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Lomarsh Roopnarine

Indian Indenture in the Danish West Indies, 1863–1873. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xii + 111 pp. (Cloth US\$ 54.99)

In 1863, after two years of negotiations between the British and Danish governments, a ship carrying 321 indentured Indian immigrants arrived in St. Croix. This first one turned out to be also the last one as the venture fell short of expectations. It's not surprising, then, that indentured labor in the Danish Virgin Islands has received less scholarly attention than in, for example, Trinidad, British Guiana, or Suriname. What makes the St. Croix case interesting is the question of why the indentured experiment failed when in other parts of the Caribbean the system expanded. Lomarsh Roopnarine, with a long track record of publications on indentured labor in the Caribbean, has taken on the St. Croix case while teaching at the University of the Virgin Islands.

Indian Indenture in the Danish West Indies (84 pages of text plus two appendices with details about the indentured immigrants) is a collection of essays rather than a monograph. Three of the seven chapters have been previously published (in the *IberoAmericana Nordic Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, the *Scandinavian Journal of History*, and *South Asian Diaspora*). There is also an introduction and a conclusion, a sketch of postemancipation St. Croix, and a chapter on views and voices of indenture. Each chapter, except the last two, begins with an abstract and concludes with a short bibliography; a more extensive list of references is included at the end of the volume. Almost inevitably, this format leads to some repetition, but the overlap is kept at an acceptable level.

Roopnarine's major source is the original list of passengers, which allows him to study gender, caste, age, and so forth. His research questions are the staple of most studies on indentured labor: the reasons for indentured immigration; recruitment; and the experiences of the indentured people in the depots, on the transportation ships, and on the plantations. He points out some interesting differences with other Caribbean colonies, such as the fact that the Crucian plantations were located in flat or semi-hilled areas, while the factories were on hilltops to take maximum advantage of wind energy. The laborers thus had to haul the cane uphill, making their tasks even more arduous. Unfortunately, however, Roopnarine often fails to explain or back up arguments and statements. On the important, but complicated, question of the economic benefits of indenture for the workers, he argues that an estimated 30 percent benefited and 40 percent did "moderately well while about 30% were victims of indenture. The latter group was worse off in the Caribbean than in India" (p. 10). This might well be the case, but he provides no references to sub-

stantiate these claims—indeed, this entire section on plantation experiences is without sources. A similar problem arises when he discusses recruitment: the arguments to corroborate his claim that “no more than 10–12% of potential laborers were deceived into signing labor contracts” (p. 27) fail to convince this reader. It may be true that by 1863 the negative stories about indenture had spread across the recruitment areas and that the British system tried to weed out deception, but these arguments hardly seem conclusive enough to arrive at a precise figure of 10 to 12 percent. Confusingly, some twenty pages later we read that re-indentured Indians “were duped twice into indenture: first, by the recruiters in India, who presented false promise of indenture, and second, by the planters who offered bounties” (p. 48). Throughout the book there are statements that would have benefited from references to original sources or secondary literature.

Why didn't the system of indenture take root in St. Croix? Roopnarine advances a mix of general and St. Croix-specific reasons. The poor preparation of planters and authorities to deal with postslavery labor challenges was ubiquitous in the region. Rules and regulations were ignored and abuses were legion. A major issue in St. Croix, however, was that the Indians had no strong protector, in the person of the British consul, to address their complaints. Also, in contrast to other Caribbean colonies, the Indians were not offered official bounties and land as encouragement to stay on the island. Roopnarine suggests that the government was only interested in a short-term measure to aid the planters, as already in 1852 the sale of the colony was being debated in the Danish parliament. An interesting point, deserving fuller treatment.

Despite these drawbacks, *Indian Indenture in the Danish West Indies* is a valuable piece of the puzzle reconstructing indentured labor in the Caribbean and worldwide.

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