The Indentured contract and its Impact on Labor Relationship and Community Reconstruction in British Guiana

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the indenture contract[1] as a legal instrument that inspired the reconstruction of social institutions and community within a specific labor relationship in British Guiana. The signing of the indenture ruptured age old traditions that were fragmentarily transplanted to a hostile social space for reconstruction. That social space characterized by a labor repressive system was the sugar plantations of post-emancipated British Guiana. This paper analyzes the reconstruction of social institutions and community not only as inducements to divide and control the labor market, but as modes of relations existing in relations of production. It begins with an introduction to the post-emancipated labor market realities of British Guiana that birthed the indentured movement from Asia to the Caribbean. It continues with a critical exploration of how the indenture contract impacted the reconstruction of social institutions and community.

Introduction

British Guiana Post-emancipation Labor Market

In 1834 slavery ended in the British Empire; several colonies, including British Guiana introduced an apprenticeship period (1844 -1838) to orient the Blacks to their freedom.[2] Concurrently, that period provided planters with the space to adjust to the loss of their human tool and new labor relations (Adamson 1972). After the apprenticeship period ended, many Blacks despite their "repulsion" to working on sugar estates were compelled to sell their labor to the primary labor market, sugar plantations (Bisnauth 2000). As free labor on plantations, Blacks tried to engage in collective bargaining for better wages and working conditions with planters. Strategic mobilization via a division of labor to formed working gangs specializing in different aspects of plantation work, accompanied collective bargaining; therefore planters bargained with gangs of laborers. In 1841–42 unsuccessful bargaining between planters and Blacks resulted in riots. Consequently, the movement of labor away from the plantations to other emerging labor markets increased (Adamson, 1972). As well, other outcomes were the eviction of many Blacks from their plantation residences, destruction of their farms, and sale of small portions of land off plantations. The aforementioned to realize labor market stability and retention (Smith 1956; Candler 1964).

The Indenture Contract

As with any labor relationship, the two constituents, planters and Blacks had divergent views of the British Guiana post-emancipation labor market. For Blacks, it was a low wage and inconsistent labor market; whereas for planters, it was an unfree, uncontrollable labor market that

interfered with sugar production and capital accumulation (Bisnauth 2000; Jagan 1997). As a result, planters whose political powers extended beyond British Guiana appealed to the home government for help in securing a docile, cheap, un-free labor force. In Britain, planters' political and economic power factored into that negotiation; hence a signed indenture was introduced and institutionalized. The indenture responded to the labor ravenous planters' covets to control laborers on plantations (Hollett 1999; William 1964).[3] That is, the indenture contract sustained the flow of labor and legitimized many restrictive labor practices in British Guiana.[4] Planters found the indenture contract a useful legal instrument to structure labor market participation, and the fulfillment of their production and profit accumulation needs. Firstly, the indenture contract as a labor retention warranty was regulated by colonial statutes and binding upon both parties.[5] It required laborers to sign a legal document, i.e., an indenture that covenanted away their freedom for a specific time period (in that instance five years) and for a stipulated wage and other amenities. Moreover, as a recruitment instrument, it shifted the financing of migration from the planters to the laborers.

Secondly, the indentured contract as a legal document codified labor relationship. It underwrote collective bargaining procedures, the enforcement of labor laws, back to work legislations, subsistence requirements and wages. In comparison to the wages of un-indentured laborers, mostly Blacks, wages stipulated by the indenture contract were low. In fact, for similar tasks indentured laborers were paid much less than other laborers. The indenture contract as an instrument to control the movement of laborers away from, and off plantations, stipulated that laborers needed a special pass. Thus, by the 1860s the demand and compensation for the labor of Blacks, because they lost most of their bargaining power, declined (Rodney 1981). Correspondingly, the British Guiana labor market was dominated by contract laborers, namely indentured laborers from India. The indenture contract represented a symbolic, as well as an actual breakaway from rooted traditions. By itself, it severely impacted emerging social relationships.

The movement of indentured laborers from India to British Guiana

Beginning in British Guiana, indentured laborers from Germany, Portugal and China arrived. Before long, due to the strenuous, manual work, many of those laborers proved unsuitable. Unsuitability, coupled with the segregated labor market resulted in an exodus of those indentured laborers from plantations. Those who remained sought employment in other small industries, or joined with the existing bargaining unit of Blacks thus, adding to existing labor conflicts (Brereton 1974). Henceforth, a suitable labor force was needed; a suitable labor force was one that was cheap, accessible, replenishable, controllable and acclimatized. Therefore, Britain turned to its other colony India for a ready supply of the aforementioned labor force.

The colonial presence in India and British Guiana together with a number of socio-economic, political factors, for example, famine and the British land policies buttress immigration from India to British Guiana (Laurence 1994). That is, many Indian nationals unable to pay the British land tax migrated; others signed the indentured hoping for a better future. That future included financial gains, the acquisition of land and the possibility of permanent residency in British Guiana (Simms 1966).

Accordingly, between 1838–1917 tales of an affluent life in British Guiana combined with Indian recruiters' strategies of kidnapping and coercion, enticed and beguiled nearly half a million Indian nationals to sign indentures that contracted them on British Guiana's plantations (Seenarine 1999; Samaroo 1987). As well, unsuspecting Indians signed the indenture and boarded ships believing that they were going to "*Cha lay Cheenee,*" meaning, "stir sugar and earn easy money" (Tiwari 1997). For others that signed the indenture and boarded ships, their destination was unknown (Samaroo 1987).

The Indentured Contract and the Reconstruction of Social Institutions and Community

Indentured laborers who went to the British Guiana were recruited from different provinces in North India. The majority of indentured laborers' home states are often cited as the provinces of Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madras and Calcutta (Brennan 1998; Lal 1998; Potter 1998; Siegel 1998; Mangru 1993; Seecharan 1997; Smith 1962; Smith 1958). Those indentured laborers, whether voluntary or involuntary, almost immediately experienced the social and physical impact of signing the indenture. That is, they were housed in depots.[6] Thus, the reconstruction of social institutions and community commenced in India.

The indenture contract, as well as the peculiar nature of that social space called "holding depot" influenced social interactions among individuals and groups. Moreover, holding depots were social spaces governed by a powerful and unrelenting colonial apparatus. Thus, those spaces became sites whereby new forms of social intercourses, social institutions and group identities among, and between, indentured labourers evolved (Chatterjee 2001; Lal 1998). Specifically, new socio-cultural and political boundaries emerged. Those boundaries would, among other things, demarcate the larger and more traditional Indian community from those who were preparing to enter, and participate in the new and different social world and social realities of British Guiana. In response to the isolation of being indentured laborers, but wanting to belong, Indian nationals situated their lived and demographic realities, in the then, existing social spaces, depots and ships.

Indian men, women and children who spoke many different languages and belonged to various castes and regions were housed in holding depots. Many of them arrived at holding depots in India without immediate family members. As a result, they engaged in new social interactions that gave birth to new social institutions; beginning with inter-caste relationships that facilitated the breakdown of traditional caste and gender barriers.[7] The Hindu caste system prescribed the interaction between castes. Frequently, members of different castes adhere to its prescribed rules. That was not possible in the holding depots, hence a breakdown of caste.

Moreover, at holding depots, due to a disproportionate number of women to men (the gender ratio recorded was one woman to four men), women were forced to seek protection from unwanted male advances. Women in need of protection, regardless of class or caste considerations formed "social unions" with men, which frequently led to "depot marriages" (Tinker 1977). Thus it was, in holding depots new social unions were constructed. In addition, the three to four months voyage from India to the British Guiana, provide telling examples of both restricted and multifaceted circumstances that surface when a large number of people end up living in a disproportionately smaller space, at sea! Indeed, some practices, such as "marriages of convenience," continued as new social practices, processes and institutions appeared, namely the *jahaji* family (Bisnauth 2000: Tinker 1993).

Jahaji

The family structure that developed in depots and on ships was not just a production or economic unit; but also a protective family unit governed by the statues of the indenture contract. *Jahaji* (literally meaning ship), a kinship type of family institution is one of the first social institution constructed on voyages by indentured labourers. Men, women and children, so as to collectively overcome and survive many of the oppressive circumstances that they encountered on the voyage all became members of a *jahaji* family. Members of that family structure were referred to as *jahajis* – ship brothers, and *jahajins* – ship sisters. Indeed, intermarriage among *Jahaji* families were forbidden. (Bisnauth 2000; Jha 1974). Once in British Guiana, *Jahaji* engaged in the functions of consanguineous families.

Indentured laborers arrival in British Guiana

After the long perilous, unhygienic voyage, indentured laborers upon arrival in British Guiana were cleaned up and distributed to their contracted plantations.[8] The indenture contract, in its legal implementation, made indentured laborers temporary residents of the Caribbean; thus enabling and constraining them in the labor market and within the social hierarchy. Indentured laborers commenced their negotiation of the social hierarchy that was independent of them and expressed their agency via labels that were assigned to them.

Labels that derived from legal infrastructures and norms to confirm assumptions of the status quo were one of the first acts of resistance and reconstruction that indentured laborers engaged in. Indentured laborers, despite many differences collectively labeled themselves East Indians.[9] East Indians was a milder form of departure from the category of indentured laborers when compared to the more disparaging label of Coolie.[10] At that historically specific juncture homogeneity, despite internal caste, religion, language and region was institutionalized as a mode of separation and resistance. The following sections outlines how the indentured contract and its codification of residency on plantations provided the social and political spaces for the reconstruction of traditional social institutions, beginning with gender relations, family forms and religion. Hence, broker by planters, newly arrived indentured laborers commenced the social process of reconstructing their social institutions and community (Horowitz 1976; Lowenthal 1972).[11]

Gender relations

Indentured men, as a result of their isolation on plantations did not have social contact with other groups of women (Blacks, Chinese). Whereas, indentured women due to the shortage of Indian women and indentured men's endogamous practice frequently changed their mates. Specifically, that scarcity of women, lack of control over women's sexuality and breakdown of marriage as a social institution directly assaulted the traditional patriarchal, Brahmanical caste and gender hierarchy of Indian society.[12]

> The Brahmanical notion of Indian woman has a number of attributes. It is the notion of woman as inferior and in subordination to the man. A woman is expected to be obedient and loyal to men in general and devoted to her husband … A woman's place is within the boundary of home, a boundary line drawn by men. Women have…obligations, whereas men have…rights (Pool and Singh 1999: 9).

However, in British Guiana, when an Indian woman was in a relationship that was abusive, she had the freedom to leave that male and cohabited with another (Lal 1998; Poynting 1987; Nevadomsky 1981; Dodd 1976).[13] That scarcity of women and endogamy prevented adherence to monogamous unions and control over women's sexuality (Brennan 1998; Lal 1998; Mangru 1987; Poynting 1987; Jha 1973). Consequently, because monogamous and arranged marriages were not or could not be institutionalized, several social boundaries became fluid. For example, due to previous marriages in India and the belief that upon returning to India, marriages in the colony would not be recognized; several couples had common-law unions; (Bisnauth 2000).[14] Gradually as the ratio of men to women equalized, both men and women adjusted to their traditional roles (Parekh 1994). Thus, with the nurturing of the kinship *jahaji* family system, the consanguineous family resurfaced.

The consanguineous family

As stated before, for many new arrivals to British Guiana, family supports and networks were virtually non-existence (Bisnauth 2000; Brennan 1998). The reconstruction of family emerged within a new reality that can be described as a production unit within a patriarchal household (Jayawardena 1963). The internal dynamics of the family reflected that which existed in India. It was a patriarchal system with a clear gender division of labour that separated the public sphere from the private sphere (Brennan 1998; Seecharan 1997; Mohammed 1994; Harakasingh 1981). The indentured women "were workers as well as wives, sexual partners, mothers, and/or single women" (Pool and Singh 1999: 12; Lal 1998). Consequently, women worked on estates and performed the majority of household tasks, i.e., food cultivation, preparation, consumption, religious worship and household tasks (Seecharan, 1997). They experienced a double-day existence. The family income was composed of the pooled labour of all, including children from the age of seven onwards (Bisnauth 2000). Age and not gender, class or caste determined labour power. However, different age groups were assigned different tasks. For example, children were given lighter tasks to complete and thus, were paid less.

In addition, to the consanguineous family the extended family system was reconstructed. Commonly, several extended families lived together as a single domestic unit, thereby creating an interdependent household unit. Although all members were expected to contribute to the family, their statuses were not equal (Jayawardena 1963). The husband was the representative of the family and had legal authority over his wife and children. The family, seen by some as an economic unit that sold labour for money, was also trying to survive under harsh, agrarian conditions and a system of oppression (Nevadomsky 1981). In that environment, the family became a protective, productive, reproductive and a consumptive unit.[15]

As the consanguineous family was reconstructed and institutionalized, so was marriage as a social institution. Usually marriages were arranged by the parents of the two parties, with religion and caste being of little significance. Couples married and were expected to stay married (Bisnauth 2000; Jha 1974; Jayawardena 1963; Smith & Jayawardena 1959). As the consanguineous family became institutionalized there was an urgency to reconstruct religion. Women would resume one of their traditional roles, that of being the preserver of the culture and tradition via the Hindu religion (Seecharan 1999/2000; Lal 1998; Mangru 1993). Moreover, through religion, women would perpetuate traditional gender roles, statuses and arrangements thus, preserving the culture and traditions of India (Bates 2001; Mohammed 1994; Parekh 1994).[16]

The indentured contract and the reconstruction of religion

Indentured labourers, despite the breakdown of caste, transplanted many of their religious practices to British Guiana.[17] In fact Hinduism was successfully reconstruction mainly because caste, one of the main organizing principles of Hindus, and some might say Hinduism, was not transplanted (Vertovec 1996).[18] It is safe to say that many indentured labourers' social, political, cultural and community practices adhered to principles of caste. Further, these practices and their existence are informed by the Brahmanical caste system. In signing the indentured contract and migrating to British Guiana, indentured laborers reinvented their caste, for even before crossing the *Kala Pani*

> Men and women from the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, looking around *in* the receiving depot and seeing no one who could attest to their true origins, gave themselves new names which indicated the upward direction which they now wished to pursue. They were now *Singh (*lion*) Sher* (tiger*), Raj Kumari (*princess*), Maha Raj (*great king*) or Maha Bir (*great warrior*)* (Samaroo, 1999/2000:20).

Speculatively, changing names explain the note of optimism and hope that accompanied the tenor of horror that described the migration of indentured labour from India to British Guiana.[19] Moreover, caste penetration confirms the practical adjustment of Hinduism, in a specific social context to meet the needs of indentured labourers (Parekh 1994).

In addition to recasting themselves, indentured laborers took with them to British Guiana "copies of the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Mahabharata* on board the immigrant ships, [these] added immeasurably to the self confidence of the Hindus" (Seecharan 1997: 44). According to Seecharan (1997), these texts that contain the teachings of Hinduism provided indentured labourers with the necessary teachings and rituals to reconstruct a new community outside India. Plays depicting various Hindu legends were enacted under trees with the community in full attendance (Vertovec 1996). On plantations many religious festivals and services were commemorated or celebrated under a tree, including *Phagwah, Diwali* and *Ram Naumi*. Marriage, birth and death rituals "auspicious days for the performing of particular tasks, the naming of children, astrological information, and so on" were transplanted (Seecharan 1997: 40).

The shaded ground under a tree became the reconstructed stage for observation and celebration of indentured labourers' religious functions

> Brahman pandits" supervised the reconstruction of Hinduism in the colony of Guyana. "No mandirs (temples) were necessary: neighbors, friends, and *jahajis* (ship mates) attended the *kathas* (often called *jhandis*), officiated by the Brahman priest in the home. This facilitated religious continuity among the indentured labourers in British Guyana, before Hindu temples were constructed (Seecharan, 1997: 41).

In that social process, "collective religious activity," i.e. reconstituted fragments of the originals strengthened homogeneity resulting in ethno-religious socio-cultural boundaries being constructed (Seecharan 1997; Vertovec 1996; Mangru 1993; Glasgow 1970; Bronkhurst 1883). Expressly, religious boundaries further served to combat the threat of conversion to Christianity and cultivated collective resistance to indentured laborers' marginalized status in British Guiana (Mangru 1993; Cross 1980).[20]

Indentured laborers' collective social responses, resistance and interdependency helped to construct among themselves a *gemeinschaft* type of relationship and community (Allahar & Varadarajan 1994; Tonnies 1955).[21] Hence, isolation on plantations, as codified in the indenture and enforced by planters contributed to the transplantation, although not in their original forms, of social processes and institutions.

Planters and the Reconstruction of indentured laborers' social institutions and community

Interestingly, planters themselves, due to their political power decisively manipulated the reconstructions of indentured laborers' social institutions and community. Planters wielded power over a divided labor market and exploited that division through such legal mechanism as the indentured contract. That legal document created tension that fuelled labor discontent and protest from Blacks whose bargaining power, as stated before weakened due to the reservoir of contracted labor (Speckmann, 1965). Moreover, Blacks, being unaware of the details of the indenture contract viewed indentured laborers as a voluntary labor force that replaced them in a life of servility on the plantations (Seenarine 1999; Jayawardena 1963).

Secondly, planters wanting to prevent labour unity exploited and encouraged racial boundaries based on the color hierarchy that exists in Indian society. Indentured labourers, as new arrivals coming from India, were members of a caste society. Upon arrival in British Guiana, indentured laborers encountered Blacks and utilized the caste system of Indian society to construct Blacks and other groups as inferior. That construction of the Blacks as inferior was

further encouraged by what appears to be, the refusal of the Blacks to work on plantations. When in fact, Blacks wanted to negotiate for better wage, unlike indentured laborers whose wage were determined by the indentured (Rodney 1981).

Thirdly, planters in wanting to concretized the existing social hierarchy and labor market division cahooted with other members of the plantation society and structured social relationship that ostracized indentured laborers as a group. Cultural differences included language; clothing and religion were used to further the divide between laboring and other groups. That ostracism further strengthened features of separateness as well as self-constructed social and political boundaries between members of the British Guiana labor population. However, despite signatories of the indenture contract, indenture laborers were not without agency on plantations.

Resistance within the Confines of the Indentured Contract

One costly mistake of planters was their construction of indentured laborers as meek, therefore a suitable replacement for Blacks, who were perceived as a more volatile labor force due to their bargaining power (Dodd 1976; Ramnarine 1987; Tinker 1977). Although, legally planters were able to exert control over indentured laborers vis-à-vis the indenture contract and their political and economic rule; that controlled was not articulated or achieved in a stress free environment. In effect, planters' legal authority and ideology were undermined by the ongoing conflicts between indentured laborers and planters. In fact, in British Guiana between 1866 and 1870, the magistrate dealt with several thousands cases involving defiance of immigration ordinances as outlined in the indenture contract. Collectively, indentured laborers defiance involved acts of labor withdrawal, group mediation, general strikes and work stoppage. Following which sugar production thus, profit accumulation constantly diminished.

In addition to labor conflicts, social relationships in British Guiana between planters and indentured laborers revolved around the abuse of the indentured women by European men. Many European men found Indian women attractive and engaged in illicit affairs with them. Habitually, the conflictual outcomes manifested themselves in the sugar production process (Singh and Pool 1999; Rodney 1981). Thus, the legal constraint of the indentured contract was collectively and constantly being resisted or rearticulated; not only by planters but also by indenture laborers. Mind you, the latter terms of social engagement was one of resistance as the forthcoming discussion summarizes.

The Indenture Contract and the Ownership of Land

The social realities as dictated by the indenture contract were all aimed at profit maximization. Thus it was, when indentured laborers were presented with what appeared to be, the ability to negotiate their existing indenture, that negotiation was also an economic exchange that benefited planters. Gradually, as benefits of the indenture system increased, indentured laborers, at different junctures throughout the indenture period, in relation to being released from the indenture contract had three options available to them. Commencing at the expense of planters, indentured laborers up until 1891, upon serving their indentureship term were entitled to free return passage to India. Planters, always eager to save money recognized repatriation as an expensive undertaking. Subsequently, planters negotiated with the government over the return passages of indentured laborers. As a result, in 1893 the two administrations, British Guiana and India agreed that indentured laborers must pay half of their return passage. Soon, even half passage for indentured laborers was assessed as an expensive initiative; thus indentured laborers were induced to re-indenture themselves to the same or another plantation. Included in that initiative was a small plot of land to grow provisions; as concurrently indentured laborers remained dependent on plantations for their labor needs. The first groups of indentured laborers

were given plots of land that was not easily cultivated and irrigated hence, a better land deal was needed (Rodney 1981).

In the midst of the negotiation over land, in lieu of return passage, the demand for sugar decreased on the world market. Planters recognizing that and having had the experience before produced less sugar. However, planters hoped for an increase in the demands for sugar and so they sought to retain their indentured labor force. Accordingly, planters desiring to keep the indentured laborers tied to the plantations demanded from the government a more acceptable land settlement scheme. Therefore, so as to dissuade repatriation a new land settlement scheme that included permanent village settlements became available to signatories of the indenture contract.

In 1897, the aforementioned village settlement scheme and offers of land in lieu of return passage were revised so as to further encourage permanent residency of indentured laborers in British Guiana. That offer included time expired indentured laborers (those who had fulfilled their indenture contract and remained in British Guiana). However, all indentured laborers, if they accepted land, regardless of their contractual status needed to be readily available to work on the demands of planters. Albeit, all initiatives by the planters and planters' controlled state apparatuses were aimed at maximizing profit and obtaining cheap labor.

As the European sugar market became more competitive, the price and demand decreased; planters, instead of investing in technology and introducing new produce, continued to depend on manual labor and sugar. It was at that historical juncture, that indentured labors utilized the decrease in the demand for sugar and redundancy of their labor to concentrate on their own means of production, the leased land around plantations. Indentured laborers, on those plots of leased land introduced rice as a cash crop. Rice was produced for their own consumption and the local market. Initially, rice as a produce of the colony did not add to the larger economy, but to the local economy of Blacks and indentured labors. Nonetheless for indentured laborers rice provided the avenue for them to become self-sufficient and upwardly mobile.

Gradually, rice as a staple crop became popular, as such, when the market demand in the colony switched from sugar to rice. Simultaneously, indentured laborers restructured their own labor towards rice production and supplied the market demands. Subsequently, an increase in the production of rice and other agricultural products contributed to a local economy. Eventually rice, as a product of the local economy became part of the national economy of British Guiana and ultimately the Caribbean. Indentured labors through the united efforts of land, labor and capital invested in their own production process.

In fact, leased land and parsimony was one of the immediate causes of indentured laborers rise to economic independence. Thus, land although a financial ploy used by planters to benefit planters, also resulted in self-sufficiency for the majority of indentured laborers. With a change in the economy and governmental structures, the social, political and economic spheres of British Guiana evolved into that of Guyana. Guyana is a country in which the colonial conflictual labor history rooted in the indenture contract, a laboring instrument, has informed many subsequent, social, political and economic realities, interactions and process of the two major population—the progenies of indentured laborers and Blacks. [22]

Endnotes

[1] Indenture and indenture contract are used synonymously in this paper.

[2] In the beginning of this analysis, I make special reference to those Indian nationals who went to the Caribbean as indentured laborers or as East Indians and the other laboring group; the former slaves are referred to as Blacks.

[3] It must be noted that the indentured contract, despite provisions that allowed for the negotiation of personal and employment relationships exemplify a labor relationship that was similar to slavery. In the

former the servitude of the person that was purchased, whereas for the latter it the person that was bought. (Galenson, 1984).

[4] A form of 'un-free' labor, *paramone – debt bondage,* closely resembling indentureship existed in Greek and Roman times (de Ste. Croix, 1988).

[5] Human labor was leased with a claim to their future earnings. The indenture contract existed in the 1600s, it was used to transport and contract European workers to the New World. Those European workers were replaced by slaves (Galenson, 1984; Tinker, 1977).

[6] Those were large warehouses used to housed the laborers, until they boarded the ships.

[7] Caste is the organizing Hindu religious principle that stratified members of Hinduism, based on their Varnas, although not synonymous, but frequently in its secular application, their occupations. Space does not permit a lengthier discussion of this principle and its conceptual complexity.

[8] Despite the perils of the journey itself, the greatest risks for indentured labors seemed to be after their arrival and assignment to plantations. For example, within the first 5 year contracted period, 98 of them died from fever, dysentery and poisoning. One hundred and sixty re-indentured, sixty voluntary remained, and two actually absconded from the plantation (Bisnauth, 2000; Nath, 1970). Observers of the Anti-slavery society being aware of these statistics publicized the harsh treatment and high mortality rate among indentured laborers. As a result, Britain, fearing that indentured laborers would replace slavery, halted indentured immigration from India (Ruhomon, 1947). However, it took another hundred years after the edict, for the practice of indentured labor to finally come to an end in 1917 (Bisnuath, 2000).

[9] Originally, the group was and continues to be labeled East Indian because they originated for the East Indies.

[10] An unskilled Asian laborer – Hindi and Telegu: Kuli – day laborer, perhaps from Kuli – a tribe in Gujarat or Urdu Kuli – slave. (http://www.wmic.edu/dialogue/themes/indian words. htm).

[11] This is not unique to indentured labourers, studies of other groups (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918; Writh, 1928, Zorbaugh, 1929) have documented that the social context of the host society impacts on the reconstruction of immigrant groups social, political and economical institutions. What is unique to indentured labourers as a group is the socio-historical period, indentured contract and social context of their reconstruction.

[12] Indian women exhibiting sexual freedom were not a social factor that Indian men previously experienced.   Thus, in British Guiana, due to the shortages of Indian women the practice of Indian women moving from one mate to another surfaced but was not institutionalized. The notion that indentured women had freedom, albeit sexual freedom must be located in the recruitment process, indentured contract, the colonial context and the patriarchal system of Indian society. Indentured women's sexual freedom was as a result of the movement of laborers from India; in fact, women were not willing to migrate.

[13] Some authors attributed the high rate of suicide among indentured men during the indentured period to the shortage of Indian women and the breakdown of women's traditional roles and statuses (Brennan, 1998; Lal, 1998; Parekh, 1994). Others, including Pool and Singh (1999:30), conclude that "it would be a mistake to suggest the lack of women was a major factor in suicide, but reports of male to male violence over women abound."

[14] In fact, Indian women were constructed as   loose (Pool and Singh, 1999; Seenarine 1999, Mangru, 1987; Poynting, 1987). That construction was buttressed by the fact that in India many widows, abandoned wives, as well as women who participated in the sex trade were recruited for the colonies.

[15] Another social institution that was reconstructed was the *panchayat*. Community disputes were settled by a system called *panchayat* (Bisnauth, 2000; Brennan, 1998). That institutionalized system of dispensing justice had its roots in India and was customarily composed of five elderly men, including the *pandits* (priests). It was reconstructed on the plantations and became an internal community mechanism for settling disputes.

[16] Although gender inequality was embedded in and reproduced by the religious Brahmanical teachings that informed the consciousness of both men and women, religion emerged as a necessary institution of community reconstruction (Pool and Singh, 1999).

[17] But despite the internal loosening of caste hierarchy, a caste system was preserved in its application to the British Guiana social order. Indeed, religion was used to foster the psychological belief that they were superior to other groups in the colony (Cross, 1980).

[19]Notwithstanding, the sufferings endured by the migrants, that particular voyage represented an opportunity to break away from similarly repressive and oppressive conditions in India. A voyage of opportunities for , so that those who chose to, can create access to psychological, social and cultural spaces that had remained closed to them in their native land. Samaroo, (1999/2000: 20) explains: "there were now many new Brahmins by boat rather than by birth." This feature is critical to the discussion because it invokes an ironic angle to the experiences of indentured labour and places the dreaded "passage from India" in a new and different light. Indentureship gave many disenfranchised Indians the opportunity to reconstruct their future, that is their very destiny, in a manner that they could achieve wider margins of "self", indeed they could literally re-invent themselves, their culture and their social institutions: "Collective amnesia, the cultivation of forgetfulness, was, therefore, crucial to the rebuilding of a new life and, for many, a new persona" (Seecharan, 1999/2000: 64).

[20] "Guyanese colonial history is replete with facts on how the plantation management and the colonial administration exercised direct and indirect pressures to convert East Indians to the Christian faith. Not only were Christina missionary activities patronized by the colonial administration but various government positions and civil services were reserved for Christian only" (Rauf, 1974: 100).

[21] Often the social characteristics used by indentured labourers to reconstruct identity and community are used to separate immigrant groups, for example, first generation Italian migrants to the United States of America created social boundaries among themselves based on the regions of Italy that they came from (Cinel, 1982, Lopreato, 1970). The Chinese of New York also created social boundaries among themselves using the regions of China that they came from (Lyman, 1986). As well, German and Russian Jews maintained social boundaries among themselves based on their countries of origin (Rishin, 1962). Speculatively, the commonality of signing an indenture and being East Indians coupled with the social realities of plantation space commanded a modified social process.

[22] The indenture labor system came to an end in 1917.

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