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The Etonian, the Indians and the Poly boys

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Abstract

Departing from reflections on the panel 'Indian Indenture: Histories, Continuities' held at the *CICC School* in London in April 2025, this essay explores histories of indentured labour, the University of Westminster's entanglement with those histories through its founder Quintin Hogg, as well as the wider reverberations of the exploitative and oppressive labour practices put in place during colonialism, and puts forward a call for more education and public debate on the histories and continuities of the indentured labour system.

Keywords: British empire; Caribbean; colonialism; indentured labourers; India

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The Etonian, the Indians and the Poly boys

Sumita Singha OBE Dr (hc)



The name of Quintin Hogg, the Victorian tea merchant and philanthropist, is associated with the University of Westminster, which is ranked 4th in the UK and 32nd in the world for 'International Outlook' . But how did he make his fortune and come to found this university? What were his connections with Indian indentured labourers? And one may even ask, 'What was the indentured labourship about?'

Running across April 2025 was the groundbreaking *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* (*CICC*): *The British East India Company on Trial*, with a series of events at Ambika P3, an exhibition space belonging to the University of Westminster, organised in collaboration with the Serpentine gallery. The *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* is a project by Radha D'Souza, lawyer and artist, and Jonas Staal, a Dutch visual artist. Following on from three sessions of the court, the space hosted the *CICC School*, a programme of screenings, talks, discussions and workshops relating to the project's theme. One event that I attended was a panel titled 'Indian Indenture: Histories, Continuities' and chaired by Kingsley Abbott, the director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. I heard about the Indians who were transported to many parts of the world to work on plantations after slavery was abolished, thereby unleashing another horrifying history. The panellists were Diamond Ashiagbor, Professor of Law at the University of Kent who examined the similarities between indentured labour and today's 'precarious' work contracts; Maria del Pilar Kaladeen, an

Associate Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, who gave us a history of indentured labourship; and Gitanjali Pyndiah, a researcher and creative writer, currently at the Getty Centre in Los Angeles as a Connecting Art Histories Scholar, who spoke about the inspirational story of 'Anna of Bengal' – a slave woman brought to Cape Town from a region near Bengal in the seventeenth century.



Figure 1: Panellists for the event at the University of Westminster, April 2025. Image credit: Sumita Singha.

The story of indentureship starts when transatlantic African slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century. In Britain, the slave trade was abolished in 1807 while slavery in its colonies was abolished in 1833. The abolition of transatlantic slavery led to a shortage of workers in the European colonies because the newly freed slaves rightly refused to work for a pittance (Jamaica had 322,000 freed slaves, while British Guyana and Barbados had about 90,000 and 82,000 respectively). Over 1.6 million Indians left India upon the promise of just eight rupees per month (worth approximately half a shilling in 1898) from 1826 onwards on a long journey to various European colonies, starting with Mauritius. Although the East India Company's Regulations of 1837, perhaps having learnt some lessons from the slave trade, laid down specific conditions aboard the ships transporting indentured workers such as proper diet, adequate space and a doctor on duty, these were frequently not adhered to. By 1838, more than 25,000 Indians had arrived in Mauritius.[1] After various stops and starts to these voyages, Indian indentured labourers travelled to many European colonies until the 1920s. The journey took an average of 100 days, and mortality rates in the early years were high.

The word 'indenture' has its origins in 'denture' (teeth) or dents – indentured contracts had an indented or

toothed edge, one part of which could be torn out and retained as proof of authenticity. However, given that most indentured labourers were illiterate and ignorant of what lay ahead, the terms of these standardised contracts could be easily manipulated. Although the contract was for only five years and could be renewed, the repatriation of those who had completed their terms and wanted to leave remained a problem. Like the stories of many modern-day migrants, their income was not enough to pay back the agent's fees and expenses; and with rising debt and the promise of Caribbean land, many stayed back. Hugh Tinker, the British historian, called indentureship a 'new system of slavery' as in the title of his book published in 1974. To be an indentured Indian labourer on the long journey to the Caribbean was to 'enter a life-and-death lottery in which the chances of survival were significantly worse than those of a shackled African slave' (Tharoor 2016: 164). Long after the trade in enslaved people ended, many Caribbean islands have remained under full or partial control of France and the UK – Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Martin, and St. Barth are still French Caribbean territories while the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and Anguilla are British Caribbean territories. Thus, there still is no political autonomy for those who were brought there by slavery or indentureship and laboured and tilled those lands.



Figure 2: Newly arrived Indian labourers (called 'Coolies' by the British) in Trinidad, nineteenth century. Of the nearly 144,000 who landed in Trinidad, only 29,448 returned to India, with a mortality rate of 30% crossing the seas (the mortality rate for the African slave trade was 12.5%). Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

We now see a large diaspora of Indian heritage in the Caribbean, South Africa, Réunion, Mauritius and as far as Fiji. Today, the food, music and surnames,[2] and people's physical features testify to the huge numbers of Indians transported there. The Indian diaspora, including those from the descendants of indentured labourers, is over 44 million globally, more than the population of Australia. Chinese indentured labourers

were also introduced to the Caribbean, as can be seen in the unique physical features of those with a mixture of African, Indian and Chinese heritages from the Caribbean. Like the descendants of African slaves, the descendants of Indian indentured labourers do not know which part of India they came from. They do not speak any languages apart from English. Apart from the physical cruelty such labourers were subjected to, the loss of their identity, culture and language were also heinous crimes.[3] Slang words used today in Trinidad and Tobago such as 'lyming' or 'liming' – meaning hanging around with friends in public spaces – reportedly come from the word for British soldiers who were called 'limeys' by Indian indentured labourers.



Figure 3: Indian-origin foods on sale in Trinidad. Image credit: Sumita Singha.



Figure 4: Kidderpore ghat, Kolkata, from which the indentured Indians sailed the 11,000-mile journey to the Caribbean (the Suez Canal opened in 1869, reducing the journey somewhat). Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Then there was ecocide in which native people, flora and fauna were removed forcibly from the land for the sake of profits. In the Caribbean, Indigenous groups such as the eponymous Caribs, Arawaks and Taino were killed in large numbers by the colonisers or through diseases brought by them. Single crops such as sugar, coffee or tobacco were grown on lands that were previously biodiverse, resulting also in the loss of animals that had their natural habitats there. Trinidad became a world centre for tar extraction in the twentieth century, leading to toxic deposits on the land, while the road-making businesses of nineteenth century in Europe and the United States became very rich. Yet ironically, the people from these poor countries who will face the worst of the climate crisis – much through carbon emissions from cars – continue to be questioned by Western news reporters about their efforts to reduce carbon. In a viral clip,[4] the President of Guyana (currently the fastest-growing economy in the world), Mohamed Irfaan Ali, who himself is a descendent of Indian labourers, explained how Guyana remains a net-zero nation despite being an economy based on oil and gas extraction, by protecting its rainforests. Work, the President added, that is done for free for the benefit of the planet.

Sugar plantations were the places where work was needed the most and profit also the highest. One of the players in the Caribbean was Quintin Hogg, the seventh son of Irish-born businessman, lawyer and politician and Chairman of the East India Company, Sir James Hogg. Quintin Hogg became involved in the tea and sugar trades from 1863 to 1865 – his father's deep involvement in the East India Company made this quite convenient. He modernised sugar production in Demerara (the former name of the Dutch colony Guiana/Guyana and now the name of a type of unrefined sugar) at the plantation of his brother-in-law, the

former slave owner Charles McGarel. Profits from the plantations that were worked on by Indian labourers were transferred back to London and were used in Christian-inspired philanthropy. 'Ragged' schools were opened when Hogg turned to educational reform. In 1882, he founded the Young Men's Christian Institute, which was renamed the Regent Street Polytechnic (incorporating the Royal Polytechnic Institution). Later, the polytechnic became a part of Polytechnic of Central London (PCL), and eventually it became the University of Westminster. Hogg's last words to the 'poly boys' are memorialised in a plaque at the University's Regent Street campus, the original location of the polytechnic (see main image). Today, Hogg is remembered innocuously as a Victorian tea merchant, philanthropist and educator. The University of Westminster's Quintin Hogg Trust states that its 'sole purpose is to support the advancement of education for the students at the University'[5] – which it does through funding a broad range of projects and activities proposed by University staff and students.



Figure 5: The memorial plaque at the University of Westminster's Regent Street campus. iImage credit: Sumita Singha.

The book *The Other Windrush: Legacies of Indenture in Britain's Caribbean Empire* (Kaladeen and Dabydeen 2021) highlights the hidden history of a 'minority within a minority'[6] – Caribbean migrants of Indian and Chinese descent, often the descendants of indentured labourers – who were the 'invisible passengers'[7] on the ship HMT *Empire Windrush* that brought them to the UK. Their stories,[8] especially those of the women, are often forgotten, and there is silence about the discrimination experienced by many of such mixed heritage. As Maria Del Pilar Kaladeen (2023, n.pag.), herself the descendant of an Indian indentured labourer, wrote in the article 'Invisible Windrush', even though one will 'encounter British people of Indian-Mauritian, Indian-South African and Indian-Fijian heritage in the UK, the system of indenture that brought their ancestors to those countries is entirely absent from school curriculums and until recently, university syllabuses too'. Even more shocking is that the study of such important aspects of British history is 'optional' in schools – and to be found only on websites such as BBC Bite Size, which is aimed at children, or on Wikipedia.

UCL has a website about legacies of British slavery,[9] and other universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, are examining their links to slavery, but indentured labour is not yet covered. Like carbon offsetting, which means you can release all the carbon you like as long as you pay for it, this kind of 'philanthropic offsetting' is a grey area, especially if the originally accumulated wealth is based on past exploitation of nature and humans. Profits made by Hogg from plantations were transferred back to the UK for educating poor boys. This was not philanthropy in the style of Robin Hood – on the contrary, poor people were robbed of their country, health, identity and money in order to bring money back to the poor of a rich nation.

So, is there a case for reparations? After all, slave owners were paid compensation when slavery was abolished, but the people who suffered due to it – the African slaves or the Indian indentured labourers who followed – were not. Trinity College theologian Reverend Michael Banner has proposed that reparations for slavery be paid as suggested by the Caribbean countries through CARICOM, a political and economic union of 15 countries and five associated members in the Americas, the Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean. However, as I said to him directly during a seminar on 29 January 2025, these reparations will not consider indentureship. As the process is so complex, Shashi Tharoor (2016), the ebullient and erudite Indian MP, in his book *Inglorious Empire* (and his Oxford Union address) asked for an apology and one pound as a reparation sum! It is clear that the connections between colonisation, the Industrial Revolution, and slave and indentured labour need to be explored, examined and debated widely – at least in the UK, if not globally.

The plight of the indentured labourers, which is not discussed as much as slavery, was brought into focus during this *CICC School* event. For example, not many people know that the *Empire Windrush* also brought workers of Indian heritage to the UK. Noting that the theme of the third case held at the 2025 iteration of the *CICC*, was 'Trading with People's Lives' we see the evidence of the 'continued exploitation of labour around the world' (Serpentine 2025: 7). A history of use and abandonment of other types of indentured or otherwise subjugated labourers is a common theme throughout colonialism and even now. One of the most poignant stories relates to a house known as the Ayahs' Home, at 26 King Edward's Road, East London (English Heritage n.d.). Ayahs were Indian nursemaids who looked after babies and children in colonial India – and their seasick mothers on the long sea voyages from the colonies to back to the UK. As the host families in Britain were rich enough to have permanent staff at home, after their arrival the women were made to wait in the UK just in case they were needed. Many of the children and Ayahs had formed deep bonds, and so the inevitable eventual forced departure was painful for both. Some families did not even honour their promises of a return ticket or of providing the means for the Ayahs to survive during their stay in the UK. This home in Hackney was the first to be opened in the 1900s after the Rogers family found an abandoned Indian woman in the City of London. In more contemporary times, the stories of the Gurkhas and Afghans who helped British troops but were not treated well ring similar bells (Walters 2025; Wilson 2005). Thus, the British Crown continues to be guilty of crimes against people, their cultures and lands.

ENDNOTES

1. It is important to note that colonial India included those countries which today are part of the Indian

subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and indentured workers also came from ‘Indochina’ and parts of Myanmar (where ‘Anna’ of Bengal came from- in quotation marks as Anna would not have been her real name).

2. For example, Ramroop, Churn, Rampersad, Harrisingh, Beharry, Bandoo, Siew, Santokie, Persad, Ameer, Amair, Mahabeer, Baboolal, Gopaul and many others – all are anglicised versions of Indian surnames.
3. And indeed, the African slaves were also subject to this kind of erasure, with them being given European names.
4. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T48d2TQ1TmE.
5. See https://www.quintinhoggtrust.co.uk.
6. See https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745343549/the-other-windrush.
7. See https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745343549/the-other-windrush.
8. See, for example, Bahadur (2013).
9. See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2014903896.

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