

## BOOK REVIEWS

LOOK LAI, WALTON. *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar. Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918*. Introd. by Sidney W. Mintz. [Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture.] The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore [etc.] 1993. xxviii, 370 pp. Ill. Maps. \$48.00.

Between 1838 and 1918, about 430,000 Indians, mostly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in north India, were recruited, primarily for work on the plantations of Guyana (about 239,000), Trinidad (about 144,000), and Jamaica (about 36,000), while between 1853 and 1884, about 18,000 Chinese from the southern maritime provinces of China were recruited, mainly for Guyana (about 14,000). Most recruits were male, with the female proportion being greater for the Indian stream (from the 1860s, about 29 per cent) than for the Chinese stream (about 15 per cent). Whereas about 26 per cent of Indians eventually returned home, nearly all the Chinese settled in the West Indies. Recruitment was primarily to work on sugar cane plantations, though towards the end of the nineteenth century an increasing number were being employed on cocoa plantations in Trinidad, rice plantations in Guyana, and banana plantations in Jamaica.

Indentured labour can be considered a system of unfree labour because of the length of time in which workers were bound to particular employers (initially in the British West Indies for up to three years, but from the early 1860s for five years), and because contract violations could be punished by criminal sanction (fine or imprisonment). In addition, many contemporary observers and later historians have considered it an unfree arrangement because some (many?) recruits were either coerced into going, or were not fully aware of the coercive nature of the system. In the case of Indian recruits, abuses in the recruitment process were reduced over time as the British government set in place an extensive set of administrative procedures to police the system, but in the case of Chinese recruits, who were generally procured by unsupervised recruiters, abuses in recruitment were much more in evidence.

Moreover, many scholars have argued that recruits were overworked and were given inadequate food rations, accommodation, clothing and medical care, and this, combined with crowded and insanitary living arrangements on ships and on plantations, caused, or contributed to, the excess mortality they suffered. The perceived abuses in the recruitment process coupled with the harsh conditions of life on plantations have indicated to many scholars a fundamental divergence of interests of employers and recruits, which has led these scholars to focus on the extent to which recruits accommodated to, or resisted, this coercive plantation regime.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a succinct overview of these migration streams, see P.C. Emmer, "Immigration into the Caribbean: The Introduction of Chinese and East Indian Indentured Laborers between 1839 and 1917", in P.C. Emmer and M. Mörner (eds), *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia, and Europe* (New York and Oxford, 1992), pp. 245–276.

Look Lai's *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, which is based on his Ph.D. thesis at New York University, provides a broad overview on Chinese and Indian indentured labour migration to the British West Indies, using a wide range of primary and secondary sources. In his preface, Look Lai states that his objective is an "integrated social history [. . .] of Asian migration to the British Caribbean" (p. xviii). One focus is how the indenture system varied from colony to colony; another focus is the response of the migrants to the indenture system and to their new social environment.

The structure of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 discusses the labour shortage which followed the emancipation of the slaves in the West Indies, and how Asian indentured labour migration was organized to help meet the labour needs of sugar cane planters. In contrast to these "pull" factors, Chapter 2 discusses the "push" factors at work within China and India which made millions of impoverished workers want to emigrate to various parts of the world. Although Look Lai acknowledges that in India the "phenomenon of the landless laborer or the socially oppressed peasant was no invention of British colonialism" (p. 24), he basically follows the line of scholars working in the Indian nationalist tradition, that these push factors were "the result of Western imperialist disruptions of traditional society"; in China, however, the "'push' factors tended in the main to be largely internally self-generated" (p. 38).

Chapter 3 takes up the organization of the indenture labour system, identifying inter-colonial and inter-ethnic variations, and showing how the system evolved over time. The discussion includes the evolution of both first indenture and re-indenture contracts. In the case of first indenture contracts, arrangements varied widely before the system became formalized in the early 1860s. Similarly, the re-indenture system changed over time, and there were important inter-colonial variations in its use. In Guyana, for example, five-year re-indentures were legal and common before the 1870s, whereas in Trinidad, re-indentures were limited to twelve months and were much less common. Employers were required by government decree to pay a bounty to recruits entering re-indenture contracts, but when the bounty was substantially raised in the 1870s, planters found it uneconomic to pay the increased bounty and the re-indenture system died a natural death.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the actual working experiences of these migrants as plantation workers, their problems of adjustment, and the ways they coped with this new and unfamiliar environment. Both groups had to adjust to a new work regime and relating to the Creole population. Specific problems for the Chinese included not understanding English, and for the Indians overcoming regional, linguistic, religious, and caste differences among various sub-groups of the Indian community. The main focus of these chapters, however, is how these groups attempted to preserve their autonomy within the plantation system, and how "they constantly struggled to make their humanity manifest in the milieu that was not designed with their own best interests in mind" (p. 153).

Their struggle included disputing work loads and wages, leading to the occasional strike and acts of violence against management and plantation property; larceny; and desertion. Look Lai's treatment of resistance, however, is largely descriptive, listing the various forms that resistance might take, rather than conveying "a clear picture of the circumstances under which worker resistance

would be mounted and, conversely, employer pressure sustained".<sup>2</sup> A further response was their attempt to carve out some measure of independence for themselves by cultivating small plots of land on their own behalf, using their cash bounty on re-indenture to buy a cow, and acquiring some interest in land cultivation off the estate.

Chapter 6 examines the opposition of humanitarian groups and the black creole community to Asian immigration, but concludes that it was left to forces outside the West Indies – in particular, Indian nationalist opinion – to bring to an end the system of indentured labour.

In Chapters 7 and 8, attention is turned to the post-indenture experiences of these migrant groups, focusing on their occupational mobility and the extent to which they preserved their social autonomy. Whereas Indians largely remained agriculturalists and showed little interest in assimilation, the Chinese increasingly went into trade, and intermarriage and conversion to Christianity resulted in a greater degree of assimilation.

Finally, the Conclusion offers very brief comparative perspectives with other unfree labour systems and with other Asian labour migration streams.

*Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar* is a most welcome addition to the growing literature on Asian migration to the West Indies. It is well structured and well written, and, in general, achieves its objective to be an integrated social history of these migrant streams. There are, however, some limitations to the work in terms of topics covered and sources used. This reviewer would have welcomed a much more detailed discussion of the caste origins of the Indian recruits and the extent to which caste distinctions persisted in the new environment. In addition, demographic issues relating to mortality (on the voyage and in the new West Indian disease environment) and fertility are hardly mentioned. Look Lai has also not followed the lead of Raymond Smith and Brij Lal in quantifying material in the shipping lists, which are extant for Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica. These lists give individual-level information on the caste and regional origins of recruits, and allow for the reconstruction of their family structure.<sup>3</sup>

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CASTILLO, SANTIAGO (Dirección). *Solidaridad desde Abajo: Trabajadores y Socorros Mutuos en la España Contemporánea*. Centro de Estudios Históricos de la UGT, Madrid 1994. viii, 567 pp. Ptas 2100.

In Spain, as elsewhere, the history of the working class was for all too long reduced to that of the organizations which aspired and claimed to represent it.

<sup>2</sup> D. Munro, "Patterns of Resistance and Accommodation", in B.V. Lal, D. Munro and E.D. Beechert (eds), *Plantation Workers: Resistance and Accommodation* (Honolulu, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> On these topics, see R. Smith, "Some Characteristics of Indian Immigrants to British Guiana", *Population Studies*, 13 (1959), pp. 34–39; B.V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983); R. Shlomowitz and L. Brennan, "Epidemiology and Indian Labor Migration at Home and Abroad", *Journal of World History*, 5 (1994), pp. 47–67 (and references cited therein).