Call for papers

2017 International Conference on the Centenary of the Abolition of Indentureship in the British Empire

Senate House, University of London
6-7 October 2017

The Yesu Persaud Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick, in partnership with the School of Advanced Study and Royal Holloway, University of London, is delighted to announce a call for papers for an interdisciplinary conference marking the centenary of the abolition of indentureship in the British Empire. The conveners wish to place special emphasis on new research in the field of indentureship studies. Three early career scholars, working on different aspects of the indenture system and its legacies, will deliver the joint keynote address to this conference. In addition, confirmed speakers include Grace Anezia Ali, Ananda Devi, Prof. Heidi Safia Mirza, Dr Nalini Mohabir, Dr Sumita Mukherjee, Dr Atreyee Phukan, Dr Anna Schultz, Prof. Brinsley Samaroo and Prof. Clem Seecharan.

Keynote Speakers: Reshaad Durgahee (PhD Candidate, University of Nottingham) Gitanjali Pyndiah (PhD Candidate, Goldsmiths, University of London) Dr Kavyta Raghunandan (Associate Fellow, Institute of Commonwealth Studies)

The abolition of slavery was the catalyst to the arrival of the first Indian labourers in the sugar colonies of Mauritius (1834), Guyana (1838) and Trinidad (1845). This was followed by the inception of indentureship in South Africa (1860) and Fiji (1879). By the time indentureship was abolished in the British Empire (1917), over one million Indians had been contracted under this system of labour, the overwhelming majority of this number never returned to India.

Opposition to indentureship was present throughout the system. Intermittently, politicians, missionaries and members of the colonial judiciary argued indentureship constituted nothing more than ‘a new system of slavery’. On the plantations, resistance was demonstrated in collective and individual action directed against plantocracies and the colonial government. This was manifested in high suicide rates (Fiji and South Africa) and labour strikes and protests (Guyana and Trinidad). In India, the activism of nationalists and returned labourers arguably proved to be the most significant destabilising force to indentureship.

Research and reflection on the history of indentureship and the Indian experience was undertaken in the final stages of British imperial belonging (Ruhomon, 1938). In some cases, such research pointed to ongoing relations with India (Vatuk, 1964). In others, writers focused on their own place in a national history (Gillon, 1962 and Nath, 1950). From the 1980s onwards, a more concentrated focus on the history of indentureship emerged (Dabydeen and Samaroo, 1987). This research underpinned postcolonial readings of the cultural and creative legacies of Indian indentured experiences, especially in relation to music (Rammarine, 2001, Niranjana, 2006) and literature (Subramani, 1979, Birbalsingh, 1989).

Scholarship on the system of indenture and its legacies is being further established and, in addition, undertakings such as the UNESCO International Indentured Labour Route Project reflect the growing acknowledgement of this diverse history.
The conveners welcome submissions for papers of 20 minutes in length for this multidisciplinary conference that address the following or related areas:

- historical perspectives on the 19th-century system of indentureship
- the abolition of indentureship in the British Empire in 1917
- the legacies of indentureship as evidenced in the language, literature and music of the Indian indentured labour diaspora
- creative responses to indentureship histories
- The experiences of African, Chinese, Portuguese, Adavasi and South Indian indentured labourers
- India and indentureship

Please send proposals and a short biography to: maria.kaladeen@sas.ac.uk by April 29th.

Further Details

Papers from the conference will be selected for an edited publication on research perspectives on Indian indentureship in the centenary of its abolition. All papers will undergo further review processes. The official language of the conference is English.

Conveners

Prof. David Dabydeen
(University of Warwick)

Dr Maria del Pilar Kaladeen
(Centre for Postcolonial Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London)

Prof. Tina K. Ramnarine
(Royal Holloway, University of London)

Dr William Tantam
(Centre for Integrated Caribbean Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London)