

Indian Indentured Labour Migration to Mauritius

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INTRODUCTION:

The 19th century has witnessed the movement of factors of production on a very large scale specially marked by movement of men, primarily the movement of labour class. Migration was majorly an outcome of poverty. Peasant migration was a combination of poverty and end of the feudal forms of exploitation. Poverty, lack of livelihood and the requirement of labour by colonizers contributed to the internal and international migration to plantations and mines on a large scale. The British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 to abolish slavery throughout British Empire¹. After abolition of slavery British faced shortage of labour in their colonies. To compensate for the slaves emancipation, there was a compulsory apprenticeship to be done by all ex-slaves for four to five years because the planters were then short of labour. So, this shortage of labour encouraged labour migration across the colonies. This was called the “Great Experiment” because, they were going to experiment the working and profitability with the free labour and not in the previous method of slavery. The first batches of Indian unskilled labourers were sent to Mauritius for sugar plantation. After that, labour was transported to work on tea, rubber, palm, sugarcane plantations and mines. Mauritius had an advantage than many other areas due to its proximity to many potentially labour abundant areas. It was generally males who migrated to different parts and hence this was temporary migration. But from 20th century women also started migrating and got migration a permanent character.

The major necessity for migration is that, for industrial capitalism to be developed, free and unlimited supply of labour is required. Because of the shortage of labour in the required and high demanding regions, migration of labour was an essential condition to carry on the production process. Poverty is not the sole reason for migration. Sometimes, peasant migration was a means to preserve feudal modes of exploitation.

¹Exceptions were made to the possessions of the East India Company, Sri Lanka and Saint Helena. But these exceptions were removed in 1843.

WHAT IS INDENTURED LABOUR?

Indentured labour was one of the important features of the 19th century. The term “indenture” refers to a written contract entered into by a person to work for another for a given period of time². It was called coolie trade if indentured labourers were from Asia. This indenture contract specified the terms of employment like wage rate, working hours, type of work, rations, housing and medical attendance³. This resulted in the development of large Indian diaspora, which spread from the Indian Ocean (i.e. Réunion and Mauritius) to Pacific Ocean (i.e. Fiji), as well as the growth of Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African population. According to Hugh Tinker indentured labour system was essentially “**a new system of slavery**” because it incorporated the repression of slavery system that preceded this system. Punishments were common, little freedom of movement, shortage of females which accounted for unstable relationships and low birth rate. The main destinations of Indian Indentured labour was Caribbean Islands, Mauritius and Fiji. Tamil migrants went to Ceylon and Malaya. Indentured workers were employed even for Tea Plantations in Assam. Indenture system was different from the *kangani* recruitment to Malaysia and Ceylon which was a more informal or kin based labour mobilization. Indian immigration was regulated by Anglo- French Treaty of Commerce of 1860. Though the labourers underwent abuses from recruiters, Anglo- French Treaty provided Indians with protection and guarantees. But African Indentured labour in Indian Ocean amounted to disguised slave trade.

INDENTURED LABOUR MIGRATION TO MAURITIUS:

About thirty million Indians migrated to different parts of the world from 1800 to 1945 and 4,22,000 of them migrated to east Africa and Mauritius⁴. One of the main reasons for preference of Indian labour was the ability of the recruiters to tap on to internal migrant labour systems. Labour recruiters who exported labour to Mauritius exploited various indigenous labour systems including tribal hill people. Around one third of the total migrants who reached Mauritius in 1837-38 were *dhangars* (tribal hill people)⁵. Informal networks were created by employers of

² <http://www.aapravasighat.org/English/Resources%20Research/Documents/History%20of%20Indenture.pdf>

³ The indentured labour derived their rights from various Acts. In Mauritius, Ordinance number 16. of 1835, was designed to combat the “idleness” of the apprentices and to legislate indentured labour.

⁴ Allen, R. B. (2017). Asian Indentured Labour in 19th and early 20th century Colonial Plantation World. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* .

⁵ Richard, A. B. (1999). *Slaves, Freedmen and Indentured Labourers in Colonial Mauritius*. Cambridge University Press.

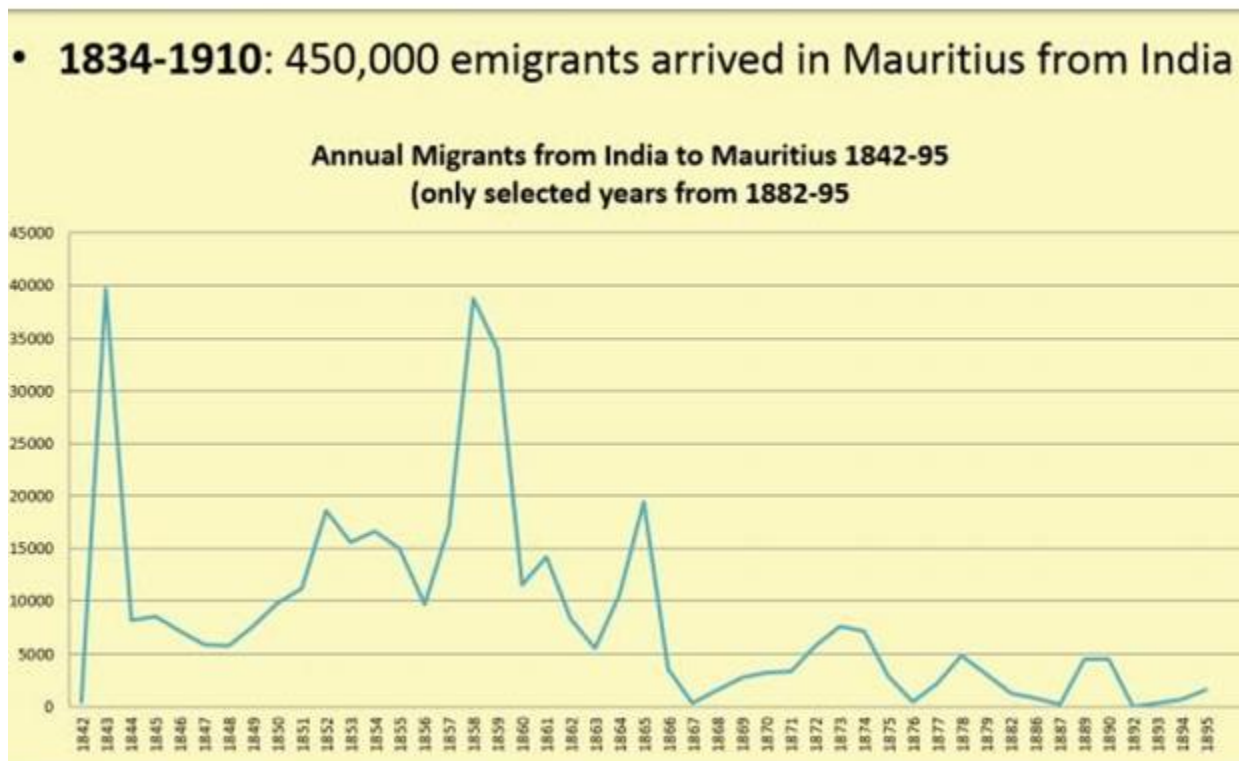
Mauritius, some of whom were themselves of Indian Origin by Intermediaries to employ more people from India. These intermediaries were known as *sirdars*.

From 1815 to 1820s, Governor Farquhar took Indian Convicts from Bengal and Bombay to work in Mauritius. The migrants arrived at Aapravasi Ghat which was known as Immigration point or Coolie Ghat. From 1834 to 1924, nearly half a million immigrants arrived to work in sugar plantations as indentured labourers. They lived in Convicts Barracks and in camps in rural districts of Mauritius. They were engaged in different types of works according to their skills. Some of them worked in plantations, some as cooks, tailors and some of the educated as clerks. As soon as the new system of emigration of labour became known, a campaign similar to the anti-slavery campaign sprang up in Britain and India. On 1 August 1838, a committee was appointed to inquire into the export of Indian labour. It heard reports of abuses of the new system. On 29 May 1839, overseas manual labour was prohibited and any person effecting such emigration was liable to a 200 Rupee fine or three months in jail. After prohibition, a few Indian labourers continued to be sent Mauritius via Pondicherry. The Import of Convicts came to an end in 1838. This was because Anti Slavery Society brought indentured immigration to the attention of British Parliament which suspended the emigration from British provinces.

Indian migration resumed again in 1842 through a new scheme, government controlled immigration. Even with the reentry of Indians, labour from other parts continued to immigrate due to low transport costs. But very soon, labour from other parts like China became resistant and unfavorable to the planters, which is why they preferred Indian labourers. New regulations limited the migrants to one year contracts that were signed only after their arrival in the colony and under the supervision of colony's new protector of immigrants. Indian labourers were preferred by planters not only for their proximity but also because colonists already had experience with Indians and if they try to get indentured labour from East Africa or Madagascar, there was a possibility for the State to impose further restrictions on labour recruitment assuming it is revival of slave trade (this is because, before the abolition of slavery, labour in plantations were slaves from Africa). One of the main reason for the rise in labour movement was due to increase in population. India's population was around 185 million in 1800 and may have increased by 100 million over the century. So the rising densities put a great pressure on the resources, lowering the standards of living for those at the bottom of social order. This added to the already vulnerable groups due to frequent famines in a more vulnerable situation. Such areas have huge numbers of out migration as an alternative to the existing situation. Another major reason was due to the British rule and policies. Because, in most the years which had disruptions in India or bringing in tenancy reforms, there was a huge rise in the number of out migrants. Though this is not the only reasons, it was one of the reason to persuade the labourers to migrate.

Mauritius and British Guiana provided a free return passage for migrants completing a minimum of five years under the contract as an incentive for the workers. From 1862, a minimum of five years initial contract became the norm in all the British sugar colonies and remained so until the end of the system. By 1846, Indian immigrants to Mauritius comprised more than 35% of total population⁶. 1850s had witnessed huge inflow of migrants which reached its peaks in 1891. Though the inflow reduced afterwards, the proportion of Indians to total population remained the same.

In the beginning there were questions regarding the ability of Indians to understand the terms and conditions of the agreements signed, but the importation of labour had a steady flow. Between 1834 and 1839 around twenty five thousand Indians were introduced into Mauritius. In 1858, there was a boom in world sugar and large numbers signed the indentured contract then ever before. Migration was an escape valve for unconvicted mutineers and rebels in wake of 1857 Revolt⁷. We could observe this in the table below.



Apart from proximity of the labour abundant areas, Mauritius was preferred because the restrictions were comparatively less and the labour were allocated into the plantations after they

⁶ Clare Anderson (2009) Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century , Slavery and Abolition, 30:1, 93-109.

have been imported. In Mauritius rations were given throughout the period of their stay. Many of the labourers died even before reaching the destination due to the conditions on the ships. There was no proper sanitation which caused many diseases on ships which led to a high death toll. Sometimes, due to the caste feeling, upper caste people did not wish to take treatment from other castes' physician which lead to further worsening of condition. The working conditions in the plantations were also harsh with long working hours and low wages. They had to work for all seven days, 2 hours on Sundays and nine hours on the other days. Some times even their children had to work along.

CONCLUSION

The abolition on indentured labour happened due to work of a coalition of humanitarians, missionaries and liberal reformers who condemned this and then worked to dismantle the system of export of Indian workers. But this happened when the profit from the indentured workers had already declined and the planters were searching for new ways to exploit local labour. Though there have been arguments saying that many of the Indians were not completely aware of the terms and conditions of the contracts signed, looking at the number of labourers exported gives us a different impression. Either the labour were unaware before going there or preferred those conditions or considered them to be better than the poverty that prevailed in India. The workers who tried to escape were recaptured and imprisoned. Sometimes their period of stay was extended to ten years from five years if they attempted to escape. Some of them preferred to return while some preferred to stay. But there was a problem particularly with women because they left home for work following disagreement with their family and were unlikely to be accepted back into their family.

The workers did try to oppose the abuses in the plantations. Some of them sent petitions to agents of government, some of them tried to take revenge against the owners, but this resulted in increased oppression. The growing Indian National Movement also added to the voices of indentured labour. Mahatma Gandhi, looking at the plight of these workers in Africa campaigned on this issue in the first decade of 20th century. So the system of indentured labour was abolished in 1917 by British Government.

Under the Capitalist plantation system, planters had to invest large sums to develop the plantations and securing the labour through indentured labour system. But this created anxiety among the planters. So they tried to extract the maximum from the labourers as maximum returns is their primary concern. For this, they ensured availability of enough workforce and relied on indentured labour through a structure of punishment of structure and coercion and placing them effectively in servitude by curtailing their possible mobility and through what ever means they could. Labour has the freedom to economic independence and mobility. But in this

system, they were denied both. But without migration, the feudal forms remain and the availability of cheap labour will be difficult. This could be considered one of the possible positive aspects of the out migration of indentured labour.

A large number of immigrants were not sent back to their country as promised in the contract, and settled in the colonies or nearby colonies after their period of indenture. These transfers had a major impact on economic development, culture, identity of these colonies. Due to these workers, the language, beliefs, forms of music and dance and culinary practices were brought into these colonies. This impact can still be seen in Mauritius. About half (~48%) of the population in Mauritius are Hindus and Bhojpuri is one of the vernacular languages. The immigration of indentured labour gradually declined, partly because of the nationalist movements and partly because the profits from indentured labour started declining during the First world War and completely disappeared in the mid Twentieth century.

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