



**GLIMPSES OF CHINESE AND INDIAN COOLIE RESISTANCE IN THE BRITISH
WEST INDIES, C. 1834-1917**

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ABSTRACT

Many people are relatively unaware of the hundreds of thousands of indentured workers from China and India, known as coolies, that labored in the British West Indies during and after the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade between 1834 and 1918. While some scholars have acknowledged the presence of these foreign contract laborers, few have closely studied their acts of resistance during this time period.

Consequently, this project seeks to better understand coolie labor experiences in the British West Indies amidst the decline of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and examine the ways in which coolies resisted their masters, related to other workers, and maintained their own identities amidst an oppressive plantation labor system. Through analyzing the daily methods of resistance that coolie laborers resorted to in plantation life, the illegal desertions of coolies, the conflicting relationships between coolie laborers and newly freed slave laborers, and the strategies that planters utilized in attempts to prevent effective coolie resistance, I find that while coolies faced several challenges in subverting the power of their employers, some found unique ways to maintain their autonomy and defy a coercive and deeply-rooted labor system. Despite these efforts, the ultimate decline of coolie labor in the British West Indies is best understood in the context of burgeoning anti-slavery attitudes and growing awareness of workers' rights at the dawn of the 20th century.

D. gave him another shove,
 and knocked him down. He lay for about a quarter of an hour,
 and then got up, and was crying for his side

After he got up, D. went to him again and said that he must work,
 and deceased still said that he wouldn't work. D.
 then gave him two boxes right and left
 on the side of his face, with his open hand. He still insisted on
 not working. D. took up a lath about fifteen inches, and gave
 him two blows across the back at the shoulders...

Mr. A. came about half-past four o'clock,
 and told deceased to work. He said he would not.¹

—Joseph Beaumont, *The New Slavery, 1871*

The above account chronicles the plight of a Chinese contract laborer who was forced to work on a Guianese plantation and eventually beaten to death for his defiant resistance of plantation authorities during the middle of the 19th century. Coolies challenged and subverted the power of their employers while maintaining their identities. Although workplace abuses like these were common occurrences on plantations across the British West Indies following the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the plight of hundreds of thousands of indentured servants from China and India that labored in the British Caribbean islands during the 19th and 20th centuries are not well-known. While it is clear that these foreign contract laborers,

¹ Joseph Beaumont, *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana*. (London: Ridgway, 1871), 117.

also known as coolies,² worked in the fields during and after the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade between 1834 to 1917, historians have less commonly explored the daily experiences of coolies and their acts of resistance. Consequently, this research will seek to better understand coolie labor experiences in the British Caribbean islands and the ways in which coolies resisted their masters and maintained their own identities amidst an oppressive labor system.

Historiography

While many historians frequently discuss the experiences of Chinese “coolie” laborers in areas like the Western United States while working as coal miners and railroad workers during the 19th and 20th centuries, few have examined the experiences of Chinese and Indian coolies in the Caribbean islands during the same time period. Even those interested in studying coolie labor in the Caribbean have limited much of their research to the Spanish Caribbean island of Cuba, while paying little attention to the British Caribbean islands of Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Mauritius, and Barbados. The existing scholarship surrounding coolie laborers focuses on the geographical and socioeconomic factors that led to the coolie trade, the economic impacts of coolie labor in relation to the thriving sugar industry and the declining slave trade, and the reasons why coolie labor was preferred over other forms of labor. However, few scholars have addressed forms of resistance.

In describing the geographic factors that led to the coolie trade, Walton Look Lai, in his work, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*, argues that the primary reason that most of the coolies in the British

² According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term coolie refers to indentured laborers from South or East Asia. It originates from the mid-17th century term ‘kūlī’ in Hindi and Telugu, which means ‘day laborer’. Although it was widely used to describe an indentured laborer from Asia during the 19th and 20th centuries, it is regarded as a mildly offensive term in some parts of the world today, particularly in Asia and the Caribbean.

Caribbean islands were of Indian descent is because the British directly ruled India during the majority of the coolie trade, making it easier to coerce Indian laborers to enter the coolie system than workers from other regions. According to Lai, the British government initially sought to avoid officially sanctioning the new coolie trade for fear of appearing to create a new slave trade. However, with planters in the British Caribbean consistently lobbying the British Government to craft new policies that would increase available labor in the colonies and lower labor costs, the colonial office relented and allowed indentured immigrants to work for planters under fixed terms.³ Lai is primarily interested in coolie labor as it relates to British power in India, and focuses less on the lives of coolies and their resistance once they reached the West Indies. Because the vast majority of coolies in the British Caribbean were of Indian descent, most of Lai's work focuses on the labor experiences of Indian coolies rather than Chinese coolies.

However, scholars Laurence Ma and Carolyn Cartier attempt to address the specific experiences of over 15,000 Chinese coolies that were sent to British Guiana, Trinidad, and Mauritius in their work, *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity*.⁴ Together, these two authors assert that a combination of internal strife and economic instability in China, as well as British incentives to find as many alternative forms of labor as they could muster following the decline in the African slave trade, were the primary causes of the migration of Chinese laborers to the Caribbean. Because of these factors, the vast majority of coolies from China were low-income, uneducated workers fleeing high unemployment rates and inner turmoil in China during the 19th century. Ultimately, Ma and Cartier argue that these unique migration

³ Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁴ Laurence J. Ma, and Carolyn Cartier, *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

factors enabled Chinese workers in the Caribbean to develop distinct transnational Chinese identities in this region, in which Chinese laborers held onto some aspects of their language and customs while also adopting cultural practices of the Caribbean. While Ma and Cartier's work is helpful in understanding the factors that led to the large influx of Chinese coolies to the West Indies, they do not address the experiences of these workers after they reached the West Indies in detail.

Coolie labor also had a significant economic impact on the burgeoning Caribbean sugar trade. Economist Michael Dacosta and historian Moon-Ho Jung both argue that the decline in the African slave trade increased the utility and recruitment of coolie labor for plantation owners, which led to rising sugar profits during the height of the sugar industry in the later 19th century. Dacosta explains that the development of an indentured system dependent on coolies from India and China led to lower labor costs, improved sugar plantation prospects, and significant new industry investments by the British royal government in British Guyana and Barbados.⁵ Thus, the recruitment of coolies to sugar plantations by both planters and British authorities in the British West Indies was essential to reestablishing England's supremacy in international sugar markets.

Moreover, Jung asserts that the reason that planters preferred to rely on coolies (rather than newly-freed slaves or other workers in the region as their primary labor source) was that plantation owners in the British Caribbean islands often perceived contractually-bound coolies as obedient, hard workers, who were less aggressive and rebellious than newly-freed slaves.⁶

⁵ Michael Dacosta, "Colonial Origins, Institutions and Economic Performance in the Caribbean: Guyana and Barbados," *IMF Working Papers* 07, no. 43 (2007): 1-39.

⁶ Moon-Ho Jung. *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Historian Howard Johnson adds that coolies were easier to control than other forms of labor because not only were they contractually-bound to provide at least eight years of non-negotiable labor services for their owners in the British Caribbean, but they were also very unlikely to return to their home countries due to dismal economic conditions at home, outstanding debts they accrued while serving as indentured servants, or shrewd re-contracting ploys created by planters. While it is true that planters perceived coolies as more docile than newly-freed slaves, examining the various avenues of coolie resistance will demonstrate that this perception was not always true.

Ultimately, while some historians have focused on the broader socioeconomic impacts of coolie labor in relation to slavery and the causes of coolie migration in the British West Indies, there are major gaps in current scholarship regarding the daily experiences of coolie laborers and the conditions, relationships, and environments that they toiled under. To understand the various ways in which coolies resisted their masters, one must more carefully address these gaps in knowledge and examine the lives of coolie laborers in the British Caribbean islands in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Historical Context

When the trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished in 1834, planters in the Caribbean islands faced a growing labor shortage problem. Sugar, the main cash crop of the British Caribbean islands, was an immensely profitable industry that required large-scale plantation labor. Yet, while the sugar industry was booming during this time—with production reaching record levels by the second half of the 19th century—the availability of African slave labor was

decreasing due to burgeoning anti-slavery movements among major slave-trading nations.⁷ To supplement this growing need for a cheap and sustainable source of labor, the British turned towards the coolie trade.

Between the abolition of slavery in 1834 to the abolition of the coolie trade in 1917 within the British empire, over 500,000 coolies migrated to the British Caribbean islands of Guiana, Trinidad, Mauritius, and Barbados. Of these coolies, 80% came from India, while 3.5% came from China.⁸ The Spanish also recruited over 125,000 Chinese coolies to Cuba between 1847 to 1874.⁹

The term “coolie” refers to migrant indentured workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, or China, who were contractually bound to provide labor and other work services for a specific period of time in exchange for wages, which amounted to five years in the British Caribbean islands and eight years in Cuba and Peru.¹⁰ Under contract, coolies were often promised working wages, free housing, healthcare services, and right of return passages in exchange for their labor, which, in the British West Indies, was primarily performed on sugar plantations. When these contracts were completed, workers were given the option to either continue working on the plantation and receive a small parcel of land or to return to their home countries.

A complex combination of push and pull factors led to the massive influx of coolie laborers to the British West Indies between 1834 to 1917. Beyond the abolition of the trans-

⁷ Deborah G. White, Mia Bay, and Waldo E. Martin. *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans, with Documents*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2017).

⁸ Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁹ Ma, Laurence J. and Carolyn Cartier, *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

¹⁰ Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Atlantic slave trade and the subsequent need for planters to find new laborers, coolie laborers sought to escape the dismal economic and political conditions in India and China.¹¹ Economists David Clingingsmith and Jeffrey Williamson write that during the 19th century in India:

Central authority waned, revenue farming expanded, the rent burden increased, warfare raised the price of agricultural inputs, and regional trade within the subcontinent declined, all serving to drive down the productivity of foodgrain agriculture. Grain prices rose, and given that ordinary workers lived near subsistence, the nominal wage rose as well.¹²

The greatest factors contributing to such economic duress were a series of droughts and famines across India during the 19th century. For example, between 1866 to 1867, nearly a million Indians died from famine caused by severe droughts, and 4.3 million died from an even larger famine between 1876 to 1878.¹³ Drought not only destroyed crops, but it also raised the price of available food, leaving millions to starve to death. However, such starvation and famine was often caused by British rulers' blatant neglect of the basic needs of Indians out of their desire for economic efficiency, preferring to sell food at exorbitant prices during drought seasons to a starving population who could not afford it while failing to institute famine-relief measures.¹⁴ Consequently, the difficulties of subsistence living in India during the 19th century increased the appeal of indentured labor work in the British West Indies.¹⁵ For example, in

¹¹ Lomarsh Roopnarine, *The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

¹² David Clingingsmith and Jeffrey G. Williamson. "Deindustrialization in 18th and 19th Century India: Mughal Decline, Climate Shocks and British Industrial Ascent." *Explorations in Economic History* 45, no. 3 (2008)., 233.

¹³ Marshall, Peter J. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire*. (Cambridge, 2008), 132.

¹⁴ *The Pioneer*, Allahabad, India, February 6, 1867, 8.

¹⁵ Laurence, Keith Ormiston. 1994. *A question of labour: indentured immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875-1917*. Kingston: Randle.

regards to the famine of 1866, one Indian newspaper at the time reported that “great distress, amounting almost to starvation, had prevailed... and that it was under the pressure of this distress that the emigrants of last season came forward.”¹⁶ This article specifically explains that the dismal conditions caused by starvation compelled Indian workers to emigrate to the West Indies. The majority of these contract laborers were rural peasants who were not fully aware of the terms of their contracts or the arduous nature of the work that they agreed to perform.

The British also imported coolies from China during this time period, albeit on a much smaller scale due to the fact that Indian workers, as British colonial subjects, were more accessible than Chinese workers.¹⁷ Political and economic failures in late Qing China, exacerbated by the Taiping Rebellion in Southeastern China, led thousands of poor Chinese peasants to flock to the Southeastern ports of Guangdong and Fujian in search of employment, where some were recruited for labor in the British West Indies.¹⁸

While the demand for coolie recruitment was driven by British planters in need of an alternative source of labor to slaves, the importation of Chinese and Indian coolies was often facilitated by other Chinese and Indian middlemen, who acted as intermediaries between the new recruits and the planters. The middleman who brokered new recruitments was often a former coolie himself, who had gained knowledge, experience, and a small amount of capital during his time working on the plantation. In exchange for a commission from the planter, the broker negotiated virtually all terms of work for new coolies and also assumed the risks of loss and

¹⁶ *The Pioneer*, Allahabad, India, October 31st, 1866, 6.

¹⁷ Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Walton Look Lai, "The Chinese Indenture System in the British West Indies and Its Aftermath," In *The Chinese in the Caribbean*, edited by Andrew R. Wilson, 3-24 (Princeton: Markus Wiener Press, 2004), 7.

damage regarding new recruits.¹⁹ Thus, while many subjects of colonial power were victimized by the greater coolie system, some benefited from it. Together, coolie labor from India and China sustained the growth of the profitable sugar trade in the British West Indies after the abolition of slavery by providing a consistent, accessible, and affordable labor source for British planters.

The ways in which indentured workers were recruited also changed over time. For example, in the early years of the coolie trade, plantation workers often forcibly recruited coolies by kidnapping, threatening, or seriously misleading workers into thinking that the compensations, destinations, and duties required of them would be much more appealing than they were in reality.²⁰ However, in the later years of the coolie trade, many indentured workers from China and India voluntarily chose to contract their labor abroad, primarily due to increasing economic turmoil in their home countries and the desire to create a better life overseas.²¹

After being recruited from China and India, coolies often endured their own form of the “Middle Passage,” where atrocities like death, disease, abuse, and rape were common. While maritime technology had improved significantly since the trans-Atlantic slave trade, some coolies still traveled in infamous slave ships while suffering similarly abysmal conditions and nearly comparable mortality rates to African slaves.²² Neglect in care and treatment during this middle passage often led to unnecessarily severe outbreaks of disease and insufficient food and water supplies, which compounded mortality rates. For instance, between 1851 to 1873, there

¹⁹ W.L. Distant, "Eastern Coolie Labour," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 3 (1874), 142.

²⁰ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism: 1834-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

Such underhanded recruiting tactics led to unflattering nicknames of the coolie trade, such as “blackbirding” and “the pig trade.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, “Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview” (*Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, no. 1, 2008), pp. 16

were approximately 64 deaths per 1000 indentured workers on the voyage from India to the British West Indies,²³ while between 1811 to 1863 there were 69 deaths per 1000 African slaves on voyages from West Africa to the Americas.²⁴ Chinese coolies did not fare much better on the voyage from China to the British West Indies, with 50 deaths per 1000 indentured workers.²⁵ This data shows that despite the fact that indentured workers from India and China were legally protected from mistreatment by their employers on their ocean voyages by British regulations, these protections were often not effectively enforced.²⁶

Across the British West Indies, coolies were legally distinct from African slaves, but their work conditions were similarly abysmal and arduous. On paper, the British colonial governments did not designate coolies as chattel or regard them as property, but their freedoms were limited. Coolies retained the rights to pursue legal remedies in court for mistreatment by their masters and to access government services like health care. Nonetheless, too often in practice, planters and colonial authorities often abused these rights and established elaborate labor ordinances that subjected coolies to their whims. For example, in contracting their labor to plantation authorities, coolies ceded their rights to freedom of movement. Coolies were often restricted from journeying more than two miles away from their allotted land during work hours.²⁷ Coolies also received disparagingly low incomes—about half the wage rates of free laborers—making it increasingly unlikely for coolies to earn enough money to return to their home countries. Ultimately, these harsh conditions caused many coolies to seek ways to resist their employers' authority.

²³ Calculated from David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 133, 137.

²⁴ Calculated from records of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission (1851-1873).

²⁵ Calculated from Arnold J. Meagher, "The Introduction of Chinese Laborers to Latin America: the 'Coolie Trade,' 1847-1874," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Davis, 1975),

²⁶ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism: 1834-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

For coolies, life on a sugar plantation was harsh and demanding. Much like the slave laborers that they often replaced, coolies were organized into a gang system of plantation labor, meaning that workers were divided into groups, and planters assigned the toughest work such as planting, manuring, and cane-cutting to groups of workers that they deemed the strongest and healthiest.²⁸ Other, less physically demanding assignments, such as domestic chores, were given to gangs of weaker coolies, who were often either very young or elderly. Despite the fact that colonial authorities created work hour restrictions to avoid criticisms of creating a new form of slavery, planters often violated these rarely enforced restrictions and illegally forced coolies to work for twelve hours or more with no additional pay for their extra labor hours.²⁹ If planters were dissatisfied with the completion of labor assignments, they often punished the indentured workers harshly, lashing them or withholding daily wages and food provisions for prolonged periods of time.³⁰ All of these severe restrictions and punishments meant that coolies were often trapped in their positions as bound laborers, fully dependent on their employers for wages needed to survive for fear of not finding work elsewhere, but with little control over how they received their wages.³¹

Acts of Resistance

In response to the harsh realities of plantation life, a number of Chinese and Indian coolies turned to escapist activities such as drinking, gambling, and opium-smoking to provide temporary relief from the toils of their labor at the end of the workday or week.³² However, even

²⁸ Joseph Beaumont, *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana*. (London: Ridgway, 1871), 21.

²⁹ *Report of the West Indian Royal Commission*, (HMSO, 1897), 97.

³⁰ Joseph Beaumont, *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana*. (London: Ridgway, 1871), 95.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 96

³² Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas: 1830-1920*, (London: Hansib Publishing Limited, 1993), 212.

colonial authorities such as Joseph Beaumont, who served as British Guiana's Chief Justice from 1863 to 1868, reported that these diversions were, "In fact, caused and fostered by poverty and distress rather than by prosperity and comfort." Furthermore, suicide was a less common, but still existent avenue that some coolies took to escape their oppressive circumstances. Although more rare than other escapist activities, suicide rates were considerably higher for coolie laborers once they arrived in the British West Indies than in their home countries, with 728 suicides per million in some places in Mauritius and British Guiana as opposed to rates of 50 suicides per million in the areas in India from which many of these migrants came from.³³ One Indian newspaper even reported that after coolies leave for the Indies, "mortality among the emigrants is frightfully high, averaging 25 percent. Suicide is very common, and mutinies and riots not unfrequently dispose of the ablest members of a gang."³⁴

However, as the coolie trade grew and indentured labor became more established and institutionalized in the British West Indies, increasing numbers of coolies turned from escapist strategies to more direct confrontations.³⁵ This shift likely occurred as criticisms of the coolie trade grew among colonial powers and as recruited laborers began more astutely realizing the exploitative nature of the coolie trade as it expanded. In the 1880s, a number of riots broke out across British Guiana and Trinidad due to workers' discontent with dismal wages and abuses of power. In one riot on Plantation Enmore, five overseers were sent to the hospital after being beaten by their workers who were infuriated with their already-low wages being withheld from them, and it took over thirty police officers to eventually end the conflict.³⁶ Beyond outright

³³ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁴ *The Pioneer*, Allahabad, India, August 23, 1867, 2.

³⁵ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism: 1834-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 128.

³⁶ *Daily Chronicle*, Georgetown, British Guiana, June 20, 1888.

violent protests, some workers also turned to traditional methods of sabotage, such as foot-dragging at work or destroying plantation equipment to hinder sugar production. In one instance reported in a local newspaper in British Guiana, an Indian coolie named Abodoolah set fire to the sugar cane field of his employer, destroying hundreds of dollars in sugar profits.³⁷

Coolies also occasionally used religious claims to both resist planter's authorities and maintain their own identities. W.L. Distant, who visited several plantations in the British West Indies in 1874, found that some coolies would claim to convert to Christianity in order to receive touted benefits from their employers, such as greater pay and less work.³⁸ However, he reports that these supposed conversions were often feigned, writing that, "Minds possessed with these strong beliefs are very unremunerative ground for the reception of new religious dogmas. The need of money is what has really brought these different people together."³⁹ In other words, coolies sometimes manipulated their master's religions to receive personal benefits.

Moreover, although few coolie laborers were well-educated and literate, those that were educated often used their abilities to directly challenge the indentured system. Bechu, a Bengali worker from Plantation Enmore, is one example of such efforts. In 1894, he sent a number of letters to colonial authorities outlining the abuses of planters, which included exploitation of Indian women by overseers, illegal threats, and the withholding of worker's wages to hinder dissent.⁴⁰ In one of his letters he proclaimed:

My countrymen like myself have had the misfortune to come to Demerara, the political system of which colony has very appropriately have divined and defined by Mr. Trollope under a happy inspiration as "despotism tempered by sugar." To these twin forces, the Immigration system is as sacred as the old system of slavery in former days, and for one

³⁷ *Daily Chronicle*, Georgetown, British Guiana, May 17, 1888.

³⁸ W.L. Distant, "Eastern Coolie Labour," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 3 (1874), 144.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁰ Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 156.

in my humble position to have ventured to touch it with profane hands or to have dared to unveil it is considered on this side of the Atlantic to be a capital and inexpiable offence.⁴¹

Here, Bechu notes the difficulty of challenging the firmly-established British system of coolie labor. However, this account also reveals that despite the daily threats and challenges that coolie laborers experienced—which were designed to prevent them from resisting their masters—some still courageously voiced their concerns to weaken the system that entrapped them in servitude. Thus, while sometimes resistance was violent and illegal, at other times it was executed through legal means. Therefore, the notion of resistance demonstrated by coolie laborers takes on multiple meanings.

Resistance by Illegal Migration and Desertion

Notwithstanding the severe risks of punishment, coolies often deserted their plantations or resorted to illegal migration to other regions to subvert their employers. According to Indian Immigration Ordinance No. 135, planters required coolies to carry with them a certificate of exemption from labor granted to them by their employers at all times to avoid being designated as a deserter or absconder. If coolies were caught outside of plantation grounds and unable to produce a certificate, they would be arrested and taken to the nearest police station.⁴² Desertion was illegal and carried with it the penalty of two months in prison or five pounds in fines—a substantial penalty considering the average wage of coolies was twenty-four cents a day.⁴³ Considering that it would require nearly one-hundred days of work to pay off the desertion fine, almost no coolies returned to their former plantations if they successfully deserted. Despite the harsh penalties for breaching their contracts, a considerable number of coolies escaped from their

⁴¹ Ibid., 156.

⁴² Indian Immigration Ordinance of Trinidad and British Guiana, (London: HMSO, 1904).

⁴³ Lomarsh Roopnarine, *The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 42.

home plantations to pursue independent survival, with nearly 13,988 coolies deserting between 1865 to 1890 in British Guiana alone.⁴⁴

Given the risks and punishments of desertion, why were desertion rates so high among coolies? To some, the mere notion of escape offered the hope of avoiding intensive labor obligations and creating an independent life with new freedoms. For instance, after 1870, increased numbers of indentured Indians deserted Trinidad for Venezuela, where they could more easily acquire their own land.⁴⁵ In some cases, coolies escaped indenture to pursue less restrictive employment opportunities such as working with the interior Amerindians in British Guiana and the cocoa farmers of Venezuela.⁴⁶ Perhaps most importantly, coolies often deserted to escape the hazardous working conditions of plantation life, the perils of which are indicated by the 32% mortality rate of coolie workers in British Guiana between 1908 to 1911.⁴⁷ The likelihood of such desertions were also aided by the proximity of the Caribbean islands to each other and the heavily forested terrain of many areas in the region such as British Guiana.⁴⁸

Ultimately, while coolie laborers pursued other methods of resistance such as riots, strikes, and sabotage, desertion was by far the most common form of resistance, as it offered more immediate hopes of escape and the creation of a new autonomous life in a more suitable environment.⁴⁹ While these deserters were never able to successfully form permanent communities akin to the Maroons of Jamaica and Suriname during the trans-atlantic slave trade,

⁴⁴ Lomarsh Roopnarine, "Indian Migration during Indentured Servitude in British Guiana and Trinidad, 1850– 1920," *Labor History* 52, no. 2 (2011): 178.

⁴⁵ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism: 1834-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 127.

⁴⁶ Lomarsh Roopnarine, *The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁹ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism: 1834-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 127.

the prevalence of desertion among coolies reveals a noticeable degree of resistance against plantation authorities to live independent lives. In other words, coolies most commonly resisted with their feet.

Limits of Coolie Resistance

As indentured workers, coolie laborers occupied a unique middle status as free but legally bound peoples, with severe restrictions on their mobility, occupational freedom, and their ability to challenge their employers. In 1864, the British Government passed an immigration ordinance that confined indentured workers to a two-mile radius of their plantations to prevent workers from subverting plantation authorities. In addition to making a violation of a civil contract a criminal offense liable to fines and imprisonment, coolie laws were designed to effectively prevent most coolie laborers from filing enforceable complaints against their employers and overseers.⁵⁰ For instance, to file a complaint in British Guiana, workers were required to go to the Immigration Office located in Georgetown. However, most plantations were several miles from Georgetown, meaning that in order to file a complaint in person, workers were required to receive a “travel certificate” from the very employers or overseers they were often bringing their grievances against. In one case, a worker was given a subpoena by a magistrate in Georgetown to testify against his master. However, upon leaving the plantation to provide his testimony, the worker was charged by his employer for missing work and imprisoned before his case could be heard.⁵¹

⁵⁰ An Ordinance to Extend the Term of Indentures of Immigrants Introduced from India and China, 1862 (No. 30); Papers re British Guiana, pp, 1863 (6830), XV. 139.

⁵¹ W. Kloosterboer, *Involuntary Labour Since the Abolition of Slavery: A Survey of Compulsory Labour Throughout the World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 13.

Additionally, while indentured workers were legally permitted to apply to return to their home countries once the terms of their contracts were met, planters could use their superior resources to prevent workers from leaving their plantations. For instance, in 1897, the Bengali coolie named Bechu was asked by the West Indian Royal Commission to testify about reported work conditions violations, such as compulsory twelve-hour workdays, on the Enmore Plantation in Demerara. When asked why coolie workers simply did not return to their home countries after experiencing such grueling labor conditions, Bechu stated:

“I know for a fact that people are constantly making applications to the authorities and they do not get a chance to go. Only last year there was a man who on three occasions made application to go to India, he was refused, and on the last occasion he came to me and begged me to write a letter to the immigration agent general.”⁵²

This statement indicates that not only were applications to return home readily refused, but planters also capitalized on the illiteracy and uneducated status of many coolies and the required medium of an immigration agent to prevent coolies from leaving their plantations.

In response to this testimony, G.W. Bethunh, an agent of the Enmore Plantation in Demerara, sent a letter to the West India Royal Commission in 1897, which denied Bechu’s claims about the labor violations found at Enmore. He wrote:

The proprietor of this important sugar property, with a cultivated area of over 2,000 acres, naturally takes a deep interest in the welfare of the labourers on his land, and for many years past he has been the main support of a church on the estate... the immigrants on this property have the privilege of free pasturage for cattle, and are allowed to cultivate plots of land with provisions... I most emphatically deny the gist of the above mentioned immigrant’s report.⁵³

The above account highlights the ways in which immigration agents, who were charged with the task of providing fair and viable representation for the indentured workers, often sided with plantation authorities by downplaying the abuses and labor violations that occurred on

⁵² *Report of the West Indian Royal Commission*, (HMSO, 1897), 98.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 159.

plantations. Together, these statements by worker and agent demonstrate that although there were a few legal remedies available for coolie laborers to pursue in response to harsh plantation rule, planters possessed a diverse and vastly superior array of legal avenues to keep indentured workers subjugated.

Tensions Between Coolies and Former Slaves

Given the many strategies that planters employed to prevent coolies from effectively resisting their authority, it would seem that coolie laborers might attempt to collaborate with other types of workers to more effectively subvert their employers' power. However, although coolie laborers shared many common experiences and conditions with former slaves and newly-freed black laborers working in the British West Indies, a multitude of conflicting interests created tensions between the two groups. After the abolition of the slave trade in 1834, many former African slaves in the British West Indies decided to stay in the region to continue working as free, paid laborers. Yet, when thousands of indentured workers began arriving from India and China to replace the loss of slave labor at the same time, tensions quickly developed between coolies and freed slaves.⁵⁴

For one, freed slaves were taxed by the British colonial government in order to subsidize the costs of importing Chinese and Indian coolies to maintain the sugar industry, which led to increased animosity from free workers towards the new arrivals.⁵⁵ Moreover, the average pay of newly freed black workers was twice that of indentured workers, which also contributed to increasing tensions between the different groups.⁵⁶ Many former slaves anxiously viewed new

⁵⁴ Michael Dacosta, "Colonial Origins, Institutions and Economic Performance in the Caribbean: Guyana and Barbados," *IMF Working Papers 07, no. 43* (2007), 13.

⁵⁵ Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar without Slaves. The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838-1904*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972).

⁵⁶ Clive Thomas, *Plantations, Peasants, and State: A Study of the Mode of Sugar Production in Guyana*. (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, 1984), 21.

arrivals as potential competitors for limited work on the plantations, especially considering the common belief among free workers that the labor supply was already adequate and that the subsequent importation of indentured workers weakened the effects of strikes and lowered overall plantation wages.⁵⁷ This notion is given credence by firsthand accounts of planters. Sandbach Parker, one of the most prominent planters in the British West Indies, noted, "...so long as an estate has a large Coolie gang, Creoles must give way in prices asked or see the work done by indentured labourers—and this is a strong reason why the number of Coolies on estates must not be reduced..."⁵⁸ Parker's statement indicates that planters acknowledged the distinctions between coolies and free workers and the fact that coolies were willing to work for much lower wages than free workers and capitalized on these disparities to maximize their profits.

Besides these economic factors, cultural differences also played a role in heightening tensions between free blacks and Chinese and Indian coolies in the British West Indies. For instance, in Jamaica, the fact that small retail businesses were often owned by Chinese coolies who operated in tight-knit family and kinship structures that precluded other ethnic groups from joining created significant hostility towards Chinese workers that resulted in a series of anti-Chinese riots. Albert Chong, the mixed-race son of a Chinese-Jamaican shop-owner during the early 20th century recounted that the only reason that his father's business was not attacked during the anti-Chinese riots in Jamaica was because his father had a history of hiring free blacks as well as Chinese workers.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 38.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 38

⁵⁹ Evelyn Hu-DeHart and Kathleen López, "Asian Diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Historical Overview" (*Afro-Hispanic Review* 27, no. 1, 2008), pp. 17.

These conflicting interests, which were exacerbated by planter interventions, might help explain the fact that many coolies and free black workers not only refused to collaborate with each other, but also often played direct roles in limiting each other's resistance efforts. For instance, in 1847, a strike led by freed slaves against planters for lowering their wages was unsuccessful because indentured workers continued to work through the strike, meaning that freed slaves could not disrupt production enough to receive the benefits of collective bargaining.⁶⁰ On the other hand, when coolies started a riot on the Plantation Enmore in 1888, some overseers were hidden and protected by free black workers from the estate, with one overseer claiming that he narrowly escaped the beatings of coolies because a black worker who was washing clothes nearby threw her clothes over him until his pursuers had passed.⁶¹

Ultimately, the conflicting economic interests and cultural differences of indentured coolies and former black slaves effectively prevented coolies and free black workers from recognizing common objectives and working together to collectively create better opportunities for themselves during the system of indentured servitude.

The End of Coolie Labor

Throughout the period between the abolition of slavery in 1834 to the early 1900s, the use of coolie labor across the world was often widely-criticized as a deplorable form of coerced labor that sustained many of the same abusive practices ensued by the slave systems it was created to replace.⁶² Consequently, British colonial authorities were no stranger to these criticisms, which grew increasingly louder as the abuses and failures of indentured servitude

⁶⁰ V.T Daly, *A Short History of the Guyanese People*, (London: Macmillan, 1976).

⁶¹ *Daily Chronicle*. Georgetown, British Guiana. June 20, 1888.

⁶² Matthew Pratt Guterl, "After Slavery: Asian Labor, the American South, and the Age of Emancipation," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003), 237.

were revealed over time. As a royal commissioner tasked with investigating mistreatment of indentured workers in British Guiana stated:

The fact is, there is a prejudice against [indentured labor], partly-sentimental, because it is the symbol of defeat to the too sanguine hopes for the future of the African race which were entertained at emancipation; partly practical, because the government experiment in this direction failed, which was made in the apprenticeship of slaves.⁶³

This statement captures the notion that many people were opposed to indentured servitude from the very beginning due to its obvious similarities to both slavery and the denounced apprenticeship system that followed slavery. How indentured labor then widely existed for a century and finally collapsed is a complex question to answer. For one, while the essential premises behind the debate over indentured labor themselves did not change, the context of these debates did. As historian David Northrup points out, “The campaign to end slavery in the older British colonies had broadened during the nineteenth century, extending its geographical scope worldwide and including many other forced labor systems.”⁶⁴ For instance, in 1843, the Indian debt and caste-based peonage systems were banned as forms of slavery, while slavery in the United States and serfdom in Russia were finally outlawed by the end of the 1860s. Growing international sentiment against slavery and similar forms of coerced labor is captured by the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 1926.⁶⁵ Moreover, international campaigns against abusive forms of coerced labor also coexisted alongside burgeoning labor movements of the new industrial classes, which created widespread distaste against unfair wages, long hours, and hazardous working environments.⁶⁶ Additionally, budding nationalist movements in both India

⁶³ *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the Treatment of Immigrants in British Guiana*, 1871, Parliamentary Papers, 63.

⁶⁴ David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism: 1834-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 141.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

and China began in response to imperialistic foreign interventions such as defeat in the Opium Wars in China and repeatedly denied sovereignty in India. These movements led both the Chinese and Indian governments to more strictly restrict the exportation of laborers from their shores.⁶⁷

In the context of increasing global awareness and national discontent with abusive labor systems, the British Royal Government eventually dismantled and outlawed the unpopular system of indentured labor in the British West Indies by the end of the 1930s. While it is difficult to measure the exact contributions of Chinese and Indian coolie resistance efforts to the elimination of the coolie trade in the 20th century, the various riots, protests, legal complaints, and desertions of coolies in the British West Indies certainly helped raise awareness of the extent of the abuses found in the indentured labor system, which was fundamental in gathering the necessary support to dismantle the system of indentured servitude.⁶⁸

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⁶⁷ Edgar L. Erickson, "The Introduction of East Indian Coolies into the British West Indies," *The Journal of Modern History* 6, no. 2 (1934): 127-46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

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