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‘Between unfreedoms: The role of caste in decisions to repatriate among Indian indentured workers in British Guiana, 1872-1911’

Indian indentured labour migration followed slavery in providing cheap labour to British plantation colonies. To make this migration characteristically distinct from slavery, the workers were offered a free or subsidized trip back to their native country at the end of the indenture period. However, despite this guaranteed and subsidized return passage, only about a third of the workers returned to India. Using data of more than 16,000 Indian indentured workers in British Guiana in the period between 1872 and 1911 collected from ship registers, we look at the role of caste in the indentured workers’ decisions to take the return trip home. We find that individuals from very low castes were significantly less likely to take the return trip, in comparison to other caste groups. Caste hierarchy played a very significant role in every aspect of the workers’ lives back in India, including in land ownership, access to education, labour markets, marriage, access to political office. The conditions of production in the plantation economies did not allow the reproduction of caste hierarchies in their original form. Thus, indentured workers from low castes, while entering one form of unfreedom (as plantation workers), were able to escape another form of unfreedom (from caste hierarchies). This clearly reflected in their decision to not return. The trend isn’t that clear for other caste groups. The “higher caste” groups were more likely on average to return, but the results stop being significant once we included data on district level natural disasters for districts the workers came from. No trend could be observed for individuals of “middle castes”. We additionally look at the interaction between caste and gender on the decision to repatriate. We find that overall women were less likely to repatriate than men, but women of lower caste backgrounds were more likely to return than women of higher caste backgrounds. We argue that this is because rigid restriction on mobility and strict norms on sexual behaviour of women were imperative to perpetuate caste hierarchy, thereby stigmatising higher caste women migrants more than lower caste women migrants. The results are robust when we include district level educational and economic controls.