

# Indentured Labourers: Migration and Experience in Colonial India



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## Abstract

Migration has been an integral part of the experience of human specie since its very inception and has shaped and affected the history of many civilizations and empires in every epoch. It had emerged as a major issue, usually in a pejorative sense, creating fissures among the 'natives' and the 'immigrants' and feeling into chauvinist and regional politics. There is no country or region in the world today which is not fraught with such tensions. The pattern of migration in colonial period in India differs from the earlier periods as it had become individualistic or in smaller groups as opposed to the migration of whole communities and was the result of the forces of industrialisation and capitalist development. Indentured labour was a system of bonded labour that was instituted following the abolition of slavery. They were recruited to work on sugar, cotton, tea plantations etc. in British colonies and meant to receive wages and in some cases, promise of a return passage once their contract was over. But in reality, this seldom happened, and the conditions were harsh and their wages low.

**Keywords:** Migration, Indenture, Girmitiyas, Sirdar, Resistance.

## Introduction

In the Indian context, traditionally migration has been looked at from a perspective of capitalist development creating a class of landless proletariat who then migrate to urban industrial centres and become a part of the industrial working class. The colonial policies have been looked upon as transformative force which disintegrated the traditional village structure and impoverished and proletarianized a large portion of the peasantry. Implicit in this view is the assumption that these labourers were freed from 'feudal' tied as they became wage labourers. But the colonialism, rather than transforming the feudal relations often strengthened them and even the so-called capitalist development did not follow the classical model of European capitalist development.

## Objectives of the study

1. To study the historical background of indentured colonial migration.
2. To identify the causes of migration and indentured labour in colonial period.
3. To explore the nature of indentured labour migration in colonial period.
4. To discuss the problems faced by indentured labourers during British rule.
5. To investigate the overall experience and life of indentured labourers in British colonies.

## Migration of Labourers

Colonial migration, which produced the colonial working class was a new and specific phenomenon unlike the earlier movements of populations in pre-colonial or feudal societies. It is noticeable in this context that from mid-nineteenth century onwards, apart from migration to the newly emerging capitalist enterprises and plantations within India, overseas migration to various other British colonies also took place in a large scale. This was popularly known as the indenture system and was started to meet the shortage of labour supply caused by the abolition of slavery in the British empire in 1833. Colonial governments in the Caribbean, the India Ocean, Africa and the Pacific turned to India after other sources of cheap labour supply had failed or were insufficient. Mauritius in 1834 was the first colony to import Indian indentured labour, followed by British Guiana in 1838, Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845, west Indian colonies in 1850, Natal in 1860 and Fiji in 1879. During the eighty-two years of indentured emigration, over one million Indians were introduced into these colonies.

These indentured migrants left home on a contract whose precise terms varied between colonies and over time. But all stipulated the nature and conditions of employment on the plantations, remuneration for work, and an optional free return passage to India after a specified period, usually ten years, of 'industrial residence' in the colonies. In popular usage, these migrants were called *girmityas*, a grotesque form of the term 'agreement' (*agreement-girmit-girmitya*). Most of the migrants had probably intended this excursion as a brief sojourn, a temporary expedient to cope with some personal misfortune or economic hardship. Regarding this some have labelled it as a new system of slavery, the only difference being that indenture was temporary situation while slavery was lifelong bondage. However, indenture was slavery or not is ultimately unresolvable question, a matter of perspective. The tension between agency and structure will remain. What need to be explored are questions relating to the social origins of the migrants, their motivations and thoughts and feelings about their predicament and how the indenture experience led to the creation of a new kind of society in overseas Indian community.

#### **Experience of Indentured Labourers**

The bulk of the Indian indentured migrants to Fiji and Caribbean and to a lesser extent Natal and Mauritius, came from the Indo-Gangetic plains of North India, initially from Bihar and U.P. The migrants came from a world caught in ferment created by the British revenue settlements. One manifestation of this upheaval was the increased rate of internal migration in India, accentuated by the availability of accessible transport and the possibility of jobs in the labour-intensive enterprises in eastern India, such as tea plantations in Assam, jute mills in Calcutta etc. Indian indentured recruits came from this 'uprooted, fragmented mass of humanity on the move.' In the case of Fiji, most of the migrants had already left their villages before being recruited.

The conditions of indenture since the very beginning of the journey served to dissolve the various caste ties and identities. Customary, and culturally sanctioned space between different castes and food taboos broke down. Enforced interaction rather than separation became the norm. But there was another development amidst all the deracination. The shared ordeal of the long ship journey forged a new identity and fostered new kind of relationships among the emigrants. The men travelling on the same ship became shipmates, *jahajibhais*, a fraternal relationship that provided an important basis of social interaction, economic cooperation and emotional support. The bonds of caste and kinship shaken in the depots and on the voyage were replaced by other wider social bonds based on social and personal needs and a shared sense of servitude.

The agreement which the indentured migrants entered into in India outlined the terms and conditions of their employment in the colonies. In practice, though, things turned out to be different. To start with, the indenture agreement was important as

much for what it omitted as for what it said. There were huge disparities between the promises and the practices of indentured. The most glaring example was the task system which meant that remuneration was to be according to the accomplishment of a given task. On paper this task was defined as the amount of work which an average, able-bodied worker could accomplish in six hours of steady work. But, in practice, tasks were set on the basis of what a few handpicked men could do and tasks could be increased if the worker accomplished it before time. The labourers of Fiji and Mauritius suffered these types of difficulties over the minimum statutory wage. The indenture agreement entitled men to one shilling per day and women nine pennies. But often citing such reasons such as laziness and ineffectiveness, the labourers were not given even this promised wage.

The labourers responded to such exploitative policies. There is broad agreement in the literature that when opportunity presented itself, labourers engaged in active resistance through strikes, petitions to the colonial government and violence against overseers. But such instances were few and, when strikes took place, they were short-lived. This can be partly explained by the authoritarian nature of the social relations of production of the plantation system itself and the fact that the planters had a powerful ally in government. The diverse social and cultural compositions of the indentured work force did not help. These difficulties were compounded by the indentured legislation which restricted the opportunity for collaboration amongst the migrants. The labourers suffered from the further disadvantage of little or no formal education in English which limited their ability to articulate their grievances to the colonial officialdom and the plantation management. The opportunities for resistance were further curtailed by the kind of leadership that developed on the plantation which revolved around the 'sirdar'. A sirdar was chosen for his loyalty to the planters and ability to enforce the plantation's edict.

However, the absence or relative paucity of active forms of resistance and did not mean that the labourers were docile. They simply chose other means of resistance. The alternative strategies adopted by the labourers were many, including malingering, wilful indolence, outright refusal to work, desertion, absence from work. But while fear, coercion and poor communication impeded collective action, some immigrants may have reconciled and even favoured a system that had given them some measure of security and certainly, among them the untouchables, the landless labourers, for all of whom strenuous labour was not a novelty. At least in the plantations, their individuality was recognized and effort rewarded for achievement rather than birth. As important as the disruptions indenture created, were the continuities it preserved in the migrants' cultural patterns. The bits and pieces which survived migration and indenture were knitted into a new pattern to suit the new environment. Religion played an important part in the maintenance of Indian culture

tradition. From very early on, the migrants seemed determined to preserve their religion to provide support and solidarity among themselves. In Fiji by the 1890s, most Indian settlements had the basic texts of popular Hinduism. These included Satyanarayan ki Katha; Sukh Saga; popular versions of Bhagvad Gita and most significant of all, Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas. Festivals such as Ramlila, Holi and Tazia, also fostered a sense of community. By the early years of twentieth century, formal Hindu organizations such as the Sanatan Dharma and the Arya Samaj were established. Also, the gulf between the Indian and the native communities that resulted from the culture, language and religion was exacerbated by the government policies. So, both choice and necessity forced the Indians in Fiji and elsewhere to fashion their identity from the fragments of their remembered past in the new surroundings in which they found themselves.

The process by which the 'myth of homeland' was produced and transported in the diaspora was marked by discontinuities and temporality. The image of India as a warm welcoming and charitable place was a powerful stimulus that survived tales of disappointment and hostile reception. For those who dreamt of return, this image provided a comforting contrast to their present state. There was, however, a clear distinction between the desire to return and actual decision to return. The general economic conditions in the colony were an important factor as also the individual success and failure of the migrant. Desire to return also coexisted with other impulses that drew the immigrants into social nexus that he or she inevitably built over a period of time.

#### **Conclusion**

Indentured experience was a varied and complex phenomenon, which cannot be explained within a simple theoretical framework. The emigrants came from varied social backgrounds, had different motivations. Some desired nothing but a brief sojourn in the colonies, some made a conscious brake with their past, some had unhappy experience, while some found new possibilities for improvements which would have been denied to them in India. It remains a relatively unexplored area and a much more amount of works has to be undertaken to reconstruct a somewhat clearer picture of these indentured migrants and their world.

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