

# *Sirdars as Intermediaries in Nineteenth-century Indian Ocean Indentured Labour Migration\**

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## **Abstract**

The sirdar (also termed sardar and jobber in Indian historiography)—foreman, recruiter, at once a labour leader and an important intermediary figure for the employers of labour both in India and in the sugar colonies—is reassessed in this article. Tithankar Roy’s thoughtful 2007 article looked at how the sirdars’ multiple roles represent an incorporation of traditional authority in a modern setting, giving rise to certain contradictions. In 2010 Samita Sen, conversely, developed Rajnarayan Chandavarkar’s argument about the use of labour intermediaries in colonial India to reveal how, in the case of the Assam tea plantations, the nexus between contractors and sirdars belies the ‘benign’ role often accorded to the intermediary within narratives from the tea industry. This article provides examples from the overseas labour destinations in the Indian Ocean region, particularly Mauritius, to further develop and nuance the debate, through an assessment of the complexity of sirdari roles in the colonial Indian labour diaspora.

## **Labour intermediaries: theoretical perspectives**

The jobbers who recruited labourers for migration from the peasant population in their home regions were known by various names: as

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*mukadams* in western India, sirdars or sardars in eastern India, *duffadars* or *arkatis* in migration to Assam and via Calcutta to the sugar colonies, and *maistries* or *kanganis* in southern India. Some of these groups were simply commercial recruiters who escorted would-be labourers to the employer or shipping agent; others travelled with their recruits and worked alongside them in factories or on plantations, often as their overseers. It is this latter group that concerns us in this article: the intermediaries who provided advances to their workers and acted as foremen upon arrival. Their role in rural-rural migration at harvest time was as important as their role in migration to urban centres. In rural Gujarat, Jan Breman has observed:

What at first sight appears to be a kind of tidal movement—a capricious pattern of wholesale influx, a haphazard swarming over the villages in the plain to be followed in time by a gradual dispersal—is in reality a movement of labour which is prestructured by highly personalized control mechanisms, that bridge the distance between home area and destination. A key figure in this is the jobber who, in providing the link between supply and demand, is on the one hand bound to the employer with whom he maintains regular contacts, . . . while on the other hand striving to secure labourers in numbers which match his current needs.<sup>1</sup>

In the jute mills of colonial Calcutta, this phenomenon has been described by Dipesh Chakrabarty as pre-capitalist, and the discipline exercised by sirdars over their workers as brutal: ‘In the jute worker’s mind itself, the incipient awareness of belonging to a class remained a prisoner of his pre-capitalist culture; the class identity of the worker could never be distilled out of the pre-capitalist identities that arose from the relationships he had been born into.’<sup>2</sup> However, Subho Basu and Anthony J. Cox have argued for a broader conception of identity formation, there being, for example, ‘no impermeable boundaries between class-based collective action of workers and their sense of belonging to a religious community’.<sup>3</sup> In submitting to the leadership of sirdars, labourers were primarily engaging in a strategy of survival.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Arjan de Haan has argued that in the jute mills ‘the process of recruitment has been predominantly personalistic:

<sup>1</sup> J. Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers. Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 328–329.

<sup>2</sup> D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> S. Basu, *Does Class Matter?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 275–283, and Anthony J. Cox, *Empire, Industry and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840–1940* (London: Routledge, 2012).

recruitment was—and still is—mainly through personal relations, and the sardar was part of the chain of personal relations'. This institution of mediating was not an invention of the employers and 'the sardar should not be seen [merely] . . . as a lackey of management'.<sup>4</sup>

Personal relationships were equally important in the recruitment of labourers to work overseas. The intermediary, known as a *kangany/i* or sirdar, was described by Sinnappah Arasaratnam as:

a person who was himself an immigrant working on the plantation as a foreman, or even as a labourer of some influence and standing. The employer would send him to India provided with money, to go to his village and district and recruit labourers among his own people. He was empowered to pay the passage and all other expenses connected with the migrants' departure . . . There was now scope for the migration of families rather than individuals . . . When the kangany returned to Malaya with his group of labourers and delivered them to his employer, they were employed in that plantation, usually under the kangany who had recruited them.<sup>5</sup>

R. K. Jain provides a similar description of the recruitment of labourers to work in Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Singapore):

Each kangani recruited a score or more of men belonging mainly to his own caste and kin group, and from about the turn of the century migration by families was the predominant form. Sometimes several emigrant bands, each under its own leader, combined under the overall direction of a high-caste head kangani. Often the kangani was a man with some capital who lent his followers the expense of travelling to and settling down on a plantation. He negotiated with the manager about wages and work conditions on behalf of his group and could remove his followers to another plantation if the terms were not satisfactory. On the plantation the immigrant band was regarded as a work unit under the kangani's supervision and he mediated between it and management in all industrial matters. Each band occupied continuous dwellings in the barracks or 'lines'. It regulated its customary relationships under the kangani's leadership and pooled resources to meet common expenses. On most plantations the kangani was allowed great latitude in regulating the social lives of the labourers outside the work situation. The relations between a kangani and a labourer could be likened to that of a patron and his client.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A. de Haan, *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Calcutta* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1996), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> S. Arasaratnam, *South Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> R.K. Jain, *Indian Communities Abroad—Themes and Literature* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), pp. 8–9.

The paternalistic role of the *kangani*/sirdar could be interpreted both positively and negatively, and changed over time. As Rajnarayan Chandavarkar observed, the use of intermediaries to aid in recruitment was widely considered as a necessary evil due to a British belief that the Indian peasant was static and immobile, which required a special effort at recruitment. This was the case with rural-urban recruitment, recruitment overseas, and recruitment to the tea plantations in Assam.<sup>7</sup> However, over time, employers grew resentful of the power and control acquired by these intermediaries. Colonial sources thus abound with descriptions of them as patriarchal exploiters who defrauded their labourers. These complaints should be treated with considerable caution, however, as rival groups of employers often sought to malign the recruitment practices of their competitors.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Tamil migrants to the tea plantations of Sri Lanka, Patrick Peebles points out:

... since one in eight plantation Tamils was a kangany, the possibility of becoming a kangany was a real one for laborers. Anyone who could return to India and bring back laborers or who was chosen to supervise others became a kangany and had a substantially higher income. The planters demonised the kanganies, but they are a creation of the system, taking advantage of the opportunities given to them. Neither the planters nor the government would cooperate with the other to create a viable alternative, and the planters used kanganies to compete with each other.

Peebles dismisses historians' notions of the *kangani* as a 'patriarch' or necessarily as a man whose caste status gave him a position of authority over his workers—pointing out that cases occurred of low caste *kanganis* with higher caste labourers working under them. He further notes that recruiting *kanganis*, thousands of whom were sent by planters to recruit in India in the nineteenth century, did not always recruit their own

<sup>7</sup> R.S. Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India. Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); S. Sen, 'Commercial recruiting and informal intermediation: debate over the sardari system in Assam tea plantations, 1860–1900', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44:1 (2010), pp. 3–28.

<sup>8</sup> See C. Bates and M. Carter, 'Tribal and Indentured Migrants in Colonial India: Modes of Recruitment and Forms of Incorporation' in P. Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). The owners of flourishing coal mines of lower Bengal (concentrated in Raniganj, Gobindpur, and Giridih) were among the vocal business interests within India who lobbied against recruitment of migration to Assam and overseas for fear that it would raise the cost of their labour. It is from this same region that the largest number of allegations of abduction, especially of young girls, arose.

kin, they sometimes bought ‘coolies’ from other recruiters, or induced bonded labourers to desert. Peebles discounts the usual demonization of the *kangani* as a physical abuser of ‘coolies’, pointing out that the evidence suggests they relied ‘more on moral influence than coercion’. Contemporary accounts of *kanganis* ‘do not reflect actual conditions but rather planters’ distaste for the independence and prosperity of the kanganies . . . planters had little control over the kanganies. Planters did not know how many workers would arrive, what would be their physical condition, or whether they actually came from India or simply walked off a neighbouring plantation’.<sup>9</sup>

Tirthankar Roy’s article draws from the historiography of both Assam and sugar colonies like Mauritius and Fiji to demonstrate that even the lowly ‘hill coolie’ tribals organized their migration with the aid of ‘village headmen’, while such men, transformed into sirdars in the overseas context, functioned as an important avenue of mobility on the plantations.<sup>10</sup> Samita Sen, more recently, has returned to the Assam case to investigate the ways in which colonial legislators repeatedly intervened to ‘define, restrict and regulate forms of labour brokerage’. Sen demonstrates how ‘sirdars’ became key recruiting figures in Assam and argues that understanding the ways in which these labour intermediaries operated is crucial to debunking theories of the traditionalist, ‘immobile’ rural Indian labour force which have continued to influence academic discourse. At the same time, she notes how ties between sirdars and contractors increasingly served to perpetuate abuses in the recruiting system.<sup>11</sup> To further address and nuance the debate around the role of labour intermediaries, this article draws upon archival evidence from Mauritius. As the principal destination for indentured labourers in the Indian Ocean region, its labour intermediaries—called sirdars—drew recruits from similar sources to those serving the Assam tea gardens.

### **Intermediaries and indentured labour recruitment**

Government legislation for the regulation of overseas Indian indentured labour was first introduced in 1826, with a decree by the

<sup>9</sup> P. Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2001), pp. 37–38.

<sup>10</sup> T. Roy, ‘Sardars, jobbers, kanganies: the labour contractor and Indian economic history’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 42:5 (2008), pp. 981–983.

<sup>11</sup> Sen, ‘Commercial recruiting and informal intermediation’, pp. 20–28.

French island of Bourbon (later known as Réunion) arranging for the reception of Indian workers.<sup>12</sup> Labourers were 'indentured' because they were obliged to sign a fixed term contract of employment on a stipulated monthly wage, with passage home to be provided by their employer at the end of their contracts. Penal clauses were subjoined to the contract, punishing unauthorized absence with imprisonment and, in some cases, imposing the notorious 'double cut' in case of sickness. The export of labour to Mauritius commenced soon after in 1829. As they became aware of the trade, British authorities in India obliged the labourers and their recruiter to appear before a magistrate to confirm that they had voluntarily entered into these agreements. In 1839 the introduction of Act XIV, following the Calcutta enquiry, temporarily interrupted the trade. Overseas migration to Mauritius was then reintroduced on 3 June 1842, this time under a Protector of Immigrants. Further legislation to protect migrant workers was introduced in 1843, with Act XXI ensuring that workers could only leave to work overseas after a certificate had been signed by both the agent and the Protector. Overseas migration to Mauritius was halted once more in 1856, due to reports of maltreatment of Indians on board ships bound for the island, but this was to last only one year. This sparked the introduction of Act XIX, passed in 1856, giving the governor-general the power to stop emigration to any country accused of providing inadequate conditions to Indian labourers. The 1860s saw contracts for all sugar colonies extended to five years and regular inspections of ships, depots, factories, and plantations were instituted; finally in 1864, Act XIII was introduced in order to create a single framework with streamlined laws and regulations for recruiters, agents, and Protectors.<sup>13</sup>

Between the 1820s and the 1860s, the role of labour intermediaries in recruitment evolved significantly. This was particularly apparent in Calcutta, where the use of local contractors employing *arkatis* and *duffadars* was rapidly replaced by the more direct method of utilizing returnee labour sirdars to 'collect' fellow villagers and bring them to the Mauritius depot at Garden Reach on the banks of the Hoogly, the primary port of embarkation in the early nineteenth century.

<sup>12</sup> P. Leroy-Beaulieu, *De la Colonisation chez les Peuples Modernes* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1874), p. 246. See also H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Further details of the legislative changes regulating indentured labour migration can be gleaned from Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, pp. 63–115.

There were several reasons why this new system of sirdari recruitment initially suited all parties. Overseas sugar planters quickly realized that more targeted methods of recruitment were likely to bring about better results. The job of the local emigration agent for Mauritius in Calcutta was greatly facilitated by the recruitment enacted by trusted workers, often those already promoted to overseer positions on the plantations (sirdars). The merchants who had dominated labour mobilization in the 1830s, utilizing *arkatis* and *duffadars*, and notoriously confining recruits in 'godowns', were effectively sidelined. The Mauritius government, which financed the emigration agent in Calcutta, supported cost-effective measures to select and ship recruits, while for the migrants, the sirdar-recruitment system offered possibilities for spouse-migration and the regrouping of family networks which were not easily achievable otherwise.

While the interests of overseas sugar planters and Indian migrants may have initially converged on the method of recruitment, this was not always the case. Employers soon recognized the enhanced role of the sirdars to be a double-edged sword. When they exercised their influence over the recruits to bring them back to the planter who had initiated and financed the return to India, all was well. When, however, sirdars influenced their recruits to engage with a rival planter, measures to tie the immigrants to those who had financed their passage were mooted. Such sirdars were accused of possessing 'unlimited power' and exercising 'tyranny' over the Indians under their control. In 'planter-speak' the sirdar then becomes a 'cunning rascal' practising 'a truly eastern despotism'.<sup>14</sup> It quickly became apparent that rival groups were establishing themselves at the depots and on board ships, seeking to gain influence over migrants. A British Indian official, Robert Neave, going on leave to Mauritius in 1845, travelled on a ship carrying indentured labourers and described the activities of sirdars and other labour brokers:

The competition of newly arrived immigrants is now so great, that large sums of money are notoriously paid in procuring them. In consequence sirdars of large bands are losing their power, from being unable to keep their men together ... The influence of the large sirdars is giving way before that of smaller leaders, who have a more close and immediate connexion with the immigrants than the others. This connexion originates perhaps in community of caste, abode or relationship, but in whatever way it arises, it enables the

<sup>14</sup> M. Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers, Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p 69.

possessor to negotiate for himself and his section and to set the sirdar at defiance. I have twice seen with my own eyes instances, where newly arrived bands at the depot refused to follow the lead of the head man, and broke up into smaller sections at their own pleasure and under other leaders. This accounts for the number of people returning to India to bring new men; but going as they do frequently and for the purposes of private persons, they should be paid by those persons.<sup>15</sup>

Colonial officials were asked to review the situation. Mr Passmore, a stipendiary magistrate serving in the Plaines Wilhems district of Mauritius, recounted the fate of a band of 45 Indians who arrived in 1846 and were engaged to work on a plantation in May of that year. Only 16 of their number worked regularly and 19 deserted during their first year on the island. This was attributed to ‘the machinations of the sirdar, who accompanied the band from Calcutta, and who, it appears, had previously been in the colony’. He was subsequently convicted of enticing away 36 Indians and of hiring them to an Indian and his contract of employment was annulled.<sup>16</sup> Sir William Maynard Gomm, governor of Mauritius, explained this ‘sorry account’ as follows:

... the practice prevails to some extent among the more considerable planters and their connexions, of dispatching influential sirdars and others to bring back bands specially destined for their own service; and where the scheme has been thwarted, owing to whatever cause, and the projected disposal of the band over-ruled at the depot or elsewhere, these are the probable results.<sup>17</sup>

Two parallel systems were already in operation that did not always converge. Informal networks were being created whereby employers in Mauritius, some of whom were themselves of Indian origin, were forging relationships with new intermediaries—sirdars—and paying them to return to India and recruit new workers. The streaming of these recruits through the government-regulated indenture system with its network of agents and depots did not always serve their interests appropriately. Some emigration agents [generally British officials] were reluctant to accept that indentured migrants might have their own organizational arrangements, and in such cases sirdars took care to conceal their identities and operations. One planter

<sup>15</sup> National Archives UK [NA] Colonial Office [CO] 167/288, Report of Robert Neave, 19 July 1845.

<sup>16</sup> Parliamentary Papers [PP] 1848 (61) S. M. Passmore to Colonial Secretary, 1 June 1847.

<sup>17</sup> PP 1848 (61) Governor Gomm to Earl Grey, 7 June 1847 (124).



attempted to articulate the problem in a memorial to the governor in which he outlined the failings of the 'established agencies in India', claimed that difficulties were placed in the way of sirdars by an 'ill informed' agent, and asserted that 'out of 20 Indians introduced, 19, if not all, have been arranged by Sirdars from Mauritius, and these same Sirdars will inform you of the ruses they were obliged to employ for themselves and their bands so as not to be discovered by the emigration agent'.<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, the story of Cassiram Juggernaut is noteworthy. He was one of ten returnee recruiters sent by planters from Mauritius to Bombay in 1855. On his arrival there, Cassiram and others collected bands of recruits and took them to the local agent, Mr St Amour. However, government-regulated indentured migration had been closed from Bombay two years earlier, and the men were obliged to wait for months at the port for a ship to take them back to Mauritius. One of the ten returnees died, and another abandoned the plan to remigrate. The remaining eight resolved to travel to Calcutta and embark from there with their families. They set out for Calcutta in November 1855 and after further adventures en route, Cassiram eventually embarked for Mauritius aboard the 'Futtay Mobarak' in 1856.

The herculean efforts made by these sirdars to return to Mauritius with their recruits prompted Mr Bryce, assistant master attendant at Bombay, to propose allowing emigrants to make their own arrangements with shipowners for passages rather than relying on the state-controlled indenture system. Mr Hugon, the Protector of Immigrants at Mauritius, also seeking to offer greater flexibility to would-be migrants, outlined a similar scheme whereby the employer would pay the passage costs of those individuals who engaged with him. However, after some deliberations, the Colonial Land and Emigration Board rejected these proposals on the grounds that permitting migrants and planters to arrange shipping and wage rates themselves might lead to less well-regulated voyages and would render migrants more vulnerable to 'the influence of the sirdars'.<sup>19</sup> They insisted that since sufficient migrants could be acquired from Calcutta and Madras, there was no need to re-open Bombay. In such circumstances it is easy to imagine cases where sirdari recruiters attempting to take

<sup>18</sup> PP 1848 (61) Gomm to Grey, 10 July 1847 encl. memorial by E. Maurel, dated 28 June 1847.

<sup>19</sup> NA CO 167/385, Murdoch and Rogers to Merivale, 15 March 1856.

migrants to a particular place and a known employer, might find themselves thwarted by emigration agents seeking to fill quotas for specific colonies.

The Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius, ostensibly appointed to 'protect' the interests of the Indian migrants, was in a difficult position. He was aware that sirdari recruiters were in many cases helping to reunite family members and co-villagers and therefore had an interest in returning to a specific place. On the other hand, he recognized that new migrants should not be forced to remain on estates where circumstances might change, through sale or other factors or where the treatment of the workforce became harsh or oppressive. At the same time, the planter-financier was entitled to remuneration for his outlay and, provided he was not in breach of labour laws, to be able to meet his labour requirements for forthcoming cane-cutting seasons. In attempting to negotiate these multiple factors, there was a return to the system of signing contracts in India. Re-instituted in 1858, it effectively bound migrants to their overseas employer, removing the labourer's right to 'choose' an employer, a right they would not regain until the expiration of their contract. Previously, new arrivals had remained at the immigration depot for 48 hours, accessible only to planters and their 'representatives' who competed to sign them at times of high demand.

The 48-hour stay at the Mauritius immigration depot, during which time new immigrants were supposed to choose an employer, was the scene of fierce competition, especially in those years when sugar prices were rising and labour was at a premium. At such times brokers were sent by planters to the immigration depot at Port Louis to procure men for them. Planters reputedly paid up to one or two *livres* per male immigrant so obtained. Another useful intermediary in the procurement of labour was the depot interpreter who was said to be 'notoriously open to corruption'. According to Anderson, the official appointed as Protector of Immigrants to Mauritius, the result was:

No immigrant ever forms an engagement for himself, or even communicates with the planter, who is standing before him for the purpose of obtaining his services. They invariably and implicitly follow the will and the directions of the sirdar to whom they have given their confidence, and who is always either in the direct pay of the planter or has been bribed by his interpreter to secure the services of the band of which he has constituted himself the chief. . .

The influence which these men obtain over their gangs during their temporary charge, is almost beyond belief; some of them, it is true, are sent by the planters to Calcutta for the express purpose of returning with

new immigrants, and of thus obtaining their confidence. Others meet their gangs for the first time on board the ship which is to convey them mutually to this island; but their unbounded influence is the same in both cases... [T]he sums disbursed by the planters to brokers, sirdars and interpreters, as already described, form a heavy tax on the agricultural body.<sup>20</sup>

The process of recruitment was thus far from being the ideal individualized market exchange imagined by the Protector. Instead, the sirdar played a critical role as an intermediary in negotiations, securing the best possible terms for the engagement of himself and his body of workers.

It was certainly the case that not all sirdars were returnee migrants sent for the purpose of recruitment. It was a common practice for the staff of emigration depots or the captains of ships to nominate men to take charge of groups of emigrants and assist the process of 'securing order and cleanliness'. Ships' captains relied on sirdars to keep order on board: 'We looked to the sirdars and topases, of whom we had forty-eight on board, to prevent quarrelling or plotting mischief' wrote one.<sup>21</sup> Nominee sirdars were susceptible to the temptations of the agents and 'immigrant brokers' who assailed new arrivals in Mauritius, because they had no strong bond either to their band or to a former employer.

Finding the right balance between operating a government-regulated migration with its rigid shipping and contractual arrangements and encouraging the independently operating returnee recruiters remained difficult. The new method of signing contracts in India did not provide enough flexibility insofar as remuneration and recognition of the expense and effort of the returnee recruiters was concerned. This issue was raised by the emigration agent at Madras:

Most of the sirdars who collect bands have been obliged to make small advances to each emigrant, before leaving the interior and naturally expect on their arrival here [the Madras depot], or [in] Mauritius to get a portion if not all of this money returned to them by the person who gets the services of his band—and further they all refuse to sign a contract at the same rate of wages as those they bring with them—indeed it appears an act of injustice to the return immigrants themselves that after laying out their own funds they should be obliged to accompany the coolies without proper engagement of a

<sup>20</sup> PP 1847 (325) Gomm to Gladstone, 30 May 1846, encloses report by Protector of Immigrants Anderson, 18 May 1846.

<sup>21</sup> W.H. Angel, *The Clipper Ship 'Sheila': Angel-Master* (London: Heath Cranton, 1921), p. 152.

fair remuneration which the present form of engagement does not secure to them.<sup>22</sup>

Sirdari recruitment operated with difficulty within government-controlled indentured migration, but the continual discussion of these problems and the many attempts made to refine the system are proof enough of the very real activities being undertaken by migrants and returnees to re-establish some degree of control and autonomy within the process.

### **The multiple roles of the sirdar**

Sirdars functioned not only as collectors and agents of labour in village, ship, and depot, but also as foremen, as spokesmen for gangs of labourers, and as pioneers of settlement. They acted as *mahajans* (moneylenders), played a key role in re-engaging bands at the end of their contracts of employment, and both resisted and assisted the planters in maintaining discipline and order within the plantations. Off the plantations, they became shopkeepers, market gardeners, operated vehicle hire companies and other industries, purchased land, became small planters, and helped to establish villages and allied social services for the growing number of Indians who elected to settle permanently on Mauritius.

The sirdars certainly found ways to enrich themselves through their activities both on and off the plantations, but how effective were they in negotiating for improved wages on behalf of their band of workers? The available evidence attests to the amounts of money sirdars could acquire when demand for labourers was high, and there is some indication that they could negotiate higher wages for re-engaging labourers at the end of their initial contract of indenture. The report of the 1845 Committee on Labour in Mauritius includes an appendix listing the answers of proprietors and planters to various questions concerning the role of sirdars on the sugar estates. Bourgault Ducoudray of the Bon Air Estate believed that 'the influence of the Sirdars is very great' and reported paying one sirdar 50 dollars for the service of undertaking to engage fresh labourers.<sup>23</sup> Baudot of Poudre

<sup>22</sup> Mauritius Archives [MA] RA [Departmental Series] 1587, Emigration Agent Madras to Colonial Secretary, Mauritius, 14 February 1860.

<sup>23</sup> 'Dollars' in this context refers to Spanish dollars, still widely in circulation in the Indian Ocean. They were worth approximately half the value of the East India

d'Or plantation employed around 500 Indians and stated that 'two thirds were induced to come to Mauritius by old immigrants who had returned after serving for 5 years'. He added 'The influence of the sirdars is great and exceedingly mischievous—they sometimes obtain a reward from one planter for inducing a band to leave their place and engage with him and then receive another reward from their own master for replacing those who thus leave.' W.W. West, British owner of the Vale plantation, stated that he had not been able to re-engage any men, despite offering an increase of wages: 'The employment of sirdars is at the root of the evil. These men induce the labourers by false promises and delusive prospects to leave, and then sell them to some other planter, regardless of the men's interest . . . It will be difficult to put this class of men down, for the Indians, when no sirdar is appointed over them, elect one themselves.' Despite these views, he also admitted that the recent influx of workers had 'been chiefly brought about by old immigrants who returned to India'. A planter of Tamil origin, Tiroumoudy, offered a more interesting insight into the machinations of sirdars. He explained that on his plantation, Bon Espoir, a band of men whose indenture contracts were about to expire had received a visitor: 'a strange sirdar from the neighbourhood has been among them trying to persuade them to re-engage elsewhere'. He deprecated the fact that such sirdars behaved 'like leeches, they bleed the labourers, and rob the masters of their men', while admitting, 'the planters have created the mischief for themselves—the want of hands has driven them to the employment of these men'.<sup>24</sup>

Sugar production was booming in Mauritius in the 1840s as the island took full advantage of the post-slavery decrease in West Indian exports, and its proximity to India, to emerge as Britain's largest supplier of that important commodity. Competition for labour was high, and the intensification of the planters' complaints testify to the fact that control over who should be appointed sirdar was increasingly vested in the Indians and bore little relation to the qualities the employers expected from foremen. They wrote:

Nearly all these sirdars are entirely deficient in the knowledge requisite to enable them to instruct and direct a gang of men in field labour. Owing to this

Company rupee. See Thomas Thornton, *The East Indian Calculator* (London: Kingsbury, Parbury and Allen, 1823).

<sup>24</sup> NA CO 167/263, Gomm to Stanley, 11 November 1845, enclosing Appendix A of Committee on Labour Report, 19 February 1845.

ignorance overseers are obliged to be sent with them at another expense; not one in a hundred can trace out a square for holding, or plant judiciously, or even clean with judgment . . . How is it possible that they should be qualified? Some only a year or so in the colony, and some just arrived, still they are of necessity accepted by the planters, and retained at a high rate of wages, to satisfy their bands, whom they cunningly instruct not 'to engage without them'.

The older sirdars further establish great dominion over these men by advances of money at enormous interest, and so entangle them as to have them always in their power. At the end of their engagement, by this singular authority they take away their bands, which they invariably sell to those who, in extremity, for want of hands, readily give a large sum.

What is most singular is, that the band themselves get no part of this money, which ranges from 200 to 500 dollars, according to the number of men; yet the fascination is so powerful, that they cling to their sirdar with a tenacity really astonishing . . .

Earl Grey, secretary of state for the colonies, reacted to planter complaints by commenting to Governor Gomm in 1847: 'the sirdars, if they possess an illegitimate influence, are doubtless possessed of a legitimate influence also, and one which is of material assistance to the labourer in making his contract with his employer'. For this reason, he argued, it is 'not desirable that the local government should interfere'.<sup>25</sup>

The sirdars, however, could do little to influence the wages of newly indentured labourers, and planter legislatures successfully campaigned to extend the duration of the indenture contract to three and then five years. The labour-importing sugar colonies each introduced different versions of the British Master-Servant laws, which imposed severe penalties on labourers for any breach of contract, no matter how small.<sup>26</sup> The fixed low wages and fines imposed on labourers who were absent or sick meant that many indentured workers found themselves short of funds for any additional items beyond the plain rations issued by the planters that they wished

<sup>25</sup> PP (1848) 61, Gomm to Grey, 3 July 1847, enclosing petition of planters, and Grey's reply of 9 December 1847.

<sup>26</sup> Mauritius introduced a notorious 'double cut' regulation in its post-emancipation statute no. 16 of 1835 which docked two days' pay for every day of unauthorized absence. Statute no. 22 of 1847 applied the same penalty to Indian indentured labourers, who forfeited any claim to wages or rations during their absence and were in addition to pay a half penny out of every shilling of monthly wages for each day's absence. After 1862 these fines could be imposed directly by planters without recourse to a magistrate. See D. Hay and P. Craven (eds), *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), Introduction, fn. 166.

to purchase. Moneylending and pooling of resources became an important aspect of sirdari functions on the estates. It was not uncommon for them to retain a portion of the monthly wages of their labourers as a form of saving. This could then be returned when the labourer wished to remit money home or to go back to India; or if a labourer was ill or absent and his wage was docked, that portion retained by the sirdar would then be used to provide him with support. Sometimes the sirdar would pool all the wages of his band of labourers before dividing and distributing it, thereby ensuring that any deductions unreasonably imposed by the planter would be rendered ineffective. The sirdar might also lend money (at a price) for special purposes, such as a marriage, or even to assist a labourer who needed to return to relatives in India, for inheritance matters or other family crises.

The planters often ascribed sinister motives to the saving and moneylending practices of sirdars. Rudelle, owner of La Barraque plantation, found that in some instances sirdars put all the wages into one bag. He was told that it was for the purpose of savings, but, believing the sirdars could not know how much each man had lost by absence, he concluded they must have made some unfair division and forbade the practice. At the same time, Rudelle claimed to hold 3 to 4,000 dollars of savings that belonged to 'old immigrants' [time expired labourers], no doubt trusting himself to manage these funds honestly. In fact, cases occurred where the planters, not the sirdars, robbed the labourers.<sup>27</sup> In 1856, the chief sirdar of the 'Industrie' estate was said to have 'lent' the sum of £370 and two shillings (the savings of his gang of labourers) to the proprietor, Mr F. Pellegrin, who promised to pay him back within eight days. But this did not happen. For two years the sirdar received no money and had to hire an attorney to prosecute his claim. The magistrate ruled in his favour, but still the money was not returned. Since the chief sirdar was now obliged 'to return to all the Indians who have put in trust with me their money, desirous to return to their native country', his last resort in 1865 was to write a petition to the Protector of Immigrants 'as our self-defender to prescribe me the way for obtaining the same sum which we have spared from the hardest labour of 22 years in this colony'. It is not recorded if he was successful, but clearly the amounts being saved by

<sup>27</sup> NA CO 167/263, Gomm to Stanley.

the workers, and placed in the care of the sirdar, were too tempting for the greedy insolvent planter.<sup>28</sup>

Despite such incidents, there is no doubt that substantial sums were saved and remitted home. According to H.N.D. Beyts, Protector of Immigrants, the remittances from Mauritius to Calcutta between 1 February 1866 and 23 October 1867 numbered 186, totalling Rs50,612—of these 111 were for sums over Spanish \$100 and 75 were for sums of \$100 or less. In 1870–71, 28 emigrants returning to Calcutta remitted Rs13,738 through the Mauritius Emigration Agents' office.<sup>29</sup> In later years the remittances through Calcutta from Mauritius were lower, ranging between a total of Rs4,910 in 1873 and Rs6,768 in 1882. This was probably because capital was increasingly being retained on the island as families became settled there.<sup>30</sup> However, these figures must be treated with caution because it is not always possible to distinguish between funds remitted by planter-financed sirdars as recruiting expenses and those saved from the wages of individual migrants. In 1872, Captain F. T. Blunt, one of several officials appointed to make regular visits to estates as Inspectors of Immigrants, offered the following appraisal of the large sums taken back to India by returnees:

I have heard a great deal of the amounts saved, sent to India, and taken there by men going home. The amounts include Sirdars and all Indians and I think I may justly remark that out of £6 a year, it would be next to an impossibility for even the greatest miser to save up the large sums reported, namely 1,000, 2,000 and even 5,000 rupees. The men who save money are the sirdars, and those who having brought a little here, trade on it; or, the man who not having a family, saves by hard work one or two rupees, and by dint of lending them at high usurious interest to the man with a family who is sick etc, thus gets on.<sup>31</sup>

The tug of war between planters and sirdars did not always end well for the latter. There are numerous examples of sirdars being stripped of their authority and demoted to manual labourer or deported back

<sup>28</sup> MA PA 8 [Immigration Department], Letter of Chief Sirdar to Protector of Immigrants, Beyts, 17 June 1870.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, and Bengal Emigration Proceedings: HND Beyts, Protector, Mauritius to Colonial Secretary, 15 March 1867.

<sup>30</sup> India Office Library and Records [IOLR] V/27/820/35, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency*, George A. Grierson, Calcutta, 25 February 1883, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> MA Immigration Reports [B Printed Series], Blunt to Protector of Immigrants, 4 April 1873.



to India. Some of those who returned to India and collected a band of recruits were not given the remuneration they expected or even a post as sirdar. Ramsamy complained to the Protector of Immigrants that his contract was that of a labourer, not as a sirdar. He explained, 'I went to India and recruited 10 labourers, and therefore, how can I work after that?' Much of the 'disorder' complained of by planters can certainly be attributed to the clash of expectations and non-fulfilment of verbal understandings between intermediaries and employers.<sup>32</sup>

Sirdars played an important role in heading and financing festivals and other cultural and religious organizations that were of great significance to estate workers. Ignorance or a wilful and mean-spirited misunderstanding of cultural practices was a hurdle to be overcome in the overseas settings and sometimes led to dismissals. In July 1840 the contracts of two sirdars in the service of Mademoiselle Bestel were cancelled, on the ground that the men had 'headed and excited a riotous meeting of the Indian labourers in her service, on which occasion another sirdar was hung in effigy ... and the whole property in the worst state of disorder for 24 hours'. An Indian interpreter interrogated the two sirdars who explained that on a Sunday morning the Indians of the plantations had 'celebrated the feast of Goburdun according to their custom, viz an effigy of Goburdun made with straw, carried by an Indian and followed by all the other Indians round their dwellings'. More damning, perhaps, was the evidence that one of the sirdars, Goordial, was reported to have 'given the worst advice to the men under his orders, telling them not to work so fast, and that if they made 30 cane holes they would get their 5 rupees and would get no more if they made 60'. The unfortunate sirdars were imprisoned for three days and fined £5. They were then sent back to Calcutta—to their considerable distress, as they did not wish to return to India.<sup>33</sup>

The more enlightened planters naturally encouraged and supported the annual festivals and permitted the building of temples and mosques on their estates as a means of anchoring their workforce in the locality. Indian planters led the way in sponsoring both the familial regroupment of workers and the erection of places of worship. Songor Itty, a Tamil immigrant who arrived in Mauritius in 1843 and subsequently became a sirdar on the Clemencia estate—owned by

<sup>32</sup> See M. Carter, *Voices from Indenture Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996), pp. 63–64, 124–125.

<sup>33</sup> MA RC [Departmental Petitions], volume 28, S. M. Pearce to J. Finnis, 24 July 1840.

Pierre Amourdon Arlanda, himself of South Indian descent—became one of the first philanthropists of the community. Together with his wife, Doya Kishto, he erected a temple on his land, and donated it to the local Hindu population in 1867.<sup>34</sup> By this time many of the ‘old immigrants’ like Itty had moved out of the estate camp on the plantation—the so-called ‘coolie lines’—to settle on marginal land which they acquired on the borders of the sugar estates. These would form the kernel of rural villages in years to come. The Inspector of Immigrants, Captain Blunt, who visited Industrie estate in 1872, remarked that ‘a great number of the Indians did not live in the camp but on the sides of the hills, where they cultivated gardens, etc, these houses and patches of ground they rented: the number given me as doing so was 150. The greater number of these men are reported to have been for many years on the estate. The shops are stated to be the property of some of the sirdars, and are let one to a Chinaman and the other to a Creole.’<sup>35</sup>

As the boom years faded and the sugar industry slipped into depression in the late 1860s planters found it expedient not only to sell off part of their estate lands but also to outsource the management of Indian labour completely to job contractors. Sirdars moved into land acquisition and job contracting on a large scale. By 1865 the governor of Mauritius was of the opinion that,

The competition now existing between the planter and the job-contractor, who is generally some old Sirdar, who has acquired influence over his comrades, and induced them on the expiration of their first engagement to place themselves under his orders, is now altogether in favour of the latter, who is always able to offer higher wages, exemption from discipline and continual leave of absence, with the same guarantee to the laborer for the payment of his wages.<sup>36</sup>

By the time the royal commissioners visited Mauritius to enquire into the conditions of Indian estate workers in the mid-1870s, the sirdar was an established fixture of the sugar economy. While some planters continued to deprecate the money-lending activities of the sirdars who ‘actually enslave their men by means of their loans and advances’,

<sup>34</sup> R. Sooriamoorthy, *Les Tamouls à L'Île Maurice* (Port Louis: Henry and Co., 1977), pp. 130–134.

<sup>35</sup> MA Inspection Reports, Captain F. T. Blunt to Protector of Immigrants, 3 December 1872.

<sup>36</sup> NA CO 167/476, Barkly to Cardwell, 15 April 1865, Re Ordinance 7 of 1865 ‘to secure the rights of new immigrants under contracts of service with job contractors and to extend the jurisdiction of SMs to claims for wages founded on guarantees’.

charging usurious interest rates sometimes as high as 75 per cent,<sup>37</sup> others felt that the influence of sirdars had waned: 'the Indians have at present a better knowledge of estates and masters, and when they find themselves well off they will leave an estate, so that the custom which existed formerly of job contractors and Sirdars enticing men away has been put a stop to'.<sup>38</sup> A more nuanced understanding of the role of the sirdar was articulated by Mr Antelme, who considered them to be 'intelligent and useful' and did not agree that Indians were always robbed by sirdars. He stated, on the contrary, that a man might spend the earnings of eight or 10 years to become a sirdar and form a gang of 20. He further stated that sirdars would loan money without interest to keep their men in the gang and obtain their re-engagement, and that they were the ones who suffered by any delay in wage payments—a notorious problem on sugar estates where income was received only when crops were sold. Finally, he stated that sirdars did indeed often receive double rations, but this was 'so that absentees who lose their wages and rations can obtain food from the sirdar'.<sup>39</sup> In other words, Mr Antelme considered that the sirdar most often performed the role of a patron and intermediary in a fashion that was constructive and useful. After hearing all the evidence available to them, the commissioners concluded as follows:

Notwithstanding the many objections that there are, both theoretically and in practice to the Sirdar system, it is one so entirely consonant with the habits and customs of the natives of India, that we fear there would be great difficulty in breaking through it. Any person acquainted with India must be aware that every village is ruled by its 'Patel' or head man, and that every trade and craft has either a 'Panchayet' (or guild) or head man (Mookadum) to rule them, and that even the labourers have their 'Mookadum' to whom they refer or appeal on all occasions; and, although the immigrants are neither of one village, one caste, nor of one trade, they still naturally seek to find a head man or mentor to whom they should refer when in need.<sup>40</sup>

The sirdari and contractor elite who emerged from the ranks of the indentured labourers to be further enriched from the parcelling out of estate lands, joined forces with wealthy Indian merchants settled in Mauritius to make collective land purchases. These were then divided into smaller strips and sold on to the ex-indentured labourers. This

<sup>37</sup> PP *Report of the Royal Commissioners appointed to enquire into the Treatment of Indian Immigrants in Mauritius*, 1875 [C. 1115], paras 2308 and 2319.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 2315.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 2301.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 2333.

process, known locally as *morcellement* [breaking up], was instrumental in the creation of Indian villages. The story of the Rama family is illustrative of the means by which upwardly mobile sirdars acquired wealth and prestige. In 1850 Kadum Rama and his wife arrived on the island from the coastal district of Ratnagiri in the Bombay Presidency. Although indentured, Rama was a former tax collector and, as an educated man, was promoted to sirdar on the Highlands sugar estate. Four sons were born, all of whom worked on the estate. The manager assisted them in the acquisition of a ten acre plot of land for vegetable cultivation. They moved with him to his next posting at the Chamouny plantation and were able to purchase 300 acres when part of the estate was sold off. Eventually the Rama family purchased the Chamouny estate outright, along with a number of other large properties. The Rama brothers sent their children to France to study, producing two doctors and a chemist. In post-independence Mauritius, a member of the family became a government minister.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in 1968 the first prime minister of the new nation was himself the son of a sirdar. Moheeth Ramgoolam migrated from the Saran district of Bihar in 1896 to join his elder brother. After some years of work on the Queen Victoria sugar estate he was promoted to sirdar and married a young widow. They had a son, Kewal, later to be known as Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, on 18 September 1900. The family sponsored Kewal's education and he attended one of the island's best secondary schools before training as a medical doctor in England, returning to take on the historic task of leading Mauritius to independence.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusions

Tirthankar Roy has speculated that the competitive weakness of the Bombay cotton mills in the inter-war period—by comparison, for example, with Japan—may be due to the fact that Indian labour was of a quality 'poorer than that of manufacturing labour in Japan, Europe and North America', and that recruiting agents or 'labour-lords', and

<sup>41</sup> M. Carter, 'Subaltern success stories: socio-economic mobility in the Indian labour diaspora—some Mauritian case studies', *Internationales Asienforum*, 33:1/2 (2002), pp. 91–100.

<sup>42</sup> A. Mulloo, *Our Struggle: 20th Century Mauritius* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1982), pp. 13–18. See also S. Selvon, *Ramgoolam* (Mauritius: Editions Ocean Indien, 1986), pp. 3–9.

their rent-seeking behaviour, may have been partly responsible.<sup>43</sup> The Mauritius case study presented in this article attempts to nuance this argument by demonstrating how dissatisfaction with the ‘quality’ of labour recruited by traditional local agents (merchants operating in tandem with *duffadars* and *arkatis*) prompted overseas employers to set up or work with existing quasi-informal sirdari and returnee-recruiting networks. These had the dual objectives of recruiting labour prepared to engage in cane cutting at the wage rates on offer, as well as offering opportunities for family regroupment on and off the plantation in a bid to encourage permanent settlement. Not only did this lead to a more appropriate labour force being acquired, but also, when the boom years turned to depression and sugar lands were being sold off and repossessed, sirdari networks and merchant connections facilitated the wholesale acquisition of land by ex-indentured Indians. The sons and grandsons of sirdars moved out of the agricultural sector, training as doctors and lawyers, and emerging as the present political elite of Mauritius. The functioning of sirdari and returnee networks, within the indenture system, so well documented in the Mauritius records, is glimpsed elsewhere, for example in the literature on Indian migration to South Africa.<sup>44</sup> Further evidence is likely to emerge as to the presence of returnees and sirdars in the more distant destinations such as the Caribbean and Fiji, notwithstanding the self-evident truth that proximity to India, which facilitated and lowered the expense of return journeys, is a key factor in determining the extent and significance of this form of semi-autonomous ‘subaltern careering’.

There were numerous enquiries and commissions exploring the Indian indentured labour system in the nineteenth century. In a legalistic fashion they compiled evidence for and against to enable the government to decide whether legislative intervention was required. This was a sensitive issue, given the prevailing ideological presumption in favour of *laissez-faire* in matters of employment law and competing demands for legislative intervention deriving from the evangelical, anti-slavery movement in Britain, which the Government of India was keen to resist.<sup>45</sup> There were also competing economic interests,

<sup>43</sup> Roy, ‘Sardars, jobbers, kangannies’, pp. 971–998.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, documents relating to the recruiting activities of Natal sirdars in India in S. Bhana and B. Pachai (eds), *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), pp 27–29.

<sup>45</sup> See A. Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire in India 1772–1843* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

with rivalries between British capitalists and employers in India and between the planters and investors in the sugar colonies, each of whom was keen to secure an abundant supply of labour at the lowest possible cost. These rivalries established the characteristic dichotomous fashion in which the Indian indentured labour experience has been described ever since: as either an unmitigated evil or an extraordinary opportunity for Indians to establish for themselves new and prosperous lives in colonies overseas. A similar dichotomy has affected discussions on the role of labour intermediaries, with the sirdars being regarded as a largely unmitigated benefit in matters of recruitment, and an object of endless opprobrium when they continued to exercise an influence over the gangs of workers they had recruited after their arrival in the colony. It is apparent that in most instances indentured labourers preferred to be represented by a sirdar with whom they were familiar in their dealings with the planters, and that the efforts of the sirdars helped to improve the lives of workers, as well as obviously enriching their own. The owners complained bitterly about the manner in which the sirdars enjoined their gangs of workers to combine together to press for improvements in their conditions of employment. At the same time, they could not garner sufficient labour for their estates without their assistance. Workers not only borrowed money from sirdars, but entrusted their savings to them as well. There was clearly therefore a large element of trust as well as dependency in the relationship. The sirdars were not only repositories of trust, but also channels of knowledge and information which was vital if the journey overseas was to be safely accomplished and to end in gainful employment. This was especially so given the legal framework of Master and Servant regulations in each of the sugar colonies that were tilted heavily in favour of the employers. Workers combined together under a sirdar, not because they were by inclination immobile, but from the evident benefits to be gained from doing so.

Strikingly, the sirdari system of labour recruitment flourished, both formally and informally, until the indentured labour migration system was brought to an end by the imperial legislature in 1917. This highlights the crucial role that intermediaries continued to play in the Indian labour economy. India never saw the great 'simplification' envisaged by Marx, which is unsurprising, given that this process was never entirely realized in the West.<sup>46</sup> As Karl Polanyi observed,

<sup>46</sup> Antony Cox controversially argues that there were substantial similarities in the factory conditions, labour supervision, and management practices of the jute mills of

networks and social relationships are as important as innovation and production in a capitalist market economy and they remain so to this day. Despite this, twenty-first century developmental policy in the subcontinent remains as committed to curbing the influence of intermediaries as were the sugar planters of the nineteenth century. As part of a campaign against 'corruption', the Government of India is endeavouring to cut out 'the middleman' in almost every walk of life. Time and again this discourse concerns itself with getting rid of the 'fixers' and 'sleazy' or 'tyrannical' middlemen'.<sup>47</sup> Occasionally, this is blamed on colonialism: 'What infrastructure the British put in place . . . were chains of powerful middlemen—a bureaucratic system of revenue officers, and below them their rural intermediaries' which 'caged the villagers' and ensured 'a monopoly of buyers linked to the government'.<sup>48</sup> Yet in the same moment, there is talk of establishing training programmes to perform many of the same functions: replacing one set of intermediaries with another, albeit under a more 'modern' system of managerial supervision. The parallels with nineteenth-century debates over the role of intermediaries in labour migration are uncanny, and the conclusions are likely to be equally complex and ambivalent, perhaps revealing in the process rather more about the competition between different interest groups for control over labour power than the aspirations of workers themselves.

Dundee and Calcutta. See A. Cox, *Empire, Industry and Class: The Imperial Nexus of Jute, 1840–1940* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation* (New York: Penguin, 2009), pp. 224, 398, 286.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.