Indentured labour in the Dutch colonial empire 1800-1940

Introduction

As the Atlantic slave trade and European colonial slavery withered and died in the nineteenth century, a new pattern of labour migrations emerged, connecting the world in both familiar and previously unseen ways. The age of imperialism witnessed the organization of a new type of overseas contract labour, to some extent intended as a substitute for the abolished trade in enslaved Africans. Indentured labourers, mostly from Asia, were caught up in the carousel of world capitalism. Many volunteered with high hopes, enticed by what would turn out to be lies and deceit. Driven by a mixture of hope and desperation they would enter a world previously unimagined.

Indentured labour was not a new concept. Since the sixteenth century, thousands of European migrants travelling to the New World had signed a similar contract, binding them to their employer for a number of years, during which their debts were paid off, often including the cost of their journey. After completing their period of indenture these white labourers became free and were often in a position to make a good life for themselves. The line dividing these early servants and free European migrants was usually a thin one. For the nineteenth-century Asian indentured labourer, however, the image becomes more diffuse. Although conditions were particularly harsh in the period up until 1900, there were stark contrasts between regions and groups of migrants. While many led a hard life, often ending in premature death far away from their homes in an alien and often inhospitable environment, others managed to exceed the standard of living they had attained in

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their home country. Over time, however, conditions did generally improve. While indentured labour may initially have been, in Hugh Tinker’s famous but contested phrase, ‘a new system of slavery’, the system certainly became more just in the twentieth century.²

This chapter does not aim to present an all-encompassing survey of indentured labour recruitment and deployment in the Dutch colonial empire, much less does it intend to write the full history of the position of the descendants of these early migrants in their present societies. Instead, it aims to shed light on extant empirical evidence on indentured labour migrations within the Dutch empire from circa 1800 until 1940.

The first two sections will discuss the concept of indenture and the Javanese precursors of the eventual indentured labour system. A study of indentured labour automatically implies a study of migratory labour, as the majority of workers came from non-Dutch regions, notably British India and China. The third section will address these areas of recruitment, while the final section focuses on the destination areas, principally Suriname, Sumatra’s East Coast (SEC) and other parts of the Outer Islands of the Dutch East Indies. Attention will also be given to regions such as Malaysia, New Caledonia and Australia, where indentured Dutch colonial subjects – primarily Javanese – were sent.

This chapter does not discuss larger debates on the meaning and development of indenture within the Dutch empire, but is based on secondary literature and focuses specifically on demographic figures, migratory routes and destinations, besides early working and living conditions.

On ‘indenture’

The terms ‘indentured labour’ and ‘contract labour’ have been used interchangeably up until this point since contract is key to the concept of indenture.³ Yet the concept of contract labour contains all forms of work submitted to certain stipulations written on paper or agreed to verbally. This is different from indentured labour, which always involves a formal written contract signed for an extended period of time. In the Dutch colonial case, the contracts were made for three to five years.

Another important dimension of indentured labour, in definition and in

² Hugh Tinker is the author of *A new system of slavery: The export of Indian labour overseas 1820-1920*. Published in 1974, this book played a key part in the historic discussion regarding indentured labour in British India.

³ The term ‘indenture’ is originally derived from ‘a document in duplicate having indented edges’. This is ‘a contract binding one party into the service of another for a specified term’ (*American heritage dictionary* 2000).