UNIT 6 PLANTATION ECONOMIES, SLAVE LABOUR AND SLAVE TRADE*

Structure

6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the historical context in which the plantation economies arose;
- understand the link between the working of the plantations and slave labour; and
- understand the significance of sugar in the growth of the plantation economies from the early period onwards.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Plantation economies evolved and emerged in the Atlantic world during the course of the late 16th and the 17th centuries. Establishment of large-scale plantations and farms, supported by a labour force, constituting of largely imported slaves from West African coast, were characteristic of early colonial economic investment into the new world and the Caribbean islands.

Both Plantations as an agro-management structure and slavery as a labour organising institution has had a long history within structures of western civilisation. Slavery has been known and recorded in European world since the Greco-Roman period, when the very material basis of civilisation was organised on the back of slave labour. The regions of Eastern Europe and Mediterranean had been familiar with trade in military-slaves in the Islamic world. Similarly, Europeans came into contact with 'plantation organisation' especially with regard to the cultivation of labour-intensive crops as sugarcane, during the course of crusades into West Asia. Sugar, as a commodity of exchange, doesn't find much mention in the ancient and medieval Europe, however, post crusadic period of the 13^{th} century, it emerged as one of the primary commodities in demand to satisfy the sweet cravings of the elite European classes. Until now honey has been the primary source of sweetener to be used in European cuisine, which by the end of the 17^{th} century came to be replaced by Sugar. Along with sugarcane, tobacco came to be the other major import from the new world.

The volume of these imports and the demands which these plantations generated for labour in form of slaves, fuelled the commercial rivalries between early colonising empires of Spain and Portugal. Eventually by the middle of the 17^{th} century, the dominance came to be severely challenged by new entrants as Britain, the Dutch and the French, all of whom invested heavily in creation of colonial plantation and protecting these investments with the creation of navies and military structures along the colonies to guard their interests.

6.2 EARLY PLANTATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

As mentioned earlier, Europe's engagement with plantation complexes as systems of agricultural management began with the interaction with similar complexes in West Asia during the period of early Crusades. The rise of Islam and movement of people and armies from South Asia to Central Asia to the North African coast and the Iberian Peninsula, also enabled large scale movement of flora and fauna. A range of crops, from tropical zones were introduced into the Mediterranean world, which included rice (originally from Southeast Asia, and reached Europe after centuries of modification due to cropping in South Asia), coconuts, Sour oranges, lemons, lime, sugarcane, bananas and probably also mangoes. Many of these over a period of time, found their way into southern Europe and one find them being cultivated in Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Portugal, by the 15^{th} and the 16^{th} century.

6.2.1 Sugar Plantation

Sugarcane plantations grew in the Mediterranean as a result of the increasing investment in sugar trade by Italian traders and early crusaders, who gained the insight into plantation organisation and methods of its replication in European farms.

As a crop sugar cane requires heavy manual labour to cultivate and take care, at the same time, raw cane plant is very heavy and hence could not be hauled or transported over long distances. As a result, any investment into sugar cane agriculture would necessitate the creation of supportive infrastructure to extract sugar out of sugarcane. Once concentrated, cane sugar has high value to bulk ratio, unlike the crop. As a result, cane sugar was ideal for long distance transport, especially over water. Over the course of the early modern centuries, the demand for sugar as a sweetener increased manifold, primarily to the emergence of new markets with the emergence of middle bourgeois classes which have the means to purchase products hitherto limited to the elite classes in European societies. Price revolution of the European markets aided in the increase of demand as well as profitability of investment in sugar as a commodity.

The first attempt to increase sugar production to serve European markets was made in the vicinity of Tyre on Eastern Mediterranean by the crusading knights, who captured the city in C.E. 1123. The venetian traders who supported the crusading armies by facilitating the movement of goods and commodities across the sea, utilised the existing farms in the vicinity of the city for sugar plantation. The profitability and viability of these early farms was the result of the adoption of local sugar extraction techniques, as well as providing of a viable market by ensuring steady transport of the extracted sugar across the Aegean and Mediterranean seas into Italian and European markets. Similar sugar farms began to emerge in the vicinity around the same period. Thus, we find King Baldwin II of Jerusalem (C.E. 1118-1131), investing personally in sugar farms in the vicinity of the city of Acre. Crusading groups as Teutonic Knights and Knights Templers owned and invested in sugar farms around the city Tripoli, in northern Lebanon.

Until the 13th centuries, sugar farms around Lebanon, remained primary source of sugar plantation and source for sugar import in Europe. An attempt to replicate sugar production on European Mediterranean was made in Sicily, by the Norman settlers in the region. Although due to technological backwardness and steady competition from Anatolian and West Asian production centres, the industry initially suffered setbacks. However, by the second half of the 15th century, with the assimilation of Asian technology, Sicily emerged as one of the main centres of sugar production and supply in Europe, and an important staging centre for transmission of sugar plantations into Western Mediterranean and across Atlantic.

Cyprus also emerged in the period from the 13th to about the end of the 15th century as one of the chief sugar production centres in Eastern Mediterranean. Cyprus came under European control in the course of the second crusade and ultimately passed into Venetian control in 1498. The plantation style management of agricultural land also got support from the leading business families and bankers of other Italian cities, who were granted access to these fertile resource areas in return of their support for crusading armies. On Cyprus we find presence of families as Cornaros from Venice and Ferrer from Catalonia in Spain. Other sugar plantation belonged to the church and especially the order of the Hospitalier.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Discuss the early plantation economies of the Mediterranean.

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2) When did sugar come in to prominence in the early modern period?

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6.2.2 Mediterranean Slavery

An interesting development which hand in hand with the expansion and adoption of plantation structure for organising sugarcane cultivation, was the use of slave-labour in Asiatic and African Mediterranean. Unlike Europe, slavery continued to flourish in Islamic zones, primarily in form of military slaves or slaves used in hard labour-intensive agricultural organisations. Even though much of the workers in these plantations were not slaves, slave labour did begin to emerge as important supplement for labour shortage in the plantations in the Mediterranean world.

Slavery remained a minor aspect of the Mediterranean economic life, much till the eighteenth century. Up to 1204 CE, when the crusading armies captured Constantinople, most of the slave traffic originated in the southern Mediterranean. Post the conquest of Constantinople, until about 1266, the slave capture zones shifted eastwards into the Black Sea, where trading ports were established for the purpose by the Italian traders. The trade went on until the 14th century, by which time, sources for slave had diversified much geographically. Tartars, Mongols, Russians and Ukrainians found their way into slave traffic, however, only a minuscule number of these slaves found their way into plantations. Hence, this early slave trade in Mediterranean made no or very little distinction based on race, ethnicity and religion of the slaves, and African slaves were certainly not part of this early exchange, which came primarily from Eastern Europe and West and Central Asian zones.

African slaves began to appear in the Mediterranean slave markets by about 14th century. Many if these early slaves were brought to North African markets from across the Saharan zone and then sold further into Europe. Gradually the Mediterranean slave trade came to engage in slaves from various regions of Africa, such as from Eastern Africa – north along the Nile valley; Central Sudan, Tunisia and Libya.

The situation regarding African slaves underwent rapid change by the mid decades of the fifteenth century. The capture of Constantinople by Ottoman Turks closed the routes to the black seaports and the eastern slave procurement regions for Venetian traders. About the same time, the Portuguese navigators explored the coastal regions of Western Africa and were able to tap into the slave markets in the region. For the next century and half, Lagos and Lisbon emerged as a major centre for slave procurement and decimation in European and Mediterranean markets.

However, with the discovery of the Atlantic slave labour market it made sense to move the plantations closer to the sources of procurement. This was aided by the establishment of settlements in Caribbean and in mainland America. Apart from the sugarcane plantations, tobacco and coffee were other crops whose cultivations began to be organised on plantation structures. Apart from agriculture, the establishment of copper and silver mines in Southern America and Mexico also attracted slave labour.

6.3 ATLANTIC PLANTATIONS

Early Atlantic plantations were established in Brazil in the seventeenth century and in the Caribbean islands of Barbados, Jamaica, Saint Domingue (Haiti) in the eighteenth century. Many of these early plantations transformed gradually into full blown agrarian settlements with well-defined political, administrative and social structure. Dependent on largely slave labour, these plantations overtime came to serve the European markets, initially as a supplement and later as main supplier of prime agricultural produces and food grains.

According to Philip D. Curtin, certain common characteristics can be discerned while analysing these early plantation colonies.

1) First and most importantly the productive labour force in these societies is slave labour.

2) Secondly, the population of these settlement societies was not self-sustaining, and this holds true for both the African slaves and the European settlers. The death rate in these colonies was consistently high and the numbers of both the African and non-African demographics must be maintained by regular immigration from Europe or in form of slave inflow from Africa. This high rate of death over birth, remained a constant factor in social life of Atlantic colonies for until about the middle of the 19th century.

3) Thirdly, the agricultural enterprise was organised in large scale plantations. Typically, the worker strength of these plantations was around 50 to 100 workers on a single farm, far larger than the European spaces at the same time. The owner of the plantation controlled and managed all steps of production with the assistance of his agents. While in farm itself almost all aspects of daily life, be it family or related to production was organised and regulated by the owner himself. This was very much different than what was organised in European farms.

4) Fourth, though capitalist in its nature, the farm itself has some feudal characteristics. For e.g. the ownership of the slaves and exercise of certain rights which were legally defined and exercisable. The agents of the owner normally acted as agents for enforcement of law and order, and most of the disputes were resolved locally and not taken to higher regulatory authorities.

5) Fifth, the plantations were created to supply a distant market with a highly specialised product – mainly sugar, and then coffee and cotton. Since the success of the plantation was in the success to export the produce, at times most of the produce was exported and there was very little left to feed the local population. Hence much of these plantations were dependent upon the supplies of food grains, eatables, and slaves provided by long distance traders. No section of European or African economies were so export oriented as the plantations were.

6) Political control over these colonies lay in distant lands and territories across vast oceans and in societies which were far different in composition and nature than what had taken shape in these distant colonies in America and Caribbean. As a result of the rivalries to dominate the trade and flow of traffic of slaves and commodities like sugar to and from the colonies, the nature of political control of the home country on the colonies was inherently fragmented and prone to tensions. Some of the major European powers to participate actively in the transatlantic commerce and control were Portugal, Spain, England, France, Netherlands, amongst others.

As the plantation activities and settlements moved west into the Atlantic zone, they evolved in form and size. From small settlements on the fringe of Mediterranean economic zone, depending on some slave labour, they evolved into humungous settlements with complex control and managerial structures, heavily dependent on slave labour. As the death rate in Atlantic zone continued to be high, the high concentration of slave workforce could only be managed and sustained through steady inflow of slaves from West African coast, which in turn gave rise to lucrative trans-Atlantic slave trade managed and controlled by western European powers, who fought and struggled over it, to ultimately shape the early modern commercial world dominated by West European imperial and colonial powers.

6.4 THE ATLANTIC ISLANDS: EARLY SETTLEMENTS

As the Europeans developed technology to venture deep into the Atlantic, they came to settle and establish initial contact colonies in some of the islands in the eastern Atlantic, off the coast of western Europe and Africa. They were developed for varying purposes. While some having climate similar to Europe were developed more of a staging and trading post for ventures further west, the others, in the tropical zone, were developed for sugar plantation and saw establishment of earliest slave settlements in the Atlantic zone. Also, it's important to note that many of the islands closer to equator along the rim of African coast, were volcanic in nature, and due to their tropical location had a far wetter climate than on the mainland Africa.

The Azores, uninhabited when discovered between 1427 and 1431, had climatic similarities with mainland Europe and hence not really suitable for plantation purpose. They were settled as staging post for ventures in the west. While Madeira or the Madeiras constitutes of two main islands, surrounded by a group of small islets, came to be amongst the earliest plantation settlements in the Atlantic. The Madeira, the largest island amongst the group along with Porto Santo, one of its neighbours from the group, had climate suitable for sugarcane cultivation. The final Portuguese settlement was attempted around 1420, at the same time as the navigators were making push southwards along the west African coast. About 250 miles south were the Canary Islands, which were also developed for sugar plantation, although the rugged topography made cultivation difficult. The islands were keenly contested by both Portugal and Spain, and it was only around 1480, that Spain gained absolute control. Still further south, opposite the mouth of the Senegal river are the Cape Verde islands. Considerably dry and hot, they were used by Portuguese primarily as an offshore base for management of their Africa trade, primarily in slaves and gold. Still further south in the Gulf of Guinea, are the islands of Sao Tome, Fernando Po, Principe, and Annobon. All the four islands were discovered and claimed by the Portuguese between 1471 and 1472. Of these only Sao Tome and Fernando Po had any valuable economic importance. Sao Tome, an inhabited island was developed as a major sugar plantation space, while Fernando Po was inhabited by African tribes, who were treated as labour source to work on these early Atlantic plantations, most possibly as slaves.

As the European settlements moved into the Atlantic, the pattern of investment and organisation of plantations underwent rapid shifts and transformations. The European settlements in the islands of the Atlantic also had a catastrophic impact on the local island populations, as the local inhabitants rapidly died on contact with the Europeans due to violent engagements and diseases, to which they had no natural resistance. Most of these early voyages were funded and supported by royal courts in Lisbon and in Spain, although the participants in these early voyages were almost always Italians. Much of the financial investments also came from the banking families of the Italian states as from Genoa and Florance.

Sugar plantation was established in Madeira in about 1455, however, the cultivation and sugar extracting continued to be organised separately. The sugar-mill establishments continued to be funded Italian merchant banker from cities as Genoa and managed by technicians from Sicily. Direct supply of sugar from Madeira to Antwerp began around 1472 and by 1480 around 70 ships were trading with the island annually. Production rose steadily from around 73 metric tons in 1455 to about 760 metric tons in 1493 to 2400 metric tons by 1570. By 1500, Madeira sugar dominated the northern European market, and was sold even in Genoa and at Istanbul, in spaces closer to the earlier Mediterranean sugar plantations spaces. The Canaries were developed by Spain in similar manner, and was supported by Genoese enterprises and German capital.

The movement to Sao Tome was the next step in colonising of the Atlantic. Lying in tropical zone, with rich volcanic soil, and closer to the slave procurement zone of Congo basin, the island provided the perfect setting for flourishing of the kind of slave plantations which dotted the Atlantic landscape in decades and centuries to come. Sugar production in the island began to rise after 1500 and reached around 2, 250 metric tons by 1544. However, in subsequent decades the cost of production in the island increased substantially in wake of uprising by Angolan slaves who used the rough terrain to their advantage and created security problems for the establishments in the region. The distance of the island from the mainland, made investment in face of security issues, difficult and over the years the production steadily fell. Moreover, settlement of plantations in Brazil, drove the sugar planters in the island out of business.

6.5 SHIFT TO AMERICAS

The movement of plantations into Americas brought about a drastic shift in the manner of organisation of both production and supply across the Atlantic. Whereas in the European world or in eastern Atlantic, the organisation was funded by bankers and enterprising individual planters, who worked under the flags of one country or other, with a pure sense of maximising their individual profit; in the Americas, this organisation was transformed into unitary nationalist enterprises, fuelled by a competitive mercantilist commercial rivalry. The organisation of trade here on became a national monopoly to be guarded and fought over. The networks of exchange and markets in the produce all became subservient to the national mercantilist interests. The history of 16^{th} and 17^{th} century Atlantic is marred by the Spanish conflict with the Portuguese and other North European powers,as well as conflict between Britain and the French and Dutch state and commercial agents and agencies.

By the end of the 15^{th} century, both Spain and Portugal began to move ahead from the initial plantations settlements in Canaries and Madeira. Spanish industry began to move to the island of Santo Domingo or Hispaniola in the Caribbean. The earliest introduction of sugar here was done by Columbus in 1493, which was not successful. Subsequently, Spanish settlers reintroduced sugarcane in 1503, with the assistance of technicians from Canaries, which again failed. However, this time the reason of failure was not absence of technology, but the scarcity of labour force. Much of the Arawak Indians died after directing diseases brought on to thee islands by the Europeans. A fresh attempt was made in 1517, by introducing both the landers, technicians and labourers from the Canaries. This time, there was some initial success, and the production rose to about 1000 metric tons before 1570. However due to the apathetic and disinterested attitude of the Spanish government, which was more interested in establishing silver mines and such industries in Peruvian highlands and in Mexico, the production declined and for a long time, the Santo Domingo production remained peripheral to other competitive production and market spaces in the Atlantic. It was not until the French occupation in the eighteenth century, that Santo Domingo emerged as one of the most prized sugar colonies in the Atlantic.

Portuguese settlements in Brazil took different form and trajectory altogether. Much closer to African coast than the Caribbean islands, the Brazilian sugar plantations emerged as true slave plantations in a short period. Portuguese domination and virtual monopoly of the slave trade in the Atlantic, ensured steady supply of labour for plantations in Brazil, and within a short period of its introduction from 1540 on wards the sugar production rose to equivalent levels as was in Sao Tome and Madeira. By 1560, it was 2500 metric tons, which rose to 5000 tons by 1580. By 1600, the figure had reached 16,000 tons and it was recorded to more than 20,000 tons by 1630. For rest of the seventeenth century,the production figures hovered between 20,000 to 30,000 tons per annum. Thus by the end of the 17^{th} century, Brazilian sugar plantations were producing much more than the contemporary Caribbean counterparts.

6.5.1 Economic Factors behind the Shift

The establishment of sugar plantations many miles away from mainland Europe, supported by slave labour imported from Africa, seems to require heavy investments and one needs to understand the rationale behind the move made many of the early settlers and planters. The economic rationale behind the movement and settlements needs to be understood in terms of availability of new navigating technology, new and improved understanding of wind and oceanic current patterns, as well as improved consumer demand in sugar, especially in north European markets.

Northern Europe, especially the markets in England and in Low countries in the seventeenth century began to experience improved conditions of wealth creation and hence consequently there was an improved demand in commodities as sugar, which until now were seen as luxury product. The cost of shipping of sugar from

Madeira to Portugal or Genoa, was almost equivalent to that to Antwerp. In most seasons, Madeira is downwind from Gibraltar, and on return a ship would rise the trade wind in Northwest direction and then from Azores, the westerlies made the voyage east to home in Europe simple and easy. Shipping technology also improved steadily in sixteenth century and made these cross oceanic voyages possible. The ships from the low countries especially provided support for transfer of bulk cargoes.

The migration of sugar-industry also gained from the "clean slate advantage". When the industry was first established in a new place, the size of the mill controlled the amount of land to be cleared and utilised to supply cane for a profitable operation. Once the investment was placed it became difficult to change the size of the mill or in many regions also bring in a change in size of cultivation holdings, as too large areas under cultivation may not be profitable as the mill in the neighbourhood may not be able to process the cane effectively. When a new island was cleared, the settlers had a decided advantage of knowing how much area is available for cultivation and how large the size of the processing mill should be to take advantage of the production capacity of the land.

6.6 SLAVE TRADE FROM AFRICA AND EARLY SUGAR PLANTATIONS

The western expansion and economic advance over the course of the sixteenth to the eighteenth century was achieved on the back of slave labour from Africa. The profitable employment of the African slave labour in plantations in the Atlantic world had led to burgeoning trade and exchange in the slaves across the Atlantic Ocean, controlled by maritime empires of the Portuguese and the other European powers. Over the period this trade gained considerable complexity in form and scope and attracted other European powers to the game. Over the course of the seventeenth century the Dutch and English emerged as engaging participants in this trade.

Africans were not always desired as slaves in the European economic world. In fact, the word 'slave' has its root in 'Slav', which literally speaks of a person of Eastern European and Baltic descent. Throughout the course of the Roman empire, slaves were primarily procured from Eastern regions and from amongst the northern Germanic tribes. Its only after the closure of the eastern route after the Ottoman conquest, as discussed before, that the African slaves began to be sought for manual farm labour in European markets.

Africa on the eve of European expansion was divided into multiple small and large states, some with complex political organisation while others with just rudimentary kinship and clan-based organisation. The states in South Saharan region evolved in response to impetus of trade and Islam, leading them to be organised as trading states, some with courts and merchants, who over time converted to Islam. The domestication of camel and its introduction in the Saharan region by Arab traders enabled these African traders to now easily move across desert spaces which had until the 9th century been a barrier to exchange between South Saharan fringe regions and the Mediterranean world. The best known amongst these states were Takrur in the Senegal valley, Ghana in the Sahel (south Sahara), located north of middle Niger and middle Senegal, Songhai near the Niger bend and Kanem, near lake Chad. There were other states which evolved still South, although in contact with the trading communities of Sahara, such as Mali, located on upper Niger basin. Another set of city-states emerged in the region of present-day Nigeria, where Hausa language was and is still spoken, while others evolved in the region between the open Savannah and tropical rain forest. State of Oyo in the present day western Nigeria and that of Benin, which lay in the tropical rain forest and had access to sea through creeks and rivulets in the region are just few examples of the variety and complexity of political space in Western and Central Africa in the early 16th century.

However, much of the sub-Saharan Africa was not organised in states in formal sense and were organised in forms of stateless societies organised along kinship and clan lines. Before the Portuguese arrival on the African coast, the exchange in Western Africa was organised by a series of interlocked trade Diasporas - people of similar ethnic identifies would settle down at distance to facilitate exchange by their own. At the fringe zones of the desert, commodities would be exchanged with other groups organised and distributed along the other ethnic lines. By the end of the 15th century, these trade networks had begun to tap into the gold deposits in the forested regions of present-day central Ghana.

When the European traders arrived on the coast, they found a network of trade routes criss-crossing tropical Africa, facilitating exchange in varieties of goods and commodities, such as kola nuts, Shea butter, several kinds of salts, textiles, iron and iron tools and importantly slaves. Most of these slaves were war prisoners, who were sold to passing traders to be sold in distant areas from where it's almost impossible to return. Some of these slaves found their way into the markets of North Africa. According to recent estimates, the number of these slaves would range from about 500 at minimum to 4000 at maximum, per year.

6.7 AFRICAN ISOLATION AND DISEASES

As the Europeans arrived on the African coast, they found the disease environment, which was not in their favour, as was the case in the Americas. The West African disease environment was too dangerous for Anya outsider to venture deep into the territory, let alone the Europeans. Even the natives faced innumerable challenges in form of rampant malaria and other infectious diseases. Infections from Guinea Worm, trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness), onchocerciasis (river blindness), and schistosomiasis (liver flukes) were extremely high. In additions the usual diseases as smallpox, measles, and malaria were also rampant. Fatality rate for non-immune adults from malaria, was about 75% of total infections. Yellow fever also had a similar fatality rate.

6.8 SLAVERY IN AFRICA

The nature of slavery which came to be practised in Atlantic plantation was in nature very different from the manner it was practised in African spaces. The slaves in plantations were purchased to perform manual labour work on the fields and were organised on the lines of gangs, under continuous supervision of the owners. This kind of slave service was obviously very different from domestic and military slavery as it functioned in north African and in Islamic communities of the east. The domestic slavery as it functioned in America, saw slave a part of the household, in a subordinate position, where as agricultural slavery, also practised in America saw slaves having ownership of their labour and they shared a part of their produce with the master.

However, in Africa, one comes across the traditions of slavery as a mix of Islamic and tribal practises. In North Africa, under influence of Islam, one comes across organised military slaves as the Mumluks in Egypt, or 'black guards' or 'abid' of Morocco. They often come across to hold the agency to change rulers and sultans because of their dominant military position. Situation changes as one crosses the Sahara. North fringes of West African Savannah, were Islamised by the end of the 15th century, saw a Mix influence of North African tradition and those emerging from within West African society. The region was sparsely populated, and kinship grouped were often forced to incorporate outside slaves to bolster their numbers against the enemy groups. Moreover, in many African societies the position of slaves was only transitional as overtimes slaves were to be assimilated within the social setup. Slaves in west Africa did all kinds of work. Some were employed as military commanders or palace servants much like Islamic societies. Many were concubines and wives; others were agricultural labourers. However above enlistment of slave labours works only in case of 'settled slaves'. There was a marked difference in social status of settled slaves and 'trade slaves'. A freshly captured slave had no rights - legal or social – as every right were forfeited, and a master could treat slave as he wishes. For few months every captured slave lived as a trade slave, until sold off by merchants to Europeans or Africans settled in North African coast or a worse fate could fall on him if sold into slavery on west African coast, from where many found their way to plantation islands in Atlantic.

6.9 BEGINNING OF ATLANTIC TRADE

It's difficult to identify a point of beginning on slave exchange in Atlantic world. The historiography of slave exchange usually concentrates on the 18th and 19th century, and usually doesn't investigate the early centuries of the exchange. The fact remains that slavery as an exchange phenomenon, remains comparatively unimportant during the first two centuries of maritime contact - roughly the period from 1450 to 1650. The early Portuguese interest was more in looking for gold, and slave exchange was an accidental by-product of gold search and trade. Initial focus of Portuguese was centred on Gambia river basin in west African coast, which provided easy access to gold fields of Bure and Bambuhu. Lower Gambia basin was already an important salt procurement centre in African trade network and had flourishing market in slaves. The Portuguese began to purchase slaves, although, not in large numbers – approx. 1300 per year before 1500 CE and another 500 per year to Atlantic islands (not counting Sao Tome).

Second point of coastal contact was Gold coast, an entry point for access to Akan Gold fields. In 1498, the Portuguese began constructing a trade castle at Elmina to protect the gold trade. Here also one comes across the beginnings of slave exchange. However, the Akans were more interested in purchasing slaves rather than selling them. In order to fullfill the requirement of slave labour to work in the gold fields, the Portuguese entered the coastal slave trade. They established trading relations with the African states at Benin and Congo, and by 1520, Sao Tome, whose own sugar industry was coming in its own, also emerged as an important centre of slave exchange. Sao Tome imported around 2000 slaves per year, while some were used as labour on the sugar fields, and about 500 per year were sold to Akans for working in gold fields. Slave shipment from Africa to Americas did not begin until around 1532 CE – to Spanish West Indies and to Brazil.

The opening of the Brazilian market for slave was more important than any other incentive for the emergence of trade to the region. The unrest in the mid African states in the Congo basin after 1550 and an almost simultaneous rise of sugar industry in Brazil, created huge impetus on both the ends of supply and demand.

6.10 SUGAR PLANTATION AND SLAVERY IN BRAZIL

Brazil emerged as the region which attracted maximum import of slaves, through the course of two and half century of slave trade in Western hemisphere. The region saw the establishment of sugar plantations under the aegis of Portuguese control from mid-16th century onwards. The early plantation complex in Brazil contained some aspects of the institutions evolved in Mediterranean, while many changes were made in organisational aspects of the plantation system in response to the conditions encountered in Brazil. The techniques of planting cane and extracting sugar were bought from Madeira, however, the organisation of land and control therein was along the lines of social and feudal institutions as they functioned in Europe.

The early Portuguese engagements with Brazil did not yield much. The region was looked as a space where ships could fill in water, fresh fruits and some dye which were obtained from woods in the coastal vicinity. For the first three decades of the 16th century, i.e. until 1530 there was no discernible attempt on part of the Portuguese or any other European power to establish a long and stable presence in the region. Unlike other regions as in Peru and Mexico, where Spaniards engage in conflict and conquest, Brazil saw little or almost no cross-cultural exchange between Europeans and native Indians.

Much of the early interest in the region of Brazil was shown by the merchants and not by the Aristocrats in Europe. They made contracts with the Casa da India, which ran the overseas business affairs of the Portuguese crown, but these contracts were not feudal charters authorizing personal government over land that might be conquered. They merely granted the right to trade. Some private individuals signed up, but so did some syndicates with several members.

A second phase of settlement and expansion began from 1534 onwards with the arrival of French, who desired to trade in dye wood, without paying to Portuguese, who claimed rights over the region. In response, Portugal organised a naval expedition to Brazil, to lay claim to their rights even more forcefully. The entire Brazilian coast, claimed by Portugal was divided into strips, in straight line, running west, from the Atlantic coast. Each strip was assigned to individuals or companies, under feudal charters, which gave complete control to the grantees over the entire affairs of the land under their control. Most of these grants were for perpetuity and in return the Portuguese crown was assured of certain custom duties and monopoly over the trade of certain drugs, spices, dye-woods, and 1/5th of any gold, silver or precious stones that may be found. The grantees bore the title – 'Captain donatary', and thus the colonies came to be called *captainiasdonatarios*.

However, the above experiment collapsed within two decades as the colonies were carved with intent to minimise the investment of the crown in the colonies so far. As the captaincies were under-capitalised, they were also continually short of labour, due to high death-rate amongst the local Indians. Moreover, the French interference could not be countered as these settlements were also poorly equipped to defend against European aggressors. Due to the above failures, the colonies were subsequently brought under crown control and administration was to be managed by bureaucrats. The switch to crown government began in 1549 and represented a new phase in Portuguese relations with Brazil.

6.11 THE SUGAR INDUSTRY

Sugar replaced Dye-wood and other forest produce as the principal commodity of export by the middle decades of the 16th century. The earliest of the plantations were established along the Atlantic coast, by employing Amerindian slaves and importing technology and extraction techniques from Madeira islands. The use of Amerindian slaves continued even after the Portuguese crown made the practice illegal in 1570.

However, the Indian slavery was not a long term option, primarily due to a very high mortality rate amongst the native Indian population, which contacted variety of diseases upon contact with the Europeans. The earliest recourse was to establish slave trade in the interiors of the Brazilian landmass, however, there was no letup in the death rate which remained high enough to ensure that there was no substantial stability and demographic sustainability in coastal plantations. Gradually, in response, over the next half a century, from 1550 onwards, African slaves began to replace locals as principal labour force in the plantation settlements along the Brazilian coast. By the end of the 16th century, Brazil emerged as leader in sugar production, replacing Sao Tome, Madeira, and the Canaries as the chief source of European sugar.

There were several factors behind this rapid growth in sugar industry in Brazil. For one, the availability of large swath of flat fertile land along the coastline, which could be used for plantation played an important role in deciding the location of the settlements. Bahia, in Salvador, was especially favoured as it supplied the best placed cane land in the world – reconcavo. About 4000 sq. Miles in size, the region was almost as big as island of Jamaica. Easy access to slaves was also one of the major reason for success of Brazilian sugar industry. The slave transfer from Africa was easy to manage, unlike the case with the Caribbean islands. The distance from point of origin, such as the Angolan coast on west Africa, to Brazil, was on an average about 30% to 50% shorter than the distance to Caribbean islands, as Jamaica, depending on the route taken. This resulted in lower mortality in transportation, resulting in higher number of slaves being available as labour.

Brazil, also has a 'clean slate' advantage over older plantation settlements as in Madeira. In Madeira, the ordinary sugar mill, produced around 15 metric tons of sugar annually, which was almost equal to the earliest coastal settlements in Brazil. However, with the colonisation and conversion of new land inland, and along the coast, the mills in Brazil, by 1570s were producing about 30 to 130 metric tons of sugar annually, depending on the location. By 1600s, the average production from an ordinary mill had reached up to 130 metric tons annually.

The Portuguese plantations also profited from the old connections between Antwerp and Madeira. As plantations began to grow and the possibilities of profitability increased, many of the early plantations began to be financed by Flemish capitalists stationed in Antwerp. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the capital inflow took care of the large investment coasts required to setup large scale plantations and big mills, as well as the coast of slave import, which usually accounted for about 20% of capital cost, beyond the investment in land itself.

By 1600, the economic structure which emerged along the Brazilian coast, under the aegis and management of Portuguese state and Flemish financiers, became highly specialised – centring on a single crop and dependent on slave labour. Some of the labour was still Amerindians, while many were African slaves, who were brought to work on these plantations as labourers.

6.12 EARLY PLANTATION SOCIETY IN BRAZIL

The planters owned the land in Brazilian settlements, along with the tools of extraction - sugar mill. The production was planned in a manner so as to maximise profit. However, over the period of 17^{th} century, the plantations themselves came to constitute a small social setup – consisting about 100 to 300 people, with even more as the centuries went by. The scattered nature of settlements along a vast Brazilian countryside, also made it difficult to structure any rudimentary political control structure. In absence of any supra-state structure, the managers on plantations took upon political and administrative roles, so as to maintain harmony and structure in nascent social groupings of 'plantations societies.' Similar rights were also claimed by cane farmers, who worked on their fields with slaves, and sold cane to mill owners and managers.

Most of the people living and working on any sugar estate or *fazenda* were legally under the ownership and legal control of the owner – *fazendario*. Ownership carried within the right to punish slaves. The estates were squally self-sufficient and the lack of political control by royal agents, made it possible for many to engage in Amerindian slavery, even though the practice has been declared illegal. Within a few decade a new social hierarchy emerged which in titles and names sounded similar to the titles and positions of lords back home, however, these were more in tune with the hierarchy and position within the plantations and in region. The individual owner or master may be under debt to the mercantile and banking communities of Antwerp, however in the plantations, he was the owner and head of the community. Within owners also – sugar mill owners had higher status than cane farmers.

The ownership over land or production structures also enabled an absolute ownership over the body and person of the slave as well as his produce. However, with the passage of time, the heirs of the original settler and owner, no longer came to command the same control and ownership over the settlement and settlers. Overtime certain customary relationships evolved which limited the absolute exercise of power and control by the descendants of the original owners. Social pressures acted as a strong limitations on absolute exercise of authority. Similarly, economic compulsion limited the scope of large scale shift or change in production patterns and structures of the plantations. By the beginning of the 17^{th} century, the Brazilian plantations owners had come to be bound and conditioned to a large extent by the social-economic limitations, much like the manor lords of the early period in Europe.

The urban growth in Brazil, also to a certain degree followed on the pattern of governance and management as brought down by the experiences in Europe. The Urban-centred local government changed in Brazil. Except for major commercial and urban centres as important ports. Most of the towns and cities were small settlements which were dominated by elites who lived in their fazendas. The key municipal institution was council or *senado da camara*. It was not an elected body but chosen in manner to represent 'good men' of the vicinity. In northeastern Brazil in the sixteenth century, this meant, the sugar planters, where as the merchants and other artisanal communities were excluded.

The *sanados da camara*made it possible for the rural elite to dominate the towns. Many of the representatives had their agents back home in Lisbon, to work for their interest at the court. A crown official in Brazil thus faced entrenched local privileges. The *Sanados* over time also extended their influence over functioning and maintenance of local police and militia. Thus over the course of two centuries, from mid 16th to the mid 18th century, the early capitalist farming and ventures gave way to plantations societies deeply hierarchies and with entrenched privileges and control functions.

6.13 THE AMERICAS

With the voyages of Columbus, the Spanish court began to realise the importance and possibilities in Atlantic, although this was not an immediate development. The Spanish court granted Columbus and his family complete control over the territories they conquered in name of the Spanish crown. In 1593, Spain established *casa de Contratación*, or house of trade, much like the *Casa de India* in Lisbon. The original intent was to carry out trade in name of the Spanish crown in Atlantic and American world. However, the colonies showed little immediate value, and casa evolved into a regulatory agency. Spain dropped out of the trading post business until a small opening occurred in Philippines a few decades later. Instead of attracting merchants, the Spanish America/Caribbean attracted adventurers and freelancers who organised themselves in war bands to capture and loot as much as they could.

6.14 THE WEST INDIES

Unlike most of the Americas, the Caribbean islands were comparatively more densely populated. The three large islands of Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico were inhabited by the Arawak – an indigenous agrarian group which were socially organised in hierarchy and had an indigenous belief system. Cuba was also inhabited partly by the Arawak. Although not as advanced as the great civilisations of Mexico and Peru, they were still the most technically advanced group in the region, prior to European arrival.

The Spanish established their base at Hispaniola, where they also found some gold, and from there, they began to move into the nearby islands. Digging ore and panning gold from the tread beds took more labour than Hispaniola could provide. Labour from nearby islands were imported as slaves, however as the Arawak population began to dwindle in face of diseases and epidemics caused by European and African introduced pathogens, the need for slave import began to arise. Moreover the near Amerindian groups had already converted to Christianity and hence could longer be legally converted to slaves. As a result the search for slaves began to expand more and more inland on islands and mainland. By the end of the 16th century, virtually all the Indians of the tropical lowlands were dead, except the Caribs, who had a war like disposition and were able to resist European advance for some time, which enabled them to develop resistance against the diseases and pathogens.

6.15 THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY 'SUGAR REVOLUTION'

The beginning of the seventeenth century in the Caribbean led to the introduction of whole scale plantation complex along with the technological knowhow and African slaves. The sugar plantations continued to move eastwards converting more and more land into a new system of land management and usage. These new structures of plantations although replicated much from the Brazilian plantations, however in crucial manners were an advance on earlier structures. These plantations were far more dependent upon the networks of maritime, intercontinental communications and were the beginnings of the slave labour-based plantation endeavours in North Atlantic world. These plantations in Caribbean also were the steppingstone for introduction of large-scale sugar plantations in North American mainland.

The geographical and climatic conditions in Caribbean islands provided perfect conditions for success of sugarcane plantations. Most of the best land for sugarcane cultivation was near coast, which enabled barrels of sugar to be rolled on to beaches and transported on lighter boats. The discovery of trade winds and advances in sailing technology and techniques in the seventeenth century, along with the rapid advances in ship building, enabled a much quicker transport of these sugar barrels from West Indies to the European markets as Antwerp and Liverpool. High and localised rainfall in islands as Jamaica, also enabled plantations without much investment in irrigation facilities. Keeping these advantages in mind, the earliest settlements to emerge were on the Eastern most of the Caribbean islands – St. Kitts, Nevis, Guadeloupe and Martinique. Antigua and Barbados also saw sugar plantations evolve, although Antigua experienced infrequent rainfall whereas Barbados had excelled soil conditions due to its volcanic nature. Hispaniola and Jamaica were developed in the second stage of expansion and Cuba yielded the best results once the problems of transportation were met and resolved.

The islands emerged as focal spaces of contestations between the European powers in the first half of the seventeenth century. Portuguese and Spanish control came to be challenged you the rising power of the English, French and the Dutch. The religious conflict in Europe and the Thirty years war, spilled overseas, with English and French navies clashing with Spanish armadas in Atlantic waters towards the end of the 16th century. With the defeat of the Spanish Armada off the coast of Gibraltar, the English and Dutch came to dominate the Atlantic exchange and wasn't about establishing colonies to counter the Spanish influence in Caribbean and in Mexico and South America. Colonies and oats were stablished to bridge the strategic gaps and for better control of Atlantic sea lanes, much on the lines of the fortified settlements in the Indian ocean region. Many of these posts also served as insertion points for illegal trade into Spanish Territories and with the Amerindians.

Some or all of the above enumerated objectives were in mind when the settlement at Barbados was planned. It was intended to be a true colony, inhabited by a plantation force from Europe – partly to grow tobacco as a cash crop and partly to be used as an English base for smuggling into the Spanish Empire. The initial settlement grew slowly in size from about its settlement in 1627 to about 1635. By the second half of the 1630s the inflow of immigrants from the mainland grew, and by 1640s population was roughly the same size as that of Virginia or Massachusetts.

French objectives were similar to those of the English, with the initial intent to smuggle into Spanish Empire and engage in barter trade with the Caribs of the Lesser Antilles. Their first settlement was on Saint Christopher (later St. Kitts), which they shared for the time being with the English company. However, the real expansion began with the establishment of the American Island Company. Like many of the contemporary commercial enterprises, the company mixed elements of commerce with the exercise of governmental power. The French crown granted the company, jurisdiction over any island the company might occupy between Trinidad in South and central Florida in north. The stockholders received monopoly over the trade and right to take over land. To meet the end, about 4000 Catholics were intended to be settled in French colonies in America's over the period of first twenty years of the 17th century.

6.16 THE ECONOMICS OF SUGAR

The change from settlement to plantation took place because of number of reasons: principal amongst these was the economic nature of sugar as a commodity. Right up to the late 19th century, sugar had a very high price elasticity of demand, i.e. as the price decreased, people were willing to pay more and more for the commodity. The European market in the period with every shift towards greater efficiency of production, rough management and changes in technology of production and transportation, led to even greater demand of the commodity. His as the prices lowered due to greater availability of sugar in market, the demand went on increasing, much like an insatiable appetite for sugar in the European markets.

One of the principal factors was the greater efficiency in oceanic transportation in the seventeenth century, achieved by the Dutch pioneers. Cargoes with high ratio of bulk could now be carried over longer oceanic voyages efficiently. These improvements applied specifically to the coast of bringing slaves from Africa to the new world. Cheaper freight rates also made possible a greater division of labour in sugar production. By the middle of the seventeenth century, islands where favourable conditions for sugar plantation existed, they could now concentrate only on a single crop, whereas food could be imported from outside and mainland Americas and Brazil.

A second fundamental condition which emerged only gradually was the epidemiological difference between the Europeans and Africans in West Indies. Both French and English colonial planners in the seventeenth century intended

Caribbean islands to be settled by Europeans only and took for granted that the large majority of European settlers would be 'servants', i.e. those who enter into a contractual engagement with the planners to settle in new world and work for some years, before gaining access to resources on their own violations. The possibility of using African slaves was rarely conceived and though about when the ventures were being conceptualised. However, rumours based on Portuguese and Spanish experiences in Brazil had already spear the words that the Africans could work better in tropics than the Europeans. The belief drew from the observation, that though newly arrived Europeans and Africans boy died in great numbers in Americas, however the death rate amongst the Europeans was considerably higher, as Africans had developed childhood immunities to some of the deadly tropical diseases, especially yellow fever and malaria. In fact, the difference in death rate was about 4 times more for the newly arrived European than the Africans transported to islands as slaves. Also, the cost of service also went a long way to entrench slavery in Caribbean.

By the 1640s the Dutch after establishing a foothold in Brazil, introduced technology of sugar to French and British islands in the Caribbean – first in Barbados. The Dutch primarily acted as suppliers of equipment and slaves to the islanders, in return for crops. In some cases, they also offered to setup and manage sugar estates. However, one needs to differentiate between Dutch planters in Brazil, who held the region of North-eastern Brazil under the aegis of the Dutch a West Indian Company, until 1645, and Pernambuco until 1654, and the Dutch interlopers who wanted to derive profit from the trade, even if it meant infringing upon the legal monopoly of the Dutch company in African trade.

Check Your Progress 2

1) What were the differences between the early slave labour and the later slave labour for the plantations?

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2) Why were the plantations located so far from the mainland Europe?

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3) What is the significance of the shift of the plantations to the Americas?

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6.17 LET US SUM UP

From its early inception in the early 12th century in a relatively known Mediterranean environment, plantations as a system of management and commercial cropping underwent large scale transformation over the centuries to emerge as the backbone of the colonial investments by the European countries in the Americas. Crops such as Sugar cane, tobacco, indigo, rice came to be grown on a large scale and transported to Europe to augment the limited agricultural possibilities in Europe itself. The race for colonies and struggle to control the exchange networks laid the foundations of modern exchange commercial mercantile economies, which formed the basis of the emergence of the capitalist-industrial complex in the 19th and the 20th centuries.

Much of this commercial success was not easy to achieve and was only acquired by investing heavily into an alternate supply of labour force, which came to be forcefully acquired from the African coastal region and transported on large scale in inhuman conditions across the Atlantic. The settlement of plantation societies and their gradual transformation into slave colonies is the story of colonisation of Americas and the Africa over the course of the 17th to the 19th century. It was only after the American war of independence and the French Revolution in the late 18th century, that there was a definite shift in attitude towards slavery, and the use of unhindered slave labour in the American colonies, that the slave trade was finally abandoned.

6.18 KEYWORDS

Plantations: Large scale agro management structures basically large farms run on huge investments in agricultural technology and labour for producing cash crops for commercial trading.

Slaves: Africans were not always desired as slaves in the European economic world. In fact, the word 'slave' has its root in 'Slav', which literally speaks of a person of Eastern European and Baltic descent. Throughout the course of the Roman empire, slaves were primarily procured from Eastern regions and from amongst the northern Germanic tribes. Its only after the closure of the eastern route after the Ottoman conquest, as discussed before, that the African slaves began to be sought for manual farm labour in European markets.

6.19 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) See Section 5.2
2) See Sub-section 5.2.1

Check Your Progress 2

1) See Section 5.8 and 5.10
2) See Sub-section 5.5.1 and Section 5.16
3) See Section 5.13

6.20 SUGGESTED READINGS

Burnard, Trevor G. *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650 - 1820*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

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