

## Origins of the Girmitiyas

*The rail is not my enemy, nor the ship;  
O! It is money which is the real enemy  
It takes my beloved from place to place*  
Indian folk song

On 9 September 1834 36 impoverished and lost looking Dhangars (tribal people) were accosted by some recruiters in Calcutta and asked if they would be willing to emigrate to Mauritius as indentured labourers. Since the sojourn was for a limited period, the remuneration promised extremely attractive—'expecting to have only to stoop down to pick up money, to scratch the surface of Mauritius and find gold'<sup>1</sup>—and *Miritch doip* thought to be just off the coast of Bengal, they readily agreed; for after all, they had come to Calcutta for employment in the first place. Thereupon they were taken to the Chief Magistrate at the Calcutta Police Court, who read out and explained the contract that had to be signed. The Dhangars then affixed their thumb impressions on the document to indicate that they understood

the terms offered, and that they were migrating voluntarily. The Vice-President-in-Council of the Government of Bengal saw no objection to the transaction, and authorized the departure of the labourers from Calcutta. These men were the forerunners of over one million indentured labourers who left India during 82 years of indentured emigration to colonies scattered across the globe.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the indentured labourers came from North India, especially from the unprosperous regions of Chota Nagpur plateau and Bihar before the 1860s, and the eastern districts of the United Provinces from the 1870s onwards.<sup>3</sup> Most of them, moreover, originated from the lower to middling social and economic strata of rural North Indian society, which was always the first to bear the brunt of economic vicissitudes and calamities of nature. Migration was of course nothing new to the peasants of India, for even in pre-modern times they had moved about quite freely in search of a better livelihood, or to escape from droughts, floods and not least, the constant depredations of tax officials. They were therefore not averse to taking advantage of the seemingly easy prospects held out by the colonial recruiters.

With the possible exception of those who migrated *en famille*, it would seem that migration was generally intended as a temporary expedient. The emigrants left under a written and apparently voluntarily accepted five year contract which promised, among other things, congenial working conditions, relatively high wages and an optional free return passage to India at the conclusion of 10 years 'industrial residence' in the colonies.<sup>4</sup> Many did return,<sup>5</sup> but as happens so often, intended sojourn was, in the course of time, transformed into permanent displacement. The struggle of these labourers in the 'familiar temporariness' of the alien colonial environment has left a legacy of problems which remain as unresolved today as they were at the turn of the century when indenture was at its height.

The story of indentured emigration is by now well known in its outline. In recent years a number of important historical monographs have appeared on overseas Indians which, taken together with the works of social scientists, especially anthropologists, have made the study of overseas Indians an autonomous and rewarding field of enquiry.<sup>6</sup> Many approaches and methods have been used, differing moral postures adopted, and a conflicting variety of themes emphasized, which is not entirely surprising since indenture itself posed a number of vexatious social, moral and political problems for all connected with it at the time of its existence.

Some scholars have emphasized the improvement in the condition of the indentured labourers and their descendants: permanent release from irksome and oppressive social customs, caste prejudices and general social degradation in India, and unsurpassed opportunities and incentives to industry in the colonies.<sup>7</sup> Others have stressed the iniquities and brutalities that the indenture system entailed. Hugh Tinker, for instance, has argued that there was one, but only one, difference between indenture and slavery: whereas one was a temporary abode, the other was a permanent institution.<sup>8</sup> Yet others have combined a deep sympathy with the plight of the downtrodden and the oppressed with remarkably objective scholarship and have suggested that improvements often did take place but at the expense of deep social and psychological suffering to the immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

The debate on the nature of indenture experience has in the main been carried on in the context of colonial societies, without relating it to the wider processes of migration. Questions relating to the social origins of the migrants, their motivations and thoughts and feelings about their predicament have very largely been neglected in most recent studies. Yet it is certain that any objective appreciation of the true meaning of the nature of indenture experience cannot be gained without a discussion of these aspects.

This chapter attempts to fill this lacuna. Using computerised analysis of Emigration Passes of Fiji's North Indian migrants, and poetic evidence from Hindi folk songs, it probes the structural characteristics and dynamics of indentured migration in India, and the responses of the indentured labourers at the time, respectively. The picture which these two contrasting sources paint questions the prevalent view of indentured labourers as inarticulate simpletons who were continually acted upon by forces beyond their control, and recognizes them as actors in their own right who were consciously aware of their situation.

The gap in our knowledge of the background of indentured labourers results partly from the emphasis most studies have given to the indenture experience in the colonies; but partly also from the dearth of reliable data in easily accessible official sources.<sup>10</sup> Those which do contain the data have generally been neglected because of their volume, magnitude and insusceptibility to conventional approaches of historical scholarship. One such source is the Emigration Passes. They contain full information about the personal and social details of each emigrant who embarked for the colonies (his sex, age, marital status), place of origin and registration in India, date of migration, name of the ship and the depot number of the emigrant, besides the certification of appropriate authorities about the

voluntary nature of the transaction. The passes were constructed on the basis of information in the Emigration Registers in the district depots, duplicate copies of which were forwarded to Calcutta (or Madras). From there they were sent along with the emigrants to the colonies where, after appropriate examination, they were filed alphabetically year by year and subsequently deposited with the Department of Labour. Fortunately for the historian of Fiji Indians, a full set (60,965) of these was preserved in Fiji and microfilmed by the Central Archives of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission.<sup>11</sup>

To investigate the structure and process of indentured emigration to Fiji from North India, each Emigration Pass of the 45,439 North Indian emigrants was examined. All important data were coded, transcribed onto a computer code sheet, put on tape and processed using the SPSS.<sup>12</sup> The results provide the closest understanding yet of the process of indentured emigration. Not only do they give a comprehensive synoptic picture of what actually happened, but also show the operation of the process over a period of time. A full discussion of all the results is not possible here, hence only three aspects pertinent to the argument are included: regional origins of indentured emigration, social characteristics of the migrants and family migration.

Indian indentured emigration to Fiji began in 1879. It was started by Sir Arthur Gordon, the first substantive governor of the colony (1875-80), to meet the shortage of labour caused by the prohibition of commercial employment of the Fijians and by the increasing uncertainty and cost of the Polynesian labour trade. In the early years, the Indian labourers were received somewhat hesitantly in the colony, as is evident in the low requisitions and the curtailment of recruiting activities in some years.<sup>13</sup> The colonial planters were initially opposed to Indian labour on account of its relatively higher cost.<sup>14</sup> However, later, as the sugar industry expanded and hopes of alternative means of labour supply vanished, the volume of Indian immigration increased markedly, reaching its peak after the turn of the century.

Fiji's North Indian migrants came from widely scattered regions of the subcontinent, though principally from its eastern and to a lesser extent central parts. Over the whole period of colonial migration to Fiji United Provinces furnished 21,131 or 46.5% of all the emigrants, Oudh 13,207 or 29%, Bihar 4,771 or 10.5% and the Central Provinces 2,808 or 6.2%. There were sprinklings from the Punjab, Rajasthan, Nepal and Bengal as well as from other colonies.<sup>15</sup> This picture holds true for the wider process of colonial migration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,<sup>16</sup> but was in

marked contrast to the pattern for the first half of colonial migration from the 1830s to the late 1860s. Then, the largest numbers came from Bihar, 'the land of sorrow', especially from the districts of Arrah and Chapra, and the tribal areas of the Chota Nagpur plateau such as Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Bankura, Purulia and the 24-Pargunnahs.<sup>17</sup> Over the years, however, their contribution declined, partly because of the reputation of high mortality among the emigrants on the voyage and on the colonial plantations,<sup>18</sup> partly because of the intense competition for Bihari, especially tribal (*jungli*), labour from the Assam tea garden recruiters from 1853 onwards,<sup>19</sup> and partly also because of the opening up of greater employment opportunities in the region itself, in the coal mines,<sup>20</sup> the indigo plantations<sup>21</sup> and in the industrial centres of Calcutta.<sup>22</sup> The focus of colonial recruitment therefore shifted to the United Provinces.

The break with Bihar is significant but it was not abrupt, and there were variations. In the case of Fiji, it supplied well over 27% of the total demand in the 1880s. The highest contribution from Bihar came in 1884 when it furnished over 51% of the emigrants, though this high figure was due chiefly to scarcity and decline in competition from other colonies.<sup>23</sup> The main districts of migration in Bihar were Shahabad, Gaya and Patna. The Central Provinces became important after the turn of the century, particularly in 1901 and 1903, when over 30% of the emigrants came from there. The main districts of recruitment in the Central Provinces were Raipur, Bilaspur, Rewa, Sambalpur and Jabalpur. For the Punjab, from where indentured emigration was always relatively small, the peak year was 1903 when it contributed 11% of the emigrants. Most of the Punjabis came from the densely populated, impoverished and migration prone districts of Jullundar, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana and Gurdaspur. However, the Punjabis tended to be troublesome elements; they were, for instance, instrumental in organizing a minor revolt in Labasa in 1907. For this reason, the Fiji government discouraged their emigration.<sup>24</sup> The Nepalis were widely admired in Fiji for their enterprising spirit, though their number was reduced substantially after 1894 when the Nepal Durbar discouraged their migration, perhaps so that they could provide recruits for the Indian Army.<sup>25</sup>

Two hundred and thirty actual districts or localities furnished Fiji's North Indian migrants, ranging from Tibet and Ladakh to Peshawar and Kabul. However, the largest numbers came from the eastern districts of United Provinces:

**Table 1**  
**Districts Supplying Over One Per Cent**  
**of Fiji's North Indian Emigrants**

District	No.	%	District	No.	%
Basti	6,415	14.12	Bara Banki	769	1.69
Gonda	3,589	7.90	Gaya	765	1.68
Faizabad	2,329	5.13	Bahraich	750	1.65
Sultanpur	1,747	3.85	Raipur	744	1.64
Azamgarh	1,716	3.78	Benares	672	1.48
Gorakhpur	1,683	3.70	Patna	644	1.42
Allahabad	1,218	2.68	Lucknow	613	1.34
Jaunpur	1,188	2.61	Kanpur	583	1.28
Shahabad	1,128	2.48	Unao	556	1.22
Ghazipur	1,127	2.48	Agra	549	1.20
Rai Bareilly	1,087	2.39	Mirzapur	527	1.60
Partabgarh	894	1.97	Jaipur	473	1.04

Here, too, there were variations over the 37 years of indentured emigration. Basti, Gonda, Sultanpur all became prominent in the first decade of this century, the peak year for all of them being 1908, when a severe famine raged in many parts of United Provinces. The supply from Faizabad reached its peak in 1910, while Gorakhpur maintained a steady level. Shahabad, in keeping with the general Bihar trend, showed a marked decline after 1889-90, its peak years. But why eastern United Provinces? There were many reasons. Recruiting was largely concentrated in the eastern districts. Attempts had been made to recruit the sturdy and enterprising Jat cultivators of western United Provinces and Rohtak, but these did not meet with any success. There were, however, other structural factors at work which made migration an extremely attractive strategy for many to cope with the increasing problems of rural depression. The high density of population was one. In eastern United Provinces around the turn of the century it reached on the average 751 persons to the square mile, in certain parts of Basti it went up as high as 1,000 persons to the square mile.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, in western United Provinces population density was much lower, reaching on the average 546 persons to the square mile. Density of population *per se* may not be the most important factor, but seen in terms of its impact on other areas of a depressed economy, such as dwindling property rights in land, subdivision of property, fragmentation of holdings and increase in rent, it does acquire particular significance.

In addition, the eastern region was experiencing rapid de-industrialization in the 19th century. One view holds this to be the result of the stepmotherly attitude of the British administration bent on punishing

the eastern districts for playing a leading hand in the 1857 uprising. The argument runs that while western United Provinces was provided with such facilities as irrigation, power and roads to cope with natural disasters, eastern United Provinces was neglected and allowed to suffer droughts, floods and epidemics with scant relief.<sup>27</sup>

A more tenable explanation, however, for the increasing disparity between the two regions of United Provinces lies in the destruction of the riverine trade marts in the eastern region by the extension of railways in the 19th century. Benares, once the entrepot of Upper India, was reduced to a local trading centre, as was Mirzapur, the commercial capital of the Bundelkhand region. Faizabad, Jaunpur and Ghazipur shared a similar fate. The railways aided the development of cities and trading centres in western United Provinces. Thus in the late 19th century, the rail-borne traffic in wheat, sugar and cotton of Chandausi, one of the great Rohilkhand marts, grew eight times; Agra's rail-borne traffic increased by 44%; and Kanpur's imports grew 20 times. By the turn of the century the eastern region, which had more than half of the province's population, came to have only a quarter of the share of total trade, while the western region controlled the rest.<sup>28</sup>

This trend had an important consequence for migration. The development of large industries and towns in western United Provinces obviated the need for its population to migrate long distances in search of employment. But in the eastern region the lack of available opportunities nearby forced displaced and uprooted people to march further afield to look for employment. The main movement was to the east—to Calcutta, Assam and Bihar; and it increased significantly during the last quarter of the 19th century. In 1881 United Provinces emigrants in Bengal numbered 351,933; in 1891 365,248; and in 1901 496,940.<sup>29</sup> The *Ghazipur District Gazetteer* commented: 'The extent of this migration is astonishing and its economic influence is of the highest importance, since these labourers earn high wages and remit or bring back with them large sums of money to their homes'.<sup>30</sup> Migration had thus become a much more accepted and integrated phenomenon in rural life in the eastern districts.

It is interesting to note that a substantial proportion of the North Indian emigrants to Fiji were registered outside their districts of origin, as the following Table shows:

**Table 2**  
**Numbers of Emigrants Registered**  
**Outside Their Districts of Origin**

Name of District	Numbers registered in the district	%	Numbers registered outside the district	%
Azamgarh	50	2.9	1,666	97.0
Basti	2,607	40.6	3,808	59.4
Faizabad	1,458	62.6	871	37.4
Gonda	1,096	30.5	2,493	69.5
Gorakhpur	943	56.0	740	43.9
Sultanpur	182	10.4	1,565	89.6
Shahabad	254	22.5	874	77.5

Except when the emigrant himself declared that he had left his native district voluntarily, registration of emigrants outside their district of origin was illegal and on several occasions recruiters indulging in the practice were severely punished.<sup>31</sup> Even if some of the emigrants were schooled to give proper answers to the registration officers, it can fairly safely be assumed that a large majority of those registered outside had left on their own. Thus the initial break had already been made, a point those who emphasize deception do not take into account. Perhaps the break was intended to be temporary, but that is another question. However, the outside registrations took place not in large cities and centres of pilgrimages, but in local urban centres. Thus in the case of Azamgarh, Ghazipur provided 21% of the registrations, while for Basti, Gonda and Sultanpur, Faizabad registered 25%, 37% and 32% of the emigrants. Large cities such as Calcutta, Alipore, Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad and Benares are conspicuous by their insignificance. This trend too contradicts the all too frequent assertions about lost emigrants falling prey to the wiles of unscrupulous recruiters in large, distant and unfamiliar surroundings.

The emigrants came from a highly varied social background. There were altogether 265 castes and sub-castes which emigrated from North India to Fiji—though the overwhelming majority were a representative cross-section of the rural society of north eastern India. There were in the emigrating population the high castes—Brahmans, Thakurs, Rajputs and Khattris among the Hindus and high status groups such as Pathans and Sheiks among the Muslims; middling agricultural castes such as Jats, Kurmis and Koeris; and low castes such as Chamars, Dusadhs, Gonds and Luniyas. But despite the difference in their ritual and social status, most of the castes who came to Fiji derived their livelihood from the land, the higher castes

generally as proprietors and sub proprietors, the middle castes as privileged tenants, and the lower ones as tenants-at-will, landless labourers and artisans. Except for the higher castes, whom caste convention prevented from handling the plough, the others were excellent cultivators. The 'Gonda Settlement Report' noted that it 'is no exaggeration to say that throughout Oudh, the cultivation of a Kurmi or a Murao is regarded as synonymous with excellence, while that of a high caste tenant with the reverse'.<sup>32</sup> The *Bahraich District Gazetteer* made the same point about the Chamars and Koris: 'Their holdings are small, and they are careful and industrious if not in the first rank of cultivators'.<sup>33</sup> But no amount of diligence could protect them against the adverse economic circumstances prevailing in the 19th century.

**Table 3**  
**Castes/Social Groups Contributing**  
**Over One Per Cent of Fiji's North Indian Migrants**

Name	Number	%	Name	Number	%
Chamar	6,087	13.40	Lodha	735	1.62
Muslim	5,455	12.01	Jat	708	1.66
Ahir	4,197	9.24	Gadariya	691	1.52
Thakur	3,416	7.52	Kewat	656	1.44
Kurmi	2,307	5.08	Rajput	652	1.43
Kori	1,942	4.27	Pathan	584	1.29
Brahman	1,535	3.38	Murao	553	1.24
Kahar	1,500	3.30	Luniya	559	1.23
Khatri	1,182	2.61	Gond	541	1.19
Pasi	999	2.20	Sheik	493	1.08
Koeri	740	1.63	Dusadh	464	1.02

British land policy of 'territorial aristocracy', adopted after the uprising of 1857, buttressed the position of *taluqdars* (hereditary landlords) who rack-rented and evicted their tenants at will. The 'only law guiding the landlord', one official noted, 'is to get all he can and let the tenant shift for himself'.<sup>34</sup> Increase in rent, but more significantly the change from rent in kind to cash owing to increase in the number of cultivators, easy availability of money and growing volume of cash crops, all created ambivalence in traditional relations between landlords and tenants, which in turn contributed to increasing instability in rural areas.<sup>35</sup> Fragmentation of ownership rights among intermediate proprietors—large *zamindars*

(landlords) were insulated by economic and institutional factors—progressively multiplied the number of uneconomic holdings, deepened indebtedness and reduced many to the unhappy lot of landless labourers.<sup>36</sup> The decline of the indigenous handicraft industry because of unfavourable competition with Great Britain displaced many artisan castes who were increasingly forced to join the already swelled ranks of landless labourers.<sup>37</sup> And finally, on top of the distress caused by the operation of man-made factors, was the constant spectre of famine which occurred throughout India with calamitous frequency in the 19th century, reducing all to precarious circumstances.<sup>38</sup>

While these economic changes affected everyone, they bore down particularly heavily on those whose position was already marginal—the middle-to-lower strata of society which, as we have seen above, supplied the largest number of emigrants. The higher castes were, to a certain extent, insulated against economic vicissitudes because a substantial proportion of them had firm, inalienable rights in land, and had the resources to tide them over crises such as famines and droughts. Even the higher caste tenants had several advantages over their lower caste compatriots. For instance, they generally paid less rent than lower caste tenants, sometimes, as in the cases of Gonda and Faizabad, 20% less.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, assertive and independent of spirit, they were 'very difficult to manage' and closed ranks 'to resist any coercive process issued against one of their number'.<sup>40</sup> It was the lower caste tenants and labourers who suffered most the hardships caused by evictions and enhancements of rents.

This is evident in the variations in patterns of migration among the higher and the lower castes. One indicator of differential distress, besides family migration discussed below, is migration by sex among the castes. Altogether 31,456 males and 13,696 females migrated to Fiji from North India. While the lower castes furnished a very high proportion of both the sexes, their contribution, percentage-wise, to females was greater than to males. Thus while Chamars supplied 12% of all males, they furnished 16% of the females in the emigrating population. Muslims too sent a higher percentage of females: 14% in comparison to their contribution of 12% of all males. This is in marked contrast to the pattern among the higher castes, except the Brahmans, who maintained a rough balance between the sexes. Jats, for example, provided 2% of males but only 0.4% of all the females, while Thakurs sent 8% of all the males and only 6% of females.

Many of the emigrants who came to Fiji, or went to other colonies, may have intended temporary migration. There must, however, also have been some, who, seeing no respite from constant vulnerability and dreariness,

desired a permanent break with their past. In this category must be counted those who moved out with their families. Little is known about them, and most of it is of an unflattering character. One of the most common beliefs in Fiji is that they were 'depot families', formed at the instance of the recruiter to avoid time-consuming investigation into the background of unattached females. A corollary is that most of the families were of mixed castes and mixed districts of origin. This view is not accurate; and in many ways a discussion of the structure and pattern of family migration neatly underlines the difference between the myth and reality of indenture.

Altogether 7,185 adult indentured emigrants stated on their Emigration Passes that they were married and were accompanied by their spouses. Of these 3,526 were males (11% of the total male population) and 3,659 females (26.7% of all females). The discrepancy between the two figures is explained by the fact that there were some men, particularly from the lower castes and tribal groups, who were accompanied by more than one wife.<sup>41</sup> Besides the married couples, there were a further 1,899 individuals, 1,769 of whom were males, who told the registration officers that they were married, but were leaving their families in the villages, perhaps in the care of the joint family. This practice was discouraged by the provincial governments who were sometimes called upon to provide for these families when they were tossed out to fend for themselves.<sup>42</sup>

In terms of actual family units, 4,627 families migrated to Fiji from Calcutta. The following table gives a breakdown by different categories.

**Table 4**  
**Family Types in North Indian Migration to Fiji**

Family Type	Numbers	%
Husband and Wife only (HW)	3,175	68.6
Mother, Father, Child(ren) MFC	642	13.9
Mother and Child(ren) only (MC)	524	11.3
Father and Child(ren) only (FC)	61	1.3
Others	225	4.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,657</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Apart from the HW families, others, too, were quite small; in fact, 97.3% of them had fewer than four members. Only three families going to Fiji contained over 10 members, the largest having 13.

There were interesting variations in the pattern of family migration over the years, and among the different districts. The first decade of indentured emigration to Fiji was a particularly notable one for family migration, for each year without exception contributed proportionately more to family

migration than to total migration. One of the peak years was 1884 when 298 families migrated, or 6.4% of the total. Another marked feature of this period was the high percentage of MC family migration. Thus, for instance, in 1879 MC families constituted 44% of the total family migration for that year; in 1882 39%; in 1884 44%; in 1885 44%; and in 1886 42%. This trend led the planters in Fiji to complain to the government about the unnecessary expenditure involved in sustaining uneconomical and unproductive families, and to ask for immediate curtailment of large scale family migration. The government heeded their call, and accordingly instructed its agent in Calcutta to recruit more single emigrants.<sup>43</sup> This attitude was paradoxical, for on the one hand the government had desired permanent settlement of the immigrants in Fiji, and on the other it favoured the curtailment of a process which might have facilitated this. Other colonies differed. Mauritius had always encouraged family migration, while British Guiana too was providing additional inducements to attract more families, though this perhaps was done to reduce the expenditure on the repatriation of time-expired immigrants.

Most of the families had migrated as family units from the villages; only 298 families (6.4%) had mixed districts of origin. Most of them, moreover, came from the high migration districts such as Basti, Gonda, Azamgarh, Shahabad, Ghazipur and Gaya. All these districts contributed more to family migration than they did, proportionately speaking, to total migration. While Basti supplied 20% of the families, it furnished only 14% of the total migrants, while Azamgarh sent 5% of the families but only 4% of the total migrants. The reasons for this are not clear though economic hardship and the established pattern and therefore, perhaps, the popularity of migration may be important factors.

However, there were important differences in the structure of family migration among the different districts, and these were particularly marked between the districts of Bihar and those of United Provinces. The United Provinces districts showed a marked prominence of HW families, and relative unimportance of the other types. The case of Basti is representative: HW families constituted 82% of the total number, MFC families 13%, MC families 3%, and others 3%. In the Bihar districts, although HW families are still very important, the most striking feature is the relative prominence of MC families. Thus from Shahabad district, HW families furnished 57% of the district's total, MFC families 16.7%, FC families 1%, MC 19% and others 6%. In the absence of any record on families in the emigration files and published reports it is difficult to put forward any definite explanation for the difference, though one informed guess may relate the prominence of

MC families in Bihar to its long history of colonial migration. Perhaps after years of patient waiting for their husbands' return, the emigrants' wives and their children, who had long been supported on a meagre joint family budget, were shunted to the periphery and indeed sometimes evicted to fend for themselves. The prospects held out by the recruiters may have attracted such desperate unwanted MC families in search of reunion. Perhaps in some cases the emigrants in the colonies may have arranged for the migration of their families.

A substantial proportion of the families were registered outside their districts of origin. In the cases of Azamgarh, Sultanpur and Gonda, for example, over 80% of the families were registered outside, mostly in the local urban centres such as Faizabad. For reasons noted above, this was to a large extent the result of voluntary migration. Apart from the fact that this trend sharply questions the deception thesis, it also suggests that the conventional picture of Indian families as highly immobile tradition-bound social units is in need of revising.

There were 152 families which migrated to Fiji as single family units, but which were registered at different places. Of these 97 were HW families, 48 MFC families and the rest FC, MC and other families. Eighty three of the mixed districts of registration families also had common districts of origin. What exactly happened here is unclear, though two possibilities are likely. One is that the husband had already migrated for employment outside his native district, and met a recruiter who registered him at the local depot. Thereupon, he returned to his village, registered his wife in their district of origin (to avoid complications), and either returned to where he was registered, or requested the transfer of his registration papers to his district, from where he and his family then migrated. The other possibility is that two persons from the same district who had left at different times and were registered at different places met on their way to Calcutta, and decided to form a liaison before embarkation. In the remaining 69 cases, both the district of registration and the district of origin were mixed, and these, in all probability, were genuine cases of depot marriages.

Most of the families originated among those castes such as Chamars which also contributed the largest numbers of migrants. However, it is clear that family migration was generally more pronounced among the lower castes, such as Chamars who supplied 18% of all the families but only 13% of the total migrants. Among the higher castes such as Brahmans and Thakurs and even among some middle order castes such as Ahirs family migration was more restricted. Perhaps this difference shows that the pressures to eke out an existence varied with the different castes. For

Chamars and other lower castes, as we have seen, life held few certainties, and thus they were not averse to migrating with their families in search of an extra rupee to supplement their barely adequate earnings at home. Among the higher castes relative economic security and social conventions with respect to family and women may have held family migration at a low level.

There were relatively few—251 or 5.4%—families with mixed castes. Of these 100 were of mixed districts of origin also. In the remaining 151 cases, mixed caste families had common districts of origin. Perhaps mixed caste marriages had taken place before the families had departed from the village (probably due to reasons of social unacceptance). Alternatively, mixed caste liaisons may have taken place outside the villages but before the emigrants were registered, suggesting the possibility of elopement.

---

The discussion thus far on the structural background of North Indian indentured emigration to Fiji has been based largely on the computerized analysis of one source, the Emigration Passes. Above all, it has attempted to show that indentured emigration was a highly differentiated process in terms of the social and regional origins of the emigrants, with important variations and changes in the pattern of migration itself. Seen in the context of 19th century North Indian social and economic history, indentured migration does not appear as an aberration or an unnatural phenomenon, but as a rational and conscious act. But while statistical analysis provides valuable details about trends and tendencies in indentured emigration, it does not give insights into the motives and perceptions of the emigrants themselves. These can be explored through positivistic methods using documents; but this is a well trod path of diminishing returns, and it would be more fruitful to turn to new and little used sources. One such is Hindi folk songs, which can movingly illuminate the feelings of the emigrants about various aspects of indenture.

The neglect of folk songs in the study of a community rich in folk traditions is a surprising, though not entirely accidental, factor. Many scholars regard them as 'soft' data prone to error and fallacy, and as handmaidens of science.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, folk sources have their uses. Their greatest value lies in the fact that they express and evoke attitudes and concerns that are important to the people themselves, and because of this they are generally representative of the human condition they portray. Moreover, in a folk or non-literate culture, songs must be sung, remembered and taught by one generation to the next, and the flexibility

inherent in this procedure enables the constant development of themes and ideas, thus keeping the oral traditions in tune with the changing feelings of the people.<sup>45</sup>

Yet there are problems. It is often very difficult to determine precisely the time of origin, and a song, sung at a particular point in time, may wrongly be taken to represent the entire period. Since the folk songs discussed below deal with the background of indentured emigration in India and the experience of the labourers in the colonies, it can safely be assumed that they originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of the pieces are anonymous and this presents the difficulty of identifying the sex or the social status of the singers. Nevertheless, since the songs cover a wide range of topics and are derived from a number of places, they can be assumed to have been shared by persons engaged in different walks of life. They show the pressures and necessities of North Indian rural society which induced emigration, the deception in recruiting in India which facilitated the process, the difficulties on the plantation in the colonies and the gradual reorientation to the new environment.

The first song is from the region of Oudh and is sung by a wife whose husband has gone abroad for employment. There is no specific reference to any particular place, though the mention of a ship makes it fairly certain that migration took place to a foreign country. The need for money is given as the sole cause:

From the east came the rail, from the west came the ship,  
And took my beloved one away.  
The rail has become my sawat  
Which took my beloved one away.  
The rail is not my enemy, nor the ship,  
O! It is money which is the real enemy.  
It takes my beloved one from place to place,  
Money is the enemy . . .<sup>46</sup>

Poverty is again given as the cause of migration:

Mother! Far away in a distant land,  
The thought of thine is crushing me.  
Poverty, abject poverty, mother,  
Has separated me from thee.<sup>47</sup>

In the following song, a desperate agricultural labourer, fed-up with a life of constant drudgery and degradation, says that anything in the colonies would be preferable to the life in India.

Born in India, we are prepared to go to Fiji  
 Or, if you please, to Natal to dig the mines.  
 We are prepared to suffer there,  
 But Brothers! Don't make us agriculturalists here.<sup>48</sup>

Social oppression of the lower castes by higher castes is given as the reason for migration by an emigrant from Surinam:

I call India blessed, and the Brahmins and Kshatriyas too,  
 Who attach untouchability to their subjects.  
 They rule by the power of these very subjects,  
 While keeping the company of prostitutes.  
 The subjects escaped and came to the islands  
 And, yes, India turned on her side . . .<sup>49</sup>

But if economic necessities created the condition for migration, the recruiters played their part too by holding out glorious prospects of easy money, acquired in congenial working conditions. Folk songs in the colonies give the impression of unfulfilled dreams and broken hopes, and not infrequently, the blame is laid on the recruiters or the registration officials. A song from British Guiana:

Oh recruiter, your heart is deceitful,  
 Your speech is full of lies!  
 Tender may be your voice, articulate and seemingly logical,  
 But it is all used to defame and destroy  
 The good names of people.<sup>50</sup>

Similar feelings are expressed in songs from Fiji. One labourer sings:

I hoe all day and cannot sleep at night,  
 Today my whole body aches,  
 Damnation to you, *arkatis*.<sup>51</sup>

While another exclaims:

Oh! Registration officers,  
 May death befall you:  
 You have deprived me of my marriage bed.<sup>52</sup>

The crossing was a traumatic experience for most emigrants coming from landlocked areas. A song from Surinam relates:

Several months on the ship passed with great difficulty,  
 On the seven dark seas, we suffered unaccustomed problems.<sup>53</sup>

Emigration was a great leveller of social hierarchies and ritual separateness among the emigrants, reducing all to the status of 'coolies'. Some protested:

Why should we be called coolies,  
We who were born in the clans and families of seers and saints?<sup>54</sup>

On the plantations, traditional patterns of interaction would receive further jolts and would eventually become irrelevant. The realities of a new life soon shattered any idealistic picture the emigrants had of their 'promised land'. A song from Mauritius hints at disappointment:

Having heard the name of the island of Mauritius,  
We arrived here to find gold, to find gold.  
Instead we got beatings of bamboos,  
Which peeled the skin off the back of the labourers.  
We became *kolhu's* bullocks to extract cane sugar  
Alas! We left our country to become coolies.<sup>55</sup>

Some of the labourers could not reconcile themselves to their new situation, and spent much of their time in self-pity and depression, as shown in this song from British Guiana:

'What sins have we committed, Oh Lord,  
That thou has given us these miseries?'  
Repenting in their hearts they called for mother and father  
Blaming their fate, their *karma*, or even the Lord Himself.<sup>56</sup>

The more sensible and practical ones tried to create fleeting niches of happiness, even in the crowded and ugly 'coolies lines' as the following song from Fiji shows:

The six foot by eight foot CSR room  
Is the source of all comfort for us.  
In it we keep our tools and hoe,  
And also the grinding stone and the hearth.  
In it is also kept the firewood.  
It is our single and double-storey palace,  
In which is made our golden parapet.<sup>57</sup>

However, the majority tried to avail themselves of opportunities for self-advancements that lay ahead of them. Even though unhappy in their new social situation, prospects of material prosperity tied the immigrants to the soil. A Surinami folk song explains:

Like the fly trapped in honey, we became slaves.  
We toiled in the fields day and night, without sleep.<sup>58</sup>

The process of reconstitution and adaptation to the new environment gradually took place among those immigrants who, for various reasons, decided to stay back. Freer forms of social intercourse, new dress patterns and dietary habits were all part of this. The following folk song from Fiji in a somewhat light vein indicates this well. The topic here is *yaqona*.

O, my beloved,  
I cannot leave yaqona.  
I have left my country, and my caste,  
I have left my parents behind also,  
But I cannot leave yaqona.  
Yaqona is the *Bhang* (*drug*) of this island,  
Which we drink to pass our nights.  
I cannot leave yaqona.<sup>59</sup>

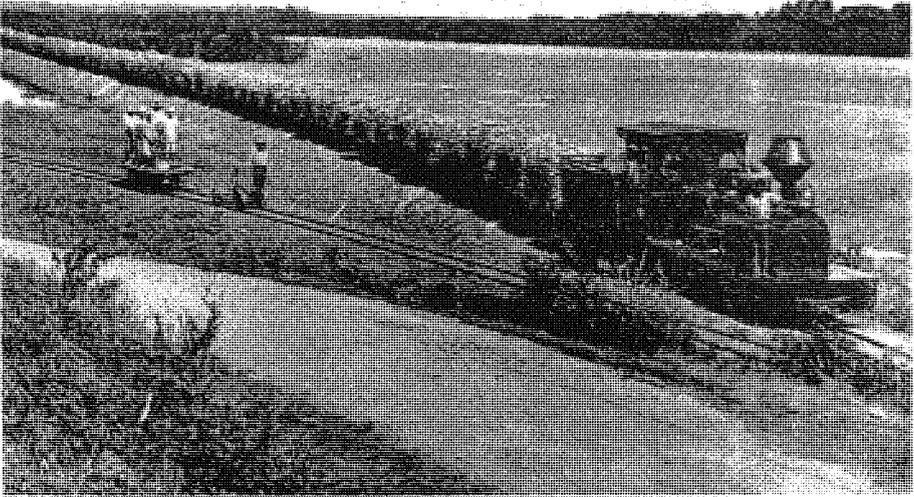
Evidence from both the Emigration Passes and the Hindi folk songs shows that the indenture experience was a varied and complex process, which cannot easily be explained within a simple theoretical framework: the emigrants came from varied social backgrounds in India; they had different motivations; if many desired nothing but a brief sojourn in the colonies, there were others who made a conscious break with their past; if many had been deceived by recruiters, there were many others who had already left their homes in search of a better livelihood elsewhere, before they were registered for emigration; if many had unhappy experiences under indenture, many others found new possibilities for improvement which would have been denied them in India. Anthropological studies of overseas Indians have emphasized the themes of fragmentation and reconstitution,<sup>60</sup> and the historian of Indian indenture would do well to explore these further.

## Endnotes

1. S. B. Mookherji, *The Indenture System in Mauritius 1837-1915* (Calcutta, 1962), 51.
2. The largest importers of Indian labour in order of importance were Mauritius (453,063), British Guiana (238,909), Natal (152,184), Trinidad (143,939), Fiji (60,965), Jamaica (36,200), Surinam (34,304) and Reunion (26,507).
3. The contribution of South India remained less than one-third while that of Bombay and the French territories was sporadic and insubstantial.
4. A copy of the contract is included as an appendix in K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (Melbourne, 1962), 210-12.
5. Up to 1870, 112,178 or 21 percent had returned, while in the decade after 1910, one emigrant returned for every two who embarked for the colonies. See J. Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration From India* (Calcutta 1874), 67, and *Census of India*, XVI: I (1921), 44.
6. For two succinct surveys of literature see S. Shigematsu, 'Overseas Indians—Bibliography of Books and Articles, 1873-1971', *Asian Studies*, XXI: 4 (1975), 25-49; and Chandra Jayawardena, 'Migration and Social Change: a Survey of Indian Communities Overseas', *Geographical Review*, LVIII (1968), 426-49.
7. Cumpston, 'A Survey of Indian Immigration to British Tropical Colonies to 1910', *Population Studies*, X (1956-7), 158-65.
8. Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London, 1974). See also Ahmed Ali (ed.), *Girmit: Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva, 1979).
9. Gillion, *op.cit.*
10. Useful data is contained in Bengal Government, *Annual Reports of the Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta on Emigration to British and Foreign Colonies (1879-1919)*, (hereinafter *Annual Reports*.) These reports are available at several places, including Calcutta, New Delhi and the colonies.
11. The complete set covers 42 reels of microfilm. The National Library of Australia, Canberra, has a copy.
12. Statistical Package for Social Sciences.
13. For instance, there was no recruiting in 1880 and 1886 because of lack of demand from Fiji.
14. *Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration)*, April 1882, B Pros. 90-93, New Delhi, National Archives of India (hereinafter NAI). Initially only one planter, J. Hill of Rabi, agreed to employ the *Leonidas* emigrants, though later others did too.
15. Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics introduced in this paper should be assumed to have been derived from my own computer analysis.
16. See Annual Reports.
17. See *Home Public (Emigration) Proceedings*, NAI, where a detailed breakdown is provided of the regional origins of the indentured emigrants.

18. *Home Public (Emigration)*, October 1858, Pros. 1, NAI.
19. Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton, 1951), 116; S. M. Akhtar, *Emigrant Labour for the Assam Tea Gardens* (Lahore, 1939), Sir Percival Griffiths, *The History of Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) and Government of Bengal, *Resolution on Immigrant Labour in Assam* for various years. (A full set of these after 1894 is available in the Victoria State Library, Melbourne.)
20. C. P. Simmons, 'Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: The Case of the Coal Mining Industry, c.1880-1939', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (here after IESHR), XIII (1976), 455-484.
21. Sir William Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London 7th ed., 1897), 226.
22. The statistics on Bihari migration to Calcutta are available in several places, including L. S. S. O'Malley's *Bengal District Gazetteers* for the different districts published after the turn of this century, *Census and Administration Reports* and various volumes of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (Oxford, 1907). All of these are available in NAI.
23. Gillion, *op. cit.*, 45
24. *Ibid.*, 48-9.
25. *Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration)*, October 1894, A Pros. 8-9, NAI.
26. A. G. Clow. 'Final Settlement Report for Basti' (1915-19), 4, NAI.
27. R. L. Singh (ed.), *India. A Regional Geography* (Varanasi, 1971), 189.
28. See Francis Robinson, 'Municipal Government and Muslim Separatism in the United Provinces, 1883 to 1916', *Modern Asian Studies*, VII (1973), 389-441.
29. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 227.
30. H. R. Neville, *Ghazipur District Gazetteer* (Nainital, 1909), 78.
31. *Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration)*, November 1898, A Pros. 25-35, NAI.
32. H. R. C. Hailey, 'Gonda Settlement Report' (1903), 11, NAI.
33. H. R. Neville, *Bahraich District Gazetteer* (Nainital, 1921), 67-8.
34. T. R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt. India 1857-1870* (Princeton 1964), 196. See also Jagdish Raj *The Mutiny and British Land Policy in North India, 1856-1868* (Bombay, 1965).
35. Walter Neale, *Economic Change in Rural India* (New Haven, 1962), 65.
36. General discussion is provided in Eric Stokes, *Peasant and the Raj* (Cambridge, 1977).
37. P. C. Joshi, 'The Decline of Indigenous handicraft in Uttar Pradesh', IESHR, I (1963-4), 23-45.
38. See B. M. Bhatia, *Famines in India* (Bombay 1963).
39. 'Final Report on the Settlement of Faizabad District' (n.d., author unknown), I 1, NAI; Hailey, *op. cit.*, 10.
40. Hailey, *op. cit.*, 11.

41. Customs relating to marriage, family and religion of the North Indian castes are discussed in William Crooke, *Castes and Tribes of North Western Provinces and Oudh* (Calcutta, 1896), 4 vols.
42. Official pronouncements on this subject are found in *Annual Reports*.
43. Gillion, 57.
44. For a brief discussion see Edmund V. Bunkse, 'Commoner Attitudes Toward Landscape and Nature', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LXVIII (1978), SSI-68.
45. See Indra Deva, 'Oral Tradition and the Study of Peasant Society', *Diogenes* No. 85 (1974), 112-27.
46. *Uttar Pradesh Ke Log Geet* (Folk songs of Uttar Pradesh) (Lucknow, 1971), 46. *Sawat* literally means co-wife.
47. From the folk song titled 'From a Foreign Land' in D. N. Majumdar (ed.), *Snowballs of Garhwal* (Lucknow, 1946), 27.
48. Source unknown. This song was recited to me during my field trip in eastern United Provinces in May 1979.
49. U. Arya, *Ritual Songs and Folk Songs of the Hindus of Surinam* (Leiden 1968), 163. I have adapted Arya's translation.
50. Ved Prakash Vatuk, 'Protest Songs of East Indians in British Guiana', *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXVII (1964), 224.
51. Dr Vijay Mishra of Murdoch University provided this song.
52. *Fiji Sun*, Girit Centenary Issue, 15 May 1979 (my translation). *Arkati* here refers to the recruiter.
53. Prof. Krishnadeva Upadhyay provided this song.
54. Vatuk, *op. cit.*, 226.
55. Abhimanyu Anat, *Lal Pasina* [Red Sweat] (New Delhi, 1977), 226. *Kolhu* is a machine used in the villages in India to crush cane.
56. Vatuk, *op. cit.*, 225.
57. *Fiji Sun*, 15 May 1979. There is a very similar song in the *Fiji Sun* on the coolie lines in the paper which emphasises drudgery and hardship.
58. See Footnote No. 54.
59. *Fiji Sun*, 15 May 1979.
60. See Morton Klass, *East Indians in Trinidad* (New York, 1961); Arthur and Juanita Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies* (Madison, 1960) Hilda Kuper, *Indian people in Natal* (Cape Town, 1961); Adrian C. Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific* (Berkeley, 1961); Burton Benedict, *Indians in a Plural Society* (London, 1961).



A familiar sight during the cane harvesting season—a train carrying laden trucks to the Rarawai mill at Ba. Lorries joined trains in transporting cane after the war.