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Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2017; xvi + 320 pp. RRP: GBP75.

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Following the abolition of slavery by the British parliament in 1833, there emerged a novel system of labour recruitment through indenture in order to furnish working hands for the sugar colonies scattered across the Indian Ocean, Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. India became the ‘mother country’ to supply millions of such indentured labourers known as ‘coolies’, who were shipped overseas to European, mostly British-owned, sugar estates in Mauritius, Natal, Surinam, Fiji and British Guiana. The monograph by Ashutosh Kumar is a detailed study of this system of labour recruitment, wherein he captures the journey of a ‘coolie’ right from his or her point of origin in the rural hinterland of North India to the arduous passage on sailing ships before landing into sugar plantations, and eventually his or her encounter with a world dramatically different from, yet in some ways similar to, the native place in India. Bhojpuri-speaking migrant labourers from the flood- and drought-prone plains of Bihar and the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh) in North India, which provided the earliest and largest numbers of recruits, constitute the fulcrum of Kumar’s analysis.

Kumar begins his narrative with a brief introduction (Chapter 1) of the extant historiography and debates around various aspects of indentured migration. The extent to which indentured migration was ‘a new system of slavery’; how far the migration to distant colonies entailed economic, social and cultural benefits for the coolies; the experiences of women who migrated as indentured labourers; the level of ‘freedom’ and ‘unfreedom’ involved in emigration legislation; issues of ‘volition’ and ‘deception’ associated with the recruitment of coolies are some of the important issues which have attracted attention of historians working on the system of indentured migration. All these issues appear at some stage or other in Kumar’s work.

In Chapter 2, Kumar traces the pre-history of migration or what he terms the ‘culture of migration’ in search of *naukri* or jobs in distant places. Kumar looks at overseas migration of the Bhojpuri-speaking population in 19th and 20th century as a mere extension of historic inland migratory patterns which were already in vogue ever since the establishment of sultanate rule. Kumar argues strongly in favour of the ‘agency’ of migrating labourers, presenting them as ‘voluntary’ and ‘fully aware’ migrants. According to Kumar, migration to distant lands, in many ways, enabled these labourers, especially women and lower castes, to move out of their perennial bonds related to caste, class and gender.

Chapter 3 looks at efforts on the part of the British colonial government in India to regulate indentured migration through various laws. These laws, as delineated by Kumar, aimed to streamline overseas migration to ensure a steady supply of 'able-bodied' coolies for sugar plantations. Emigration legislation thus turned a casual system into a well-organised one. According to Kumar (p. 70), for practical as well as political reasons, the Government of India mitigated most of 'abuses' associated with the early years of indentured migration by putting into place a system of regulation best epitomised by the Emigration Act of 1883. The Emigration Act of 1883 governed almost all aspects of indentured migration, such as the roles of recruiters and sub-agents of emigration, the agreement to be signed by the intending emigrant, and judicial review of the agreement and offences by either the recruiter or the emigrant.

Chapter 4, the longest one, captures meticulously the on-board experience of the indentured labourers on a sea voyage that lasted weeks, sometimes months, before the indentured labourer reached the destination colony. This journey was full of hopes and despair, life and death, levelling of old hierarchies and creation of new relationships. Here, Kumar gives the minutest details of kinds of ships being used for transportation of the coolies to distant lands, mortality rates during voyages, on-board medical provision, dietary provisions during the journey and experience of emigrants aboard the ship. He shows how, amid the traumatic and arduous journey, the *girmitiyas* (Bhojpuri term for indentured labourers) formed novel relationships such as that of *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji behan* ('ship-brother' and 'ship-sister') undermining the existing hierarchies back home and how a whole new cultural universe was reproduced by them to overcome the emotional pain of leaving behind their kith and kin.

In Chapter 5, Kumar offers a comparative analysis of the cultural and agricultural worlds traversed by the *girmitiyas*. He looks at differences in the nature of sugarcane production under the peasant system of North India and that under the plantation regime. He examines change and continuity in family life and marriage; rituals of birth and death; celebration of festivals like Holi, Dussehra, Diwali and Muharram; and reception of religious texts, sects and traditions while moving from North Indian peasant society to plantation colonies, especially Fiji. In doing so, Kumar establishes the fact that while culture is lived and reproduced in communities, it is crucially tied to 'place' and the exigencies of work and labour (p. 155). The shift of context from the peasant commodity production system of North India to the capitalist mode of sugar production in plantation colonies introduced significant alterations in the socio-cultural world of Bhojpuri-speaking emigrants.

All the aforesaid themes reverberate in the memoirs of *girmitiyas* which constitute the subject matter of Chapter 6. Kumar focuses particularly on the writings of three extraordinary *girmitiyas* – Totaram Sanadhya, Baba Ramchandra and Munshi Rahman Khan. All three belonged to the upper echelons of Indian society and hence were entrusted with relatively easy tasks at the manager's house in the plantations and did not have direct experience of the harsh regime of plantation work. Nevertheless, their written memoirs provide an important insight into the world of indentured labourers.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Kumar critically analyses the nationalist discourse around the indenture system and its eventual abolition in 1917. He argues that its initial phase exhibited a disdainful attitude towards the problems of coolies. Instead, the early nationalist discourse, including that of Mahatma Gandhi, made deliberate attempts to draw clear

lines between 'free' Indians and the 'coolies' working in the colonies and committed itself to the cause exclusively of 'free' Indians (pp. 207–208). In fact, in many ways, coolies who were ready to work under any circumstance were indirectly held responsible for the contemptuous attitude of the colonisers towards 'free' non-indentured Indians. Thus, a hierarchy of status was upheld in the initial phase. For early nationalists, it was not the condition of indentured workers that was the problem per se, but the fact that respectable and wealthy 'free' Indians were being treated in the same ways as those who were working as 'coolies'. However, frustrated in their attempts to attain a 'respectable' position in the eyes of the colonisers, the nationalist leaders started invoking the harsh working conditions of coolies in their rhetoric to bargain with the colonial state. This, in turn, created a powerful anti-indenture campaign voiced by prominent leaders such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi, CF Andrews and others in the second decade of the 20th century and eventually led to the system's abolition. Here, Kumar rightly points out that the overall exploitative nature of the system was merely a secondary concern in the nationalist discourse that mobilised the question of indenture for wider political purposes (p. 205).

Kumar's study, which he presents as an endeavour to develop 'an alternative view' on the world of *girmitiyas* (p. 241), appears to be heavily influenced by the views and writings of Shahid Amin, who supervised Kumar's doctoral work at the University of Delhi, and of Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, who guided his postdoctoral research on the 'Becoming Coolies' project at the University of Leeds. These influences appear to have led him to occasionally romanticise the journey of a coolie. In his interest in the details of the cultural world of *girmitiyas*, Kumar has overlooked the exploitative structure which was characteristic of the indentured system. His appraisal of the overseas migration of the Bhojpuri-speaking population as a mere extension of historic inland migratory patterns misses vital differences between the two. While the earlier inland migrations were short-term and unorganised, indentured migration was long-term and far more organised in nature with the state being actively involved in the recruitment process. Furthermore, the psychological trauma of separation faced by the *girmitiyas* was hardly there in the case of peasant soldiers of sultanate. For the latter, returning home was much easier, socially as well as economically, than for overseas coolie migrants. Similarly, in his attempt to celebrate the 'agency' of emigrating labourers, Kumar downplays the element of deception involved in their recruitment through indenture.

Nevertheless, Kumar offers a lucid narrative of indenture migration from its beginning in 1834 till its abolition in 1917. It is useful for both the scholarly investigation of various aspects of overseas migration from India to sugar colonies and for a lay reader trying to understand, out of curiosity, the unique world of the *girmitiyas* of the Ganges valley.

Craig Freedman, *In Search of the Two-Handed Economist: Ideology, Methodology and Marketing in Economics*, Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2016; xx +418 pp., ISBN 9781137589736. RRP Hardcover EUR 135 (AUD 206.50; ebook EUR 107 (AUD 163).

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