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‘Sterile Citizens’ & ‘Excellent Disbursers’: Opium and the Representations of Indentured Migrant Consumption in British Guiana and Trinidad

Jamie Banks

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of Asian indentured migrants as ‘consumers’ in colonial British Guiana and Trinidad. Focusing on the specific case of opium, it explores how attitudes towards the drug fed into broader debates about socio-economic responsibilities of these labouring communities. After first establishing the considerable revenues which colonial authorities derived from the taxation of opium, the article illustrates the growing calls for migrants to ‘pay back’ to the colonies which had shouldered the cost of their introduction. It also explores how stereotypical representations of Chinese and Indian consumption informed debates about the economic viability of continuing to import various forms of migrant labour. The article argues that migrant consumption *mattered*, and that understanding *why* it mattered necessitates a broader understanding of how indentured migration shaped the economic and social histories of various British colonies following emancipation.

KEYWORDS

Indentureship; opium; consumption; British Guiana; Trinidad

Introduction

In 1891, Dr Dennis Comins, the acting Protector of Emigrants from the port of Calcutta, was sent on a special assignment to the Caribbean. Following calls to terminate the return passage entitlement for time-expired labourers, Comins was tasked with assessing if the condition of the Indian population in various British colonies warranted as much.¹ As Comins was perhaps aware, this matter was thorny issue not only for the recipient colonies, who desperately sought to reduce their expenditure on immigration, but also the Government of India, who had originally introduced the right to return passages to prevent abuses in the system.² Conducting extensive enquiries in British Guiana and Trinidad, as well as Jamaica, St. Lucia, and the Dutch colony of Suriname, Comins’ final

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report concluded that the right of migrants to a return passage should remain, albeit with some minor alterations.³

It is likely that the many of the issues on which Comins ultimately staked this decision, such as the irregular payment of wages and the exploitative use of indebtedness, are more than familiar to most scholars of indentureship. Perhaps less familiar, however, is the significant attention which Comins also afforded to the financial contributions which migrants made to colonial revenues, especially through the consumption of imported commodities. In the case of British Guiana, for example, Comins suggested that the 'frugal habits and slender requirements' of the colony's Indian population rendered them of little worth as the 'purchasers or consumers' of excisable-commodities.⁴ By contrast, Comins noted that Indians in Trinidad more than 'contribute[d] their proportion to general taxation', being the 'chief consumers' of imported goods such as rice, kerosene, and opium.⁵ Similarly, Comins suggested that Indians in Jamaica also contributed 'very materially' to colonial revenues, being the principle consumers of goods such as tobacco, flour, rice, and butter.⁶

In offering such assessments, Comins, and others, articulated an understanding of the economic value of indentured migrants as something more than just a source of extractable 'labour'. Officials such as Comins instead recognized, and even emphasized, the value of the revenues which various colonies *also* derived from migrant consumption. In fact, there were even instances in which these revenues were touted as a key justification for continuing to import migrant labour, despite push-back from importing colonies. Following calls to abolish indentured migration to Trinidad in 1910, for example, Mr Aspinall, then secretary to the West India Committee, reminded the legislature of the revenues derived from taxes paid on goods such as 'ghee, opium, ganga [cannabis], and rice.' He also went on to disparage claims that Indians failed to 'contribute very considerably to the upkeep' of the colony.⁷ In short, both Comins and Aspinall stressed the importance of the additional revenues which colonies derived from articles of migrant consumption, as well as the broader economic benefits which indentured labourers brought to their recipient colonies.

For the most part, however, historians of indentureship have seldom addressed the social and economic implications of migrant consumption. Whilst studies such as Nilanjana Deb's have stressed the ways in which flows of commodities facilitated the expansion of indentureship, little attention has been paid to the parallel ways in which migrants subsequently facilitated the flows of culturally-significant commodities into various British colonies.⁸ This broadly follows the paradigm established by the seminal work of Hugh Tinker, which has led to a continued, if perhaps unintentional, emphasis on the degrees to which indentureship was little better than a 'new system of slavery.'⁹ In a bid to move beyond this neo-slavery paradigm, several scholars have sought to fundamentally recontextualise historiographical engagement with indenture. Clare Anderson and Alessandro Stanziana, for example, have

argued that indentured labourers have far more in common with the lot of convict transportees, or European agricultural servants, than they did with enslaved persons.¹⁰ Others, such as Reshaad Durgahee, have sought to recast our understandings of the spatiality of indentureship, stressing the agency which time-expired migrants exerted as they travelled the length and breadth of the ‘indentured archipelago.’¹¹ In a similar vein, this article argues that engaging with history of indentured migrants as ‘consumers’ illuminates their contributions to both the economic prosperity, and discursive economy, of colonial societies following emancipation. Focusing specifically on contemporary representations of Chinese and Indian opium consumption, this article demonstrates how colonial commentators came to expect something far more from these migrant communities than just their labour.

In using the term ‘representations’, this article refers to the ways in which contemporary observers understood, constructed, and depicted the consumptive practices of indentured migrants. Put another way, this article examines the various colonial discourses that came to envelope migrant consumption.¹² Examining the writings of officials, missionaries, and the colonial press, this article demonstrates how attitudes towards these consumptive practices eventually became a touchstone in debates about whether to continue to import various streams of migrant labour. As noted by Robert Cochrane, the ‘vocabulary and imagery’ used to represent migrant communities is important, not least because it ‘shaped public discourse over [migrants’] privileges, responsibilities, and socioeconomic position in colonial society.’¹³ By extension, these also help to elucidate privileges or responsibilities otherwise under-addressed in existing scholarship on indentureship. More broadly, they also help to ‘destabilize persistent representations of the Indian migrant as a passive victim of indenture,’ both within contemporary sources and modern scholarship.¹⁴

In considering the varying representations of indentured labourers, historians have largely focused on how racial stereotypes were invoked to affirm the suitability of various groups for plantation labour.¹⁵ Pieter Emmer, for instance, has studied the pervasiveness of ‘the meek Hindu’ stereotype and its use as a key justification for Indians’ suitability for plantation labour.¹⁶ Similarly, Stan Neal has explored how essentialised notions of an inherent ‘Chinese character’ underpinned experiments with Chinese labour across the British Empire.¹⁷ Moving beyond representations tied to the prescriptive category of ‘labour’, this article uses these representations of migrant consumption to think about the more complex, and often fraught, place of indentured communities within the economic and social histories of the post-emancipatory Caribbean. Specifically, it uses the varying representations of migrant consumption to demonstrate how colonial observers increasingly envisioned these communities as contributors to the broader economic prosperity of various British colonies through both their labour *and* consumption. In short, this article’s central contention is that migrant consumption *mattered*. Moreover, it argues that understanding

why it did necessitate a broader understanding of how indentured migration shaped the economic and social histories of various British colonies following emancipation.

This article's exploration of indentured consumption is divided into three sections. The first section explores the introduction of opium consumption into British Guiana and Trinidad. Using customs returns, excise records, and official reports, it demonstrates the economic contributions which migrants made to colonial economies through the revenues derived from the taxation of commodities such as opium. The second section then explores the varying representations of Chinese and Indian opium use, as well as how these fed into broader debates about the socio-economic responsibilities of migrant communities. Highlighting a growing contempt for conspicuous consumption, the article demonstrates how commentators came to stress that migrants should consume in ways that supported the interests of the common economic good. Finally, the article explores the contrasting estimations of Chinese and Indian consumptive practices and how these fed into debates about whether to continue importing migrant labour. In this way, the article demonstrates how the economic value of indentured migrants was not only codified in terms of a hierarchy of extractable labour, but also – in part – through the broader contributions they might bring to colonial economies.

Opium & Indentureship

The abolition of chattel slavery across the British Empire posed several grave questions for European sugar planters. Chief amongst them was how best to replace it. Despite an early gravitation towards Chinese labour, especially in colonies such as Mauritius, it was Indian migrants which eventually constituted the bulk of the post-emancipation plantation labour force.¹⁸ In total, the years 1834–1917 saw at least 1.37 million Indian migrants travel across the British Empire, to work on colonial plantations, in mines, and in the construction of colonial infrastructure.¹⁹ Indian indentured labour was first trialled under private auspices by planters in Mauritius, followed shortly thereafter by the 'Gladstone Experiment' in Demerara.²⁰ After a temporary suspension between 1838–1842, Indian immigration was thereafter extended to Trinidad, Jamaica, and the Windward Islands, and later to Fiji, Natal, and Malaya.²¹ Of this 1.37 million, some 238,909 Indian immigrants would arrive in British Guiana between 1838 and 1917, with a further 147,500 arriving in Trinidad between 1845 and 1918.²² These numbers were bolstered through the introduction of a further 13,533 Chinese labourers to British Guiana, and 2,654 to Trinidad, largely during times in which migration from India was suspended.²³

The practice of opium consumption, in the form of either eating or smoking, was introduced to British Guiana and Trinidad by these same Asian migrants. Whilst some isolated cases were recorded during the 1830s and 1840s, concerns

about opium use first reached an apogee during the 1852/3 Chinese emigration season.²⁴ Following the arrival of the *Lord Elgin* – from Amoy – in British Guiana, for example, reports noted several fatal cases of dysentery amongst ‘those who had been addicted to an immoderate use of opium.’²⁵ Similarly, the reports of Dr Henry Mitchell, the Agent-General of Immigrants for Trinidad, noted that many of the migrants who disembarked per the *Lady Flora Hastings* were ‘confirmed opium smokers’ unfitted for agricultural labour.²⁶

Officials also expressed concerns about the rise in opium consumption which followed the arrival of migrants in various colonies. In British Guiana, for example, the Attorney General was alarmed that estate hospitals across the colony were seemingly filled with ‘numerous instances of miserable beings physically destroyed by opium.’²⁷ Similarly, Mitchell noted that a sizable proportion of the mortality sustained by Chinese migrants after their arrival in Trinidad ‘must be ascribed to opium.’²⁸ As a result, colonial officials in both British Guiana and Trinidad scrambled to introduce restrictive legislation. In British Guiana, these efforts took the form of Ordinance No. 22 of 1861, which introduced measures to restrict the importation, distribution, sale, and consumption of opium.²⁹ Meanwhile, in Trinidad, Ordinance No. 24 of 1865 dramatically increased the rate of excise duty levied upon opium.³⁰ As explained by Governor Manners-Sutton in his correspondence with the colonial office, such measures seemed justified, given that opium was of ‘that class of articles which may properly be taxed ... [for] the purpose of revenue.’³¹ This suggestion would prove especially portentous, given the subsequent course of colonial opium legislation.

Ultimately, efforts to restrict opium consumption in both British Guiana and Trinidad proved unsuccessful, with the initial, prohibitive thrust of earlier legislation giving way to measures which increasingly sought to protect the collection of colonial revenues. Such a change was first evident in Trinidad, heralded by the introduction of Ordinance No. 14 of 1879.³² Modelled upon the British Manufactured Tobacco Act of 1863, or simply the ‘Cavendish Act’, the ordinance introduced an entirely new regulatory framework for taxing and distributing imported opium in the colony.³³ This included the introduction of retail and wholesale licenses for the sale of opium, the enclosure of opium into pre-portioned packets, and the sealing of these packets with a special customs stamp.³⁴ Virtually identical measures were also subsequently introduced in British Guiana, following the failure of preceding efforts check opium smuggling and illicit distribution.³⁵

This potted history of opium legislation in British Guiana and Trinidad is salient for two reasons. First, it illustrates how the colonial government in both colonies came to derive significant revenues from the taxation of opium. Whilst legislation was originally introduced to prohibitively restrict opium use, it seems that officials were increasingly forced to accommodate for consumer demand through a more liberal regulatory system.³⁶ Second, the specific case of opium provides a clear example of the broader economic contributions which

Table 1. Import duties (in GUY\$) raised on Opium, enumerated as part of estate supplies, and contributed annually to the Immigration Fund, 1857–1869.

Year	Amount Raised (GUY\$).	Total Imported (lbs.)
1857	893.13	893.13
1858	765.94	765.94
1859	1174.22	1174.22
1860	3190.86	3190.86
1861	3067.50	3190.86
1862	1867.78	1245.19
1863	2640.20	1760.14
1864	7624.17	5082.78
1865	11068.72	7379.15
1866	14186.62	9457.75
1867	15678.50	10452.34
1868	18344.98	12229.99
1869	15839.45	10559.64

Source: HCPP 1871 [C.393-I] *Appendices to the Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Treatment of Immigrants in British Guiana, Part I.* (London: HMSO, 1871): Appendix M1-Amount of Import Duty on 'Coolie Stores' and Opium, 58.

Chinese and Indian migrants made to colonial economies, in this case through consumption. The revenues derived from the taxation of imported commodities served as a means of bolstering colonial finances. The clearest example of this fact was British Guiana's immigration fund. Established in 1863 to offset the costs associated with the introduction of indentured migrants, the immigration fund was primarily derived from the taxes levied upon 'estate supplies' – such as lime, coal, and iron punts.³⁷ However, the fund was also derived from the taxes levied on imported consumer goods such as opium. As indicated by Table 1, the duties raised on opium made an increasingly sizable contribution to the immigration fund, reaching a peak of GY\$18,344.98 in 1868.³⁸ This represented around forty percent of the total revenues collected by the immigration fund in that year.³⁹ Although it provided a fraction of the *overall* costs of indentured migration (just 2.1% of the GY\$506,195 cost in 1864/5, for example), the immigrant fund nevertheless indicates how the revenues derived from migrant consumption were fed back into the colonial economy.⁴⁰

The value of migrant opium consumption is also made clear by the annual reports of British Guiana and Trinidad's customs departments. These indicate that opium and cannabis made a significant contribution to colonial economies well into the twentieth century. In British Guiana, for example, the Comptroller of Customs' report for 1899/1900 indicated that opium and cannabis raised a total revenue of GY\$51,478.13, making them the seventh most valuable import for the colony in that year.⁴¹ Likewise, the reports of Trinidad's Collector of Customs indicated that the excise duties levied upon opium raised a total of £8,127 between 1898 and 1900.⁴² Opium duties moreover continued to make a sizable contribution to colonial revenues well into the twentieth century. In 1911, for example, Trinidad's annual customs report noted that opium and cannabis duties raised a combined revenue of \$4,551 in 1909.⁴³ In fact, the revenues derived from opium remained so important that the

colonial Governor, George Le Hunte, warned of bankruptcy if the proceeds from opium were restricted under the Hague Convention of 1912.⁴⁴ In summary, the above figures indicate the clear economic benefits which both British Guiana and Trinidad derived from the taxation of migrant opium consumption. Whilst the amounts derived from this consumption were by no means comparable to those raised by the British Raj in India, they nevertheless establish that Asian migrants materially contributed to broader colonial prosperity through the consumption of import commodities such as opium.

The Politics of Consumption

Beyond the simple matter of revenue, migrant opium consumption also proved a source of considerable consternation amongst various elements of colonial society. Taken at face value, such concerns seemed to reflect the same 'orientalised' discourses about opium which became commonplace across the Empire during the latter half of nineteenth century.⁴⁵ When considered in more detail, however, these varying representations also reveal more fundamental debates about both the purposes of indentured labour and the responsibilities of migrant communities to broader colonial society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Protestant missionaries – of various stripes – proved to be some of the most ardent critics of migrant opium consumption.⁴⁶ Typically, missionary sentiments tended to emphasize the immorality of practice. For instance, Rev. Henry Bronkhurst, a Wesleyan missionary stationed in British Guiana, noted that 'temperance' was not a 'striking virtue' of the colony's migrant population.⁴⁷ Even missionary accounts, however, seemed to reflect a concern for more than just the abstract (im)morality of opium consumption. Instead, they also seemed to understand indentured migration as an extension of the 'civilising mission', emphasizing the need for migrants to be educated in more productive and 'civilised' ways, and expressing frustration with those who seemed incapable of achieving them. Bronkhurst, for example, went on to note his efforts to promote the use of Government Savings Banks, arguing that their adoption would save some of the money presently 'squandered in drink and narcotics.'⁴⁸ In short, Bronkhurst perhaps saw indentureship as an opportunity to replace 'immoral' and 'unproductive' habits with more 'temperate' and 'productive' ones.

To some extent, these concerns were self-serving, reflecting a self-interested desire to present their newly 'temperate' congregations as a tangible metric of missionary successes. Rev. John Morton of Trinidad, for instance, would proudly declare that all those who joined his congregation did so on the condition of abstaining from the use of 'opium or ganja [cannabis].'⁴⁹ As Louise Moschetta has noted in parallel descriptions of Indian jewellery, however, European accounts were also imbued with a moralizing distaste for the 'material excesses' of Indian consumption.⁵⁰ In a similar vein, it seems that missionaries likewise frowned upon the consumption of intoxicants as

‘superfluous’, tantamount to the effective ‘squandering’ of the opportunity for a better life. Such sentiments were perhaps most evident in the writings of Rev. William Lobscheid, who had worked closely with Austin Gardiner, the colonial emigrant agent in China, to promote emigration. Recounting the case of a Chinese man who had done ‘nothing but satisfy his craving [for opium]’ after arriving in British Guiana, Lobscheid seemed to express a dismay not only for the man’s opium use but also his failure to recognize, or realize, the opportunity presented to him for a better life.⁵¹

Like missionaries, a number of colonial medical authorities expressed a palpable disdain for Indian cannabis use in Trinidad. Chief amongst such critics was Dr Thomas Ireland, the former Chief Medical Officer of British Guiana, who wrote a controversial article about cannabis use and insanity in Trinidad.⁵² Largely focusing on the alleged psychological effects of cannabis, Ireland’s article also criticized the growing consumption of the drug in the colony, which he blamed on migrants having ‘more wealth to indulge in the luxury.’⁵³ Similarly, Comins, a former inspector of asylums in Bengal, suggested that a ‘much greater command of money’ allowed those in Trinidad to indulge in cannabis far more than they might have done in India.⁵⁴ To what extent Indian labourers were able to indulge in excessive amounts of cannabis, however, is quite a different story. As noted by the report of the Controller of Customs for 1902, the price of cannabis was fixed at such a rate as to render it a ‘very costly luxury to labourers earning a shilling a day.’⁵⁵ Nevertheless, both Ireland and Comin’s comments implied that migrants were ill-equipped to make the most of their new found financial freedom.

Specific concerns about the consumption of intoxicants also fed into broader debates about the socio-economic responsibilities of migrant communities, as well as the long-term viability of indentured migration. As noted by Walton Look Lai, the Black professional classes in both British Guiana and Trinidad increasingly criticized indenture migration as a net drain on colonial finances.⁵⁶ By extension, some also argued that migrants themselves had a (largely unfilled) responsibility to contribute to the broader economic prosperity of the colony. This broader politization of migrant consumption was astutely observed by Joseph Beaumont, the Chief Justice of British Guiana, who noted the oft-quoted view that conspicuous consumption, such as opium-smoking and gambling, led many to believe that the labouring population were ‘better off than their masters.’⁵⁷ To Beaumont, however, such sentiments failed to acknowledge these practices for what they were: short-term efforts to mitigate long-term suffering. Indeed, Beaumont suggested that these ‘evils,’ ‘fostered by poverty and distress,’ would dissipate once material conditions improved.⁵⁸ Regardless of what one makes of Beaumont’s suggestions, they demonstrate the wider context in which indentured migration (and consumption) came to be discussed. Beyond discussions about the value or efficacy of immigrants as plantation labour (the purpose for which they had been ostensibly introduced), some

now stressed that migrants *also* had a responsibility to consume in the interests of the common economic good.

Such expectations were likely borne of the financial arrangements which underpinned indentured migration, which placed a growing burden on the general population. Whilst planters, as the chief benefactors of immigration, paid the lion's share, one-third of the annual costs were met through general taxation.⁵⁹ This increasingly took the form of taxes levied on general foodstuffs such as pickled beef, pork, fish, and beer – goods chiefly consumed by the labouring classes.⁶⁰ In British Guiana, for example, Beaumont noted that the burden of immigration on general revenues was felt most on goods 'consumed by the labouring classes,' with the duties on these goods reaching up to 100% *ad valorem*.⁶¹ Similarly, in Jamaica, William Garland Barret noted that duties on food stuffs such as beef, pork, bread, and flour had increased exponentially to fund immigration.⁶² It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that some came to criticize indentureship as a collective burden imposed solely in the interests of planters. William Sewell, for example, noted the growing view that taxing general revenues to fund immigration was manifestly 'unjust', given that it supported a system from which those taxed 'derive[d] no benefit.'⁶³ Conversely, Edward Underhill reasoned that given 'all classes are benefitted by the increase of employment' there was some reason that 'a portion of the cost of immigration should be met out of the general funds ...'⁶⁴ Whether such arrangements were 'unjust' or not, they go some way to explaining why popular discourses placed an increasingly emphasis on the civic responsibilities of indentured migrants: the economic cost of migration.

Whilst contemporary attitudes towards opium consumption were almost overwhelmingly negative, some commentators bucked this trend by characterizing it as the inalienable right of the colony's wage earners. Following police harassment of Chinese residents in Georgetown, for example, the *Berbice Gazette* questioned why any person, Chinese or otherwise, should be arrested for possessing 'what he has paid for and earned by the sweat of his brow.'⁶⁵ The paper also questioned the hypocrisy which underpinned official attitudes towards the regulation of opium, arguing that, by the same logic, this should be matched by 'a companion Ordinance to dole out a wineglassful of beer and a teaspoon of brandy.'⁶⁶ Similar arguments were also made in an article in the *Royal Gazette*. Like the *Berbice Gazette*, it too questioned the hypocrisy of allowing the 'tobacco smoker' to enjoy his 'soothing weed', whilst 'the hard working Asiatic' was deprived of his, simply because he 'pleases to fill it with the products of a different plant.'⁶⁷ Beyond the simple issue of moral equivalency, both articles engaged with the more pertinent issue of what rights should be afforded to Chinese migrants as wage earners in the colony. Specifically, these articles stressed that, in principle, Chinese migrants had a fundamental right to spend their wages on whatever goods they so wished, without harassment or impediment. Interestingly, however, this was a right which the *Berbice*

Gazette did not extend to Indian migrants. Questioning who, save Indian migrants, was ‘restricted from freely buying and consuming the luxuries of his choice?’, the *Gazette* illustrated some of dualities evident in contemporary attitudes towards migrant consumption.⁶⁸

‘Sterile Citizens’ & ‘Excellent Disbursers’

As the above extract makes apparent, representations of migrant consumptive practices were not homogeneous, at times drawing clear distinctions between the relative propensities of Indian and Chinese migrants towards consumption. Forming part of broader essentialised notions of the Chinese and Indian ‘character,’ commentators alike increasingly stressed the ‘miserliness’ of Indian migrants, in contrast to the ‘spendthrift’ nature of the Chinese. These assumed proclivities were also later invoked as justifications for halting or restarting various migration streams. As the work of historians such as Stan Neal reminds us, the essentialisation of ‘character’ served a key mechanism for fulfilling various colonial objectives. In the specific case of Chinese migration, for instance, Neal illustrates how notions of an essentialised Chinese ‘character,’ perpetuated through allusions to ‘innate’ habits and traits, was used to promote Chinese migration across the British Empire. Arguing that the Chinese were ‘industrious’ and ‘thrifty’ *by nature*, various parties stressed that these characteristics made them an ideal labouring population.⁶⁹ Similarly, this final section illustrates how essentialised notions of Chinese and Indian habits of consumption, ascribed as a facet of their broader ‘character,’ were invoked in debates about whether to continue importing various streams of migrant labour.

On the one hand, notions of an innate Indian ‘frugality’ were frequently an object of scorn in the accounts of European observers. In British Guiana, for example, Henry Kirke observed that many Indians continued to live in ‘the same wattle and daub hut’, wear the same ‘dirty dhoti, or loin-cloth’, and eat the ‘same vegetable curry and rice’ despite amassing ‘a considerable amount of money.’⁷⁰ Similarly, James Collens noted that Indians living in Trinidad were ‘frugal and saving to a fault, living on the plainest and coarsest of diet, often denying himself sufficient even of this fare to gratify his love of hoarding.’⁷¹ This presumed tendency towards frugality was weaponised by critics of immigration, often amongst the Black professional classes, who argued that Indian migrants were a net drain on the colonial economy. In the words of *The Creole*, a Black-owned newspaper in British Guiana, every Indian migrant was a direct loss to the colonial economy, given their disposition towards jealously ‘hoarding’ their wages.⁷² Similarly, the Black-owned *San Fernando Gazette* argued that Trinidad’s Indian population were a ‘worthless and filthy set’, whose sole aim was to drain their temporary abode ‘as much as possible of its coins’ before returning to India.⁷³ Such sentiments have, in turn, led historians such as Donald Wood to

suggest that Indians were increasingly seen as economically ‘sterile citizens,’ who contributed nothing to the general upkeep of various colonies.⁷⁴

The grave irony of such characterizations, however, was the parallel stress which many placed on the large sums of money which Indian carried back with them to India – sums which were often touted as evidence of the benefits of indenture. Indeed, Bronkhurst questioned the ‘flourish of trumpets’ which often accompanied the ‘large amount of money’ which migrants brought back with them to India, given that it seemed more beneficial for colonies to induce time-expired labourers to stay.⁷⁵ In any case, contemporary accounts were awash with tales of the fantastical sums which migrants brought back with them to India. George W. Bennett, for instance, noted that passengers returning to India per the *Clarence*, in 1865, carried back around £11,243 in savings.⁷⁶ Similarly, Collens noted that those returning to India from Trinidad in 1887 carried with them, ‘£12,065 in bills and specie, besides gold and silver ornaments which they were wearing to the value of another £1,000.’⁷⁷ Representations of Indian consumption thus illustrate some of the contradictions which underpinned them, specifically the tensions between a stress on Indian ‘miserliness’ yet an eagerness to celebrate it as proof of the merits of indenture.

In contrast, European commentators were almost unwaveringly favourable in their assessments of Chinese consumption. Even before their ‘failed’ introduction in the 1850s and 60s, many had staked the material benefits of introducing Chinese labour to the Caribbean. As early as 1807, for example, Lt. William Layman encouraged the introduction of Chinese migrants to Trinidad, noting the ‘great increase in produce, wealth, and resources ... [that have] been the invariable consequence of their introduction’ elsewhere.⁷⁸ Similarly, in response to enquiries made by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission, John Crawford noted that ‘they [the Chinese] ... have not the faculty for hoarding ... that distinguishes the pernicious Hindoo [sic],’ making them valuable contributors to colonial prosperity.⁷⁹ More explicit comments characterized appraisals of Chinese consumption towards the end of the century, particularly evident in European observers’ somewhat odd fascination with Chinese eating habits. George Bennett, for instance, noted that Chinese migrants often spent ‘liberally’ on food, purchasing ‘the most substantial meals [they could] afford’. This was unlike Indians who, Bennett lamented, were ‘content with a rice diet and a good balance in the savings bank’.⁸⁰ Henry Clark similarly noted that the Chinese in Trinidad were ‘quite as fond of a good dinner ... as any John Bull’, often laying on fabulous dinners for their guests.⁸¹ One such dinner was recounted in memoirs of Henry Kirke, where he noted tucking into a meal of ‘tannia soup, roast capon, cold tea, and excellent brandy (Hennessy’s XXX)’ at the house of Chinese merchant.⁸²

It was this twin identity, as both labourers *and* consumers then, which underpinned favourable appraisals of Chinese migrants across the Empire.⁸³ Indeed, such appraisals even led some to stress the benefits of restarting Chinese

migration to the Caribbean, despite its effective termination after the Kung Convention of 1866. The *Royal Gazette*, for instance, intimated the desirability of reintroducing Chinese migrants to British Guiana, given their willingness to circulate their 'earnings freely' in the colony. This was unlike Indians who, the *Gazette* argued, did 'no direct good, or almost none' for the economy.⁸⁴ Similarly, Bronkhurst noted the calls amongst several merchants in Georgetown for the resumption of Chinese immigration, given that Chinese migrants were 'excellent disbursers as well as earners of money'.⁸⁵ Despite the unfulfilled promise of Chinese migration as a solution to post-emancipation labour shortages, it seems that various parties continued to cling to Chinese propensities for consumption as a solution to economic malaise in the colony.

Conclusion

In summary, this article has used the varying representations of migrant consumption as a means to rethink the place of Asian indentureship in the historiography of the post-emancipatory Caribbean. Whilst prior works have tended to emphasise the various ways in which Chinese and Indian migrants were presented as the 'ideal labourers,' this article has demonstrated that these representations formed only one facet of the imagined place of migrant populations within colonial society. Through the specific case of opium consumption, this article has demonstrated the considerable proceeds which colonial governments drew from excise duties on imported commodities. It has also demonstrated how various observers – such as missionaries and colonial officials – conceived of migrants as 'consumers', assigning their consumption varying degrees of social and economic importance. In this way, observers displayed an understanding of migrant communities as something more than just 'labour', a reduction which has continued to characterize historiographical engagement with indentureship. Finally, this article has demonstrated the tangible implications of these debates about migrant consumption, illustrating how these fed into broader discussions about whether to continue to introduce various forms of migrant labour. In short, this article has hopefully shown that migrant consumption *mattered*.

In arguing that migrant consumption did matter, this article has also touched upon the broader historiographical reframing necessary to understand *why* it did. As stressed most pointedly by Richard Allen, migrant experiences of indentureship have continued to be understood within highly circumscribed social, economic, and political contexts.⁸⁶ As Allen's work also reminds us, however, migrant experiences of indenture did not start and end at the boundaries of the plantation. Rather, migrants' experience of indentureship were numerous, diverse, and complicated, just like those of the freedmen, and women, who preceded them. In attempt to broaden these confines, this article suggests that engaging with the history of consumption represents one, albeit important, example of how historians might begin to look beyond the metaphorical bounds of the

plantation. Specifically, these debates about the responsibilities of migrant communities demonstrate how they were thought of through more than just the abstracting prism of 'labour.' Instead, in this instance, they were also seen as essential to the social and economic prosperity of British colonies following emancipation. It is this entanglement with the broader social and economic histories of the post-emancipation Caribbean which has perhaps been lost in historiographical debates about the 'freedom' or 'unfreedom' of indentureship as a system, but that nevertheless warrants considerably more attention.

Notes

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