Introduction

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The Ameena Gafoor Institute for the Study of Indentureship and Its Legacies is a unique organisation playing a crucial role in advancing the academic study of the system of indenture. Since its establishment in 2020 it has assembled an impressive academic advisory board that reflects the diverse global communities created by the colonial system of indentureship. In addition to the establishment of an annual lecture and conference, this bi-annual journal will be a feature of its regular output. Independent of any university, the institute has the potential to advance the study of indentureship while ensuring a strong and genuine level of public engagement. One example of this is the institute's oral history project, a creative response to the limitations enforced by the global pandemic, which has already shared interviews with leading scholars on the field of indentureship.¹

The optimism with which this journal has been embraced is evident in this first issue, which hosts articles by pioneers in this field of study, Brij Lal, Brinsley Samaroo and Clem Seecharan, and work by some of the most promising young academics adding to the study of indentureship today. There is no question that the study of indentureship needs both a dedicated institute and a scholarly journal. This neglected field spans some 400 years of history, from the first indentured servants to leave Europe for the Americas in the sixteenth century, to the abolition of indentureship in the British Empire in 1917. Whether Japanese indentured servants in Latin America; blackbirded indigenous South Sea islanders in New Zealand; Indian and

Chinese labourers in South Africa and the Caribbean or the post-emancipation indentured Africans in the Caribbean, this system of labour has created diasporic communities across the globe deserving of the sort of interdisciplinary, academic attention that the journal and the institute can offer.

This is not just a historical issue, as a recent important article by Kamala Kempadoo reflects; we are able to see the ghosts of indentureship globally in present-day forms of unfree or exploitative labour relations.² Like many other journal issues produced during the COVID-19 pandemic, this first issue has of course been impacted by the closure of libraries and universities that took place across the world as a result of national lockdowns. In spite of this the editors are proud of the content of this first issue and the individual contributions to the categories of academic essays, creative and life writing and book reviews, which will form part of future issues.

The first academic article in this issue is Brij V. Lal's 'Indian indenture: history and historiography in a nutshell'. For anyone new to the study of Indian indenture, or even those already familiar with the subject, Lal's article provides a succinct survey of both its history and historiography. Beginning with its origins, Lal describes the where, why and how of indentureship, providing key dates and numbers along with pointers towards scholars whose work has helped to shape our understanding of its many complexities. He concludes by highlighting the myriad ways in which the focus has now largely shifted away from straightforward historical accounts towards a much wider and more personal interpretation of the experience of indentureship, way beyond the 'traditional boundaries of scholarship'. Following on from this is legendary Trinidadian scholar Brinsley Samaroo's article 'Changing Caribbean geographies: connections in flora, fauna and patterns of settlement from Indian inheritances'. Here Samaroo shows how the migration of seeds that formed part of the 'Jahaji bundle' changed the geography of the colonies concerned. He further shows that

Indian animals also formed part of this geographical change, referencing in particular the mongoose and water buffaloes. The last contribution from what has become known as the pioneering ‘trinity’ of indentureship scholars is Clem Seecharan, with an extract from his forthcoming article ‘Plantation Port Mourant and the arrival of Indo-Guyanese cricket after the war’. As a historian, Seecharan has written many works on cricket in the West Indies and this extract examines how his passion for the sport is inextricably linked to his own discovery of other key Indo-Guyanese figures. Beginning with his reading of a 1966 issue of *New World Quarterly* and a handful of books by Jagan, C.L.R. James and the cricketer Kanhai, he shows just how important each of these men, all originally from the plantation of Port Mourant, were in shaping his own intellectual development. As both his and James’ earlier writings demonstrate, analogies from the game of cricket can equally be applied to their own breaking down of social and political ‘boundaries’.

In the area of life writing Gitan Djeli’s autobiographical piece ‘kreoling sisters: (un)intimate relationships, child marriages and women spirits’ is a scholarly exploration of the lives of some of her ancestral foremothers that were blighted by the legacy of indentureship in Mauritius. She focuses on the particular cases of her mixed-race aunt, Monol, who was a victim of ‘ingrained antikreol/antiAfrican racism’, and her great grandmother who became a child-bride at the age of nine. By reinscribing these women into her personal family archive and the wider historical context, she demonstrates how indenture studies can intersect with Black history in a way that can enrich both whilst also posing a challenge to the official, patriarchal view of the history of slavery and its aftermath. Expanding the theme of intergenerational silences, this time at community level, is an exciting collaborative piece by the Ro(u)ted by Our Stories Collective, who analyse their experiences working to create a community-owned digital archive for and by Indian-Caribbean people in North America. Their multi-voiced

piece reflects the spirit of collaboration that informed the project they describe here. An article by scholars Crispin Bates and Marina Carter also straddles the historical and the literary as it explores the evolving metaphor of the *kala pani*, analysing how the concept was harnessed and manipulated by the British and how it exists today symbolically and as a literary device. ‘Increasingly *kala pani* is used as a literary and creative device, a tool for descendants of indentured migrants and the writers and artists who excavate their encounters, to imagine and express the experiences and feelings of their ancestors’, they argue, referring to the writings of Khal Torabully and Amitav Ghosh, and the art of Maya Mackrandilal and Andil Gosine.

In creative writing, the editors are pleased to have an excerpt from Ameena Gafoor’s fictional memoir *A Lantern in the Wind*. It begins during the 1940s by setting the global scene before focusing on the life of one Indo-Caribbean family and how they adapted to the changing circumstances that the Second World War brought about. It is rich in details about their living and working conditions, the food they ate, the tenuous links with their ancestral home of India and the economic circumstances that eventually force their father, Haniff, to enlist into the RAF. The lives of Lily and the children are thereafter punctuated by the arrival of Haniff’s letters from abroad, but finally the reader is left wondering whether he ever will return after the war, or, indeed, send for them to join him in the ‘Mother Country’.

In what is hoped will be the first of many insightful interviews into the lives of artists working with indentured histories, Tao Leigh Goffe has interviewed artist Andrea Chung. The interview begins with a discussion about Afro-Chinese Caribbean heritage, which leads Chung to explain how a sense of inherited ‘trauma’ has fed into and influenced her art, although she is determined it should not, in turn, affect her own child. She then talks about the importance of a recent trip to Mauritius, courtesy of a Fulbright Scholarship, and the connections that she made

between the legacy of colonialism and indentureship, both there and in the Caribbean. This resulted in a series of artworks linked to the transformative powers of the sea, leading in turn to her latest cyanotype – *A Litany for Survival* – with its emphasis not upon historical sorrow but rather on change and regeneration. The work of another exciting artist is explored to fascinating effect in an exciting piece by Priya Swamy and Sarojini Lewis where they ‘read’ the indentured histories of the sour and unusual vegetable the karela as an alternative archive of experiential histories. This article, with its important interventions on karela’s recent appropriation by Dutch companies, makes unexpected and poignant ties between the journey that seeds made under indentureship and the adjustments required of contemporary migrants. Moving between scholarly analysis, autobiographical revelation and question and answer format, with images interspersed to disrupt/illustrate the prose, and shifting from third person to first person and back again, Swamy and Lewis challenge the limitations of single-genre discourse.

Finally, two reviews for works by novelist Ingrid Persaud and academic Aliyah Khan close this first issue. Rather than simply adding to the existing acclaim for Persaud’s novel, academic Michael Mitchell’s review concentrates on specific aspects of its composition that help to make it what he describes as both an ‘important’ and a ‘marvellous’ book. He emphasises the skill with which Indo-Trinidadian identity is so adeptly portrayed by Persaud – particularly in terms of language, location, cuisine and religion – along with her determination to present the reader with ‘serious and topical themes’ such as adolescent self-harm. Looking beyond the narrative itself, he suggests that where the novel really excels is in revealing ‘connections’ through its creative use of imagery, in a manner that is often reminiscent of great poetry.

Sara Salem’s thorough review of Khan’s important study of Muslims in the Caribbean highlights two key strengths to Khan’s book.

The first is that it corrects the assumption that only descendants of Indian indentured labour form the Muslim community in the Caribbean, thereby ignoring the ‘strong presence of Muslims of African descent’ and their contribution to the hybridity of Caribbean Islam. Its second can be read as ‘an important intervention’ in scholarship about the global nature of the Muslim world, helping to shift the focus in Islamic studies and to demonstrate the fluidity of what it now means to be Muslim, particularly for those living in the Caribbean today.

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NOTES

- 1 <https://ameenagafoorinstitute.org/oral-history-project>
- 2 ‘Bound coolies’ and other indentured workers in the Caribbean: implications for debates about human trafficking and modern slavery. *Anti Trafficking Review*, 9 2017 (pp. 48-63).