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Vijayalakshmi Teelock

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VIJAYALAKSHMI TEELock

Mauritian indenture: an overview of the historiography

Indentured labour migration in the nineteenth century Indian Ocean was the most important labour movement to occur at that time. Nearly two million people left India to work on plantations in the Indian Ocean, Pacific, and Atlantic regions. The early historiography of indenture was characterised by, for the most part, system-focused and survey-type studies, essentially by Western scholars, such as Cumpston and Tinker.¹ In India, a pool of Indian historians between the 1950s and the 1970s wrote histories of indenture based almost entirely on secondary sources. Some were imbued with a strong degree of patriotism and belief that India, as a regional power, had some responsibility towards overseas Indians.

In addition to these earlier studies focussed on the mechanisms of indentured recruitment, on the legal framework of indenture, the structure of the migration processes, statistics and economic history, there arose also a focus on “agency” and its supposed confirmation that indentured labourers were not to be viewed as “victims”. Northrup acknowledged that while he found it difficult to liken indentured servitude to slavery, it was a sort of “voluntary bondage”.² How voluntary this was is still open to debate, as far as Mauritius is concerned, as indentured workers were unequal players in a game where the other players were men in power in London, Paris, Calcutta, Georgetown or Port Louis and their fate already decided. Land-ownership, education and resultant socio-economic mobility are forwarded as evidence of “agency” for Mauritian indentured labourers, but the sad and neglected truth is, that the majority of the indentured in Mauritius

1. Ian Cumpston, “A Survey of Indian Immigration to British Tropical Colonies to 1910”, *Population Studies*, vol. 10, n°2, 1956, p. 158-165; Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

2. David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

either did not survive their indenture or left Mauritius at the end of their contract. Their history has yet to be researched and written.

There are many avenues for new and further research that remain open. For example, up to now, no in-depth demographic study had been undertaken to quantify the actual numbers arriving, departing, and settling down in Mauritius. Exact proportions of who came, from where in terms of caste status, gender, regional origin have not advanced much from the original studies by Carter and Deerpalsing.³ It is also only in last few years that the ending of indenture has aroused some interest and this, mainly as a result of the commemoration of the ending of indenture in the British Empire in 1917. There have also been too few works on gender issues and on family under indenture in Mauritius. While notarial and official records reveal something of their material condition, they do not enlighten us much on the psychosocial state of the women. The debate whether the paucity of women gave them more power and “enhanced their independence” is also far from over.⁴

The role of local, Indian and metropolitan capital in shaping Mauritian economic and social history was a hitherto neglected field of study, but Richard Allen⁵ began to fill this gap. However, new scholars have not continued this work. Also required are local regional studies: as Shepherd⁶ has pointed out, the degree of insertion of Indians does not only depend on absolute figures but in the extent of dispersal in the country. In Mauritius, though the geographical spaces have somewhat become blurred, the interior of rural districts are still overwhelmingly populated by people of indentured origin and thus able to maintain social and cultural cohesiveness.

Today, in Mauritius, the focus has shifted towards studying the experiences of indentured labourers, their settlement and the nature and extent of their integration. The consequences of immigrants settling down were the emergence of a local population with Indian roots and their gradual entry into all spheres of social, economic, cultural and political life of Mauritius. Comparative studies with the Caribbean and elsewhere need, however, to emerge and take into account strategic parameters such as the indentured workers’ numerical proportion in the host country, local and global economic factors, the relative proximity to the country of origin and the

3. See for example, Marina Carter and Saloni Deerpalsing, *Select Documents on Indian Immigration Mauritius 1834-1926*, Volumes 1-3, Mauritius, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1994.

4. Brian Moore, *Race, Power and Social Segmentation in Colonial Society: Guyana After Slavery 1838-1891*, New York, Gordon and Breach, 1998, p. 12; see reactions: Lomarsh Roopnaraine, “East Indian Women and Leadership Roles During Indentured Servitude in British Guiana 1838-1920”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol. 16, 3, July 2015, pp. 174-185

5. Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

6. Verene Shepherd, *From Transients to Settlers*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 1994, p. 16.

existence or not of an indigenous population. These are key determinants of the success of the indentured's insertion into the host society and the fate of the descendants in those societies. The analysis of the shift of immigrants from that status to that of settler and citizen needs to be dealt with in a most "sensitive" manner as local situations are heavily influenced by political events and the steady departure of descendants of indentured labourers from host country. Whether "all diasporas are unhappy" is the next great question future historians cannot afford to ignore.⁷

Vijayalakshmi Teelock (University of Mauritius)

7. Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora, Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 1.