When Indian emigrants disembarked at Port Louis, they entered a new phase of their lives where they had to work in a complete alien setting under a new labour regime and with new set of norms of work. This chapter will attempt to look into the working as well as the personal lives of the indentured workers on the plantation sites in terms of their allotment, engagement, working conditions, wages and other allowances, strategies of labour control, resistance of labourers, and aspects of their personal lives such as marriages, family lives, religion, caste, etc.. To make the narrative structured, this chapter is divided into two parts: part one is about their working lives and part two describes their personal lives.

I: Working Lives

From Port to Estates

i. Disembarkation; the Immigration Depot and Its Procedures

In the beginning, when the emigrants arrived in Mauritius, they were straight away handed over to the planter without any procedural follow up or housing at the port. The first proposal to set up a place to receive the arriving emigrants and house them before their allocation to the plantations came from the Mauritian planters under the aegis of Free Labour Association in the wake of prohibition imposed upon importing labourers from India in 1839.¹ When the emigration from India was resumed in 1842, a Protector of Immigrants was appointed at Port Louis for the inspection of arriving labourers, to record their identifying details and to supervise the

process of their allocation to plantations. It was made mandatory by the law to house all the immigrants in depot for 48 hours so they can have time to negotiate and chose their employers according to their free will. To carry out all these functions, the Protector needed space at the port and subsequently an emigration depot was set up at Commissariat Stores which had to function as a small pox hospital as well in addition to receive the newly arrived immigrants. The place was made of wooden structure which was in a dilapidated condition. It had no place for cooking and lavatories, was infested with white ants\(^2\) and there was no space for setting up the office of the Protector. Dissatisfied with the arrangements at this site and fearing that immigrants would flee from this place without the mandatory registration and engaging with some planter, Protector Anderson decided to shift the emigration depot to Mrs. Rondeaux’s place in May 1844. In addition to house the newly arriving immigrants, deserters were also moved to this place but only to be removed soon because of the heavy pressure for accommodating the huge influx of immigrants. Very soon, however, this place also proved insufficient because of poor maintenance of the building\(^3\) and the huge quantum of arrivals. In 1849, Protector Thomy Hugon requested for a larger premise for the emigration depot and a modification plan was submitted to construct additional housing and office space which became imperative because of the massive influx of immigrants and for carrying out recently elaborated registration process, collection of fees, issuing of tickets etc. In that year and again in 1853, the depot was renovated, enlarged and improved. In 1859, a new building was added to the depot premises. The most comprehensive plan of expansion and modification of the emigration depot was executed in 1865 when the newly constructed railway line split the depot in two parts.

A foot over bridge was constructed to connect both the parts, additional new sheds

\(^2\) PI to Colonial Secretary, dt. 22 May 1844, PB2
\(^3\) PI to Colonial Secretary, dt. 8 May 1844, cited in Aapravasi Ghat: Past and Present, Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, Mauritius, 2003, pp. 5-6.
Plate VI

Plan of Immigration Depot Mauritius, 1865

Plan of Immigration Depot, 1865
Chapter 5

were built. Plan of 1865 remained the blue print of depot till the end with occasional modifications and extension of basic facilities like provisions for cooking space, privies, space for medical care etc. The remains of this depot, now known as Aapravasi Ghat, has acquired a legendary status in the minds and memories of Indian Diaspora in Mauritius as a symbolic medium to connect to their indentured heritage and their ancestors.

Upon their disembarkation from the ships, Indian immigrants were received in the Immigration depot which also functioned as the hub of all the administrative functioning of the immigration process. In the depot itself, which in principle was meant to provide a secure transit point to the newly arrived immigrants, they got a feel of the discipline and regulated lives which were waiting for them. After the arrival, immigrants were taken before the Protector and their names, age, place of origin, caste, and other identifying details were recorded in the immigration registers. They had to go through a thorough medical examination especially because of the fear of spread of epidemics, and even in cases of minor suspicion, they were often placed under strict and lengthy quarantine. In cases of couples and families arriving, they were given marriage certificates. In this entire process they were often subjected to harsh treatment and even beating by the employees of the depot.

In addition to receiving and registering the newly arrived immigrants, immigration depot also functioned as the principal office of the immigration department. In this capacity it worked as a place to receive the time expired immigrants (immigrants whose contracts were expired and who were not re-engaged), facilitate their re-engagement, receive deserters and vagrants from police and their reinstatement. To quote Higginson,

'The depot has from a mere registration office for the arriving and departing Indians being transformed into the central Agency, to which
all the regulations for the management of immigration: for the allotment of labourers, for the issue of tickets to old and new immigrants are referred. It has also to a certain degree become a source of revenue.\(^4\)

**ii. Allocation of Immigrant Labourers**

The emigration of Indian labourers started as a private initiative and emigrants arrived in Mauritius on the requests of specific planters after signing the contract at the port of embarkation in India itself. Therefore, during this period, on their arrival, immigrants were just handed over to the planter who had made the request for them.

But when the immigration was resumed in 1842 at public expense, a new system of allocation of immigrant labourers was introduced with an intention to enable the immigrants to freely choose their employer. Under this new system immigrants were recruited for Mauritius and after their arrival in the colony, they were to be kept in the immigration depot for 48 hours\(^5\) and enter into a contract only after meeting prospective employers. It was intended that this system of immigrants’ free choice in their allocation would ultimately benefit them as it would create a competition among the planters who would in turn offer more generous wages and other facilities to the immigrants to attract them. As Governor Gomm emphasised that,

‘the greater the competition among the masters, the freer will the new labourers be to make their choice.... by leaving the door wide open to the public as at present, the interests of the immigrants would seem to be best protected.’\(^6\)

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\(^4\) Higginson to Newcastle, dt. 28 December 1853, SD 45/219  
\(^5\) Colonial Secretary to PI, dt. 18 February 1843, PL 57  
\(^6\) Gomm to Stanley, dt. 9 July 1844, CO/167/254
Whether this newly introduced system of allocation worked for the benefit of immigrant labourers or not is a matter of contest but it gave birth to two detrimental features in the allocation process. These features were: first, rise of intermediaries and second, frequent turning of this competition into clash and disorder in the immigration depot. Removing these remained one of the primary concerns of the administrators. For planters it became necessary to take services of people who could negotiate with the arriving immigrants in their language on behalf of planters. This circumstantial necessity provided a new opportunity to the enterprising Indian immigrants to work as intermediaries or 'sirdars' and occupy a prominent position in the whole network. The planters' inevitable dependence on the sirdars and the hold these sirdars maintain over the allotment of immigrants was soon noticed by the Protector. He tried to curb the influence of these intermediaries by introducing a lottery system of allotment in which only planters and their bona fide agents were allowed to participate. However, this lottery system could not gain popularity and had to be abandoned soon because of the complaints of the large planters who found it difficult to procure enough labourers for their multiple estates through just one representative, as allowed under this system. These large proprietors also complained against the undue authority of these sirdars which was hampering true interests of planters and eventually the prosperity of Mauritius.

The open access to the immigration depot brought some disorder. In order to improve the distribution process and pacify the disorder, the acting Protector J. Dowland proposed certain changes in the system in 1847 which were finally implemented with slight modifications by Thomy Hugon who took charge of Protector in the same year. According to Dowland's proposal, immigrants should

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7 General Report of CLEC, 1845, p.16; Document 4.4, Select Documents, Vol. II
8 Document 4.3 and encl. Select Documents, Vol. II
forms bands and these bands would then be presented to the planters who would engage one band for a particular estate. When Hugon implemented these suggestions, he assigned the task of forming of immigrant bands on a returnee recruiter who were remigrating with some new recruits. After this group based distribution, the remaining immigrants were to be organised by the Protector and then allotted to the estates that had the reputation of good working conditions for the labourers. This system apparently worked well without causing much discontent among the planters and the Mauritian authorities were appreciated for devising such a system.

When Higginson took charge as Governor in 1851, an attempt was made to fix ceilings on the immigrant labourers employed by a planter per annum. Ordinance 9 was passed in 1851 which authorised the Governor to determine the number of immigrants an individual employer would be allowed to engage per annum. This ceiling was to be calculated on the basis of the average volume of sugar produced by such planter on his estate in the preceding three years and the employers wanting to engage a larger number of labourers than their assigned quota would be required to pay a fixed amount of money for each extra labourer engaged. This ordinance set the principle and the actual quota was set by Ordinance 15 of 1854. Under this ordinance, planters were entitled to receive five new labourers per annum per 100,000 lbs of sugar produced. To get extra labourers, they had to pay £3 per additional male immigrant. Ordinance 22 of 1857 went a step ahead in diluting the Mauritian government's direct control over the volume of immigration and placing the demands according to the planters' interests. This ordinance allowed the planters to directly

9 PI to Colonial Secretary, dt. 26 April 1847, CO/167/282, PRO.
10 Hugon to Colonial Secretary, dt. 11 January 1848, PP, Vol. xlv, No. 399, 1847-48.
12 Ordinance 9 of 1851, Encl., Grey to Higginson, dt. 11 July 1851, SA 46/103, MA.
13 Sutherland to Newcastle, 7 August 1854, CO/167/360, PRO.
send their requirements of additional labourers to the Emigration Agent in Calcutta.\textsuperscript{14} These regulations significantly reduced the occurrence of conflicts between the competing planters and the Governor observed that the planters and their agents were freely communicating with the immigrants and cases of disorder in depot were very rare.\textsuperscript{15} However, the incidents of enticing away the immigrants engaged by other planters continued to occur and in 1857 when the arrival of immigrants reached at an unprecedented high level, acts of violence, attacks on immigrants, and clashes took place in the emigration depot and the Protector had to call for extra police force to prevent the acts of violence.\textsuperscript{16} The futility of such efforts to control the conflict between the planters and protect the interests of the immigrants led Governor Stevenson to suggest that they should ‘give up the fiction of allowing the Indian to choose his own master, a selection which, owing to the peculiarities of his character, and the circumstances in which he finds himself placed, on his arrival in a strange country, he is not likely to make for himself’.\textsuperscript{17} He also suggested that instead they should ‘sanction the engagement of a man in India …’\textsuperscript{18}

Subsequently, Ordinance 30 of 1858 was passed by the Mauritian government ‘to check certain abuses which are found to arise out of the employment of recruiters to collect emigrants for private parties.’\textsuperscript{19} Now onwards, all the contracts for engaging immigrant labourers to different estates had to be entered into and approved in India itself, prior to the embarkation of immigrants from the Indian ports. Planters and their agents were debarred from entering into the Immigration depot or making contacts

\textsuperscript{14} Ordinance 22 of 1857, Encl. to Labouchere to Stevenson, dt. 17 October 1857, SA 59/53, MA.
\textsuperscript{15} Higginson to Grey, dt. 11 March 1852, SD 43/263, MA.
\textsuperscript{16} Protector to Colonial Secretary, dt. 8 June 1857. PB 6; Report of Royal Commission, Vol. II, Evidence of T. Hugon.
\textsuperscript{17} Stevenson to Lytton, dt. 5 August 1858, PP, Vol.xxi, No. 31, 1859.
\textsuperscript{18} Stevenson to Lytton, dt. 5 August 1858, PP, Vol.xxi, No. 31, 1859.
\textsuperscript{19} Emigration Commissioner to Merivale, dt. 5 March 1859. Encl. 2 to Document 4.11, \textit{Select Documents, Vol. II}
with the just arrived immigrants. For any immigrant arriving in Mauritius without entering into contract in India, or any unclaimed band of immigrants, Protector had the authority to allot them to any planter or engage them in public works like road building.20

**Working on Plantations**

When the immigrant labourers arrived on the plantations, they were restricted to the confines of the estates where every aspect of their life was set by the plantation regime to maximise its interests and get the most out of these labourers. They worked under strict prerequisites of a written contract and plantation authorities defined the working schedules, wages and other allowances for the immigrant labourers, and provided the food, clothing and medical care to them.

i. Duration of Contracts

In the depot itself immigrants had to sign a written contract which allocated them to a specific location and set the parameters of their lives for a fixed period of time. The terms and conditions of such contracts were articulated in a language which raises doubts about their comprehensibility for the ignorant immigrants 21; however they were supposed to sign it only after understanding it completely and by exercising their free choice. The first such contract signed between the representative of G.C. Arbuthnot and 36 natives (dhangars) mentions the duration of contracts, wages and other allowances such as food and clothing provided to the immigrant labourers, and provision for return passage after the completion of contract. 22 Marina Carter argues that these ‘contracts marked a departure from slavery in providing for a wage

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20 Encl. 3 to Document 4.11, *Select Documents, Vol. II*
21 Legislative Department of Indian government noted in its public consultations, ‘it is not in all cases certain that they fully understand the terms of the contracts by which they bind themselves, or that they are really willing to proceed for long periods to a distance from their native country.’ Public Consultations, Legislative Department, dt. 6 March 1837 in *Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers Bill*, London, 1938, pp. 202-203.
Chapter 5

payment to workers as well as food and clothing but if we look at the fine print of these contracts and the unfulfilled promises of wages and allowances, it is evident that these contracts did bind the immigrant labourers to specific locations (and she herself admits this), and these differences remain only in theoretical promulgations. By the time the system was suspended in 1839, around 20,000 Indian immigrants were already working in the island under different contracts which were similar only in one respect, their duration, i.e. for five years.

Shortly after, a sense of dissatisfaction began to be felt among the Indian and British authorities as well as among the opponents of the system about the discrepancies in these contracts and the inherent intentions in protecting the interests of immigrant labourers. After his return from Mauritius in 1837, T.C. Scott of Bengal Civil Services reported that ‘the terms of these (contracts) have been getting gradually less advantageous to the labourers.’ He found the terms of contracts deficient for securing a fair treatment and proper payment to the labourers and suggested the reduction of the period of contracts to two years. In Britain, Secretary of State Glenelg was also sceptical about the well being of the immigrant labourers under the private contracts and suggested that these contracts should last only till the labourers refund the costs of their introduction through their labour. Concern for the freedom of ‘coolies’ and five year duration of the labour contracts was among the various concerns of the British and Foreign Anti Slavery Society (BFASS) of Britain. In a petition submitted to the House of Commons, its secretary J.H. Tredgold asserted that:

“persons working under such contracts are slaves and such wages and allowances are utterly inadequate to sustain them in health for the

24 ibid.
performance of the heavy duties required of them in sugar
cultivation."\(^{28}\)

All the committees set by the Indian government to enquire into the abuses associated with indentured immigration found that the terms of contracts were beyond the understanding capabilities of the immigrants, and the five year period was too long and left no scope for any rectification in case of grievances emerging for either parties.\(^{29}\) Therefore, the Indian government recommended making these contracts terminable at the option of either party after a certain reasonable period.\(^{30}\) J.P. Grant recommended elaborate regulatory measures for conducting indentured immigration in his minutes. He suggested the appointment of a Protector in Mauritius to safeguard the interests of Indian immigrants and reduction of the duration of contracts to two years.\(^{31}\) Finally, when emigration was resumed in 1842 under Act V of 1842, the duration of contracts was reduced to one year, which the immigrants had to enter into after their arrival in Mauritius,\(^{32}\) while in the earlier system immigrants signed the contracts for five years before their embarkation from Indian ports.

The reduction in the duration of contracts was not well accepted by the planters as well as by the Mauritian authorities who perceived it as loss of their authority over immigrant labourers and raison d'être for the uncertainty in labour supply and instability on the plantation as well as for unrest among labourers. A committee was appointed by the Mauritian government in 1845 for enquiring into the causes of labour shortage. This committee held yearly contracts responsible for the

\(^{28}\) Emigration from India: The Export of Coolies and Other Labourers to Mauritius, BFASS, London, 1842.


\(^{30}\) Public Consultations, Legislative Department, dt. 6 March 1837 in Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers Bill, London, 1938, p. 203.

\(^{31}\) Minute of J.P. Grant, March 1841, PP, Vol. xvi, No. 427, 1841.

plight of the labourers because 'in yearly contracts they do not become attached either to the place or employer .... have no inducement to raise stock or to keep gardens, which were sources of large profit and comfort .... and (therefore) Indians under yearly engagements amass less money, have less means and less comforts.' It also attributed the lack of interest in planters and their harsh treatment towards labourers as well as the massive desertion of labourers before the end of term to the yearly contracts which 'establishes a false and mischievous relationship between the labourer and the employer' and therefore the committee proposed the extension of contracts as indispensable for the sugar manufacturing. This correlation between duration of contracts and security of labour supply was endorsed by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners as well:

"it seems very desirable, at first sight, that any colony which may pay for the introduction of the labourers should be enabled to secure some certainty that they will remain within the same territory for a sufficient period to compensate the outlay."

This prevalent view that Indian labourers were not willing to re-engage was countered by the Mauritian Governor. He asserted that the desertions from certain estates were caused by the disadvantages of these estates rather than to any susceptibility to immigrant labourers' 'wandering habits.' He reiterated his suspicion about longer contracts and substantiated his assertion about immigrants' desire to re-engage with a number of reports emanating from different estates across the island. The table appended by Gomm to one of his despatches to Gladstone, shows

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34 ibid.
35 ibid.
36 Gomm to Stanley, dt. 28 April 1845, SD 26/79.
that a substantial number of Indian immigrants re-engaged themselves to the same employers for consecutive years:

Table 5.1

Number of Indian Indentured Labourers introduced after January 1842 who have re-engaged on the same estate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>II year</th>
<th>III year</th>
<th>IV year</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Port Louis</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Pamplemousses</td>
<td>866</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Pamplemousses</td>
<td>1582</td>
<td>1103</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>3038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riviere du Rempart</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flacq</td>
<td>1305</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Port</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savanne</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black River</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaines Wilhems</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moka</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6268</strong></td>
<td><strong>3091</strong></td>
<td><strong>1136</strong></td>
<td><strong>10498</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Despite the Governor’s views, planters continued to argue for longer contracts and ultimately the situation turned in their favour with the coming of a new governor in 1849 who was supposedly sent to protect the commercial interests of the planters. New Governor Anderson contradicted all the evidence produced by the earlier Governor and reiterated the planters’ argument that longer contracts would generate a greater attachment of labourers to the estates and curb the detrimental influence of sirdars and crimps. Ordinance 3 was passed in 1849 which extended the duration of contracts from one to three years. This extension yielded the desired results for

38 Encl.1, Anderson to Grey, dt. 10 July 1849, PP, Vol. xxxiv, No.741, 1850.
planters by contributing to a sharp decline in the labour circulation and lowering of wages but they were not satisfied yet and wanted the length of contract be extended to five years. They raised this demand for the extension of contracts through lobbying groups like the Chambers of Agriculture and Commerce of Mauritius and ultimately the duration of contracts was extended to five years through Ordinance 16 of 1862.  

As it is evident from the above discussion, the underlying motive of the planters for extension of duration of the contracts was their desire to control the labourers and curb the possibilities of a wage hike which labourers could demand while re-engaging. The administrative debates which took place on the issue overlooked the labourers' intrinsic right to re-negotiate their wages if they were not satisfied and decided the matter in favour of the planters, despite the strong opinion of a number of administrators.

ii. Wages

Indian immigrants who were introduced to work in Mauritius were to receive five rupees or ten s a month as wages and food and cloth allowances. In addition to these, they were also provided free housing on the estates and free medical attendance. In the colonial perception this was bliss for the Indian labourers because in India these labourers hardly earned more than two rupees a month and that too without any additional allowance which they received in Mauritius.  

For some observers, the rate of wages in India was even less and there was a general consensus that the wages offered in Mauritius were enormously high compared to wages in India and therefore the Indian labourers better their condition by emigrating to Mauritius.

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39 Encl., Newcastle to Stevenson, dt. 11 October 1862, SA 76/ 794.
But what were the hard realities of these glorified high wages – did the immigrants actually receive what was claimed to be their remuneration or did it remain an ‘unfulfilled expectation’42 – needs an elaborate and critical examination.

In the very beginning of the system in 1834, Indian immigrants were employed on five rupees a month to work on plantations and it was anticipated by the administrators that this would increase with time and rising fortunes of the sugar economy. But unfortunately this increase never took place and the figure of wages paid to the immigrant labourers remained same for more than eighty years with occasional and short-lived increases. It even decreased on several occasions with the sinking fortunes of sugar economy.

Table 5.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Monthly Wages (Rupees/Month)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>5 – 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>4 – 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>5 – 7.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>5 – 7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>4.54 – 5.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>5 – 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* lower rates were paid to the new immigrants and the higher rates were for the re-indenturing labourers in fifth year of service or even after that.

42 Carter, Marina, Servants, p. 177.
Above table shows that the wages paid to immigrant labourers remained same from beginning till the end of indenture system. But this is only in absolute terms and if we consider the inflationary effects and calculate the real value of wages in relative terms, the immigrants actually received wages on diminishing rates.

The planters undertook every possible trick to resist any increase in the wages. The first such trick was to reduce the bargaining opportunities of the immigrants by importing surplus labourers and binding them to the same contractual obligation for as long as possible. For employing immigrant labourers under same conditions, planters always insisted on longer contracts, in which they ultimately succeeded, and imposed severe restrictions on their mobility so the labourers had no respite but to engage with the same estate on whatever wages it offered.

When the intending immigrant was recruited, he was to receive wages of six months in advance in India itself. But from this advance payment, a considerable sum was spent even before the embarkation as payments to the recruiter as his remuneration for recruiting the emigrant, to the other people involved in the process of embarkation and buying utensils and other essentials for the voyage. And thus the immigrants arrive in Mauritius with six months wages already due on them which implies that for the next six months they would not receive any wages except the food.

There was a big gap between the stipulated wages and what the labourers actually received in Mauritius. The two main deductions put into practice by the planters were – monthly deduction for return passage and the notorious ‘double cut’ of wages. One rupee or one fifth of the total monthly wages was deducted by the planters as a security for good conduct and to meet the passage expenses in case of their repatriation because of any misconduct. This accumulated deduction was to be
refunded to the labourers upon the completion of the stipulated contracts. Though Ordinance 5 of 1840 restricts any unlawful detention or misuse of this money and provided for its reimbursement, practically it was never returned back to the labourers who were forced to re-indenture several times.

The second but most widely used by the planters and which earned a unsavoury reputation in the narratives of labour control in Mauritius was 'double cut' or deduction of two days of wages for an absence of each day, whatever the reasons might be. This was practiced by the planters as early as 1839\(^43\) and finally got the legislative endorsement also in Ordinance 22 of 1847.\(^44\) The planters' explicit authority in applying this double cut without any reference to the labour protective authorities like Stipendiary Magistrates was established by Ordinance 16 of 1862.\(^45\) And what followed was the rampant misuse of this provision by the planters to curb the labour mobility and for non payment of wages. In 1874, the former Assistant Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius, Robert Mitchell reported that double cut reduced the wage bills by one third on good estates and one half on bad estates to what should have been actually paid to the labourers.\(^46\) The Royal Commission's enquiry and opinion relating to double cut were reproachful and after citing numerous occurrences where double cut was imposed by the planters for reasons other than unlawful absence of labourers (these reasons were most often meaningless in nature like absence because of imprisonment, or attending court proceedings) the Royal Commissioners described it as a 'monstrous system'.\(^47\) Despite this persuasive condemnation, the provision of double cut remained in effect even in the supposedly

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\(^{44}\) Tinker, Hugh, A New System of Slavery, p.188.
\(^{45}\) Ordinance 16 of 1862, Encl., Newcastle to Stevenson, dt. 11 October 1862, SA 76/794, MA.
pro-labour legislation of 1878\textsuperscript{48} and it was abolished only through Ordinance 13 of 1908\textsuperscript{49} 'when indentured immigration was in its last gasp'.\textsuperscript{50} On some estates planters even enforced deduction of four days' wages for absence of each day.\textsuperscript{51} In addition to these two universal deductions, planters made deductions from labourers' wages for their absence due to sickness\textsuperscript{52}, idleness, drunkenness,\textsuperscript{53} cutting of grass, losing tools, collecting firewood\textsuperscript{54} and on countless other similar unreasonable grounds, whichever the planters fancy.

Planters used every possible excuse to defer the payment of wages in cash to the labourers. On innumerable occasions irregular payments and heavy overdue of wages were reported despite the strict legislative provisions for weekly or monthly payments of wages throughout the indenture period.\textsuperscript{55} On Bel Omble estate, Pyndugadoo and several other labourers complained that they had not received any wages for four to eight months and in ultimate despair, demanded for the cancellation of their contracts.\textsuperscript{56} The Royal Commission reported that between 1856 – 70, more than thirty estates had arrears for more than three months on an average per year.\textsuperscript{57} Planters' usual defence was the liquidity crunch. Sugar production was credit based in which planters take credit for production and repay only when the final produce was sold in the market which undoubtedly provided limited liquidity at the disposal of planters. However, the overdue of wages had more to do with the attitude of planters than the actual crisis of funds. Planters were always avoiding the wage payments on

\textsuperscript{48} Labour laws of 1878 tried to impose some strictures for the judicious use of double cut by making the assent of Stipendiary Magistrates mandatory.
\textsuperscript{49} Report of Sanderson Committee, 1910, Pt. III.
\textsuperscript{50} Tinker, A New System of Slavery, p. 189. Tinker mentions 1909 as the end of double cut.
\textsuperscript{51} 'Report of the Committee appointed to inquire into the causes of the insufficiency of the labouring population', dt. 19 February 1845, PP, Vol. xxxi, No. 641, 1845.
\textsuperscript{52} Ordinance 16 of 1862, Encl., Newcastle to Stevenson, dt. 11 October 1862, SA 76/794, MA.
\textsuperscript{53} 'Report of the Committee appointed to inquire into the causes of the insufficiency of the labouring population', dt. 19 February 1845, PP, Vol. xxxi, No. 641, 1845.
\textsuperscript{54} Report of Royal Commission, 1875, p. 310.
\textsuperscript{56} ARPI, 1871.
\textsuperscript{57} Report of Royal Commission, 1875, pp. 297-98.
some pretext or the other and a minor fault on the part of labourers provided them the opportunity to forfeit all the accumulated wages of errant labourers. In addition, the non payment of wages often pushed the labourers into a debt trap of money lenders who were usually sirdars loyal to planters, and it was expected that it would force the immigrants to extend the contracts. Non payment of wages was the most insisted upon grievance of indentured labourers and it accounted for the largest proportion in the complaints lodged by the indentured labourers. Table below shows that complaints for non payment of wages accounted for the maximum numbers among the total complaints preferred by Indian labourers against their employers:

Table 5.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Complaints for Non Payment of Wages (cases entered)</th>
<th>Total Complaints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>1672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>1107</td>
<td>1378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>959</td>
<td>1009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7235</td>
<td>10126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ARPI for years 1878-99.
Chapter 5

It also acted as stimulus for the confrontation between the planters and labourers. Despite this prominence, the redressal mechanism available for labourers to reclaim their wages often proved deficient in ensuring the payment of wages and arrears. On majority of occasions, courts connived with the planters, labourers found it very difficult to establish their dues because the wage registers were not properly maintained, and ultimately the claims of labourers were dismissed. In some cases even when the instances of non payment of wages were established, the legal procedures were notoriously slow and Stipendiary Magistrates, who were entrusted to secure the payment of wages, had difficulty in obtaining the dues for labourers and convicting the defaulters. 58 All these innate constraints of the wage payment made the stipulated wages into a longing which immigrant labourers could never attain.

iii. Other Allowances: Food and Clothing

In Mauritius, Indian immigrant labourers received rations and clothing also during indenture and this has been cited as the reason for the relatively lower rates of wages in the colony compared to the other labour importing destinations. 59 It was always mentioned in the contract as a necessary provision. As per the Ordinance 40 of 1844 60, immigrant labourers (above 10 years of age) received the food as per following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>1 ½ lbs</td>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhall or salt Fish</td>
<td>2 oz</td>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>¼ oz</td>
<td>Daily</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* for those below 10 years half of the above rations were to be supplied.

59 Tinker, Hugh, A New System of Slavery, p. 185.
60 PP, Vol. xxviii, No. 691, 1846.
However the actual rations given to the immigrants were never according to these prescribed scales of the contracts and it was successively reduced in later period. In 1873, indentured labourers were given same quantity of rice but the amount of dholl or salt fish was reduced from 2 oz daily to a little more than one oz (8 oz a week). Right from the beginning, reduction in the prescribed allowances and insufficient provision of food were the major complaints of the immigrants. In most of the cases they were given only rice everyday and other items occasionally. One of the most profound complaints to Dickens Committee was registered by Bibi Zuhoorun who returned from Mauritius on 20 September 1838:

'I had an allowance of rice served out to me; three small pots full for every seven days; every Sunday a little dholl, and a little ghee; no fish, no turmeric, nothing that was put down in the agreement...'.

Since most of food items were being imported into Mauritius, in situations of economic crisis it became financially difficult for the planters to provide the prescribed rations especially rice. And therefore the substitutes for rice were also mentioned: manioc, flour, wheaten bread or pounded maize. Despite the inadequacy of the rations provided by the planters, immigrant labourers had to sustain themselves on it because the prices of food items were exorbitant and beyond the reach of the labourers. Situation was made even worst by the fact that they were not allowed to move out of the confines of the estates and had to obtain required items from the petty shop on the estate on whatever prices the shopkeeper asked for. Ramalingam who

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61 Prog. No. 1, Rev., Ag. & Com. Dept., Emig. Branch, August 1873, NAI.
62 Ibid.
64 Evidence of Ramalingam, dt. 12 August 1842, Examination of Coolies Returned from Mauritius to Madras, OIOC.
65 Evidence of Bibi Zuhoorun, in Report of Dickens Committee; also Prog. Nos. 31-35, Gen. Dept., Emig. Branch, February 1874, WBSA.
returned from Mauritius noted that ‘pigs, fruits and vegetables are in plenty, but they were too dear for our means’.

In addition to food, indentured labourers were also provided their clothing. Men were entitled to receive two dhotis per annum and the women a fixed length of cloth. For winters they were given a blanket. And as in the case of food stuff, they were often denied these as well. Bibee Zuhoorun complained that she was not given any cloths or blankets and was forced to beg for old dresses. The clothing planters provided to the labourers was inadequate in protecting them from the vagaries of changing weather in Mauritius. If we carefully observe the photographs of Indian immigrants of that time we often find them wearing coats, trousers and military uniforms, which clearly imply that they often beg or buy the discarded clothes of planters or military uniforms to face the adverse weather conditions.

The practice of planters providing rations and clothing to the immigrant labourers on the plantations was essentially rooted in their attempts to restrict the mobility of labourers and maximise the working hours. It was effectively used by the planters to lower the wages and reduce their expenditure on maintaining the labourers, as they often provided much less rations and clothes to the labourers than the prescribed scale.

iv. Medical Attendance

According to the contracts, all immigrant labourers were to receive free medical attendance in Mauritius, and estates employing forty or more indentured labourers had to maintain a hospital on the estate. But the following observation of

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67 Evidence of Ramalingam, dt. 12 August 1842, Examination of Coolies Returned from Mauritius to Madras.
69 Carter, Marina, Servants, pp162-163.
Anderson leaves no illusions about the actual state of imperial claims of hospitals and provision of free medical attendance:

'The hospitals on the establishments which I have seen, are generally more calculated to increase disease than to alleviate its sufferings .... some of them are unfit for the reception of human beings. From a place of this description, an Indian was brought before the Committee by his comrades in such a state of emaciation as to have become a perfect skeleton; he could not stand without the assistance of three men, and although he had been for weeks in this state, his companions declared that he had neither received medical advice or any kind of attention.'\(^{71}\)

The situation remained more or less the same throughout. In 1875, the report of the Royal Commission found that the hospitals were often deserted or inhabited by animals, while Indian immigrants died without medical attendance.\(^{72}\) In 1902, a report on estate hospitals noted that, to provide medical attendance to 91,924 people living on estates, there were only fifteen doctors available.\(^{73}\)

The reasons for such a callous state of medical attendance on the plantations were attributed primarily to their stereotypes about Indian labourers as indolent and malingerers. Deposing before the Dickens Committee, Bibee Zuhoorun made the following observations about the medical attendance on plantations:

'When they (Indian labourers) complained of sickness, the doctor said they were lazy; the men were put in the stocks and got salt given them; two or three men died in this way; ... and two men died in the hospital.'\(^{74}\)

Apart from merely satisfying the mandatory requirements to maintain a hospital on the estates, irrespective of their functionality in providing medical care to

\(^{71}\) Anderson to Colonial Secretary, dt. 30 November 1838, PP, Vol. xxxvii, No. 58, 1840.
\(^{72}\) Report of Royal Commission, Chapter XX, pp. 354-92.
\(^{73}\) Tinker, Hugh, A New System of Slavery, p. 200.
\(^{74}\) Evidence of Bibee Zuhoorun, dt. 20 September 1838, in Report of Dickens Committee.
the inhabitants, these were, as argued by Marina Carter, used to discipline the habitual malingerers\textsuperscript{75} and as quarantine stations to prevent the spread of contagious diseases rather than treating the sick labourers. Provisions for free medical care to all indentured labourers remained in the books only and hospitals existed only to show to inspectors.

v. Housing

Unlike food, clothing or medical attendance, planters were not legally obliged to provide housing to immigrant labourers till 1867. Still when immigrant labourers arrived on plantations they were housed by planters in the huts vacated by the slaves and ex-apprentices. Since they come in far more numbers these huts were not enough and large sheds were built with low partitions to provide separate housing for single men and families.\textsuperscript{76} On several estates, labourers were allowed to build their own huts as well but they were also not very different. These sheds and huts were built of palisades, uncut stone or aloes and covered with straw. Most of them had only one door and no windows\textsuperscript{77} and the ceilings were so low that it was impossible for an adult person to stand straight in these huts. According to Robert Mitchell,

\begin{quote}
'the dwellings of the Indian labouring population are composed of light frames of rods, the sides covered with cane straw (trash) tied into bundles and sometimes plastered with a thin coating of mud, their average height being from four to five feet...'
\end{quote}

On these coolie lines, there was no proper system of supplying drinking water, drainage and sanitary facilities like latrines. The absence of latrine system was ascribed to the habit of Indian labourers to defecate in open and their reluctance to use

\textsuperscript{75} Carter, Marina, \textit{Servants}, p.171-72. She observes that soon these hospitals became useless for this purpose also.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Report of Royal Commission, 1875}, p. 347.
European lavatories. All these contributed to a dreadful condition of sanitation and hygiene on the plantations and resulted in frequent outbreak of epidemics since the 1860s. Royal Commissioners noted that camps were not regularly cleaned and filth and rotting vegetable matter was accumulated in most camps, contributing to the pollution of air. Maintenance of dwellings was left to the labourers. There was no proper system of inspection of dwelling areas on estates and the Stipendiary Magistrates had no powers to enforce cleanliness in the coolie lines till 1860s, when some stringent measures were adopted for proper maintenance and sanitation of the labourers' huts in the wake of serial epidemic outbreaks. Despite these occasional measures, not much improvement took place and the dwellings remained overcrowded, dingy and far behind the normal hygienic conditions.

Planters and colonial authorities placed all the blame for an unsavoury condition of sanitation on labourers themselves. Indians were blamed for remaining in the dingy huts. As owner of a sugar estate in Pamplemousses claimed:

‘(he) built a very expensive, substantial camp in masonry for his labourers but they dislike it, and prefer to crowd together like animals in their miserable huts.’

It was argued that Indians do not like interference with their habits and because of their indolence and slovenly attitude they do not adopt the European ways of hygiene and cleanliness. Practice of keeping their animals near their huts was also attracted criticism from authorities as animal dung was seen as a reason for unhygienic conditions. These rapprochements were rooted in the pejorative stereotyping of Indians as dirty and slovenly who liked to live in dirt. What went

81 Kelly to Colonial Secretary, dt. 10 July 1846, PP. Vol. xxxiv, No. 325, 1847.
missing in this imperial defence and blame game was the limitations of resources and space imposed upon the labourers by the plantation regime. Also providing basic amenities and improving the general living conditions of labourers remained a matter of least priority in the planters’ scheme of profit maximisation.

**Women as Labourers**

Immigrant women from India were brought into Mauritius primarily for two reasons. First reason was based on the moralistic considerations of the empire: remove the evils cropping up among the Indian labourers because of lack of women. Second was the practical consideration of the planters: immigrants coming with their wives or getting married in Mauritius would to tend settle there and thus provide a stable labour supply. Unlike Fiji and other destinations of Indian immigrant labourers during 19th century, women were not engaged on plantations as indentured labourers in Mauritius. The very few women who came in the initial years of immigration were employed as domestic helps and ayahs.82 The responsibility for women being not involved in the contractual labour system effectively goes to the planters’ insistence to employ able bodied young men for the rigorous demands of cane cultivation. They feared that engaging women labourers would not prove cost effective for them as women were supposed to perform only lighter work for the same wages. Initially administrators of the indenture system like Thomy Hugon were also against employing women as labourers. Even though the immigrant women were not engaged under contracts, it does not entail their absence from the production process. During the peak sessions, they were involved in cutting and cleaning of crop, and helped in preparing sugar, etc. on the basis of short term verbal contracts.

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82 Evidence of Bibi Zuhoorun in Report of Dickens Committee, evidence of Lutchoomee in Examination of Coolies Returned from Mauritius, 1842.
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Official reluctance towards engaging women changed in the 1860s when Indian women emerged as a sizeable portion of the Indian population in Mauritius. In 1861 Protector Beyts proposed to engage women in plantation work on limited engagement on the grounds that it would help women to improve their material and moral conditions. But there were not many takers of Beyts’ suggestions and among the total 2453 women who arrived in 1862, only 14 women were engaged to work on plantations. In 1867, only 97 women worked as wage labourers from 24722, the total female population on estates. This drastically low proportion somehow improved in later years and in 1871, total 1808 women (6.9 % of their total population on estates) engaged as wage labourers.

Table 5.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Occupations of Indian Women, 1901 and 1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Offices and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food, Tobacco, Drink and Lodging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other General and Undefined Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Occupation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census Reports, Mauritius, 1901 and 1911.

83 Report of Beyts, 1865, BIA / 5, MA.
84 ARPI 1862.
85 ARPI 1867.
86 ARPI, 1871.
Above table shows that the occupational pattern for Indian women did not change in any significant manner even in 1901 and 1911. However the engagement of women as workers remained a distant reality in Mauritius and as late as in 1911 when only for 7264 women agriculture was listed as occupation while 108,332 Indian women were classified as without any occupations.

Women continued to be unemployed or marginally employed and thus economically dependent upon the male population having lesser degree of 'economic independence.' This essential difference unequivocally distinguishes the position of Indian women in Mauritius from their counterparts in other destinations where they were properly engaged to work and earned as much as the male labourers could and thus attained greater levels of economic liberation.

**Structure of Protection and Control**

i. **Structure of Protection**

All the initial enquiries into the conditions of Indian immigrants in Mauritius revealed atrocious accounts of exploitation and ill-treatment which led to the termination of the system in 1839. Therefore, when the system was resumed in 1842, a protective structure was considered necessary to maintain order on the plantations and also to pacify the anti-indenture sentiments. The two major agencies of this labour protection structure were – Protector of Immigrants and the Stipendiary Magistrates.

i.i **Protector of Immigrants:**

Resuming the immigration of Indian labourers to Mauritius, Act XV of 1842 provided for the appointment of a Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius, to be nominated by the Government of India. Since most of the disorder was reported in the manner in which immigrants were allotted to estates, the main responsibility of the Protector as assigned by this Act was to supervise the disembarkation and allocation
of immigrants.\textsuperscript{87} The jurisdiction of Protector’s authority in protecting the immigrants from any abuse or ill-treatment was confined to the immigration depot only and he had no responsibility or control over what happened to these labourers once they had left the depot. Charles Anderson was appointed as the first Protector. As a Stipendiary Magistrate, he had condemned the working conditions of immigrants on estates in Port Louis in 1838.\textsuperscript{88} However, in 1840s, he switched sides and began to advocate for the planters’ interests. He prepared the blue print of the plan of immigration proposed by the Mauritian planters and even went to England as an emissary of Mauritian planters for resuming immigration, which raised many eyebrows about his credentials in protecting the interests of immigrants.

In the attempt to make the immigration office the hub for all the activities and concerns relating to Indian immigrants, the duties of the Protector were extended from time to time. His added responsibilities included registration of time expired labourers, receiving of vagrants, supervision of returning immigrants, inspection of estates and reporting on the general conditions and treatment of immigrants on estates.\textsuperscript{89} He was even entrusted to ensure that all the arrangements for recruitment and introduction of intending emigrants in India work in good order.\textsuperscript{90}

Now let us examine how the Protectors actually performed their responsibility of protecting the interests of the Immigrant labourers. Protectors often considered themselves administrators of the system and ‘active intermediaries’ between the immigrants and the planters, rather than protectors of immigrants’ interests. Honestly admitting the limitations and failure of the office, Protector H.N.D. Beyts wrote to the Colonial Secretary in 1860 that the name of Protector was something of misnomer.

\textsuperscript{87} Act XV of 1842, PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 530, 1844.
\textsuperscript{89} Report of Royal Commission, 1875, pp. 180-194; Stevenson to Newcastle, dt. 24 October 1860, SD 54/ 171.
\textsuperscript{90} Stevenson to Newcastle, dt. 24 October 1860, SD 54/ 171.
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and Immigration Agent would be a far more applicable title because he was just administering the system as a bureaucrat.\textsuperscript{91} One of the major grievances of labourers was the low rates of wages paid to them but the Protector tended to urge them to accept these, as is evident from the example of the Protector who advised them to ‘...be satisfied the first year with moderate wages.’\textsuperscript{92} This advice reflects that the Protector was there to actually protect the planters’ interests rather than the labourers’. The other grievance of labourers was restrictions imposed by the plantation regime on their mobility beyond the plantations, especially as these stood in the way of their being able to avail of opportunities other than plantation work. Further, for entering into new work contracts, labourers needed to acquire a duplicate ticket issued by the Immigration office. Protector Hugon recommended the increase of fees for duplicate ticket to 1 £ (the monthly wage labourers received was 10 to 14 s) on the ground that it would lead to instability in availability of labourers for plantation.\textsuperscript{93}

Apart from the complete failure in protecting the interests of immigrants and instead imposing new charges and penalties on them, the Protector’s performance in discharging other duties was a complete failure as well. Royal Commission reported that these duties were carried out in a ‘wholly inefficient’ manner and the title Protector was ‘calculated to mislead’.\textsuperscript{94} Even in their self proclaimed role as administrators they failed miserably.

\textbf{i.ii Stipendiary Magistrate}

After the abolition of slavery, Stipendiary Magistrates were appointed at the behest of the British government in all the former slave colonies to safeguard the interests of emancipated slaves. In Mauritius, these ex-slave apprentices were soon

\textsuperscript{91} PI to Colonial Secretary, dt 30 August 1860, PB10.
\textsuperscript{92} PI to Colonial Secretary, dt. 11 January 1848, PP, Vol. xliv, No. 399, 1847-48.
\textsuperscript{93} As an impact of this prohibitive increase, the applications for duplicate tickets reduced from 12,500 in 1861 to 1226 in 1871. \textit{Report of Royal Commission, 1875}, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Report of Royal Commission, 1875}, p. 580.
replaced, almost completely, by the immigrant labourers from India. Now these magistrates were assigned to ensure the proper implementation of the contractual obligations between the labourers and planters and to settle the disputes arising out of any violations. They had the powers to impose fines or order imprisonment of both labourers and planters, whoever was found guilty. They were required to visit estates to ascertain the condition and treatment meted out to the labourers and listen to their grievances.\textsuperscript{95}

Appointment of Stipendiary Magistrates was seen by planters as an inducement for creating insubordination and disorder among the Indian labourers. These magistrates often found it difficult to extract information from the planters and at times they were not even allowed to enter the estates. Another attempt by planters to curb the labourers’ complaints against abuses and ill-treatment which they were being subjected to on the plantations was their insistence on introducing penal provisions against the labourers who brought ‘frivolous, vexatious or malicious’ complaints against their employers.\textsuperscript{96} This was accepted in 1852. The stated reason for legislation was to control the disorder and prevent the misuse of the redress mechanism by labourers by lodging false complaints against planters. But in reality it added extra strength to the planters’ control over labourers’ rights to demand fulfilment of contractual obligations on the part of planters and to seek redress in case of any grievance. Because of lack of resources and knowledge, connivance between administrators and planters, and the confusing intricacies of the legal procedures, it was almost impossible for labourers to provide enough evidence to establish their charges. Instead of getting relief from the Stipendiary Magistrates, aggrieved labourers would often find themselves at the receiving end and got punishment from

\textsuperscript{95} Nicolay to Secretary of State, dt. 27 January 1835, CO/167/182, PRO.

\textsuperscript{96} ‘Report of the Committee appointed to inquire into the causes of the insufficiency of the labouring population’, dt. 19 February 1845, PP, Vol. xxxi, No. 641, 1845.
Stipendiary Magistrates for making false complaints. When Pandoo and his band complained to the Magistrate of Moka district about severe work, beating up and insufficient food, Magistrate dismissed their complaints as false and malicious because they could not produce any witness and punished them with fine and imprisonment.\textsuperscript{97} In this case, the most interesting point worth emphasising was the pro-immigrant approach of the Protector who conducted an independent inquiry and reported that immigrants were wrongfully convicted by the Magistrate who was not just and fair in delivering his duties.\textsuperscript{98} In 1871, the Stipendiary Magistrate of Pamplemousses wrote to the Protector that it is the tendency of Indians to make false and malicious complaints.\textsuperscript{99} This logic of false complaints by immigrant labourers was used by the Stipendiary Magistrates for bluntly refusing to register the complaints.\textsuperscript{100} In contrast, it was not necessary for planters to produce any evidence supporting their allegations. Labourers were punished at the whims of the planters, without any evidence or trial. They would even send notes to magistrates specifying the particular punishment they wanted to be granted to the convicted labourers.\textsuperscript{101}

In their convictions of Indian labourers, most Stipendiary Magistrates followed the prevailing racist and class prejudices against Indian labourers. In most cases they were punished without a proper enquiry and for minor offences Indian labourers got severe punishment, even more than the maximum prescribed by the law.\textsuperscript{102} Apart from the connivance between the magistrates and planters, and the biased opinions of magistrates, some technical disabilities also worked against the

\textsuperscript{97} Papers relating to the case of Pandoo, a sirdar and others, 1867, Bl/ B, MA.
\textsuperscript{98} ibid.
\textsuperscript{99} Stipendiary Magistrate, Pamplemousses to PI, dt. 22 May 1871, PA/ 12. Stipendiary Magistrate of Flacq also reported a case in which Neuchand and Oozeer, two immigrants made false complaints against their employers on instigation of their friends. Stipendiary Magistrate of Flacq to PI, dt. 20 September 1871, PA/ 12, MA.
\textsuperscript{100} ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Report of Royal Commission, 1875}, pp. 530-32.
\textsuperscript{102} Evidence of Sheik Manick in \textit{Report of Dickens Committee}. 

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effective use of this agency by Indian labourers. Often because of linguistic limitations, complainants could not articulate their grievance in court in a comprehensive and accurate manner, and at times they tended to exaggerate. In this situation, magistrates often found the planters' narrative precise and thus more authentic.

Stipendiary Magistrates also failed to perform their other assigned duty of inspection of estates. Initially they were simply not allowed by the planters to inspect the estates. Later, when a league was formed between the planters and magistrates, they were allowed to visit estates, but by then they had lost the motivation. Magistrates' inspection of estates was very cursory in nature and as noted by Royal Commissioners, remained 'in most, if not all cases — a mere delusion'.

In 1860s, immigrant labourers were given the right of appealing to the Supreme Court against the judgements of Stipendiary Magistrates. But this too, as the Protector recorded, was '...perfectly illusionary. He (immigrant) finds this remedial course so difficult to enter upon and so dilatory and expensive when adopted that he very seldom ventures to resort to it.'

Colonial states' benevolent neutrality gradually turned into pro plantation position by the 1860s and as Marina Carter argues, 'the protective machinery set up to defend the interests of immigrants was correspondingly at its most ineffective'.

ii. Disciplining the Labourers

The early colonial perception of Indian labourers in Mauritius was that they were docile, hardworking and dependable and therefore they were preferred by the planters. Planters' initial priority was to get the maximum number of labourers and

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104 ARPI, 1861.
105 Carter, Marina, Servants, p. 27.
the issue of disciplining the labourers was restricted to enforcing the work schedule. But after a while, when substantial number of labourers arrived in the colony and they began to demand their lawful rights and started raising their voice against their exploitation, planters' perception was inverted and all of a sudden Indian labourers became indolent and 'compulsive liars', who brought 'frivolous, vexatious or malicious' complaints against their employers. This marked a significant change in the priorities of the planters and therefore their strategies for disciplining the labourers. Demands for labour in the initial phase of expansion was effectively fulfilled by introducing new batches of immigrant labourers but when the demands augmented further and competition started between the planters to obtain maximum numbers of labourers, it became imperative for the planters to change their strategy of labour control. In this changed strategy, planters focused on two tactics – ensuring the availability of labourers already introduced for the maximum possible period and forcing the time-expired labourers to re-engage. Both these tactics had a common intent – restrict the mobility and freedom of labourers. It was economically more beneficial for planters because they could force the labourers to re-engage at lower wages.

In this context, all the initiatives of planters to discipline labourers were focused on efforts to control desertion and vagrancy and tie them down to plantations.

ii.i Disciplining Deserters:

Desertion or 'unlawful absence from work without reasonable excuse' among the immigrant labourers remained the foremost concern of planters' strategies of labour control in Mauritius. In the initial years of immigration, it caused anxiety among the planters due to fear of instability of labour supply. The committee which was appointed in 1845 to find out the causes of insufficiency of labouring population in
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Mauritius reported that out of the total number of labourers engaged to estates, a large proportion was always absent on account of desertion, temporary absenteeism or sickness and the main reason for the labour shortage in Mauritius was attributed primarily to desertion. It estimated an average of six percent desertion and absentees. The main cause for this high ratio of desertion, according to this committee, lay 'in the character and habits of the Indians', who love to change their jobs and wander around because Indians were by nature averse and by habit unaccustomed to steady labour. In this essentially racist understanding of the factors responsible for desertion among the Indian labourers, ill-treatment and over-rigid discipline of plantations came last. In fact, the inability of planters to maintain discipline was also listed as a cause of the high rate of desertion, by the committee.107 Between 1845 and 1850, the average proportion of desertion was calculated at more than five percent, a relatively high level.108 This concern about the debilitating effects of desertion for the growth of sugar based economy by creating an uncertainty about labour supply was shared by the colonial administrators as well. Governor Gomm termed it as extreme licentiousness of the labouring population109 and Major Hay castigated it as a monster evil.110 The usual official justification for attempts to castigate desertion was that immigrant labourers leave the plantation work after a very short period which proved to be burdensome for the finances of the colony owing to the heavy costs of their introduction. Following table shows that even towards the end of system, complaints about desertion were very high among the total complaints lodged by the employers against Indian labourers.

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108 Abstract of Labour Returns, 1845-50, B1/ A
109 Annual Report, Immigration Department, 1845. (hereafter AR)
110 AR, 1854.
Table 5.6

Complaints Made by Employers Against Labourers, 1878 – 1898

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Complaints for Desertion</th>
<th>Total Complaints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>3960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>3361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>3361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>3717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>3147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>3241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>3527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>1276</td>
<td>3603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>1166</td>
<td>2783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>3020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>3006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>3556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1022</td>
<td>3983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>1053</td>
<td>4101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>1158</td>
<td>3093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>918</td>
<td>2763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>2753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>2656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>2479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>2528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>2192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ARPI 1884, 1899.

The initial shriek about desertion continued to dominate planters’ concerns and create anxiety throughout and they sought stringent legislative measures to control desertion. Under the provisions of Ordinance 1 of 1846, deserters could be imprisoned for up to four months and fined £ 20. His contract had to be extended until
all absences, except those caused by real sickness, had been made up.\textsuperscript{111} Colonial Office, however, found Ordinance 1 to be unjust and oppressive to the Indian labourers and therefore disallowed it.\textsuperscript{112} It also suggested to the Mauritian government that it should not resort to labour coercive regulations. However, the Mauritian government continued to use punitive measures to control desertion. Several ordinances were passed from time to time to control the desertion from estates.\textsuperscript{113} In 1860, the re-engagement related regulations were modified which provided for automatic renewal of contracts unless the labourers clearly specify their desire to end the contract to the Stipendiary Magistrates.\textsuperscript{114}

The racist attitude embedded in the notion of desertion leading to instability of labour force became the rationale for attempts to control desertion. Planters colossally used it to restrict the mobility of Indian labourers from plantations, curb their natural right to choose their occupation or negotiate for higher wages after the end contractual obligations, and to force them to re-engage on to plantation after the expiry of their initial engagements on unfavourable terms and conditions.

\textbf{ii.ii Disciplining Vagrants}

As per legislative definitions, vagrancy is associated with criminal activities but it gained new meaning in context of labour control strategies in Mauritius where it was used by the authorities to restrict the mobility of indentured labourers and to prevent them from finding alternatives other than plantation work. Any Indian labourer found outside the plantation confines would be arrested as vagrant. Indians were very often arrested as vagrants for ‘crimes’ such as visiting relatives on other estates, or when on visits to the Magistrate or Protector to register their grievances.

\textsuperscript{111} Ordinance No. 1 of 1846, SD 27/54.
\textsuperscript{112} Grey to Gomm, dt. 29 September 1846, SA 40/38.
\textsuperscript{113} Some of the ordinances passed to control desertion were – Ordinances 22 and 23 of 1847, 15 and 16 of 1852.
\textsuperscript{114} Select Documents, Vol. III, p.84.
Colonial authorities began to depict the Indian labourers who had completed their contracts as ‘do-nothings’ who left plantation work because they did not want to work. Since they did not have any steady work and they spent their time vagabonding, in colonial perception these people were vagrants. As the number of time expired labourers increased from 1850s onwards, the ‘vagrancy’ among the Indian immigrant population was taken up very seriously by the administrators. According to Hay, the acting Governor, vagrancy was ‘an evil which in addition to the loss it entails on the employer of the labour, is fraught with moral and social mischief, and ...the source and basis of much of the crime of the island.’ And therefore he emphasised the continuation of ‘most strenuous efforts’ to remove this evil. Government indeed dealt with the vagrants very zealously and as following table shows, between 1861 and 1871, an average 11.5 to 17.2 per cent of total male Indian population in Mauritius was arrested on charges of vagrancy.

Table 5.7
Arrests of Indians for Vagrancy, 1861-71

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Arrests</th>
<th>% of Total Male Indian Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>23371</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>16668</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>18834</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td>18382</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>19416</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>16884</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>22357</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>23916</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>16880</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>12096</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ARPI, 1861 – 1872

115 Gomm to Grey, dt. 3 July 1847, CO 167/184, PRO.
116 Hay to Herbert, dt. 3 May 1855, PP, Vol. xliii, no. 2711, 1856.
117 ibid.
These extremely high figures of arrests of Indians for vagrancy provided the essential defence to the colonial authorities for coercive labour legislation. To control vagrancy, 'vagrant hunts' were organised in which Police swept large areas and Indians found outside plantation or other workplaces were arrested as vagrants.\textsuperscript{118} These repressive legislative initiatives to control vagrancy 'reached their apogee with the promulgation of Ordinance 31 of 1867'.\textsuperscript{119} This ordinance, which can be termed as a black act for its relentless provisions of labour control, made it mandatory for all the immigrant labourers, whether new or old, to carry passes issued by Inspector of Police of the district where the labourer used to stay. Ordinance 31 made it mandatory to affix photograph of immigrants on the passes for which they were charged £ 1, which was quite a high amount considering the fact that their total monthly wages were about 10-14 s. Such a high cost of putting photographs was, once again, intended to prevent the time expired immigrants to apply for duplicate passes which were required for going out of the estates. Imposition of this fee had the desired effect upon the outward mobility of labourers from estates. In 1861, old immigrants applied for duplicate passes which drastically reduced in 1871 to 1226.\textsuperscript{120} Another seize of the pass system to control labourers' mobility was restricted territorial validity of these passes. All the passes were issued for a particular district only and if an old immigrant entered into the other district on whatever pretext – whether to meet some relative or friends living on other estates and even if by ignorance, he was liable for arrest as vagrant and on inestimable occasions they were actually arrested. The difficulties in obtaining these passes for an ignorant class of people, the procedural complications and heavy charges made it difficult for a large number of labourers to obtain it within the stipulated time. They were at times arrested for vagrancy while going to get the

\textsuperscript{119} Select Documents, Vol. III, pp. 84-85.
\textsuperscript{120} Report of Royal Commission, 1875, p. 223.
pass made because usually the estates were far off from the towns where Magistrates' offices were located. Employers, who were frustrated by the labourers' refusal to remain in their service, would often bribe the police to arrest such labourers as vagrants so they could then reclaim them from the court. To keep the unclaimed Indians apprehended for vagrancy, a vagrant depot was set up in 1864 in Port Louis. This was supposed to work as English 'workhouses', 'aimed at discouraging idleness and as instilling docility and a sense of duty in the potential labourers confined within its walls.'

The severity with which vagrancy was dealt with by the Mauritian planters and administrators attracted a lot of criticism from the observers from late 1870s onwards. These legislations were condemned for being reminiscences of the slave laws. The Royal Commission found that vagrancy and labour laws amounted to nothing less than the unbridled harassment of the Indian population. The Police Commission underlined the irregularities in cases of vagrancy,

'immigrants may be deemed to be vagrants upon very insufficient grounds. ... (because) there seems to be in the minds of many of the officials a distrust of the genuineness of any employment which an Indian may adopt on his own ground.'

The restrictive measures against Indian labourers in Mauritius were noticed by the Indian authorities as well. A colonial official noted that,

'(the old immigrants were) subjected to most vexatious and unnecessary restraints upon their personal liberty, ... penalties for vagrancy were excessively severe, 28 days imprisonment for a first offence, hard labour being added apparently without warrant of

123 Report of Royal Commission.
law....After two or more convictions within two years imprisonment from 6 to 9 months might be awarded.’

Subsequently the Indian government objected to the powers given to the Police to arrest labourers without warrants on suspicion of vagrancy citing the cases of false convictions of Indians as vagrants.

The non-maintenance of proper records relating to convictions of Indian labourers as vagrants and missing information about the causes of vagrancy led to confirmation of the distrust of the Stipendiary Magistrates and indicate a connivance between planters, Magistrates and Police to force labourers to re-engage on the plantation. The real motives of such severe anti-vagrancy legislations were planters’ desperation to ensure the availability of labourers at lower rates of wages in post 1860s period when not only the fortunes of sugar economy began to sink but many labourers also started moving out towards towns in search of alternative vocations and new prospects. Anti-vagrancy measures were manipulated by the planters as a labour mobilisation strategy by forcing them back to plantations and preventing them to choose their desired jobs. As Geoghegan summarises:

‘On the whole then, the tendency of Mauritius legislation has been, I think, towards reducing the Indian labourers to a more complete state of dependence upon the planter and towards driving him into indentures, a free labour market being both directly and indirectly discouraged.’

Such inconsiderate and harsh strategies of labour control in Mauritius can be attributed essentially to the attitude of the colonial administrators and planters towards

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the Indian labourers. In colonial narratives, Indian labourers were described as lazy, unreliable and prone towards criminal behaviour and therefore they deserved stern handling. This was admitted in the Report of Royal Commission in no ambiguous terms,

‘as a class, the Indians are regarded with fear and distrust, as dangerous and lawless vagabonds; or at least, with pitying contempt, as ill-regulated children, fit only to be treated accordingly.’

ii.iii Sirdars: Planters’ Disciplinary Agent

The stipulated strategy of planters to control immigrant labourers on the estates was directly implemented on daily basis by overseers or sirdars. Initially planters employed ex-apprentices or creoles as sirdars who could easily establish their authority by being aliens but the communication gap between the two made it difficult to enforce the regulatory measures. Gradually planters switched their preference towards employing those Indian labourers as sirdars who had served satisfactorily for some time in the colony. When immigration was resumed in 1842, planters offered the charge of sirdarship to the returnee immigrants who came with a band of immigrants with him. It was expected by the planters that because of common ethnic origins, these sirdars could establish better links with the labourers and ensure the smooth flow of the work routine and maintenance of order on the plantations. As an agent of labour control, sirdars were expected to oppress the labourers and to collaborate with the authorities and the power structure of the plantation and they lived up to this expectation very dutifully. They enforced the work discipline very fiercely, severely punished the labourers for unfinished or improper work, assisted police and other disciplinary authorities in maintaining order, deposed in courts against labourers, and mediated on behalf of planters in event of any confrontation.

129 Report of Royal Commission, 1875.
between planters and labourers. Despite this loyal disposition, sirdars were made responsible for the performance of labourers and completion of tasks and in case of deficiency in the work of labourers, the sirdar of such band had to get it properly done at his costs.\textsuperscript{130}

However, at times the community ties overpowered the sirdars’ anti community dispensation and sirdars not only tried to redress the grievances of labourers but also helped them to raise their voice against any repression or non fulfilment of their dues in terms of wages or rations. On many instances sirdars took their bands to the police or magistrates to help them in registering their grievances and seeking redress.\textsuperscript{131} This swapping of responsibilities – from disciplinary to protective – was not well received by the planters and instead of the usual pampering, sirdars were dealt with sternly. In one such case, when Pandoo, a sirdar on Bon Veive estate in Moka district took his band to the Protector and then to Magistrate to register their complaints against severe work and thrashing, he was severely beaten up and condemned with a fine of 10 $ or an imprisonment for two months for making false and malicious complaints.\textsuperscript{132}

Sirdars’ position on the plantations was ambivalent: at one level they enjoyed the privileges of representing authority on the plantation and on the other side they were very vulnerable too. They were held responsible for all the disorder on plantations and whenever they tried to work according to their conscience or assume the role of benevolent regulator, they were condemned by the planters.

\textsuperscript{130} ARPI, 1872.
\textsuperscript{131} ARPI, 1870, 1873.
\textsuperscript{132} Papers relating to the case of an Indian immigrant Pandoo and others. B1/ B, MA.
Protesting Labourers

Colonial plantation settlements, by their structure and functional essentials, were binary power structures of oppressors and the oppressed—planters dominated the indentured labourers. In this hierarchical power structure, the dominance of planters was established through the harsh work discipline based on sanctions, punishments and violence rather than incentives. To delineate the rationale for such harsh and intimidating labour regime, planters took resort to the usual colonial defence of racist chauvinism and describing the other with contempt and distrust. Indian labourers were habitual idlers, lazy and troublemakers and therefore they required external discipline and stern dealing. Such inconsiderate labour regime infringed upon the interests and freedom of the labourers and a sense of disaffection and class antagonism begun to crop up among them. However, the apparent articulation of this disaffection into resistance was restrained by certain limitations imposed upon the indentured labourers by the plantation regime in Mauritius. A detailed analysis of these limitations would help us to understand the nature and scope of labourers’ protest and the discourse analysis of their unstructured and individualistic resistance.

When immigrant labourers from India arrived in Mauritius, they were confined within the boundaries of the plantation estates under contractual obligations. They had almost no inkling of the new production relations; neither had they any control over it. According to Eric Hobsbawm,

‘They came into it as first-generation immigrants, or what is even more catastrophic, it comes to them from outside, insidiously by the operation of economic forces which they do not understand and over which they have no control,.... There problem is how to adapt themselves to its life and struggles,’ 133

As an upshot of this ignorance, Indian labourers, despite having awareness of their belonging to the same class, lacked the ‘class consciousnesses’\textsuperscript{134} and failed to discern its political ramifications. The augmentation of class consciousness was further restrained by the severe restrictions imposed upon the mobility of labourers off estates because the very emergence of class consciousness required intra-community exchanges and collective initiatives. Indentured labourers were housed on the estates itself without any links with wider socio-economic or political networks of the island and there was no space for inter community exchanges as well. In this secluded condition, there was no class consciousness enabling them to relate their discontent with the other’s dissatisfaction and this explains to an extent why the protests of Indian labourers remained individualistic and there was no collective resistance against the repressive plantation regime.

In addition to the economic and political dominance over indentured labourers, planters tried to establish a psychological and moral dominance as well.\textsuperscript{135} They used to demoralise the labourers by using the repressive instruments on a daily basis – use of abusive language, thrashing, non deliverance of basic requirements like food, etc. These measures augmented the predicament of the labourers who already had a low self-esteem because of sense of loss they were feeling in the alien setting.

Because of all these limitations, the protests of Indian labourers have been characterised as predominantly individualistic, covert and since no great ‘mythical revolution’ took place on the plantations in Mauritius, it has not received the adequate attention from the scholars of indentured Diaspora. For Hugh Tinker, ‘In the early

\textsuperscript{134} I have borrowed this conceptual difference between awareness of class and class consciousness from Lukacs’ analysis. See Lukacs, Georg, \textit{History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics}, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1971.

\textsuperscript{135} For one of the finest analysis of the moral dominance of colonialism see Fanon, Frantz, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, Groove Press, New York, 1967.
days in Mauritius, there are scarcely any references to estate protest. (because) the harsh plantation discipline kept them in order.'\textsuperscript{136} Marina Carter, who has otherwise applauded the labourers' endeavours in shaping their destinies, too explains these protests in terms of responses in a labour-coercive economy which 'were all too easily overturned by repressive anti-vagrant and squatter laws.'\textsuperscript{137} In this section I want to explore the landscape for protests of Indian labourers in Mauritius in whatever naïve and unstructured forms they were being articulated. My essential argument is to rectify the conventional imagery of indentured labourers as passive, meek instrument in the schemes of colonial plantation system.

\textbf{i. Modes of Protest}

Under the contractual bindings of indenture system and repressive discipline, immigrant labourers could not openly defy the order of the authorities. In such austere situation, apart from exploring the legal channel of protest in form of complaints to authorities, labourers' anguish was articulated by employing individualistic modes of protest such as desertion, absenteeism, spontaneous attacks on the property of planters, and in extreme distress even suicides. Borrowing the conceptual term from James Scott and taking a cautious note of his caveat for not overly romanticising these 'weapons of the weak', I have tried to delineate these modes of protests in terms of 'everyday forms of resistance' which were informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains.\textsuperscript{138}

\textbf{i.i Complaints and Petitions}

To register their protests, labourers made complaints to the Protector and Stipendiary Magistrates, a system of redress provided by the legislative structure of

\textsuperscript{136} Tinker, Hugh, \textit{A New System of Slavery}, p.227.
planted more frequently by the immigrant labourers were about their sufferings and non-payment of wages and rations, excess work, inadequate housing and medical attendance, ill-treatment and interference with their way of life.\textsuperscript{139} Vencatachellum, an immigrant from Madras complained to Magistrate twice because he beaten up ‘violently’ and ill-treated by his master. The Magistrate reprimanded the master for his conduct towards Vencatachellum.\textsuperscript{140} But not every labourer’s complaints were attended with the same spirit by magistrates. On complaints of harsh treatment, many planters filed case against labourers for defiance or idleness and for which labourers had face the punishment instead of getting redress.

Despite a general distrust among the authorities, Indian labourers continued to use this mode of protest. After a while they realised that collective complaints make more impact and even more liable to be attended by the authorities than the individual complaints. While deposing before the Magistrate of 24 Parganas, Ramjee Koneji, a returnee emigrant from Mauritius, noted that unless ten men combining complained to the Mauritius police no notice was taken of our complaint.\textsuperscript{141} On various occasions, sirdars, who were often being targeted by the protesting labourers as an agency of labour coercion, instigated the protest. In one such episode, the entire band under a sirdar registered their complaints together.\textsuperscript{142}

It was the perpetual attempt of the planters and authorities to discredit the validity of labourers’ claims. They insisted that Indian labourers, by habit, made ‘frivolous, vexatious or malicious’ complaints against their labourers and on innumerable occasions labourers had to bear the brunt of registering their complaints.

\textsuperscript{140} Statement of Vencatachellum, Examination of Coolies Returned from Madras to Mauritius, 1842.
\textsuperscript{141} Prog. No. 37, Gen., Emig., 28 April 1853, WBSA.
\textsuperscript{142} Petition of V. Pydayaya and others, dt. 10 April 1882, PA 50; Papers relating to the case of Pandoo, a sirdar and others, 1867, B1/ B, MA.
by the hostile authorities. At the instigation of planters, they were beaten up by the police, or even imprisoned by the Magistrates for registering false protests.\textsuperscript{143} The choice for exploring the option to register complaints was restricted by the not so easy accessibility of Magistrates and police for the labourers and their indisposition in providing redress,\textsuperscript{144} whether because of their racist attitude against Indian labourers or because of simple corruption.\textsuperscript{145} In majority of cases the authorities, whether police, Magistrates or the Protector, asked the complainants to return to the estates. For instance, in case of Pandoo and his gang, it was Stipendiary Magistrate who forced them to return while in case of Pydayaya, the Protector himself ‘advised them to quietly return to their work’.\textsuperscript{146} The other limitation was the intricate process of seeking redress from the Magistrates and the high charges of court procedures, which ignorant labourers found difficult to follow and afford.

\textbf{i.ii Absenteeism, Desertion and Vagrancy}

For indentured labourers, absenteeism, desertion and vagrancy were covert forms of expressing their discontent with the harsh work discipline and repression. They could not bear the hardship, therefore they voluntarily withdrew from the plantations to escape either for short duration or permanent desertion. Colonial authorities always tried to undermine the escape of labourers as a form of protest and attributed it to the ‘general idleness and unsettled habits of Indian labourers’ which needed to be dealt with severity. Recently this colonial prejudiced explanation of the Indian labourers’ attempts to escape from the estates has been very effectively countered by various scholars like David Northrup, Richard Allen, M.D. North-

\textsuperscript{143} Papers relating to the case of Pandoo, a sirdar and others, 1867, B1/ B, MA.
\textsuperscript{144} Report of Dickens’s Committee.
\textsuperscript{145} Evidence of Bibi Zuhoorun, in Report of Dickens’s Committee.
\textsuperscript{146} Note of J.F. Trotter, Protector, PA 50; Papers relating to the case of Pandoo, a sirdar and others, 1867, B1/ B, MA.
Coombes and S.J. Reddi. These scholars argue for studying these as an articulation of labourers’ attempt to escape the repression. Rather than usual denial, some colonial authorities had also recognised the connotations of escape as protest. J.F. Trotter, who was Protector, admitted that the continuing incidence of illegal absence was attributed to the Indian labourers’ aversion to the manner in which they were treated and managed by estate authorities. Following this outline, my attempt in this section will be to describe these escaping labourers not as offenders but as protesters by situating their attempts of running away within the landscape of protest against the repressive labour regime of plantations.

Owing to the limitations of effectiveness of complaints in redressing their grievances, running away from plantations were the most widely used mode of protest from the 1840s to 1870s. In 1838, Thomy Hugon reported about large scale absenteeism among the Indian labourers. In 1844, absenteeism was reported to reach a massive eleven per cent and desertion at more than six per cent of the total Indian labourers engaged on estates. The empirical details of absenteeism, desertion and vagrancy are scarce for pre 1859 period and occasional reports are the only source of information. It was only after 1859 when the Protector started to submit annual reports, we get detailed of these ‘offences.’ According to Allen’s estimates, an average of 3463 labourers were sentenced to imprisonment per year between 1852 to


148 ARPI, 1881.

1859 for desertion and vagrancy.\textsuperscript{150} Between 1860 and 1863 figures rose to 5824 a year.\textsuperscript{151} The frequent occurring of absence and desertion among the Indian labourers can be discerned from the following table:

Table 5.8

Proportion of Complaints Against Indian Immigrants for Absence and Illegal Desertion, 1860 – 1898

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Total Complaints</th>
<th>% of Complaints against Illegal Absence/ Desertion (annual average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860 – 64</td>
<td>15,491</td>
<td>87.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865 – 69</td>
<td>12,903</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870 – 74</td>
<td>4,831</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875 – 79</td>
<td>4,457</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880 – 84</td>
<td>3,398</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885 – 89</td>
<td>3,194</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890 – 94</td>
<td>3,317</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895 – 98</td>
<td>2,339</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While desertion was used for immediate respite from repression, many used it strategically to get out of the contractual obligations. Ramaswamy, a returnee immigrant from Mauritius admitted that he deserted the estate several times and he did it deliberately so he could get discharge from the contract.\textsuperscript{152}

For planters, absence and desertion meant uncertainty of labour supply and heavy losses and therefore they adopted heavily repressive methods to suppress ‘this monster evil’. Police force was reorganised, new police stations were set up in


\textsuperscript{151} ARPI, 1860-63.

\textsuperscript{152} Statement of Ramaswamy, dt. 24 August 1842, Examination of Collies Returning from Mauritius to Madras, 1842.
country side and carrying passes was made mandatory for all the immigrants.  
(Already discussed under section on Disciplining Labourers)

i.iii Violent Modes of Protest: Attacks on Symbols of Planters’ Authority

Rather than resorting to the usual escapist routes against coercive labour control, at times immigrant labourers employed violent modes of protest as well. The most frequent expression of these violent methods were attacks on the symbols and agencies of planters’ authority – attacks on properties, destruction of machinery, ‘revenge killings’ of animals, etc. These violent protests were articulated at both the levels of aggression – individual as well as collective. In one of the first reported cases of violent protest of Indian labourers, on 23 October 1836, an Indian labourer Kittery slapped the overseer when he reprimanded Kittery for having lost his tools.153 In 1839, an immigrant labourers Pirhoo was convicted for damaging the cylinders of sugar mill.154

As more open and direct form of protest, verbal and physical assaults against human beings were also reported. Insolence and use of abusive language were most frequently used tools. Indentured labourers, according to Marina Carter, ‘deliberately flouted social conventions to draw attention, in spectacular fashion, to the injustice of their treatment.’155 In one such unique incident on Belle Etoile estate in 1841, indentured labourers who were apparently not satisfied with the distribution of rations, abused the manager in obscene language and harassed him by showing their genitals to the manager and his family.156 Sirdars were the most obvious target of this violent wrath of Indian labourers, though several incidents of assaults and even killings of policemen, estate managers and planters had also been reported. In 1853,

153 JA 56/ 2, MA.
154 JA 64/ 222, MA.
155 Carter, Marina, Servants, p. 226.
156 JA 71/ 18; Carter, Marina, Servants, p. 226.
immigrant labourers attacked three estate managers and one proprietor. A proprietor was reportedly killed by the Indian labourers in 1860. In 1865, thirteen Indian labourers killed their master in the fields, though later it was officially concluded that 'jealously and feelings regard to women' were the reasons behind the murder. On various occasions, sirdars, who were often being targeted by the protesting labourers as an agency of labour coercion, instigated the protest, which in some instances have been actuated by the vested self-interests of sirdars.

These violent expressions of indentured labourers' anguish and resistance never became the prominent mode of protest and remained sporadic spurts. Between 1878 and 1898, the total number of complaints registered by employers against Indian labourers for maliciously injuring employers' property was 291, average about 14 complaints per year. Figures for assault show high rate of recurrence but it had been clubbed with insubordination and other offences which make it difficult to actually work out the quantum of assaults by indentured labourers.

**i.iv Suicides as a Mode of Protest:**

The relentless exploitation and absence of any effective redress system led to a sense of despair and frustration among the immigrant labourers leading to necrophilic tendencies and they considered ending their lives as the only way out. As a newly arrived immigrant, Mooneesamy, said: 'would be far preferable to die at once than suffer misery continually'. The rate of suicide among the Indian immigrants was alarmingly high. In a letter to Secretary of State, Governor of Mauritius reported 'the extraordinary frequency of suicides among the Indian immigrants... especially among

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158 Report of the Procuring General, 1865, MA.
160 ARPI, 1878 – 99.
one class of them (the indentured labourers on estates)’. According to police reports cited by Mauritian Governor, 642 Indian immigrants committed suicide in Mauritius between 1860 and 1870.\textsuperscript{162} Following table shows the high proportions of suicides committed by Indian immigrants in Mauritius:

Table 5.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cases of Suicide among Indians</th>
<th>Total Suicides</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>64</td>
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<td>1873</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
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<td>1874</td>
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<td>52</td>
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<td>1875</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>1876</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45</td>
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<td>1878</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
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<td>1883</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ARPI, 1870 – 85.

The official accounts ascribe the reasons for such high rates of suicides among the Indian immigrants to jealousy, sickness, temporary insanity, domestic troubles, ill-treatment etc. while a large number of cases remained unexplained – ‘no cause or

\textsuperscript{162} Prog. No.13, Rev., Ag. & Com., (Emi.), November 1871, NAI.
uncertain causes'. Among one of the most important causes clubbed by authorities as uncertain causes was most likely the depression among immigrants due to their isolated location on estates and severe strain caused by excessive work load and as an extreme form of escapist protest, many labourers decided to end their lives.

The foregoing narrative of various modes of protest Indian immigrant labourers resorted to in order to resist the exploitation and harsh discipline of plantation regime in Mauritius divulges the fact that Indian labourers never gave up their desire for fair treatment and aspirations of improving their conditions. They tried to resist the exploitative norms of plantations whenever possible and prudently used the available mediums to articulate their resistance, even if they were escapist initially. From 1870s onwards, when the situation somewhat softened and Indian labourers became independent of contractual bindings, they started open defiance of orders and refusal to work, which are the most commonly used form of resistance in the history. In this phase their protests gradually transformed from individual to collective also, though with certain limitations.

It may be historically incorrect to equate these naïve protests with any modern day resistance movements considering the fact that most of these could not gain much respite to the labourers. The specific labour relationship of control and dependence and the brutal suppression of dissenting voices by the ruthless instruments of coercion and discipline restrained the gains of such protests. It can not be denied that these everyday forms of resistance were used as a stratagem by planters in justifying their oppressive labour control, however this does not undermine the importance of these modes of protests in the awakening of a community to struggle for their dues.

163 Prog. No.13, Rev., Ag. & Com., (Emi.), November 1871; ARPI 1879.
164 Dipankar Gupta has very eloquently suggested the limitations of such protest and their misuse by the authorities to justify the oppression in context of peasantry in Western regions of Uttar Pradesh. See Gupta, Dipankar, ‘Everyday Resistance or Routine Repression? Exaggeration as Stratagem in Agrarian Conflict’, *JPS*, Vol. 29, No. 1, October 2001, pp.89 – 108.
The following folk song of Indian Diaspora in Mauritius recapitulates the plight of Indian indentured labourers on the plantation estates of Mauritius and their despair in quite unambiguous terms\(^{165}\):

\begin{verbatim}
चुनीके नाम हम मारीच के दीपवा हो............................
पहुँचे अरी हम पाने को सोनवा............पाने को........
बदले में मिलेला भाई बैंसों की मार हो.........................
छिलछिल गयली सब मज्दूरन की पीठवा.........मज्दूरन......................
कोल्लू के बैल बने इवचन पीसन को .........................
छोड़ा था देश अपन कुल बनन को.........................कुली\(^{166}\)
\end{verbatim}

\(^{166}\) English translation of this song:

‘Having heard the name of the island of Mauritius,
We arrived here to find gold, to find gold.
Instead we got beatings of bamboos,
Which peeled the skin off the back of the labourers.
We became \textit{Kolhu’s}* bullocks to extract cane sugar,
Alas! We left our country to become coolies.’


* Kolhu is a bullock pulled machine to extract juice from sugar cane in rural India.
II: Personal Lives

Despite the rigorous working life on plantations, Indian immigrant labourers managed to demarcate and maintain spheres of their personal life. The personal lives of Indian immigrant labourers were essentially shaped according to the space available for the observance of their socio-cultural practices and maintenance of social institutions, as well as the desire of the diasporic community to articulate a distinct identity for itself. After a thorough regulation of the working lives of the indentured labourers, the colonial authorities turned their attention to regulating aspects of labourers’ personal lives such as marriage. However, they showed more tolerance towards some other aspects such as observance of religious practices, festivals, caste taboos, etc. Based of this role of the colonial administration, I have tried to explore the personal lives of Indian labour by dividing it into two parts: in the first part, I have explored their marriage practices and family lives which were directly regulated by the plantation authorities, and in the second part, I have discussed certain aspects like religion, caste, festivals etc. which remained outside the purview of the authorities.

Personal Lives under State Regulation: Marriages among the Indian Immigrants

According to the colonial officials, the relatively low proportion of women immigrants in the initial phase of indentured immigration led to unstable sexual relationships and affected the order on plantations as this instability of men-women relationships furthered immoral ways of living, abduction and exploitation of women
Chapter 5

immigrants, violent clashes between the immigrant labourers and even murders.\textsuperscript{167} This prejudiced view of colonial authorities, based on Victorian notions of social order and moral standards, has been shared by a majority of scholars of indentured Diaspora who study indentured emigration in terms of continuance of slavery. These scholars argue that 'the disproportion between men and women was the main factor in shaping the life of the coolie lines'\textsuperscript{168} and 'Indian social life in Mauritius presented a disquieting spectacle.'\textsuperscript{169}

Therefore, to maintain order on the plantations and encourage a structured family settlement, the colonial authorities adopted a double-pronged strategy: first, they tried to increase the numbers of immigrant women by legally fixed quotas and second, they put a close watch and legislative regulation over the marriages among the immigrant community. The initiatives to encourage emigration of women we have already discussed and I shall limit this discussion to the administrative initiatives for regulating the marriages only.

Indian marriages acquired legitimacy in Mauritius only when they were declared before the Protector or a Magistrate and registered by him. Because of the general ignorance and the complex as well as expensive process of declaration of marriages before a Magistrate, most of the immigrants could not afford to follow this registration process and therefore their marriages solemnised, according to religious rituals, were invalid according to the law and their children were technically illegitimate. Even for the immigrants who were already married and arrived with their

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{167} Even Royal Commissioners, who were supposedly not influenced by the racist prejudices, noted that the custom of polyandry was an accepted custom in Mauritius and often a group of immigrant men would keep one woman in their housing who would cook their food and fulfill their physical demands. The most disturbing effect of this custom was, according to the Royal Commissioners, too much quarrelling among the immigrants and sometimes even murders. \textit{Report of Royal Commission}, 1875.
\textsuperscript{168} Tinker, Hugh, \textit{A New System of Slavery}, p.201.
\end{flushleft}
wives from India, their marriages were recognised as valid in Mauritius only if they had been already declared before the Protector at the port of embarkation in India.

Because of the large influx of Indian immigrants and a sizeable number of Indian labourers already present in the colony, the colonial authority had to revise the marriage legislations because they could not just delegitimise all the unregistered marriages of the Indian immigrants. In 1853, provisions were made to recognise the marriages solemnised between the members of Indian immigrant community according to their religious rites but the immigrants who wanted to marry had to produce a ‘certificate of non-marriage’\textsuperscript{170} to check polygamy or abduction of already married women. In 1856, a full ‘Indian Marriage Ordinance’ was introduced with almost similar provisions. Another concern of colonial authorities was the practice of early marriages among the immigrant community and therefore the need to regulate the age of marriages. The 1856 ordinance fixed the marriageable age of men and women at 18 and 15 years respectively.\textsuperscript{171}

The official contempt for Indian marriage customs came from the widespread instances of selling of daughters or wives, using marriage ties to bring women to Mauritius and then selling them off to make more profits by the sirdars and returnees. In 1860s, when the government paid a bounty of £2 for bringing legitimate wives in order to promote family migration, ‘many sirdars and overseers brought two and sometimes three women with them’ as their wives who were, as the Protector reported, sold or transferred to other men\textsuperscript{172} to make more money.

Because of the relative scarcity of women and their crucial importance in performing the domestic chores at the plantations like maintaining the households, raising children and looking after the livestock, etc., the usual custom of husbands

\textsuperscript{170} Report of Royal Commission, 1875.
\textsuperscript{171} Indian Marriage Ordinance, 1856.
\textsuperscript{172} ARPI, 1862.
getting dowry from the daughters’ family was reversed in the diasporic setting and often the grooms paid a premium to the daughter’s father or relatives. In one report, an immigrant Doyal of Flacq, gave $137 to get married to Bagmanea. This practice of paying the bride price was not limited to any particular section of the Indian immigrants and another immigrant Virapatim, who had south Indian origins, paid several hundred rupees to get married to Taylamen.173 However, the colonial authorities did not see these instances of bride-price as ‘women empowerment’ and ‘source of additional income for the Indian women’,174 as scholars of diaspora from the feminist genre describe it today. For the colonial authorities, these were forced sale of women175 and considering the fact that the money was often paid to the father or relatives of the brides who, on many occasions, ‘sold’ their daughters or female relatives many times, their description appears to be more tenable than that of the revisionist scholars of diasporic women.

The one positive change in the marriage customs among the Indian diasporic community in Mauritius was the practice of widow marriages, which Marina Carter ascribes to the relative scarcity of the women.176 Because of the traditional marriage practices in India, where there used to be big age gaps between the male and female partners, often the girl being ten or fifteen years younger to the husband, there was a relatively higher proportion of widows. In Mauritius, unlike the societal restrictions in India which prohibited the remarriages of the widows, the circumstances were more conducive and these widows got married, some more than once.177 Among the single women who migrated to Mauritius, a substantial proportion was of widows who

173 Gomm to Grey, dt. 11 June 1847, CO 167/ 283, PRO.
174 Carter, Marina, Servants, p.246.
175 Gomm to Grey, dt. 11 June 1847, CO 167/ 283, PRO.
176 Carter, Marina, Servants, p.246.
177 Pitcher Report, Chapter 3.
ventured to go to distant lands to look for a new beginning and many of them were able to forge matrimonial alliances in the emigration depots itself.\textsuperscript{178}

Controlling the illegal emigration of women in the disguise of wives by the sirdars and returnees and then their subsequent sale in the colony remained a primary preoccupation of the colonial authorities’ marriage related legislations. The other underlying assumption of the administrators’ attempts was that by making the registration and declaration compulsory, they would be able to make the matrimonial alliances among the immigrant community more stable and be able to curb the sexual immorality. Therefore, the registration and declaration of marriages was the main thrust of the Marriage Ordinance 17 of 1871. All the immigrants arriving with their wives and children had to declare and obtain certificates for their marriages twice – once at the port of embarkation where the Protector had to verify their claims of being married and then again upon their arrival in Mauritius where the Protector would give them the certificate without which their marriages were not legally valid and children legitimate.\textsuperscript{179} Considering the ignorance of emigrants and the general aversion among them for the cumbersome registration process, government of India made conscious efforts to emphasise the significance of the registration of marriages before embarkation. A. O. Hume, who was Secretary of the Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce department which administered the indentured emigration, made a special request to the Judicial Secretary of Bengal government to warn the intending emigrants that unless they register their marriages before departure from India and obtain a certificate from the Protector, their marriages will not be held valid in Mauritius.\textsuperscript{180} Any immigrant, who wanted to get married in Mauritius, had to obtain a

\textsuperscript{178} ibid.
\textsuperscript{179} Prog. No.12-16, Gen.(Emi.), December 1871, WBSA.
\textsuperscript{180} Hume to Secretary, Judicial Department, Government of Bengal, Prog. No. 9, Gen.(Emi.), January 1874, WBSA.
certificate from the Protector to testify that he had arrived unmarried in Mauritius.\textsuperscript{181}

After certain modifications through Ordinance 26 of 1890, the most elaborate ordinance was passed in 1912. This ordinance recognised the validity of marriages solemnised according to the religious traditions of immigrants and conducted by the Indian priests who were appointed by the Governor for the celebration of marriages in a district or territory specified by the Governor. This ordinance, while fixing the marriageable age as 21 years for intending husbands and 18 years for the intending wives, also gave space for child marriages by allowing the marriages to be celebrated between the couples below the prescribed age if the parents had given their consent to it. Colonial authorities were perturbed by the disinterest of the immigrant community in getting their marriages registered and therefore to make the registration of marriages more convenient for the immigrant community, all the designated priests were given a register and a schedule of certificate in which they were to register all the marriages celebrated by them and then forward each case to the Civil Status Officer within a week who would then enter the details in the Register of Marriages.\textsuperscript{182}

The patterns of marriages among the Indian immigrants can be traced from the reports on the condition of Indian immigrants in Mauritius. Marina Carter, in her research on Indian immigrants in Mauritius, has also done a selective sampling for the first generations of the immigrants from the Registers of Marriages. All the reports as well as Marina Carter’s findings show that the most of the marriages among the immigrants were intra-regional – North Indians, Tamils, Telegus, and Marathas getting their partners from the same regional communities – with few instances of inter-regional marriages as well. The other important pattern was that the majority of

\textsuperscript{181} Prog. No.12-16, Gen.(Emi.), December 1871, WBSA.
\textsuperscript{182} Ordinance and Proclamations, Government of Mauritius, 1912.
marriages were performed with the bride and groom being from the same religious community. As already mentioned, the occurrence of remarriages and widow marriages was also very common.\textsuperscript{183}

**Personal Lives Beyond the Regulations**

The personal life of diasporic communities is the most favoured site of academic exploration among the scholars of Indian Diaspora, especially among those who belong to the disciplines of anthropology and cultural studies. These scholars study the different aspects of the personal lives of the indentured Diaspora – cultural practices, social institutions, and religious observances as part of a larger project of the articulation of diasporic identity. However, they conceptualise it either in terms of ‘persistence’ or ‘adaptation’. Scholars of migration studies, geographers and anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s, who tended to study the formation of Diaspora in economic terms and as part of the spatial movement of labour, define diasporic communities as a monolithic and homogenised, fixed in terms of space and time. This definition is based on the similarities between the factors and patterns of migration and it propounds the theory of *cultural persistence* as the dominant factor in the shaping of the personal lives of the diasporic community which reconstructed and imitated the cultural symbols and value systems of the homeland in their destinations. The processes of reconstruction are metaphorically described as transplantation (with symbols like the banyan tree)\textsuperscript{184} in which the immigrants neatly pack the essentials of their personal lives (cultural baggage) and unfold that baggage in the new setting and recreate their homeland. But the main problematic with this theory of cultural reproduction lies in the way it conceptualises the reproduction as an objective, 


\textsuperscript{184} Tinker, Hugh, *The Banyan Tree: Overseas Indians from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, OUP, London, 1997.
mechanistic replication and neglect the dynamics of subjective elements in the reproductive process. Cultural reproduction is a generative process involving innovation and creativity\(^{185}\) and the diasporic communities decide the ways and elements of cultural reproduction according to the circumstantial necessities of their surroundings. Based on the anthropological-societal theory of ‘plural societies’, this approach argues that the different ethnic groups had very little scope for interaction in the diasporic setting which prevented the cultural exchange and assimilation of the social-cultural symbols and norms between the Diaspora and the host societies and therefore the diasporic communities continued to live their separate lives.

The recent ramification of this approach, though in much more redefined, liberal and convincing ways, is the concept of *multicultural societies* where diverse cultural groups and identities coexist and maintain their distinct personal lives without any interpenetration or clash. This ‘salad bowl’ approach denies the interaction and influences of different coexistent cultures as if they are housed in impermeable cultural zones.

Contrary to this approach is the theory of ‘melting pot’,\(^{186}\) propounded particularly in the American context in which all immigrant cultures could be absorbed and would eventually contribute to the emergence of a national identity. However, this approach is now considered by scholars as chauvinistic in nature as it had its roots in strong racist state policies. In any case it offers no explanation for the Indian diasporic situation. In recent years, a less radical version of this theoretical approach has emerged in the wake of post-modernist celebrations of hybridity, cross-culturalism and dissolution of territorial boundaries. This approach argues for a process of assimilation and adaptation in the personal lives of the Diaspora in which


the host and the diasporic community interact at different levels and subsequently, through a process of 'creolisation', a hybrid cultural life of Diaspora evolves.

In this work, I have tried to argue that the social and cultural life of the Indian indentured Diaspora was not shaped in accordance with any theoretical formulation, but varied in relation to the specific settlement patterns on the estates, the circumstantial necessities and also according to the volition of the diasporic community.

While discussing the origins of the indentured immigrants in Mauritius, in chapter two of this work, we have seen that these immigrants came from varied castes and not necessarily from the lower castes. The observance of caste related rituals and societal behaviour among the immigrants were subject to certain malleability as well persistence. The most important caste related social behaviour which was subject to change among the Indian immigrants was the dietary habits which had to change right with the beginning of their journey to Mauritius. Food was cooked by the immigrants, without any consideration for their caste belongings, and all the immigrants on board had to eat that food. Eating the food cooked by lower castes was a big taboo for the upper castes in India but, once on board, the immigrants had to give up, with occasional resistance though, their special preferences and taboos about who had cooked the food.

The resistance from the immigrants about the violation of their caste related practices appeared more prominently at the work place. Immigrants from the castes who were not traditionally agriculturalist, resisted to their engagement as agricultural labourers and on many occasions refused to perform the menial work. Many immigrants from the occupational castes like barbers or washer men and upper castes like Brahmins and Kayasthas came to Mauritius on false pretences projected by the
recruiters that they would find jobs according to their previous occupation and
suitable to their caste status. After their arrival in Mauritius, when these immigrants
were also engaged as agricultural labourers, it came as a big shock for them and
many refused to work as agricultural labourers, condemning it as a disgrace.187 The
refusal to work by the non agricultural castes was considered as a serious problem by
the planters who looked upon it as loss of workforce and resources and made frequent
complaints to the authorities. Royal Commission recorded a number of such cases
where planters complained especially about barbers’ and Brahmins’ refusal to work
on plantations.188 They were ill-treated by the planters for their refusal and often
forced to work, but some were more reluctant and came back to India. On some
occasions, however, planters gave concessions to these immigrants. Vencatchellum,
a barber who returned to Madras from Mauritius in 1841, deposed before the Madras
Committee that after he expressed before a Magistrate his unwillingness to work on
the estate, the Magistrate ordered his employer to pay him a sustenance allowance.189
On some estates, high caste immigrants were exempted from the menial work.190

In Indian society, the most prominent site of the working of the caste values
was marriage. At this level also, owing to the relative shortage of women, especially
high caste women, immigrants had to compromise with their traditional belief in
endogamy. But immigrants tried their best to observe the sanctioned deviations in
their marriages and in most cases, marriages were of the kind described as
hypergamy, in which men from high castes married, women from lower castes, which

188 Report of Royal Commission, 1875.
189 Evidence of Vencatchellum, Statement of Coolies Returned to Madras from Mauritius, 1842,
OIOC.
was approved in India also. In the absence of options of choosing their marital partners from within the same caste, the other criterion adopted by the immigrant community in Mauritius was that of common regional and linguistic origins. This emerged as the most decisive factor in forming the matrimonial alliances, especially among the Tamil and Telegu immigrants.

Despite colonial prejudices against the religions of Indian immigrants, which were denounced as 'flagrant heathenism' and their festivals described as 'licentious orgies', the colonial authorities did not interfere in the religious observances of the Indian immigrants. For Indian immigrants, religion and its associated observances like festivals, worship, building temples etc. provided a solace from the sense of loss and dislocation they had to face in the alien diasporic setting. As community places for worship, the immigrants set up makeshift temples called 'chautaras' in their housing on the plantations itself. Gradually, with the help of some relatively well off members of the immigrant community like traders, and the meagre savings of the labourers, proper temples were constructed. The first temple constructed by the Tamil community was on Terre Rouge in 1846. In 1867, a Shiva temple was constructed in a village called 'Gokula' in the north of the island. Apart from constructing temples, the Hindu immigrants identified and recreated some sacred geographical markers of their religion also. A lake in Grand Basin area was named as 'Ganga Talab' (named after the Ganges river of India which has immense sacred significance for the Hindus). The festivals celebrated by the North Indian Hindu immigrants were

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193 Commercial Gazette, dt. 8 June, 1854, cited in Carter, Marina, Servants, pp.259-60.
Holi, Durga Puja, Ramnavami and Shivratri in which immigrants from South Indian also participated. The main festivals of immigrants of Tamil origin were Cavadee and Fire Walking.

There was a sizeable Muslim community among the Indian immigrants – in 1911 the total number of Muslims in the Indian population was 39,145 or around 20 per cent of the total Indian population. They also built mosques to perform religious functions, sometimes even more vigorously than Hindus built temples, because of the perceived threat of being dominated by the majority faith (Hinduism) and loss of their religion and distinct cultural norms. According to Emrith Moomtaz, a scholar of the Muslim community in Mauritius, Islam was present in Mauritius much before the arrival of Indian indentured immigrants and a mosque called ‘Camp Malabar Mosque’ was constructed as early as 1805 near Port Louis. In 1863, a group of Muslim immigrants from Bihar build a mosque in Baramia, Rose Belle, through community contributions. The grand Jumma Maszid (mosque) was also constructed. Its grandeur was very artistically reported by Nicholas Pike who was travelling through Mauritius in late 1870s,

‘There is a beauty about its dome and minarets which is unique and as you stand under on a clear night, myriads of stars glittering overhead it is not difficult to fancy yourself transported to the Oriental land where Allah alone is worshipped.’

The main festivals celebrated by the Muslim immigrants were Id and Muharram. On Muharram, large processions were taken out with Tazias or Yamse and initially it was an inter-religious event with Hindus also participating in large

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196 Census, 1911.
numbers, though on some occasions communal clashes broke out.\textsuperscript{200} The Muslim immigrant community also put up strong resistance to the attempts made by the colonial authorities to interfere with their rights to take out processions during festivals.\textsuperscript{201}

Two institutions through which the Indian labour Diaspora tried to forge community ties and observe socio-cultural practices were – Baitkas for the Hindu community and Jamat for the Muslims. Baitkas were late evening informal gatherings of the immigrants in which labourers would assemble after their dinner and discuss their sufferings and aspirations and someone, who could read, would read passages from the sacred texts like Ramayana, Gita or Mahabharata. Gradually these Baitkas became more institutionalised and functioned as a centre for learning for the immigrant community and later functioned as a major institution for the political awakening among the immigrants. For Muslim community it was Jamat, which was a more formal institution set up often in mosques to carry out community service and provide education to the children along religious lines.

Thus, it appears that the personal lives of the Indian diasporic community in Mauritius were restructured around their socio-cultural traditions and practices and in this process of restructuring and recreating, certain aspects and institutions were reformed in very significant degrees while others remained more or less unaltered. The critical element in determining change or lack of it was the circumstances prevailing in the new situation. Where the change was necessary, pre-existing norms did not stand in the way, where it was not, they continued to exist and provide the basis for distinct social and cultural identity, which in turn provided solace to the people who inevitably felt a deep sense of loss.

\textsuperscript{200} Carter, Sirdars, p.262.
\textsuperscript{201} Anderson to Grey, dt. 17 September 1849, CO 167/ 314, PRO.