

Resisting Nation: Anti-Indenture Movement in India

Dr Amit Kumar Mishra
Associate Professor
School of Global Affairs
Dr B R Ambedkar University Delhi
Karampura Campus, New Delhi
Email: amitchs@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore how the anti-colonial nationalist lobby in India linked the servitude of Indian indentured labourers with the bonded self of the Indian nation. This paper shows how the anti-colonial nationalist lobby in India, by linking the servitude of Indian indentured labourers with the political subjugation of India under British colonialism, demanded the abolition of the system. Through this exploration, I would try to shift the frame of analysis to the larger projects of national liberation and rights of citizens of a sovereign nation during the British colonialism.

Keywords

Indentured labour, servitude, Indian national movement, coolies, nationalism

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**Dr. Amit Kumar
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Since the very beginning of the emigration of Indians to work as contract labourers in plantation colonies, the abuses related to the recruitment of Indians and their deplorable condition in colonies attracted the criticism of individuals, public forums, political organizations and press in India. In 1910s, a very strong anti-indenture movement was initiated by the Indian nationalists which subsided only when the system was finally abolished. However, the impact of this anti-indenture resistance has been characterised in a negative manner. P.C. Emmer gives ‘the increased political pressure from Indian nationalists’ as a reason for the sudden stop of indenture emigration.¹ He argues that the middle class Indian nationalists, for their hurt national pride and the Indian landowners and capitalists because of the threat to their labour supply, collectively opposed the indenture system and the British government, which had lost its authority in the wake of the First World War, abolished the indenture system under the pressure of this collective opposition.² However Gail Omvedt’s analysis of migration in colonial India argues a completely different position. According to Omvedt, ‘..however strong the nationalist agitation may have appeared, the indenture system in fact ended when it was outmoded and relatively useless for the changing needs of the plantations,’³ In the following narrative of anti-indenture protests of Indian nationalists we shall examine the validity of both these assertions.

According to the nature of responses in a historical setting, these responses can be divided into two phases – the first phase or the *phase of limited responses* which continued till late 1880s, and the second phase or the *phase of organized responses* which began during the early 1890s with the beginning of a new phase of political awakening and organizational activities in the backdrop of the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885.

First Phase

As early as in 1838, hardly four years after the beginning of organized emigration of Indian labourers to work on sugar plantations in Mauritius, the general mood in India was formed against the system after having heard about the abuses of the system and the stories about the ill treatment of Indians in the colonies. Reporting the abuses of the exportation of Indian labourers, on 5 July 1838, *Bengal Harkaru*⁴ called for its prohibition, ‘if an effort both strong and persevering be not made – not for the modification of trade, but for its immediate prohibition – it will grow into a monstrous evil.’⁵ *Friend of India*, another newspaper from Bengal with missionary sympathies, wrote about the underpayment of Indians in Mauritius,

‘coolly in not merely the victim of ignorance, but of deceit. The market price of labour at the Mauritius is fifteen dollars a month, and it is

only because cooly is ignorant of this fact, that he engages to serve for two and half and his board.’⁶

Another issue of this paper asserted that ‘the only path of safety lies in absolute prohibition.’⁷

In 1838, Young Bengal, a radical intellectual group of youth in Bengal under the leadership of Henry Vivian Derozio, took up the issue of the abuses in the recruitment of Indians to colonies and their subsequent ill treatment. On 10 July 1838, a meeting against the ‘coolie trade’ was organized in the Town Hall, Calcutta which was presided over by the Sheriff of the city. A petition to the Colonial government was prepared urging the suspension of all further shipments of coolies until it was proved that the emigration was as greatly advantageous to the Indian people as to the exporters and employers. A group of leading public figures of Calcutta city under the leadership of Dwarkanath Tagore met the President in Council on 26 July 1838 and presented the above petition for the suspension of the system of exporting coolies to the British colonies.

Following the adverse reports about the system and the abuses associated with it in the press, and the protests, the Council of India temporarily suspended further emigration of Indian labourers to the colonies in 1839. A committee, known as the Dickens Committee or Calcutta Committee was set up to investigate the allegations against the system. However, in 1842, the House of Commons in England decided to resume the system of exporting labour from India to the plantation colonies, primarily under pressure from the planters whose interests were severely affected by the prohibition.

After the resumption of the system in 1842, protests were continued in the form of sporadic meetings, occasional reports in the newspapers and petitions submitted to the government. But these protests could not generate the desired strength of public opinion against the system which could have further pressurized the government to prohibit the system. In fact there were very high levels of emigration of Indians to work in plantation colonies from the 1860s to the 1880s. The approach and levels of awakening of the times need to be kept in mind while discussing the limitations of this phase. The main approach of individuals, organizations and public opinion was humanitarian and was highly influenced by the liberal traditions of England. The levels of political awakening were also embryonic and the process of the emergence of the nationalist discourse against the colonial hegemony, which could argue for the dignity and rights of its people, was yet to begin.

Second Phase

The massive emigration of Indian labourers to work in plantation colonies from 1840s to 1870s, despite the reports about the ill treatment of Indians and the callous attitude of the colonial government towards the repeated petitions of Indian leaders to prohibit the emigration caused disillusionment and erosion of faith among the Indian intellectuals and leaders in the post 1880s period. Nationalist leaders linked up the causes of migration and the exploitation and ill treatment of Indians in the colonies with the economic exploitation of Indian resources under colonial rule and the politically subordinate status of India. This provided the theoretical premises to the opposition of indenture system by Indian nationalists.

The first Indian nationalist leader who himself experienced the disabilities of Indian immigrants and the repressive conditions under which they were living was Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi went to South Africa in May 1893 to plead the case of an Indian merchant. During the very first days of his stay he had to face many disabilities which made him fully aware of the discrimination and disabilities Indians were facing in that colony. He decided to resist this discrimination and started a passive struggle. Gandhi was well aware of the need for propaganda and the support of the outside world especially from the Indian leaders and press. He was in constant touch with Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozshah Mehta etc. and kept writing to them about the deplorable condition of Indians in South Africa and for their support in his struggle.⁸

In India, the Indian National Congress which was on its way to becoming the representative voice of the Indian nationalism also began to voice its concern over the sufferings of Indian in the colonies. However the leaders of Congress took it up with utmost concern after Gandhi's visit to India. To make the Indian people and government aware about the open racial discrimination and exploitation of Indians in South Africa and to secure their support for the causes of Indians in the colonies, Gandhi published a pamphlet, 'The Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa: An appeal to the Indian Public' (a historic document on the plight of Indians in colonies) in August 1896. This pamphlet, which became known popularly as the Green Pamphlet because of the green colour of its cover, was so revealing and persuasive on the grievances of Indian immigrants that it created a stir in Indian political spheres and mobilized the leaders to take up the issues of the suffering of Indians in the colonies. Gandhi visited Calcutta, Bombay, Pune, Madras; met many nationalist leaders of that time such as M.G. Ranade, Badruddin Tyabji, Pherozshah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak; and addressed public meetings in Madras, Bombay and other places⁹ Among the other prominent Indian nationalists of the time, Gopal Krishna Gokhale took keen interest in the plight of

Indian indentured labourers in the colonies. He was in constant touch with Gandhi since they met in 1898 and was keeping a close watch on the condition of Indians in the colonies.

The Congress session held at Calcutta in December 1901 marked the beginning of a new phase of action oriented response towards the problems of Indian settlers in the colonies. Mahatma Gandhi himself attended the session and presented a detailed report and resolution on the conditions of Indians in South Africa. His advice to Congress was to 'Move the Indian public; let them hold public meetings; if possible, send deputations to the Viceroy, and do everything that you can do to strengthen our hands ...'¹⁰ We shall see that this was the course of action Indian nationalists adopted.

Gandhi went back to South Africa in 1903 but Gandhi's plea had an impact on Indian nationalists and the language of protests was also becoming sharper. In 1902 a deputation led by Pherozshah Mehta under the banner of Bombay Presidency Association submitted a memorandum to the Viceroy and urged him to stop the state regulated migration. The Congress resolutions in 1903 and 1904 are also testimony to this growing concern and the language of protest¹¹.

'This Congress views with grave concern and regret the hard lot of his Majesty's Indian subjects living in the British colonies in South Africa, Australia and elsewhere, the great hardships and disabilities to which they are subjected by the colonial government and the consequent degradation of their status and rights as subjects of the king and protests against the treatment of Indians by the Colonies as backward and uncivilized races.'

The Benaras session of Congress in 1906 urged the British Government to recognise the Indian emigrants as British citizens and, if necessary, even demanded the prohibition of indenture labour.¹² From the Benaras session onwards, we witness a change in the attitude and demands of the Indian nationalists. So far their demands were limited to getting redress for Indian Diaspora but with a growing disillusionment with the British government's stand on their demands, they began to attack the very root of the problem, and wanted abolition of the system itself.

A big public meeting was organized on 9 September 1909 in Bombay Town Hall which was chaired by Sir Currimbhoy Ibrahim. In the presence of H.S.L. Polak, who was sent by Gandhi to get support from Indian leaders, Gokhale moved a resolution in which he equated the condition of Indian workers with slavery in which they were denied the basic rights and called upon the British government to prevent the continued injustice and ill treatment of Indians and stoppage of further

recruitment of Indians.¹³ He argued that since this question was primarily related to the condition of Indians in India, the struggle against it should be carried out in India. What is to be noted here is a conscious attempt by Indian nationalists to relate the issue of discrimination and disabilities of Indians in other colonies to the colonial subjugation of India and the perception of their humiliation as the humiliation of an 'Indian'¹⁴; so they could use this correlation to further the nationalist awakening in India against colonial rule.

In the same year, Gokhale moved a resolution in the Lahore session of the Indian National Congress asserting the necessity of prohibition of recruitment of indentured labourers from India.

After Gokhale's speech in the annual session of Congress, the protests against indentured labour and plight of Indians in colonies was taken up in earnest and a new phase of active protests began which finally brought the system to an end in 1920. Another development in the political realm provided Indian nationalists a constitutional forum to raise their voice of protest on the issue of indentured emigration. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 provided for Indian representation in the Imperial Legislative Council. Indian leaders like Gokhale and Madan Mohan Malviya utilized this opportunity in the most eloquent manner for their propaganda against the evils of Indentured labour, and for the betterment of the condition of Indians in colonies.

Many leaders from the indentured Diaspora community also shared the platforms of anti-indenture protest with Indian nationalists. Manilal Doctor, a barrister of Indian origin who went to Mauritius to work among the Indian diasporic community there, was in constant touch with Indian leaders. On Gandhi's suggestions in 1910, he came to India to attend the annual session of the Indian National Congress at Allahabad. There he met Gokhale and Malaviya and reported to them about the plight of Indians in the colony. Again in the Calcutta session in 1911, while seconding a resolution on indentured emigration, he presented a detailed report on the condition of Indians in Mauritius, calling for the earnest attention of delegates to the conditions of Indians in colony and demanded its immediate prohibition.

'It was by painful experience that I came to learn how iniquitous, unjust and immoral that system is. Almost every week gangs of labourers would come to my house and ask my advice and request me to plead their cause before the courts of law...the penal provisions of the labour law....makes this system a system like that of slavery... If a man is ill and does not come to work, and if the medical attendant at the sugar estate says that he is not ill, he will be treated as a criminal and will be sent to jail..... It should be stopped for any country, be it British Guiana or British Demerara or any other place. I think you will all agree with me that indentured

system should be stopped at once because it is immoral, irreligious and highly detrimental to the best interests of the country.’¹⁵

In India, the reaction was becoming stronger and stronger. On 25 February 1910, Gokhale moved a resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council which was presided over by the Viceroy, Lord Minto. Moving the resolution, Gokhale called for the total abolition of indentured labour and called it near slavery.

‘my own view of this system of indentured labour is that it should be abolished altogether. It is true that it is not actual slavery, but I fear in practice in a large number of cases it cannot be far removed from it. To take from this country helpless men and women to a distant land, to assign them there to employers in whose choice they have no voice and of whose language, customs, social usages and special civilization they are entirely ignorant, and to make them work there under a law which they do not understand and which treat their simplest and most natural attempts to escape ill-treatment as criminal offences – such a system, by whatever name it may be called, must really border on servile. I strongly hold therefore that the system should be done away with altogether.’¹⁶

The annual session of the Congress held in 1911 demanded the total abolition of the Indenture system.

‘...this Congress is strongly of opinion that in the highest national interests, the system of indentured labour is undesirable and should be abolished.’¹⁷

In the same session, C.Y. Chintamani, a noted nationalist leader from United Provinces, equated it with slavery which is opposed to individual freedom.

‘..if you go to the root of the matter you will come to the conclusion that the difference between indentured labour and the slavery of the old is not very great. Indentured labour is opposed to individual freedom, and it must be abolished if righteousness between man and man is the policy of the government.’¹⁸

He further argued that the abolition of the indenture system will be a great advantage for Indians and it wouldn’t create much hardship to Indian labour compared to their sufferings in the colonies.¹⁹

Gokhale was by this time missing no opportunity to oppose the system and argue for its termination. On 4 March 1912, he moved a resolution in Legislative Council recommending total prohibition of the recruitment of Indian indentured labour.

‘That this Council recommends to the Governor General in Council that the government of India should now take the necessary steps to prohibit the recruitment of Indian labourers under contract of indenture....’²⁰

In his powerful and illustrious speech following the moving of the resolution he called the system of indentured labour ‘a monstrous system, iniquitous in itself, based on fraud and maintained by force’.²¹

Gokhale’s resolution was supported by Mohammed Shafi, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Bhupendra Nath Basu, and Malik Umar Hayat Khan. Malaviya was very vocal against the indenture system in his speech. While condemning the system, he held it responsible for the moral and national degradation. Though the resolution was defeated by 11 votes (33 votes against 22 for), it was a stern warning for the government. All 22 non-official members voted for the resolution which made it quite clear that the public opinion was against the system.

Asserting his commitment for the cause, Gokhale said after the meeting that his motion ‘will be brought forward again and again till we carry it to the successful issue’.

On Gandhi’s request Gokhale visited South Africa in October 1912 to see the problems of Indian settlers. After his return, Gokhale moved the following resolution, in the annual session of Congress of 1912 held at Bankipur:

‘... This Congress is strongly of opinion that in the highest national interests, the system of indentured labour is undesirable and should be abolished.’²²

Gokhale, despite his failing health, travelled across India addressing meetings against indenture system and collecting funds to support the struggle of Indians in South Africa.. On 14 November 1913, he addressed a meeting in Bradlaugh Hall at Lahore, which was attended Lala Lajpat Rai, Zulfiqar Ali, and Mohammad Iqbal. He spoke at Allahabad, with Tej Bahadur Sapru and Motilal Nehru, at Calcutta with Surendra Nath Banerjee, at Bombay with Aga Khan and Pherozshah Mehta.²³ Addressing the Bombay meeting, Aga Khan called it a calamity and unparalleled in the history of Modern India. On 31 December Gokhale issued an evocative statement on the situation in South Africa.²⁴

Gokhale persuaded C.F. Andrews, a missionary who was British by birth but Indian in heart and mind, to visit South Africa and support Gandhi. C. F. Andrews was actively involved in the movement against indenture system and for its complete abolition. He wrote to Banarasidas Chaturvedi that the complete abolition is the only way to regain the self respect of Indian nation,

‘I now see that we must all strive to get that system at all costs entirely and utterly abolished. It is the only way to regain our self-respect as a great nation and we must do it at all costs.’²⁵

Gandhi returned to India in January 1915. By this time, the opposition of indenture system and the question of diasporic Indians had already taken the centre stage of nationalist politics in India. Many organizations at local levels - Indian Coolie Protection Society, Anti-Indentured Emigration League, League for the Abolition of Indentured Emigration, etc. were formed to protest against the system. Gokhale, Malaviya, Motilal Nehru, Pherozshah Mehta and other prominent nationalist leaders were taking a firm stand against the discrimination and disabilities of diasporic Indians. Soon after his return from South Africa, Gandhi launched a massive campaign against the indenture system and the disabilities of diasporic Indians which ultimately brought the system to a formal end in 1920.

Speaking at a public meeting in Bombay on 28 October 1915, he called for the abolition of indenture labour in a year's time,

‘...However protected that system might be, it still remained a state bordering upon slavery. It would remain a state based upon full fledged slavery and it was a hindrance to national growth and national dignity.’²⁶

In March 1916 Madan Mohan Malaviya decided to move a resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council for the abolition of the Indenture system. Taking facts from the recently appeared report of C.F. Andrews, he flayed the system for being inhuman, exploitative and morally degrading.

‘.....it has been shown that the indenture system is thoroughly indefensible. It begins, as Mr. Gokhale observed, in fraud and is maintained by force. It does not benefit the labourer....On the contrary it is a curse to him. And it lowers the status and wages of the free population and brings the name of India into contempt...no reforms will prove sufficient; tinkering will not do; the system must be abolished root and branch.’²⁷

Viceroy Lord Hardinge, while accepting Malaviya's resolution, was vague about the date of abolition of the system – ‘he has obtained the promise for the abolition of the system in the due course’. When Gandhi met the new Viceroy Lord Chelmsford in early 1917, he did not give any definite assurance and also refused to allow to Malaviya to introduce a bill in the Legislative Council for the immediate abolition of the indenture system. This non-committal attitude of the British Government caused anxiety among the Indian nationalists especially Mahatma Gandhi who decided to travel country wide and mobilize people on the issue. He began his tour from Bombay and to press the government for a definite and early abolition of indenture, 31 May 1917 was the date fixed in the Bombay meeting as the date by which indenture system should be stopped.²⁸

From Bombay, Gandhi went to Ahmedabad, Karachi, Delhi, Surat, and Calcutta. In support of Gandhi's agitation, protests were being organized across the country mainly under the banner of the *Home Rule League, the Servants of India Society, Bengal and United Provinces Congress Committees, the League for Abolition of Indentured Emigration* etc.

In addition to the organisational efforts of Congress at national levels, there were numerous instances of opposition to the indenture system in localities under the aegis of local organisations. In 1915, when the renewal of emigration to Mauritius was proposed by Mauritian planters, a series of fierce protests were organised in localities. Meetings were organised in villages, market places etc. and pamphlets were circulated in labour recruiting regions like Banaras, Allahabad, Mathura, and Ballia to carry out propaganda against the indenture system and dissuade people from emigration.²⁹ In one such pamphlet people were warned to be careful of the *depotwallahs* or the agents of emigration agencies:

Save yourself from depot - wallas.

Be careful!!!

Be careful!!!

Be careful!!!

It is not a service but pure deception.

Don't get enmeshed in their meshes, you will repent.

They take you over seas!!!

To Jamaica, Fiji, Damra, Mauritius,

British Guiana, Trinidad, and Honduras.

They are not colonies but jails.

Save, be careful from depot-wallas.

They spoil your religion under the pretence of service.

Don't hear sweet talks, they are your enemies.³⁰

Allahabad which was a major hub of nationalist politics became a prominent centre for the anti-indenture movement for obvious reasons. A meeting against the indenture system was organized on 19 January 1917, in which Sarojini Naidu made an emotional appeal to end the system,

'Let the blood of your hearts blot out the shame that your women have suffered abroad. The words that you have heard tonight must have kindled within you a raging fire. Men of India, let that be the funeral pyre of the indenture system. Words from me tonight. No tears tonight, because I am a woman and though you may feel the dishonour that is offered to your mothers and sisters, I feel the dishonour offered to me is the dishonour to my sex.'³¹

Prayag Mahila Samiti (Allahabad) organized a protest meeting against the recruiting women for indenture emigration in Allahabad on 18 February 1917, which was presided over by Mrs. Nand Rani Nehru.³²³²

The Leader,

19 February, 1917.

On April 12, 1917 British Government stopped the system of Indenture labour but did not abolish the Indentures in colonies which implied that in many colonies, Indians would remain under indenture as late as till 1921. C.F. Andrews and Malaviya demanded the immediate termination of all the indentures. Malaviya moved a resolution in Imperial Council in 1918 for the termination of the indentures which have not expired. Finally, on 1 January 1920, all the indentures were abolished which technically made all Indians free in the colonies.

The anti-indenture movement of Indian nationalists was based on two essential deliberations: first, emigration of Indian labourers under indenture system was based on the principles of economic exploitation of resources of colonies in favour of imperial interests and therefore it would never have any scope of redress. Second, they linked the grievances of Indian indentured Diaspora with the larger discourse of anti-colonialism and the movement against indenture system was one facet of their attempts to mould public discontent against the colonial rule.

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