised that three weeks was not enough to be able to go through all the required papers in time and decided to stay in New Delhi.

The archive that I used to research this project was primarily the digitised papers of the emigration branch of the Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce available on computers in the National Archives of India (NAI) reading room. These papers dated from 1874 and proceeded well into the twentieth century. Due to time restraints and limited by the scope of the project, I examined all the papers from the emigration branch between 1874 and 1920. These papers were the printed and unprinted proceedings of the emigration branch, organised according to subject. The papers that I spent the most time searching for and analysing can be classified into two broad groups: general papers relating to the administration of indenture as a whole, and local files, responding to specific, localised issues and questions. The papers relating to British Guiana and French Guiana were particularly valuable as the National Archives of Guyana and the *Archives départementales de la Guyane* have significant gaps and erasures in their holdings concerning indentured labour, so many in fact that writing histories of indenture. It was bitter-sweet to find full copies of reports made by the Immigration Agent General or the British consul at Cayenne or other individuals within these colonial administrations at the NAI which could not be found in complete form in the Caribbean, London, or France.

Despite my best efforts, I did not find as much correspondence as I thought I would between various sections, departments, and officials of the Government of India and local administrators at the ports of departure concerning letter-writing between migrants and acquaintances left behind in India. This does not mean that that letter-writing did not happen historically but rather it was not a main administrative concern. Although laborious, the fact the papers of the emigration branch were not keyword searchable or properly indexed and required the systematic reading of every file, it familiarised me with view of indenture and other migrations from India across the British and other foreign empires in a way which I previously had not been exposed to. The papers of the emigration branch did not register a concern about letter writing until the 1880s when numbers of migrants who had stayed behind, refusing their return passage back to India became significant. Despite the system of indenture starting as early as the 1830s, primary concern around regulating and legislating transportation and indenture was the main focus of the emigration branch until the mid 1870s. The question of letter-writing came more to the fore in the 1880s as a result of the Grierson report on indenture. What remained a fundamental hurdle, however, was a question of language and the translation and transliteration of English or Creole to, predominantly, Bhojpuri. This was particularly apparent when emigration agents in colonies did not have appropriate interpreters or the correct language skills.¹ My examination of these papers relating to letter-writing also revealed to me that, within the eyes of the colonial overseers of the system of indenture, it simply was not a priority. A pithy example is within one set of the proceedings in November 1874, regarding the number of blankets given to migrants departing from Karikal or Pondicherry and the inadequacies of the postal ties between French Caribbean colonies and India.² As seen from the annotations of the proceedings, the concern of the emigration branch was focused exclusively on the number of blankets given to migrants for their journey to French Caribbean colonies. The question was primarily one of breaches to regulations of transportation rather than the subtler longer-term improvement of working conditions for these migrants; these migrants were, after all, primarily and foremostly, labouring bodies.

Yet the papers of the emigration branch revealed the fostering of other inter-colonial ties in particular through inheritance. In the early days of indenture, if any migrant died intestate, the property went towards funds that were available to destitute migrants. Attitudes towards the meaning of inheritance changed by the late 1870s, again at a time when the larger questions and issues of the regulation of transportation had to some extent been ironed out, when, in the words of the Secretary of the Governor of Bengal in 1878, 'the relatives of an emigrant look upon him as cut off from them for ever'. With the arrival of a surprise inheritance, however, 'nothing would tend more to encourage emigration than the fact of sums of money left by relatives being sent by the colonies to their families in India'.³ Simply put, the colonial administration attempted to use inheritance as a propaganda tool. A report written in 1877 by the Administrator General of British Guiana concerning wills highlighted that few migrants died intestate. The most powerful reason behind this was the fact that migrant property was moveable and took the form of cattle,

¹ P.C. Cork, Protector of Immigrants, Jamaica to Colonial Secretary, Jamaica, 4th July 1884, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration branch, Proceeding No. 14, November 1884, p. 4.

² Keep-Withs to Proceedings Nos. 11-13, Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce, Emigration branch, Proceedings Nos. 11-13, November 1874, NAI, p. 6.

³ A Mackenzie to Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce, dated 17th July 1878, Emigration branch, Home, Revenue and Agricultural Department, July 1880, Proceedings Nos. 25 to 33, NAI, p. 2

jewellery, or money. Such property was therefore gifted before death in front of trusted friends and families or half was given to the partner of the deceased and the other half depositing in a savings' bank in the name of the deceased's children. In the case of single men, the Administrator General noted that most would pool their property with another so that should one of them die, the other could take possession of it.⁴ By the end of 1880, a new system was put in place to facilitate the transmission of inheritance and the use of wills between the Caribbean and India. Should no heirs be found in the colony of arrival, details were sent to the Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta and Madras to make enquiries with any information on hand and trace potential heirs, a process simplified by the adoption of a next-of-kin register.⁵ Should no heirs be found within three years, the inheritance would be absorbed by the Colonial Treasury in India.⁶

An interesting question for further research would be to examine how exactly this inheritance was used by the Colonial Treasury and which funds it was absorbed by. There may be an interesting history or links between the labour of indentured labourers and other aspects of colonialism in India or elsewhere. This is not to say that searching for such letters written by or for indentured migrants shouldn't also require further investigation. While in New Delhi I was fortunate enough to meet Dr Prabhu Mohapatra at Delhi University who stated that I would find the more interesting and granular archives of everyday and personal ties between India and the Caribbean in the regional archives of Lucknow and Patna. Further research needs to be done in this letter-writing, as a way of recovering voices lost through layers of bureaucracy at such archives. I was not able to fully answer my initial questions but being receptive to the papers that the emigration branch had to offer, I was able to return from New Delhi with a different set of questions. These proceedings were full of more anecdotal incidents of mobility, communication, and indeed ties across geographical spaces through other means than letter-writing.

Finally, this research showed me there were other sites of indenture or mobility that should be included within broader histories and geographies of indentured labour. The papers of the emigration branch evoked concern of so-called illegal, that is migrations not sanctioned by the Government of India, to such places as Madagascar or the Congo Free State of time-expired Indian indentured labourers. These histories have so far been unwritten and unheard.

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⁴ H Watson to Secretary to Government, British Guiana, dated 23rd October 1877, Emigration branch, Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce, July 1880, Proceedings No. 25-33, NAI, p. 6.

⁵ A McDonnell, Officiating Secretary of Government of Bengal to Secretary of Government of India, dated 19th December 1883, Emigration branch, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, January 1884, Proceedings nos. 20-21, p. 3.

⁶ Dr J Grant to Sec of Government of Bengal, dated 1st October 1885, Emigration branch, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, October 1885, Proceedings Nos. 10-11, p. 2.