



Working Papers

[www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers](http://www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers)

*MMG Working Paper 19-01* • ISSN 2192-2357

RUMA CHOPRA

Rethinking the Historiography of Coolie  
Integration in British Caribbean Cities

Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

*Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften*



Ruma Chopra  
*Rethinking the Historiography of Coolie Integration in British Caribbean Cities*

---

MMG Working Paper 19-01

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
*Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity*  
Göttingen

© 2019 by the author

ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

Working Papers are the work of staff members as well as visitors to the Institute's events. The analyses and opinions presented in the papers do not reflect those of the Institute but are those of the author alone.

Download: [www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers](http://www.mmg.mpg.de/workingpapers)

MPI zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften  
MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen  
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, 37073 Göttingen, Germany  
Tel.: +49 (551) 4956 - 0  
Fax: +49 (551) 4956 - 170

[www.mmg.mpg.de](http://www.mmg.mpg.de)

[info@mmg.mpg.de](mailto:info@mmg.mpg.de)

## Abstract

This essay situates Caribbean indentured labor migrations within the larger history of slavery. In doing so, it broadens the field of slavery studies, complicates how we define labor systems in the British Empire, and challenges the ethnically-rooted assumptions of global labor history. It compels a fundamental rethinking of the historical transition from enslaved to free labor in the Caribbean, the first associated with African slaves and the second with Asian servants.

**Keywords:** Caribbean, slavery, indentured servitude, labor migrations, abolition

## Author

RUMA CHOPRA has published essays and books related to allegiances during the era of Atlantic slavery and Atlantic revolutions. Her most recent book, *Almost Home: Maroons Between Slavery and Freedom in Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), demonstrates how the unlikely survival of a community of escaped slaves reveals the contradictions of slavery and the complexities of the British antislavery era. Dr. Chopra is professor of history at San Jose State University.



Experts in Atlantic slavery offer critical insights to scholars who study the Asian diaspora in the post-slavery British Caribbean. To best understand the dynamics of these new societies, Indian and Chinese indentured servants in the 1830s must be located within the contradictions of slavery in the Caribbean, a system that created minute hierarchies among slaves (based on skill, complexion, age, and gender) and surprisingly, accommodated free blacks and a free colored population, settled primarily in urban areas. In their efforts to embrace a new age of “free labor,” nineteenth century British abolitionists suppressed the prior existence of free black families who had also lived within a regime of slavery. Indentured migrants, they argued, indicated the beginnings of a new enlightened morality, a movement away from slave labor to free labor, away from feudalism to capitalism, and away from Africans to Asians. The abolitionists flattened the workings of Caribbean slavery to magnify their own accomplishments. In prevailing conceptions of global history, and especially in descriptions of the transition to free labor, historians too, have followed the path of the abolitionists.

Caribbean governments did indeed experiment with contract Africa and Asian labor. Yet the huge significance attributed to 1834 as a turning point between slave and free – the year that marked the legal abolition of British slavery – is not evident in the archives. Well before 1834, before the arrival of large-scale indentured labor, there was already the *coexistence* of slave and free labor among blacks, the contradictory pulls of feudalist and capitalist behavior, and the co-residence of free Chinese immigrants with both free and enslaved blacks. Indentured laborers fit into an existing labor dynamic comprising a range of unfreedoms and freedoms; they did not create it anew.

Three assumptions that dominate the field of nineteenth century Caribbean history require revision. The first assumes that the primary theme of this period is the story of a fundamental labor transformation, i.e., the transition from slavery to indenture after the abolition of slavery in 1835. That free labor and slave labor existed side by side before the importation of indentured laborers, is mentioned but not studied, because the numbers of free blacks were small. Yet this misses the logic of a system that had long relied on the dynamic between slavery and freedom. Although the indentured did not challenge this dynamic, the focus on the importation of indentured laborers as something novel continues, perhaps because the ethnicity of the workers changed from African to Asian.<sup>1</sup> The reigning works on indentured labor have paid insufficient attention to the interactions between free black communities and slaves, well before the arrival of the indentured,

---

1 Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: Export of Indian Labor Overseas, 1830-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism: 1834-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

and especially within Caribbean cities. These earlier interactions fundamentally change how we view the arrival of Asian laborers within the post-slavery regime. The Asians, of course, were a distinct ethnic group but they entered a society which was not simply divided between unfree blacks and free whites. Although free blacks during slavery did not have the same kind of mobility that was possible for indentured workers after the abolition of slavery, they too formed an intermediary class between white planters and African-descended slaves.

The current literature does not sufficiently deal with the fact that about two hundred *free* Chinese laborers entered Trinidad as early as 1806, before the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese followed the models of success set by the plantation class: They settled in the urban world within two miles of the capital, and at least one Chinese man became a slaveowner by 1815. Further, all free people were not listed together in the same census records: The free Chinese were listed separately from free blacks. This single revealing example challenges assumptions in prevailing studies of indentured labor, i.e., that the more-free servants *replaced* the less free slaves in a model that would eventually lead to full freedom for all workers. Yet the Chinese entered Trinidad as a free people, and they entered a society where there were other free people. And the prevailing model neglects something crucial: Both groups of free people aspired to become slaveowners.

In a new historiographical trend, the focus has moved beyond the Caribbean, towards globalizing the indentured labor flow, and showing how indenture affected both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds.<sup>3</sup> This work engages with important issues of identity as Indian laborers crossed the oceans and back. Newer work also deals with informal labor flows and especially pays attention to the migrants' return to their "homelands." But these studies, too, are caught in a curious dynamic: They intensively study the "return" of the laborers to their "origins," but not the migration of the laborers to other parts in the Caribbean, e.g., the migration from Trinidad to Venezuela of time-expired servants. There is a stubborn binary dynamic set up between "home" and "abroad" that is not supported by the evidence.

A third focus in the current literature considers how immigrants drew upon strands from their homelands, such as religion, to create usable pasts. An interesting feature of

---

2 B. W. Higman, "The Chinese in Trinidad, 1806-1838," *Caribbean Studies*, Vol 12, no. 3 (Oct., 1972), 21-44.

3 Prabhu Prasad Mohapatra, "Longing and Belonging: The Dilemma of Return among Indian Immigrants in the West Indies, 1850-1950," in *liAS Yearbook* (New Delhi: Center for Contemporary Studies, 1995), 134-155.

this work has explored new laborers' adaptations to the Caribbean in terms of resistance, especially the use of religion by Indians to resist assimilating into the black Creole culture, i.e., they reinvented Hinduism or Islam in a new context. The work of scholars associated with the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen has been particularly important.<sup>4</sup> Although this work offers insights, current ethnographic work cannot be projected to an earlier moment. Coolies, for example, entered the Caribbean monthly, in hundreds, and not in tens of thousands, all at once. Some migrants *entered* a fully mature plantation colony (like Jamaica) and others entered a newly colonized space (like Trinidad). Their labor experiences and their possibilities for integration were not identical.

The lack of communication between experts explains the gaps in established studies. Specialists in slavery and African-American history do not typically study indentured labor systems; their work stops with the abolition of slavery in their own local context. Likewise, experts in the Asian diaspora in the Americas begin their study of displaced Asians in the 1830s, after the abolition of slavery by the British Empire. Bridging the two historiographies breaks new ground in Caribbean history by studying groups not typically studied together or comparatively, i.e., imported Asian indentured servants, and newly freed African slaves. What is often ignored in both histories are the *indentured Africans* who also arrived in the Caribbean, primarily from Sierra Leone. Hence, like Asian servants, African servants also entered the Caribbean during the age of slavery. New work must examine more carefully the relationship *between* the two groups of indentured laborers – from Africa and Asia – as well their relationship with the just freed slave populations, and their interaction with the colonial elite.

Studying African and Coolie labor together complicates the definition of labor systems in the British Empire, and challenges the ethnically-rooted assumptions of Caribbean history. It disrupts three fundamental assumptions: (1) It questions the idea that the transition from enslaved to free labor began in the Caribbean only in the nineteenth century; (2) It questions the periodization of the British Empire as divided into two stages, the first one based on slave labor and the second one based on servant and free labor; and (3) It upends the idea of studying labor movements in terms of “ethnicities.”

---

4 Colin Clarke, “Religion and Diversity as Differentiating Factors in the Social Structure of the Caribbean,” *MMG Working Paper 13-06* (Göttingen, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, 2013).

### *Further Research*

Asian servants (Coolies) did not inaugurate the “free labor” era in the Caribbean. First, slaves and free blacks existed side by side from the first years of Caribbean slavery: Free blacks lived in urban centers and Maroons, a warrior community of ex-slaves, lived in the mountainous rural areas. The importation of indentured servants did not mark the first break towards non-slave labor but continued a long established process. In cities such as Kingston, Jamaica, and Port of Spain, Trinidad, free blacks already comprised a substantial minority. Indeed, indentured servants *added* to the free population and intersected with them in complicated ways.

Second, the relocation of non-slave laborers to British zones to meet labor needs and protect frontier settlements in the Americas did not begin with the Asian diaspora. An imperially subsidized movement of free black migrants long preceded the arrival of the indentured servants. Indeed, American loyalists – white and black subjects who preserved allegiance to the British Empire – moved to less-populated British areas in need of labor in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, over 50 years before the arrival of indentured servants. The indentured laborers’ relationship to ex-slaves would mimic the earlier relationship between free blacks and slaves during the slavery era. This pre-history critically shifts significance of indentured servants (i.e., temporarily unfree labor) in world history. It challenges existing chronologies of the movement from unfree to free, and questions the extent to which *Asian* laborers initiated the shift to free labor in the Caribbean context. What then deserves further study is how newly arriving dependents maneuvered with the already settled dependents to gain patronage, desired occupations, and social status. Because this process happened most intensively in colonial cities, they deserve to be the first point of study.

Comparative studies are necessary to avoid creating a static picture of the post-slavery Caribbean urban. Cities did not share a single way of assimilating Asian servants or keeping Asians separate from ex-slaves. Kingston and Port of Spain offer a sharp contrast: Kingston was the urban center of the richest island in the British Caribbean while Port of Spain was a city in a just-acquired frontier colony. These factors affected the kinds of social and economic opportunities available to ex-slaves and to indentured servants, and fundamentally changed the terms of Asian integration.

An alternate approach to studying the integration of Coolies is to situate them as newcomers in ex-slave societies which comprised just-freed slaves, long-freed slaves, as well as Afro-Caribbean people born free because they were children of free black or colored mothers. After the abolition of slavery, uprooted Asian servants who settled in Caribbean



cities inserted themselves into longstanding routes, established by free black and colored people, as they aspired to wealth, status, and respectability. Placing these Asian newcomers within the already-created routes of free blacks illuminates the range of mobilities and freedoms that were available to them.

