Indian indentured labour

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1. Family history sources for Indian indentured labourers in the colonial era

This research guide provides some very brief history and background on the system of indentured labour and sketches the type of records that are held at The National Archives. It also gives a clear picture on how much material relating to individuals can be found for the purpose of tracing back the roots of labourers from India. It is important to understand the nature of this type of emigration and the conditions faced by labourers, as well as the regions from where they were recruited and their religious affiliation. All of these help to piece together and construct family history.

The researcher should note that only the forenames of Indian labourers are recorded in many of the documents. Also note that The National Archives holds Colonial Office records received from the colonies and Foreign Office records relating to a variety of countries colonised by foreign rivals such as Dutch and French Guiana. These records were sent to the Secretary of State in order to make policy on various issues and for discussions in Parliament. Certain documents keep an account of the expenses incurred in the transport of labourers; others focus on improving their living conditions; and some monitor whether the whole system was profitable to empire. Therefore, family history information is likely to be scant. This particular guide does not include information on Chinese indentured labourers, although The National Archives holds the Foreign Office correspondence relating to this. The best option is to make a search of the Catalogue using the keywords 'Chinese AND Coolies'.

2. Introduction and history
The abolition of slavery created a shortage of labourers in the colonies, and sugar planters put acute pressure on the British government, as their economic fortunes went into temporary decline. To combat the depressed sugar industry market, Britain decided to emigrate a very large amount of Indian indentured labourers to the sugar producing colonies. Liberated Africans were also sent to the West Indies at the expense of the government.

The Indian 'coolies' (indentured labourers) sent into Mauritius from 1834 came to be regarded as the most important early immigrants of this type. All the labourers were from Bengal. Originally set up as a bounty system, the Mauritius arrangements initially introduced 41,056 new arrivals to the tiny colony. Due to abuses in the system, the British government in 1844 took emigration into its own hands; and from that period to the end of 1854, about 107,000 persons were sent through an agency of government officers from the East Indies (principally Calcutta) to Mauritius. As early as 1837, the system of indentured labour had been questioned in Parliament and denounced by Thomas Fowell Buxton, Lord Brougham, and others. The government of India ordered a ban on further 'coolie' shipments in 1838. Emigration was suspended and a committee appointed in Calcutta to inquire about abuses in the system. The report of this committee in 1840 showed that oppressive conditions were rampant. Also Colonial Office documents on Mauritius court proceedings against planters or masters gave ample evidence of abuses.

Sir J.P. Grant, a member of the committee, recommended that emigration should be transformed into a regulated system and one secured by legislation. Restricting emigration to certain ports, the new system would appoint a Protector of Emigrants whose task was to oversee that regulations were put in practice for the voyage concerning space, food, water, ventilation, medicine, etc. On 1 March and 26 July 1842, there were further discussions in Parliament. Prime Minister Robert Peel directed the government of India in 1842 to re-open emigration to Mauritius under proper safeguards. Accordingly, an Order in Council was issued in 1842 providing for the appointment of responsible emigration agents in India and of a Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius.

In 1844, emigration to Jamaica, British Guiana, and Trinidad was allowed. Emigration was legalised to Grenada in 1856 and St. Lucia in 1858. In Natal the system of indentured labour began in 1860.

The last indentured labourers went to the West Indies in 1916. Repatriation continued for many years after the time limit. The last ship carrying returning emigrants left the West Indies for India in 1954.

3. Indentured emigration to foreign colonies

The trade in kidnapped 'coolies' became a significant problem in the decades after the emancipation of the slaves, but eventually Britain and France worked out treaty arrangements to help curb this practice. As early as 1826, France had delivered an arrêté or decree that allowed for Indian immigration to flow to its colony of Réunion. By 1830, over 3,000 Indians had gone there. Sparked by the republican revolution and the uprisings of enslaved labourers in the French West Indies in 1848, France emancipated slaves throughout its colonial empire. Labour shortages emerged that encouraged unscrupulous elements to carry out the kidnapping and decoying of British subjects. As a means of curtailing this activity, a form of preventive legislation entitled Act XXIV was passed in India during 1852. This contributed to the pressures leading to negotiations with the government of Napoleon III in France, which culminated in the Convention of 1860. The Act XLVI of 1860 set up mechanisms for India to provide labourers to France's colonies, including Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana. The provisions largely harmonized the rules in place with those practised in Britain's colonial possessions.

In 1863 emigration was sanctioned to the Danish colony of St. Croix, followed by the Dutch colony of Surinam in 1872 and the British crown colony of Fiji in 1885. However, India would halt the flow of indentured labourers to France's colonies by the 1880s because of abuses in the system.

4. System of transporting indentured labourers

For unskilled labourers, colonial documents frequently use the 'coolie' term, which has disrespectful connotations. The word 'coolie' is a term of disputed origins, which some believe was derived from an aboriginal tribe in the Gujarat region of India and others maintain came from a Tamil word 'kuli'
meaning 'payment for occasional menial work' (Oxford English Dictionary). Some of the indentured labourers were nomadic peasants, members of the poorer labouring classes, or those aboriginal people from the sloping plains of the Ganges called 'Hill coolies'. The latter had been known by the name of 'dhangurs', which some speculate comes from the word for hill (dhang) and others regard as deriving from a payment given in unhusked rice (dhan). Before 1840, a substantial portion of indentured labourers came from so-called 'Hill coolie' backgrounds. Later many others showed up for indentured labour contracts, including Hindus, Brahmins, high castes, agriculturists, artisans, Mussulmans, low castes, and Christians. It has frequently been suggested that the significant number of Brahmins and high-caste persons in the mix testifies to the famine and economic distress convulsing India for many parts of the nineteenth century.

Some religious leaders were among the indentured workforce. The need was there, and some of the able labourers set themselves up as priests. Among Hindus, there were Upper castes consisting of Brahmins, Rajput, and Chatri; a Medium Social class composed of Gowalah (Cowherds), Koris (weavers), Kurmi (agriculturists), Kahar (servants and cultivators), Mali (gardeners), Teli (oil pressers), Naipali, Kaesth, Kalwar, Bania (merchant caste), Ghatwal, Sonar (jewellery makers), and Dhanukh; and a Lower Social class including Chamar (tanners and cultivators), Dusadh, Bhar (labourers), Hajam (barbers), Nunia, Kaibarta, Dhobi (washermen who would wash, starch, and press clothes).

The 'coolies' were in large measure young, active, able-bodied people accustomed to demanding labour, but they were often ignorant of the place they agreed to go or the length of voyage and the problems they were going to face. The 'Hill coolies' had been used to a marshy soil, low wages, and scanty food.

Due to legislative reforms, all labourers faced requirements to appear before a magistrate and to satisfy him that it was their choice to emigrate. They needed to convince him of their satisfaction with their contracts and conditions. In many locales, the contract was for five years, and it could be renewed, with certain exceptions such as in Mauritius where a free return passage was provided after ten, or in Natal, after five years residence. However, in 1851 the government of India changed the condition so that free return passages could be provided for those unable to raise sufficient revenues, whether from sickness or real destitution. Prior to embarkation, the labourers were housed at depots with guards so that they would not escape. Here they were also fed, clothed and examined by members of the Indian medical service. CO 384/107 contains letters from the Protector of Emigrants to prove that the labourers were well looked after, and it gives the names of the Indian labourers who were at Trinidad depot in 1874 to board the ships of the Golden Fleece, British Empire, Essex, Brechin Castle, and St. James. It gives their name, date of admittance in the depot, and body weights on arrival and departure, including their gain or loss of pounds during their days in depot.

Emigration was conducted from the ports of Calcutta, Madras, and, subsequently, Bombay. The Governor-General appointed emigration agents who were responsible for selecting the ships. He also appointed at each port a Protector of Emigrants who had the responsibility of seeing that the emigration agent effectively carried out the regulations of this service. His responsibility was to check the ship's condition before departure and confirm that the labourers were embarked voluntarily as well as having everything properly explained to them.

Initially the indentured labourers were collected through the agency of Duffadars, a term commonly applied to locally based agents. This system later changed due to exposures of corruption, and subsequently proper licensed recruitment agencies were established.

Subject to the provisions of the Passengers Act, ships had to be sea-worthy, properly manned, equipped, fitted, and ventilated. The emigration agent surveyed and approved whether the ship met these requirements, and the Protector of Emigrants granted a certificate to the Master of the ship.

Every fifty Indian labourers had to be accompanied by a sirdar or chokedar (supervisor) who was competent to interpret.

On embarkation, the labourers handed their passes to the master of the vessel. Before embarkation, gratuities of fifteen rupees were paid to the emigrants. This rate varied for different colonies.
An officer was appointed by the colonial government at each port of embarkation to act as Immigration Agent-General or Protector of Immigrants and Inspector. He superintended the arrival, made every preparation for the reception of immigrants, and explained to them the nature of their prospects in the colonies. Also this functionary sent copies of the annual reports to the officials of the Indian government. The reports were examined in the Calcutta Secretariat and questions arising out of them were referred to the colonial government.

5. Surgeons

A qualified European or native surgeon superintendent was appointed on each ship. This medical figure examined the emigrants before embarkation and was the principal person in charge of the emigrants during the voyage. He kept the nominal list of 'coolies'; surgeon's journal; admission and discharge book; casebook; register of births and deaths; return of deaths for the emigration agent; 'coolie's' tickets (their registration papers were kept by themselves but generally collected by surgeons after sailing for fear of loss); the list of sirdars (supervisors of 'coolies'), Bandharries (high-caste Brahmins who were appointed as cooks), topazes (Indian cleaners), and hospital nurses and attendants. These records may be held at the archives of former colonies.

6. Voyages

The length of the voyage to the West Indies was twenty weeks from Calcutta and Bombay and nineteen from Madras. The ships called at the Cape and St. Helena on their passage. From Calcutta to Natal it took twelve weeks, to Mauritius ten weeks; from Madras seven and ten weeks respectively. After the disembarkation under the control of the colonial officials, the labourers remained for about one week in the local depot pending allotment to the employers.

7. Births, marriages and deaths at sea

BT 334 covers the dates 1891-1972. For those trying to trace indentured labourers, they will have to deal with one considerable obstacle. If the family of an indentured labourer gave birth to a child on board a ship, the records simply list the parent as 'coolie'. But the records do list the name of the child. In order to search these records, a researcher needs to know the name of the ship and the year of birth.

8. Places of recruitment

According to CO 384/107, the North-Western provinces, Oudh, and Bihar, furnished the largest number of recruits. The ships carried men from the following places:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship sailing from</th>
<th>Ship sailing to</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>District of recruitment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta and</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Northwest provinces</td>
<td>Allahabad, Azimfhr, Mirzapore,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
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<td>Beneras, Gahazepore, Goruckpore,</td>
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<td>Meerut, Cawnpor, Barielly, Agra,</td>
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<td>Jansie, Jounpore Oude, Lucknow,</td>
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<td>Seetapore, Sultanpore, Faizabad,</td>
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<td>Calcutta and</td>
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<td>Oudh</td>
<td>Indore, Nagapore, Jubbulpore,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
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<td>Raipore, Remah, Gwalior Shahabad,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Patna, Gya, Arrah, Sarun, Tirhoot,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calcutta and</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Central India</td>
<td>Chumparan, Monghyr, Bhagulpore</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
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As men and women travelled significant distances to take ships from Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, it is very difficult to pinpoint where one might have originated. Especially during famine periods in India, a substantial proportion of the 'hill coolies' travelled from far places. After a certain period some families joined their men in the land of their indentured service.

9. Conditions on the ships

When emigration was first opened to Mauritius and the West Indies, there was a high death rate both on the long sea journey and during the process of acclimatisation in the colonies. In 1856, the neglect of proper sanitary precautions at a quarantine station in Mauritius was the cause of a frightful mortality rate among the labourers. This led to the passing of Act No. XIX of 1856, which authorised 'the Indian government to suspend emigration to any colony on the grounds that proper measures had not been taken for the protection of emigrants on arrival in the colony or during residence therein or for the provision of a return passage', according to the Report of the committee on emigration from India to the Crown colonies and protectorates (Sessional papers, House of Commons, Cmd 5192, 1910, XXVII, 1). During part of 1856 and 1857, the colonial government actually suspended emigration to Mauritius until some remedial action had taken place.

The high percentage of the death rate was due to the prevalence of diarrhoea, dysentery, cholera, measles, and the adverse conditions of the voyage. The Immigration Protector kept returns of deaths, and later these were submitted to the authorities in annual reports. Measures were taken to reduce the mortality rate and several reforms were made to improve the conditions of labourers.

10. Official reports and correspondence

Under the seventeenth clause of the Passenger Act, the emigration agent in India had to keep a complete list of the passengers on board. This information was later transmitted to the West Indies. Also, a summary of the emigrants on board of each ship was forwarded to the Governor of the West Indies colonies.

A return of quarterly summaries of the accounts was sent to England and to the Commissioners of Colonial Lands and Emigration in London.

11. Petty crime and criminal records

Significant numbers of labourers were subject to severe ill treatment by their managers, with many dying following the dreadful violations inflicted upon them. Due to these unbearably bad working conditions, many lost their lives.
conditions, many 'coolies' fled, seeking to return to their native lands, and were imprisoned for desertion. It is possible their names may have been noted in the local Police Gazette. Absence from work and similar offences against the labour law were punishable with fine and imprisonment.

'Coolies' were also flogged with the dreaded 'cat o' nine tails' whip for running away from the estate. There were investigations and courts of inquiry before a stipendiary magistrate.

An example of criminal records can be found in CO 384/111, which contains details of the execution of Indian 'coolie' Khaidoo for murder, including the circumstances of the crime committed in 1876. It also contains proceedings on the following 'coolies' who were guilty of wilful indolence during working hours in March 1876: Soomaria, Budul, Dorrastoolla, Sewbode, Rughoonath, Jugranee, Hoonooman, Rootay, Goolanp (female), Bunsee, and Ramdaye.

Another example, in CO 384/113, contains the departure of 184 Indian passengers from the colony of French Guiana on the ship Jean Pierre for Rio to work on the sugar estate of Viscount de Mawc in Brazil in February 1877. It gives the name of each labourer’s country, race, and age. It also contains proceedings taken in front of a stipendiary court magistrate and newspaper cuttings of court cases against Indian labourers, which took place in British Guiana in 1876. These include:

- Case of Mungroo, was guilty of wilful indolence during working hours and absence without leave
- Case of Budal or Badul, no.311, arrived on the ship Neva in 1876 in the country of Essequebo
- Case of Somaria or Soomarria, female, aged 27 on the Caledonian estate situated in the island of Wakenam
- Case of Dorostolla no.108, who arrived on the ship Sowaker in 1873, was guilty of neglecting duty
- Case of Mouraudhan, no. 390, who arrived on the ship Neva in 1871, was guilty of wilful indolence during working hours on the plantation of Johanna Cecilia, Essequebo

A further example, CO 384/114, contains detailed proceedings, warrant commitment, conviction, and published newspaper cuttings on Indian cases heard before the stipendiary Justice of the Peace at British Guiana, Georgetown, Demerara in 1876:

- Brassington V Dorostolla
- Field V Muthoora
- Kelly V Motey
- Hunter V Raudhea
- Clarke V Rughoonathe
- Clarke V Hoonoonman
- Braud V Bunsee
- R F Rose V Juranee F
- Field V Rootay
- Porter V Goulaup. F
- Holliday V DinMohamud
- Thompson V Seegoree
- Porter V Sumbhoo
- McLean V Ramcol

12. Indentured labourers appearing in Colonial Office records

Biographical information relating on indentured labourers can be found in the original Colonial Office correspondence relating to the West Indies in record series CO 318. It contains specific sections devoted to Indian labour and migration to the West Indies for the period 1843 to 1873. These are continued in CO 323 and later in the immigration department records CO 571 for the period 1913 to 1920 (only seven pieces are held in this series). CO 323/1752/2 contains correspondence relating to the position of Indians in the colonies 1939-1940, which includes a statement showing
the names of pensioners and the amount of pension paid by the government of Jamaica, through
the Emigration Agency at Calcutta in 1940 (includes names of the pensioner and date of award of
pension). CO 319/45, CO 319/48, CO 319/50, CO 319/52-55 has letters from the Secretary
of State dealing with 'coolie' immigration from 1843 to 1872.

CO 571 contains correspondence of the General Department concerning the entry of Indian
indentured labour into the West Indies and Mauritius. For example, see CO 571/1 for the case of
immigrant Mohabir, no.303, ex Indus 1913, concerning the cancellation of his indenture due to
the false declaration of his caste. The record of a gratuity of 150 rupees granted to Babu Bhuthnath
Ghose for long service as depot clerk in 1913 is also in CO 571/1.

A report of the immigration agent general for British Guiana for the year 1913-1914 is in CO
571/3, which contains details of the removal of the indentured immigrants from the La Gloria
Estate. Also included in CO 571/3 is a copy of the register of cases before the magistrate on the
La Gloria Estate 1914-1915 concerning immigrants who were prosecuted for breach of the
immigration ordinance for malingering, desertion, and absence from work. It gives the name of
defendant; year of arrival; charge; the date and method of disposal; punishment; and remarks. A
copy of the earnings of the allotments ex Ganges November 1915 and Sutlej March 1916 is in CO
571/4. This gives the name of each labourer, their gender, and weekly earning details.

A return showing the number of East Indian Immigrants in the Lepers Home during the year 1917-
1918 in Jamaica is held in CO 571/6.

From 1873, the records of the Land Board and Emigration Department are held in CO 384. This
includes a variety of correspondence such as surgeon's reports that sometimes give details of the
births and deaths of Indians on the ships. Only first names of the Indian labourers have been noted
in these records. Also contained are policy papers on indentured labourers such as annual reports
sent to the Governor from the immigration department of the colony prepared by the immigration
agents general. It contains statistical returns and analysis of the mortality amongst the Indian
immigrants under indenture of service on the estates; and returns of mortality on board emigrant
ships which sailed from Calcutta for Demerara from 1866 to 1873. CO 384/106 has returns of
mortality on board emigrant ships which sailed from India to the colonies; returns showing the
number of immigrants to whom bounty was paid; analysis of the mortality amongst the Indian
immigrants; a numerical and analytical table of the population in the colonies; and a summary
statement of receipts and expenditure. There is no name index to these records so searching for
information on individuals is extremely difficult.

The certificates of the surgeon's superintendent for the ships Pandora, Rohilla, and Middlesex on
their voyages from Calcutta contain hospital, death and birth lists of the immigrants who were
aboard these ships. Also there are medical officer reports on immigrants, which give the number
and name of the immigrants, their sex, age, the disease they had suffered with, and the date of
their death 1875-1876. These can be found in CO 384/110.

CO 384/106 includes a certificate of the surgeon superintendent of the ship Berkshire 22
December 1874; Syria 7 January 1875; Dacca 19 January 1875 and Alisa 31 January1875. All of
these left Calcutta for St. Helena. The document contains death, birth, and hospital lists. It also
includes the mortality return of Indian immigrants on the Ailsa during the voyage from British
Guiana to the Calcutta. It gives the name of each 'coolie', father's name, sex, age, name of the
ship, year of arrival, rank of death, date of death, and remarks.

CO 384/102 has correspondence on 'coolie' immigration in Grenada and Trinidad. Within the
Grenada correspondence, there is the return of the Indian immigrants in this colony, showing their
location in the several districts, and their increase and decrease during the year 1873. Within this
document, the section on Trinidad Correspondence includes male and female Indian immigrants
who had taken ten acres of land allotment in lieu of their return passage to India. This gives first
name, registered number, extent of land, and district in Trinidad. It also includes a schedule of
seven cases of "coolie" murders between 1 October 1872 and 30 September 1873, which gives the
date of trial, names of the accused, summary of changes and acquittals, conviction, and
sentences. The section on Jamaica includes nominal return of deaths on board the ship
Lochlogom from Calcutta to Jamaicain 1874. It gives name, age, sex, disease, date, and
remarks, covering 32 passengers in total.
CO 384/109 contains medical officers' and surgeons' reports on death, birth and hospital lists of immigrants on the following ships:

- Skinda - Voyage from Calcutta to British Guiana 1876
- Botanist - Voyage from Calcutta to British Guiana on 2 December 1875 having touched at St. Helena
- Syria - Voyage from Calcutta to British Guiana January 1876
- Ailsa - Voyage from Calcutta to St. Helena 19 December 1875

Another record series on the Land and Emigration Commission is CO 386, which is mainly concerned with emigration to the West Indies and includes information on Indian indentured migration, policy papers, and a list of ships. For example, CO 386/188 contains a list of ships which sailed from India to British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Grenada, and St. Vincent for the period 1859-1870. It gives the name of the ship, where she sailed from, date of departure and arrival, number embarked, number landed, births and deaths at sea, name of surgeon and remarks. It also includes ships which sailed from China to French colonies, African colonies, St Kitts, Natal, and Tobago.

CO 386/9 records the appointments of surgeon's superintendents to "coolie" emigration ships between 1875 and 1878. This document also gives the name of surgeons and their acceptance letters to their appointments to the Government Emigration Board, Downing Street, Whitehall, London.

Apart from these major record series mentioned above the researcher should also consult the regional record series of each of the colonies below.

12.1 Mauritius

The first sets of indentured labourers were sent to Mauritius in 1834. The Mauritian sugar plantocracy expressed frustration that relatively few liberated slaves desired to work on their plantations, so they soon clamoured for new sources of workers. Significant amounts of correspondence were created at that time to analyse the pros and cons of an indentured labour system.

Initially, arriving ships used Port Louis as a point of disembarkation. The best sources to check are CO 167 (Original Correspondence 1778-1951) and CO 168 (Entry Books 1810-1872).

PRO 30/12/31/5 has an abstract of the committee of enquiry on Indian labourers in Port Lewis 1837-1838. This gives the details of the employers and conditions of the labourers on the establishments where the engagements have been observed. It also gives names of the ships taking 'coolies' from Calcutta on 11 August 1834 to Mauritius. It has a report of the proceedings in cases of assault from 1 January to 30 September 1840, which gives the date of complaint; name and quality of the party complained against; name and quality of the complaint; nature and object of complaints; names of the witness of both sides; summary of the inquest decision; remarks and observations; and names of the Indian workers (first name only).

12.2 British Guiana

On 1 January 1838, two ships sailed from Calcutta to British Guiana carrying healthy men as well as a few women and boys. Many were "Hill coolies" under contract. In the beginning, 'Hill coolies' on the passage faced high mortality rates. Hesperus and Whitby took 'coolies' to Demerara to work on the estates of John Gladstone. In 1874, the last Chinese contract labourers arrived in Demerara. In 1843, the end of the first period of five-year indentures in Guiana closed, and many of the labourers returned to India.

In 1917, the government of India abolished the indenture system. No more East Indian labourers were allowed to enter Guiana.

CO 111 contains original correspondence of British Guiana, formerly Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo, 1781-1951 and CO 112 contains entry books of British Guiana, 1797-1872. It is also
For example, CO 111/161 contains a list of Indian 'coolie' immigrants, which gives the names and ages of the labourers for 1838. CO 115/2 contains applications for labourers from the estate owners for Demerara and Essequibo in 1850 which give the name of applicant, name of estate, where situated, description of immigrants, and number applied for.

12.3 Trinidad

Indian indentured labourers were introduced to Trinidad in 1845. Documents relating to Trinidad mainly contain Governor's despatches that were sent from Trinidad to the Secretary of State of Colonies in London, in which a researcher will find annual reports from emigration agents from India and reports from immigration agents from Trinidad. It includes the names of the ships and total numbers of indentured labourers that arrived at Trinidad. It does not give the names of the passengers. It also includes matters relating to the well-being and mortality rate of the passengers on the ships, analytical and numerical tables of the population in Trinidad, occasional surgeon's journals and reports. However, biographical information may also be found in CO 295 original correspondence of Trinidad 1783-1951 with the register of correspondence of Trinidad for the period 1850-1951 in CO 372. The register of out-letters of Trinidad 1872-1926 is in CO 497 and CO 296 contains the entry books of Trinidad 1797-1872.

12.4 Jamaica

Indian emigration to Jamaica started in 1845. The last set of indentured Indian labourers arrived in Jamaica in 1916. Among those who sought repatriation to India, the last batch of 425 labourers returned to South Asia on 23 November 1929. The government of India and the India Office in London continued to take an interest in the welfare of Indians in Jamaica up until 1947.

After the indentured service, many were free Indians and were employed as agricultural labourers. Some became farmers, traders, and shopkeepers. The Law 23 of 1879 authorised a grant of 10 acres of land to each immigrant in lieu of return passage, but it was stopped in 1897.

CO 137 contains original correspondence of Jamaica, 1689-1951. The register of correspondence 1850-1951 is in CO 351. The entry books are in CO 138 for the period 1661-1872. It is also worth consulting the CO 141 Government Gazettes of Jamaica, 1794-1968.

12.5 Ceylon and Federated Malay States

Dutch colonizers grabbed coastal Ceylon from the Portuguese in 1658, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gained wealth through the export of cinnamon and pearls. With the British occupation of Ceylon in the late eighteenth century, the large island soon made the transition to new agricultural exports, as the quality of its cinnamon went into decline. Coffee exports from Ceylon to Great Britain increased sevenfold between 1845 and 1870. With disease wiping out much coffee production in 1876, many planters shifted to tea cultivation. For coffee and then tea harvesting, labourers arrived in large numbers from south India, as planters in Ceylon and Malaya supported restrictions on north Indians who were alleged to be more prone to rebellious activity. While a large amount of the labour migration has been designated as "free", the development of a kangany system of gangs of workers sometimes resulted in restrictive practices that subjected the work force to harsh exploitation. Workers lived close enough to home that many could return to their Indian villages after a season of picking tea in Ceylon.

As for Malaya, the leading scholar of immigration to that nation, K. S. Sandhu, estimates that approximately 250,000 indentured labourers came from India between 1844 and 1910. This represented a minority of Indian migration to Malaya. Sugar plantations in Penang relied significantly on indentured labour, while later the coffee and rubber plantations experimented with other models including the kangany system, which some thought represented progress over indentures. Indentures in Malaya were typically one to three years in duration, substantially shorter than the five-year indentured contracts in many other parts of the world. The largest number of Indians arrived in Malaya during the twentieth century, as automobiles and other goods led to skyrocketing demand for rubber.
As previously explained, emigration to Ceylon and Federated Malay states was restricted and conducted from Madras. Madras and Negapatnam were used as ports of embarkation. Indian emigrants to the Federated Malay States were not required to enter into agreements. However, they worked for the employers to whom they had been introduced. Those who wanted to return to India had to pay their passage. Payment of passage from India had already placed many labourers into debt bondage, and subsistence wages made it hard to raise money to return home (see CO 571/3).

CO 54 contains original correspondence for Ceylon, 1798-1949, with registers of correspondence in CO 326 before 1850, after 1849 the registers are in CO 337. Entry books, 1794-1872, are in CO 55. CO 273 contains original correspondence for the Straits Settlements between 1838 and 1946 with registers to this correspondence in CO 426 for the period 1867-1945. For registers of correspondence after 1919 see CO 786. CO 717 contains original correspondence for the Federated Malay States 1920-1951.

12.6 Fiji

Great Britain annexed Fiji in 1874, an action that sometimes has been described as a reluctant form of colonialism. The migration of Indians to Fiji commenced in 1879, though very few came until 1885. This flow came to an end in 1916. Approximately 60,000 Indians arrived in Fiji during these decades. Many Fijians rejected the drudgery and miserably low pay offered on cotton and then sugar plantations. Imported Indian labour became one of the solutions for the planters. In the 1870s, planters wanted the British government to make greater efforts to compel Fijians to carry out labour on the plantations, but Fijian resistance ultimately encouraged the European settlers to accept more workers from India in the 1880s until the end of indentures during World War I.

CO 83 contains original correspondence for Fiji 1860-1951 with a register of correspondence 1860-1951 in CO 419. It is also worth consulting the registers of out-letters, 1874-1926, in CO 515.

12.7 "Coolies" to Danish, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch colonies

In 1863 emigration was allowed to the Danish colony of St. Croix and in 1872 to the Dutch colony of Surinam.

The National Archives holds the Foreign Office records relating to the 'coolie' emigration to French colonies, Réunion and Guadeloupe, in FO 2 and FO 27, and Surinam in FO 37. Consular department general correspondence from 1906 in FO 369 has some files on 'coolies'.

Foreign Office confidential print in FO 881 includes correspondence relating to the Portuguese Macao 'coolie' trade and 'coolies' moving from India to Cuba.

FO 37/884 contains abstracts of the reports of the immigration department for the years 1895-1903 in the colony of Surinam. Table A shows the prices paid by immigrants for the planting on plots of crown land granted on lease or in free use, and it gives the name of the Indian lessee or the occupier, the area and situation of the plot and the price paid. Table B shows the prices paid by Indian immigrants for the acquisition of plots from private individuals, and it gives the name of the Indian purchaser, the area and situation of the plot and the price paid.

12.8 Natal, South Africa

In the first half of the 19th century, Natal struggled to find a model for supplying labour. Some favoured following the example of Australia in bringing in white workers and others looked to the tropical plantation colonies with their emphasis on black labour under white overlords. As Secretary for the Colonies in 1848, Gladstone proposed that British convicts might be used to clear the lush vegetation in the Natal countryside, but the scheme did not get underway. The Governor of the Cape then made a proposal in 1854 to bring Indians to the region, but the government of India held up many of these proposals for the rest of the decade by arguing that there was already tremendous demand for South Asian labour in Mauritius and in the Caribbean. On August 7, 1860, Act XXXIII on emigration to Natal passed, and it met the legal conditions stipulated in India. In the
first year over a thousand people arrived, and they worked primarily on coastal plantations with
three-year contracts. By the close of the 19th century, Indians in Natal actually outnumbered
Europeans, and at several points white settlers had demanded new conditions and restrictions on
the flow of migrants. Indian labour also played an important role in railway construction, though
the issue of imported labour became an explosive controversy in the early 20th century with the arrival
of immigrants from China. The government of India finally shut off labour flow to the Natal in 1911.

Relevant records can be found in these series:

- CO 48 Cape of Good Hope Colony (Cape Colony), Original Correspondence
- CO 179 Natal Original Correspondence 1846-1910
- CO 357 Natal Register of Correspondence 1849-1910
- CO 405 Natal Entry Books 1852-1872

12.9 St. Kitts, St. Lucia and Grenada

St. Lucia and Grenada made applications in the mid-1850s to allow for immigration, but 'the
Government of India took exception to certain provisions of the proposed Labour Law in those two
colonies, and it was not till after considerable modifications had been made that emigration was
legalised to Grenada in 1856 and St. Lucia in 1858', according to the Report of the committee on
emigration from India to the Crown colonies and protectorates (Sessional papers, House of
Commons, Cmd 5192, 1910, XXVII, 1). Between 1856 and 1860, 944 Indians came to Grenada,
while 1,215 arrived in St. Lucia in the final years of that decade. A few thousand more came over
the next two decades. In St. Kitts, almost all of the Indian migrants arrived there between 1861
and 1865, as labour emigration had been legalized in 1860. The annual reports of the Colonial Land
and Emigration Commission indicate that 337 East Indians came to St. Kitts during the first half of
the 1860s. Immigration to these three islands in the British Caribbean was tiny when compared to
the sizable flows to British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica.

Relevant records can be found in these series:

- CO 239 St. Christopher (St. Kitts), Nevis and Anguilla: original correspondence 1702-1872
- CO 321 Windward Islands original correspondence 1874-1951
- CO 101 Grenada, original correspondence 1747-1873

12.10 Kenya and Uganda

In the 1880s, Britain revived the Elizabethan pattern of chartered companies as a mode of
colonisation, most famously by Rhodes in southern Africa but also by other investors behind the
British East Africa Company, which was chartered in 1888. This latter firm largely failed to make
profits, and eventually the British government turned to the taxpayer to finance ambitious rail
construction projects in the region. Between 1895 and 1902, several thousand Indian indentured
labourers helped build the Uganda Railway, a 587-mile track that climbed over mountain slopes as
high as 7000 feet. This enterprise cost many lives, as an estimated seven percent of the
indentured workers perished during their contract, according to historian Hugh Tinker. Man-
eating lions also attacked the rail construction brigades on several occasions, killing around one hundred
workers.

Rail construction projects also brought Indian 'coolies' to Kenya. In 1903, a railway construction
camp around Nairobi had been burned down in hopes of averting the spread of bubonic plague. But
rail expansion proceeded in the years ahead. The documentary record includes the transition of
Kenya from a British protectorate (1890) to a crown colony (1920) to full independence (1963).

Relevant records can be found in these series:

- FO 107 Foreign Office: Political and Other Departments: General Correspondence before
  1906, Zanzibar and East Africa
- CO 533 Colonial Office: Kenya Original Correspondence 1905-1951
- CO 536 Colonial Office: Uganda Original Correspondence 1905-1951
13. Sources not held at The National Archives

The National Archives does not hold the passenger lists of the Indian indentured labour migration; land deeds; contracts or agreements made between labourers and emigration agents; labourers' tickets; immigration lists from the colonies; or details of wages given by the plantation owners.

We do not hold the logs of the steam ships which carried labourers; registers of sugar estate plantations and residence depot details upon the completion of a five-year contract before departure to India; or local census information.

14. Sources to look for in the archives of former colonies

The following sources are not held at The National Archives but they may be held in the record-keeping institutions of post-colonial governments:

- Reports of births of children to any immigrant which employers were required to report within one month to the agent general.
- Reports to the Medical Officer of the deaths of immigrants
- Additional forms completed by immigrants if they were re-indentured in the colonies
- Returns of deaths of Indian immigrants occurring in the colony's hospitals or prisons
- Returns of information on convictions or legal infractions may also be available

Returns of information on convictions or legal infractions may also be available.

15. Conclusion

The earliest labourers who left India were frequently peasants or illiterate people in search of a better life. Many hoped to get away from Indian famines that ravaged the country in the 19th century. Others left in groups of family members. Under economic stress, people on the move did not record a great deal of family history information in India. It is possible that oral history may have been passed on from generation to generation. Though The National Archives does not hold complete records on indentured labourers, research in the Colonial Office records can help one imagine the experiences they went through in the journey of indentured labourership. Those who stayed in their new countries became citizens of the colonies or the emerging post-colonial nations. As many examples can attest, their descendents have often attained prosperity and assumed positions commanding general respect in their new societies.

16. Further reading

*Report of the committee on emigration from India to the Crown colonies and protectorates* (Sessional papers, House of Commons, Cmd 5192, 1910, XXVII, 1)

*Report to the government of India on the conditions of Indian immigrants in four British colonies and Surinam Part II* (Sessional papers, House of Commons, Cmd 7745, 1914-16, XLVII, 677)


*Colonialism and migration: indentured labour before and after slavery*, ed P C Emmer (Lancaster, 1986)
Kenneth Lowell Oliver Gillion, *Fiji’s Indian migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne, 1962)


*The worlds of unfree labour: from indentured servitude to slavery*, ed Colin Palmer (Aldershot, 1998)

Panchanan Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour 1834-1900* (Delhi, 1970)


John Dawson Tyson, *Report on the condition of Indians in Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad* (India, 1939)

**The following publications may also contain useful information:**

*Asiatic Journal of Calcutta*

*The British Emancipator*

*The Times*

Guide reference: *Overseas Records Information 21*

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Downloaded from: http://www.national-archives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/indian-indentured-labour.htm