
UNIT 15 THE BEGINNINGS OF INDENTURED LABOUR

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Understand how the beginnings of indentured labour was a direct consequence of the territorial expansion of the British empire and foundation of its economic interests
- Understand how the establishment of the indentured labour system came about with the abolition of slave labour in the British colonies stimulating the demand for labour
- Understand some aspects of recruitment and transportation of the indentured labour to the colonial plantations
- Understand some aspects of their life and work on the plantations and the plantation economies

15.1 INTRODUCTION

The beginnings of the indentured system of labour can be traced back to the period in which the British empire was expanding and consolidating its territories and settlements. In this period in ie the the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century the British mercantile and commercial interests established large plantations of commercial crops such as sugar in the island colonies of Mauritius, West Indies and Surinam etc. The early plantation economies were mostly worked upon by slave labour brought from African slave trade. However with the growth of slave abolition movements in Britain in the early nineteenth century the British government was forced to abolish slave labour. But the plantation economies continued to demand labour. According to the then current wisdom developing under the industrial revolution this labour had to be free or contract labour. But given the overall colonial conditions prevailing it turned out that this labour which was sought to be supplied from the older colonies like

India it could be anything but free. The British turned to recruit labour mainly from the economic crisis ridden tracts of Eastern India (mainly today's Bihar and U.P.) or to certain tracts of the Madras and Bombay Presidency. It must be at the outset be clarified that the indenture system in the Assam tea plantations, Sri Lanka or some parts of Africa like Kenya is not being discussed here as it began at a later date i.e. after 1860s. And as Rana Behal points out that the Assam tea plantations did not have a background of slave labour.

15.2 TRANSITION FROM SLAVERY

The plantation economies of Mauritius etc. relied extensively on slave labour in the early period. In Mauritius as Richard Grove points out the early planters were given land or concessions so as to build their plantations. Gradually a social, economic and legal system was built up to maintain and develop the sugar colony. The slave labour was kept in control by this complex system. Any attempt to deviate from the requirements of labour was met with a swift attack. The slaves resorting to escape this system were declared marrons or absconders and quickly rounded up and subjected to severe beatings by a whip called cat'o nine tails. In many cases they were subjected to long sentences in prisons where many of them perished. Thus practices of ill treatment of the labour were established which became a part of the legacy of these plantation colonies.

Subsequently with the growth of abolitionist movements in Britain and elsewhere the system of slave labour was abolished by 1833. Then after that there was an attempt to retain the slave labour by an apprentice system in the West Indies and Mauritius. The erstwhile slaves were brought back as apprentice workers in the plantations to fulfil the ever growing demand of labour by the plantations. The end of slavery had a rather severe impact on the plantation dominated economies; especially with the reluctance of the former slaves to work at the wages offered by the planters. Interim measures were tried in terms of this 'apprenticeship' system which allowed cultivation to continue by having former slaves to work as apprentices. The scheme was basically a forced apprenticeship of four to six years for the former slaves above age six and a half. It was actually a form of compensation to the planters, mandating the emancipated slaves to provide 40V2 hours a week of unpaid labour to their former masters over the six years of apprenticeship following emancipation. It was also expected that by this the freed persons would be familiarised to become wage labour since the apprentices were supposed to be paid for any extra labour. But, in effect many planters used the apprenticeship laws to exploit as much unpaid labour as possible and simultaneously reducing some customary distributions of food and clothing to the prevailing plantation workers, thus turning 'apprenticeship' into 'little more than a mitigated form of slavery'. The reluctance of ex-slaves to continue forced the West Indian legislatures finally to terminate apprenticeship in 1838, earlier than was initially planned. This finally brought the complete emancipation of former slaves on 1 August 1838 in the British West Indies and nine months later in Mauritius.

These were early attempts to foster a move towards wage labour in the plantation colonies. But it soon became clear that the slave labour could not be thus retained so then moves began to explore fresh sources of labour in the British empire. The plantation owners turned to the British government for this purpose. The British government then initiated the moves to recruit and hire labour from the Asian colonies. It was thus that in 1834 the first batch of labour from Eastern India called the dhangurs were moved to Mauritius for work in the plantations. Before that the British also experimented with moving convict labour to Mauritius for building infrastructure in the colony of Mauritius.

However the demands of the time were to hire wage labour. For this the indentured system was devised as a form of contract labour who would sign the contract for a period of five years to serve in the plantation colonies. Attempts were also made to recruit Chinese labour as Brij Lal tells us. The Chinese workers were considered as:

‘ well made, robust, and active, inured to field labour, and able to work during the heat of the day, in fact, they are equal to our best Creole field labourers; they are eager for gain, and will do anything for money; they are quiet and very intelligent for their class, and not lazy. They value money, and are shrewd; and I do think no class of men can be better adapted to our wants than they are.’ (Colonial Report)

But the Chinese were considered to be unfit for long term labour on plantations as with the first opportunity they would move out of the plantations for making money out of trade and allied activities.

As Brij V. Lal points out ‘these failures focused attention on India as a reliable and enduring source of labour. In the nineteenth century, India remained the principal source of labour supply to the sugar colonies of the British Empire. An important attribute of the Indian indenture was that it was state regulated, not privately contracted. It was conducted on the basis of a written and supposedly voluntarily accepted contract or ‘agreement’ (dubbed *girit* in Fiji), which the emigrants signed (or, more commonly, affixed their thumbprints to) before leaving India. In the early years of indentured emigration, the terms and conditions were not uniform; indeed, they varied widely in content and application. But by the 1870s, a more or less uniform document was in place for all the indentured labour-recruiting colonies. The contract stipulated, among other things, the nature and conditions of employment (dealing principally with work related to the manufacture of sugar cane), remuneration for labour on the plantations, entitlement to medical and housing facilities and, above all, the availability of a return passage to India after a period of ‘industrial residence’ in the colonies, usually 10 years after the date of arrival. There can be little doubt that the majority of the emigrants intended their excursion out of India to be a brief sojourn, a temporary expedient to cope with their fluctuating economic fortune at home. Many did return: up to 1870, 21 per cent of the emigrants had returned, and in the decade after 1910, one emigrant returned for every two who had embarked for the colonies.”

Lord Salisbury the Colonial Secretary of State in fact saw the recruitment of indentured labour from India as a humanist enterprise and stated:

“ While, then, from an Indian point of view, emigration, properly regulated, and accompanied by sufficient assurance of profitable employment and fair treatment, seems a thing to be encouraged on grounds of humanity, with a view to promote the well-being of the poorer classes; we may also consider, from an imperial point of view, the great advantage which must result from peopling the warmer British possessions which are rich in natural resources and only want population, by an intelligent and industrious race to whom the climate of these countries is well suited, and to whom the culture of the staples suited to the soil, and the modes of labour and settlement, are adapted. “

Indeed it was thus the system of indentured labour was sought to be rationalized. The unfreedom which occurred in the working out of this system (see below) too was rationalized away. It was the overall goal of attaining free trade and a perceived free movement of people that was used to rationalize the recruitment and deployment of the indentured labour.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What was the ‘apprentice system’? Discuss.

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2. Comment on the nature of the contract signed by the indentured labour.

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15.3 THE RECRUITMENT AND TRANSPORTATION OF THE INDENTURED LABOUR

As was required by the emerging demands about wage labour the process of recruitment and transportation of the indentured labour was subjected to an elaborate process of creating records of the details of the labour so recruited and sent on ships from India to the distant plantation colonies. The recruitment system

had an ensemble of emigration agents and local recruiters in small towns and villages of Eastern India, Western India and Southern India. The local recruiters also relied on the group leaders of laboring men called sirdars who offered to facilitate the recruiters and the emigration agent as described by Marina Carter in her work ‘‘Sirdars Servants and Coolies’’. Besides the labour which turned up at the Emigration Depot looking for work was also recruited. We also have accounts of fraudulent recruiting where labour was beguiled in to emigrating to the plantation colonies. It was reports such as these which initiated the arguments about unfree labour in the context of the plantation colonies. Initially the labour which went to these colonies migrated as single person labour. As Marina Carter pointed out in the case of Mauritius the migration of families begins only by 1870s. Recent research has criticized Grierson’s view that only the lower castes migrated to the plantation colonies. As Brij Lal points out ‘from the data on the indentured migrants from Fiji, it can safely be assumed that the pattern for Fiji obtained in other sugar colonies as well. Of Fiji’s 45,000 North Indian migrants, Brahman and allied castes numbered 1,686; Kshatriya and allied castes 4,565; Bania 1,592; middling agricultural and artisan castes (Kurmi, Ahir, Jat, Lodha) 15,800; menial and low castes (Chamar, Pasi, Dusadh) 11,907; and Muslims 6,787.²⁸ In other words, the emigrating indentured population represented a fair cross-section of rural Indian society. And this is not surprising, for it was the cultivating castes, without social or institutional protection, that bore the brunt of the deteriorating economic situation in the country in the late nineteenth century: increases in land rent, often demanded in cash rather than kind, increasing fragmentation of ownership rights and subdivision of property, which particularly affected the lower-order cultivators, while the widespread decline in the handicraft industry in UP was ruinous to the artisan class. To many in distress and despair, migration offered a way out. Prolonged absence was not contemplated, but in time an intended sojourn was transformed into permanent separation.’’

It has been pointed out in recent researches that single women too migrated in large numbers. Often the practice was to contract depot marriages and separate after reaching their destinations. Indenture was seen as some kind of liberation from the oppressive economic and patriarchal conditions by these women as recent feminist writings point out. However the Mauritian records point to immense tensions in the Indian communities in Mauritius. Police records of the 1880s evidence large numbers of murders of women in the Indian communities which the Mauritian police called ‘wife murders’.

The journey undertaken by the newly recruited indentured labour in the ships to the plantation colonies was another defining factor in the movement of this labour to the plantation colonies. A prescribed diet as detailed in the Protector of Emigrant’s reports points to the tough conditions of travel. The travel itself was arduous lasting months and with little medical or health support. Many migrants died in the voyage itself. On the other hand lasting bonds were formed during the course of the journey between the migrants who often called each other ‘jehaji

bhai' or ship brothers as Richard Allen points out and helped them to generate an extensive network of friends and we

ll wishers in the difficult days to be spent on the plantation colonies.

The British government on its part undertook an extensive documentation of the emigrants leaving the shores of India. The National Archives in India and the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius for example have a large collection of registers called the ship registers. In this register there are detailed records of each migrant coming on particular ships. These details include the names of the emigrant, age, district and village of origin. In fact these records are still used by the current descendants of the migrants to trace their roots back to India. Besides these registers there are marriage registers in these archives in Mauritius which detail the court marriages contracted by these migrants while in Mauritius. These records were all compiled under various laws and regulations passed by the British government. IM Cumpston puts the number of Indian immigrants to the different colonies of Britain on the basis of these records as follows:

Indians in British Colonial Territories- 1870: Mauritius - 351,401 British Guiana - 79,691 Trinidad- 42,519 Jamaica - 15,169 Other W.I. islands -7,021 Natal(South Africa)- 6,448 (IM Cumpston, A Survey of Indian Immigration to British Tropical Colonies to 1910, Population Studies, 1956)

15.4 WORK AND LIFE ON THE PLANTATIONS

Upon arrival in the plantation colonies the workers were allotted to different estates both singly and in groups. Here they were subjected to a brutal regime of work. The work of the labour was either time work or task work. The schedule was grueling. After being woken up at 5.00AM in the morning and after a hurried breakfast they were off to the fields till 4.00PM. The work varied according to the stage of the sugarcane crop production. In the initial stage they would be planting the young plants and later looking after the irrigation etc. and then later the work of harvesting. As Bisondoyal puts it most of the work involved 'ploughing, hoeing, weeding, harvesting and planting cane.' Brij Lal points out that the newly arrived workers would be given time work and then details 'The labourers were promised that they would do either 'time work' or 'task work'. The new arrivals were usually allotted time work but as they became accustomed to the working conditions on the plantations, they were assigned task work—a task being defined as six hours of continuous work that an able-bodied man could be expected to accomplish. In Trinidad, by 1913, almost 90 per cent of the work was by task. In most cases, it was the overseer who decided what task was appropriate. Sometimes, tasks were defined on the basis of what a few chosen men could accomplish. And the task could be varied. If a worker accomplished his work in good time, he could return the next day to find his task extended. Sometimes, the standard from one plantation could be applied to another without considering the topography of the fields. And sometimes the workers would be paid nothing at all for a partially completed task.'

While on plantations the workers were governed by a strict and brutal regime of regulations for work. There were strict penalties for different offences. The labour ordinances provided a very large number of offences for which the employers could punish their labourers. In Trinidad between 1910 and 1912, the most important offences included desertion (1,668); absence from work without a lawful excuse (1,466); refusing to begin or finish work (1,125); and vagrancy (983).³⁶ Other offences included malingering, using threatening words and breach of hospital regulations. In Fiji, the employers were able to obtain prosecutions for 82 per cent of all the cases that they brought before the courts. Indentured labourers were also punished for not registering their marriages, when they had no idea about such a process. , Most of their marriages were carried out according to Hindu and Muslim rituals. And the labourers knew that they could have a week's pay cut or face a month in prison if they spread waste within 60 yards of a stream running through a plantation. Indentured labourers convicted of violating the labour ordinance could either be fined or imprisoned. The planters could legally recover lost work by extending the contract by the number of days they were absent from the plantations.

Besides the indentured labour on the plantations were also subjected to practices of their employers carried over from the days of slave labour. Often they were subject to beatings and whipping for their perceived lack of work. Moreover as Marina Carter points out even the laws curtailing their movement were executed in ways which were a throwback to the days of slavery. The most famous of these were the anti-vagrancy laws and ordinances passed in Mauritius. These laws and ordinances were passed to prevent the labourers moving from one plantation to the other or for taking up trades of hawkers or vegetable sellers to supplement their meager incomes. The institutional mechanisms of courts and the police carried in to effect these laws in the way the slaves were treated in the early era. The police organized vagrant hunts in the manner of absconding slave (marron) hunts to track down the labour which absconded from work or the plantations. The most affected were the time expired immigrants whose contract for work on the plantations was over and they were either waiting to reengage or settle in nearby villages or waiting to go back to India.

So severe was the implementation of these anti vagrancy laws was that even a plantation owner in Mauritius (De Plevitz) was moved to draft a petition for these immigrants to the government for appealing against these laws. Following is a description of the petition and some of the testimonies from this petition:

“The Indian Immigrants were helpless before the harshness of the Labour Law of 1867 and the Ordinance and Regulations of 11th Nov 1868. They could expect no mercy from the police. Rarely, if ever, they had justice at the hands of the local magistrates. They had many grievances to complain of but to whom to do so? They were not conversant with English and French and must have had a very poor command of Creole. Worst of all they were in an alien land where the people from whom they might expect justice were the most interested in making them the victims of their grabbing selfishness.

Fortunately for them they found De Plevitz taking interest in their cause not because he had anything to gain from this but because he was imbued with feelings of humanity among inhuman employers. As soon as they came to know that he sympathised with them, the Indians began to come to him with the stories of the atrocities perpetrated on them. At last they had found a man who could guide them to formulate their grievances. At the request of these Indians, De Plevitz, as he himself said later, drew up the petition which was translated into Tamil and the Nagri dialects. Copies of these translations were circulated throughout the island through agents who undertook the task, not for lucre, but convinced of the noble nature of their sacrifice. De Plevitz also went about the island accompanied by an Indian boy who explained the contents of the petition to those Indians who showed interest in it.

In spite of everything done to discourage De Plevitz, the petition was signed by nearly 10,000 a fact which in itself shows the utter despair in which the Indians found themselves. The value of the petition lies in the fact that apart from the complaints of a general nature made by the Indians against the police, the local magistrates and the Protector of Immigrants, De Plevitz had taken care to append to it individual cases in which the petitioner gave a detailed account of his being victimised on some occasion lately. To give an idea of these cases, we think it relevant to mention the following two cases:

(I) Suroop, Old Immigrant, No 18 682, gardener at Mr Bouquet's estate, Nouvelle Decouverte

In the month of January 1871, I was informed that my friend Lalchurn at Poudre D'or, was very ill – accordingly I started to go and see him. I was near Mr De Chazal's estate, when I met a Sergeant of Police, who arrested me, locked me for the night, and brought me next day before the magistrate at Poudre d'Or. I showed my ticket and police pass to the magistrate, but the pass being for the district of Pamplémousses, I was condemned as a vagabond to one month's imprisonment with hard labour.

(sgnd. Suroop)

(2) Rajchunder, Old Immigrant No 138,928

In December 1865 I went in the Depot to have my photograph taken. I had to go on five successive days, and was each day turned out with violence. There were peons there with rattans, who struck me with them and turned me out; I remonstrated against this. I had to travel 100 miles backwards and forward, and pay 4s before I could obtain the photograph.

(sgnd. Rajchunder)

The Chamber of Agriculture watched with indignation every move of De Plevitz. The president of that body Dr Icery, wrote to the Governor that a monster meeting had been held at Montagne Longue, which De Plevitz had presided. In fact it was not a meeting at all. What was imputed as such was only the

considerable number of Indians who came at a shed or 'hangar' adjoining Mr De Plevitz's house and whose grievances were taken down in writing either by Plevitz himself or one of his assistants. The Chamber of Agriculture was not always impartial.

Commenting on the clamour of Dr lcery for the application of the rigour of the law against De Plevitz, the Royal Commissioners of 1872 bring out that 25 years earlier a president of the Chamber of Agriculture, Mr Currie, denounced the application of the same law when Governor Sir William Gomm attempted to restrict some of the meetings and proceedings of the Merchants' and Planters' Association.

On the occasion Mr Currie wrote: "You will not fail to mark the extreme illiberality of that law and its flagrant opposition to the spirit of British legislation..."

"But however illiberal that law may be, and inconsistent with British freedom, Sir William Gomm's interpretation of it goes still deeper into arbitrary rule, and aims at the total prohibition of anything like associations. Indeed, His Excellency is evidently desirous of extinguishing in this colony every means of collective representation on the measures of the local government." "(From Glimpses from Mauritian History)

This account shows the pathetic conditions prevailing in the 19th century Mauritius. Freedom of movement and freedom of association were both curtailed by these draconian laws and ordinances. In spite of these constraints however the lives of the indentured labour were seen by some scholars as constituting both constraining and liberating experiences. The old hierarchies of caste and religion had dissolved to a certain extent but the new ways of a freer life were gradually emerging. As Brij Lal puts it:

"It was simultaneously an enslaving as well as a liberating experience for many. There were many in the indentured population whose birth had confined them to the lower stratum of Indian society, a fate ordained by divine injunction, it was said, from which there was no escape in this life or the next. To them, migration and indenture offered the possibility of realising their individual humanity. Everywhere they grabbed the opportunity with relish. Indenture was a crucible in which was forged a new society. Old notions of purity and impurity, taboos regarding food, diet, social space, the rituals of prayer and worship collapsed over time to be replaced by new norms and conventions. Caste, as a social institution, became anachronistic; its protocols of approved behaviour unenforceable. Remuneration during indenture was based on the amount of work accomplished, not on social status. The paucity of women necessitated marriages across caste and sometimes religious lines. Everywhere, people continued to 'play' at caste long after indenture had ceased, but its relevance and legitimacy were gone. Fragmentation was accompanied by the process of reconstitution."

The changes in the lives of the indentured labor occurred also when they moved out of the plantations to settle in the nearby villages after the expiry of their indenture. As their number increased new settlements arose where the immigrants combined their old ways of life brought from home and the new experiences they had gathered while working in the plantation economies. The sugar economies they were working in also went through periods of turmoil in the second half of the 19th century. Consequently the plantation owners started selling portions of their lands. Some of these lands were bought by the time expired indentured labour since the 1850s. This process initially called petit morcellement (or small parceling of lands by plantation owners) in Mauritius expanded in to a process of grand morcellement (or large scale parceling of lands by the plantation owners). Subsequently by the late nineteenth century we see the emergence of the Indians as small scale plantation owners who supplied raw sugarcane to the plantation sugarmills. In the process they became stakeholders in the sugar economy as planters rather than wage labourers. This initiated a process of social, economic and political change in the plantation economies where the Indians came to dominate all aspects of life in these plantation colonies.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Did only lower caste migrants go to the plantation colonies? Discuss.

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2. Comment on the nature of plantation work done by the indentured immigrants.

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15.5 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit you saw how the beginnings of the indentured labour system made a transition from slavery. The pressures to abolish slavery in Britain made the colonial administrators and the plantation owners look for a system of free labour. But the rigidities of contract and the legacy of slavery led to what Hugh Tinker called 'a new system of slavery'. The recruitment processes and the treatment of the migrant indentured labour in fact created another system of unfree labour which was still justified as better than slavery by the notions of freedom and free labour upheld by the economists and administrators of that time.

15.6 KEYWORDS

Abolitionist movements: movements to abolish slavery in the British colonies in Britain.

Free trade: the notion under capitalism which advocated free movement and exchange of goods, services and manpower across countries to facilitate the growth of capitalism. But as various historians have shown the colonial context invariably led to regulations and fetters which did not allow the actual free trade to happen

Morcellement: In Mauritius the portioning and selling off of estates in times of global financial crisis in the second half of the 19th century. These lands were mostly sold to Indians who by the late 19th century emerged as sugar growers in their own right.

15.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress1

1. See Section 15.2 for your answer.
2. See Section 15.2 for your answer.

Check Your Progress2

1. See Section 15.3 for your answer.
2. See Section 15.4 for your answer.

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