

## “Following Custom”? Representations of Community among Indian Immigrant Labour in the West Indies, 1880–1920\*

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On 25 June 1887, a curious incident was reported in the *San Fernando Gazette* of Trinidad in the British West Indies. At the end of the month of Ramadan that year, on the great festival day of Eid ul-Fitr, the Indian Muslims of Victoria village and of nearby estates congregated for the mass prayer in the Little Masjid. A fracas began unexpectedly when several Muslims objected to facing east in the direction of Mecca for the prayer. They argued instead that they should face west as they were wont to do in India. Theological debates soon gave way to a free exchange of blows between the votaries of eastward and westward prayer. Peace was restored after a considerable period, but with appeals to the eminent lawyers, Messrs Wharton and Farfan, to mediate in the dispute. Was the dispute simply due to ignorance as to the true direction of Mecca? Or was it a case of “following custom”, the much maligned traits that the Indian Muslims shared with their compatriots?<sup>1</sup>

This incident, a small footnote in the longer history of community formation, is significant for another reason – indicative as it was of the travails of travel. Migration always meant transformation of lives and styles and involved living with changes that one neither chose nor anticipated. Cultures had to be created; they could not simply be

\* A version of this article was presented at the AILH International Conference on Indian Labour History, New Delhi, in March 2004 and at the SEPHIS Workshop on “Labour Migration in an Earlier Phase of Global Restructuring” in April 2004 in Xiamen, China. I would like to acknowledge the comments of the participants at those conferences. I am especially indebted to Kaushik Ghosh, University of Texas, for his thoughtful remarks. A completed version of this paper was presented at the South Asian Studies Seminar at the Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge University, on 17 May 2006, where I sorely missed the acute observations of Raj Chandavarkar, Director of the Centre, who passed away just over three weeks before my presentation. I dedicate this essay to the memory of this outstanding historian of labour in South Asia. I would also like to acknowledge the generous support of the Trustees of the British Indian Golden Jubilee Banquet Fund in enabling me to complete the research for this essay.

1. John Morton, the Canadian Presbyterian missionary in Trinidad, found the habit of “following custom” to be one of the most irritating obstacles to proselytization. See Sarah E. Morton (ed.), *John Morton of Trinidad [...] Journals, Letters and Papers* (Toronto, 1916), p. 196.

transplanted. The incident interests me because it provides a striking illustration of two competing and divergent theoretical formulations about the larger question of community and ethnic identity formation among Indian migrant labourers and their descendents in the British Caribbean colonies.

The first of these, the theory of cultural persistence or retention, was popularized largely through the work of anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s. The main features of this theory may be summarized briefly. According to this theory, cultural identity is central to the process of distinctive community and ethnic formation in the diaspora, and this cultural identity is transmitted largely through deeply embedded cultural symbols and value systems. In the case of the Indian community formation, the centrality of religious, caste, and family patterns is stressed as they are institutional embodiments of these value systems. Thus, it was argued, wherever Indians emigrated in large numbers the deeply embedded institutional patterns of caste, religion, and family values (the so-called cultural baggage) were carried by the migrants to their new homeland. These cultural values transplanted to the new surroundings shaped the emergent forms of community identities. In this view “culture” is seen as deeply resistant to the changes unleashed by modernizing forces in the new society.

The classic ethnographic description of this process of cultural continuity is to be found in the work of Morton Klass and Arthur Niehoff on Trinidad, conducted in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Persistence in the diaspora of the cultural values of the homeland, it was argued, shaped the distinct ethnic identity of the diasporic community and prevented their assimilation into the prevailing cultural norms of the new societies. This explanation of ethnic distinctiveness was both reinforced and transformed by the emergence of the enormously influential theory of plural society expounded in the work of M.G. Smith in 1965 on the British West Indies. In this study Smith characterized the multi-racial societies of the West Indies as being composed of population segments marked by distinct ethnic attributes who lived in a state of “economic symbiosis and mutual avoidance”.<sup>3</sup> Following on as it did from the work of J.S. Furnivall on colonial Burma and the Dutch East Indies, plural-society theorists emphasized the fact that each ethnic group held on to its inherited cultural

2. Morton Klass, *East Indians in Trinidad* (New York, 1961); Arthur Niehoff and Juanita Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies* (Milwaukee, WI, 1960). These studies followed the acculturation and cultural persistence framework of Melville Herskovits’s pioneering study of African cultural survivals in Trinidad. See M. Herskovits, *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact* (New York, 1938), and M. Herskovits and F. Herskovits, *Trinidad Village* (New York, 1947). See also the early study by Daniel Crowley, “Plural and Differential Acculturation in Trinidad”, *American Anthropologist*, 59 (1957), pp. 817–824.

3. M.G. Smith, *The Plural Society in the British West Indies* (Los Angeles, CA, 1965).

traits and interacted with each other only in the market place or if they were obliged to by the overarching political compulsions of the state. The influence of plural-society theories was largely due to the close fit they had with the emergence of the racialized politics of post-Independence West Indies.<sup>4</sup> As is clear, cultural-retentionist arguments focused strongly on reified cultural traits that had been inherited by the immigrant communities from their homeland – very much like the votaries of westward prayer in the example cited at the beginning of this essay.

However, the arguments of cultural retention came under scrutiny very early in historical and anthropological studies. Instead of cultural persistence, what was emphasized now was the variety of ways in which central features of a putative ethnic culture had been adapted to and changed by their context in the new world.<sup>5</sup> This process of adaptation and transformation was initially termed acculturation and assimilation, but it acquired theoretical prominence with the elaboration of the “creolization process” in a thesis by the cultural historian Kamau Braithwaite.<sup>6</sup> Initially proposed as an argument for “intercultural” traits of African and European culture during the time of slavery, the thesis has since been extended to Indian diasporic formations.

In the case of the Indian diaspora it was argued, for instance, that the institution of caste identities had been largely attenuated through the experience of migration to a new society – where caste status bore no implications for occupational or social mobility, or for resource control.<sup>7</sup>

4. L. Despres, *Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics in British Guiana* (Chicago, IL, 1967). See also L. Despres, “Anthropological Theory, Cultural Pluralism, and the Study of Complex Societies”, *Current Anthropology*, 9 (1968), pp. 3–25; C. Clarke, “Pluralism and Plural Societies: Caribbean Perspectives”, in C. Clarke, D. Ley, and C. Peach (eds), *Geography and Ethnic Pluralism* (London, 1984); and C. Clarke, *East Indians in a West Indian Town* (London, 1986). The use of the plural-society perspective in historical study is best exemplified by the work of B.L. Moore on British Guiana. See B.L. Moore, *Race, Power and Social Segmentation in Colonial Society: Guyana after Slavery 1838–1891* (New York, 1987); *idem*, *Cultural Power, Resistance and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana 1838–1900* (Montreal, 1995). While being broadly framed within the pluralist paradigm, there has been a recent trend in anthropological studies of the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean towards contextualizing ethnicity. See for instance C. Clarke, C. Peach, and S. Vertovec (eds), *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge, 1990); S. Vertovec, *Hindu Trinidad: Religion, Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Change* (London, 1992); T.H. Eriksen, “The Cultural Context of Ethnic Difference”, *Man* (ns), 26 (1991), pp. 127–144.

5. R.T. Smith and C. Jayawardena, “Marriage and the Family amongst East Indians in British Guiana”, *Social and Economic Studies*, 8 (1959), pp. 321–376; C. Jayawardena, *Conflict and Solidarity in a Guianese Plantation* (London, 1963).

6. Kamau Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford, 1971).

7. There are several essays along these lines in B. Schwartz (ed.), *Caste in Overseas Indian Communities* (San Francisco, CA, 1967); C. Jayawardena, “Migration and Social Change: A Survey of Indian Communities Overseas”, *Geographical Review*, 58 (1968), pp. 426–449; J. Nevadomsky, “Abandoning the Retentionist Hypothesis: Family Changes Among the East

Similarly, it has been pointed out that changes in language patterns had led to extensive creolization of the migrants' original languages (Hindi, Bhojpuri) and there was evidence of distinct adaptation to the dominant creolized English. Scholars have focused on syncretic adaptations of cultural values of Creole society by Indians in the Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> The creolization thesis, as is clear, emphasized radical discontinuity and cultural transformation in diasporic identity formation. In recent years the creolization thesis has received much support from the postmodernist turn in the social sciences, with its celebration of hybridity, migrancy, and its emphasis on improvisation in the formation of identity. One might with some qualification think of the upholders of the creolization thesis as votaries of eastward prayer in the example cited at the beginning.

While a fuller critique is not attempted here, I will briefly set out my main points of disagreement with both the creolization and cultural retentionist arguments. The first relates to the notion of community identity in the diaspora.<sup>9</sup> Both theories, I believe, are pitched at a general level and are applied without discriminating between the different diasporic contexts. Both these formulations assume an unproblematic notion of diaspora.<sup>10</sup> One implication of that is the notion of a binary relationship between two fully formed cultures – the plural-society theory emphasizing separation, and the creolization model emphasizing interaction and interculturalism. The problem, of course, lies in the presumption of the wholeness of cultural identity ascribed to the immigrant and indigenous groups. What is lost sight of is the contestatory process by which

Indians in Rural Trinidad”, *International Journal of the Sociology of Family*, 10 (1980), pp. 181–198.

8. See for instance R.K. Jain, “The East Indian Culture in a Caribbean Context: Crisis and Creativity”, *India International Centre Quarterly*, 13 (1986), pp. 153–164. For the process of creolization among Indian women in contemporary Trinidad, see P. Mohammed, “The ‘Creolization’ of Indian Women in Trinidad”, in Selwyn Ryan (ed.), *Trinidad and Tobago: The Independence Experience, 1962–1987* (St Augustine, Trinidad, 1988). For a nuanced enunciation of the creolization process focusing on “interculturalism” between the lower-class Indian and black populations in the Caribbean, see R. Reddock, “Contestations Over Culture, Class, Gender, and Identity in Trinidad and Tobago”, in Verene A. Shepherd and Glen Richards (eds), *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourse in Caribbean Culture* (Kingston, Jamaica, 2002). Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881–1905* (London, 1981), argues that there was gradual creolization along class lines among Indian immigrant labourers.

9. The creolization model has been comprehensively critiqued from a Marxist dialectical standpoint by Nigel O. Bolland, “Creolization and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History”, in Alistair Hennessy (ed.), *Intellectuals in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean*, vol. 1, *Spectre of the New Class: The Commonwealth Caribbean* (London, 1992), pp. 50–79. For a pointed critique of the constructionist approach to ethnicity as applied to the diasporic Indian community see Aisha Khan’s comments in “Ethnicity, Culture and Context”, *Man* (ns), 27 (1992), pp. 873–879.

10. For a critique of the notion of diaspora as applied to the Indians in the West Indies see Prabhu P. Mohapatra, “Longing and Belonging: The Dilemma of Return among Indian Immigrants in the West Indies 1850–1950”, *IIAS Yearbook 1995* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 134–155.

immigrant communities are formed through their insertion and emplacement in social relations engendered by specific social formations.

In the case of Indian immigrants to the West Indies, the way in which the immigrants were forced to relate to the wider society through their position in the labour regime on the plantations has been insufficiently explored in studies on community-identity formation. I intend to demonstrate in this essay the crucial role of the changing labour regime in shaping the formation of the community identity of Indian immigrants. However, by emphasizing the relationship between labourers and the labour regime, I do not at all mean to suggest that the community identity was in some sense directly derived from the structure of the labour regime. It is here that I wish to focus on the ways in which identities are formed in the crucible of practices of representation, for it is through those that the structures of the labour regime impinged on the process of identity formation. However, it is also my contention that there exists no pre-formed cultural identity that is then expressed through representation. In cognitive terms, there is no identity imaginable outside representation. This allows one to think also of identities as historically amenable to transformation and to imagine the coexistence of multiple identities along with different practices of representation. Instead of a single reified ethnic identity, we can imagine a repertoire of community identities being constituted by acts of representations.

Despite this preliminary excursus on the weighty question of identity, what I propose to explore here is far more modest. I shall examine four different sets of self-representations of community identity among Indian immigrants to the West Indies during the period 1880–1920, the last phase of the career of the indentured labour regime there. The first of these is about collective representations of community staged in the Muharram festival by Indian immigrants to the West Indies. Next, I shall take up three different styles of representation of community identity in the public sphere propounded by three individuals. Two of them were irrepressible and prolific letter-writers to the colonial newspapers, while the third is the author of one of the rare literary texts produced by an Indian during the period of indenture in the West Indies. What I will focus on is the different styles of representation of community identity in relation to the dominant labour regime, and I hope thereby to provide some clues as to the contradictory and often contested nature of the process by which community identity was fashioned during the period of indenture.

#### CHANGING LABOUR REGIME ON CARIBBEAN PLANTATIONS

Before I undertake this analysis, it will be useful to mark out the terrain of the labour regime on which these acts of representation were staged. The

labour regime to which the immigrants came was marked by transformations along two axes – that of the economic cycles of growth and stagnation, benchmarked by international sugar prices; and the long-term process by which indentured labourers were transformed into permanent settlers.

Indentured labour from India was imported to the Caribbean colonies of British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica following the abolition of slavery in 1838. Resistance by former slave labourers to the unreconstructed labour regime on the sugar plantations forced planters to find sources of “cheap and reliable labourers” from India. Several private experiments beginning in 1838 gave way to organized labour import under the colonial aegis. Planters and the colonial state jointly met the cost of recruiting and disciplining immigrant labour, effected now under a series of ordinances promulgated from the 1840s onward and collectively known as the Coolie Ordinances (consolidated in the late 1890s as Immigration Ordinances of British Guiana (1893) and Trinidad (1899)). Between 1838 and 1917, excepting a few years in the early decades, there was continuous annual import of labour from India – totalling 238,000 to British Guiana, 145,000 to Trinidad, 50,000 to Jamaica, and 40,000 to Surinam, which was a Dutch colony. Smaller numbers came to St Lucia, Nevis, and Grenada.

Indentured labour resuscitated the flagging sugar industry. Acreage under cane and sugar production increased greatly between the 1840s and 1880s, buoyed by favourable sugar prices and the continuous flow of indentured labour. From the mid 1880s, sugar prices dropped precipitously, to half the level of 1880. Cane acreage and sugar production stagnated until the end of World War I.<sup>11</sup> The Caribbean sugar industry is thus marked by two distinct phases: of growth, from the 1840s to 1880, and crisis and stagnation, from 1884–1917. Interestingly, the import of indentured labour from India remained roughly equal in both those phases, indicating the crucial role played by low-wage indentured labourers in ensuring growth in the early phase, and stabilization of the plantation system in the period of crisis.

These immigration ordinances and the apparatus of enforcement and “protection” that came into existence regulated every aspect of the working lives of the immigrants and to a large extent their non-working lives too (including marriages and festivals, sickness, housing, and their return to India). The central feature of the labour system that came into being was contractual servitude at fixed wages (25 cents or 1 shilling per day) for a period of five years on a plantation, where the labourer was also

11. Cane acreage in British Guiana and Trinidad rose from 45,000 acres in 1850 to 135,000 acres in 1884; in the same period, sugar production increased from 55,000 tonnes to 187,000 tonnes. By 1915, cane acreage in these two colonies had fallen to 121,000 acres and sugar production was 162,000 tonnes.

obliged to reside. He or she was forbidden to be outside the plantation without the explicit permission of the planter, since the essence of indenture lay in prohibiting the labourer from taking advantage of the competition for labour, which was scarce. Contracts were enforced by making any breach of the provisions of the ordinances a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment.<sup>12</sup> It was into this extremely restrictive and oppressive labour regime that Indian immigrants were placed to serve out five or ten years of their working lives. After ten years of industrial residence in the colonies, the immigrant could seek repatriation to India,<sup>13</sup> a provision explicitly inserted in the contract in order to distinguish indentured servitude from slavery.

While immigrants came from practically every province of India, the overwhelming bulk – up to 80 per cent in fact – were drawn from United Province and Bihar in the Gangetic plains of northern India. While the social composition of immigrant labour reflected the religious and caste structures of those regions, the gender and age compositions were markedly skewed. Immigrants were predominantly single, male, and in the prime age group of twenty to thirty-five. Family migration was not the norm, with only 15 per cent of immigrants being married couples; very few migrants were children, and only 28 per cent were female, of whom 70 per cent were single. All the evidence points to the recruitment of immigrants individually rather than in groups, and not usually from their home villages, with most already having been mobile in search of employment before they were recruited in the major cities or rail and road junctions of the region.<sup>14</sup>

The nature of recruitment reflected the particular nature of the demand from planters for able-bodied young men fit for hard labour, which was geared more towards continuous import than local reproduction to meet its need for a servile labour force. Indeed, colonial labour policy militated against settlement of the labour force for the greater part of the period when indenture was in place. Deaths outstripped births among Indian immigrants right up to the end of the nineteenth century – not an unexpected result given this skewed gender composition of the immigrants.

Community formation on the plantations was thus beset with structural problems, but in spite of them there emerged an embryonic community

12. For the process of formation and enforcement of indenture laws in the West Indies see K.O. Laurence, *A Question of Labour* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1994), and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, "Assam and the West Indies, 1860–1920: Immobilizing Plantation Labor", in Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (eds), *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955* (Chapel Hill, NC [etc.], 2004), pp. 455–480. Between 1880 and 1915 an average of 25 per cent of indentured labourers in British Guiana and Trinidad were prosecuted for breach of contract offences every year; nearly one-third of those prosecuted were imprisoned.

13. On the changing policy of repatriation see Laurence, *Question of Labour*, and Mohapatra, "Longing and Belonging".

14. Laurence, *Question of Labour*; George A. Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency* (Calcutta, 1893).

centred on the sugar estates. The spearhead was embodied in the time-expired labourers, whose terms of indenture had ended. According to the indenture contract, they could apply for a free return passage to India after completing a further five years of residence in the colonies, so around the estates there grew small settlements or villages of former indentured labourers who worked on the estates but took up diverse other occupations too. After completing their ten years, many immigrants either did not return at all or decided to delay their return. On the whole, of the sum total of immigrants who came to the colonies, only about 20 per cent ever returned to India. This process of villagization accelerated in the late nineteenth century as the sugar economy plunged headlong into extended crisis.

A slow but steady mutation occurred in the plantation labour regime in the late nineteenth century as the policy changed to induce settlement of immigrant labour. That was done mainly by encouraging former indentured labourers to become part-time estate workers and then to bear the cost of reproduction in small parcelized holdings. Thus a cane-farming smallholder community grew in Trinidad by the turn of the century, and in British Guiana a rice-farming and paddy proletariat emerged among Indian immigrants. This process of villagization transformed the character of community formation among Indians, with the slow emergence of differentiation within their community.

This brief excursus was necessary to describe the changing nature of community formation among Indians. I have identified three phases in the process by which Indian labourers were transformed from temporary sojourners to permanent settlers in the colonies. The first phase from 1838–1880 was a phase of growth in the plantation economy, with the centre of an immigrant community being strongly anchored on the estates and nearby. Between 1880 and the end of indenture came the phase of villagization, with increasing diversification of occupation and the shifting of the centre of gravity of the community away from the estates and into villages and settlements. The third phase, in the post-indenture period, is marked by continuing decline in the social prevalence of the plantations and greater occupational mobility, differentiation among the Indian settlers themselves, and a move to urban areas by professionals and educated people. These are necessarily broad phases – and there were overlaps between them – and the tendency towards settlement was accelerated or retarded according to the pace of the economic and political processes.

#### MUHARRAM IN THE CARIBBEAN

A bemused “sightseer” was once witness to the celebration of Muharram (or Tadjá as it was called in British Guiana) on a sugar plantation in Demerara in British Guiana in 1897 and exclaimed:



There is something very striking in the thought that this Muslim “Miracle play” should be so firmly rooted in this single corner of the American continent. If we count Trinidad as part of the British Guiana then this must be the only spot in the whole of the Western hemisphere where the martyrdom of Hassan and Hossein is annually commemorated. It is as though Good Friday were religiously observed in a single province in the middle of China.

This singular incongruity led him onto philosophical speculation about the East in the West and he further ejaculated:

The Coolies bring their Tadjas and Tom Toms and we give them trousers and other advantages of civilisation. They come here with their strange customs and superstitions and we give them in return free schooling and Western standard of living. What the result of this strange conjunction of the Orient in the Occident will be, what sort of a social cosmos it is going to produce I leave to others to foretell.<sup>15</sup>

He may not have been right about Good Friday in China nor about the advantages of trousers and civilization, but he was not very far from the truth in his observation about the strange location of Muharram performances in the heart of the West – except that he should have included Jamaica, Surinam, and the tiny island of Grenada, where Muharram was celebrated too. In fact, wherever Indian indentured labourers were sent, be it the African continent or the American, from Mauritius to Natal, Fiji to the Caribbean colonies, Muharram emerged in the nineteenth century as the most important and spectacular festival of Indian immigrants. If our “sightseer” had been more knowledgeable he would have been acquainted with the Hosay massacre in Trinidad of 1884. Undoubtedly many of the contemporary missionaries knew of it. Our man would have exclaimed in even greater surprise at the fact that Hindus and Sunni Muslim labourers had even laid down their lives in order to assert their right to celebrate a minority Shia sect festival.<sup>16</sup>

On 30 October 1884, 6,000 Indian labourers, residents of sugar estates around the town of San Fernando, brought out their processions of *tazias* – replica tombs of the grandsons of the Prophet – and marched towards the town to complete the ceremony of immersion of these *tabuts* to end the festival of Muharram, just as they had done for the previous thirty years. But that year the government had banned the procession from entering the town and threatened to punish severely any infringement of the ban. Yet the procession marched on to fulfil what they said was their “religious

15. *The Daily Chronicle* [hereafter, *DC*], Georgetown, 1897.

16. For a detailed account of the Hosay massacre of 1884, see Kelvin Singh, *The Bloodstained Tombs* (Basingstoke, 1988), and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, “The Hosay Massacre of 1884: Class and Community among Indian Immigrant Labourers in Trinidad”, in Arvind N. Das and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Work and Social Change in Asia: Essays in Honour of Jan Breman* (New Delhi, 2003), pp. 187–230.

obligation". A short distance from the town troops and police, mustered to stop the procession, opened fire from two of the entrances to the town. Twenty-two Indian labourers were shot dead and 100 more were injured. None of them had attacked the police nor had they even entered the town. When the dead were counted and the injuries totted up, a startling statistic emerged: 17 of those killed were Hindus and 5 Muslims, while 76 of the injured were Hindus, with 19 Muslims and 1 Christian.

The government had banned the procession, ostensibly arguing that Hindu and other non-Muslim participation indicated that it was not a religious event, so that banning it would not amount to religious suppression of the immigrants. Enquiries followed and the Governor of Jamaica, Sir Henry Norman, exonerated the government from allegations of interference with the religion of the immigrants. Yet a timid Hindu labourer, when asked by the Commissioner as to why he, a Hindu, had joined the Muslim festival, replied "I did so because it is the custom of all the coolies in Trinidad to join Hosay". Strange indeed are the effects of travelling cultures and customs, the more so because in that same year Muharram processions in Agra in the Northwest Provinces had become the site of a major riot between Hindus and Muslims. In the 1880s and 1890s there were more conflicts between Hindus and Muslims over the Muharram procession in several cities of northern India, and following them came the great round of conflicts over cow-killing during Bakr-Eid. Why indeed did Muslims and Hindus who fought and killed over Muharram in India jointly lay down their lives in far-off Trinidad while defending their right to celebrate the same festival?

I have elsewhere analysed the reasons for the unprecedented hostility of both the colonial state and planters to mass public manifestations of community among the Indians, and the obstinacy with which the workers staked a claim to public performance of that community.<sup>17</sup> What I wish to note here is the historical trajectory of the story of this popular community festival in the Caribbean.

If our bemused sightseer had lived to see the third decade of the twentieth century, he would have seen the passing into history of the system of indentured labour and with it the passing of Muharram as the prime celebration of the descendants of Indian immigrants. In 1932 Tadjja was banned in British Guiana by the colonial state, but for some time before then it was certainly on the wane.<sup>18</sup> In Trinidad, Hosay, as

17. *Ibid.*

18. B.F. Williams, *Stains on My Name, War in My Veins: Guyana and the Politics of Cultural Struggle* (Durham, 1991). B.L. Moore argues that the decline of Tadjjas in British Guiana was due to increasing Creole participation and the consequent withdrawal of Indians from the celebration. However, except for citing the disapproval by missionaries and planter newspapers he provides no evidence to support his argument. Moreover, since he reproduces the missionary and newspaper accounts uncritically he continues to misread the Tadjja as a Hindu festival, since

Muharram was called, had been pushed into a corner of the suburb of St James in Port of Spain and survives to date only because of its value as an exotic tourist attraction. In Surinam, as in Fiji, the 1930s saw the decline of Muharram, which was by then a minor festival in certain rural locations and was devoid equally of its past grandeur and wide participation.<sup>19</sup> In all these locations several other forms of religious festival had overtaken Muharram. For example, Hindus were celebrating Ramlila and Deepavali; while Muslims enjoyed Eid ul-Fitr.

What then accounts for the dazzling rise of Muharram during the nineteenth century among the Indian labour diaspora and its subsequent fall from grace? In this section I shall try to explain some puzzling aspects of this phenomenon associated with Muharram; first of all its immense popularity with the predominantly Hindu and Sunni Muslim emigrants, the cultural meanings they derived from its performance, and its unique place in community formation in the nineteenth century; and then the factors leading to its decline in the period after the demise of indenture. I shall do so with reference mainly to Muharram in British Guiana and Trinidad, which were the two most important Indian labour-importing colonies.

I will anticipate here the main thrust of my exposition, although to some extent it is already evident in the presentation of the problem itself. The coeval emergence and decline of Muharram and the indentured labour system is an important feature of the problem as I have set it out. My contention is that Muharram's unique features and its wide popularity as the premier religious and community festival bore an important relation to the labour regime in which the emigrants found themselves. It follows from another proposition that community-identity formation among Indian emigrants and their descendents was closely shaped by their relationship, both involuntary and expressive, with the labour regime. The colonial state played a constitutive role in the labour regime on the plantations and the changes it underwent over time, and it directly influenced the recruitment, organization, and discipline of labourers. So to the extent that Muharram symbolically expressed the community aspirations of emigrants, it was necessarily refracted through their own experience of the labour regime and the colonial state; the relationship was no doubt not a simple unilinear one, it was multiplex.

Yet what has marked several contemporary as well as later anthropological accounts of diasporic community formation in general and

“the Hindus would have been more anxious to put on their own show rather than simply join ranks with the Muslim compatriots and rivals”. This is specious reasoning, to peddle the plural-society thesis against the historical evidence; Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance and Pluralism*, pp. 218–223.

19. J.D. Kelly, “From Holi to Diwali in Fiji: An Essay on Ritual and History”, *Man* (ns), 23 (1988), pp. 40–55.

Muharram or similar cultural performances is a deliberate erasure of the relationships they bore to the labour regime and the colonial state. They focus instead on pre-existing cultural attributes and the ethnic identity markers of the community. But ethnicity or community identity are subject to historical processes and remain part of the problem to be explained rather than being its explanation.<sup>20</sup>

The origins of the celebration of Muharram in the Caribbean are quite certainly to be found in the early years of indenture. In Trinidad, the earliest celebration of Muharram can be traced to 1855 in the Philippine estate in the Naparima area. In British Guiana its origin is not well recorded. Yet by the late 1850s contemporary newspapers had taken notice of the celebration of this “tumultuous festival” of the coolies in Trinidad and British Guiana. They noted with wonder the parade through the main cities of the island of “coolie castles” or “locomotive temples”, as the *tabut* replica tombs of the martyred grandsons of the Prophet were termed. They remarked on the high spirits of the “noisy crowds of coolies exhibiting much earnest gesticulation, making a great noise, dancing and capering” and their vigorous fencing with sticks. There was a certain amused tolerance of this “false and foolish worship” on the part of the heathen crowd.<sup>21</sup> These early reports noted that the local black population participated in these parades in great numbers as onlookers in search of novelty, while they scarcely mentioned the religious denominations of the Indian immigrants. It remained for a long time a festival of coolie religion, which was broadly termed “idolatry”.

What was noticed consistently was the public display of Muharram – which by the late 1850s was called “Hosay” or “Hosein” in Trinidad in imitation of the lamenting chant of “hai hassan hai hosein” and simply “Tadja” in British Guiana. (In Jamaica it was known as Hussay.) The ignorance of the religious importance of the festival was widespread and it was left to missionaries especially interested in proselytizing among Indian immigrants in the 1870s to decode it for the edification of public and officials alike. However, missionaries both in Guiana and Trinidad, disliking its idolatrous aspects, were deeply hostile to the celebration of Muharram, an unruly congregation in their eyes; and, just as much, they deplored the attractions it held for the black, lower-class Christian population. From the 1870s, Christian missionary opposition to the

20. But see C. Jayawardena, “Religious Belief and Social Change: Aspects of the Development of Hinduism in British Guiana”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 8 (1966), pp. 211–240, for changes in religious belief coinciding with changing status of Indian labourers after indenture. See too Kelly, “From Holi to Diwali in Fiji”, for a nuanced account of the transformation of rituals and festivals and the relationship of this transformation to changes in plantation regimes in Fiji.

21. *The Trinidad Sentinel*, 6 August 1857; *Port of Spain Gazette* [hereafter, *POSG*], 13 July 1859.

festival's public aspect was an important ingredient in the making of the colonial state and in shaping reactions to Muharram among planters.<sup>22</sup>

In the nineteenth century Hosay, Tadjá, or Hussay was celebrated in the first ten days of the first Islamic month of Muharram, or twelve new moons after the last celebration, since the Islamic calendar is lunar, with alternating months of thirty and twenty-nine days. Processions of *tazias* from various estates were sent off to be immersed in a river, or the sea, in a grand procession accompanied by women singing ritual laments or Mersiahs. For most of the nineteenth century, the grand spectacle of the Muharram procession found its culmination in the coastal cities of the colonies: Georgetown, Port of Spain, and San Fernando. It was there that the elite of the colonies witnessed the parade of *tazias* from their balconies, and as the years passed they saw with horror the growing size of the processions and the “diabolical activities accompanying it”, namely stick fighting and the incessant chants of “hai hassan hai hosein”. By the 1880s, for instance, San Fernando, a quaint planter town with a population of barely 5,000, was invaded annually by the Hosay procession, consisting of anything from 15,000 to 20,000 Indian labourers.

It is clear from accounts of the nineteenth century, from which the above descriptions of the festival have been gathered, that Muharram was by far the most important community festival for labourers. The question that must be answered is what cultural meanings did they seek to represent in this festival and how was the community identity of these Indian immigrant labourers expressed through it? By answering it, we can understand the reasons for the marginalization of Muharram in the late-indenture and post-indenture periods. The primary identity of Indian immigrants in the plantation setting remained that of “coolie”, nominally meaning an unskilled wage labourer, but in fact a pejorative racial appellation applied to all Indians.

What is interesting is that the racial stigma and low-status ascribed to Indian labourers were rooted in laws and ordinances based on the voluntary and free labour contract. Yet nothing marked out the Indian immigrant as the member of the lowest social group in Trinidad more than the spatial and temporal immobilization which was imposed by the five-year indenture. It was the very attribute of immobilized labour implicit in the term “coolie” which was extended to the whole community of Indian immigrants and their descendants. Understandably, community aspirations of Indians were asserted in opposition to the “coolie” identity and to the physical and cultural immobilization imposed by the indentured labour regime.

It was the processional aspect of Muharram which was perhaps the most

22. Singh, *Bloodstained Tombs*. The details of Muharram celebrations in the following sections are from Mohapatra, “The Hosay Massacre”.

important reason for its popularity among immigrants. The articulation of community identity in a processional form was especially important in the context of the spatial immobility of the community engendered by the indentured labour system. Through the Hosay procession, the community manipulated already existing spaces and places but gave them a new, albeit temporary, meaning. The Hosay procession performed at least three functions which were crucial to the expression of community identity: an integrative, a transgressive, and a reiterative one.

The route of the procession connected normally segregated plantation communities and physically linked the enclosed space of the plantations with the city or town centre. So it was that the community was structured by the procession and at the same time imprinted itself on the existing space. In its transgressive aspect, the procession narrated a counter discourse to the normal spatial immobility imposed on the immigrants. By occupying the highway and marching through the centres of towns, Indian immigrants laid claim to the public spaces which were ordinarily denied to them. Public spaces, highways, and towns were especially fraught places for Indians. By occupying such spaces with the procession, even though only temporarily, Indian labourers symbolically transcended both their “coolie” status and the spatio-temporal restrictions under which they lived. The Muharram procession quite literally mobilized an immobile community.

However, the counter discourse of space was not formulated in opposition to established authority even though the procession did not draw its legitimacy from any explicit legal right to occupy space. Rather, the transgressive and liminal aspects were normalized through the reiterative function of the procession. By establishing over the years fixed routes, destinations, and an order among estates for their participation in the procession, the community claimed for itself an implicit right to occupy and march through public spaces. By integrating, mobilizing, and investing customary rights to public spaces, the Muharram festival and its procession powerfully articulated community aspirations and religious belief. The sacred and the profane were not separated; neither in the practices nor in the minds of the participants.

A final feature of the processional form of Muharram needs to be noted here. While I have drawn attention to the relation between the expressive forms of community and the specific condition of labouring existence (integration, mobilization, public representation) it must not be inferred from this that the procession was in any sense a direct expression of the labouring identity of the indentured immigrant workers. In fact in Muharram and the procession if any thing was visually absent it was precisely any direct reference to the labouring condition on the plantations. I would even suggest that the Muharram procession allowed Indian immigrants to deny their overwhelming existence as coolie labour by representing themselves as a fully fledged moral and cultural community.

Muharram drew its sharpest meaning for the participants in the evident contrast with their daily condition of labour – and that was the meaning so powerfully conveyed to the wider public through the procession.

However, despite this caveat, because of the way in which the processional form of Muharram became an expression of community assertion, it emerged as a potentially powerful vehicle for representing collective grievances. In my analysis of the 1884 Hosay massacre I have demonstrated the special conditions in which community assertion and class grievances were uniquely combined in the Muharram procession in Trinidad.<sup>23</sup> The Muharram of 1884 in Trinidad came in the wake of an unprecedented wave of strikes that swept through the colony between 1882 and 1884 as planters tried to counter the crisis of falling sugar prices by an intensification of work. To planters and the colonial state the threat of insurrection appeared imminent as they panicked in the face of the massed display of the Muharram procession. By brutally enforcing a ban on the procession the colonial state sought to separate the class and community assertions expressed in Muharram.

Having elaborated the cultural meanings whose expression was sought in Muharram, I shall now explain its eventual gradual decline as the premier community festival of Indians in the diaspora. Muharram grew in size and importance with the spread of the plantation economy, and although its decline coincided with the plantation's severe crisis of the late nineteenth century, the most important factor in its decline remained the unabashed hostility of the colonial state to its procession. The first attempts at controlling the procession had been initiated in British Guiana in 1869 when a special ordinance required specially chosen headmen to ask permission for it and to be responsible for its good order. That was followed in Trinidad by the promulgation of ordinances banning the procession from towns and public roads and confining it to the estates. Finally, the large-scale shooting down of workers in 1884 to enforce the ordinance broke the back of this community festival. A Trinidad ordinance of 1885 made the celebration of the festival a Muslim affair, with punishment for non-Muslim celebration.

I have argued that community representation in public spaces was the most powerful source of the popularity of the festival. Denied this vital expressive quality, and confined to individual estates, the festival was starved of the chance of public support. Allied to this was the sustained hostility of missionaries and orthodox Muslims to the pagan display in the festival. But the factor that worked incessantly in the background was the gradual move away from the plantation and the process of villagization that was initiated as a response to the crisis of the late nineteenth century. As the locus of community formation shifted away from the plantation

23. *Ibid.*

and the estates, Muharram could no longer remain the preferred mode of community assertion. There was a definite shift from public display of community to more inward and exclusive forms of religious observance, such as flag worship for Hindus, and Eid among Muslims. The process of retreat from public display was soon overtaken by a new form of engagement in the emerging public sphere in the colonies.

#### VOICE OF THE SETTLER INDIAN: "A SON OF INDIA" IN TRINIDAD

In the aftermath of the crisis of 1884, a new mode of public activity emerged quite suddenly in the Caribbean, in the form of writing letters to the leading journals of the colonies. The first letter-writer to emerge from the ranks of the Indians wrote in the *San Fernando Gazette*, a daily paper widely circulated in Trinidad, in 1888 under the *nom de plume* "A Son of India". This was the leading Creole (black) newspaper of the colony and it championed the cause of educated Creoles who were demanding a greater share in the affairs of the colony. It was in this newspaper that "A Son of India" began writing a series of letters and essays drawing attention to the demands of the Indian community.

Three factors seem to have given rise to this public form of representation. First, the emergence of a substantial number of Indians, former indentured labourers who had diversified from the plantations and formed the nucleus of the Indian settler community. Second, from within this small but rapidly growing section there emerged a minuscule group of Indians educated in English largely through the proselytizing effort of the Canadian Presbyterian mission in Trinidad, which opened its first school for Indian children in 1871.<sup>24</sup> Third, the institution of the Royal Franchise Commission enquiring into the question of electoral enfranchisement in the colony in 1888 gave a fillip to public agitation for elected and representative government largely led by a progressive Creole middle class.<sup>25</sup>

It is significant that the first letter from "A Son of India", written in December 1888, was an address to the new Governor William Robinson, articulating the demands of the growing settler Indian community.<sup>26</sup> The themes set out in the letter seemed to have persisted throughout the career of this pioneer Indian letter writer. First, there was the demand that efforts should be made by the government to retain the Indian labourers in the colony rather than repatriate them. Second, the most important incentive for them so stay would be if the government should intervene actively to

24. By 1888 there were 52 schools in several estates and villages, with 3,000 children of settler Indians. Ten educated Indians were employed as interpreters and shop clerks in 1880.

25. On the Royal Franchise Commission see *POSG*, 12 September 1888.

26. Letter from "A Son of India", *San Fernando Gazette* [hereafter, *SFG*], 8 December 1888.



provide education for Indians, taking into account their special needs, considering that the bulk of them were outside the purview of any education effort at all. In it there was the demand to provide for compulsory education to all Indian children. Third, the language of imperial citizenship is deployed by the author to seek government welfare and to stake a permanent claim on the colony. (“It is not too much to ask from the Government these privileges, for we consider ourselves part and parcel of the great British Empire and not aliens”.) Finally there is a conscious effort to refute the ascription of low status to the Indian community on the ground of their low-caste origins, illiteracy, and position as bound labourers on estates. This was done in several subsequent letters by drawing on the glorious past of the Indians and noting the fact that not all immigrants were of low caste; a fair proportion were of high and middling castes.<sup>27</sup>

In demanding special attention by the government for the education of the Indian community, “A Son of India” irked several pro-planter lobbies as well as the Creole middle class. The former thought it useless expenditure on a class whose main occupation should be and would remain labouring on the estates as “coolies”. The *Port of Spain Gazette*, the colony’s pro-planter newspaper, reacted to this novel form of public activity and demand for education by asserting that most Indians would “enter the school as a coolie and emerge from it the same coolie”.<sup>28</sup> The emergent Creole middle class continued to deprecate immigration and the immigrants as causes of demoralization to the colony and a potent factor depressing the labour market.<sup>29</sup> They saw in the demand for education emanating from the settled Indian community another instance of state pampering and special privilege. Even John Morton, the Canadian Presbyterian missionary who played a leading role in setting up schools for Indians, was irritated by the demand for non-denominational education for Indians demanded by “A Son of India”.<sup>30</sup> The author, who was himself a Christian and had been trained in a missionary school, was acutely aware of the reluctance of Indians to enter denominational schools for fear of losing their religion. He sought to highlight the need for advancement of the settler population through education rather than conversion as a means of “amalgamating to Western civilization”.<sup>31</sup> Through his letters “A Son of India” also commented on the major legislation affecting the Indian community, such as the Immigration Ordinances and ordinances on Indian marriages.<sup>32</sup>

27. See letters from “A Son of India”, *SFG*, 4 December 1889 and 25 February 1892.

28. See letter from “A Son of a Gun”, *POSG*, 16 December 1892.

29. See, for example, the letter from “Fairplay”, *SFG*, 16 December 1892.

30. Letters from John Morton, *SFG*, 18 February 1892 and 24 March 1892.

31. Letter from “A Son of India”, *SFG*, 21 January 1892.

32. Letter from “A Son of India”, *SFG*, 4 July 1896.

How was Indian community identity expressed in this new form of public activity by the letter-writers? The community that was imagined had as its nucleus those who had made Trinidad their home – this included the rapidly growing peasant proprietors involved in cultivating Crown land and others who had diversified into activities outside the plantation, such as trading, huckstering, and market gardening. The spearhead of this group was the small number of educated Indians, most of whom were Christians. There was no attempt to exclude indentured immigrants, but it was evident that they were seen as the source of recruits into this rapidly expanding nucleus. Thus, the letter writers did not oppose immigration as the Creole middle class did, but were all for its encouragement. All the same, it was imagined that they could become full members of the community only by graduating out of the estates. The emphasis on education as a means of acquiring citizenship and permanence was indicative of the character of this putative community.

While the problems of indentured labourers were sometimes raised in “A Son of India’s” letters, there was no attempt at criticizing the indenture system directly, nor did he express any substantial complaint about wages, working conditions, or terms of contract. The ascription of the low status of “coolie” identity to the whole Indian community was contested, but in some sense too there was an implicit acceptance of their condition. By 1889, the term “coolie” was thought to be too degrading to be used to designate Indians in general. The Presbyterian mission led the way in this, under pressure from its exclusively Indian members to change the name of the mission from “Coolie mission” to “East Indian mission”. As a new community began to be imagined around the settlers, there were attempts to begin rudimentary organization of the Indian community around 1897 with the establishment of the East Indian Congress in Trinidad.

While the settler community of Indians eventually came to chart a different path of involvement with the colonial public sphere in the late nineteenth century, what do we see happen to the indentured Indian workers, and what was their response to the crisis of the plantation economy? In the next two sections I shall look at two different styles of representation of community in the work of songwriter Lalbehari Sharma and of “coolie” publicist Bechu in British Guiana.

#### THE POETRY OF INDENTURE: LALBEHARI’S *DAMRA PHAG BAHAR*

It is widely assumed that Indian immigrants were illiterate and that their education happened after their entry into a plantation. This image fits neatly into the idea of the plantation and indenture as a school for the development of immigrants. However, there is enough evidence contrary to this popular image to suggest that literacy was not entirely absent

among the immigrants – a fair number were literate in the native languages of India, such as Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani. In the first place, familiarity with and reading of important religious texts was fairly common among Indians. It is possible that the upper-caste Brahmins and Muslim clerics and ritual specialists were perhaps over-represented among this group. Despite that, it is also true that the Indian diaspora has produced far too few public texts for posterity in the forms of memoirs, autobiographies, and other literary texts.<sup>33</sup>

It is in this context of the near absence of any public record authored by the immigrants that the rare work of Lalbehari Sharma has some significance. Lalbehari was an indentured labourer in Guiana whose work was published in 1916, just as indenture was coming to its end.<sup>34</sup> His work entitled *Damra Phag Bahar (Holi Songs of Demerara)* was written in Nagri script and in a mixture of the Bhojpuri and Awadhi languages, and was a collection of original songs meant for recitation during Holi festivals. The language of the text and the construction of the poems followed the sixteenth-century textual forms of the epic *Ramcharit Manas [The Story of Rama]* by Tulsidas, with a mixture of couplets [*doha*], quatrains [*choupai*], free verse [*kaḥita*], and rhymes [*chautal, ulara*] well-known in the main recruiting ground of the immigrant population in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar.

It is evident from the mixture of forms utilized in the text that the author expected familiarity from his readers and audience not just with the themes but also with the sequences and rhythm of the text. The text is eminently suitable for recitation, quite apart from being highly readable too. The explicitly intended audience is a collective of singers and listeners or, as he wrote in his preface, *gayanpriya rasik* [connoisseurs of songs]. Yet it is evident from the structure of the collection, and from the references to the landscape sprinkled with the names of settlements and estates where Indians resided, that the expected audience and readership is the Indian community of British Guiana.

While ostensibly meant to entertain, the text was also confessional, in that the poems were intended to cleanse the inner world (*antah karan pavitra*) and provide an outlet for the anxieties and worries of the readers. The collection of songs is in three parts. The first introduces the author to the audience and relates the story of his present condition and daily life in British Guiana; the second part is a collection of songs touching upon the Holi being played out by the epic characters Rama, Sita, Krishna, and

33. But see the recent publication of an autobiography of Munshi Rahman Khan, an ex-indentured labourer from Suriname: Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, Ellen Bal, and Alok Deo Singh, *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Labourer: Munshi Rahman Khan (1874–1972)* (Delhi, 2005).

34. Lalbehari Sharma, *Damra Phag Bahar* (Georgetown, 1916).

Radha; the third part consists of philosophical and esoteric prayers (*bhajans*).

The introductory section of the collection is of obvious interest in this analysis, although I shall refer as well to the overall theme of anxiety, lament, and alienation (*viraha*) that pervades the text. The story of the author is briefly described. He was born in the village of Mairatand in Chapra, a district in the Bhojpur region of Bihar, and is currently resident on the Goldenfleece estate in Essequibo on British Guiana. The first description of the country is of a “bad country” (*Kudesh*) bereft of *dharma* and conscience (*vivek*) where the author has enlisted himself as a coolie after abandoning the path of Vedas and so having to submit to doing lowly work (*kukarma*). From this it appears that the author had been a Brahmin who now feels disgraced by becoming a coolie.

A brief account of daily life on the plantation follows, beginning with the work bell at 5 in the morning at the barracks and the call to work of the sardar (headman or driver). In the field following the sardar arrives the sahib (overseer/manager) dressed in hat and with whip and workbook in hand ready to deduct pay for short work. This supervision distresses the author as he contemplates his work in a country surrounded by police stations, and laments seeing the poor deceived into emigrating to such a country as this. This distressing theme is interrupted by a description of a Saturday pay day, when men and women gaily dressed receive their pay from the sardar. Then in the final section the author ponders how to carry on thus for five years of worrying about when he will become eligible for his ticket to leave the plantation.

The passage of time on the plantation and the constant anxiety leads some to become renouncers (*sadhus* and *fakirs*), while others wander in distress and anxiety wondering how to carry on. The section ends with the advice to the indentured workers to remain patient and stay on the plantation and try to live as they would in the village, “back home”, under the benign guidance of the sardars. In this account we have a story of the overturning of the moral order and descent into moral anomie produced by plantation work, and the anxious desire to escape the discomfiture of coolie status. It is significant that the answer provided in this section of the text is to reinstate the order of the village, but under the sardar.

However, it is in the next two sections that the author displays his poetic prowess by weaving in themes of gay abandon represented in the play of Holi by Ram, Sita, Krishna, and Radha, with an acute sense of the longing felt by the women abandoned by their husbands. The theme of erotic play and *viraha* permeates these songs, but is often interrupted by philosophical exhortations to abandon the illusions of worldly goods. The world is after all a false dream – the world of money, power, family, and fame is mere illusion and not one’s own.

While clearly the author here draws on perennial themes in the Bhakti

and Nirgun poetry of Kabir and Dadu about the illusory nature of the world, what is interesting is the juxtaposition with the description of the plantation world in Guiana. To the audience and singers of this collection, the resonance with their daily life under plantation rules must have been strong. By describing the world of money, power, and fame as illusory, the author seeks to strike a parallel with the world of the plantation and its life, which is itself in a sense morally degraded. Similar parallels could be found in the intense desire of the abandoned woman for her distant husband or that of Radha for Krishna, and the desire for release from the plantation. Yet the response to both these predicaments should be patient inward contemplation about the true nature of the world to establish stability and harmony through outward compliance with the village-like order on the plantation and by chanting the name of god (“Without the name of Ram the world is like a beautiful woman without her nose”) in the company of the good (*satsang*).

What the author is advocating is a sense of detachment from the surrounding world that will enable the community to pass through the period of moral degradation forced on the immigrants by their insertion into the plantation regime. Thus there is an existential critique of the indenture system through which a potentially moral community can be established, but this critique by itself is not enough. What is required is an inward transformation and detachment from the outer world. Significant in this text is first of all a complete lack of engagement with the labour regime (except in a moral sense) and with the public sphere of the colony: there is no attempt to imagine a better world, nor bettering oneself or the community through any such engagement. I suggest that the identity which this text tries to represent is one of disengaged community; and the style in which this imagined community is represented is one of inward contemplation. Yet this may not be enough of a characterization, since what destabilizes the attempted normalization is the intense, almost erotic desire to escape the conditions of existence imposed by the real world of the plantation.

We must now explore the final aspect of the representation of identity, developed under the indenture system. I shall address the question through the account of a remarkable and in some ways atypical attempt by one individual to engage with the plantation order and the colonial public sphere.

#### BECHU: A “COOLIE” CRITIQUE OF INDENTURE

On a presumably balmy Sunday morning on 1 November 1896, readers of Guiana’s largest circulating daily newspaper, the *Daily Chronicle*, were surprised by the appearance in its columns of a letter signed by Bechu, Indentured Immigrant of Enmore estate Ex Sheila 1894. If the fact that a

letter written in flawless English by an indentured coolie was itself an unprecedented phenomenon, what must have astonished the newspaper's readers even further was the letter's content and style.

Will you kindly permit me through the medium of your widely circulated paper to say a few words with regard to the official investigation which has been made concerning the rate of wages paid to the indentured labourers in Plantation Non Pareil? Being a coolie myself, and an indentured one in the bargain I have up to now refrained from saying anything in the matter [...].

With this modest disclaimer began the career of Bechu the indentured coolie, who wrote letters to the editors of several of the colony's newspapers for the next four and a half years, championing the cause of the immigrant labourers by brilliantly dissecting and exposing the façade of legality and claims of public good made by planters and the colonial State. So powerful was his indictment of the indenture system that the West India Royal Commission which visited Guiana in 1897 invited him to present evidence and a written submission – a rare honour for a mere coolie. His exposés stung the planter class so much that he was twice prosecuted for libel (1898 and 1899). The jury being equally divided each time, neither convicted him.

He found admirers galore among leading Creole politicians, and sworn and bitter enemies among planters. His mordant wit, erudition, catchy style, and precise and irrefutable arguments brought a whiff of fresh air to the stuffy, flowery prose normal to any public discourse conducted in the colonial newspapers. He made defence of the public good an admirable cause and his success emboldened a few Indian immigrants to follow in his footsteps. But as suddenly as he had arrived, he one day bade farewell, to return to India in 1901. In his brief but incandescent career, Bechu developed a sharp and completely new perspective on Indian immigration, a view from below, nevertheless, in dialogue with the perspective from above.<sup>35</sup>

I shall now turn to the elaboration of this perspective of Bechu, with reference to some of his letters to the *Daily Chronicle* and the debates he entered into in the public domain, as well as to his submission to the Royal Commission.

It will be useful to place the career of Bechu in the context of the last decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Sugar prices had steadily declined up to that time, reaching their lowest level between 1896 and 1903. In British

35. Bechu's letter and submission to the West India Royal Commission, along with a number of annotations, was published in C. Seecharan, *Bechu: 'Bound Coolie' Radical in British Guiana 1894–1901* (Kingston, 1999).

36. On the condition of Indian indentured workers and the sugar industry in British Guiana in the last two decades of the nineteenth century see A.H. Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves* (New Haven, CT, 1972); Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People*.

Guiana, the acreage under sugar cane reached a peak of 80,000 acres in 1890 and fell by a quarter to 67,000 acres by 1900. Sugar exports fell from 130,000 tonnes in 1888 to 84,000 tonnes in 1900, their lowest level in 30 years. Buffeted by lower prices and competition from bounty-fed continental beet sugar, Guianese plantations were in deep crisis, as estate after estate was merged with others or abandoned. Of the 113 estates in 1880, only 52 remained in 1901.

Cost-cutting and wage reductions were the preferred weapons of the planters to counter plummeting profits. Intensification of work and reduced wages became endemic to the plantations and unemployment ran rampant. Yet surprisingly the average annual import to the plantations of indentured labour (4,000) remained almost the same between the 1880s and 1890s. The incessant gluttony for bound labour, even when free labour was in abundance, was the characteristic response of planters to such a crisis. It is against this background that naked exploitation of immigrants was visible beneath the carapace of an indentured system based on supposedly voluntary contract.<sup>37</sup> Bechu's critique was not only probing and pointed; it made its mark because of the crisis.

The immediate context for Bechu's letter of November 1896 was the riot by indentured labourers at Non Pareil in October.<sup>38</sup> Indentured workers protesting against low wages and a heavier workload at the plantation came out on strike en masse and went to the Protector's Office to complain. They were allowed this right under the immigration ordinances, but on their return they were confronted by police who rounded up the leaders on the pretext of conspiring to create disturbances. The workers refused to give up the men, and police fired seventy-two rounds at them, killing four and severely injuring forty others. Bechu's letter was the first public protest against this brutal repression.

Bechu began by questioning the inquiry into wages, which was carried out *post facto* and found wages to be "ample". Bechu produced his own contract which mentioned explicitly that every indentured labourer was entitled to a wage of 1 shilling for seven hours of field work, and if working on a task his wage could not be lower than this guaranteed minimum. Any work or task other than that specified was to be paid at overtime rates, by the hour. Bechu argued that the protest of punt loaders at Non Pareil was justified, since they received wages below the guaranteed minimum and worked nearly fourteen hours without being paid overtime. He followed this up by arguing that while indentured workers were frequently convicted of breach of contract for trivial matters, no planter was ever

37. Adamson has calculated that on average there were thirteen strikes per annum on British Guiana's estates between 1884 and 1903: Adamson, *Sugar without Slaves*, pp. 106–109.

38. Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People*, p. 158. See also the account of the Non Pareil riot in *DC*, 18–21 October 1896.

prosecuted for the rampant violation of this contract to pay a minimum wage. While acknowledging the prevailing depression in trade he wondered, "Why should the indentured worker bear the sole burden for that?" He ended by quoting the Bible: "Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundantly, but unto him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."<sup>39</sup>

The letter was received in stunned silence and in the next six days only one letter appeared heartily supporting Bechu's argument.<sup>40</sup> But within a few days a planter named Langton published a lengthy essay in the *Argosy* entitled "A History of East Indian Immigration" which argued against Bechu.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the stereotyped planter's view of coolie immigration as a benefit to the indentured labourers and that indentured immigration was crucial for the survival of the colony's economy, Langton addressed the key issue of guaranteed minimum wages. He argued that the coolies had it explained to them on their arrival in the colony that their earnings were dependent on the successful completion of their tasks, and that average effort would earn them the guaranteed minimum wage. It was the laziness of the coolies which prevented them from completing their tasks and so earning the minimum wage. Bechu replied point by point to Langton and other planter correspondents, arguing that the government must ensure that the coolies received the minimum wage of 1 shilling a day.<sup>42</sup>

In a subsequent letter Bechu exposed the planters' attempt to use the fact of the Non Pareil riot to demand protection for West Indian sugar. Planters had started a campaign in the London press, arguing that the condition of the sugar industry under competition from bounty-fed sugar from the continent was so bad that they were compelled to reduce wages and that social unrest like the Non Pareil riots would recur ever more frequently if protection were not granted to their sugar through counter-vailing duties. Bechu pointed out that under no circumstances could the planters reduce the wages of indentured coolies, and if the planters claimed that then they were in blatant violation of the contracts. He also pointed to the hypocrisy of planters at the same time demanding more indentured labourers when they could not pay them minimum wages.<sup>43</sup> He had written in one of his letters:

We are all alive to the fact that these are hard times, but if the planters are unable to keep to the terms of their contract let them liberate those who wish to be

39. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 1 November 1896.

40. Letter from J. Wharton, *DC*, 5 November 1896.

41. Langton, *Argosy*, 21 November 1896.

42. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 9 December 1896.

43. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 7 January 1897.



liberated – set [them] free and then there will be no occasion for dissatisfaction even if the men can not earn six pence per diem.<sup>44</sup>

In taking up the question of the guaranteed minimum wage, Bechu made plain the contradictions in the indenture contract and exposed the blatant violation that went on in the name of freedom of contract. Contracts should bind both parties; not provide freedom for planters and bondage for labourers. Bechu's exposé irritated the planters – several of them doubted his existence, thought he was hankering for notoriety, and wondered how, if he was so educated, he could escape the scrutiny of the recruiting agencies in India? One planter even suggested that he should be packed off back there!<sup>45</sup> Bechu's reply to this calumny was humorous and full of wit.<sup>46</sup> To the question "Who is Bechu?", he replied in one of his letters

A queer looking specimen of – it is believed – the human race (but evidently the rarest description) because when I was exhibited in the Calcutta Zoo most people, naturalists included, were ready to swear for true that I was the Missing Link, but since there was no Darwin to declare me to be the *Simian Pure*, I unfortunately lost my chance of making a fortune.

When planters wondered if he were a real live indentured emigrant he replied "It is a positive fact that I am a real live animal and what is more surprising I am allowed to go about *unchained*." To the question about his education Bechu replied

If it is possible to educate monkeys why should not the "connecting link" between man and him be taught as well. If the Planter is death on education he should lose no time to shut up schools and do away with the Education Commission else in course of time he will find "too much educated *coolyman*" in this colony.

As Bechu's letters caused a mounting furore, the issue of coolie immigration and countervailing duties came up for discussion when the West India Royal Commission came calling in the colony in February 1897. Bechu's notoriety earned him an invitation to attend the Commission.

It was in his evidence before the West India Royal Commission that Bechu displayed his full analytical and rhetorical powers. Quoting from previous inquiry commissions, from the famous novelist Trollope, and other literary luminaries, Bechu argued that the indenture system was a veiled system of slavery, or a "despotism tempered by sugar".<sup>47</sup> Citing his

44. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 22 December 1896.

45. See letters from Langton, *DC*, 12 December 1896; Planter, *DC*, 9 January 1897.

46. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 12 January 1897.

47. See Bechu's written evidence in *Report of the West India Royal Commission*, vol. 2, Appendix C, p. 131 (London, 1897), and his evidence in vol. 3, p. 1131. See also *DC*, 2 February 1897.

own experience as an indentured worker, Bechu pointed out that the concept of equality embodied in the contract was never applied in practice, nor were the specific provisions of the contract adhered to by the planters or enforced by the colonial State. Hours of work were long and the task system allowed the planters to pay wages regularly lower than the stipulated minimum.

He pointed out that even though safeguards appeared in the contracts, the structure of plantation authority easily negated them. Workers found it difficult to complain against the drivers and overseers for fear of being prosecuted on trumped-up charges under breach of contract provisions. He pointed out that the prosecution by planters of large numbers of immigrants was a device to lower the earnings of immigrants as much as it was a way of terrorizing them into submission. He also noted the unrestrained practice of concubinage and sexual exploitation of Indian women by overseers and managers, which was a potent source of conflict. Indeed, a direct result of it was the prevalence of wife murders among Indians.

The most important critique of indenture that Bechu advanced was twofold: first it was explicitly inequitable, especially on the issue of the payment of minimum wages; second, indentured immigration was a weapon in the hand of planters used to keep the labour market permanently depressed. The irony of it was that government revenue through custom duties, which subsidized immigration expenditure, was largely derived from the consumption of goods produced by the labourers. He opposed further immigration because it was in fact directly contrary to the interests of all Indians, whether indentured or free, who were resident in the colony. Instead he suggested that time-expired Indian immigrants be offered an incentive to settle down by providing them with land instead of a return passage to India.

Although elements of Bechu's critique of indenture (such as lowering of wages, subsidy to the planters) had been articulated earlier by the rising Creole middle class, opposition to indentured immigration often meant opposition to the Indian community's very presence. Bechu's position was distinct, in that he argued from the experience of an indentured coolie, showing that it was in fact not in the interest of Indians to support further immigration, and that the interests of both Creole and Indian labourers, free and indentured immigrants alike, were harmed by the indentured immigration system.

From the evidence before the Commission the question was answered that had so bothered the planters. Who was Bechu, and how had he arrived in the colony? He submitted that he was a Bengali orphan raised by a Presbyterian missionary lady in Calcutta and that he had lived and worked with other missionaries as a copyist and domestic servant. Though never educated in a school, as a child he had been taught by the missionary lady.

His interest in literature he had cultivated himself. As to his arrival in the colony, he said he had been in much reduced circumstances when a recruiter offered him a job in the colonies. His preference had been for Trinidad, and to be a clerk, but he was forced to come to Guiana because the recruiter refused to let him leave without paying for the time he had spent waiting for the ship. He was assigned to plantation Enmore and worked in the fields for five months, when due to repeated fever he was allowed to work in the deputy manager's house. His employers were obviously kind and he had had no cause to complain against them as he was always paid his due of 1 shilling a day.

Bechu's evidence before the commission made him an instant hero among the Indian community and among the reform-minded Creoles. Planters were understandably upset and attempted to malign Bechu before the commission and even more so afterwards.<sup>48</sup> Planters stooped to insult not just Bechu but all Indians as born liars. One planter quoted Macaulay's infamous statement about the effeminacy and low cunning of Bengalis: "What the horns are to the buffalo, what the paws are to tiger, what the sting is to the bee [...] deceit is to the Bengali."<sup>49</sup> To this Bechu characteristically replied by quoting Shakespeare's "Cursed be he who moves my bones" and Longfellow's "Lives of great men".<sup>50</sup> Planters were often at a loss to match his barbs, while several defenders of Bechu arose from the ranks of Indians and Creoles.<sup>51</sup> Throughout the next three years Bechu kept up his attack on the plantation system both at the level of policy and by exposing specific instances of oppression practised by the planters.<sup>52</sup> He exposed individual acts of cruelty, such as the case of a sick indentured worker forced out of hospital and sent to work, after which he died.<sup>53</sup> Bechu's letter to the newspaper landed him in a libel suit which dragged on for a whole year. He was acquitted only when the jury twice failed to reach a verdict.

He also periodically brought up the matter of the stoppage of wages, the despatching of armed police to stop immigrants from complaining, and the plight of Indian hawkers who were rounded up by police and prevented from hawking their wares in towns.<sup>54</sup> He vigorously pursued the question of minimum wages for labourers by several times challenging the planters to produce evidence of such payments. It is interesting to note that never

48. See J. Thomson's evidence in *Report of the West India Royal Commission*, vol. 3.

49. Letter from "Civis Mundi", *DC*, 12 February 1897.

50. Letters from Bechu, *DC*, 14 February 1897.

51. See letters from East Indian Descendent and Ramswammy, *DC*, 9 February 1897, 15 February 1897, and 22 February 1897.

52. See letters from Bechu, *DC*, 28 July 1898 and 27 August 1898, on stopping of wages and repatriation problems.

53. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 18 September 1898.

54. See for example letters from Bechu, *DC*, 5 March 1899, 22 August 1899, and 14 April 1900.

once were the planters able to produce such evidence, falling back on spouting inanities like the moral development of immigrants under indenture, the quasi-paternal care of the planters, and the economic benefit to Indians of emigration.<sup>55</sup>

Politically, one interesting debate that Bechu initiated was about reindenture of time-expired immigrants. Bechu had suggested very early on that instead of the expense of the continued immigration of ever more indentured labour, time-expired labourers could be persuaded to re-indenture themselves with the suitable incentive of a 50-dollar bonus. He kept on repeating this alternative suggestion for some time.<sup>56</sup> His idea might appear to go against the grain of the general critique of indenture as it would only lengthen its duration, but the suggestion was not at all contradictory because it was pitched at a different level. Central to Bechu's critique was the claim that continuous importation of labour under indenture served to depress wages to starvation level and led to unemployment among both Creole and Indian free labourers. The only long-term solution was the complete abolition of indentured immigration, although in the short term the solution to unemployment among free labourers might be found in reindenture if planters could be persuaded to forsake costly importation and instead pay statutory minimum wages.

Bechu's advocacy of reindenture must be understood in the context of his insistence that the indenture contract legally guaranteed the 1 shilling a day wage, for this was at a time when pay offered to free labour had fallen well below the minimum guaranteed wage of indentured workers. It is interesting that none of his planter opponents ever took up the suggestion of reindenture as an alternative, because they realized that it would be the thin end of a wedge which would dislodge the whole indenture system. Bechu had always argued that the main prop and life blood of so obviously oppressive a system was the annual importation. Towards the end of his stay in Guiana Bechu's letters became increasingly strident in their denunciation of the immigration system.

In his last letter to the newspaper before he left for India, Bechu pleaded that immigration be stopped for three years as an experiment,<sup>57</sup> but what he thought of the indenture system on the plantations is evident from one of his letters citing several of his compatriots who preferred to be in jail,

55. See letters from Planter, Norman Bascom, Creole planter, *et al.*, *DC*, 5 February 1899 and 8 February 1899, and Bechu's replies in 7 February 1899, 8 February 1899 and 11 February 1899. As evidence of the last point one planter pointed out that all the letters sent from India to the colony were without paid postage while the letters from the colony were all with paid post. Bechu replied to this by saying that that was a reflection on the postage service of the colony since anyone who wanted his letter to definitely reach its destination made sure that it was "bearing", since that at least ensured its receipt.

56. Letters from Bechu, *DC*, 2 February 1897, 18 April 1899, and 12 January 1900.

57. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 5 February 1901.

where they were assured a meal a day, rather than to work on the plantation. He wrote “In India, Sir, we look down with contempt on a man who has been to the Jail, but here the best of us dare not do so for we can hardly tell when we shall have the misfortune to be sent ourselves.”<sup>58</sup>

Bechu left for India some time in April 1901; he had been released from indenture in 1898 when a prosperous Indian shopkeeper, impressed by his advocacy, paid his indenture fees to the colony. Why did he stay on for three more years and why did he decide to go back? We have no idea. And about his career back in India, we do not know. He vanished as suddenly as he had arrived on the public scene with his letter of 1 November 1896. But for a period of five years Bechu represented the indentured immigrants and sought to give them a public presence and voice.

The essence of the indentured labour regime was the denial of the public existence of the workers, for in a sense the coolies were the planter’s children, which was the effect of their immobilization, peculiar legal subordination, and ethnic separation from the larger body of labourers. By making the wider public aware of their presence, Bechu gave theoretical articulation to the practical criticisms indentured workers made in their various complaints against the whole indenture system. His mode of representing the indentured workers provided the basis for solidarity among the different sectors of workers throughout the colony. In other words, he made possible a labouring identity for the Indians. In many ways his critique was far superior to the nationalist critique of indenture that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century, which explicitly denigrated the labouring identity of the indentured immigrants and focused on their moral degradation.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to argue against the emergence of a singular identity in the Indian labour diaspora in the West Indies during the period of indenture. Neither cultural persistence nor creolization theories of identity formation can capture the multiple possibilities that could and did coexist in the period under study. I have demonstrated that by examining four different styles of representation of identity which emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the plantation societies were in the throes of a deep crisis.

What was common to all of these was that they shared the same relational field that I have identified as the labour regime. Each of these forms of identity bore a relation to the labour regime without in any way being derived from or determined by it. Representational practices ranging from the collective to the individual mediated those relationships, and

58. Letter from Bechu, *DC*, 9 January 1901.

certain styles of representation of identity emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century when plantation societies were in the throes of a deep crisis. My aim in this essay has been to try to transcend the dualities of culture and economy, class and community, which have plagued the study of diasporic formations, especially those formed through long-distance labour migration.