

ABSTRACT

A SOCIAL HISTORY OF INDENTURED INDIAN IMMIGRATION
TO BRITISH GUIANA AND TRINIDAD, 1854-1884

Elizabeth R. Rabe

Between 1854 and 1884, over 190,000 Indian immigrants came to the British colonies of British Guiana and Trinidad as indentured servants to work in the booming sugar industry. Colonial authorities and plantation owners replaced black slavery with a new system of coercive, unfree labor. Indian immigrants signed labor contracts that bound them to work on plantations for five to ten years in conditions that reminded contemporary observers of slavery. Indians suffered and died during their passage from India and in the canefields of British Guiana and Trinidad. This study explores the recruitment, voyage, and life and labor of these indentured Indians.

Although Indians led hard lives in the British colonies, they contested their servitude in numerous, small ways. Indian laborers stole food, feigned illness to avoid work, rioted, and conducted labor strikes. Indians further challenged their degradation by developing a rich community life. Drawing on their Hindu and Muslim beliefs, Indians built temples and mosques, celebrated religious festivals, and launched cooperative economic ventures. Indentured servants recreated and adapted traditional Indian village life to the West Indies.

This study of Indian immigration and indentured servitude is informed by research in published primary and secondary sources and archival research in the British National Archives (London), the India Office Library (London), the National

Archives of Trinidad and Tobago (Port-of-Spain), and the University of the West Indies Archives (St. Augustine).

Keywords: Elizabeth R. Rabe, British Guiana, Guyana, Trinidad, Indentured Labor, Indian Immigration, East Indians, Hindu, Muslim