

After The Crossing: Immigrants And Minorities In Caribbean Creole Society

“Oceans without Borders”: Dialectics of Transcolonial Labor Migration from the Indian Ocean World to the Atlantic Ocean World¹

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Abstract

By investigating the hitherto unstudied trans-colonial migration between Mauritius and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century, this article complicates liberal Eurocentric perceptions of global labor force formation under the auspices of colonial capital. Indeed, coercion, as depicted in liberal historiography, was a crucial component of indentured migration but indentured workers themselves sometimes availed of the opportunity of the global demand for their labor by engaging in trans-colonial migration. The dialectic of the formation of globalized indentured labor regime was such that while capital sought to confine workers to specific plantations, the very nature of the demand for labor enabled workers to defy the dictates of capital and further enabled them to move from one colony to another in search of better livelihoods and thus made them globally mobile. These migrations did not follow the so-called boundaries between the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. Rather such migrations reflected workers' search for jobs through trans-colonial networks within the framework of imperial domination.

On June 16, 1915, in a letter to Jehangir Bomanji Petit, the Secretary of the South African Indian Fund, Mohandas K. Gandhi expressed his strong disapproval of the indentured labor system in the following words:

I feel that I ought to place on record my strong conviction, based upon close personal observation extending over a period of twenty years, that the system of indentured emigration is an evil which can only be ended. No matter how humane the employers may be, it does not lend itself to the moral well-being of the men affected by it. I therefore feel that your Committee should lose no time in approaching the Government of India with a view to securing entire abolition of the system for every part of the Empire.²

Gandhi's indictment of the indentured system found its way into the liberal historiography on indentured labor, which presented indentured (contract) workers' experiences within the British imperial state as "a new system of slavery."³ By investigating the hitherto unstudied transcolonial migration between Mauritius, India, and the Caribbean in the mid-nineteenth to early

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