

Indian Indentured Labour Regime

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore some of the essentials of the indentured labour regime under which millions of labourers from India were sent to work in different British, French and Dutch colonies under a contract known as indenture. A succinct survey of the indentured labour regime will offer some fresh insights into the commodification of labour and constitution of labour as an analytic category in interconnected histories of global capitalism under the aegis of imperialism.

Keywords

Indenture, Coolie, Girmitiyas, Slavery vs Free Labour, Imperial capitalism

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Introduction

Year 2017 marks the abolition of emigration of Indian indentured labourers to work on colonial settlements across the world, and therefore it becomes opportune to look at some of essential features and functioning of this labour regime.

The expansion of the capitalist world economy under the aegis of imperialism necessitated a colossal demand for labour, especially for labour intensive plantation work, which could not be fulfilled by the locally available labour force in the regions of expansion. The problem of labour scarcity was further augmented by the abolition of slavery throughout the empire. To meet this increased demand for labourers required for the growth of the capitalist production system, a 'new labour regime was inaugurated' in which 'labour began to flow from regions where people were unemployed, or displaced from agriculture or cottage industries, towards regions of heightened industrial or agricultural activity.'¹ One of the most important, though not because of its size but because of its spread and perplexing consequences, among such flows of labourers was the immigration of Indian labourers to work on plantation settlements like Mauritius, Trinidad, Fiji, Guiana, etc. as contract labourers² is known as indentured labour regime. A succinct survey of the indenture labour regime will offer some fresh insights into the commodification of labour and constitution of labour as an analytic category in interconnected histories of global capitalism under the aegis of imperialism.

Ideological Debates and Dilemmas

Beginning of indenture system did not go uncontested and we had two dissimilar opinions on the matter which has generated intense political-ideological debates not only during the time of indentured emigration but continues to influence the historiography till date. Plantation lobbies and the colonial authorities underlined the material/moral benefits it brought to the indentured labourers and help them survive the economic desperation and oppressive social order. Secretary of State found it as 'among the few resources open to the sufferers for escaping these calamities (poverty and distress), one is emigration to Mauritius..³ On a much more complex and greater ideological level of legitimisation of the indenture system, it was described 'as a powerful agent of civilisation.'⁴ This viewpoint has influenced the revisionist historiography of our times where indenture system has been perceived and analysed as the 'escape hatch'⁵ for the desperate populations from India – the only way of survival and 'an increase in opportunities, incentives to industry, security, and release from the bondage of traditional custom, caste prejudice and social disapproval.'⁶

The opposing view, presented by the anti-slavery activist in Britain and

nationalist leadership in India stress upon the moral degradation and material abuse of the indentured labourers in order to dissent with the continuation of system.

Regulations of System

Absence of any regulatory mechanism was considered to be the root of all the evils associated with slavery and therefore to move away from the shadow of slavery, colonial administrators and propounders of indenture regime were prompt in initiating a well described regulatory structure for conducting the process. Regulatory framework and offices were created more with an intention to legitimise the system by making a careful dissociation with slavery rather than to effectively control the inaccuracies. It was this regulatory structure and interventions of state which distinguished the indenture labour from the slavery.⁷ In the process the basic relations between the capital and labour was recreated, redefined and rearticulated through these regulations.

These regulations relating to the indentured labour regime can be understood more effectively by dividing them into two domains, according to their scope. First set of regulations were intended to regulate the system: various functional aspects of it like recruitment, transportation, working hours, plantation process etc. The second set of regulations was decreed to deal with the human beings: the indentured labourers and their actions and attitudes.

Such elaborate legal structure and detailing of regulations was needed for the smooth functioning of the indentured system and also to ensure the compliance of the labourers which was moored, as Look Lai asserts in the case of Caribbean, in Marxist assumptions that labor in the colonies had to be compelled through “artificial” (i.e. legal) means.⁸ This was considered to be influence by the progressive despotism (James Mill) in which barbaric techniques were seen as legitimate measures of coercion as coolies were inherently incapable of reciprocity.

Disciplining the labour was new discourse in the domain of agrarian labour regime which was justified on grounds of maintaining the high mortal order. Regulations, disciplinary measures and retributions were given a veneer of morality, though they were based on similar ideologies of racial supremacy and discrimination as in case of slavery.

Indian labourers were described as habitual idlers, compulsive liars, immoral and defiant who needed to be handled sternly. Royal Commission of Mauritius admitted it in no uncertain terms:

‘..as a class, the Indians are regarded with fear and distrust, as dangerous and lawless vagabonds; or at least, with pitying contempt, as ill-regulated children, fit only to be treated accordingly’.⁹

In order to underline the subordinate status of Indian indentured labourers in the plantation hierarchy and therefore to justify their subjugation and segregation, colonial authorities highlighted their belongings from the lower strata of the Indian social order. George Grierson noted in 1883 that ‘only the lowest castes emigrate and that nothing will ever induce men of higher class of life to leave India.’¹⁰ Scholars have defied this assertion for Indian emigrants across all the locations. A detailed study of the origins of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji, Brij Lal has shown the domination of intermediary castes among the migrants.¹¹

Articulation and assertion of racial differences between the communities was part of the dual process of creation and segmentation of the labourers under indentured regime – first stigmatise population and then relegate them in the hierarchical order to rationalise their exploitation, use of coercive methods, lower remunerations and denial of certain rights like choice of work and protest. Vagrancy and desertion of estates were considered as a moral threat to the plantation order than merely the material loss of labour but desertion could be caused because of ill treatment, low wages, or other repressions in the labour regime was never admitted by the planters or the colonial authorities. Enactment of regressive labour laws under the indentured system like that of 1867 in Mauritius reflects the ascendancy of plantation lobby over the colonial authorities and defining influence of economic concerns over the political and moral concerns of the colonial government. The need to secure a bound and disciplined labor force that was compliant, reliant, and consistent was ensured legally by segregating indentured coolies spatially, socially, and occupationally.¹²

According to **Rodney, immigrants** under indenture were underpaid and were “denied the rights to seek out new employers,” implying that their position as “free” laborers was very much conditioned by their contracts and their “freedoms” more restricted than other tiers of “free” laborers.¹³ In addition to industrial control, a series of legal regulations like vagrancy legislations restricted the mobility of indentured laborers. East Indian indentured laborers experienced a series of abuses, hostilities and brutal “punishments” on the part of planters.¹⁴

The fundamental logic of the regulations of indenture labour regime was determined by the capitalist rationale of ‘enforced regularity, punctuality, uniformity and routine’. Such copious deliberations over the regulation and state intervention in the indentured regime were part of the strenuous efforts made by the colonial government, under the compulsions imposed by the liberals, to place it out of the shadow of slavery. But, ‘the great irony, of course, is that so much of the paraphernalia of the new institutional discipline bore such striking resemblance to that of the slave plantation. Centralised surveillance, regimentation, division of labour, strictly controlled

work pace, written rules and regulations were all standards pursued by every planter, though not always attained. It was as if part of society would have to be enslaved to preserve the liberties of the rest.’¹⁵

Colonial authorities tried to promote indentured labour regime as an egalitarian system which provided the same legal rights to the planters and the labourer. The penal provisions in the laws regulating the indenture system for violating the conditions of indenture were applicable to both – the planters and the labourers. However the rate of conviction for violation of indentured labour laws reveal the divergences in the role of legal institutions and colonial state: 72% of indentured labourers charged under labour laws were convicted while the conviction rate for the planters or their representative was only about 10% in Suriname.¹⁶ For Fiji, 82% of the labourers charged under violation of labour laws between 1885 and 1906 were convicted¹⁷ Colonial state also developed structures and institutions for the protection of labourers in order to articulate its paternalistic attitude and as assertion of the benevolence towards the subjects – appointment of the Protector of Immigrants, provisions for medical care, standards for housing, minimum wages, protection against physical abuse etc. These provisions were used by the colonial state and pro indenture officials to initiate and then defend the continuation of indenture system despite all round critic of the system for being exploitative, discriminatory and extension of slavery. As late as in 1909 when the evils associated with indenture system were universally accepted, Governor of British Guiana underlined the good things for the indentured labourers:

‘Indenture means care in sickness, free medical attendance, free hospital accommodation, morning rations in early days, sanitary dwellings, habits of industry gained, a guaranteed minimum daily wage, and general supervision by government officials.’¹⁸

What this defence fails to underline is that the guaranteed wages remained the same over almost the entire century, and almost 1/3 of the total labourers were subject to prosecution under the labour laws. There were several contrary assumptions regarding the capability and compliance of labourers were adopted and there was a rather uneasy reconciliation of such assumptions in regulations of indenture labour.

Indenture and Capitalist Development

Indenture labour regime was crucial in facilitating the expansion of colonial capitalist economies by ensuring the uninterrupted supply of labour, cutting the cost of productions, providing the cash crops need for the industrialisation and consumption needs and the global process of capital accumulation. A succinct survey of the indenture labour regime makes it clear that the spatial and ideological expansion of capitalism

under the aegis of imperialism was closely linked and crucially facilitated by the indentured labourers. Indian labourers who arrived to these plantation settlements under indenture system help the survival of the plantation economies and at larger levels facilitated the uninterrupted territorial-economic expansion of the British capitalism. When indentured immigration was suspended for alleged abuses, Gladstone, a British planter in Guiana and father of future Prime Minister of Britain, was at the forefront for its resumption. His rationale was not of benevolence – saving the Indian population from distress but the very benefit of plantation economy and eventually the empire. He wrote to the Colonial Secretary, ‘We cannot doubt but that Lord Glenelg, as well as the other members of his Majesty’s Government, will see and admit the great importance of these suggestions (resumption of emigration from India) to the future preservation and prosperity of not only British Guiana, but also of most of our other West India colonies.’¹⁹

Plantations served as the regional economies of the global capitalist economy of the empire and success of plantation economy was dependent upon critical balance between abundant land and cheap labour and the supply of cheap labour was ensured by the arrival of Indian labourers under indentured system. The whole process of transoceanic emigration of Indian labourers under the indentured labour regime was situated within the broader context of the expanding political economy of the empire. It was not fortuitous but strategic and systematic which can be ascertained through a critical reading of the meticulously crafted system of labour mobilisation and regulation of their lives as labourers. As Herman Merivale writes;

‘they are not voluntary immigrants in the ordinary sense, led by the spontaneous desire of bettering their condition... They have been raised, not without effort, like recruits for the military service’²⁰.

The nineteenth century emigration of Indian labourers to British plantation settlements under the indenture system was part of interconnected capitalist development under the aegis of imperialism in which labour was commodified and circulated from the extant reservoirs of cheap labour to the new settlements or to those regions which were facing labour crisis in the wake of emancipation of slave workforce; in order to facilitate the capitalist development of the metropolis or the empire:

‘indentured labour migration in the 19th century was a part of a larger process of international circulation of capital and commodities, the ultimate aim of which was commodity production, under conditions of uneven and combined capitalist development.’²¹

For Karl Marx, immigrant labourer was ‘the light infantry of industrial capital’

which could be deployed at will to serve the needs of expanding commodity production. Gay Standing, in his study of migration and modes of exploitation, points out that ‘by virtue of commoditization under capitalist state, labour became invariably mobile and migration was necessary for the national and global extension of capitalism’.²² This process of relocating labour was done in a strategic manner by the concerned colonial governments through well-structured labour mobilisation strategies in which labourers were carefully mobilised according to the specific needs of the labour importing colonies. It was this strategy which was essential for making of the indentured labour regime and determined the contours of this regime.

Indentured labour regime provided the new basis of economic/territorial expansion of Capitalism and stimulated a phenomenal upswing in the sugar trade from the destinations of Indian indentured labourers. It resurrected the dwindling fortunes of the sugar industry across the regions. Between 1845-48 and 1884 sugar export from British Guiana increased from 36000 tonnes to 120000 tonnes. For Trinidad increase was from 19000 tonnes to 64000 tonnes.²³ For Fiji which was a late entrant in the entire process (acquired by British in 1874) exports of sugar doubled between 1893 and 1914. The movement of labourers not only laid the basis for large scale increase in tropical production but also played crucial role in creation of infrastructure and technical advancement in transportation – shipping and port building, roads, railways, means of communication – all of which were critical prerequisites for accelerating capitalist development. Contributions of Indian labour Diaspora in capitalist development is underlined in an undeniable manner by Beaton Patrick in following passage:

‘Those swarthy orientals, so thinly clad, are the muscles and sinews of Mauritian body politic. They are the secret source of all the wealth, luxury and splendour with which the island abounds. There is not a carriage that rolls along the well macadamised chaussee, or a robe of silk worn by a fair Mauritian, to the purchase of which the Indian has not, by his labour, indirectly contributed. It is from the labour of his swarthy body in the cane-fields that gold is extracted more plenteously than from the diggings of Ballarat.’²⁴

Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to present an overview of the indentured labour regime, under which Indian labourers were mobilised to work on sugar plantations across the Caribbean Indian and Pacific Ocean regions, in order to reflect upon certain essential pointers for the study of agrarian labour regime in terms of formation, functioning and transformations and to draw the big picture by situating these into the overall political-economic order of the times. Such an overall study of the indentured

labour regime from larger perspectives of plantation economies is necessary as it provides critical insights into understanding of imperial control, circulation of goods and labour across territorial limits, commodification of labour and the linkages between the colonies and metropolis, as well as between colonies.

Indentured labour regime could commodify the labour but it could not establish a free labour market with symmetrical relationship between the labour and capital. It continued to be governed by the imperial-racial hierarchies and unevenness of class relations according to racial prejudices which severely curtailed the labourers' ability to negotiate for their labour as they could do in a free market. (though there could be no ideal free market ever) The discourse of labour regime was determined by the incongruity of economic rationality and noblesse oblige of the system.

In not uncertainty, Indentured labour regime provided the labourers to escape certain social-economic subjugations at home as it has been often argued, but a comprehensive analysis of the labour regulation under the indentured regime makes it clear that they were simultaneously drawn into a more ruthless structure of moral and physical domination. Madhavi Kale, who situates the entire debate within the larger premises of British liberalism and imperial discourse, puts it in a rather sophisticated level of argument and normative analysis, 'The imperial labour relocation strategy characteristically and contradictorily made good the promise of imperial liberalism to release people from the fixities of place, custom, and birth into mobility and the opportunity to rise above their "traditional" station – *into other orders of imperial hierarchy*.'²⁵

References

¹Wolf (1982: 356, 361).

²There was another stream of immigration of Indian labourers to work on plantations in Malaya, Burma and Ceylon but as a conscious choice, I haven't discussed them in this paper because the immigrant labourers to these destinations were recruited under a different system which led a debt bondage of labour-master relationship and thus require different analytical treatment. I have also not included the indentured emigration of Indian labourers who were recruited to work in mines or non-agricultural sectors considering the theme of this conference.

³ Letter from Sec of State for Colonies, Further Papers Respecting East Indian Labourers, 1842.

⁴Prinsep 1841

⁵Emmer, P.C. 'The Meek Hindu: The Recruitment of Indian Indentured Labourers for Services Overseas. 1870-1916'. In *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery*, edited by P. C. Emmer. Dordrecht: Martinus

Nijhoff, 1984. p.204

⁶Cumpston, I.M. *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834-54*. London: Dowsons, 1969. p. 162.

⁷Marina Carter

⁸Look Lai p127

⁹Report of Royal Commission Mauritius 1875

¹⁰Grierson Report

¹¹(Brahmins and high castes 12%, intermediary castes 43%, lower castes 33% and Muslims 12% for Fiji; give from other locations as well

¹²Munasinghe Callaloo p.76

¹³Walter Rodney, *A History of Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*

¹⁴Ron Ramdin pp.54-67

¹⁵ Thomas Halt: The Problem of Freedom, p.38

¹⁶ P C Emmer : Importation of British Indians in Suriname p. 107

¹⁷ Brij Diaspora p.176

¹⁸Report of Sanderson Committee, 1910 p.27:568

¹⁹Gladstone to Glenelg dt 28 Feb 1838.

²⁰Merivale, Herman, *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies*, Frank Cass, London, 1967 (1861), p.345.

²¹Richardson, Peter, *Chinese Labour in the Transvaal*, London, 1982, p. 3.

²²Standing, Gay, 'Migration and Modes of Exploitation: Social Origins of Immobility and Mobility ', *JPS*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, 1981, p. 201.

²³ K O Laurence Question of Labour Appendix I

²⁴ Beaton, Patrcik.

Creoles and Coolies; or, Five Years in Mauritius

. London: James Nisbet, 1858. pp.10-11.

²⁵Kale, Madhavi, *Fragments of Empire: Capitalism, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* , Uni of Penn Press, Philadelphia, 1998, p. 175. emphasis added.