

# INDENTURED WORKERS, IMMOBILITIES, MOBILITIES AND SPACE

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Between 1825 and 1922 more than one million immigrant workers left India to labour in various fringe areas of the British Empire. Of these, the majority, more than 400,000 reached Mauritius, an Indian Ocean island off the coast of Madagascar. Indentured workers' arrival coincided with the global expansion of sugar plantations and the contraction of slave-based economies. Planters actively sought a steady supply of labour that could be tied to plantations and could enhance their production regimes. Moreover, planters and colonial governments<sup>1</sup> actively assumed that indentured workers and their families were ignorant of their destinations. It is this presupposition that shapes this paper. Here, I examine the interaction between space, mobilities and immobilities in relation to indentured workers in Mauritius. While oceans connote mobility, islands did not always imply mobility and rather suggest immobilities. For example, coolies' arrival into the island did not signify free movement. Rather the island's stringent colonial apparatus and its strict geo-physical borders limited the indentured worker's mobility at various points: the Calcutta coolie depot and the quarantine stations in various places (Pointe aux Canoniers, Flat and Gabriel islands). Thus, the case study of indentured workers' mobility through the ocean and eventual immobility in the island underline the paradoxical nature of oceanic mobility. At the same time, indentured workers' immobilities and mobilities were informed by the spaces they inhabited and their own perceptions of space. Finally, indentured workers' complex networks of information and acclimatization to new work environments led them to new mobilities.

## Early Indentured Workers' and Spatial Understanding

During the early phase of indentured labor, intending emigrants travelled long distances through large expanses of hinterland within India to the port cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. While waiting to embark for their remote destinations, recruits inhabited various spaces in the

three port cities. Because Calcutta was the most important supplier of indentured workers, it eventually saw the rise of an elaborate coolie depot. Official accounts related to the Calcutta Commission of Enquiry highlighted the imprisoning and fixating factor of such a space: "The three sides of the inner court had a running corridor, which was bounded by several cells, all having separate doors." It could be suggested that notions of mobility and immobility simultaneously coalesced at the coolie depot of Bhowanipore. Recruits had been mobile enough to reach the depot but were immobilized there, depending on which historical evidence is privileged. Because officials of the Calcutta Commission Enquiry were intent on ending indentured labour, it was obvious that the depot would be perceived as a prison. Recruits once more became physically mobile as they embarked for remote corners of the British, French and Dutch empires.

## Coolie Ship

The coolie ship has often been associated with high mortality rates, diseases and the impending spectre of death. However, the coolie ship can be approached spatially in different ways. The crew (captain, master pilot, vessels' pilot, topazes) all conceived the ship as a physical form where social and spatial hierarchies co-existed and where conflicts abounded. For example to maintain the social hierarchy and functional use of the ship, coolies were kept "down between decks." This hierarchy was broken for utilitarian and health reasons. John Dyer, master pilot explains how coolies' "place was cleaned out from once to twice a day and sprinkled with chloride." Indentured workers, at the time of questioning, had diverse responses to inhabiting the space of the "between decks." For instance, Motee Ram was taken to Mauritius by the ship "Elizabeth" and remembers that "we were put below" thus indicating his perceived lived space. Mohummud Ally's take is more definite than Ram's since he states that "we were not subject to discomfort on the ship going or coming." Nonetheless, the ship could be associated with various emotional junctures. For example, the spatial confines of the ship reminded Joomra of an emotional moment: "my father died at sea, going down." The coolie ship with its complex

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I use "colonial government" interchangeably with "colonial state."

physical, social and emotional spaces journeyed through various oceans to reach its destinations.

## Immobilities Associated with Physical Fixity, Quarantine Practices and Colonial Administrative Practices

Indentured workers encountered new climates and habitats once they landed in receiving colonies. In Mauritius, while recruits had recently experienced with the mobility of the coolie ship across the Indian Ocean, in Mauritius, they had to contend with immobilities associated with the geo-physical fixity of the island, quarantine practices and colonial administrative practices. Several diseases (namely cholera and malaria) had struck the island in the early to mid-nineteenth century thus leading to the creation of quarantine stations at Pointe aux Canoniers, Flat Island, and Gabriel Island. Often times, indentured immigrants would recover at the quarantine stations but at times they would fall sick on sugar estates. Since sugar production was central to the island's economic survival, the colonial government monitored labour fitness closely. Thus, for instance, Camiah had reached the island on

Moreover, his last employer an "Indian timber merchant" had caused difficulties regarding his papers. Unfortunately, Seetowa's petition was not granted. While the island as a bounded space became a site of immobility for the diseased, sick and injured indentured workers, it also became a prison for those who desired to return 'home.' However, it would be reductive to highlight the immobilities of indentured workers without considering the new types of mobilities that emerged after their acclimatization on the island.

## New Mobilities and Beyond

During the early phase of indentured labour, colonial accounts were informed by European notions of cartography and space. According to this principle, those who did not produce actions and movements inspired by such cartographic objectivity were unaware of their space. This is apparent in the accounts of master pilots and captains who regularly transported coolies. For instance, James Smart, a master pilot who brought coolies to Mauritius in the early phase of the indentured system claimed that "many of the Coolies have a notion that they are not going on a sea voyage; [and that it is] a river voyage." He further adds that coolies thought they were in a bumboat, tried



*Sailing ships at Port Louis harbour.  
Mauritius National Archives*

17 May 1854 but as he was nearing three years on the island on 12 May 1857, he was sent back to India because he "was labouring under leprosy" and "treatment having been of no avail." Camiah was now considered futile in a demanding labour process. Even indentured workers' filing of petitions to the Protector of Immigrants proved useless. Many indentured workers riddled with diseases sought free passages to India. For example, Seetowa described himself as "old and afflicted with a disease," and petitioned the Protector of Immigrants for a "free passage" since he was "desirous of returning to India."

to "buy gram" and tried "to lower their lotas [copper containers] on one side to get water [from the Hooghly], and finding it salt[y], they will go to the other and will lower down again, thinking to get it fresh." According to Smart's cartographic perspective, coolies were acting illogically and were highly unfamiliar with their spatial surroundings. However, it can be argued that indentured immigrants' notions of space and time would have been shaped by indigenous concepts that originated in the large land expanses of the Chota Nagpur area. Even if one were to pursue Smart's logic of workers'

'ignorance' of their destination and of the geographic location of Mauritius, they did not remain 'ignorant' for long. Soon, indentured workers grappled with a complex bureaucratic structure to exercise their choice. For example, on January 11, 1850, Dacoo, Rama, and Dhurma were "desirous of returning home without delay ... at their own expense and in a vessel of their own choice." While it may be suggested that such colonial language became standardized and did not really reflect the motivations and intent of indentured workers, it can also be contended that acclimatization to the island's space and bureaucratic conventions, enabled workers to pursue wider horizons. Dacoo's, Rama's and Dhurma's motivations could be tied to return migration and such motivations were various. The Protector of Immigrants, Thomas Hugon, skeptically demonstrated the logic of indentured workers in the following explanation of their mobilities: "immigrants on their arrival [in Mauritius] [were] certainly under the influence of comrades (...) whom they follow blindly." Hugon's words suggests that indentured workers had articulated complex information networks stretching from their places of origin in India to the different nodes of colonial plantation societies. More broadly, friendships had also enabled the mobilities of recruits to Mauritius and other colonies. These mobilities from India to Mauritius were also global. For example, by the early twentieth century, it was not uncommon for remigration to occur in a trans-colonial manner – that is from receiving to receiving colony instead of from India to the receiving colony. The Protector of Immigrants of Fiji notes in July 1907 that of 117 re-migrants to Fiji in 1906, 33 had "worked or lived previously" in Natal, South Africa; 4 in Mauritius, 3 in Rangoon, and 10 in Ceylon. This information demonstrates that 4 re-migrants to Fiji had not allowed the geographical fixity of Mauritius to bind them. Rather, they had actively new avenues that would provide them with better wages. These new mobilities of indentured workers and Old Immigrants are also linked to opportunities available within the south west and western Indian Ocean. It was common for coolies from La Réunion to seek higher wages in Mauritius or for Mauritius coolies to settle in Seychelles or in Madagascar. Even though the colonial state sought to fixate indentured workers within the confines of the island, they often found ways to emigrate to neighboring islands such as Madagascar. This came to the attention of W.H. Marsh, Assistant Colonial Secretary who entreated the Protector of Immigrants to "watch and prevent the emigration of Indian Coolies from [leaving Mauritius for] Madagascar so far as circumstances allow him to do so (...)"

Though colonial archives has emphasized workers' ignorance of their destinations, it is crucial to use the interlinkage between space, immobilities and mobilities to understand how workers perceived their space and lived experiences.

# FLAT ISLAND AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE QUARANTINE SYSTEM IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY MAURITIUS

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## Introduction

Flat island, the largest offshore islet of Mauritius located in the north was officially decreed as one of the main quarantine stations of Mauritius in February 1857, following the death of 284 indentured immigrants near its shores. Although another station located at Pointe aux Canonnières was created the same year, Flat Island became central for implementing quarantine measures to ensure better conditions to indentured immigrants suffering from contagious diseases. Thus, the quarantine scheme developed during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Mauritius is intricately linked with the indentured immigration system and the treatment and condition given to indentured labourers. This article aims to provide a general view of the implementation of the quarantine station of Flat Island as a result of the improvement of the quarantine procedures in Mauritius during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Tragedy of 1856

On January 1856, the vessel *Hydere* and the *Futtay Mombarak* arrived with more than 300 immigrants each, transporting passengers infected with cholera on board. Lengthy maritime procedures and uncertainty about the medical condition of the immigrants at the time of arrival in Port Louis had delayed in giving the ship pratique or placing the immigrants in quarantine. The final decision was to place the immigrants in quarantine at Gabriel Island, sister of Flat Island. There were no proper amenities on the islet to cater for the well-being