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Labour migration from India to the British West Indies, 1834-1888

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Abstract

Scores of Indians were taken to work on the plantations of the far-off British colonies. They were mostly lured by the *arkatis* or middlemen, who gave an enticing picture of working on the plantations. Most people fell into the trap of the *arkati* due to the abysmal socio-economic conditions prevailing in British India. This was compounded by vagaries of nature like famines, floods and epidemics, which aggravated their conditions further. This practice came to be known as indenture and the people who worked on plantations were called *girmitiyas*, taken from the word agreement. They were worse off than the people transported as slaves. Slavery officially ended in 1834. The indenture system enabled planters to gain access and control a body of Indian workers as 'bounded coolies'. Their contracts were renewed after a period of 5 years. The first colony to get indentured labourers from India was Mauritius. This paper explores the problems that the Indian labourers experienced and endured during their indentureship period. The British Parliament contemplated several laws to allay the problems of the labourers as they too were British subjects.

Keywords: Indentured labour, Mauritius, British Guyana, plantations, experiment

Introduction

Immediately after emancipation in 1834, there was a significant exodus from the sugar estates and a cry from British West Indian planters for more labour. The planters had to: ensure that their profits were secure and could be maximized; resuscitate old estates, maintain and improve on existing estates and develop new ones; utilise immigrants to work on and develop available fertile lands which were lying waste in colonies with inadequate labour supplies; make attempts to secure a steady supply of cheap, malleable and "disposable" labour and obtain surplus labour to keep down wages. Additionally, planters had to: control their labour through long term contracts, regulations, laws and severe disciplinary action; allow later immigrants to lead and motivate former slaves and liberated Africans by providing an example of industrious work habits; allow liberated Africans the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of a "superior civilization" and address the black-white imbalance in the population. Planters and the local administrators and the British Government worked together in solving the "labour problem". They had all expected their former slaves to desert the estates after emancipation in 1834 and the end of apprenticeship in 1838.

Labour migration commences

Indian indentureship was introduced to enable sugar plantations to retain a body of contract labour ('bound coolies'), in a colony where the freed African people were erroneously perceived to have abundant options for independent livelihood (Seecharan 2015 60) ^[58]. Despite opposition by the British Anti-Slavery Society, this "new system of slavery", indentured labour was quickly implemented. The planters had their way. In the British West Indies planters turned to several sources for new labour including Africa, the West Indian islands, Portugal and China. These schemes failed to bring about the desired results and the planters turned mainly to India for migrant labour. Planters needed a labour force that could be controlled in military fashion and which provided a ready and "disposable" supply on-site for its field and factory operations. The planters failed to understand the new democracy that should have been ushered in and treated the former slaves and new immigrants with the same harshness as they had done during slavery. They failed miserably in adjusting to the new times. Instead they imposed a new system of slavery. Indian migrant labour initially assisted in resuscitating the abandoned estates and later in significantly expanding sugar production.

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The “Great Experiment”

In Mauritius the planters turned to Africa, China and India. India proved to be the source of reliable and cheap labour for the British colonies. Britain developed a programme of replacing slavery with indentured servitude deemed the “Great Experiment.” Mauritius was selected to be the “experimental station” for the theory that free labour would prove more productive than slave labour. This project of ‘indentured labour’ was an attempt to import on a large scale into the colonies working-class labourers who willingly wanted the opportunity to improve their lives, based on the promises made to them. This took the form of a contract, which, upon expiration, could provide a return passage back to their land of origin. This “experiment” was extended to the British West Indian colonies.

Indian indentured emigration to Mauritius began in earnest in 1834. At that time Lord William Bentinck was the Governor General of India. On 9 September 1834, 36 Dhangars signed contracts to work for five years on a sugar estate in Mauritius in return for a salary of Rs.5 per month, with six months’ pay in advance and the payment of their outward and return passages. Their rations accommodation and clothing were given free of charge. The conditions stipulated in this first contract between the 36 Dhangars and Hunter, Arbuthnot and Company satisfied the Council of the East India Company. The contract was signed in the presence of the Chief Justice of Calcutta (Vivek 78) ^[64].

In 1835, 1,160 men, 61 women, 22 boys and 11 girls arrived from India. Mauritius thus became the first British colony to import free labour on a large scale from another part of the British Empire. It was described by Herman Merrivale as an “absolutely novel phenomenon in economic history.” On this island of 720 square miles fell the dubious privilege of importing an indentured workforce to supplement (or supplant) local labourers recently liberated from slavery. By the middle of 1837, about 19,000 labourers had been exported from India to Mauritius and Bourbon, of whom about 8,000 were from Calcutta, a greater number was from Pondicherry and some from Cochin (Erikson 28 cited in Bishnudath R. Singh 55) ^[59]. According to I.M. Cumpston, Mauritius became “the epitome of the struggle between free labour and slavery and the test scene for the success of renewed coolie emigration.”

However, problems soon arose. To the employers there was little difference between their new charges and their former slaves (Indians Overseas). The planters of Mauritius, long accustomed to a mentality of coercive control over slaves, tended to overlook the fundamental difference between these new recruits and their former labourers (Cumpston 13) ^[18]. The fact that Mauritius had several thousand Indian slaves prior to emancipation would colour the planter-indentured labourer relationship. These same problems would occur in the British West Indies which imported Indian migrants. There was widespread abuse and ill-treatment of the Indians in Mauritius. Low wages, discrimination and hard work were the reality across the empire including the Caribbean (Vivek 65-66) ^[64]. In Mauritius, Governor Nicolay had to inform employers that Sunday work, unlimited hours and corporal punishment were illegal (Indians Overseas).

The Anti-Slavery Society in its petition to the British House of Commons called their attention to ‘the general state of the laws, and the administration of justice, in the Mauritius as affording no guarantee of fair and honourable treatment

to immigrants on that island” (Cambridge Library Collection 73). This society also sent John Scoble to investigate the condition of Indian migrants in British Guiana. His investigations in Guiana revealed a very similar situation to that in Mauritius as will be shown below.

Glenelg felt that “some unexceptionable authority in Mauritius to settle labour disputes was needed” (Glenelg quoted in Cumpston 15). He also felt that “(C) ontracts should be as short as possible to defray the expenses of importing coolies; five years was too long” (Glenelg quoted in Cumpston 15). The very same problems would plague Indian migrants to the British West Indies throughout the indentureship period.

On Governor Nicolay’s initiative the traffic was temporarily suspended in Mauritius in December 1837, pending closer regulation and control (Nicolay quoted in Cumpston 13). By that time some 18,627 Indians had arrived in Mauritius. In this number there were only 225 women and 51 children. The extreme shortage of Indian women caused its own unique problems. In their quest for female companionship Indian men and women returned to the law of the jungle. Nicolay also exhorted the importers to “apply for a certain number of women to accompany the men, as want of women had caused great disorder on some estates where Indians were mixed with apprentices” (Glenelg quoted in Cumpston 13). Governor Lord Harris had made a similar call in Trinidad. The shortage of Indian women caused problems throughout the British West Indies. At the end of 1842, there were 20,332 male migrants and only 931 women (Vivek 83) ^[64].

In August 1838 a Committee of six persons was appointed in Calcutta to investigate emigration. There were serious disagreements among members and the report was submitted more than two years later. The Committee found that planters did not adhere to the contracts and that bad masters paid no money wages in the majority of instances (Sarup 2011 139) ^[54]. Furthermore the police officers in the interior of Mauritius were not easily accessible to those wishing to lay complaints and “the magistrates were not very cordially disposed to enforce the provisions of the contract inserted for the advantage of the coolies” (139). Three members were wary of the resumption of emigration. In separate reports another strongly recommended resumption while the fifth member suggested strict regulation and control. The sixth member had left for England.

Another committee was set up in Mauritius in October 1838 with the object of obtaining accurate information with respect to the treatment of the Indian migrant labourers. C. Anderson, Special Judge, alone reported on Port Louis establishments, as there was a difference of opinion among committee members on the treatment meted out to the Indians. He found that the Indian labourers in Port Louis were “generally fed clothed, and paid with but little deviation from their agreements. With few exceptions, however, they are treated with great and unjust severity, by over-work, and by personal chastisement; their lodging accommodation is either too confined and disgustingly filthy, or none is provided for them; and in case of sickness, the most culpable neglect is evinced in withholding the accommodation, the advice, and the attendance which the utter helplessness of the sufferers so urgently requires” (Cambridge Library Collection 11-13). In most places the Indians slept on the bare floor and at several establishments

they slept in or above stables or in a verandah. There was insufficient hospital accommodation for the sick. Where hospital accommodation existed they were “generally more calculated to increase disease than to alleviate its sufferings” and were “unfit for the reception of human beings”. Carters and porters worked from sunrise to sunset, and often for several hours by moonlight. Anderson himself had frequently seen bands of Indians driving wood and rice at ten o'clock at night. The Indians complained that their work was too severe and insufficient time was given for them to eat their meals. They were beaten at many establishments. At two such establishments, the complaints were “loud and strong” and at one of these “convincing marks of the most severe stripes were exhibited to the committee by several individuals”. Anderson called for “a speedy remedy, if free labour is to be placed on that footing which sound policy, justice, and common (Cambridge Library Collection 73). By June 30, 1839, 25,468 Indian migrants left for Mauritius. Some migrant labourers also arrived from East Africa. Indentured labourers in Mauritius comprising of Indians, Chinese, Africans and Creoles replaced slave labour (Vivek 59) ^[64]. In 1843, Indian emigration came under systematic government superintendence (83). Ordinance 40 of 1844 made it obligatory for estate owners to provide to provide lodging and hospital facilities for migrant labourers and regulated the article of food to be supplied to them. It was hoped to put an end to the abuses. The combined figures for indentured servants from Africa and India rose to 30,000 in 1851 and 60,000 in 1861. The labour problem was solved first, and most easily, in Mauritius. “Inexpensive labour” was imported from India in vast numbers. Thus began a widespread outflow from India to the rest of the world including the British West Indies. Between 1834 and 1910 (the last year of arrivals), 451,776 Indian migrants arrived in Mauritius ^[59].

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an estimated 5.5 million Indian migrants left British India for greener pastures. Some Indians migrated to nearby Burma, Ceylon and Malaya. Another 1,301,577 went far and wide across the Kala Pani. Of these 1,050,383 departed for Mauritius, Reunion and the West Indies and 251, 194 for East Africa, Seychelles, Natal and Fiji. The West Indies, including Surinam and French Guiana, received 548,151 migrants. Ninety per cent of these were deployed in sugar cane plantations.

British Guiana

The transportation of Indian labourers to the Caribbean began in 1838 when two shiploads of “coolies” were landed in the British colony of Demerara (British Guiana) (Samaroo 1). In 1838, the *Hesperus* and *Whitby*, embarked 437 Dhangars (including 20 children and only 12 women) at Calcutta. The Indians were made slaves on Gladstone's - Vreed-en-Hoop and Vreedenstein, and four other plantations (Scoble 5). Their condition was no different to that in Mauritius as seen above.

John Scoble, an English Congregational minister, had helped form the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS). In 1831, Scoble was a full-time lecturer of the Anti-Slavery Society, and was later involved in the protests against the apprenticeship system, which was abolished in 1838. He reported on the abuse of Indian migrant labour in both Mauritius and British Guiana. BFASS sent him to Guiana to investigate the condition of the Indians (Ramdin

55). His alarming report, *Brief exposure*, was a veritable history of the horror and misery faced by Indian migrant labour. Scoble, like Beaumont and Tinker, saw “a new slavery” (Scoble 1) and demanded “absolute prohibition.” Based on reports of eye-witnesses, and his own investigations, he could not believe that so much “oppression, cruelty, and misery,” existed (Scoble). His visits and research revealed the excessive death rate, the filthy conditions, the beggary and the cramped accommodation. In one sick-house, the Indians had mortified ulcers, their flesh rotting on their bones, their toes dropping off. It was so “appalling, that humanity calls loudly for the interference of the executive”.

Scoble's report was drafted by BFASS in response to Lord John Russell's announcement that his cabinet intended to lift the ban on Indian immigration to Mauritius. Scoble's “single object” was to fill the gap in the information presented to the House of Commons, respecting the Hill Coolies in British Guiana, in return to an address moved by Mr. William Gladstone. Scoble knew the facts and rebutted the “very partial, and most unfair representations” made to the British Government by Gladstone and others. He mentioned the widespread kidnapping in India, and published another important pamphlet, *British Guiana: Facts! Facts! Facts!* Scoble mentioned the case brought against Jacobs, a driver at Vreed en Hoop. Furthermore, “the wretched Coolies were most cruelly whipped and injured.” Some of the floggings took place under the general manager's house, but he went Scot-free. A properly constituted industrial tribunal would have dismissed him. Scoble's findings are utilised and discussed in Adamson (42-43), Schomburgk (133-137 154-155), Ramdin (53-55), Singh (55- 62), Kumar (3) and Bisnauth (15). The nineteenth-century counterpart of the *encomienda* had arrived (Adamson 56).

In Britain, Lord Brougham described indentureship as “an abominable traffic” and charged that the “mortality and massacre of the voyage far exceeded the African Middle Passage itself” (Bisnauth 15). A Commission of Inquiry was set up to investigate these charges (15). The Inquiry revealed “undoubted maltreatment and brutality” including flogging (C.O. 114/20 and C.O. 111/379 cited in Adamson 42). Two drivers were found guilty of assaulting immigrants, and one had extorted monies from others (Bisnauth 15). The hospital at Belle Vue was in poor repair and the medical officer remiss in his duties (15).

In East Indian Immigration, Tota Mangar notes that Guyana received 238,909 Indian immigrants during indentureship. Other recipients of Indian immigrants in the British West Indies were: Trinidad; 147,592, Jamaica; 37,027, St. Lucia; 4,561, Grenada; 3,529, British Honduras; 3,000; St. Vincent; 2,523, St. Kitts; 361 and Nevis; 342. In the French West Indies, Martinique received 25,509; Guadeloupe 45,844 and French Guiana 19,276. Suriname imported 35,501 Indians. Guiana also received over 40,000 Bardadians, over 35,000 Portuguese and 15,720 Chinese.

Mangar notes the fraudulent Indian recruiting system, the high mortality at sea, the “Gladstone Experiment”, the difficult lives; planter oppression, the extremely harsh plantation conditions and the determination to survive. Plantation life was characterised by the following features: draconian labour laws, Protectors and magistrates siding with the planters, farcical court trials, low wages, beatings, unrealistic task work, arbitrary wage deductions, the

humiliating pass system, lack of proper social amenities, poor housing, lack of potable water, and poor medical facilities and sanitation. Life under indentureship was one of "struggle, sacrifice and resistance." Indians brought with them their main religions, Hinduism and Islam and their ancient culture. He cites the descriptions of indentureship by Scoble, Rodney, Tinker, Beaumont and Trollope, among others. (Mangar 2021 1-11).

In February 1840, Lord John Russell gave the "prescient warning" in his famous statement "I should be unwilling to adopt any measure to favour the transfer of Labourers from British India to Guiana....I am not prepared to encounter the responsibility of a measure which may lead to a dreadful loss of life on the one hand, or, on the other, to a new system of slavery." (Ramdin 53; Adamson 43). His fears came to pass as shown herein. This occurred despite Schomburgk's view that "(a) new system of slavery can never rise again in a British colony (Schomburgk 138). Schomburgk supported the import of "starving" Hill Coolies from India, who would receive "high wages" in Guiana (131-132).

Dale Bisnath recorded that many Indian immigrants in Guiana were "condemned to endemic poverty and chronic ill-health...beatings and kickings (and) jailed for breach of contracts" (Bisnath 83). Lakhanram, a labourer, pointed out that people were actually "living like pigs" (87). The works of Bisnath, and others like Jenkins, Des Voeux's, Webber, and Beaumont describe in great detail the misery of the Indian migrants in British Guiana, particularly in the 1870s and 1880s. The misery experienced by the Indians is best recorded in the exasperated plea of a migrant labourer in British Guiana to Edward Jenkins, recorded in his book.

The Coolie: His Rights and Wrongs

"O massa, plees, massa help Coolie. Manahee too bad, massa, starve um, beat um, chuck um, so. Massa stop um wagee, take um wife. Coolie live too bad, massa: too hard work, too little money, too little food... O massa, no go mahitee. Mahitee know manahee - go manahee's house-eat um breakfast-come court - no good Coolie go court - mahitee friend manahee: always for manahee, no for Coolie" (Jenkins 103).

William Des Voeux, who served as stipendiary magistrate (appointed Senior Magistrate in 1866) in British Guiana, tried to alleviate the distress of the Indians (Ramdin 59-60). He was deeply touched by the unrest at Plantation Leonora in December 1869 (Nath 68; Ramdin 60). Based on his conviction and in view of a recent meeting of the West India proprietors, Des Voeux wrote a 100,000 word letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Granville. His chief concern was to "expose abuses." He noted that some of the immigrants supposed advantages were in fact nominal. Magistrates actively connived with estate managers in abusing the labour laws (Adamson 115 131). This partiality caused discontent (Des Voeux 10 17). He recommended measures including reform of the magistracy and the medical system (7 8). Des Voeux's suggested reforms were in the interest of peace and justice, the comfort and happiness of the labouring classes, and the interests of the whole colony (28-29).

The planter-dominated Court of Policy made laws in their own favour and the migrants' life was not far removed from slavery. Des Voeux mentioned the cruelties which they endured (15 23). Cases of assault by managers were brought

to court. Small offences meant a loss of wages and exorbitant fines or imprisonment (11). Indians held on to the "slenderest of protections" (Nath 64). The appointment of Sir Francis Hincks as Governor in 1862 had only made matters worse.

Des Voeux's main recommendations included: the creation of a superior class of magistrates; improved housing; potable water; and immigration reform (18-23). He gave the lie to the purported huge savings of Indians. This lie was propounded by government officials and others like Rodway. Des Voeux had this to say, "No one who knows the extremely meagre diet of the Coolies and the penurious habits of the great majority of them, could consider such a saving as any argument for their general prosperity. Property has almost been entirely realized by the exceptionally strong and that the majority die prematurely and penniless" (27). The high death rates averaged 44.8 per thousand from 1855 to 1872 (Adamson 130). Des Voeux's letter forced the British government to appoint a Royal Commission of Inquiry in August 1870. (Ramdin 60; Ishmael (210-211),

In 1871, Joseph Beaumont published "A New Slavery." He was Chief Justice of British Guiana from 1863 to 1868. He was well-acquainted with the immigrants' condition (Beaumont 43). He communicated with immigrants frequently and observed how they lived. He found "serious evils" in the labour law, which was "exceedingly stringent and galling," and liable to great abuse (44-46). One such evil was the artificial system of "indenture", and their subjection to a code of law which is "unnecessary, arbitrary, and in many particulars unjust and oppressive" (44). Misdemeanours subjected the immigrant to penal and criminal proceedings of "terrible and crushing severity". Large numbers of migrants were prosecuted (47). For every breach of duty, the immigrant was made subjected to heavy penalties, and possible imprisonment (Beaumont 46-47). Kandhi notes that during the five year period ending June 1870, 32,876 charges were brought against immigrants (Kandhi 6). Beaumont was repeatedly distressed by the "shocking spectacles" in the gaol hospital. The gaols were filled with immigrants - 4936 commitments within one year, 3148 of whom were of born in Indian or China, and 2111 committed for offences against "the Labour Laws" (Beaumont 49-50). Prosecutions on the estates in 1907-8 reached its highest - 39.2 per cent (Ramdin 66). In 1916, imprisonment for labour offences ceased. As in Trinidad, the jails and hospitals tended to be full, because the sick who could not work were not allowed to stay in their barracks (66)

Other troubling features were: extreme poverty: frequent debility and sickness: inadequate hospital accommodation, their general ignorance, and their special ignorance of the English language and customs (Beaumont 44). Other factors included the sex disproportion, the high murder rate, including uxoricide, and the pass laws. Beaumont warned that without reform disorders would follow (41).

Beaumont also observed the "extraordinary number of deaths amongst the Immigrants" from "too common neglect, disregard, and sacrifice of their health and lives" (61). During 1864 to 1868 the deaths amongst the indentured immigrants ranged from 1200 to 1300 per annum. Between 1864 and 1868, there was a very high death rate of 4 per cent (63). Some deaths were due to a lack of "seasoning" (75). The unnecessarily high death rates constituted a "most

flagrant disgrace” - reproduction of one of the most shocking features of West Indian Slavery, the certain dying out of a race of people placed in a false and subject industrial and social condition. He added that the mortality statistics were “inaccurate, uncertain, or confused, or...partial” (61). Beaumont called for certain “ameliorations,” the most important being an end to the penal laws (Adamson 131). Beaumont and Des Voeux became the “outstanding critics” of indentureship (131).

The Aborigines Protection and Anti-Slavery societies appointed Edward Jenkins counsel to represent the Indians before the 1870 Commission (Jenkins 23). Jenkins published his book - a meticulous and forthright account, in which he denounced the corruption of colonial officers and magistrates based on his own observations. There was vindication for Des Voeux when the *Times* review of Jenkin’s *The Coolie His Rights and Wrongs* pointed out that Jenkins’s book proved the substance of Des Voeux’s allegations. The Commission gave Des Voeux “full credit for putting the administration of law upon a stricter footing” and conceded the inference that the Magistrates courts “are proved...to have been places where the Immigrants cannot and do not get justice” (C.O. 111/379, 88 cited in Adamson 116).

Jenkin’s observations included: biased laws, arbitrary imprisonment, unfair wages, a scarcity of women, inadequate housing and daily abuse. These made the immigrants’ life miserable, and also impacted Guiana’s economic well-being. Reform would benefit both planters and labourers. The Protector should be a member of the Court of Policy (86-87). Migrants frequently complained that they had been deceived by recruiters in India. One migrant had produced a document which stated that the wages in Demerara were from ten annas (1s. 3D.) to two rupees (4s) (91-92). Adamson stated that the main defense of indenture had been that “it was necessary for the protection of the labourer himself” (Adamson 127). He supported the findings of Des Voeux, Jenkins and Beaumont (124-131). The migrants also knew nothing whatsoever of the penal sanctions (Jenkins 93-94). The Indian system was “rotten,” medical examinations were unsatisfactory and remedies were necessary (94-96). Anthony Trollope had described the government as “a mild despotism tempered by sugar” (49). Sugar planters held a position of great influence in the Government of British Guiana and controlled the majority of the seats in the Court of Policy. Jenkins stated that “a mild despotism of sugar” would aptly describe the government (49).

Look Lai points out that conditions in Guiana were not as rosy as painted (Look Lai 138). The books of Jenkins, Beaumont and Des Voeux, the main works of the period harshly criticised indentureship (138). Beaumont’s “stinging condemnation reverberated through the century and was often quoted by critics (138). Des Voeux’s letter was “(b)y far the most thorough-going indictment of the system” (Bisnauth 189).

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